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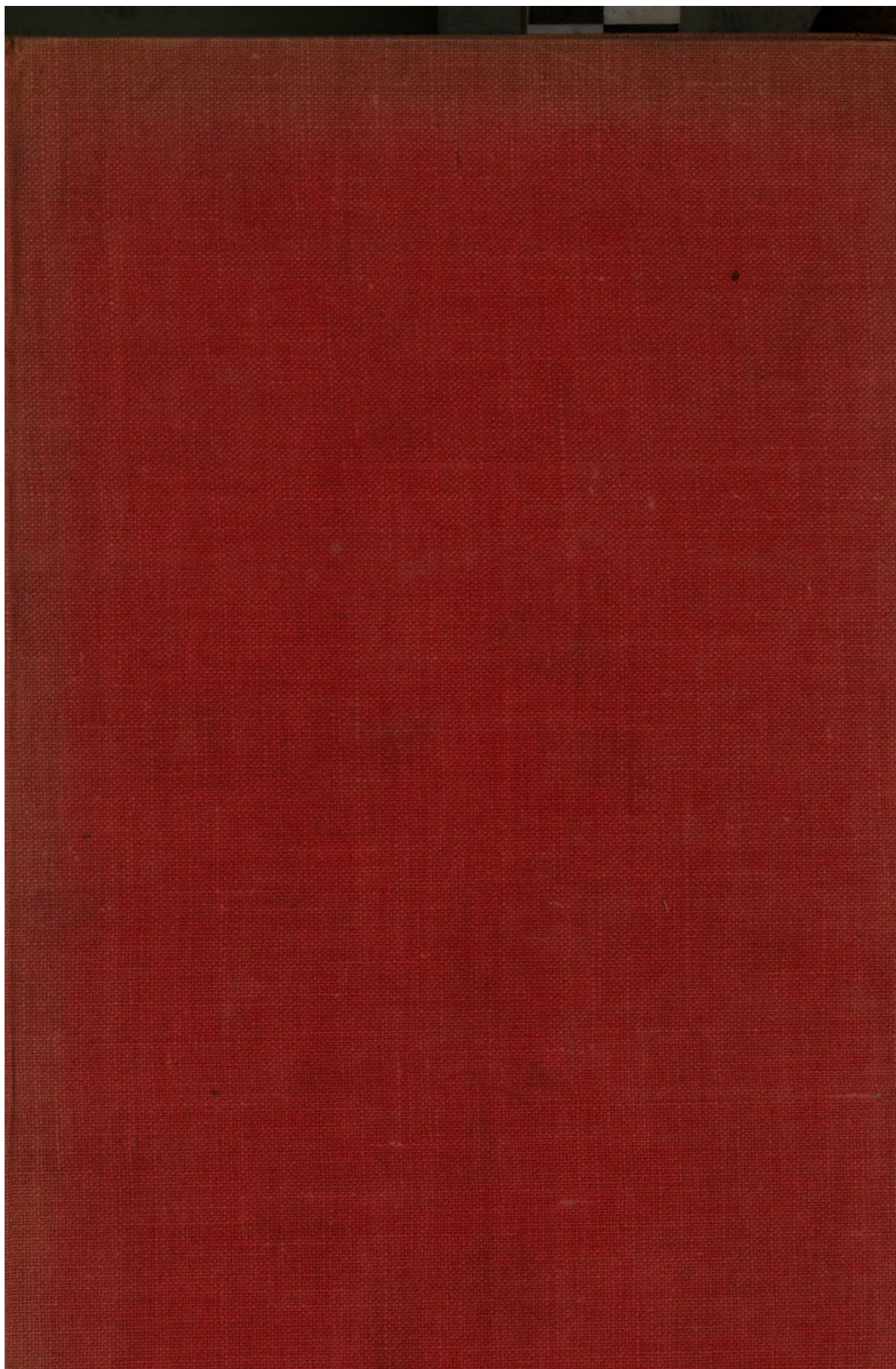
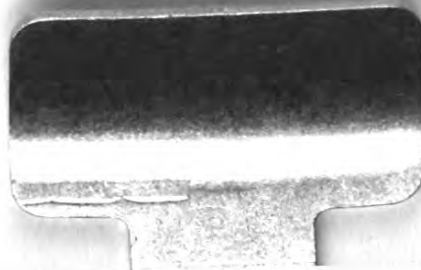


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SOPHKA

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by

BORIS STANCOVITCH



Translated from the Serbian by
ALEC BROWN

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
	TRANSLATOR'S NOTE	9
I	AN OLD FAMILY	19
II	EFFENDI-MITA'S SOPHKITZA	42
III	THE DECLINE OF THE FAMILY	53
IV	SOPHKA'S DELIGHT IN HER BEAUTY	63
V	THE FAMILY'S POVERTY	82
VI	THE FAMILY'S ABASEMENT	101
VII	GAZDA-MARKO AND EFFENDI-MITA	114
VIII	GAZDA-MARKO	120
IX	SALE OF SOPHKA	127
X	BETROTHAL	143
XI	MARKO AND HIS WIFE	155
XII	GAZDA-MARKO'S STORY	162
XIII	SOPHKA BETROTHED	171
XIV	BRIDAL BATHING	177
XV	EFFENDI-MITA'S WOMENFOLK	
	PREPARE	194
XVI	EFFENDI-MITA'S FEAST	202
XVII	THE FEAST CONTINUED	209
XVIII	THE WEDDING	218
XIX		230
XX	SOPHKA SERVES	238

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXI	SOPHKA AND MARKO	243
XXII	SOPHKA AWAITS ATTACK	248
XXIII	MARKO DEFEATED	253
XXIV	SOPHKA AND HER HUSBAND	264
XXV	MARKO DEAD	267
XXVI	THE YOKE GROWS LIGHT	277
XXVII	ANNUNCIATION	281
XXVIII	A NEW YOKE DESCENDS	286
XXIX	PROUD DESOLATION	293
XXX	PROUD RESIGNATION	296

TO
CONSCIENCE BROWN

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

BORIS (or, more correctly, Borisav), Stancovitch died in 1927. The main part of his literary activity lies before the recent wars. He was a native of what used to be known as Old Serbia – roughly the territory lying between Skoplje (more familiar perhaps in its Turkish deformation of Üsküb) and Serbia proper. The action of this book takes place in and about Stancovitch's native town, Vranje (Vranié). The significance of this may escape those less familiar with the Balkans, so I should explain that here is real Balkan country, something very different from the gentle rolling lands of Serbia proper, or the Slavonian plain to the north, or gentle Bosnia. Here we have radiantly barren mountains tenaciously clasping exquisitely fertile valleys. The inhabitants of mountain or valley reflect their soil.

But Sophka is a story of human relations, and the only significance of Stancovitch's district for us is in the fact that, though near to Byzantium, (and thus removed from direct European influence) it is yet far enough away to have been preserved even from that centre's valiant efforts at metamorphosis. Let us but be anachronistic, and take

to-day. Byzantium, having, with quite laudable enthusiasm, done the world service by holding part of the medieval Balkans in pickle for centuries, has, in the shape of its latest product, the Turk, by a flourish of a wilfully unflorid pen essayed, so to speak, to abolish the fez. With restraint indeed laudable Nature has allowed him to hasten slowly, and merely transmuted all fezes to busmen's caps. In the Vranje district even that surface improvement has not been made. It may then perhaps be imagined how very medieval the Vranje country was at the close of the nineteenth century !

The story of Christian Gazda-Marko's friendship with the Mohammedan Albanian mountain chief, and of the blood feud to which it turned in an instant when Gazda-Marko found the Albanian's nephew was responsible for the unchastity of his sister, reads more like a story of the dark ages were it in this part of the world—whereas it is but a story of what was everyday life when Stancovitch was a boy—and still is everyday life not much farther from the main Balkan routes to this day.

It is a pity indeed that the old style of double titles has ceased to be customary, so that if a second title is used it is scarcely noticed. Were the manner still in use, it would have been possible to call this book 'SOPHKA, OR VIRTUE UNREWARDED', a most harmonious and ex-

planatory title – were it not that ‘SOPHKA, OR LUST JUSTLY PAID’ would to some seem equally explanatory and adequate.

But there is no doubt at least on one matter – that the characters in this book are not possessed of any free will. They are the puppets of a relentless destiny in the way of ancient drama; they are ruled by a Greek (or Balkan, for in what is essential the terms are synonymous) fate. And it is possibly a foible due to Western Christianity to even think of adding the moral touch, to try to hide the puppet pattern nature of Sophka’s life by suggesting either that for her faithfulness to the child husband who was eventually to maltreat her she was, in her sordid end, sadly unrewarded; or that that sombre end was sombre because she had lusted too much for bodily satisfaction, neglecting the spirit.

It is because of this dominant interest in the conflict of persons, to the point of neglecting the special social conditions which provoked the particular conflict, that it is more than usually difficult to explain the book, for the non-Balkan must still be puzzled as to exactly what people the story is about. From one aspect, it is about the conflict between the ordinary conception of marriage which townbred Sophka has, and the country folk’s conception, with its strange custom of father-in-law’s *jus primæ noctæ* – probably in this case dating back to the final conquest in

custom (as well as law), of patriarchy over matriarchy (which there seems reason in the Balkans to date somewhere in the first millennium B.C.).

The passage of this district, a little before the date of the story, from Turkish rule to Serbian, and the resulting division of the Turkish estates, and freeing of the bonded peasants – a process which, as in Russia and elsewhere, was a tardy result of the economic failure of the feudal system – clearly is of no importance, being but a piece of necessary machinery. But the subject of the book, from another aspect, is dependent on this, being a less specialised conflict between Balkan town and country folk.

Sophka's family is a town family, and Marko's is a country family. The country family is a family of mountaineer graziers, huntsmen and raiders. The town family relies for its wealth and for the money to acquire country estates on trade. The country folk for generations have married in the mountains, the stock remaining rustic, wild, healthy – not that these qualities necessarily go together. The townsfolk for generations have married town to town, and there a steady accumulation of definitely urban blood has gone on for centuries, since Byzantine days, since even earlier times, producing, under artificial conditions, aristocratic flowers such as Sophka is, of lusciousness, and of delicacy of sense, but overbred. FEVERED BLOOD is

perhaps the best rendering of Stancovitch's own title for his book. It explains much.

But what is the race of the people concerned, what do they represent? is, I am aware, a very legitimate question. Alas, races were mixed everywhere some millenia earlier than this story, and the most I would care to suggest is a tendency in these townsfolk to Mediterranean characteristics (with a strain of that pertinacious subdivision called Armenoid, and perhaps a dash of so-called Nordic Alpine), and a tendency in the country folk to Alpine characteristics, with a great leaning towards the tower head type so common in Albania.

The civilisation of the people concerned is another matter. Here, at least, we are dealing with ponderables. The townsfolk are Byzantine, with all it means in refinement of mental processes, delicacy of living and weakness for luxury. The country folk are, in their mountain fastnesses, extra-Byzantine, and, largely, in their customs, pre-Byzantine. It is a very ancient right Gazda-Marko thinks to use when, making use of his wealth and the town family's impoverishment in decadence, he imagines Sophka will first be his, and then, and then only, her husband his son's. He is broken because, under the control of that Greek (or Balkan) fate which rules all characters in the book, he is conscious himself from the beginning of his attempt that he must fail. In

payment for the pleasure and luxury of having Effendi-Mita's daughter for daughter-in-law he is obliged to leap the centuries and change custom faster than man can. That is the moral touch.

Sophka, with her townbred Byzantine horror of Marko's conception of her (a force equal in its power of demolition to any moral persuasion of the West), breaks Gazda-Marko. But she herself is broken because she too, under the ruling of that fate, has to pay. She has to pay for the luxurious pleasure of making her boy husband into a lover just such as his father had wanted to be; and she pays, too, because she has sinned the great sin of woman, which is covetousness, lust for the absolute possession and domination of the man she loves. She passes from her earlier, seeming guilty, lust, to this lust which seems almost virtuous. That is why it is not clear whether this English version's second title should be 'Virtue Unrewarded,' or 'Lust Justly Paid'; but this question is outside the scope of a foreword intended merely to help the reader out with a slightly exotic subject-matter.

I do not think Stancovitch himself was interested in any moralising thesis. He was not a highbrow writer, nor even a reflective writer. He was a natural (unlettered and untutored) storyteller, with an exceptionally acute sense of physical realities. He seems a poet of what is a peculiarly Balkan way of living – a physical exultation in all,

not only of the pleasures, but also of the pains of life. Everything is done to the full. Even Marko's horse, when Marko rides off in his frenzy of thwarted desire, has to be made to bleed as its master's heart bleeds. Stancovitch in all his writing is obsessed by this fulness of life; and it is that, indeed, which enables him to overcome his lack of training in the tricks of writing.

His style is atrocious – and perfect. He runs on and on, binding together the blazing phrases with a Biblical series of *ands*. He repeats himself. He contradicts himself. He ignores plot. He ignores plan. He is eminently concerned with the moment being lived. There is no thought of future, and very little remembrance of past. He is the anti-thesis of Western Proust. I only hope that with this very free translation I present, in which I have endeavoured to suppress practically every conditional or other complicating clause, into which the series of and-linked clauses would tend to sort themselves in English, and somewhat to smooth out the action, I have adequately rendered a great writer into English from his beautiful Serbian.

ALEC BROWN.

Fressingfield,
Autumn, 1931.

SOPHKA

CHAPTER I

AN OLD FAMILY

THE family was old and the house was old. It seemed their house had been there ever since the town existed. The Bishop, on the great feast days, on his round of visits after the service, had as long as man remembered gone first to them. They had their own altar table in the church, and their own burial ground in the graveyard. Their tombs were marked by marble stones, and the lamps before them were kept always burning, all day and all night.

No one knew exactly which of their ancestors had built their house. They only knew they had been rich from the beginning of things. Otherwise memory began with Hadji-Triphoun, after whom they had added Hadji to their name; for after the pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre which made him Hadji it was he who had had the courage to bring out again all the wealth which had till then lain hidden and piled and stored in cellars and barns and stables from time immemorial. Hadji-Triphoun brought it all out, to use it, to *let all the world behold*.

He built a portico, vaulted and strong as a keep; and he raised the storey of the house and covered it with carved timbers. He filled the rooms with priceless carpets, and with ancient and precious eikons from the Patriarchate of Ipek and the Monasteries of Mount Athos and the Monastery of Rilo; and on shelves round the white walls of the rooms he laid out silver washing vessels and golden holders for the little coffee bowls. At the outer gate he put a mounting stone of marble, so that when he rode out on his famous horses he should have something worthy of his house to set his foot on. And – so they remembered him – whether it was winter or summer he rode magnificent in a padded and frogged fur kaftan; silver-mounted pistols and half-scimitar in his belt; heavy boots to the knee.

From that time no Turkish patrolman dared even go by the house, let alone loiter near it, and all night long a lantern was kept burning at the gates, and four watchmen on duty there. He, that great-grandfather of Sophka, he Hadji-Triphoun, who traded in all the principal towns of the empire and mixed with the highest in the land was, through his acquaintance and even more through his wealth, in a position to have removed, nay, to have banished not only mere patrolmen, but even Pashas too.

In any matter affecting the Serbians, a new school or a church or a monastery being built,

or, what was more difficult and dangerous, the removal of a tyrannical official, everyone knew that he was the man to appeal to. On such an occasion the first men of the town could be seen, upstairs, in that carpet-walled room, all night sitting there in council; and the task was always left to him to accomplish how and when he might find fit. And it was always very soon done; by means of a bribe, which was most often successful, or else by means of a bullet, when he had recourse to a Musulman, some Albanian thug. But in return for that the gold lamp of their house burning before the crucifix had always to be burning, and the altar table next that of the bishop always to be theirs, and no one but them dare stand by it through the service. And at Easter and at Christmas or during the household feast for three days food and drink were sent to the poor and to those in prison.

He was harsh and hasty. Not only the servants of the household, but every member of the family trembled before him. He was Lord God Almighty to his churls the peasants of his lands at Rataj and the millers of the Sobina mill. It was even said he had killed some of them. From the day he set out, usually the beginning of summer, to travel about Turkey trading, to the day of his return in the autumn the whole family used his name as a threat. In particular did the

widows, whose sons had just come of age, and instead of taking their father's place in the household had begun spending and wasting, threaten these spendthrifts with their 'bata,' as the whole family called the old man.

'Now then, now then, you know he'll be coming' they would say. 'I was down at the house yesterday and they were expecting him any minute. I'm not going to have myself trembling and shrinking in front of him because of you; I'm not going to lie and keep you dark any more. I can't and I'm not going to have him suddenly shouting at me when I leave him "now then, what are you keeping that boy of yours dark for? Don't I hear, don't I know what he does with himself, where he goes sneaking and how much he spends? I'll wring his neck like a sparrow's. Don't let you or he or any of you show yourselves in my sight." And that's why I'm not going to conceal you, to be spoken to like that. I'll let him know the whole truth when he comes, you'll see!'

This had an effect, this was a good threat. Everybody knew what they could expect from him. And, indeed, as soon as he arrived home the whole family had to be there, all the wives of his sons and the sisters and the other women. The men did not dare show themselves the first day, and knew that whatever he had to say to them he would say or command through their wives.

Each of the women in turn would go upstairs,

there to the balcony where he usually sat. Humbly, in fear and trembling, not daring to look at him because of his mightiness, because he seemed too great and too terrible to look on, they would bid him welcome with:

‘You have come, daddy.’

And he would say, curtly, morosely, ‘I have come!’

But if he summoned any of them up there by name, she would go fainting. They all knew he never summoned anyone by name for good. It usually meant their husband had done something wrong; either had not returned money he had borrowed for his business; or had not even used it for the purpose he had pretended.

Yet for all his severity the poorest and most distantly related of the women of the family was never forgotten, for he brought a present from his travels for each of them.

He never spoke much; but what he said was law. To this day things he said were proverbial, ‘Ah, so-and-so and so-and-so, as the late Hadji-Triphoun said,’ you would hear. And when he was not travelling he spent the whole day at home, in summer up there on the balcony, in winter downstairs, in the big room. All day long he sat there; smoking, sipping coffee, and issuing his orders.

Yet in spite of the harsh discipline he maintained he somehow could not contrive to manage

his own only son. He easily married off his daughters as he wanted, but his son was born late, when the old man was already so old that no one could have even hoped for a child at all, let alone for a son, an heir. It was the last child, and a late one and an only son, yet when the boy grew to manhood somehow Hadji-Triphoun could not get on with him. His son, as if for sheer devilry, refused to turn out according to his will. Who can tell why? was the old man's consolation. Was it because, being old, he could not go trading any more, and so had stopped accumulating wealth, thus had lost his authority; or was it – and that was the bitterest thought for the old man – was there not likely someone inciting his son against him.

At last he concluded it was her, the boy's mother. Until the boy was born she had been a mouse, silent; and though it was true enough that even after the boy was born she never dared to oppose him to his face, yet he felt there was some difference. It seemed as if, sick at last of the eternal fear and trembling in which he had kept her, she ceased to mind him. She took no more notice of orders and his cursing of the servants and the serfs, but turned towards her son, and thought of him alone.

When she went to visit her married daughters and other relations, her son went with her, and he was by her side at all household festivals and

all festivals of the Church. And all of them, sisters and mother, rivalled in trying to please him. Whatever he did was holy to them. They could not imagine that anything he had done or anything he might do was wrong or was worthless.

