

THE COSSACKS

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Leo Tolstoy

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A new translation by Peter Constantine

Introduction by Cynthia Ozick



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Leo Tolstoy

Count Lev (Leo) Nikolayevich Tolstoy was born on August 28, 1828, at Yasnaya Polyana (Bright Glade), his family's estate located 130 miles southwest of Moscow. He was the fourth of five children born to Count Nikolay Ilyich Tolstoy and Marya Nikolayevna Tolstoya (née Princess Volkonskaya, who died when Tolstoy was barely two). He enjoyed a privileged childhood typical of his elevated social class (his patrician family was older and prouder than the Czar's). Early on, the boy showed a gift for languages as well as a fondness for literature—including fairy tales, the poems of Pushkin, and the Bible, especially the Old Testament story of Joseph. Orphaned at the age of nine by the death of his father, Tolstoy and his brothers and sister were first cared for by a devoutly religious aunt. When she died in 1841, the family went to live with their father's only surviving sister in the provincial city of Kazan. Tolstoy was educated by French and German tutors until he enrolled at Kazan University in 1844. There he studied law and Oriental languages and developed a keen interest in moral philosophy and the writings of Rousseau. A notably unsuccessful student who led a dissolute life, Tolstoy abandoned his studies in 1847 without earning a degree and returned to Yasnaya Polyana to claim the property (along with 350 serfs and their families) that was his birthright.

After several aimless years of debauchery and gambling in Moscow and St. Petersburg, Tolstoy journeyed to the Caucasus in 1851 to join his older brother Nikolay, an army lieutenant participating in the Caucasian campaign. The following year Tolstoy officially enlisted in the military, and in 1854 he became a commissioned officer in the artillery, serving first on the Danube and later in the Crimean War. Although his sexual escapades and profligate gambling during this period shocked even his fellow soldiers, it was while in the army that Tolstoy began his literary apprenticeship. Greatly influenced by the works of Charles Dickens, Tolstoy wrote *Childhood*, his first novel. Published pseudonymously in September 1852 in the *Contemporary*, a St. Petersburg journal, the book received highly favorable reviews—earning the praise of Turgenev—and overnight established Tolstoy as a major writer. Over the next years he contributed several novels and short stories (about military life) to the *Contemporary*—including *Boyhood* (1854), three *Sevastopol* stories (1855–1856), *Two Hussars* (1856), and *Youth* (1857).

In 1856 Tolstoy left the army and went to live in St. Petersburg, where he was much in demand in fashionable salons. He quickly discovered, however, that he disliked the life of literary celebrity (he often quarreled with fellow writers, especially Turgenev) and soon departed on his first trip to western Europe. Upon returning to Russia, he produced the story "Three Deaths" and a short novel, *Family Happiness*, both published in 1859. Afterward Tolstoy decided to abandon literature in favor of more "useful" pursuits. He retired to Yasnaya Polyana to manage his estate and established a school there for the education of children of his serfs. In 1860 he again traveled abroad in order to observe European (especially German) educational systems; he later published *Yasnaya Polyana*, a journal expounding his theories on pedagogy. The following year he was appointed an arbiter of the

peace to settle disputes between newly emancipated serfs and their former masters. But in July 1862 the police raided the school at Yasnaya Polyana for evidence of subversive activity. The search elicited an indignant protest from Tolstoy directly to Alexander II, who officially exonerated him.

That same summer, at the age of thirty-four, Tolstoy fell in love with eighteen-year-old Sofya Andreyevna Bers, who was living with her parents on a nearby estate. (As a girl she had reverently memorized whole passages of *Childhood*.) The two were married on September 23, 1862, in a church inside the Kremlin walls. The early years of the marriage were largely joyful (thirteen children were born of the union) and coincided with the period of Tolstoy's great novels. In 1863 he not only published *The Cossacks* but began work on *War and Peace*, his great epic novel, which came out in 1869.

Then, on March 18, 1873, inspired by the opening of a fragmentary tale by Pushkin, Tolstoy started writing *Anna Karenina*. Originally titled *Two Marriages*, the book underwent multiple revisions and was serialized to great popular and critical acclaim between 1875 and 1877.

It was during the torment of writing *Anna Karenina* that Tolstoy experienced the spiritual crisis which recast the rest of his life. Haunted by the inevitability of death, he underwent "conversion" to the ideals of human life and conduct that he found in the teachings of Christ. *A Confession* (1882), which was banned in Russia, marked this change in his life and work. Afterward, he became an extreme rationalist and moralist, and in a series of pamphlets published during his remaining years Tolstoy rejected both church and state, denounced private ownership of property, and advocated celibacy, even in marriage. In 1897 he even went so far as to renounce his own novels, as well as many other classics, including Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, for being morally irresponsible, elitist, and corrupting. His teachings earned him numerous followers in Russia ("We have two Czars, Nicholas II and Leo Tolstoy," a journalist wrote) and abroad (most notably, Mahatma Gandhi) but also many opponents, and in 1901 he was excommunicated by the Russian Holy Synod. Prompted by Turgenev's deathbed entreaty ("My friend, return to literature!") Tolstoy did produce several more short stories and novels—including the ongoing series *Stories for the People*, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886), *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889), *Master and Man* (1895), *Resurrection* (1899), and *Hadji Murád* (published posthumously)—as well as a play, *The Power of Darkness* (1886).

Tolstoy's controversial views produced a great strain on his marriage, and his relationship with his wife deteriorated. "Until the day I die she will be a stone around my neck," he wrote. "I must learn not to drown with this stone around my neck." Finally, on the morning of October 28, 1910, Tolstoy fled by railroad from Yasnaya Polyana, headed for a monastery in search of peace and solitude. However, illness forced him off the train at Astapovo; he was given refuge in the stationmaster's house and died there on November 7. His body was buried two days later in the forest at Yasnaya Polyana.

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Introduction

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Contemplating the unpredictable trajectory of Tolstoy's life puts one in mind of those quizzical Max Beerbohm caricatures, wherein an old writer confronts—with perplexity, if not with contempt—his young self. So here is Tolstoy at seventy-two, dressed like a *muzhik* in a belted peasant tunic and rough peasant boots, with the long hoary priestly beard of a vagabond pilgrim, traveling third class on a wooden bench in a fetid train carriage crowded with the ragged poor. In the name of the equality of souls he has turned himself into a cobbler; in the name of the pristine Jesus he is estranged from the rites and beliefs of Russian Orthodoxy; in the name of Christian purity he has abandoned wife and family. He is ascetic, celibate, pacifist. To the multitude of his followers and disciples (Gandhi among them), he is a living saint.

And over here—in the opposite panel—is Tolstoy at twenty-three: a dandy, a horseman, a soldier, a hunter, a tippler, a gambler, a wastrel, a frequenter of fashionable balls, a carouser among gypsies, a seducer of servant girls; an aristocrat immeasurably wealthy, inheritor of a far-flung estate, master of hundreds of serfs. Merely to settle a debt at cards, he thinks nothing of selling (together with livestock and a parcel of land) several scores of serfs.