But the old man, jealous now, and seeing how the women's spoilings were making his son too tender far, was always angry with him. He could not bear to look at the boy when he spoke. But yet he loved him too much to thrash him as he thrashed all the rest. It is true, though, that he never admitted to loving him, and even, when the boy fell ill, would not go downstairs to see him; but yet he could not raise his hand against him as he had done against all the others, the servants and the churls.

But as soon as the son began to mix with the Turks and drink with them and even go with them to their harims to make love with their girls and their women, the old man began to lose control. 'If that's what he wants,' he foamed, 'Hadji-Triphoun understands.' He too was young once. But then there were the wenches on their farms. Why Turkish women, why those pagans? For with them, when four of them have only one man to them, their blood is hot and their bodies soft, and they suck a man dry! 'That,' the old man said, 'is why my son is as he is, pale and weedy and thin, more a green girl than a man.'

And he could no longer bear even to look on his son and would not let him come near him.

And when, after scenes of many hot words and cursing, he heard how, in the company of some boys, the boy had broken the peace of the night with his debauches in some *kafana* and had come home at dawn, he would not call the boy; it was the mother he called.

‘Have you heard what he’s done?’

And even if she had heard she pretended not to have done.

‘What?’ she asked.

‘How dare you ask me what?’ he blazed out, and began taking off his boots to throw at her. ‘What do you mean, haven’t heard? Where’ve you been? Are you alive? What do you mean? Do you think because I don’t come down there I can’t hear anything, can’t see anything? What time was it this morning when he came in? Ah?’

‘What do you mean,’ she insisted on being surprised. ‘The boy was home early and went to bed, he’s still asleep.’

In moments like this he lost all patience. His boot or his heavy amber and silver cigarette holder went flying after her, with an ‘Out of my sight, don’t you show yourself in my sight.’ And he would roll back on his cushions in his rage, now not so much angry with the boy as with the boy’s mother, for her seeming love for him, and for always lying because of the love she pretended to

have for him, for defending him so firmly, as if only she loved him, as if he was her son alone, and only she wished him good.

For he knew when the boy had come in, he had heard him. The boy's hand had no sooner touched the great ring on the great door than she, his mother, had flown from the house. Probably she had not even once closed her eyes, waiting for him, and she would not even let the armed watchmen at the gate open it.

'Don't you,' she said, 'when you open it you make such a noise, you'll wake the old man up there.'

Whereas he, the old man, knew it was no concern for his sleep, but concern lest he hearing her son, knew at what an unseemly hour he had returned – at daybreak.

And amid this eternal dissension and cursing and estrangement from his only son, the old man died. For final spite to them, and most of all to spite his wife, he never spoke a word to them of his illness, but lay himself down there on the balcony of the house, letting only the servants come near him. And thus one day they found him lying there already cold.

And from that day, from Hadji-Triphoun's death, their house knew of nought but that life of wild plenty, a jungle of luxury hidden from the world; beautiful women, fine clothes, the most delicate meats and sweet eating. There was a

baking woman who did nought but the baking alone for them. That was her living and her labour from sunup to sundown, so many were the breads and the cakes and the pasties and other bakings that were made for them.

And never in their house did you hear, as in the neighbouring houses, the sounds of fighting or quarrelling or of screaming children, or of an oath uttered aloud. What quarrelling, what disputing was done, was done in silence; and sudden deaths which occurred made no sound. The one thing of importance was living as finely and as lavishly yet as silently as possible; for the rooms to be as richly hung and as warmly and cosily furnished as possible, for the murmur of soft women's garments to be heard in the courtyard, and for white, tender, bosoms, faces and hands to be seen there.

Without end fields and barns were bought up; and the stables and outhouses, which in the old days had adjoined the house, were moved further and further away to parts of the property where the rattle of waggons would not break on the luxurious peace of the house. And the garden round the house was extended farther and wider, and was full of the finest and the best of flowers, with copious mulberry and cherry trees and all rarest kinds of roses, and low-trained apple trees giving but a few choice fruits every year.

The sole duty of the women was to dress and to

deck themselves as finely as they could, to know as many exotic dishes as they could, and to embroider as difficult and as complicated embroideries as they could; but withal to be as beautiful and as white, yet as lusty and as lustful as they could; and the aim of their life was to discover which of them, by her constant care for her body, could by her beauty cast all the others behind her and enslave all the men of the house, driving them, regardless of considerations of blood-tie or of age, to a madness of desire.

Thus too the men; they were males, and they lived apart, males only. They appeared nowhere in public. Though the warehouses were still maintained in the upper bazar, and large quantities of hemp and of salt were held in them, they were more used as an office for settling accounts with their churls or for receiving rents than for trading. But even for those gentlemen's tasks they never appeared – no one but their chief man. Still less were they to be seen in their fields or vineyards. The only farm they visited was that of Lower Vranié, and there they went for the pure pleasure of going there. In the first place it was only a gunshot away, and secondly it was most suited, summer and autumn, for repose. It lay alone, deep in the fields, with a walled yard and a watch tower wrapped in foliage; and all round it were walls and ranks of high aspens ever lulling the old house to sleep.

There were countless stories and fables connected with that farm, particularly the house with its watch tower and courtyard wall. It was only there that any of the men were to be seen; because their only other occupation was fine dressing and ceaseless care for the length of their lives. For this reason there were always some of them at the neighbouring waters recovering from their excesses, so that, when the first banquets and festivals of the winter season were come, they might eat and drink as much as their lust could command.

The preparations for their own household feast, that of Saint George, took two full weeks. Women from among their relations, especially the poorer ones, slept night after night at the house, slept even then but a brief space, in order to be able to labour without interruption hour after hour for all the cakes and meats and bakings necessary to be made ready. And if any cake did not turn out aright, it would be cast aside and another made, as often as three times till it was as it should be. There would be days of council about the washing and the scrubbing and the ordering and decking out of the house. For all, from the smallest child to the head of the house, new clothes had to be made. Even the servants' clothes had to be renovated – and to the girls, of whom there was a great number, mainly daughters of their churls, would be given not old renovated clothes, but gowns that had only been worn a

few times and were slightly out of fashion either in colour or in cut.

In this way all was prepared and arranged in advance for the festival day, and everyone knew that their house would always be the most magnificent, so that when their guests came they would be puzzled by the splendour, and the telling of it would last for months, the cry of gossiping women 'Yao, how marvellous was the Hadji-Triphoun feast!' not to cease for weeks.

And the men of the bazar would carry on the wild merrymaking, after the festival was over, on that farm in Lower Vranié. There, behind fast lock and key, together with rich and notorious Greeks and Wallachians and the principal of the Beys (whom for religious reasons they could not receive in the house) there were riotous scenes. Dancing girls were brought from Üsküb, and *zourla*-players from Massouritza, and gypsy wenches not ordinary Romies, but the so-called *Gorgovkas* – the gorgikies gypsies that lived in the larger villages around, and in the inns of the high-road, wenches renowned for their hot and wiry bodies and their whory eyes.

And then from that house with the tower, where they locked themselves in with the players (whom they put in another room so they could not see all that went on), for days the crack of pistols fired in tipsy ecstasy could be heard right down in the town, and rockets tore into the sky.

It was whispered, in confidence, among the women of the house that one night Savetta, who was no ordinary woman, to lie for money, came there. Savetta was rich, and had a huge property her husband had left her. It was whispered that she (secretly, of course) had been there with them, drinking and gambling. And it was said among the women one time that the carousal ended in a terrible bout of gambling in which they, their menfolk, had, as befitted them, for that was how things were done, gambled away whole fields and vineyards.

And that was the whole life of their menfolk, for all other life, that of the streets and the neighbours and the business world was not merely far away from them, but they did their best to make it so. Their great effort was to be as aloof from the town as possible, self-sufficient with their houses and their farms and their churls. And they seemed to find the whole charm of life in those efforts to be aloof. And in order to succeed they tried to be as different as possible in every little thing. Thus in food, which they never allowed to be over-fried or too fat or too hotly spiced, but always gently and sweetly done, the only fat being butter, never the usual lard. Thus too in speech, and as the result of constant mixing with Greeks and Wallachians and Turks came a soft pronunciation, and in speech with their women they ended their phrases with little additional polite *gianm's* and

dateem's. Thus too in clothes, which was most marked: not one of them wore full boots – they wore only patent leather shoes. They wore, it is true, wide homespun pantaloons like anyone else, pantaloons hanging in coarse folds at the seat; but the calves of them were never too long, nor baggy and full of cords, but tight fit to the leg, and short enough to show a good expanse of white sock. The rosaries too that they carried were not like other men's. That does not mean those of a hadji's, to the sepulchre, with a cross on them. They were tiny, black and expensive, so that the whole long length of them could easily be gathered up into the hand.

They also had the same features. Their faces were long, narrow, thin-cheeked, their moustaches kept short-trimmed, never overhanging the upper lips.

Yet, in case the town forgot them, they attended every public function. They sent subscriptions to funds for schools or churches. And, because of this, one of them was always chosen to be a patron of a church or public institution, not so much for any real help, any work done, as in recognition of presents and subscriptions. In fact people were afraid of offending them, because it was known that if, in any petty public matter, one of them was not elected to the committee, the lack of attention would be taken not exactly with offence, but rather with an offended indifference,

and the dreaded conclusion that 'Well it's clear enough there's no more help needed there!'

And perhaps it was because of that hard outer world, from which they so carefully drew apart, from which they vainly fled, and which they feared just as much as it feared them, because, from envy, it was always ready to laugh and have its fill of malice – whatever went wrong in the family was carefully hidden and hushed up. That was common knowledge. The most embittered feuds over the division of property, the vilest passions and habits, the most shameful illnesses, – all were kept a secret. Nothing was to be known of it all, nothing seen, nothing heard. And it was known how when there was something to conceal any of them who had to go out in the town, would, if he had not confidence in himself, first look in the mirror to see if his face or his eyes did not tell the tale.

And there was much to be seen, much to be heard, much to be talked of, which was thus concealed, and particularly in recent years, since the break-up of the family commune had begun, since every brother (every uncle of Sophka's) had wanted to have his own house, and everything in it be a copy of the family house.

Sophka herself to the end remembered with fear and trembling all that as quite a child she had heard when her grandmother, her mother and her aunts, alone, thinking no one could hear

them (less than anything fearing that Sophka, so small, should understand, let alone remember;) chatted together and shuddered at what she herself, when growing up, saw with her own eyes.

Her great-grandmother, Tzona, had been the talk not only of their town, but even of the neighbouring towns; notorious for her luxuriousness and her devilry. When she was widowed she refused to marry again. Half the unmarried men of the town waited in hopes she would marry one of them, if not at once at least when she had grown a little older, and her beauty had gone. But she would not look at any of them. She kept the house, heading it like a man; and represented it abroad like a man. When she went to the farms round to inspect them she rode on a horse. Her men, their hands on the hafts of their weapons, rode on either side. She not only smoked, she could use arms. Her walk even and her bearing, and above all her high curving brows and longish oval face made her different from other women.

Nor did she end like other women. Every holy day, without exception, she went to church and there, by their table, next that of the bishop, went through the service. Then a new teacher, one Nikoltcha, famous for his singing and his incomparable voice, came to the town. It was with him that at last, there in the church, listening to his singing, that she fell in love.

Who knows how they got to know each other or where their meetings took place. People simply began to observe that, as soon as, from the choir gallery, he saw her at her table, his voice lost its pious, high-pitched, dry note, suited to prayer and psalm, and became but suited to worldly things, so passionate that all who heard it were shaken and troubled. Even the bishop, as the man approached his hand, after singing, for the blessing, was heard, as he blessed him, to say 'Aferim, my lad! Aferim, Nikoltcha! A little too powerful and moving your voice is!'

But just as she knew how to hide from the world her relations with him, hide that love come late in years, if not in beauty and freshness, she knew how to end it when the coming of a child would have shown it up. Shortly and peacefully she ended herself. One day they found her dead in her bath with her veins cut.

Then Sophka's famous grandfather, Cavarola. Instead, as head of the house, of remaining at home (especially as his younger brother was always ailing), and although he had married the most beautiful girl of Üsküb, a girl of a half Greek family, he went on with his so-called business rounds of other towns, after putting up with only a few months of married life – really, of course, going back to his former loose living with dancing girls and gypsies and others of the

underworld. His wife was obliged to stay at home and look after her brother-in-law who was an idiot, and care for him and always be with him. And at public gatherings and at household festivals she had to appear with him. And nobody knew when it began, for, it seems, she lived in sin with him.

Nothing though but that sinning of hers with her insane brother-in-law could explain the patience and forbearance she later showed to her husband Cavarola. He, when he came home, would go into fearful rages and behave like a brute, no doubt because he guessed what had happened.

Then he began bringing whores home, and continuing his debauch at home, and his wife herself had to wait on them all and serve them. And then the brother's servants would secretly carry off the brother, fainted away in his terror, and would hide him in some neighbouring house so that he should not be killed.

His wife died early, and his brother ended up in the Monastery of Saint Prokhor, a lunatic. And off he went again on his travelling and loose vagabondage. Helped by their uncles and other relations his daughters kept the house going: though in order to keep all this dark he still came home several times in the year.

But matters did not end there. Cavarola kept on at his ways till, his daughters married and he

an old man, he shamed them all by marrying again. He took a virgin. And, as if to spite the world, he had as great a to-do at the wedding as if it was his first marriage. It is true the girl was not so young, was on the way to being an old maid, but still she was a virgin and famous for her luscious beauty. She too was a sort of Greek, of a Greek family, that lived right in the town, down by the church. She was not a daughter or sister of the house where she lived, but yet some sort of distant relation; and who knows why she had been brought there, already an old maid? He only had one child by her, a son, the first of the family to dress in Western fashion. Only her luscious beauty seems to have lasted no longer than the wedding, as immediately after she dried up and shrivelled. And because of that, in order to restore that shrivelled beauty, she spent her whole life in caring for her body, bathing it, steaming it, anointing it. . . . People say she was scarcely ever out of the bathhouse.

Then there was Sophka's grandfather's own sister, Naza. Three times she ran away before she was married. Three times she went over to the Turks. Practically a whole farm was spent in buying her out. And afterwards, to hide it all, they married her to one of the household servants, and bought him a little house up outside the town, and gave him a few fields and vineyards to

live on. And when she grew to middle age she never came down to the house again, except on the eve of the Lenten fast, when it was the custom for the whole family to meet and ask forgiveness, and kiss and make peace. But that husband of hers, the former servant, 'that aunt of theirs husband' (as he called himself), was scarcely ever out of the house. He was proud of being related to them, and be able to sit at meat with them. He was in everybody's way, and was hated by everyone, not because he sat with them, but because he reminded them, was a living witness of all that had been. . . .

Then worse and worse things. So many insane, so many paralysed, so many born with open wounds, so many dying in the full flower of youth, so many comings of famous Turkish and other doctors and midwives, so much charm-saying, so much sprinkling of sacred waters, so many takings to sybils in caves, to holy inscriptions, to healing waters. . . !

Even now whenever Sophka recalled her mad Uncle Rista her flesh moved with a wild uneasiness. She remembered that that was why when she was a little girl she never liked going to see him, and much less staying two or three days with him – as she did with other uncles.

Nobody knew exactly why he went mad. After an illness in which he was quite paralysed he got

the idea into his head that during his illness his wife had deceived him with the eldest of the apprentices of the shop, and he took to drink. Then he went quite off his head. They kept him tied up and fed him tied up, there, on the upper floor. And whenever Sophka together with the other children thought of going to see him up there out of curiosity and climbed up the stairs and peeped through the railings of the balcony in front of his room, when he saw them, he would come hopping up to them, tall and pale, in nought but shirt and drawers, yelling out 'Okh! – the whore – Maria!' On feet clad in new white socks but strapped together he would hop round and round yelling all the time 'Okh! Okh! – Maria – the whore!'

Then their aunt would hear and come flying out. She would chase them away and by main force drag him back into the room. At night it was even worse. Sophka, under the quilt with other children (who were used to it and already long asleep), could not get to sleep, because through the ceiling she could hear him hopping about. But the worst always came when her aunt went off to give him *a dose of medicine!* Sophka did not quite know what sort of medicine this was, but when it was given him she could clearly hear his groans and cries of 'Give me some water! Water, you witch! I'm dying for fresh water! Aokh!'

And there would come a fearsome yell, and a

rumble-tumble – he resisting and she tying him to the bed. Then she would come back, exhausted, limp. And as she loosened her clothes for the night she would sigh and mutter in prayer ‘Take him, O Lord. Free me, O Lord!’

CHAPTER II

EFFENDI-MITA'S SOPHKITZA

AND in fear Sophka guarded her thoughts from turning to family, because she knew that when the family took possession of them she found herself, days on end, slinking about the house, ill as if she were hiding from herself.

Her own grandfather and grandmother she remembered but vaguely, as in a dream. Her grandmother's face was always a little the clearer. Her grandmother always sat downstairs in the main room and always with her back on the bathroom wall as if, even in summer, she wanted to warm it on the steam-heated wall. A pointed nose, a pointed chin, but an astoundingly lofty forehead and deep, large, mysterious eyes with long clearly marked brows right to the edge of her hair and lashes as thick as night.

Then the evil thing was that she was some sort of relation of her husband, Sophka's grandfather, not it is true a direct relation, but still a sort of cousin. The grandfather had had to put down a great deal of hard cash before he was allowed to marry her.

And the story went that after they were married, as if because such near relations had married, for long years she went with her head bound up, because it always ached; and for that ache she was constantly taking medicine – generally the medicine of strong double-stilled plum brandy. Sophka's grandfather called her 'motherkin' and was ready to carry her all day and all night in his arms.

Of her grandfather Sophka could only remember one thing. As soon as she was big enough to sit alone at table he ordered that a measure of wine should be placed for her as well as for all the others. That was all she remembered him by, nothing else. That was all she knew herself. But later people told her of how, when her own father grew a lad, and, as was the custom and was fitting for their house, rich as it was, went off to travel and to find knowledge – her grandfather and grandmother were never at home. They handed over the magazines up in the bazar to their man Toné and left the house in the hands of Magda the maid, whom they had taken as a child and who was already part of the household, and they spent all their time going round their farms. There they spent their time living on their churls, in order to be able to send as much as possible to Sophka's father, Effendi-Mita, for him to be as easy as possible with his pocket, and continue his studies of books and of the world as long as he could.

And certainly there was no doubt when Sophka's father came back, that he had become a most superior Effendi, a real silk gentleman. There wasn't a finer man in the town. He spoke Turkish and Greek and Arabic better than his mother tongue. He was a stranger to everybody, a foreigner, especially to many of his relations. He did occasionally speak to them and give them the time of the day; but this was for form alone, not because he wanted to. He even ignored his parents at times. He would not eat with them downstairs. He had to have a table laid upstairs in the guest room, and special food cooked for him, he was so finicky. The only thing that pleased him and of which he was proud was that on account of his learning and his elegance the first Beys of the town and the Pashas sent him invitations: and that not the Beys who were Beys simply by money, but the others, those who were not only rich but were educated as he was, and who in recent years had come to those parts and been appointed judges and magistrates. It was those invited him, sought his company. At trials, at council meetings, he was a sort of interpreter, a sort of link between them and the people they tried. He was even invited to their festivals, and received in their houses, and he returned their hospitality, though the banquets he gave them had to be more luxurious and full of more rarities than were theirs. He was also the best and most

authoritative judge of such womanflesh as the Beys gathered round them.

Later, when the time came for him to find a wife, as there were no more rich better-class girls in the town, there were but two courses open to him, either to take a peasant girl with a large dowry (as only village girls with property still consented to come to the towns to such old houses as was his), or to take a beautiful but practically penniless girl.

He chose the latter. Sophka's mother was the youngest of a number of sisters, of a family once fairly well-to-do, but which had gone down in the world. They lived on the rents from a number of tumble-down little shops on the edge of the town. Sophka's maternal grandfather was a complete invalid and nearly blind, and sat all day at home with a green eyeshade over his eyes, afraid of sunstroke, and always unbelted and unkempt as if he had just got out of bed. Her sisters had long ago got over lamenting their former wealth and had all married petty merchants and shopkeepers, most of them self-made men, but she, Todora, was different from them all. She was more a boy than a girl; an insolent hussy; a dark girl; wiry. Nobody ever thought such a beauty would grow out of her as did, but that did not deceive Effendi-Mita, who, the moment he saw her, knowing into what a beauty she would develop one day, married her, to everybody's amazement,

and much to the loss of his former pride and lordliness. But he was not mistaken. After a year of marriage, in a rapid blossoming, Todora broke into a lavish beauty.

But he soon tired of her beauty and took up his old ways again. Meals were carried upstairs to him. The family rarely saw him,—still less often did he speak to them; less often still consent to look at anything, to inspect anything in the house. And after Sophka was born his wife had to leave him entirely, and slept then downstairs with her parents-in-law, for him to be as independent of them and as tranquil as was possible. And once again the least excuse was made the occasion for leaving them, and he went away, ostensibly on business; and though now those journeys, through shortness of money, did not last as long as they once had done, they were very frequent. And they were most frequent at the season when his first youthful travels had been made. And he was even away from the house when his father and mother, Sophka's grandmother and grandfather, died; and when he returned pretended that the man who came with the news could not find him in time for him even to come and take leave of their bodies.

But in spite of this separation of his not only from the family, but even from his wife, life in that house went on as luxuriously and lavishly as ever before. Sophka's mother, to her death

grateful to him for marrying her and socially raising her, showed more than anyone had hoped for from her. She managed the house, arranging the rooms and cooking, and entertained relations and other visitors as if she was of the richest and highest blood of the town: and the whole of the many branched family still gathered, as of old time, at their house. With every holy day, every household festival, every birthday, Sophka's mother seemed to be more beautiful herself and more luxurious in her appointments. And never by as much as a turn of expression, a movement, a single word, did she hint at her husband's constant separation from them all and from her, from his wife.

It was only later, when Sophka was no longer quite a baby, that he seemed to soften a little; but this was more on Sophka's account than her mother's. He would come down to see them. He himself began to teach Sophka to read and to write. At the beginning of this change, sometimes in the evening, when he came home and Sophka was in the kitchen with her mother among all the other women, and Sophka ran to meet him, he would throw his arms round her, and with her, through her, join his wife and the others. Then Sophka would feel the fingers of his hands playing on her face, feeling their way round her neck and chin and through her curling hair. Even now, when Sophka recalled it, she could sense

again the scent of those thin, tender fingers, slightly wrinkled at the ends, the scent of his clothes, and, in particular, of his sleeves, out of which came those hands to caress her and embrace her and draw her to him.

'How are you, my little Sophka, my Sophkitza?' he would ask her, 'Have you been a good girl?' and he would bend down towards her in marvelously sweet temper, stand with her there in the kitchen and talk to her mother, and even find a word for the other women; not as previously, when he never stopped a moment or even looked to see who was there, let alone wish them the time of day, but went straight through and up to his own room.

Then everybody's heart would grow lighter, in particular her mother's heart, for she snatched greedily at such moments (mostly on account of the other women), to exchange a few words with him, and be playful, and pretend to spank Sophka as he held her, and cry 'Good? Why the whole morning she's been racing and chasing about the garden. There's nothing to be done with her, the way she breaks and spoils the flowers.'

And Sophka, still feeling his hand on her, would fling her arms round his knees and the great folds of his breeches, and, tiny as she was, knowing it would please her mother, she would deny trying to prove she was good. "'Tisn't true, Effendiitza, 'tisn't true, daddy! 'Tisn't true, by your life,

't isn't!' And he would pick her up and carry her off to his room.

Then, if dusk fell, and all his wife's visitors had gone, he would play with her. Most often he put her on the couch and went on his knees in front of her and put her little arms round his neck and his chin on her belly and stared at her with extraordinarily wide-open, curiously deep eyes: and it seemed as if tears ran from his eyes, and his lips moved and grew moist. Somehow he never tired of this, as if in Sophka's eyes and lips he remembered – relived in something, something never quite found; always regretted? Wondering why this wonderful little Sophka was not a boy, an heir? Or did her thin little lips and her infant but dark eyes and her little swart brow and her hair already long, remind him of her mother as he had first seen her and loved her?

And he would carry her about the room hugging her, crying 'Sophkitza! . . . Daddy's Sophkitza!' and hug her closer and closer so that she could feel his fresh-shaved cheek, that had but just begun to be raspy.

And if this unusual good temper and good spirits were not interrupted by the unexpected arrival of someone else he might eventually summon her mother; and then they would dine together and sit together up there in his room, and Sophka could not remember sweeter dinners than those.

There came a time when for days the happiness might go on. They would drive out to the Lower Vranié farm. Nobody but they three and Magda.

He sat on the front seat, always lolled back, with one leg stretched out and one hand resting on it. He dressed in a homespun suit, but one not just like other people's – one cut specially for him. The breeches were a little tight-fitting, and unfrogged, as such breeches were lighter and, on account of the way they were stitched, more expensive. A long, thin face, a little bony, the eyes and lips fixed in their expression, a rather high forehead with one deep furrow across it immediately below his hair. The eyes always half-closed, always tired-looking. The hand on his knee held Sophka there, she dressed and decked like a big girl. Her hair in a kerchief, with little curls drawn out round her forehead and her ears; and all covered with spangles and jewellery. Opposite them sat her mother, rosy and bright, coiffed and unguented specially for the trip. Her eyes, her famous large eyes, with the drawn out brows above them, and her burning cheekbones below them, shining marvellously, and her lips were dancing.

The shay would sweep downhill into that narrow cutting with willows and dykes pressing in it from either side, but the air so fresh there. Then out of that and towards the level patch, where the maize and tobacco fields were, faster

and faster towards their goal. Magda, up on the driver's seat with the coachman, surrounded by baskets and bundles of food and pasties would not be able to contain herself any longer, crying her good-day and bandying words with the peasants and workmen that they passed. She was the only one to answer their salutes, as, he Effendi-Mita, with Sophka in his lap, lolling back did not deign to look at anyone, only at his feet stretched out in their patent leather shoes, the real double Turkish sort of shoes: or at least he seemed to be looking at them,—perhaps on purpose not to notice those salutes and have to answer them.

Shielded from the world on that farm, behind courtyard wall and aspens, they would spend some days. Even in summer a coolness was wafted from the river. Her father would spend the whole day down in the garden reclining on cushions, a bowl of tobacco at his side and empty coffee cups around him. Her mother would be up in the tower, blissful hour after hour at the windows of the room which, she would say, she was airing. And Magda would be at her perpetual feud with the churls and the house servants for not bringing the butter or the cheese or the hen exactly when she had ordered, so that dinner would be late. And in the evening they would drink wine cooled in the river to their dinner, there with the nighttime, clearer-sounding stronger murmur of the river and the rattling of the water-mill, and, as if

from afar, the rustling of the thick juicy aspen-leaves above their heads. And after dinner, while her mother, in the upper room, was laying out the beds, her father would stay there, lolling back sipping at his wine.

And often enough, in a whisper to start with, to himself, but getting louder and louder, he would sing; till suddenly, carried away on a flood, his full voice would ring out, and her mother not dare to interrupt, but from out of the lighted room listen; and by her mother's face Sophka could see that she did not understand the words of the song – they were foreign to her – but she could also see how much she felt them, as if she was vibrating there from happiness and delight, her opened lips drinking in that voice, of which the garden was more and more filled, which soared over the river and the aspens, so strangely passionate and hot.

Somewhat later, when he thought Sophka was already asleep, he would go upstairs, his still unfinished wine in the bottle, and continue his singing there. He would take her mother to himself and unbraid her hair and, singing still, embrace her and kiss her cheeks and her lips.

After a few days they would go back home; her father as if tired, taciturn; but her mother blissful. She could not hug or kiss Sophka enough, because it was her, her child, she had to thank for his return to her, – her husband and her love.

CHAPTER III

THE DECLINE OF THE
FAMILY

THEN came the war and liberation. Turkish rule and power vanished, and with it vanished Effendi-Mita, Sophka's father. He went off with the Turkish Beys when they went, and there he stayed with them, trading he said. Rarely did he come back to Serbia. And as Sophka grew up his visits grew less frequent. Once in a twelvemonth he would come. He would arrive secretly at night, and he would stay but two or three days, not stirring from the house. He would not even visit his nearest relations, his father's brothers and sisters.

And Sophka could remember that those times of his coming were evil times, for, after each of his departures for Turkey, for days her mother was a broken woman, broken because only she knew the whole truth of it.

She knew that he had no trade or business of any kind there; and that it was still less because of any inability to leave off mixing with those Turkish Beys; but that it was quite another thing, and that

to them at least he need not have lied, need not have pretended. She knew he was running away to refuge, from the poverty which struck fear in him. If not there yet, it was certain to come. Before the liberation, long enough ago, she had known all was not well with their property, and especially with the farms and the water-mills. They were certainly still known as his; but he never got all the monies from them, only a part,— even she did not know how little a part. That part would have looked more like a present, a gift from his peasants—his churls—than his right takings. The rents and lease monies of the mills had been discounted for so far ahead, and at such low rates, that it was worse than any outright sale.

But no one dared mention selling to Effendi-Mita. He preferred a hundredfold unfavourable loans from local usurers to selling anything, letting anything definitely pass to other hands. And for his pride all those discountings and mortgagings had to be made by someone else, in absolute secrecy. It was always their headman, Toné, he whom Sophka's grandfather had raised from churldom, who did it. In the end Toné became so skilled in reckoning that he spent all his time up in the business quarter in the warehouses, representing the house. It was he who discounted the rents and at last mortgaged the house itself. And even in those days it was whispered that as well as a tidy capital amassed,

Toné had his own house and four years' untouched wages. But for Sophka's father he was above suspicion. He was never asked from whom he had got money, or what property he had mortgaged or at what terms. All that was expected of Toné was to produce money and make sure that no one knew about it – nothing else was of any importance.

But with the end of Turkish sovereignty came civil courts and litigation; with much ado as to settling matters with the churls and determining what lands were whose; which the lord's, which Turkish, and which to be the churls'. Then it became evident that in the end nothing of their property would be left; in which the most cruel thing to Sophka's father was that he, Effendi-Mita, would have to go to court and take oaths and squabble, and that with whom? – with those that were but yesterday his churls! That is why he let everything slip by him. If he had wanted to he could have refused to admit having taken even a penny from a single one of those churls, as others of his class did, and so have got back their sold, squandered property.

'Ekh,' he would say, 'am I to have a peasant's table and peasant tears cursing me?' And bitterly and proudly he refused the easy dishonesty.

But he was just as unwilling to accept the other thing – to be reconciled with losing, selling his property, all that had to come. That is why,

immediately after the liberation, he went off with the Turks and left the final management and winding up of it all to Toné. And, at one with the lawyers who after the liberation flooded the town and who even wore napoleons on their spurs, Toné put everything in apple pie order – till nothing at all was left, nothing but a few miserable acres of field and vineyard, – and at that fields a long way from the house and of exhausted vines. Not a proper vine to be seen; nought but useless horse chestnuts with their rigid branches. Only one field worth anything was left – that down by the Morava, by the bridge on the way to the Springs.

And whenever Toné came to report to Sophka's mother his face with its uneasy eyelashes showed how much he had stolen and plundered in that final settlement. He, their man, whom they had cared for and raised from churldom! She could have cast into his face the trifle of money he brought. But yet could she, Todora, show that man her feelings? Merely, when Toné, bidding his good-bye, pretended, in formal politeness, to beg her blessing and her forgiveness, and canted of how he was obliged to leave them and take over his own shop and business, she managed to say to him, so much her words choked her, an ambiguous 'Ako, ako,' – which is to say – 'Don't mention it, pray don't mention it, Toné!'

Then he went on muttering stuff about – 'Well,

you see, I mean, even if I'm not with you any more. . . . If things had gone better I'd thought I'd have been yours to death. As if a man'd think of quitting your roof. . . . But even if I'm not, you always know where to find me, you just send for me and let me know, and I'll be there in a trice.'

'Very well, very well,' was all she said.

And, unable to wait to the end, till that servile creature, bubbling over with pleasure, stroking his clothes, most attentively flicking the dust off his shoes or putting his collar straight, had passed out of the courtyard, Todora, trembling in her pain and misery and shame and misfortune, turned and went indoors and, in the first dark corner she found, fell weeping, choking with her sobs.

And everyone knew that nobody was to know this family disgrace either. No one of the family and no outsider. Those few acres that were left, principally river land, Magda's sons undertook to cultivate on a half-and-half basis. But actually they gave more than they got out of those acres from gratitude to Todora, because, it seemed to them, she had given them as their own the land they had only held before as churls. And Magda rarely left the house. She would spend the week with her sons and their daughters, and as her husband was dead, be a sort of head of the house

there, but as soon as Saturday arrived or any Holy Day she would be up at her old mistress's house, and never come empty-handed, but with flour or butter or cheese, enough for Sophka and her mother for many days. And there in the old house, hearing what was to be heard and making herself useful, she would spend a number of days. Other peasants too, once their churls, went on visiting them in the same way, and they too never came empty-handed and never mentioned that the land was now theirs, so that at first Todora did not feel her want very hardly. And that was why at first it was not too difficult for Sophka's mother to hide the truth; and for the whole family, in particular Sophka's uncles, to be always made welcome as they always had been when they visited her with strong brandies and good wine and coffee.

And when the next household festival arrived things were done just as in the old days, and Sophka's mother was in her best, with flowers in her hair, and Sophka with a new frock of silk, the latest and costliest printed *basma*. And hour after hour, happy and gay, they received visitors, and there were even fiddlers making music. And when questions were asked about Effendi-Mita Sophka's mother said she had received a draft from him only a day or two before and that the bearer had brought news he could not come, was engaged in something big, but would look to

come at all costs in the autumn, and the *basma* Sophka was wearing he had sent specially for her frock. . . .

And in fact Sophka herself did not at first know where her mother found the money for her always to have expensive new clothes: though she soon found out. She realised though that her mother gave her such expensive frocks in order, by their costliness, to assure her it was he, her father, sent them: fearing lest, like any child, she quite forgot him, or even came to hate him for never coming, for leaving her and her mother always alone. And all those their former servants who came bringing, as they said, presents to him, somehow always came when Sophka was not at home, so that she did not see them.

But all her mother's efforts were in vain. She soon knew all about her mother's deception and all about everything else that went on round her; especially her relations squabbling about her since she and her mother were left alone by her father's alleged going-over to Turkey. Even when she was still quite small her aunts all vied with each other as to with whom she could stay, and with whom her stay would be longest: as if she were quite grown up. And Sophka knew that all that love and tenderness of her relations came from a sense of the misfortune that had already begun: and that they were already fussing about her and making the most of her as if to get over their

family obligation to her: to show her proper hospitality before the crash came, so that when it did come and finally separated them, and their minds were full of it at least she would remember them in a good light for their kindness and their love for her, and think of them as rich and kind. And the reason why they struggled for her love was that they were acutely aware that she, Sophka, was the last of the line, and that with her it would all be ended and for ever wiped away. Yet it seemed that the chief reason they tried to get her affection was her father, Effendi-Mita; because, though he had left them, they still respected him so much that they were prepared to pet his only child, his darling, and care for it as the apple of their eye.

And that their love for her really was more on account of her father than herself, Sophka could see by her mother; because, later on, when Sophka began to show signs of womanly beauty, when her friends one day in play suddenly stopped and, awed by her beauty and the wealth of her bosom and her hair, cried out 'Oh, Sophka, how wonderful you are, how big you have grown!'—her mother never left her alone. The gate was no more allowed to stand open for hours. Sophka was not allowed to go by herself to the gate or even to the wicket leading to the neighbouring courtyards, or, even with womenfolk, to go out into the street, without her mother having inspected her, to see

how she was dressed. However busy she was, if Sophka wanted to go to her friends, her mother would leave her work and wipe her hands and go with her to the wicket and the neighbour's garden door patting and stroking her clothes to better order. . . . For, in the name of the Lord, her mother would say, proud of her – how could she let Sophka go out dressed just anyhow? Only to think of such a thing! Only let her father come back at that moment and see her like that or hear she'd been out like that carelessly dressed or half-dressed, why, she wouldn't dare to show herself before him, let alone look him straight in the eyes.

But this was all so unnecessary. Sophka in the end knew all about it: why her father lived in Turkey; why he came so rarely to see them, so that she only pictured him now as he was in his night arrivals, – clothes a little threadbare, face somehow dulled, dried-up looking, wrinkled though as always freshly shaved, and with moist lips, and eyes as piercing as ever; and as always with his counting beads; in patent leather shoes, with white socks. . . . She knew too all about those long nights when her father and mother (when they thought she was deep in her sleep), sat through till daybreak without a spoken word. In their eyes could be seen the inevitable conclusion to it all – that they could not go on longer, that the house ought to be sold, and they to clear

out. But, alas, what would the graves in the graveyard have to say; and the living relations, and the outer world!

CHAPTER IV

SOPHKA'S DELIGHT IN HER BEAUTY

THEN it seemed to Sophka that she had always known all about it, and she could not remember when she had not known, just as well as she had clearly and unquestioningly understood all that was going on round her. She knew quite well what was fated to become of her.

As a child she had been sure of what a beauty she would be, and how that daily growing beauty would amaze and conquer.

Everyone, in fact, knew that only she, the only one of their house, only she, daughter of Effendi-Mita, could be so beautiful – no one else. Nor was she mistaken.

And, as she had always known it would, that beauty of hers did not exactly make her prouder, it made her happier; happier not because she distracted and tortured men by it, but because through it she was satisfied, satisfied with herself. She kept more care of herself, loving herself more, for she knew that her beauty would be no ordinary everyday beauty, that which consists,

in the passage to maturity, in mere splendour of body and tenseness of energy, but the real, higher and stronger beauty which so rarely comes and is slow to fade,—in fact, but gets, with time, finer and finer and more ecstatic; that beauty which diffuses as a woman walks and moves, a very odour of itself.

All that came to be as she had felt it would, for when she was grown up,—no, more than that, when she had passed her twentieth birthday, and passed too (for everybody knew that no ordinary person dare ask her hand), her twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth, she was not only as beautiful as ever, but with those years of waiting even more splendid and luscious. A certain fattiness and excess of her flesh vanished, but yet at the same time her forms grew firmer and more pronounced. Her shoulders became broad, full, well-developed; and her upper arms, the muscles of them, grew smoother and rounder, so that the flow of line up to the shoulders was solidly direct and yet lissom, by which her torso, dissolving in the flood of her hips, was the better delineated. Her arms were a little long, and thin, with long thin fingers; but the wrists round and full showed the real whiteness of her flesh. It was not the freshness of her face that was striking so much as the fairness of her skin. The face was gentle and somewhat long, the foundation of bone showing well, the forehead a lofty smooth expanse, the eyes large

and dark, set in a long setting, the flesh over the cheekbones always well coloured and the lips thin and always firm; moist and passionate only at the corners of the mouth. And all her body's beauty had as it were become stationary, a living embalming, neither waxing nor waning, the only mutable element in it her lavish hair which flourished in ever greater plenty. It was dark, soft and heavy, so that she was always conscious of it, and when she let it down it flowed in a soft cloak over her shoulders and her waist.