In caricature, the two—the old Tolstoy, the young Tolstoy—cannot be reconciled. In conscience, in contriteness, they very nearly can. The young Tolstoy's diaries are self-interrogations that lead to merciless self-indictments, pledges of spiritual regeneration, and utopian programs for both personal renewal and the amelioration of society at large. But the youthful reformer is also a consistent backslider. At twenty-six he writes scathingly, "I am ugly, awkward, untidy and socially uncouth. I am irritable and tiresome to others; immoderately intolerant and shy as a child. In other words, a boor.... I am excessive, vacillating, unstable, stupidly vain and aggressive, like all weaklings. I am not courageous. I am so lazy that idleness has become an ineradicable habit with me." After admitting nevertheless to a love of virtue, he confesses: "Yet there is one thing I love more than virtue: fame. I am so ambitious and this craving in me has had so little satisfaction, that if I had to choose between fame and virtue, I am afraid I would very often opt for the former."¹

A year later, as an officer stationed at Sevastopol during the Crimean War, he is all at once struck by a "grandiose, stupendous" thought. "I feel capable of devoting my life to it. It is the founding of a new religion, suited to the present state of mankind: the religion of Christ, but divested of faith and mysteries, a practical religion, not promising eternal bliss but providing bliss here on earth. I realize," he acknowledges, "that this idea can only become a reality after several generations have worked consciously toward it," but in the meantime he is still gambling, losing heavily, and complaining of "fits of lust" and "criminal sloth."² The idealist is struggling in the body of the libertine; and the libertine is always, at least in the diaries, in pursuit of self-cleansing.

It was in one of these recurrent moods of purification in the wake of relapse that Tolstoy determined, in 1851, to go to the Caucasus, an untamed region of mountains, rivers, and steppes. He had deserted his university studies; he was obsessed by cards, sex, illusion, infatuation; he was footloose and parentless. His mother had died when he was two, his father seven years later. He had been indulged by adoring elderly aunts, patient tutors, obsequious servants (whom he sometimes had flogged). When the family lands fell to him, he attempted to lighten the bruised and toilsome lives of his serfs; the new threshing machine he ordered failed, and behind his back they called him a madman. Futility and dissatisfaction dogged him. Once more a catharsis was called for, the hope of a fresh start innocent of salons and balls, in surroundings unspoiled by fashion and indolence, far from the silks and artifices of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Not fragile vows in a diary, but an act of radical displacement. If Rousseau was Tolstoy's inspiration—the philosopher's dream of untutored nature—his brother Nicholas, five years his senior, was his opportunity. Nicholas was an officer at *stanitsa*, a Cossack outpost, in the Caucasus. Tolstoy joined him there as a zealous cadet. The zeal was for the expectation of military honors, but even more for the exhilaration of seeing Cossack life up close. The Cossacks, like their untrammelled landscape, were known to be wild and free; they stood for the purity of natural man, untainted by the affectations of an overrefined society.

So thinks Olenin, the young aristocrat whose sensibility is the motivating fulcrum of *The Cossacks*, the novel Tolstoy began in 1852, shortly after his arrival in the Caucasus. Like Tolstoy himself, Olenin at eighteen

had been free as only the rich, parentless young of Russia's eighteen forties could be. He had neither moral nor physical fetters. He could do anything he wanted. ... He gave himself up to all his passions, but only to the extent that they did not bind him.... Now that he was leaving Moscow he was in that happy, youthful state of mind in which a young man, thinking of the mistakes he has committed, suddenly sees things in a different light—sees that these past mistakes were incidental and unimportant, that back then he had not wanted to live a good life but that now, as he was leaving Moscow, a new life was beginning in which there would be no such mistakes and no need for remorse. A life in which there would be nothing but happiness.

But the fictional Olenin is Tolstoy's alter ego only in part. After months of dissipation, each comes to the Caucasus as a volunteer soldier attached to a Russian brigade; each is in search of clarity of heart. Olenin, though, is a wistful outsider who is gradually drawn into the local mores and longs to adopt its ways, while his creator is a sophisticated and psychological omniscient sympathizer with the eye of an evolving anthropologist.

After starting work on *The Cossacks*, Tolstoy soon set it aside and did not return to finish until an entire decade had elapsed. In the interval, he continued to serve in the military for another three years; he published stories and novels; he traveled in Europe; he married. Still, there is little evidence of a hiatus; the narrative of *The Cossacks* is nearly seamless. It pauses only once, of necessity, in Chapter Four—which, strikingly distanced from character and story, and aiming to explain Cossack culture to the uninitiated, reads much like an entry in a popular encyclopedia. Terrain and villages are minutely noted; also dress, weapons, songs, shops, vineyards, hunting and fishing customs, the status and behavior of girls and women. "At the core of [Cossack] character," Tolstoy writes, "lies love of freedom, idleness, plunder, and war.... A Cossack bears less hatred for a Chechen warrior who has killed his brother than

for a Russian soldier billeted with him.... A dashing young Cossack will flaunt his knowledge of Tatar, and will even speak it with his brother Cossacks when he drinks and carouses with them. And yet this small group of Christians, cast off on a distant corner of the earth, surrounded by Russian soldiers and half-savage Mohammedan tribes, regard themselves as superior, and acknowledge only other Cossacks as their equals." On and on, passage after descriptive passage, these living sketches of Cossack society accumulate—so much so that a contemporary critic observed, "A score of ethnological articles could not give a more complete, exact, and colorful picture of this part of our land."³

The name "Cossack" appears to derive from a Turkic root meaning freebooter, or, in a milder interpretation, adventurer. As a distinct population group, the Cossacks grew out of the movement of peasants escaping serfdom, who in the fifteenth century fled to the rivers and barren plains of Ukraine and southeastern Russia, seeking political autonomy. Having established self-governing units in areas close to Muslim-dominated communities, whose dress and outlook they often assimilated, the Cossacks were eventually integrated into the Russian military; their villages became army outposts defending Russia against the furies of neighboring Chechen fighters. It is into this history—that of an admirable, courageous, independent people, in gaudy Circassian costume, the women as splendidly self-reliant as the men—that Tolstoy sets Olenin, his citified patrician. And it is vital for Tolstoy to halt his story before it has barely begun—momentarily to obliterate it from view—in order to supply his readers in Moscow and St. Petersburg with a geographical and sociological portrait of the land Olenin is about to encounter. For such readers, as for Olenin, the Cossacks are meant to carry the romantic magnetism of the noble primitive.