But it troubled her, because with her maturing, her developing into this fine beauty, her father's visits grew rarer, and she knew this was all on account of her. It was as if he was afraid of her. There came a whole summer, autumn and winter with no sign of life, even no messenger, from him; and then there was a space of nearly three years without a sign of his existence.

Her mother was ill with fears. This was not because she was afraid of becoming quite a pauper, of being without a crust of bread,—although she had begun to know the oppression of real poverty. She had now sold nearly all the upper garden behind the house, which faced the street; and of course she had sold it to that Toné of theirs, because he was the only person they dared trust not to tell the whole world it was his, that he had bought it outright; but to say, as he had done with other land of theirs he had bought, that he

rented it, and that he had to get their special permission to put up the sheds that he built there. What Todora feared was being entirely abandoned by her husband, for she knew what he was like; and if that happened – it wasn't herself she cared for, her time had already gone, she was ready for anything – what would come of their Sophka; after such shame and degradation, what would come of their Sophka; now a grown woman, famous far and wide?

But Sophka, when she saw her mother's agonies and fears, was more sorry for her than for herself. She had long been at peace in herself. Years before, in the first days when she had felt her breasts grow full and her body more splendid; when any sudden contact, even if only of the noise of footsteps coming nearer, made her start nervously and the flesh of her writhe gently and sweetly, when the blood first rushed to her head at the sight of a man and her feet were sealed to the ground and she felt that, if he came up to her, in her paralysis she would be unable even to move, let alone to resist and defend herself from him – as early as that time, and that was the most painful thing, she was convinced that no one would ever appear, no one ever be born, equal to, worthy of her, of her and her great beauty, her alone, Sophka – Effendi-Mita's Sophka.

At that early time she was convinced that there would never be a man greater than she, for her

to be entirely happy when he, finer and greater than her in his blood and in his body, made use of her strength and her beauty and destroyed it – for only such a one was to have her, only such a one's lips would she suffer. And because of that early conviction, with which she had long been at peace, everything else could now be borne, and she was even happy that she was clear as she was about things; because now there could be nothing to frighten her, nothing to terrify; any man was harmless in her eyes, and so she could always be at ease, and could even bring herself to stand by the open gate and look grown man or callow lad straight in the eyes; even, when the whim was on her, go walking down the street or visiting her friends, alone. Even at night she had no fear. And by reason of her freedom of mind she did not envy any one of her friends who, though younger than she, had already married, and were rich and reckoned among the wealthier society of the town. Nothing of that could make her envious or spiteful, because, being superior to them all, and on that account well satisfied, especially by her rare beauty, she could look on it all with indifferent eyes.

She never did what other girls did – if she were standing at the courtyard gate and a man came along, – hide behind the wall, and, when he had gone by, peep out after him. Never. Whenever she stood at the courtyard gate she stood freely

in front of it, never inside, never concealed, never concealing any part of her form, especially never hiding the form of her breasts, over which, if another girl had had them so splendidly developed, she would have thrown a shawl, and drawn it up to her chin. She never did this, but stood fully in the gateway, her hands clasped behind her back, she herself leaning on one of the wings of the gate, her feet carelessly planted before her, her legs crossed. She was always unrestrained, hiding nothing of herself, never with her head half concealed, the flowers in her hair out of sight, but just as she was indoors, or with a still less restrained look, as if to defy the world, her lower lip slightly pursed, casting light shade round the corners of her mouth. She would so hold the glance of anyone who would have accosted her that he melted away, eyes downcast, passing her by, with a respectful salute.

And if with any man there was another who did not know her or had heard of her but never seen her, she would hear, when they were well past, 'I say, old fellow, whoever's that girl?' in a voice surprised and amazed at her beauty and particularly at her insolent unrestrained bearing.

And 'Sophka, Effendi-Mita's daughter!' would be the answer. And in all comments of that sort that she overheard about herself was nothing but wonder and respect, never the sort of remarks men had to make about other women; and for

this reason she did not fear to be simply herself.

And the same freedom with which she would stand in the gateway watching the passers-by, or walk in the streets, she would lean out of the window of the storey that overlooked the street and calmly watch the life of the town. For days on end she could be seen sitting up there hour after hour, head on hands so that her cheeks were rounded and redder, her shoulders pressed together, bent right over, gently swaying to and fro, enjoying the delight of the feel of her own cool flesh, for the summer-warm window wood, pressing on her, murmured to her of the lissom line of her limbs and of the blood-throb within them. She found most pleasure in looking out in this way on Holy Days, over the street and the neighbouring house seeing the square by the church beyond, up by the business quarter, for all of this could be seen from their house.

With detached and mocking eyes she would follow the folk as they progressed to their homes, and especially the women coming from church, where they had been, not so much in order to worship God as to be seen in their new clothes. There was Gazda-Milenko's young daughter Nata with her rounded, clear-skinned face, to be seen going home every Sunday from church with her father and stepmother, the father walking behind, not in the old costume, but in European trousers and coat, so as to look as young as possible

all for his new young wife, whom he looked at more than at his daughter, though Nata did not mind that. She was delighted to be taken by him, and did not realise that he was dressed as he was because of her stepmother, and she was there because it was not the thing for him to go about with his new wife and leave her, so grown-up a daughter alone in the house. Whenever they appeared Sophka would watch her pityingly, thinking how little she knew about it all, and observing the way in which, in her delight, her thoughts on her new clothes, the girl kept turning this way and that to see if all the world was thinking how beautiful she was.

How many times, too, did she not watch the daughters of Tashko the saddler who lived up the street a little way from their house. There were four of them, all within a year of each other. Their parents had been peasants, but when the old man made money the children, especially the daughters, were much talked of. They all dressed alike, and generally in thin materials of bright colours, no doubt in order to attract as much attention as possible. Their faces and eyes were gentle, as of samite, and nobody would have taken them for the children of such parents – especially not the father's, for he was a bloated fellow with swarthy hair, and a fat, dark purplish peasant face. Sophka had noticed that there was always at least one of them self-satisfied with her prettiness, the flutter

she thought she caused at the gate, or out in front of the house, to get a better view of someone or show that yes, there she was, waiting at the courtyard gate. And they were always to be seen at church and at any festival and any dance, and they even went to festivals in the villages round. When quite young they used to go in an ordinary peasant waggonette with their father and mother and a basket full of meats and bottles of wines and spend the whole long day out, but later, when the money had been made, they went in their own sprung enamelled phaeton and without their father,—only their mother and one of their brothers with them; and no longer started at shriek of dawn, but paraded out after the midday meal when all the other folk of good class went, all the people who went to give the jollifications a quick look and then turn round and be off home well before dark. They went, that is, more for a parade outing than, as ordinary folk only free to get away from daily labour on these Holy Days did, on account of the festival itself.

But however well satisfied Sophka was with her lot, however far she was from envying anyone, and so from being agonised or miserable, the winters were always the easier; perhaps because then she was lonelier, more cut off from the world and from everything else. In the long autumns and the drawn out fierce winters she was quite alone, except for her mother, whose visits to

kinfolk were rare and short. Nor was this in order not to leave Sophka in the house,—as mothers usually fear for their daughters if they leave them alone, in case of mischief, in case of some man . . . but because she knew that in winter Sophka could not run out for any and every little whim. And apart from their mother's rare visits the winter seclusion was only disturbed by the larger feast days such as Saint Nicholas; when, on account of visitors, though but a narrow circle, those living near, they were obliged to dress and appear in the world of the living; whereas other days, throughout the winter, were absolutely tranquil. They then were absolutely isolated, walled in by the walls of their house and the courtyard, and felt themselves at liberty to do exactly as they pleased.

That was why Sophka's winters were the pleasantest, the most carefree time. When the winter was past things were different. With the spring, there came on her a sort of unrest and with it terror. This may have been for external reasons because the isolation of winter was over, and all that had so long been walled in and stifled and bridled by snowdrifts and cold was liberated. Life of the market and street began anew, churchgoings too and public gatherings and festivals, mingling the two sexes. And it may have been that she was ill at ease because then she knew that, not on her account, but for the sake

of her mother and the family, she had, so as not to be forgotten, to take her part in that social existence, although she had nothing in common with it, and it was all foreign and alien to her.

But certainly the worst thing of all was that with every advent of spring and passing of summer she noticed, although she never admitted it to herself, a fear like a sly serpent ever more powerful in her waiting to strike, that at last at some public gathering, or in the after church parade, there would appear the girl who, by her fresh beauty, would cast her for ever aside, Sophka the old maid.

And yet she was sure that could never happen. She did not deny that another might attract attention by the novelty of her first appearance; but none could ever surpass her in beauty; even if her face with the years became treacherous, she knew she could triumph over all. Yet God preserve her from that happening, for she knew that if life thus outwitted her, she would become a savage and desperate creature, and scorn the ways and decencies of her fathers to prove what she knew to be true, and show the blind and crass that even in her withered age no woman was her peer. *That* it would be a terrible thing to do, but she would not be Sophka if she did not do it when the moment came. At other moments, shamed by her thoughts, terrified by them, she would be full of guilt and blame herself and scold herself, for

letting such things come into her mind, and for dwelling thus on things that others no doubt never even thought of.

How long were those inward struggles to last? Why could she never be happy, never at ease? When would she be able, like other girls, not to think, but merely to live and be happy thereat? The whole day, from morn to night, she, too, to work and think of naught but how to snatch sweet tidbits without the others seeing; and then with sweet pleasure to eat a gorging meal and after eating it lie down on a soft bed and sink into a bottomless sleep of sweet fatigue and so day after day. To leave everything to fate; blooming in health and strength to wait with delight for asking in marriage, and then for the wedding day, when she would possess a husband, and when she would have her house, like her friends already married and be mistress of it and go with her husband visiting his relations and to the household feasts and to the public assemblies – having as good a time as possible.

And whenever thoughts of this nature plagued her she would try by force to be calm; she would take a piece of work, a piece of difficult embroidery, one of the famous old designs, and try to be excited by it and be pleased by it and enter into it, and thus stitch on all day, without raising her head from the work, and her mother with difficulty dragging her from it for meals. She

would maintain the effort of this discipline day after day, week after week; and, as the piece of work grew clearer under her fingers and the designs rose up on the linen like living things, she would grow deeper and deeper into it, and gradually be changed by it, sleep more peacefully and in the morning be fresher, no longer with bloodless cheeks. Her food became sweeter to her; the air round her fresher; and she could fall asleep whenever she wanted into a sweet and deep sleep. But yet when such a piece of work was near to its completion it always lost its hold on her, and her industry failed; her mornings ceased to be fresh, every day was heavier with headaches and broken sleep. She imagined then that this came from the strain of too close work, when she found her hands and neck trembling, her head heavy, her body racked as from weakness.

Then would begin days of aimless wandering about, of dragging herself about, as if she were ill . . . till, with a sudden onslaught, those thoughts would begin again, her whole torso throbbing and she full of a curious self-delight. A sensation as of melting in sweet feeling, even her mouth dripping with a sweetness, so that every moment she found her tongue feeding on her moist lips, and in her immense desire for something a longing to cry out.

Then she knew quite well that *that* was come on her, felt that she was not one Sophka, but two,

one herself, the other that other self outside her, round about her. Then, like a criminal, Sophka waited for nothing but the coming of night, to lie down and, feeling herself alone in her bed, give her body over to that other Sophka. And she would dream of the coming of that other one, with the glory of the August sun, in the dry days, when dust was on the world – the burning globe gently but steadily sinking, drawn to the scented bosom of the billowing hills, sweetly breathing above the town, above the evening haze. And while yet the teeming town wrestled with repose, stirring uneasily in the first dark, night engulfed the drowsy sun; and Sophka slept, dreaming still. And in the morning was idle to wake, but very dreaming tired.

Throughout a day after *that* she would shrink from her mother and from any other women and sit till night fell in the garden at the back of the house, and there, as if she were mad, would turn to the flowers, and in each flower find one of her lusts and in each twitter of a bird one of her inexplicable unsung yearnings and the voice of a song.

Then she sometimes felt a thing which often happened to her, but which she could never explain. Everything, that is, the garden and the flowers and the trees and the sky above, and on the earth the heights of the hills around her beyond the town and herself, and she herself dressed just like that, sitting just like that, in front of that

very same flower, and the house even like that, and those voices coming from it and her mother's footsteps and the other footsteps she could hear and the very words they were saying, what they wanted, the tone in which they spoke – everything, exactly like that, had been there before, and moved round her before, like that once before. And with the approach of night the whole of it, and she with it, seemed no more to be earthly, but clearer, more detached, more ecstatic, and stronger; so that when she came into the house from the garden out of all that suffusion of delight and happiness, she would fling her hands in the air and be nigh to singing a song aloud – though afraid to. All her efforts were concentrated on not letting her mother know anything of it; and even though in such moments of bliss she was not hungry she would force herself to eat so that her mother did not notice anything unusual, and then leave the table as soon as she could.

She would say she was going to bed, but what she wanted was not rest, but to be alone and then, alone in the night beneath her bed coverings, to be like the sun in the strong arms of the hills, lulled by the enchantment of her virginal dreams; and it was most remarkable that, though she was sure she would never marry, all her dreams melted into a vision of married happiness, their bedroom, their furniture, their bed. . . .

And the dream was always the same; a great

luxurious room full of intercrossing multi-coloured rays of light. Round her the other rooms, furnished in the same way, bright with the bridal towels and other gifts she had brought. . . . Down in the courtyard a fountain, the streams from which and the spray from which showed amber yellow as they rustled in the light of her room. Marriage music could be heard. He, her husband, as if winding up the bridal rout, wearily but merrily, was fitfully and delightedly writhing his body in tune to the rhythm of the song the wedding guests, as they left, were singing.

He was lofty-browed, with rather long ebony moustaches, clothed in silk and homespun, and his clothes were aromatic of the bloom of his flesh; and she was there, on the bed, in her bridal shift, in the sea of that light and the murmur of the fountain and the song,—waiting for him. And though he still had not come, she could already feel the form of his body near her and the pain to come, the touch of his hands and his lips and his head on her bosom, and she heard the soft words breathing from his lips. . . . Then he came, they led him in, exactly as she drawn him, tall and slender like a green poplar, but yet with the glory of the oak in massive shoulders, and conquering jaw, and calm tread.

That was why she was so fond of solitude. Even when she was quite alone in the house, and

her mother had gone to the cemetery or on some business, and deep into the night did not return, she even enjoyed suffering the terror of darkness. She would on such occasion retire to the upper rooms and then, the outer gates and the walls enclosing her and making her safe, she would submit to herself. She would unfasten her stiff embroidered *yelek*, parting its harsh walls that imprisoned her gentle flesh, and would free the fast belting that constrained her waist, and thus lounge. For her linen, no longer fiercely held to her, then softly caressed her, and there was a delight in the air that crept over her skin. Her white shirt was then tender to her, and almost with a man's exultation did she gloat on her breasts' ripe forms, rising half hid from the eye, below the satin cream of her neck.

Once she nearly did a foolish thing. It was some time at the end of the summer. It was a Saturday, a market day. Her mother had gone with Magda to the cemetery. Night fell, a warm, stifling night. Still her mother did not come, and she was alone in the way she so often was – walled in by the silent bricks around her, – having nothing to do, being afraid to walk about; was sitting in the upper room, as usual, in *deshabillé*, and even more fiercely than usual that madness of hers came upon her; but on this occasion, as never before, she suddenly began to feel an immeasurably deep, disquiet fluttering in the very deeps

of her being, clutching her heart,— as to what this would all end in? Would not, indeed, would not the end of it all be death? Then why all this?

And at that moment she heard Vanko the mute coming in from the garden, and singing, probably drunk, as he was every Saturday, on the tips he got running errands in the market, and as he saw nobody downstairs in the kitchen he began to come upstairs, towards her. She started nervously. She covered herself quickly and began to fasten her belt, but suddenly a wild thought came on her, and sweat broke out on her. Why not? He was drunk — he would not know; he was a mute — he could not tell. Why not the one thing she had so often thought and dreamed? Why should not she once know what it feels like to have a man's hand upon you?

And when Vanko had reached the top of the stairs and saw her, delighted at finding a woman, happy and drunk, he mumbled and made signs to tell her how much he had earned that day, and from whom,— all with his 'ba, ba, ba!'

But when he saw that there, on the couch, among her cushions, her clothes unfastened, she lay, and did not get up, did not answer him, or smile, he stood petrified in front of her. But she called him, 'Give me your hand!' she said.

He reached out his hand without hesitation, the fingers stretched and spread out, and the left hand, which was nearer to her. She took his

hand, but not as she usually did, by the fingers; but by the wrist, by his square and bony wrist. Then she saw the spread-out fingers clenching, for he was surprised at the way she had taken his hand, so that when she drew the hand towards her it was black and hard with the veins on it, like an animal's paw. . . .

But she was not the one to hold back once she had made up her mind. Quickly she pulled him towards her, and held him to her. She imagined a sense of all-consuming delight, and foolishly thought that her madness would end in repose. But she felt pain, and nothing else. In horror, she quivered, and started up, and pushed the idiot from her.

But now the idiot was excited. Something had served to madden him, and, with distorted features, he clung to her, clutching at her, pulling her towards him as if with giant pincers, uttering spluttering savage cries.

Any other girl in her place would have lost her head, and fainted from terror, at the mercy of the madman, but she in her disgust glared at him, amazed, and then tossed him from her and went quickly from the room.

CHAPTER V

THE FAMILY'S POVERTY

It happened near Easter. Sophka, as usual before the great feasts, was not working down in the kitchen, but in the upper rooms, turning them out and rearranging them. To keep clean she had put on an old *mitan* which was so tight her breasts were simply bursting in it. In order too, not to get her head dusty, she had wrapped her head entirely in an old shawl, which threw up her face in clearer and sharper relief. Her clog slippers clattered on the dry balcony.

It was just after dawn. The yard in front of the house downstairs had long been watered and swept. The paved paths from the gates to the house showed white. At the well water was trickling out of a bucket and glinting in the sun as it dripped over the stones. The grass round the well, about the courtyard, and even among the stones of the paving showed in dark patches. Their garden, behind the house, fenced off from the courtyard, was green, and the sparrows were twittering under the eaves. From neighbouring houses too could be heard preparations for the

morrow – beating of carpets and blankets and rugs and clatter and scouring of all copper dishes. From the road came the sound of passing feet. The day was fresh and warm, full of a life-giving balsam, as usually are the spring days before Easter. At the bottom of the steps, immediately adjoining the kitchen, her mother was sitting, wrapped up, as if she was cold – though merely to keep the dust from above where Sophka was at work from soiling her clean white shirt showing at neck and bosom. And, thus huddled up, she held on her knees a dish in which she was pounding wheat, while one eye was on the kitchen to see nothing in the pots bubbling round the hearth boiled over. She pounded the sacrificial wheat with care, because that evening was the time to go to the cemetery to carry food for the dead.

Then the great ring of the gate rattled, and a voice cried '*Domatchini*,' 'Household of my master!'