But there is a different, and far more sinister, strain of Cossack history, which Tolstoy omits, and which later readers—we who have passed through the bloody portals of the twentieth century—cannot evade. Tolstoy saw, and survived, war. We too have seen war; but we have also seen, and multitudes have not survived, genocide. The most savage of wars boasts a cause, or at least a pretext; genocide pretends nothing other than the lust for causeless slaughter. And it is genocide, it must be admitted, that is the ineluctable resonance of the term "Cossacks." Writing one hundred and fifty years ago, Tolstoy registers no consciousness of this genocidal association—the long trail of Cossack pogroms and butcheries—hence the Cossacks of his tale are merely conventional warriors. Lukashka, a young fighter, coldly fells a Chechen enemy; his companions vie for possession of the dead man's coat and weapons. Afterward they celebrate with pails of vodka. A flicker of humane recognition touches the killer, but is quickly snuffed: "He too was a man!" Lukashka said, evidently admiring the dead Chechen." To which a fellow Cossack replies, "Yes, but if it had been up to him, he wouldn't have shown *you* any mercy." It is the language of war, of warriors, heinous enough, and regrettable—still, nothing beyond the commonplace.

Then is it conceivable that we know more, or wish to know more, than the majestic Tolstoy? Along with Shakespeare and Dante, he stands at the crest of world literature: who can own a deeper sensibility than that of Tolstoy, who can know more than he? But we do know more: through the grimness of time and the merciless retina of film, we have been witness to indelible scenes of genocide. And it is because of this ineradicable contemporary knowledge of systematic carnage that Cossack history must now, willy-nilly, trigger tremor and alarm. Fast-forward from Tolstoy's eighteen fifties to the year 1920: Isaac Babel, a Soviet

reporter, is riding with the Red Cossacks (a brigade that has made common cause with the Bolsheviks); they are hoping forcibly to bring Poland to Communism. Babel, like Olenin, is a newcomer to the ways of the Cossacks, and he too is entranced by nature's stalwarts. In his private diary he marvels at these skilled and fearless horsemen astride their thundering mounts: "inexplicable beauty," he writes, "an awesome force advancing ... red flags, powerful, well-knit body of men, confident commanders, calm and experienced eyes."⁴ And again, describing a nocturnal tableau: "They eat together, sleep together, a splendid silent companionship.... They sing songs that sound like church music in lusty voices, their devotion to horses, beside each man a little heap—saddle, bridle, ornamental saber, greatcoat."⁵

But there is a lethal underside to this muscular idyll. Daily the Cossacks storm into the little Jewish towns of Polish Galicia, looting, burning, torturing, raping, branding, desecrating, murdering: they are out to slaughter every living Jew. Babel, a Jew who would become one of Russia's most renowned writers (and whom the Soviet secret police would finally execute), conceals his identity: no Jew can survive when Cossacks are near. (My own mother, who emigrated from Czarist Russia in 1906 at the age of nine, once confided, in a horrified whisper, how a great-uncle, seized in a Cossack raid, was tied by his feet to the tail of a horse; the Cossack galloped off, and the man's head went pounding on cobblestones until the skull was shattered.)

Tolstoy did not live to see the atrocities of 1920; he died in 1910, and by then he had long been a Christian pacifist; but surely he was aware of other such crimes. The Cossack depredations of the nineteenth century are infamous; yet these, and the mass killings Babel recorded, hardly weigh at all in comparison with the Chmielnicki massacres that are the bloodiest blot on Cossack history. In a single year, between 1648 and 1649, under the leadership of Bogdan Chmielnicki, Cossacks murdered three hundred thousand Jews, a number not exceeded until the rise of the genocidal Nazi regime.

None of this, it goes without saying, forms the background of Tolstoy's novel; *The Cossacks* after all, is a kind of love story: its theme is longing. The seventeenth century is buried beyond our reach, and already the events of the middle of the twentieth have begun to recede into forgetfulness. All the same, the syllables of "Cossacks" even now retain the fearful death toll, and a reader of our generation who is not historically naïve, or willfully amnesiac, will not be deaf to their sound.

Tolstoy's stories are above all always humane, and his depiction of his Cossacks exuberantly individuated and in many ways unexpectedly familiar. They are neither glorified nor demeaned, and they are scarcely the monsters of their collective annals; if they are idiosyncratic, it is only in the sense of the ordinary human article. *The Cossacks* was immediately acclaimed. Turgenev, older than Tolstoy by ten years, wrote rapturously, "I was carried away."⁶ Turgenev's colleague, the poet Afanasy Fet, exclaimed, "The ineffable superiority of genius!"⁷ and declared *The Cossacks* to be a masterpiece; and so it remains validated by permanence. Then what are we to do with what we know? How are we to regard Tolstoy, who, though steeped in principles of compassion, turned away from what he knew?

The answer, I believe, lies in another principle, sometimes hard to come by. Not the solipsist credo that isolates literature from the world outside of itself, but the idea of the

sovereign integrity of *story*. Authenticity in fiction depends largely on point of view—so it is not Tolstoy's understanding of the shock of history that must be looked for; it is Olenin's. And it is certain that Olenin's mind is altogether bare of anything that will not stir the attention of a dissolute, rich, and copiously indulged young man who lives, like most young men of his kind, wholly in the present, prone to the prejudices of his class and time. Tolstoy means to wake him up—not to history, not to pity or oppression, but to the sublimeness of the natural world.

So come, reader, and never mind!—set aside the somber claims of history, at least for the duration of this airy novel. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* pays no heed to the Spanish Armada; *Pride and Prejudice* happily ignores the Napoleonic Wars; *The Cossacks* is unstained by the horrors of war. A bucolic fable is under way, and Olenin will soon succumb to the mountains, the forest, the village, the spirited young men, the bold young women. His first view of the horizon—“massive mountains, clean and white in their gentle contours, the intricate, distinctive line of the peaks and the sky”—captivates him beyond his stale expectations, and far more genuinely than the recent enthusiasms of Moscow: “Bach's music or love, neither of which he had ever believed in.”

All his Moscow memories, the shame and repentance, all his foolish and trivial dreams about the Caucasus, disappeared forever. It was as if a solemn voice told him: “Now it has begun!” ... Two Cossacks ride by, their rifles in slings bouncing lightly on their backs, and the brown and gray legs of their horses blur—again the mountains.... Across the Terek [River] smoke rises from a village—again the mountains.... The sun rises and sparkles on the Terek shimmering through the weeds—the mountains.... A bullock cart rolls out of a Cossack village, the women are walking, beautiful young women—the mountains....

And almost in an instant Olenin is transformed, at least outwardly. He sheds his formal city clothes for a Circassian coat to which a dagger is strapped, grows a Cossack mustache and a beard, and carries a Cossack rifle. Even his complexion alters, from an urban pallor to the ruddiness of clear mountain air. After three months of hard bivouac living, the Russian soldiers come flooding into the village, stinking of tobacco, their presence and possessions forced on unwilling Cossack hosts. Olenin is no ordinary soldier—his servant had accompanied him from Moscow, and he is plainly a gentleman who can pay well for his lodging, so he is quartered in one of the better accommodations, a gabled house with a porch which belongs to the cornet, a man of self-conscious status: he is a teacher attached to the regiment. To make room for him, the cornet and his family must move into an adjacent thatch-roofed house: Olenin, like every Russian billeted in the village, is an unwelcome encroachment. “You think I need such a plague? A bullet into your bowels!” cries Old Ulitkin, the cornet's wife. Maryanka, the daughter, gives him silent teasing hostile glances, and Olenin yearns to speak to her: “Her strong, youthful step, the untamed look in the flashing eyes peering over the edge of the white kerchief, and her strong, shapely body struck Olenin. ‘She is the one!’ he thought.” And again:

He watched with delight how freely and gracefully she leaned forward, her pink smock clinging to her breasts and shapely legs, and how she straightened up, her rising breasts outlined clearly beneath the tight cloth. He watched her slender feet lightly touching the ground in their worn red slippers, and her strong arms with rolled-up sleeves thrusting the spade into the dung as if in anger, her deep, black eyes glancing at him. Though her delicate eyebrows frowned at times, her eyes expressed pleasure and awareness of their beauty.

But he cannot approach her. He is solitary, watchful, bemused by everything around him. He sits on his porch, reading, dreaming; alone and lost in the woods, he is overpowered by a spurt of mystical idealism. More and more the abandoned enticements and impressions of Moscow ebb, and more and more he immerses himself in Cossack habits. He befriends a garrulous, grizzled old hunter, Eroshka, a drunkard and a sponger, who teaches him the secrets of the forest and introduces him to Chikhir, the local spirits. In and out of his cups Eroshka is a rough-cut philosopher, ready to be blood brother to all—Tatars, Armenian Russians. He mocks the priests, and believes that “when you croak ... grass will grow over your grave, and that will be that.” “There’s no sin in anything,” he tells Olenin. “It’s all a lie.”

And meanwhile Maryanka continues elusive. She is being courted by Lukashka, whom Olenin both admires and envies. Lukashka is all that Olenin is not—brash, reckless, wild, a fornicator and carouser, fit for action, at one with the life of a fighter. He is a Cossack, and it is a Cossack—not Olenin—that is Maryanka’s desire. Even when Olenin is finally and familiarly accepted by Old Ulitka, Maryanka resists. At bottom, *The Cossacks* is an old-fashioned love triangle, as venerable as literature itself; yet it cannot be consummated, on either man’s behalf. Maryanka may not have Lukashka—violence destroys him. And she must repudiate Olenin: he is a stranger, and will always remain so. Despite the Circassian coercion, despite Eroshka’s embraces, despite the merrymaking Chikhir, he is, unalterably, a Russian gentleman. He will never be a Cossack. In the end Moscow will reclaim him.

But Tolstoy’s art has another purpose, apart from the regretful realism of the tale’s denouement and its understated psychological wisdom. It is, in this novel, a young man’s ardor, instinct with ardor—an ardor lacking any tendril of the judgmental. By contrast, the old Tolstoy, at seventy, pledged to religio-political issues of conscience, nevertheless declined to lend his moral weight to a manifesto seeking a reprieve for Alfred Dreyfus, the French Jewish officer falsely accused of treason. Though this was the cause célèbre of the age, Tolstoy was scornful: Dreyfus was hardly a man of the people; he was not a *muzhik*; he was not a pacifist believer. “It would be a strange thing,” he insisted, “that we Russians should take up the defense of Dreyfus, an utterly undistinguished man, when so many exceptional ones have been hanged, deported, or imprisoned at home.”⁸ His polemical engines charged instead in a campaign on behalf of the Dukhobors, an ascetic communal sect that refused to bear arms and, like Tolstoy himself, preached nonresistance to evil. A brutal initiative urged by the Czar had exiled the group to the Caucasus, where at the government’s behest bands of Cossack horsemen surrounded the sectarians, whipped and maimed them, and pillaged their houses. Tolstoy was outraged, and in a letter to the Czar protested that such religious persecutions were “the shame of Russia.” That among the agents of persecution were the selfsame Cossack daredevils about whom he had written so enchantingly forty years before will perhaps not escape notice.

And again: never mind! The young Tolstoy is here possessed less by social commitment than by the sensory. His visionary lyricism exults in Maryanka’s strong legs, and in the mountains, woods, and sparkling rivers of the Caucasus. The Caucasus is his motive and his message. Natural beauty is his lure. Tolstoy’s supremacy in capturing heat, weather, dust, the thick odors of the vineyard, culminates in a voluptuous passage:

The villagers were swarming over the melon fields and over the vineyards that lay in the stifling shade, clusters

of ripe black grapes shimmering among broad, translucent leaves. Creaking carts heaped high with grapes made their way along the road leading from the vineyards, and grapes crushed by the wheels lay everywhere in the dust. Little boys and girls, their arms and mouths filled with grapes and their shirts stained with grape juice, ran after their mothers. Tattered laborers carried filled baskets on powerful shoulders. Village girls, kerchiefs wound tightly across their faces, drove bullocks harnessed to loaded carts. Soldiers by the roadside asked for grapes, and the women climbed onto the rolling carts and threw bunches down, the men holding out their shirt flaps to catch them. In some courtyards the grapes were already being pressed, and the aroma of grape-skin leavings filled the air.... Laughter, song, and the happy voices of women came from within a sea of shadowy green vines, through which their smocks and kerchiefs peeked.

The scene is Edenic, bursting with fecundity, almost biblical in its overflowingness. Scenes and juices spill out of every phrase: it is Tolstoy's sensuous genius at its ripest. Olenin will not return to Moscow, yes; but his eyes have been dyed by the grape harvest, and he will never see again as he once saw, before the Caucasus, before Maryanka, before the mountains. The novel's hero is the primordial earth itself, civilization's dream of the pastoral. The old Tolstoy—that crabbed puritanical sermonizing septuagenarian who wrote *What Is Art?*, a treatise condemning the pleasures of the senses—might wish to excoriate the twenty-something author of *The Cossacks*. The old Tolstoy is the apostle of renunciation. But the young Tolstoy, who opens Olenin to the intoxications of the natural world, and to the longings of love, means to become, at least for a time, an apostle of desire.

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NOTES

1. *Tolstoy*, by Henri Troyat. A biography translated from the French by Nancy Amphoux. Doubleday, 1967, p. 116.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 284 (the critic was one Annenkov, writing in the *St. Petersburg Review*).
4. *Isaac Babel; 1920 Diary*. Edited by Carol J. Avins, translated from the Russian by H. Willetts. Yale University Press, 1995, p. 14.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
6. Troyat, p. 284.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 285.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 564.



Moscow lies silent. From time to time screeching wheels echo in the wintry streets. Lights no longer burn in the windows, and the street-lamps have gone out. The ringing of church bells rolls over the sleeping city, warning of the approach of dawn. The streets are empty. The narrow runners of a nighttime sleigh mix sand and snow as the driver pulls over to a corner and dozes off, waiting for a fare. An old woman walks past on her way to church, where candles, sparse and red, are already burning asymmetrically, throwing their light onto the golden icon stands. The workers of the city are waking after the long winter night and preparing to go to work.