Even Sophka, upstairs, heard the voice, and noticed its sharp and strained accent.

'There's someone knocking, Sophka,' cried her mother from below.

And Sophka left her clearing and came down.

'Why don't you open, Mummy,' she murmured as she came down.

'Hurry up, hurry up, there's someone arrived,' her mother hurried her.

While on her way by the well to the gates to

open, Sophka saw her mother quickly put the dish of wheat from her; and, rapidly, though everything was clean, brush the step in front of the kitchen a few more nervous times and then switch away a cleaning cloth and something else left lying at the foot of the stairs.

Sophka opened the gates, and waited for the stranger to come in. In the open gateway stood a tall, shaven-headed Albanian. Sophka smiled, as she saw at once that it was a messenger from her father, one of the horse dealers that came from Turkey every market day to buy horses. She noticed too that her mother, as soon as she had recognised an Albanian, a man from Turkey, that is, one sure to be *his* messenger, for whom she had, as always just before the great feasts, been hoping, still moved nervously and uncertainly about the kitchen, looking all round, making quite sure that everything was clean and in order as it should be.

'Is this Effendi-Mita's house?', the Albanian began in a loud voice, as if uncertain, looking at the gates again, to make quite sure he had not made a mistake.

Sophka nodded yes. He came in and went towards her mother with long strides, his hands thrust into the flaps of his white pantaloons, and when he was still some distance from her began:

'Behold, Effendi-Mita sends his greetings and bids me to tell you. . . .'

‘Very well, very well,’ her mother cut him short, ‘welcome to our house.’

And when he had reached her, she quickly brought a three-legged stool forward for him to sit on.

‘Sit down and rest!’ she offered him, warmly.

Timidly, as if petrified, the Albanian lowered his body down on to the stool. Her mother, as always with those heralds from her father, stood before him, her arms crossed on her bosom and her head a little inclined towards him, in order as with delight and respect to hear all her husband had to say and to order her.

Sophka went to the kitchen to prepare coffee for the Albanian.

The Albanian frowned, as if to force that high watermark round jaws and forehead which showed how far his morning wash had gone, into higher relief, and began his story. He rarely looked at Sophka’s mother, only at his strong wiry legs in their thick white pantaloons and long goathair socks.

Sophka could tell from his voice that he was put out of countenance by something, and she smiled, because she knew in advance what this was. No doubt but that he, like all her father’s messengers, thought to find the whole house, and her and her mother, much poorer than they were, – and so to have not a good word to say for their Effendi-Mita.

But there he was deceived! He had seen her, Sophka, and her mother, who, though over forty, was still young and fresh, with a warm eye and hair as black and shining as ebony, and though there were some lines round eyes and mouth, they were scarcely noticeable ones that merged invisible into the freshness of her tender face, round and as white as milk. If she was as fine as that in her everyday clothes, what was she like when dressed!

Yet in front of the messenger she stood and humbly, and as if timidly, asked about her man, blaming herself for not having guessed what he wanted her to do for him, which was why, could not the messenger see, she could not give it him at once: but, if he would forgive her, she would send it that very evening by her servant to the inn where the messenger was staying.

And Sophka could tell by the Albanian's expression what an impression her mother and the house made on him; especially when he caught a glimpse of Sophka making the coffee, with the glint of the great heavy trays and immense copper dishes in the gloom of their kitchen in the background; and when he saw there before him the fine stairway leading up to the upper rooms, and the old mulberry tree with its forked skin-like trunk down by the gates, and the old mounting stone by the gates, though this now, it must be admitted, broken but with the marble base still

showing. He grew more and more confused and gulped at his coffee with tremendous, hasty gulps, and then quickly got up, standing too, not in the middle of the path, but on the edge of it, as if he could not steer straight, and poured forth an excuse to Sophka's mother, to the effect that there was no need to hurry, and that he would wait in the inn till she was ready.

'I'll wait in the inn, if you can't make it to-day, to-morrow will do, if you want,' – all in a broken Albanian pidgin speech.

'One day, two day, three day, I will wait all you liking.'

Her mother led him to the gate, and Sophka stayed in the kitchen washing the cups. She noticed that her mother, once the Albanian was gone, grew limp, came back with slow, dragging steps. At the well she paused for some time, then turned aside and went to the cellar. In front of the cellar door too she stood a long time, as if examining something inside – because when at last she turned from it, she called out to Sophka –

'Sophka, go to the Haritons and call Vanko.'

Sophka went and was soon back with Vanko. Whenever Vanko saw her mother he stood scared in front of her.

By signs Todora told him to run up to the bazar and call Toné to her. Vanko went off at the run. A little later Toné, with a smiling already fleshy face, shaved close, and roomy cord-less

breeches, arrived. With quick, short, would-be deferential steps he came up to his former mistress, who, while Vanko was gone for him, had prepared coffee for him and brought out a case of tobacco and paper for rolling, all of which she had set before herself. She herself had rolled a cigarette and slowly smoked it, while she waited for him.

'You wanted me, mistress?' Toné asked her, stuffing his beads into his belt and humbly going on to his knees before her.

'Sit down, sit down,' and she pressed him, and gave him coffee and tobacco.

'Yes,' she said 'I do want you, — for a trifle. You know those barrels and vats of ours?'

'How wouldn't I know, mistress? I remember when they were made! We had to take the gateway down to get them in! How wouldn't I know them!'

'Well, it's about them . . . I've just been poking about in the cellar, and that reminded me of them. You know our vintages have been poor of late years, and they can't all be filled, and I thought I'd ask you how it would be to find someone to store his wine in them, — just so that they don't fall to pieces. You know what I mean, you deal in wine. And you know what a good lock there is on the cellar door!'

'As for that' . . . and Sophka could tell by his voice that he had already guessed what was coming,

– ‘Well, mistress . . . now that wouldn’t be a bad idea, it wouldn’t. It would be a good thing too if I . . . now I’ve a bit of wine to store, – if you’d let me. . .’

‘Very well, then, very well, Toné. Better you than a stranger,’ said her mother, relieved.

‘Excellent. Thank you!’ Toné said quickly. ‘Only, mistress, the most I can do with is two vats. All the others only your house could fill, my house and hand don’t reach to that, you know how badly off we are.’

‘Well, as much as you can, Toné. As for the rest, the Lord ’ll find someone.’

‘God grant, God grant, mistress! May He grant every man his wish. And how is the Master? Any news from him?’

‘Oh, there was a dealer in this morning with news. He is well, thank you, Toné. He can’t get away just yet. Tied up in some piece of business. Sent some stuff for a frock for Sophka and money for our Easter.’

And although Toné was sure the exact reverse was the truth he pretended to believe her. He went quickly away, and sent her a whole year’s rent for the two barrels in advance by his boy, and said he would take the barrels later, or perhaps the whole cellar. He would even put his own lock on it. Her mother did not count the money, for that she never did, although in every roll of coins Toné gave there were always a number

of false ones; but gave the boy a tip at once and sent salutations to Toné and his wife.

The boy went; the gates were closed behind him; and Sophka saw her mother sit on, motionless, staring at the empty coffee cups, wrapt in thought, and turning over the money that lay in her lap. She did not even hear the gates open and their Magda, like one very much at home, slip in.

As usual she came laden with as many bundles as she could carry, and did not pause by Sophka's mother or greet her, but went straight into the kitchen.

'Oh have you come?' cried Todora not noticing Magda till she was in the kitchen.

'I am, mistress, I thought I would never get here,' Magda began, as if to excuse herself.

'My folk up there in the village kept me back, what with one thing and another, you simply can't get away from them, I could hardly get here. Look . . .'

And, without showing what she had brought, as if it wasn't worthy of their notice, she set about putting the flour in the bins and butter and cheese in *sakhans* and *tendjers*, all things she had brought from her house, carefully stored up by her people during the fast, all to be able to bring them, once their masters, as much good as they could.

'Magda!' Todora called again.

'Yes, yes, mistress!' Magda replied, and came

running out, her hands dirty, her sleeves rolled up, for she was already washing dishes.

'Go to the Inn of Many Colours and ask for the Albanian dealer,' Todora instructed her, 'and ask him if he would like any baked foods to take to *him*. Then go to the Stores for *basma*, they know the sort to send for us, only quick, because we have to go out. You understand, don't you?'

'Of course I do, mistress,' Magda replied.

Old, thin and bony, dressed in a medley of town and village costume, quickly she thrust her bare feet into her old slippers and went off. And she did not go by the main gate down the main street, but wicket to wicket, through the gardens and courtyards of the whole district, so as to see everybody and say 'how do you do' to everybody on the way, and only when that was done did she take the quickest route on to the inn.

And Sophka knew well that she would not pause to ask the Albanian what he could carry but simply tell him how to see that the cakes he would be given to take should not be crushed or broken. And Magda then would tell him all about them, her lords, about Sophka's mother and her father, and Sophka herself – though most of all about her grandfather, whose servant she had originally been. And all that not for his information, but to make sure that the Albanian noticed her, and when he had delivered the greetings of each and all, would mention that there

was an old woman, – when *he*, Effendi-Mita, would remember her and know it was *his* Magda.

And as these thoughts passed through her head Sophka caught sight of Magda from the upper windows. The old woman had got away from the courtyards and was going along the street that led straight up into the bazar where the inns were. Evidently she was aware how she had dawdled, for she was nearly running. At every step the wrapped-up bundle of short hair on her head waggled left or right. Then she suddenly began walking slowly, tired. Then again, she went on at a run, taking her slippers off as if those heelless loose things were too tight for her, and going on barefoot. But in spite of her anxious haste still every now and then she stopped, like a little child unable to resist the temptation to go to answer somebody's greeting and exchange a word or two.

And after a considerable time Magda came back, with two apprentice boys and a whole roll of *basma*, and Sophka knew that Magda had come back through the neighbours' courtyards again with those two boys on purpose for all to see Sophka's *basma* and envy her.

Later, as the sun began to sink, the hour for going to the cemetery arrived. The bells began to clang out through the rumble and rattle of the town. Cries and shouts – the bleating of lambs

awaiting slaughter and men managing their restive horses bought at the Easter market, and peasants singing as they passed by on their way home came to Sophka's ear at the upper room. The clamour from the bazar grew greater and greater, confusion seeming to force its way through the evening dust raised by the watering and sweeping of pavement in front of every house and shop.

The roll and *gievrek* sellers were already filtering from the bazar along the alleys leading to the main roads out of the town. Tirelessly they ran hither and thither, weighed down by their baskets of bakeries, to get sales; their pockets, dragging with coppers, rattled against their leggings. Weary of jaw, they bustled round the peasant women, jostling them and persuading them to buy their stale, heated-up rolls, with cries of

'All hot, lady, all hot, three for a farthing!'

And the peasant women scuttled left and right, to avoid the *gievrek* sellers, sure of being cheated by them; and the horses of their menfolk, who pulled up drunk at every inn to swill down another tot, pawed the dusty ground, impatient for a crazy gallop. Out of the peasant wenches' shirt bosoms tumbled the gewgaws they had bought to take home to the village, while the horses rode down whatever fell in their path, even setting themselves straight at the Gypsies as it was a great joke to kill a Gypsy. And the Gypsy women, in

new yellow kerchiefs and tattered blouses, scattered before them, and turned rolling eyes on them, pleading, with a 'Don't master, for the love of God, Master!'

But the peasants, yelling 'At 'em!' in hoarse tipsy voices, lashed their horses on and the Gypsies, mortally fearing, scattered wide.

Magda, downstairs, was all in a flutter; simply could not wait for Sophka's mother to get dressed, had the basket of the foods to be offered to be taken to the graveyard all ready, and was waiting at the courtyard gate. The basket was already balanced on her head, and the silk towel covering the basket swept her face. The noise and confusion from the bazar quarter heated her, and every moment she looked in the gates and called,

'Come along, mistress, come along, mistress, everybody's already gone!'

That was quite true, everybody had started. From the network of alleys that covered the slope on the other side of their street came the sounds of the women on their way to the graves, and those who passed Magda goaded her with

'Come along then, Magda! Has Mistress Todora not yet gone?'

'Not yet, not yet, she is just coming, we're just going,' Magda answered them, shuffling on her slippered feet like an impatient nag.

Sophka had come downstairs and was putting

the finishing touches to her mother; it gave her real pleasure that her mother should go there so beautiful and fresh, in her silk blouse and her costly and dark-hued *colia* which sat so warmly and well about her middle, and patent leather slippers.

Probably on account of thoughts of the graves and the keening to be done, Todora's eyes were already moist and her lips warmer with blood, though Sophka suspected that her father's messenger was also a cause of that. Although her father had sent no message by him that he was coming, Sophka's mother nevertheless guessed – hoped – that perhaps at last, for this Easter, (since he had not been for so long) he would please them, rejoin them.

And indeed, at that moment, feeling guilt before Sophka for those hopes and thoughts of him, of her husband, and ashamed of her weakness, she kept her wet face hid from Sophka, and tried to prevent the girl from taking so long playing with her, adjusting her toilet.

'That's enough, that's enough, Sophkitza,' she said, to stop her. Yet it was clear what delight she had in the way her costume suited her.

Sophka tied her mother's kerchief neatly, so that her open cheeks and her oval chin stood clearly out of the white soft silk frame; and went out with her as far as the gate. And when she had closed the gates after her and Magda, quickly,

nearly at the run, she went upstairs to watch them.

She revelled in how proudly and gladly her mother walked; with a touch of arrogance, her shoulders tossed back, calling the time of the day to any other of her neighbours she met; and all of these forming up round her or behind her, as if they were her disciples. There was Sophka's aunt, Simka, whose house was at the corner of the second street from theirs, a dark thin woman, long since widowed, who for years had spent most of the time in the law courts, at suit with the peasants, still absolutely unable to believe that her dead husband could have spent so much, and sold the land to the peasants, without leaving anything for her and the children. There she was, coming out with her youngest son. The moment she saw Todora she went up to her and kissed her, and Sophka knew what she was saying

'How are you – I had to go to the law courts to-day, I only just managed to get away in time.' Simka then walked along by Todora's side.

And when her mother, heading the small procession of women, turned down a side street and was lost to view, Sophka stayed a long time at the window feeling her voluminous *shalvari* lying heavily on her groin and round her hips, and as she leant over the window-sill she felt the plentiful flesh between them sweetly squeezed by her meeting shoulder blades. Her mother

had gone; she broke suddenly into her own world.

Through the windows shone the light of the sun, playing ruddily on the red carpets. The sun, sinking, flooded the town in a fire that was like fresh blood, and in that red sea the dust clamour held undiminished. Over the quarter of the bazar stood a cloud of dust, writhing in the glowing air, but from the house beneath her no sound came; nor from the courtyard; nor from the garden. And Sophka started, for in that oasis of tranquillity she grew suddenly sharply aware of her body, bathed by the fresh scent that rose from the garden towards her. Leaves in the garden muttered. A strong, humid earth odour rose from the grass and the flower-lined walks.

How well she knew how that silent world would grow more and more insistent, take more hold of her, rising up to her as an odour to take her. She was isolated from the ordinary world. There, tired by the labours of the day, everything was sinking to rest. In her everything was wakening.

She listened. Creaking of a *shadouf* at a distant well, a boy going by in the street taking his master his newly-ironed fez.

Terror, fear of herself, seized her. She rushed through the great room and shut herself in the warmth of the kitchen but once she was shut in there with the familiar pots and pans she felt at

ease again, and she went out to the courtyard gate. When she had made sure that it was well closed she started back, as if soothed by finding it closed.

And then, on her way back from the gates, it came. She felt that same enjoyment of her own flesh that she felt winter evenings when shut in alone. Now, on account of it, she dared not go back upstairs again and be in that room alone, for she knew that full madness of hers would take possession of her – knew that, though the passion days were there, weeks of weeping, when even no smile should cross the face – she would revel in that her dreams, warm with her own happiness to come when all Christian maids should mourn.

And in order to prevent that she went, pretending to herself one duty or another, poking about about the courtyard, tidying, passing as often near the gate as possible, where she could hear the noises of the town, which took her from herself and fortified her against herself.

At the same time from the garden flooded that sweet freshness. Up in the graveyard above the town the bell was still ringing, and its flat measured beat agonised Sophka. A dry heat enveloped her. She could no longer bear even to go into the ground-floor bedroom, so large and gloomy, with its cupboards and bathing alcove. There was a fear on her lest somebody should appear from those openings and recesses, and in the end she did

what in another way she most of all feared – ran upstairs, and there, in the upper room, by the window, lay on the wide soft couch buried in the deep red. Her blood grew hotter still, her forehead and her hands sweating; she dared not stir, let alone close door or window, and who knows how long she would have sat like that had she not suddenly heard a gentle knocking at the outer gate: not a loud knocking but such as a tired man makes, when, not to draw the attention of passers-by, he knocks for some known person in the house alone to hear him and open.

And then Sophka heard her mother's voice calling

'Sophka, Sophka – open the gate!'

With throbbing heart, overjoyed, relieved, Sophka went down.

It was, indeed, high time for her mother and Magda to be back. Night had descended on the town, and the walls outside the courtyard were heavy with the still dust of the day. But Magda had already in her usual way slipped round through the wicket from the neighbours' garden so as to open the great gate for her mistress. Before Sophka's heavy steps could reach the gate she had left her basket in the kitchen and got to the gate.

'All right, Sophka, all right, I'll open it!' she cried.

At great haste she flung it open for Sophka's

mother, standing wearying there, breathless, worn out by the feasting and the keening on the graves.

'So there you are!' was all Sophka said, and took from her mother the towel in which she had carried the candles, the sprig of basil and the flowers to the graves; and which now, on the return, contained others' cakes and other gifts.

'There I am' said her mother, nothing more, and went indoors.

Sophka stayed behind to lock the gate again. She could hear Magda running before her mother to set the kitchen in order before she got there, to light a candle in the room so that the mistress, in the gloom, should not fall over anything. Sophka followed them in. She felt surly and tired by it all. She went through into her mother's room.

CHAPTER VI

THE FAMILY'S ABASEMENT

IMMEDIATELY after that Easter messenger, the first for so many months, for years even, to their great delight and surprise other messengers followed at frequent intervals with greetings from him and news that he was well.

Yet Sophka noticed that her mother was far from being as glad as she would once have been. Those frequent messengers, those warm messages they brought, that unusual tenderness, had begun to disturb her and worry her, fill her even with fear and distress; and it was not long before Sophka realised why. Her mother had long been at peace with the thought that some day it would all have to come out; that he would leave them altogether, and end up over there without a word to them, end perhaps by violent death, all to hide the truth from the world. . . .

But now that there came this succession of messengers she was frightened, afraid illness accounted for his tenderness, that he was seriously ill there and that, feeling death in lonely isolation, in a foreign land, nigh upon him, he was trying

to show them that though he had left them, only they in the world were near and dear to him.

And at last her mother, through that fear he was dying, and was sending messengers to take his last leave of them, and unable to get confirmation from these messengers of what she was sure of (for they all said he was well), sent a special messenger, a peasant Magda provided, to find him; on the sly from Sophka, though Sophka knew of it. And so that the peasant did not guess why he was being sent, she had Magda send him as if on her account. Of course he was not to dare, when he had got over there, into Turkey, and found *him*, to say a word to him or report to him; he was merely to find out if he was well or ill – nothing more. But as to how he looked, how he was dressed, where he habitually sat, in what company – he was forbidden to find out. And that peasant went and returned and confirmed that Effendi-Mita was not ill abed; which was enough.