But fashionable young gentlemen are still out on the town.

Light flickers illegally from behind the closed shutters in one of Chevalier's windows. Carriages, sleighs, and cabs are huddling in a line by the entrance. A troika is waiting to leave. A porter, bundled in a heavy coat, stands crouching behind the corner of the house as if hiding from someone.

"Why do they keep blathering, on and on?" a footman sitting in the hall at Chevalier's door wonders, his face drawn. "And always when it's my shift!"

From the brightly lit room next to the hall come the voices of three young men. One is small, neat, thin, and ugly, and gazes with kind, weary eyes at his friend, who is about to leave on a journey. The second, a tall man, is twiddling his watch fob as he lies on a sofa next to a table covered with the remains of a banquet and empty wine bottles. The man about to leave on a journey is wearing a new fur jacket and is pacing up and down the room. From time to time he stops to crack an almond with his thick, strong fingers, whose nails are meticulously clean. For some reason he is continually smiling. A fire burns in his eyes. He speaks passionately, waving his arms. But it is clear that he is searching for words, and that the words which come to him seem inadequate to express what has moved him. He is constantly smiling. "Now I can tell you everything!" he says. "It's not that I am trying to justify myself, but I want you, of all people, to understand me as well as I understand myself—I don't want you to see things the way a vulgar person would. You say that I have done her wrong!" He turns to the small man, who is gazing at him with kindly eyes.

"Yes, you have done her wrong," the small, ugly man answers, and it seems that even more kindness and weariness are reflected in his eyes.

"I know your point of view," the man about to leave continues. "You feel that there is as much happiness in being the object of love as there is in loving—and that if you attain it once, it's enough for a lifetime!"

"Oh yes, quite enough, my dear fellow! More than enough!" the small, ugly man says with conviction, opening his eyes wide and then closing them.

“But why not experience love oneself?” the man setting out on a journey says. He becomes pensive for a moment and then looks at his friend as if pitying him. “Why not love? I don’t mean ‘Why not be loved?’ No, being loved is a misfortune! It’s a misfortune because you feel guilty that you cannot return the same feelings, that you cannot reciprocate. Lord!” He waves his hand disparagingly. “If only this could all happen reasonably. But it seems to have a will of its own. It’s as if I had made her fall in love with me. I know that’s what you think—know you do. Don’t deny it! But will you believe me if I tell you that of all the bad and foolish things I have done in my life, this is the only one I do not and cannot repent of! I do not lie to her, not at the beginning and not later! I really thought I had finally fallen in love, but then I realized that the whole thing was an unintentional lie, that one cannot love that way. So I simply could not continue. And yet she did. Is it my fault I couldn’t? What was I to do?”

“Well, it’s all over now!” his friend said, lighting a cigar to chase away his drowsiness. “But one thing is clear: you have not yet loved, and you don’t know what love is!”

The young man about to set out on a journey clasped his head in his hands, again wanting to express something, but unable to find words. “You are right! I have never loved! But I have a desire within me to love, a burning desire! Yet the question remains: Does such a love exist? Somehow everything is so incomplete. But what’s the point of even talking about it! I have made a mess of my life, a complete mess! But you’re right, it’s all over now. I feel that I am about to embark on a new life!”

“A new life that you’ll also make a mess of,” the man on the sofa cut in.

But his friend did not hear him. “I am sad to be leaving but also happy,” he continued. “Though I have no idea why I am sad.” He began to speak about himself, not noticing that the others did not find the topic as interesting as he did. A person is never so much an egoist as in moments of rapture. He feels that at such times there is nothing more splendid or interesting than himself.

A young house serf wrapped in a scarf and wearing a heavy coat came into the room. “Dmitri Andreyevich, the driver says he cannot wait any longer—the horses have been harnessed since midnight, and it’s already four in the morning!”

Dmitri Andreyevich looked at his serf Vanyusha. In the serf’s coarse scarf, his felt boots, and his drowsy face, he heard the voice of another life calling to him—a life full of hardship, deprivation, and work.

“Yes, we must leave! Farewell!” he said, patting the front of his jacket to see if any of the buttons were unclasped. The others urged him to tip the driver to wait a little longer, but he put on his hat and stood for a moment in the middle of the room. The friends kissed good-by—once, twice, then stopped and kissed a third time. He walked up to the table, emptied the glass, took the small, ugly man by the hand, and blushing said, “I must speak my mind before I go.... I must be straightforward with you, because I love you dearly, my friend.... You are the one who loves her, aren’t you? I sensed it from the beginning ... no?”

“Yes, I love her,” his friend replied, smiling even more gently. “And perhaps ...”

“Excuse me, but I have been ordered to put out the candles,” one of the sleepy waiters said, hearing the last words of the conversation and wondering why gentlemen always kept

saying the same things. "Who should I make the bill out to? To you, sir?" he asked, turning to the tall man, knowing very well that he was the one who was to pay.

"Yes, to me," the tall man said. "How much do I owe?"

"Twenty-six rubles."

The tall man thought for an instant but said nothing and slipped the bill into his pocket.

The other two friends were continuing their farewell. "Good-bye, you are a splendid fellow," the small, ugly man said.

Their eyes filled with tears. They went out onto the front steps.

"Oh, by the way," Dmitri Andreyevich said, blushing as he turned to the tall man. "Take care of the check, will you? And then send me a note."

"Don't worry about it!" the tall man said, putting on his gloves. "Ah, how I envy you!" he added quite unexpectedly.

Dmitri Andreyevich climbed into the sleigh and wrapped himself in a heavy fur coat. "Well, why don't you come along?" he said, his voice shaking. He even moved over and made room. But his friend quickly said, "Good-bye, Mitya! God grant that you ..." He could not end his sentence, as his only wish was for Dmitri Andreyevich to leave as soon as possible.

They fell silent for a few moments. One of them said another farewell. Someone called out "Off you go!" And Dmitri Andreyevich's driver set off.

One of the friends shouted, "Elizar, I'm ready!" And the cabbies and the coachman stirred, clicked their tongues, and whipped their horses. The wheels of the frozen coach creaked loudly over the snow.

"Olenin is a good fellow," one of the two friends said. "But what an idea to set out for the Caucasus, and as a cadet of all things! Not my notion of fun! Are you lunching at the club tomorrow?"

"Yes."

The two friends drove off in different directions.

Olenin felt warm in his heavy fur, even hot, and he leaned back in the sleigh and unfastened his coat. The three shaggy post-horses trudged from one dark street to the next, past houses he had never seen before. He felt that only travelers leaving the city drove through these streets. All around was darkness, silence, and dreariness, but his soul was filled with memories, love, regrets, and pleasant, smothering tears.

"I love them! I love them dearly! They are such wonderful fellows!" he kept repeating, on the verge of tears. But why? Who were these wonderful fellows? Whom did he love? He wasn't quite sure. From time to time he looked at one of the houses and was astonished at how odd it was. There were moments when he was surprised that the sleigh driver and Vanyusha, who were so alien to him, were sitting so close, rattling and rocking with him as the outrunners

tugged at the frozen traces. Again he said, "What fine fellows, I love them dearly!" He even burst out, "I'm overcome! How wonderful!" And he was taken aback at saying this, thinking, "I'm not drunk, am I?" Olenin had drunk a good two bottles of wine, but it was not only the wine that had affected him: He remembered the words of friendship that had seemed so sincere, words that had been uttered shyly, impulsively, before his departure. He remembered his hands being clasped, looks, moments of silence, the special tone in a voice saying, "Farewell, Mitya!" as he was sitting in the sleigh. He remembered how sincere he had been. All this had a touching significance for him. He felt that it was not only good friends and acquaintances who had rallied around him before his departure. Even men indifferent to him, who actually disliked him, or indeed were hostile to him, had somehow resolved to like him and to forgive him, as one is forgiven in the confessional or at the hour of one's death.

"Perhaps I will never return from the Caucasus," he thought and decided that he loved his friends, and the others too. He felt sorry for himself. But it was not his love for his friends that raised his soul to such heights that he could not restrain the foolish words that spontaneously burst from him; nor was it love for a woman which had reduced him to this state. (He had never been in love.) What made him cry and mutter disconnected words was love for himself—a young, burning love filled with hope, a love for all that was good within his soul (and he felt at this moment that everything within his soul was good). Olenin had not studied anywhere, was not employed anywhere (except for some nominal appearances he put in at an office), had already squandered half his fortune, and though he was twenty-four had not yet chosen a career or done anything in life. He was what Moscow society calls "a young man."

At eighteen, Olenin had been free as only the rich, parentless young of Russia's eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could be. He had neither moral nor physical fetters. He could do anything he wanted. He had no family, no fatherland, no faith, and wanted for nothing. He believed in nothing and followed nothing. And yet he was far from being a dry, bored, or somber young man. Quite the contrary. He was fascinated by everything. He decided that love did not exist, but whenever he happened to be in the presence of an attractive young woman, he found himself rooted to the spot. He had always been of the opinion that honors and titles were nonsense and yet had felt an involuntary pleasure when Prince Sergei walked up to him at a ball and spoke a few pleasant words. He gave himself up to all his passions, but only to the extent that they did not bind him. The instant he immersed himself in a certain activity and felt the imminence of a struggle, the tiresome struggle of everyday life, he instinctively hurried to tear himself away and reassert his freedom. This was how he had approached work, society, dabbling in agriculture, music (which for a while he had thought of devoting himself to), and even the love of women, in which he did not believe. He thought a great deal about where he should direct the power of youth that is granted a man only once in a lifetime. Not the power of mind, spirit, or education but the power to make of himself and of the whole world whatever he wants. Should he direct this power toward art, science, love, or toward some practical venture? There are people who lack this drive, who the moment they enter life slip their heads beneath the first yoke that comes their way and diligently toil beneath it to the end of their days. But Olenin was too aware of the presence of the all-powerful god of youth, the capacity to stake everything on a single aspiration, a single thought, the capacity to do what one sets out to do, the ability to dive headfirst into a bottomless abyss without knowing

why or what for. He bore this awareness within him, was proud of it and unconscious pleased with it. Until now he had loved only himself and could not do otherwise, because he expected nothing but good. He had not yet had time to be disappointed in himself. Now that he was leaving Moscow he was in that happy, youthful state of mind in which a young man, thinking of the mistakes he has committed, suddenly sees things in a different light—sees that those past mistakes were incidental and unimportant, that back then he had not wanted to live a good life but that now, as he was leaving Moscow, a new life was beginning in which there would be no such mistakes and no need for remorse. A life in which there would be nothing but happiness.

As always happens between the first two or three post stages during a long journey, one's imagination lingers at the place one has left, but then suddenly, as one wakes up on the first morning on the road, one's imagination shifts to the journey's end, where it builds castles in the air. This is how it was with Olenin, too.

Outside Moscow, he gazed at the snow-covered fields and was happy that he was alone in the vast expanse. He wrapped himself in his fur, lay down in the bottom of the sleigh, calmed down and, no longer agitated, began to doze. The farewells had shaken him, and he thought of the past winter he had spent in Moscow. Images interrupted by vague thoughts and reproaches began springing up in his mind despite himself. He remembered the friend who had seen him off, and his affection for the young woman they had spoken of. She was rich. "How could he love her, in spite of the fact that she loved me?" he wondered, and a nascent suspicion came into his mind. "There seems to be a lot of dishonesty in people. But why have I never loved?" he asked himself suddenly. "They keep telling me that I have never loved. Can it be that I am some sort of moral cripple?" And he began thinking about his past infatuations. He remembered the sister of one of his friends in the days when he first entered society. He had spent many evenings sitting with her at a table, a lamp lighting the lower part of her delicate face and her slim fingers at their embroidery. He remembered the long, faltering conversations, their awkwardness in each other's presence, and the unease and persistent annoyance he felt in the face of this awkwardness. An inner voice kept saying, "This isn't quite right, this isn't quite right." And it wasn't. Then he remembered a ball, and a mazurka he had danced with the beautiful D. "I was so much in love that night! How happy I was! And how ill and vexed I was the next morning when I woke up and realized I felt completely free! Where is love? Will it not come and bind me hand and foot?" he thought. "No! Love does not exist! The young lady next door, who told me that she loves the stars in the sky, which she also told Dubrovin and my bailiff, was also 'not quite right.'" Olenin remembered his farming venture in the village, but in this memory too there was nothing he could dwell on with pleasure.

"I wonder how long they'll be talking about my leaving?" he suddenly thought but was not clear about who "they" might be. The following thought, which made him knit his brow, was of his tailor, Monsieur Cappelle, and the 678 rubles that Olenin still owed him. He recalled the words with which he had asked the tailor to wait another year to be paid, and the expression of bewilderment and resignation on the tailor's face. "O God, o God!" Olenin said, screwing up his eyes and trying to chase away the unbearable thought. "And yet, in spite of everything, she did love me!" he mumbled, thinking of the young woman he and his friend had mentioned during their farewell. "If I had married her I would have been able to pay o

all my debts, and now I also owe so much money to Vasilyev.” He thought of how he had played cards with Vasilyev the night before at the club, to which he had gone directly after seeing her, and how he had then humiliated himself by begging to play on after his money had run out, and Vasilyev’s cold refusal. “A year of thrift and I will pay everything off, and then they can all go to Hell!” But despite this reassurance he again began to count up the debts he still owed, their terms, and when they were due.