But what more than anything else calmed Sophka's mother was the peasant's own surprise when he came across Effendi-Mita just over the frontier, in an inn on the highroad. That meant he was quite near – not, as they had thought, far away, they knew not where, perhaps right down by the coast.

But that calm did not last long. He not only went on sending messengers to them, but occasionally really did what they had always boasted to

others that he did – sent them a little money and presents for Sophka, and this frightened Todora more than any thought of illness had done. She knew it could not be the result of any trading or earning. And, knowing he was a man who would stick at nothing, and that whatever he decided to do, the worst and most terrible thing he could decide, it was her business only to submit and to obey him, she was nearly prostrated by her apprehensions. Nor did more and more tender greetings and more and more munificent presents help matters.

And when one evening a messenger came, and confided to her that they could hope for his coming and expect him – that night or the next day he was sure to arrive – but that nobody should be allowed to know of his coming or anyone to see him, Todora was limp and drooping from fear. But, when she heard Magda's delighted cry, and saw Magda trundle towards the gates on her usual journey of public herald to all the neighbours, she sprang up and nearly choked her, so fiercely she held her back; and whispered to her so closely that even Sophka could not hear.

'Hold your tongue! How can we tell why he's coming?'

Then, because she knew what a crazy old thing Magda was, and was afraid she would give her the slip and trumpet the news abroad, she bundled her into the kitchen and shut her up there.



In a state of great agitation, unable to imagine what was afoot, Todora paced up and down in the garden in front of the house.

And it became clear to Sophka that her mother was in that state because she no longer merely feared, but was certain, that he had sold the house to someone there foreign, which had enabled him to send all those messengers with money and presents; and now he was coming to hand the house over to the purchaser and take them away foreign to Turkey with him.

He came that very night. Everything was just as he had ordered; the house in darkness, all the doors of the house closed, and only upstairs in the guest room a lamp dimly burning, wrapped round with a cloth to dim the light as much as possible.

A little before midnight, when the cocks began to crow and all other life about the house was in peace and darkness, they heard a rattling of the ring on the courtyard gate, a rattling so cautious, soft and quiet that Sophka's heart stood still. *He* was there as if he had never been away. Her mother, steeled for anything, went, outwardly calm enough, to let him in. Three times Magda, in the kitchen, fell over things, so upset she was. There was a sound of breaking crocks as she fled into the garden behind the house.

At the gates could be heard a quiet, tranquil voice asking

‘How are you?’

Sophka waiting, holding a lighted candle above her head by the kitchen door, was paralysed by that tranquil voice she heard. Sobs choked in her throat. She felt she should fly to him and fall on his neck and embrace him in her joy for all the agonies he had caused them and sob, crying

‘Tata, dear Tata!’

But all that happened was that he and her mother came slowly towards her. He was walking as calmly, brushing and straightening his pantaloons crushed in travelling, as if this arrival was an everyday happening, an ordinary coming home, just as if he had gone out but that morning on business and now was returning.

Her mother, holding a lamp behind him, did not say a word. Still smoothing his clothes, he looked about him at the house, picking out one thing and another in the dark – the mulberry tree by the courtyard gate, the steps, the cellar door beneath them. As if speaking to himself he murmured

‘There, there, . . . that’s still in its place!’

And when he reached Sophka she took his dry cold hand in her sweating hand and kissed it and said

‘Welcome, Tata!’

He started violently. Then he pulled himself together. It was as if he had not thought before of how she would have grown or how beautiful

she might be. He stared at her in amazed admiration. He could do nothing but pat her cheek and kiss her hair, and ask

‘How are you, my child?’

They went indoors, all three of them weighed down and troubled. Todora was like a wooden figure. His eyes flitted restlessly about him, nervously peering round the kitchen, at the store pots, at the rows of utensils on the shelf; and at the room beyond.

All that he brought with him into the house was an odour of snuff, and an odour of weariness and dustiness coming from his homespun clothes, his wide breeches, his short *zouave*, his wide-sleeved coat. He was in homespun as he always had been, but though the braid that bordered on his under-drawers showed in the candle-light to be worn shiny, those undergarments were of costly silk.

But he himself had changed a great deal. The forehead was more protruding, the face narrower, short-clipped moustaches touched with grey, and the Adam’s apple and the contours of his throat, rising from the clean white silk neckerchief he always had worn, against the shaven and now wrinkle-rutted neck, were more sharply outlined than before. Only his lips, those ever fresh, moist lips, had not changed.

And so that was all that came of that embracing and kissing and crying which Sophka had imagined

would be when he came – that cold silence and painfulness and a speechless feeling of strain grew stronger and stronger. Only when Magda, who was afraid to come in and greet him without being summoned, purposely clattered something in the kitchen, did he stir. He started at the sudden noise and went upstairs to his guest room.

‘Who was that?’ he asked as he went.

‘Magda,’ they said.

And he looked pleased, but not because it was Magda – because it was nobody else.

‘Magda? Is Magda still with you?’ was all his comment on her. He did not even have her in to see her; and she was very grieved.

And by daylight he was gone. Sophka had no notion of when he left. But her mother, not he and his departure, weighed heavily on her, for this time there was none of Todora’s usual active agitation at his departure from her.

Although it was morning and he was finally gone her mother was still in the upper room, sitting on a cushion by the bed, not dressed yet, only a cloak thrown over her shoulders, only her night shift on, unbelted. The bedding still lay unmade, the eiderdown tossed aside, the pillow with a crumpled covering, the dusty marks of her father’s boots still there on the carpet.

Round that cushion lay little trays full of tobacco ash and dead matches; there was a candlestick

in which a candle had burned and guttered itself out; there was a small water pot with the stale water of the night before. The air was fuggy; the curtains and the windows still tightly closed.

Sophka guessed that her mother had not even gone with her father to the gate. If she had gone out to the gate with him, when she came back she could not but have noticed the terrible tobacco fug. She loved clean air and would certainly have opened the windows, let fresh air in. Yet, for her not to have seen him off, something important and terrible must have passed between them; and that, she had no doubt, no doubt whatever, was that he had sold the house, and had come to tell them; which was why her mother could not come to herself. How would she be able ever to bring herself to leaving the house and going away with him, to Turkey, to God knows where?

Whereas Sophka felt it might even be better so, at least be better for herself in that foreign land, because nobody would know there who or what she was.

And that she was right her mother herself confirmed; because, as soon as she saw Sophka coming into the room pretending to be looking for something, but obviously coming just to see her, and to learn by her face what was the matter with her father, and why he had gone away again, she

said plainly, simply, to avoid all further questions
'He's coming back!'

And remained crouching as she sat, a defeated woman.

The whole of that day she did not stir, nor once come down from that room, as if hoping there to recover from the shock of it. She did not come down till the next day.

That very morning she found an excuse to send Magda off to the village, and Sophka knew this was simply from fear that Magda would not be able to hold her tongue, but would spread the news about the town that Effendi-Mita had come and had gone. Yet previously, whenever he had come or left, her mother had kept Magda in the house for that very purpose of having her go about the town, trumpeting her master's visit and the marvellous presents he had brought. That had then been a necessary means of persuading the world that he had not abandoned them, and the dispatching of Magda away to the village was but another proof for Sophka that the dreadful end had come, and her father had sold the house – that it was to tell them that he had come.

That was probably why her mother and he had quarrelled that night – because her mother, for the first time in her life, had been against him, would not consent to his will, had told him all she thought of it – and he had gone off in a rage; when she, for the first time in her life, had left

him to depart alone, had not bid him god speed, had not lit him to the gate; but, petrified, in her shift alone, had remained there beside the bed – just as Sophka found her.

Her mother said nothing to her of it. But in the days that followed it became quite clear that he had sold the house.

Apart from her mother's strangeness that morning after he had gone, there was the way she set about overhauling the house, as if every day were now to be a feast day. All the chests and cupboards were opened and everything that they held, sheets and towels and carpets and embroidered woollen and linen cloths for all purposes, were brought out and aired, and then not, as usual, put back again, but hung and draped round the couches and walls of the rooms.

This, for that matter, seemed all for the good, – in the first place because, when they went, they would be able to gather up and pack everything very quickly; and in the second place because when the stranger, the purchaser, arrived, he would not be able to realise that they absolutely had to sell the house because of their poverty. When he saw such a richly decorated house (especially the reception rooms) he would conclude that they had sold him the house more from a desire to move to another town than from need. They could have lived for years on the sale of

their carpets alone, and any purchaser would be proud of taking such a rich and finely done-up house – proud to be buying from them not as picking up a house cheap but as a man from his peer – as if the house had been sold in friendly bargain.

For this reason her mother's decorating and arranging the house immediately before the sale she believed due, pleased Sophka; and she helped with a will in the arranging and finishing off. Outside too, in the garden, she dug and tidied, raked and transplanted so that the purchaser when he came should not see any of the muddle of that rubbish and broken pots such as you see about the houses of the poor, whose way it is when they have sold their house to another, before they move out to turn everything upside-down and *despoil* it, stripping house of fittings and garden of flowers.

Then their relations seemed to get wind of it. Who could tell how. Sophka did not care, for she knew that however much you huddle and hush nothing can really be concealed. When they saw the house was being overhauled they began to visit them every day; and Sophka even wondered if her mother had not told them everything, and begged them to hide it from her till the very last moment.

Only in this way was Sophka able to see sense in the curiously tender attitude of them all towards

her. Each of them, taking leave, looked upset and stared most fixedly at her, as if they were bitterly sorry for her – sorry she was going, sorry they would not be able to look at her any more, and that, though it was none of her fault, she would have to suffer *there*, in a foreign land, in Turkey.

The only one who was obstinate was Aunt Stoya. When she came, she kissed Sophka immediately, as she arrived, and then stayed with her till they had talked over everything under the sun, and only then went up to see 'her' – Sophka's mother, her own sister – and the other women. But as soon as she had got there, when, as Sophka thought, the sale of the house had been announced to her, right from the kitchen Sophka could hear her resistance, her quarrelling, her protesting. In vain other voices tried to calm her, and especially Sophka's mother – tried to get her not to shout, not to talk and scold in such a loud voice, in case Sophka downstairs heard, as that would not make matters any better. Sophka could get snatches of her Aunt when the door upstairs opened. She could hear her shouting and, it seemed, reproaching and swearing. It must be all against him, her father.

'Shh . . .! Hold your peace!' cried Sophka's mother.

'I shall not; indeed I shall not!' and Aunt Stoya seemed to be shouting in a muffled, half

stifled voice through the fingers of a hand that was trying to silence her.

'You can't tell me. Don't I know? I'm not blind. Have you come to that? Does she (certainly Sophka) deserve that? I'll look after her, I'll feed her and keep her. And you, you (that must be her mother – Aunt Stoya's sister) . . . where's your tongue, why don't you tell him what you think of him? Oh, but he's your *husband*. All you care about is to have your darling of a husband by your side, everything else can go to the devil! . . .'

Then it was clear that these last words had made them all more decided than ever in shutting her up, such a hullabaloo rose against her. . . .

CHAPTER VII

GAZDA-MARKO AND EFFENDI-MITA

ON the second day of Whitsuntide, in the evening, the music of a wood horn could suddenly be heard from down by the tollhouse, winding a tune strange in its roundness and its unusual phrasing. Sophka's mother started. She came running out.

'Sophka, what if it's him? . . .' she cried.

Sophka was blank – could not believe it. Surely he would not go so far as to bring in the purchaser, as he sold his last property, with music and merriment! Then she thought she understood better – that it was the better to hide it that he came so.

Magda, all aflutter, ran upstairs to light the upper floor. A carriage soon stopped at their gates and Sophka heard that voice, nearly strange to her, but yet long ago familiar, crying

'Open!'

Without a thought as to how they were dressed, whether well or badly, they both ran out, both Sophka and her mother, with candles. At the open gates, under the light of the candles they

saw him leaving the carriage. They could not see his face, but they knew him by his clothes, and behind him came another, a huge man, in a sheepskin coat, nearly hidden by the darkness. That must be the buyer of the house. And when they had paid the player and the coachman and they had led the finely caparisoned chestnut mare that had been tied behind the carriage inside and tied it to the mulberry tree (doubtless the mount of that buyer, for him to ride away on after dinner) they proceeded indoors.

Whether from the direct effect of the drink, or because he had to go through the mummary of all that merriment and drinking, Sophka's father's face was pale and curiously puffy. As he led his visitor in at the gates his gesture showed him the house.

'There you are, Master Marko. That's my serail, that's Effendi-Mita's house you've heard tell of. And here is the mistress of the house, and here is my daughter, my Sophka, Tata's Sophka.'

And when he had reached his hand to his wife, who kissed it, he began to stroke Sophka's hair and cheeks tenderly, his already dried-up palms trembling a little; and this disturbed Sophka.

Their guest, Gazda-Marko, somewhat ill at ease, shook hands with Sophka's mother. Sophka did not know whether to shake hands with him or to kiss his hand, for he was not so very old. But when the visitor noticed her hesitating he put

her at ease by giving her his hand outright to be kissed.

'*Zhiva bila, ktcheri!*' (May you flourish, daughter) he said, in an old-fashioned way.

Lit by the flickering candles they went into the house. Sophka noticed how the visitor, the purchaser as she thought him, took stock of the house all the time, drinking it all in; the house that now, decked up as it was, looked brighter than ever it had done, large and squarely upstanding in the night, with the light from the kitchen and from the upper floor, solid without and rich within. Sophka also noticed how close to her mother he kept. Her mother went before them, and, in pretended delight at their coming, cried in a voice that trembled a little, yet so little (for that would be shame) none would notice it—

'Magda, Magda! Hurry, hurry! Get dinner, here are visitors come!'

And Magda was all confusion; did not know which way to turn first; and when she blundered out and kissed Effendi-Mita's hand her voice was gone. He was surprised, started back, was pleased.

'Why, Magda,' he cried, 'Are you still here, Magda?'

'I . . . I . . . yes . . . yes' she stammered, as if offended by his surprise. 'I am in my place, where else should I be, master? I am in my place!'

‘And how are your folk in the village? Are they alive and well?’

‘They are, they are, Master!’ Magda cried, fidgeting before him, nearly brought to tears by his condescension in even asking about her folk.

Then upstairs, in the great guest room, they sat down. Sophka’s mother, knowing this was coming, had not moved a thing in the guest room since Easter. Sophka felt her father would be pleased to find the house in such order, and particularly enjoy seeing the purchaser surprised by the furnishing of the house, in particular by the shelves of gold and silver cups and dishes, all glowing in the light of candles in massive sticks. The yellowish wood, but recently soda scoured, shone against the red of the cushions and carpets; all of it embellished by the ceaseless stirring and fluttering in the breeze of the towels hung round the walls.

She hastened downstairs to the kitchen to arrange dishes of food on a great tray, to take upstairs and serve, and as she put the dishes ready she could hear the visitor upstairs already making excuses and trying to retire, so surprised and flabbergasted was he. He would not sit on the cushions, for fear he dirtied them, but asked for a chair. Every moment he turned to her father to ask him

‘I say, Mita, hadn’t I better be going, I’ll be in your way.’

But Sophka's mother would not hear of his going, gave him no chance of saying it. If he had come by himself, she said, he would have had the same reception, so why should there be any difficulty when the master of the house was there; and she simply cried downstairs to Magda to bring in the dinner.

But Sophka knew that her mother meant that for her – for her to prepare the *sophra* of main dishes as quickly as she could, as Magda had already taken up *rakia* and the small meats, and left with Todora to serve them with. And at last Sophka was ready, and carried upstairs and into the room to them the large silver tray loaded with dishes.

And as she placed it before them, bending over it, she observed that the stranger did not take his eyes for one second from her, and that those eyes when she stooped to set the *sophra* down and her plaits tumbled forward over her shoulders and all her rich body, compressed in its gown by her bending, revealed its lines, her breasts dreaming seemed to cry for release from its waiting. In an unwonted state of delight, breathless with her excitement, she started away and tossed her plaits back over her shoulders, and went back into the kitchen to Magda.

Upstairs dinner began. They drank more than they ate, and Magda, seeing that the wine they had bought for Easter would soon all be gone, in

order not to have to go out for more late at night, made a number of secret journeys, squeezing through the narrow window of the cellar, and through holes she bored slanting in the barrels, under the hoops, drew of Toné's wine. As if to justify her theft she muttered

'Ah, the scoundrel! Wormed his way in, like a moth, he did. Changing the padlock indeed, as if we weren't to be trusted, as if anyone was going to take his beastly wine. . . .'

And she took the wine she drew to the kitchen and filled it all in saucepans and crocks and stew-pans so that neither Sophka nor her mother should notice it – because what might they not have to say to her if they did. They would even have made her put it back.

And as night came on Sophka observed that those upstairs got freer in speech and manner. And numberless times, as her mother came down for wine and food, through the opening door she caught the sound of their visitor, left alone with her father, confirming some arrangement – the arrangement of the sale of the house, of course.

'What I say I stick to!' he would cry, and then drink again.

At last Sophka left them, and went to her room and to bed; partly because it was not the thing for a girl to sit up so late, and partly because she would have to be up betimes in the morning; her mother would be too tired.

CHAPTER VIII

GAZDA-MARKO

AND that visitor of theirs, the purchaser, when, at the screech of dawn, he left, and had already mounted his horse to rise off, lingered a long, long time at the gates – as if he wanted to drink his fill of the sight of their house – now his, thought Sophka – and fix it in his memory, the whole of it with the houses around it and with its massive courtyard gate. But at last he set off, past the fountain, downhill, on the road past the gardens and the fields. He rode towards that part of the town which was still new, but recently built, not properly town yet, – where peasants lived, people coming in now to the town from the surrounding villages, or come as refugees from Turkey.

His chestnut horse, with undocked tail to hoofs, lissom neck, a fine square head, and intelligent eyes, felt its master's firm knees, gave a lively start, in a few seconds was quickly gone in a cloud of dust.

The sun was lighting the horizon from behind. Night was dispersing, and around them, through

the early morning mist, the forms of things were beginning to show; and from the fields and gardens came an odour of rotting grass and of roots. Far away to one side, by the river, the murmur of water and first trial twittering of awakening birds was audible; but on the town side, about the streets that ended by the house, everything was still, in silent darkness. Only it seemed to him, the stranger, that from there, from that house, from Sophka's house, the candle she had held was still burning and lighting the way before him. And for this reason it was that he frequently put up his hand, and from his physical delight and satisfaction, took the peasant fur cap off his head, and smoothed his forehead, his eyes, his whole face.

The chestnut, knowing the way, turned of its own accord down the last street, narrow and winding, like a ravine between the street walls and the trees; then up the hill, towards the business quarter – to its master's house. Then he, noticing he was near home, felt a sort of confusion, so that he drew himself up in the saddle and strained a little against the spurs. But the chestnut, ending the return home with a canter, whinnied from delight.

Further still above them, in the market quarter, lighted braziers dimly showed here and there out of the darkness, and the bakers could be heard at their work; but here, as usual on the edge of the town, everything was silent, wrapped in darkness.

The only sign of change from night was the drawn-out barking of dogs and the crow of cocks from the field beyond.

Marko drew his mare round so as to bring himself up to the gates; it looked as if he was preparing to shoulder it down. He knew quite well from experience that neither knocking nor kicking at the door would waken his people there in the house, as the house was too far from the gates, and what he did was draw his pistols from his belt and hammer on the gates with their butts; and he hardly had the patience to wait till, through the cracks between the heavy, strong but wide-set planks, he saw some light about the house, and his servant Arsa, bareheaded, a sheep-skin coat over his shoulders, a tallow candle in a stick in his hand, run to the gate.