“And I owe Morel quite a bit of money, too,” he remembered, thinking of the long night which he had piled up that substantial debt. It had been a night of wild carousing (there had even been a gypsy orchestra), organized by a group of aristocrats from St. Petersburg: Sashka B., an aide-de-camp to the Czar, and Prince D.—another elderly gentleman of some importance. “Though one wonders why those gentlemen are so pleased with themselves,” Olenin thought. “And the arrogance with which they have set up their little circle, which one is supposed to feel so flattered to join! Just because they’re high-ranking officers? It’s terrible how foolish and vulgar they think everyone else is. I showed them in no uncertain terms that I had little if any interest in being part of all that—though I am sure that my steward Andrei would be quite stunned to hear me address a gentleman like Sashka B., a real colonel and an aide-de-camp to the Czar, as ‘my dear fellow.’ That evening nobody drank more than I did. I taught the gypsies a new song, and everyone sat listening to it. Even if I’ve done a lot of foolish things in my life I am, after all, a very, very impressive young man,” Olenin thought.

Morning found Olenin at the third post stage. He drank tea, surprised Vanyusha by helping him reload the bundles and trunks, and then sat stiff-backed in the sleigh among his belongings, organized, punctilious, and extremely pleased at knowing where everything was. He knew where his money was and how much he had, where his passport and traveling papers were, and everything seemed to him set up so practically and so nicely organized that he became quite cheerful and saw the long journey ahead as nothing more than an extended jaunt.

Throughout the morning and well into the day he was immersed in calculations: how many versts* he had traveled, how many remained to the next post stage, how many to the first town, how many till lunch, till evening tea, till Stavropol, and what fraction of the whole journey he had already put behind him. He also calculated how much money he had: how much was left, how much was needed to pay off all his debts, and what part of his income he could live on every month. By evening, as he drank his tea, he had calculated that the road to Stavropol was seven-elevenths of the whole journey, that these debts amounted to one-eighth of his assets, and that with some economizing he could pay them off within seven months. He complacently wrapped himself in his coat, made himself comfortable in the sleigh, and dozed off.

His imagination now dwelt on the future in the Caucasus. All his dreams involved Ammalat-beks,* Circassian†† maidens, mountains, raging torrents, and looming dangers. His visions were hazy and obscure, but beckoning glory and menacing death gave this future a veneer of excitement. With remarkable bravery and breathtaking strength, he saw himself slaughtering and subjugating hordes of wild Chechens, and then again he imagined himself a Chechen fighting the Russians for independence, shoulder to shoulder with his comrades. As his dreams grew more detailed, familiar faces from Moscow appeared: Sashka B. fighting

against him alongside the Russians, or then again fighting him alongside the Chechens. Even the tailor, Monsieur Cappelle, somehow ended up celebrating with the victors. But now when old humiliations and mistakes came to mind, the memory was pleasant. It was clear that in the Caucasus, surrounded by mountains, torrents, Circassian maidens, and danger, such mistakes would not be repeated. He had now confessed these errors to himself, and that was that.

But there was another dream, the sweetest of them all, that merged with the young man's dreams of the future. It was about a woman. She stood there in the mountains, a Circassian slave girl, slender, with a long braid and deep, docile eyes. He imagined a solitary hut high in the mountains, with her waiting by the door as he came home tired and covered with dirt, blood, and glory. He imagined her kisses, her shoulders, her sweet voice, her docility. She was beautiful but uneducated, wild, and rough. During the long winter nights he would begin to educate her. She was clever and quick-witted and would soon learn all the essentials. And why not? She would also have a knack for languages, read French novels, and even understand them—she would surely love *Notre-Dame de Paris*. And she would be able to speak French. In a drawing room she would have more poise than a lady of the highest society. And she could sing—simply, with strength and passion.

“Ah, sheer nonsense!” Olenin said to himself. They had arrived at a post stage, and he had to climb into a new sleigh and pay a tip. But he quickly fell back into his nonsensical dream and again imagined Circassian maidens, glory, a return to Russia, the rank of colonel, and a beautiful wife.

“But there’s no such thing as love, and honors are sheer nonsense!” he said to himself. “And what about the 678 rubles? But the conquered lands of the Caucasus will give me all the wealth I need! Though now I think of it, it wouldn’t really be proper to keep it all for myself. No, I will have to distribute it. But to whom? I’ll start off by giving Cappelle 678 rubles, and then we’ll see.” The images that clouded his thoughts became hazier, and only Vanyusha’s voice and the sleigh stopping interrupted his healthy, sound sleep. In a drowsy stupor he changed sleighs at a new post stage, and they drove on.

The following morning brought the same stages, the same tea, the same bouncing horse-cruppers, the same short conversations with Vanyusha, the same vague dreams and evening slumber, followed by a night of tired, healthy sleep.

3

The further Olenin traveled from the heart of Russia, the more distant all his memories seemed, and the nearer he drew to the Caucasus, the lighter his heart became. “I don’t even want to go back or show my face in society again!” he thought. “Here the people are not really *people*—I mean, none of them know me or will ever move in my circles in Moscow or hear anything about my past. Nor is it likely that anyone in Moscow will ever find out anything I do here.” A new sense of being free of his past overcame Olenin among the rough and simple men he met along the road, whom he did not acknowledge as “people” on the

level of his Moscow acquaintances. The rougher the people and the fewer the signs of civilization, the freer he felt. He hated Stavropol, through which he had to travel: There were signboards everywhere, some even in French, ladies in carriages, cabbies waiting in squares on a boulevard, and a gentleman in a hat and coat eyeing all who drove by. "It wouldn't surprise me if these people knew some of my acquaintances," he muttered to himself, and again he thought of the club, the tailor, the cards, and Moscow society. But beyond Stavropol everything was most satisfactory—wild and, above all, beautiful and dangerous. Olenin became more and more cheerful. He regarded the Cossacks, coachmen, and innkeepers as simple men with whom he could chat and joke without having to think about what class they belonged. They were all part of mankind, toward which Olenin felt an unconscious natural warmth, and they were all friendly to him.

While still in the land of the Cossacks of the river Don, he changed from sleigh to cart, and beyond Stavropol the weather was so warm that he rode without his coat. It was suddenly spring—an unexpected, joyful spring for Olenin. At night he was warned not to venture out of the fortified Cossack villages, for they said it was dangerous after dark. Vanyusha was becoming anxious, and a loaded gun lay beside him in the cart. Olenin became increasingly cheerful. At one of the post stages, he was told that there had been a terrible murder on the road not too long ago. He now saw armed men by the wayside. "It's beginning!" Olenin said to himself, eager to see the snow-covered mountains about which he had been told so much. One afternoon a Nogai* driver pointed his whip at some mountains shrouded in clouds. Olenin peered at them avidly, but the light was fading and they were hidden by the clouds. He saw something white, something gray, but try as he would, he could not find anything attractive in these mountains about which he had heard and read so much. He thought the mountains and clouds looked alike, and the extraordinary beauty of snow-covered peaks that everyone went on about was as much an invention as Bach's music or love, neither of which he believed in.