'Who's there, who's there?' he heard Arsa cry savagely as he left the house, shielding the candle against the wind; and then heard him dart forward at a fevered run the moment he heard his master's short ill-humoured

'Me!'

With one hand he held the candle on high for his master to see as well as possible, and with the other he opened the bolted gates and pushed the bolt aside (more a log than a mere slat for a bar), and did not care as the coat slipped from his shoulders, leaving him there in his underlinen, or that he had left one sandal halfway across the

yard, but, as he opened the gates, not knowing what to say, Arsa spoke to the horse:

‘Whoa, there, whoa, my chestnut!’

‘Is there anyone alive here?’ he growled at Arsa, as he pushed past him into the yard.

Arsa trundled at his heels and only just managed to reach him by the threshold of the house and take the horse by the bridle, and hold the stirrup to help him dismount.

The moment he was off his horse Marko went straight to his own room, a little sloping roofed cubby that had only just been built on to the miserable house. It was low pitched and cramping, a stifling little den. The floor was of trodden earth, and the carpets on it, recently new, were already practically part of that panned soil.

The cushions and pillows were hard, and lay scattered exactly as he had left them.

He strode into the stale room, and the first thing he did there was examine two huge padlocks on a long deep oak chest painted in various colours. Only when he made sure that they were untouched – not merely unopened, but hanging at exactly the angle he had put them at before he went out, did he relax, and take up his stand in the middle of the room waiting for some member of the household, his servant Arsa, or his wife or another servant, to bring in a candle and undress him.

But by this time it was fully day. The cobbles

of the yard showed blue in the morning light and through the window of the room, opposite him, at the well, he could clearly see the huge iron bucket hanging on its chains. The crackling of dry sticks could be heard from the kitchen; and then a quick, bright flicker appeared on the hearth and swelled to a fire that showed on all sides, even as far as that little room. Then quiet, timid steps to and fro the one other room of the house and the kitchen could be heard.

At last Arsa settled the chestnut in the stable. He then went in to his master with a candle; and began to undress him. Marko, still standing, vaguely aided Arsa in his task.

‘Are they up?’ he asked.

‘Yes, they are, master,’ was the answer. ‘The mistress is at work in the kitchen. Tomtcha is just about to dress.’

Tomtcha was Marko’s young, only son.

Arsa arranged cushions for him, but Marko did not sit and, lean back as usual on them to have his boots taken off. He sat squarely down on the long chest, and, while he raised his legs, supported his body on his small-fingered, yet thick coarse hands. Belt and under belt with pistols and yatagan and loading stick were all taken off him and carried away to be cleaned. Marko was now in his under-linen, but still he sat, head bent, hands gripping the great chest. The lining of his roomy pantaloons showed white, and his open shirt, framed in

a *zouave*, tumbling from his shoulders, revealed a powerful thickly-forested chest – dark with its hairs right up to his short squat bare neck.

He sat thus, not stirring, nor raising his head; not even when his wife came in, bringing him the first refreshment. On a small, old and rather battered tray stood the glass of water and, on a little saucer, the sweetness, – a few lumps of sugar of a very doubtful colour – a clear sign of how long a stock of sugar lasted; for only he in that house ever ate it.

Marko's wife came in tranquilly enough. She was quite used to his untimely homecomings. Her only greeting to him was a curt

'So there you are!'

'There I am!' he replied.

She was sullen, but then she always was; the unusual was something sullen, awkward, ill at ease in his answer. Without as much as a glance at her he took the sugar, dipped it, crunched it, and washed it down at a gulp.

'Shall I make you a bed?' his wife asked, standing weak and patient woman before him.

She was all humility, broken. She was dressed in a mixture of village and town fashion. A town costume blouse, crossed over the front by the ends of a new, but very plain shawl; thick white stockings; round her middle a peasant woman's belt; a small knife at the belt. Thin, pale faced,

with colourless eyes; bony, with the hairs of age on her face. She had a pleasant odour, an odour of milk and manure and the plain smell of rough and coarse clothes.

'Yes, I want to sleep,' Marko said.

He did not move from the chest. She started for the door. He called her back.

'Listen,' he said. 'Tell Tomtcha to dress and go to the inn.'

Then he changed his mind.

'But no. Let him stay here!'

With a petulant wave of the hand he dismissed her. As if to himself he went on speaking

'They can do it themselves when the time comes!'

She went out, soon returned, bringing bedding. It was already broad daylight; the sun fully up. Marko motioned to his man to cover up the windows; and when it grew dark in the little room he lowered himself slowly and heavily on to the bed and wrapped himself up for sleep.

CHAPTER IX

SALE OF SOPHKA

IN the house he had left behind him, Sophka, the whole of that day, was in the best of spirits; and for those good spirits her whole life after she could never forgive herself. She could not forgive herself for not having been able to feel it and know – she, Sophka, who all her life had known and felt everything ahead – not to have felt at this most important point of all in her life, when it was her whole life in question, what was afoot!

Yet how should she have known? It was natural to think that the house was sold, that the visitor of the night was the man who had bought it.

When her father had slept he got up, at about the midday meal time. He made a good meal, and went to sleep again, and then, in the evening, when it was dark, he came downstairs to them into the kitchen. He went out and looked over the garden and the yard; and the cellar; and Sophka's mother followed him, to be at hand, and tell him anything he wanted to know.

After the evening meal Sophka went to bed downstairs, in the large room, with Magda who

slept there with her because she could not sleep alone. She soon forgot herself in sleep, knowing nothing, since she was already reconciled to the sale of the house, and even relieved, for now their years of strain had come to an end at last there was no longer cause for nights alert. Even though they did go to live in poverty in a foreign country, in Turkey, they would be together with *him*, her Tata. With him their head, him to guide them, they would be able to breathe freely again and move and live a normal life. And for these reasons Sophka was perfectly happy, and so fell into a sweet and deep sleep.

But the next morning she realised that the night had been one of turmoil. It must have been about midnight, when her sleep was already lighter, that a continual murmur, ceaseless talking and walking about, heard from the room above through the ceiling, forced itself into her half conscious mind. And when she awoke she could distinguish in it, through memory, her mother's voice, loud as she had never heard it before, resisting, quarrelling, crying.

This was all clear to her in a flash when she saw her mother the next morning. She was coming hesitatingly down the stairs with her hand to her brow over her eyes, and her lips and her whole face were quite hideous, so distorted they were, as if in horror. She entered the kitchen where Sophka and Magda were, and all she was able to say was

'Magda, take Sophka to her Aunt's. She will stay there. You come back.'

This was down in the kitchen, where it was still dark. The earth of the floor was damp, fresh from morning sweeping; the beams above were black from smoke, and opposite her on shelves stood the copper pots and pans; and when she heard her mother's words, and knew well the fell thing they meant, those dishes began to devour her like great inflamed eyes, and everything about her dissolved in oscillating circles. She stumbled, and nearly fell, but quickly drew herself up and tried, in her terror – unable to believe what she had heard, in a fever tried to catch her mother's eye; but her mother had already passed through into the great room and was weeping softly over the window sill.

Were those sobs of sorrow, pain, or happiness and joy, that at last the marriage of Sophka was determined? For that was what the being led away by the servant to another house meant for a marriageable girl. She had been asked in marriage and the offer accepted – and such was the custom – for her to conceal herself three days in another house. Sophka clenched her toes as she stood there, and a spasm of pain rose from her knees, fending her bowels, cutting her in two like a knife.

'Mummy!' she cried.

But her mother, as if afraid now, turned aside

from her, pressed her head closer to the wood of the window and wept still more, and through the tears begged Sophka not to come near her, not to ask questions of her.

‘Go, my child, go!’ she said. ‘Oh, don’t you understand. It has to be; it’s fate. I knew no good, nothing else could be expected of him. Don’t you see how it is? At least you, Sophka, don’t torture me; I have enough as it is, oh!’

But she stifled the wail in her, weeping and sobbing quietly again, from fear lest he, upstairs, should hear her.

And for the moment those tears of her mother made Sophka more at ease, for at least she knew her mother did not approve of it. But still unable quite to believe it, not knowing which way to turn she asked

‘Why, mummy? Why? . . .’ and tears of fury started from her.

‘I don’t know, my child. I don’t know, don’t ask me – all I know is that it is all settled. He’s up there – there is the devil in him! I dare not show myself to him – oh!! . . . this black world!’

And then a flood of such energy and fury even hatred for her father came over Sophka that she went up to him. What infuriated her most was the insult in it – that, even if he had wanted to marry her, he should treat her in such a way, arrange it all so suddenly behind her back as if he hated her. But whether he saw her coming up

to him, or Magda, doing out his room, the stupid old thing, weeping and sobbing as she worked was the cause, she was checked half way up the stairs by his terrible voice bellowing with oaths

‘None of that sniffing and snuffling here ! You snuffling . . .!’

This stupefied Sophka, for she felt that these curses were for them downstairs, her mother and especially herself. Her beloved father’s voice was curiously dry and steamy; no soft warmth, no vibration in it now, and Sophka came down the stairs faster than she had gone up, and with the pain at her heart greater than ever it had been.

Then Magda came down, crestfallen; and without another word Sophka went with her to her Aunt Kata’s. She stumbled and fell in her haste now,snatching at what small necessities she wanted, only to get away as quickly as she could and be quit of it all – though still, still unable to believe the loud truth of it.

She would have said they simply could not treat her so. She had thought she was not like the rest; she would have said she was no foolish heifer of a girl neither knowing nor fit to know anything, with whom parents’ will should be done as they liked and whenever they liked. . . . Yet worse than all hurt her own foul blindness in not foreseeing it, if not in years before, then at least last night – that great peasant boor, not buying the house, but, but, buying her, but buying her. . . .

And then she began to remember things – and now realise why the stranger had been so astounded when he saw her. And she remembered how he had never taken his eyes off her, and the ceaseless quivering of his full lips, and she remembered that phrase he kept repeating whenever alone with her father – What I say I stick to. He had, that meant, agreed to take her even before he saw her; and now he had seen her was bewildered, glad, ill at ease.

Her Aunt Kata was surprised to see her; but Magda with gestures and a few quick words in Turkish, soon enough told her everything. Her Aunt Kata was overjoyed, did not know what to do for pleasure; but by the expression on Sophka's face and the girl's trembling and uncertain steps and in particular by the heat she felt in Sophka's lips kissing her hand, Kata saw that Sophka should be left alone as soon as possible. She went at once to prepare a room, and as soon as it was ready she called Sophka.

'Come, come, little Sophkitza,' she called. 'Sit down, rest yourself. It'll all be right, don't be afraid!' Perfunctorily she consoled her; and then, scarcely able to contain herself, rushed back with Magda to Sophka's mother.

Sophka flung herself on the bed, and in spite of all it meant was warmly grateful to her aunt for locking her in the house as she left her. At least

that imprisonment made her free from questioning fools. She need fear no one's coming.

But Aunt Kata should have shut the courtyard gate too, so that, a little later, Sophka could not have seen a sight that disturbed and pained her terribly – seen their own gate and through it their house and all that was going on there – especially Magda's repeated entries and exits; for Sophka knew they meant she was running round to all their relations to invite them to hear the news.

And soon too she saw how, delighted at the news that Effendi-Mita had arrived, yet terrified at being summoned by him (as that was not usual from him), they began arriving, house by house – with the older generation, all the uncles and the husbands of her aunts well in advance. There was now a hive-like busyness at the house and Sophka saw that Aunt Kata was most busy amongst them.

The house, wide open to the world, was filling, and it would have been for a gay feast indeed were not they all of them dumb, with scared and mysterious faces. And Sophka imagined it was her father, through in that upstairs room, announcing Sophka's coming marriage, and at the same time ordering them not to let a word of it pass their lips to anyone, no stranger to know till it was all over. Announcement and command complete they could all go home again to get ready and

prepare their costumes and everything else to be ready for the invitation to the wedding.

And sudden realisation of the steady onward march of preparations defeated Sophka. Why should they treat her thus – she, whom till then they had treated with such affection and respect? To whom was this they were marrying her? Who was he? What was he? From what fold was he sprung?

And pain and misery, weeping and sorrow took firmer and firmer hold of her, till she began to feel herself, as she lay there, falling to unconsciousness. After a whole hour of miserable stupor, slowly and painfully she came to herself again. And as the day grew older and passed away, leaving her still locked alone in that house, with horror she found her mind growing hysterically more and more clear, till it became obvious, and her teeth chattered as she thought of it, that the stranger of the night before was now her future husband. She seemed to feel herself already on his knees, and those lips of his on hers, and those hands of his with the short and delicate hairy-backed fingers over her body; and she felt her hair rise, and sweat chilling on her forehead; and crazy from horror at the very thought of it she got up and tried to run from the room, crying 'Oh God! Oh God!'

And, a prisoner, she flung herself hopeless on to the bed and wept.

But that night, before even they meant her to, she learned the real truth of it.

At last, long after dark, her Aunt Kata came back. Sophka heard her key grate in the kitchen door. A candle was lit and then the kitchen fire. There was some other woman too. They set about cooking dinner, and as they worked they talked. Yes, yes, things had always been the same. Why, so-and-so had married much worse. Anyway there was money, Marko was so rich that nobody could say how much he had. True, he was one of those new folk, just come from Turkey and settled there, but he owned caravanserais on the Stambul road, and was a regular contractor in cattle to the Turkish army. Money, if only recently come to the town, taking a small house in the lower suburb. . . .

Then Sophka was perplexed, for she heard them making excuses for the match, saying that although he was still young, *only twelve years old*, anybody would be only too glad to marry into so rich a house.

A shudder slowly mastered her cold body. So *he* wasn't taking her for *himself*, then; he was not a widower wanting a second wife, let alone an unmarried man – it was for a son he had come to bargain, a son who was still but an unformed child! Fever followed the first chill of dismay, and Sophka began to feel she would spew all her blood and her bowels out through her mouth

in her revulsion; so overcome by pain too was she, and agony that hopelessly goaded her to groan.

She mastered herself then as fast as she could and went out into the kitchen and, when lit by the hearth flames she saw her appear her aunt mumbled

‘What is it, Sophkitza?’

‘I want my shawl,’ she said. ‘I am just going up to the house, I have forgotten something.’

She could scarcely bring the words out, and did not stop properly to put on the shawl that her aunt, amazed, reached to her, but just flung it over her shoulders and bundled it about her head so that no one should see her and went out.

Not the darkness nor the loneliness nor the dead fall of the water at the well alarmed her; she was already mistress of herself, not Sophka a child, Effendi-Mita’s *Sophkitza*, but a full woman, her own self, her own woman, no one else’s. Clenching her hands under her breasts in her fury so that she was nigh crying from the pain, she drew her *shalvari* up to be able to go as quickly as she could, she reached the end of the alley and passed the fountain into the courtyard and entered her house. There were candles lit in all rooms, upstairs and down. As if she had never existed, as if she was dead and long ago buried and forgotten the house was tranquil and lit up, living its independent life.

At that moment Magda came out of the kitchen and nearly collided with Sophka. Sophka, looking up at her father's room, only asked

'Is anyone at home?'

'He himself is,' Magda replied.

Sophka went up. In front of the door were his shoes and at the sight of that sign of him a trembling fit took her, yet she opened the door boldly and went in. The light of the candle was flickering, and looked as if it might have set fire to her father's hair, for he was bending over it.

When he saw her, as if it was a strange man come to see him, and not her, his Sophka, he got up and said only

'Effendi'm.'

Then by her disturbance and the fierceness of her eyes he apparently guessed why she had come, and his lips began to twitch.

'Father,' she began – and she could scarce get the tender word, 'Tata' through her lips, so bitter and so offended did she feel that he should treat her so.

'I cannot . . . and won't. . . .'

And she felt she might lose all her courage and break down into tears in front of him, so she finished it in a rush

'I can't and won't marry such a husband!'

All she saw was him get up, and in his socked feet come towards her, with a sort of dry twisted smile. He stopped near her and said

‘Sophka, my dear – beauty and youth are but for a time.’

In his voice seemed to ring his own experience, his sorrow and bitterness, and this put Sophka aback. He too once had thought that beauty and youth were the first things and the greatest – and that was why he had come to this misery.

Sophka went on muttering ‘I can’t . . . I won’t. . . .’

If he had not so valued youth and beauty, not married her mother, he would not have suffered so much and come to this, Effendi-Mita felt; just when his heart had softened, and he had come back to them – here, in place of daughterly gratitude, was this. . . .! He could bear it no longer.

‘Nor can I . . .’ he cried.

And he sprang away from Sophka, drew himself up to his full height. Sophka saw his toes in socks alone clenching in the carpet, his feet pawing nervously. And as if to plead with him for mercy she went on

‘I am ashamed! before my friends and before the whole world, father!’

‘And I too am ashamed!’ he cried.

And, warding off her words, shaking in fury, and not fury against Sophka, but as if against himself, against his fate, he began pouring out all his misery.

‘Am I not ashamed then?’ he cried. ‘Do I want

it for my own pleasure – do you think it's my delight? Don't I know how much it is I ask of you when I know my part of it? I, I, okh . . . !'

And he groaned and shook himself in his misery at Sophka's ingratitude, for it was only his fierce love for her had made him come back, for he had come back to ensure future happiness for her, to find her a good husband of a well-to-do family. And that his care for her should result in this choice of a child was not so terrible as was his own lot – he to hobnob with – he to be related to that peasant Marko, the father, and be at one with him and live with him. And there to crown the bitterness of his heart was the girl with her wail of 'can't and won't.'

He could! He could go through with it all, but she couldn't! He quivered in his rage; his toes dug into the carpet, till through the thick pile he could feel the hard grain of the boards. His hands were clenched behind his back, and from his block of shoulders was thrust his bare neck, shaven, wrinkle-furrowed round the Adam's apple that started out as if it would choke him. He spoke quietly, as if to himself, without one glance at Sophka.

'I can, but nobody else can,' he said. 'I can do everything, I have to. I Effendi-Mita! But you won't, for you it's shame.' And in that *you* he counted both mother and daughter.

'Would your fine feelings then want me to go

down to the caravanserais to be a street porter, waiting to carry for Turkey merchants who once thought themselves lucky when I merely acknowledged their salute? Be lackey to them, paid with a snack in the inn and a copper in my hand to buy a little flour and bring you home . . . Is that what you want of me?’

He strode up and down, agitated as Sophka had never seen him before. He could not breathe freely. His fingers cracked. His now aged, wrinkled, shaved head, narrowed down to the bone frame of it, shook. He was so agitated that for long he could not calm himself. And yet Sophka felt that what he had just said and what had passed between them was not all he had to say, not the worst. Lit by the guttering candles, she could see his torso trembling and quivering as his knees and his hips gave way and swayed.

And realisation of what it had come to between them came on him and he crushed his head in his hands and gasping groans came from him. He was striving to calm himself, to avoid what came, to force it back. But he could not master it.

He suddenly swung round to her, came close up to her, pressed his hands to the sides of her head, and then, before he spoke, looked cautiously all round him. What was coming was not to be heard even by the night.

‘Is it my dear child, my own child, my Sophka, my Sophkitza,’ he asked, in a sepulchral voice

‘that you can’t believe your daddy? You think he is a liar, that he has got money, that he is not poor, that he just wants to marry you off, that that has come up his back. Just look at him!’