His enthusiasm for the mountains faded. The following day, as he rode in the troika early in the morning, he was awakened by a chilly breeze and looked around indifferently. The morning air was completely clear. Suddenly, not more than twenty paces away, as he first thought, he saw massive mountains, clean and white in their gentle contours, the intricate distinct line of the peaks and the sky. He suddenly grasped the great distance between himself, the mountains, and the sky, the immensity of the mountains, and the boundlessness of this beauty, and was afraid that this might be only an illusion, a dream. He shook himself to wake up—but the mountains were still there.

"What are they? Can you tell me what they are?" he asked the driver.

"Mountains," the Nogai answered indifferently.

"I've been looking at them too," Vanyusha said. "What a sight! No one back home would believe it!"

As the troika sped over the smooth road, the mountains looked as if they were running along the horizon, the rose-colored peaks sparkling in the rising sun. At first the mountains merely took Olenin aback, then they filled him with joy; but then, the more he looked at the chain of mountains that rose not from behind other mountains but straight out of the steppe, the more he *felt* them. At that moment everything he saw, everything he thought, everything

he sensed, took on the stern and majestic character of the mountains. All his Moscow memories, the shame and repentance, all his foolish and trivial dreams about the Caucasus disappeared forever. It was as if a solemn voice told him: "Now it has begun!" The road, the outline of the river Terek visible in the distance, the Cossack villages, and the people—all this now seemed to him no longer trivial. He looks at the sky and sees the mountains. He looks at himself, at Vanyusha—again the mountains. Two Cossacks ride by, their rifles slings bouncing lightly on their backs, and the brown and gray legs of their horses blur—again the mountains.... Across the Terek smoke rises from a village—again the mountains.... The sun rises and sparkles on the Terek shimmering through the reeds—the mountains.... A bullock cart rolls out of a Cossack village, the women are walking, beautiful young women—the mountains.... Chechen marauders roam the steppes, I am riding along the road, but I am not frightened of them, I have a gun, strength, youth—the mountains....

4

The stretch of the Terek along which the Greben Cossack villages lie, about eighty versts in length, unifies the terrain and the people. The river flows swift, turbid, and broad, eternally washing gray sand onto the flat right bank, overgrown with reeds, while eroding the steep, low-lying left bank with its tangled roots of century-old oak trees, rotting plane trees, and young brushwood. The Terek separates the lands of the Cossacks from those of the hill tribes. Peaceful but restless Chechen villages lie on the right bank, while on the left bank, half a verst or so from the water, are the Cossack villages, seven or eight versts from one another. In the old days, most of these villages had been built on the riverbank, but every year the Terek shifted northward and washed over them, and now nothing remains of them but overgrown ruins, kitchen gardens, and pear, plum, and poplar trees entwined with wild brambles and grapevines. No one lives there anymore, and the sandbanks are dotted only by the tracks of deer, wolves, hares, and pheasants. A road runs through the forest linking the Cossack villages that are just over a cannon shot distant from one another, and along the road are watchtowers, with sentinels and military checkpoints manned by Cossacks. Only a thin strip of fertile, wooded land about half a mile wide is under Cossack control. Beyond it lie the rolling dunes of the Nogai and Mozdok steppes that stretch far into the north, emptying, God knows where into the Turkmen, Astrakhan, and Kyrgyz-Kaisak steppes. South of the Terek lie Chechnya, the Kochkalykov Range, the Black Mountains, another range, and the snow-covered massifs whose peaks have been seen but never climbed.

From time out of mind a handsome, warriorlike Russian population of Old Believers called the Greben Cossacks, have lived on this wooded strip of land by the river. A long time ago their forefathers had fled Russia and settled among the Chechens by the banks of the Terek on the Greben, the first ridge of the forest-covered mountains of Chechnya. The Cossacks intermarried with the Chechens and adopted their customs and way of life, but they retained both the Russian language and the Old Beliefs in all their purity. A legend prevailed among the Cossacks that Czar Ivan the Terrible came to the Terek, called the Greben elders into his presence, and granted them the land on the Russian side of the river. He urged the

to live in friendship with Russia and promised not to force his rule upon them or to compel them to change their faith. To this day, the Greben Cossacks claim kinship with the Chechens. At the core of their character lies love of freedom, idleness, plunder, and war. Russian influence expresses itself only in negative ways: the disallowing of elections, the removal of bells, the army stationed there or constantly marching through. A Cossack bears less hatred for a Chechen warrior who has killed his brother than for a Russian soldier billeted with him to defend his village, and who has blackened the walls of his hut with tobacco smoke. A Cossack will respect an enemy tribesman but despise the Russian soldier, whom he sees as an oppressor with strange and alien ways. In fact, to the Cossack the Russian peasants are foreign, wild, and contemptible. The only ones he has met are itinerant peddlers or settlers from the Ukraine, whom the Cossacks scornfully call *shapovali*, "hat pounders." To the Cossack, the epitome of style is dressing in Circassian fashion. The best weapons are bought or stolen from the hill tribes, as are the best horses. A dashing young Cossack will flaunt his knowledge of Tatar, and will even speak it with his brother Cossacks when he drinks and carouses with them. And yet this small group of Christians, cast off on a distant corner of the earth, surrounded by Russian soldiers and half-savage Mohammedan tribes, regard themselves as superior and acknowledge only other Cossacks as their equals.

A Cossack spends most of his time at the checkpoints, on campaigns, or hunting and fishing. He almost never works at home. Even his presence in the village is an exception; he will return there only for the feasts of the holy days, and then he carouses. All Cossacks make their own wine, and drunkenness is not so much a general tendency as a ritual, neglecting which would be considered apostasy. A Cossack regards a woman as an instrument of his well-being: A girl might be allowed to enjoy herself, but a married woman, from her youngest years to advanced old age, has to work hard and fulfill the requirements of obedience and labor prevalent in the East. As a result, women, notwithstanding their apparent subjugation, are well-developed both physically and morally, and have far more authority in the home than do women in the West. A Cossack woman's seclusion and habituation to heavy work give her all the more power within the home. A Cossack considers it unseemly to speak to his wife needlessly or with tenderness in front of others, but when he is alone with her he is aware that she is superior to him. His house, all he owns, his entire property, are amassed and maintained through her work. A Cossack lives in the firm conviction that manual labor is demeaning and appropriate only for a woman or a Nogai workman. But he does have a vague sense that everything he calls his own is a product of women's work, and that it is in the power of women—mothers and wives—whom he considers his slaves, to deprive him of everything. Furthermore, the constant heavy work that Greben women do has given them a uniquely independent and masculine character, and has developed in them physical strength, healthy understanding, decisiveness, and firmness of character. Most of the women are stronger, cleverer, and better looking than the men. The beauty of the Greben women is particularly striking, as it combines the purest features of a Circassian face with a strong and robust Russian body. The Cossack women dress in Circassian fashion—in a Tatar tunic, a quilted jacket, and slippers—but tie their head scarves as Russian women do. They insist on style, cleanliness, and elegance, both in dress and in the decoration of their homes. The women, particularly unmarried girls, enjoy freedom in their dealings with men.

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