And he opened his coats to show the linings of them.

Sophka, amazed, saw that it was only a narrow border of them – as much as swung open and showed as he walked, that was lined with new and expensive lining. The hidden remainder was worn and greasy, even in places worn away, and the padding fallen out. It was dirty and stank of sweat and wayside inns, endless nights spent without undressing, and through the tatters showed a beggar’s dirty body.

Then Sophka’s rage vanished. She crumpled, bent and practically fell at his feet, crying

‘Oh, Tata, oh Tata!’

And he collapsed on the floor.

Then she fled from him. She never could remember clearly which father she fled from – that one, standing before her, greasy, dirty unbuttoned pauper, or this one prostrate on the floor. But she could recall that as she ran away her mother passed her, on her way up to him; and by this she saw her mother had been listening, and now, afraid lest something had happened, was hurrying to his aid.

And, indeed, Sophka had but got to the foot of

the stairs and started for the gate when she heard her terrified mother's voice

'Water, Magda! Quickly, water, water!'

And Sophka made her way towards her aunt's house, no longer feverish, no longer feeling misery or pain; merely crushed, lifeless.

She quickly passed the fountain and the dull patch of light of the street lamp by it. The water of the fountain fell with dull splashing. Everything was tranquil, held in by the dark; no dogs even barking and no footsteps to be heard. Only up there, from their house, from his room, her father's room, light at the window into the night, continually changing as someone moved up and down in the room. It was probably her mother, going about the room, no doubt with water bringing her father back to consciousness, putting him to bed.

CHAPTER X

BETROTHAL

Although Sophka went in quietly, decidedly, with steady walk, no timidity; even boldly, only eyes a little misty and brows wrinkled, though looking clearly; her Aunt was afraid, ill at ease asking her, as if that would save everything

‘Something to eat, Sophkitza?’

‘No, thank you, I had something at home!’ Sophka said, and went to her room.

And it was only afterwards, when she heard her aunt at the hearth in the kitchen finish the day’s household work and go to bed in the opposite room that the reality as it concerned her came upon Sophka again, and she started up in a sweat. Was it really all true?

She sat there then, chin supported on hands; lost in amazement as she realised that she could no longer feel anything – fear, terror, rage were gone. There was only a sort of chasm in herself and that chasm filling with a foul and impure odour from which she shrank, trembling.

So that was the truth? She had known nothing. She had only known of herself; of her fine soft

hair; of her luxurious body, of which she was so proud, and which through such long years she had taught to be proud too, proud of itself for the splendid husband lover it should own.

But how different the truth. Now she could not get rid of the image of him, her father, with his torn linings, the sweat of his foul clothes and the beggared look of his face; and that terrible, dead man's voice, not even pleading, but fading away as if in death on his uncertain lips for the horror and shame that before her, his daughter, his Sophka, he should have now to reveal himself; telling her, confessing to her, as he would not have confessed even to death – that he had not a crust in the world, not even the thought of anything else or the desire of anything else. . . .

And the worst was that she knew after that awful confession of his and his degradation that everything between them was over. Never more would he be in her eyes her dear and great father, Effendi-Mita; and knowing that he would never dare to look straight at her again, never laugh or smile with her, or caress her – let alone exult in his delight before her, as she, full of veneration for him, waited on him and served him.

All gone. Now they both knew that he would always be dependent on her, since by sacrificing herself in this marriage she had saved him. Through that it would always be painful for her to see him; and thinking that he would always

avoid her; and when, on account of the outer world, he absolutely had to talk to her, she would always hear in his voice that foul mixture of whine and reproach; whine to forgive him, and bitter reproach that she should have driven him so to lower himself before her, and expose to her his nakedness, losing in her eyes the respect, the adoration he had possessed and so carefully preserved.

Sophka felt great bitterness at heart; was overcome with remorse. If only she had realised the truth, she would have shown no trace of resistance; certainly never have dared him so.

But it was still not too late. She still had time to repair the damage, to show him how she could sacrifice herself for him.

And as she lay on her bed, head in hands, the smell of the smouldering wood fire in the kitchen and of the unwashed dishes and the refuse left there coming to her nostrils, mingling with the fresh night air, she began to feel a warmth, stealing through her, by reason of that coming immolation of all her ideals. The sacrifice would certainly amaze and call forth the admiration of everyone; and she began to realise that she would not only not be diminished in the eyes of them all, but would be greater.

The next day it was she who wakened her aunt,

not her aunt her, so anxious was she to accomplish the sacrifice: and she sent her aunt to her father to say she consented, and not only her aunt and her mother, but Effendi-Mita too was astounded. He was so unable to believe it that he came over to the aunt's house to see Sophka. When he came into her room, she could see by his unslept and troubled face both his joy and his alarm. Again she was conscious of the ambience of stale sweat about him, his dirtiness and the raggedness. She rose the moment she saw him, and kissed his hand. In real remorse for having so troubled and frightened him the night before, she said 'Forgive, Tata, for I did not know . . .'

He stood there, and looked frightenedly at her; he thought perhaps, perhaps, perhaps she . . . And because she understood that fear in him Sophka fiercely held her eyes to his piercing glance, till he was convinced and his glance faltered.

The joy in him was heartbreaking. He embraced her and kissed her dear head through its coat of fine hair and as he did so mumbled

'Thank you, my child! Thank you, my own Sophkitza!'

And that almost maudlin gratitude broke down Sophka's defences. Her heart, it seemed, opened and bled, for by that troubled shaky embrace of her head and kissing of her hair she saw his petty pleasure, now he knew for certainty that to the world he could uninterruptedly go on

being the same grand Effendi-Mita; even though before her, his Sophka, his child, his daughter, everything was lost: any respect, all admiration. All that remained was any mercy she granted – any showing she did not hate him, merely pitied him. And as if in grief for himself it was that he embraced her with troubled shaky hands and kissed her hair and muttered

‘Thank you, my child! Thank you, my own Sophkitza!’

Sophka nearly collapsed into sobs; but he saw this and stepped quickly back from her. And, as if to balance this humiliation before Sophka, he was his blustering self as soon as he was out of the room, waving his arms and twirling his sleeves and ordering in his normal highpitched drawn-out tones

‘Let someone go for that matchmaker woman Hariton’ – for the wedding arrangements had to be made by the professional *ashtchika*. ‘And tell her to go to Squire Marko and tell Squire Marko to come early this evening to my daughter Sophka’s toasting.’

And as he left the house he shouted

‘And you women hurry up and get things ready over there in the house!’

And then as if anxious to escape from his sister’s house – from Sophka – he was off striding fiercely down the street.

But Sophka had no time for brooding. She got up, pulled herself together, and as she knew that now she had to be ready to appear, she made her bed and put the room in order. They would all be at peering in to see her, and they should see her at her best.

The first was her aunt. Even before she had finished pulling on her *zouave*, scrambling to be the first over there, at Sophka's home, as Effendi-Mita had ordered, to help in the preparations for the feast, she came in to Sophka.

'All happiness, Sophka, be yours,' she said.

And Sophka could tell by the flutter in her voice that she and all her household, who had gloatingly hoped that she would be made to consent once Effendi-Mita had made up his mind, were not at all prepared for the glad consent she seemed to have given.

She had no peace the whole of that day. Every minute someone ran into the house to see her; even children; but she welcomed it, because all that coming and going, all that staring, all that false glad chatter so wearied her and exhausted her, that she became quite stupefied. And so, when night fell, and they brought her gala clothes, needles and combs, oils and cosmetics and laid them all out over table and wide window sill, and brought in a large mirror and put lighted candles, and left her alone to deck herself and to dress herself for the betrothal feast and carousal –

she was not troubled. She dressed herself and decked herself as if with real delight. She drew at her waist till she could draw it in no more; she fastened the tight *zouave* on its fastener so firm and close that her breasts were crushed beneath it, and through the sleeves of the thin shirt her rounded shoulders with their full, hot muscles rose billowing white.

And when at a late hour, they came and told her that her father-in-law was already come, and she went over to the house with her aunt, she was calm; even when she went into the courtyard, and the blaze of the upper windows and open door first flooded on her. Nor did the embracing and kissing of the other women downstairs in the kitchen move her. Even when, late in the night, the time came for her to go upstairs and kiss her father-in-law's hand, and take his gift and the sign of the pact, she went as if of ice. With frozen grace she bent for her cool lips to kiss his hand, and then withdrew herself a pace and stood gazing at him with clear and sober eyes, – at him, her father-in-law, her new 'Tata.'

He, legs sprawling, hands on knees, was seated on a large cushion. On his right hand was Effendi-Mita. Before them was a *sophra* laden with small meat dainties, with honey cakes and other sweetmeats. Marko's fingers were thick and short, with wrinkled, though clean white skin. There

was one massive gold ring on one hand. His *mintan* and his *zouaves* were unfastened at the neck. It looked as if he never properly fastened them, for his chest was protected enough by the swart fur of hair that covered it. The skin of his face was still fresh; wrinkles only at the corners of eyes and lips. His mouth gave the first impression of being enormous but yet you saw it was small. The lips were fleshy, that was it, and the chin was a disproportionately delicate oval and the neck, shaved of all hair at the back, was short. Sophka saw in him a sensitive savage, a gentle giant.

He was not as nervous and confused on this visit as the first time. His ease showed in his comfortably sprawling legs, the fingers lying lightly on his knees – almost as if he had been destined for that meeting – and, now it had materialised – Sophka and Effendi-Mita and Sophka's mother there, mid all their beauty and luxury, – he was blissfully happy.

In his happiness, too, he acted according to his heart's own prompting. He should have let her kiss his hand and go, leave the two fathers to finish the ceremony themselves – but before she could get to his hand he was on his feet. He got up with such a quick movement that the soles of his high boots creaked on the floor and it seemed he would crush the very planks of the floor; and to everybody's amazement he went up to her –

'Sophka,' he said, 'now you know what it's all about, now you know what we want. But before anything is decided I, your Tata, if it's my lot to be it, have something to beg of you. Let God never forgive you if you consent before you have come to consent of yourself; let God never forgive you if you come into my house without wanting to . . . It's true your Tata hasn't yet got such a house as you deserve, but he will . . .'

She felt that mad voice pierce her bosom and enter her heart; but by an effort she kept control of herself. She did not stammer from nervousness as any other girl would have done and leave it to her parents to answer for her. A keen glance shot from under the thin line of her brows, and, to her father's amazement, (for again he was shivering with fear) she said quite gladly and warmly

'I really want to.'

It seemed her father-in-law asked no more than that. He came up to her and kissed her on the brow and drew deep in the scent of her hair, and once again she kissed his hand.

'Bless you!' he said.

And Sophka saw that he was so drunk from his excitement that, in spite of his great manhood, his fingers twittered and fluttered as they fumbled for something in the deep breast pockets of his *zouave*. Though he had been afraid lest it all come to nothing, she saw he had prepared some

special thing as a betrothal gift for her. At last he found it. He pulled out a heavy long string of massive doubloons, each of five ducats, and himself put it over her head, and the length of the necklace was so great that it covered her whole bosom with gold. And even Sophka, accustomed to great lavishness, started back in astonishment. Again she kissed his hand, and thanked him, calling him 'Tata'. And then went down. And behind her back she heard them all cry with her father and mother, in their relief

'May she be happy!'

Then all kissed each other; and in particular did Effendi-Mita kiss, with firm lips, his new friend Marko. He was unable to speak – as if the reality of it was more than he could believe. So many times in secret had he trembled and shaken from fear at the thought nothing might come of it.

Then Marko in his delirium pulled up the ends of his *mintan* so far that they came right out of his belt and cummerbund and flowed round him; and from next his skin produced a bag of money. He thrust plates and dishes and bowls and glasses to one edge of the *sophra*, and on to the cleared space tipped a heap of gold pieces.

'For the wedding,' he cried – 'let my Sophka have all she wants: stint nothing!'

And still he poured the gold from his bag –

ducats old and new, dirty with mildew from the bag, long kept in a damp place. And when it was ended, and there was a heavy pile of gold on the *sophra*, Effendi-Mita uttered a cry, as if he had begun to live again, and yelled

‘Magda!’

Magda, downstairs, must have been awaiting that cry, so quickly did she come in.

‘Magda!’ cried Effendi-Mita, in real ecstasy, ‘Magdo, Magditzza,’ (and that was the very first time in her life she had been called Magditzza by him, and she could have dropped for joy) ‘Magda, our Sophka wants to leave us! Praise be to the Lord, for we have lived to see her married – now Magda, open the gates wide and set the lanthorns at the gates and bring me my gun. Let the whole world know! Let everybody see! Let everybody hear!’

And he got to his feet. He went up to the open window in his besocked feet, carrying the money folded by Sophka’s mother in a cloth, in his hands, and as he went he cried again ‘Let the whole world hear it!’ He then threw the bundle of money on to the couch in a corner and the bundle fell among the cushions with the small dull chink of gold.

He could not bear to wait for Magda to bring him his gun, but went to the window, and hung by his hands on the crossbar, and looked out over the town below him. In the dusk of the night

down the slopes round him stretched the billowing roofs, pierced by chimneys and high poplars. He looked out on the town, that petty world which in its secret heart had waited, gloating in its certainty of seeing him brought low. But there he was, once more as he had been before, the old now, but the same great Effendi-Mita . . .

And he took the gun from Magda, and began to dance crazily from joy and to fire the gun through the window at the open sky.

Then, to everyone's amazement, came the playing of musicians who had suddenly appeared from no one knew where.

But that was Magda's work. She had seen what was coming and had sent a man and ordered him to bring the players the moment he heard the shooting.

The house was now ablaze – the lamps at the gates, in the courtyard, in the kitchen and cellar and every room. The whole district too was astir and coming towards the house. At first they could not believe their eyes, but when they saw the number of the players, and the amount of light and bustle, and heard the music of a betrothal feast, they were convinced. Effendi-Mita's Sophka was at last betrothed . . .

CHAPTER XI

MARKO AND HIS WIFE

AT dawn, shortly after they had all lain down to rest, Marko got up and went out. He whispered to Magda to bring him his horse. He would have left unnoticed. But Sophka noticed him and ran out after him.

‘Whither, Tata?’ she asked.

Marko was delighted by her attention, though afraid lest anyone else upstairs had been wakened by it.

‘Shh! Daughter,’ he said, ‘Your Tata’ll be soon back. I have orders to give at home.’

He had to do that. He could not take his new friend there otherwise, as he knew nothing would be ready. For this reason the whole night, in all the drinking and jollification, he had been obliged to hold himself back, saving himself up for going to the house at daybreak to put things in order there, and for coming back for his friend to take him there for further entertainment and merrymaking.

But when at last he felt himself firm on his

chestnut, away out of the gates, his whole body was alert and he rode easily, happy that all had come out so well – and that the great and wonderful beauty Sophka was to marry his son, come into his family, be his daughter-in-law. He was so incredulously happy that he could not rest in the saddle – and his chestnut, surprised by his fidgeting and his fierce grip on bridle and flanks, turned its head to its master as if to ask him what was the matter. Marko merely laid his hand on the horse's head and stroked and patted it, and said in a gentle, pacifying voice –

‘Shh, old thing!’

Then he spurred hard and galloped away, swooping like an immense bird through the suburb and down upon his unsuspecting house. The blue of dawn, the fresh and still damp air bathed them. The cocks of the neighbourhood were still crowing, and lighted candles showed here and there in houses or stables. The ridges of the hills beyond showed in the sky, ranged one behind the other.

Arsa, scared by the unexpected return, ran in to the mistress and wakened her.

Marko rode up to the kitchen threshold. Stana, his wife, came out and held the horse. From horseback, before dismounting, he reached out his hand.

‘Kiss!’ he said.

She kissed it, started timidly back when she had done so, went suddenly pale.

'Say "my darling"!'

'Why darling,' said Stana, nervous, puzzled.

'You have a daughter-in-law . . .!' he cried.

And then, as if that was not enough, he paused, and looked cheerfully down at her, and went on –

'You have a daughter-in-law such as nobody else has – it's Sophka, Hadji-Triphoun's grand-child.

'Oh, you don't understand,' then broke from him.

His voice was strained as if in trouble. He turned angrily aside. She was not pleased; she was even frightened.

He strode into the one large room and in a minute shouts could be heard coming from there.

'Let the house be got ready! Everything we've got is to be brought out, everything out of the attic!'

Arsa, demented, began. He dragged in rug after rug, stumbled with a heavy *sophra* which was even larger than Effendi-Mita's, laboured under cushions, and, helped by Stana, ranged them round the room. Marko stood and watched and gave orders.

'There . . . that's right. . . . Now this . . .'

And, lord there, in high boots, heavy *zouave*, silk cummerbund and sheepskin coat, he stooped

and, wonder of wonders, with his own hand he spread out and patted mats and carpets, so great was his fever.

‘That is right. . . . That one here. . . . Now another. . . . Bring them all in!’

When the room was ready and Marko had inspected it once again, he trod down the floor, now a luscious bed of mats and carpets, with his boots, and particularly the edges round the walls, so that no straw from the underlayer of new matting should show from under the carpets. Then he had cautioned Arsa once again to have everything straightened up – in particular the mistress was to be properly dressed and ready for the reception – and rode rapidly away, back to Sophka’s people, to bring his friend, Effendi-Mita, to his house.

Only after he had gone, and she was all alone, did Stana realise it was true, and then she lost her head. Yet more immediate fear was on Arsa, and he kept her to it, and by force, bringing her her clothes himself, made her dress; and took great care not to let her fasten her great peasant knife and bunch of rusty old keys to her belt. She dressed, but she could not think clearly; it was too hard to believe it was true.

Somewhat later, when it was broad daylight and the sun was quite hot, the sound of musicians came from up in the town, and all the children

ran to meet the players. And women from neighbouring houses began to come into their courtyard on the excuse of getting water from the well, but really because they had heard the news, and Stana wanted to be able to hide, to run away. She shut herself in the kitchen and then - she did not herself know why - she burst into tears that were too big for her and too bitter.

Arsa ran to the gates and waited there for the coming guest.

And Stana stood trembling, wiping the tears away. Her eyes veered all round, as if seeking somewhere to hide from the great crowd of people that had suddenly filled the yard. Yet when Marko saw her so confused he was not angry with her, did not attack her as she might have expected him to, but smiled, as if to relieve her, and said, tenderly teasing

'Don't cry, old woman, are you upset then now you'll be a grandmother?'

Then Effendi-Mita came up to her and kissed her.

'How are you, dear lady? Are you glad, dear lady?'

She could only stammer

'Of course I am, of course I am.'

And then they seated themselves on the cushions arranged, and Arsa brought them a little of every kind of *rakia* to try, to see which they would like brought them. But Stana went into

the kitchen and clung to her hearth. It was the music and the crowd in front of the house upset her the most – all the neighbours, and children, and old women, filling yard and house, wishing her luck

‘Aunt Stana, Aunt Stana, *sretchno!*’

Terror paralysed her, and whatever she did was wrong. One of the playing gypsies wanted a drink. He got a full flasklet, the first one she could grab off the tray of drink for the guest for whom Arsa had drawn it.

Though she knew that it was high time to move she could do no more than stare idiotically at the hearth on which she should be making coffee. Though that should have been done long ago she had not even taken them syruded fruits. She had not even gone in to them to say a word to the new *friend*. She knew she should have asked after the health of her daughter-in-law and of the girl’s mother, but she could not. She did not know them, she did not want to know them, so how should she count them as her own kith and kin?

But Marko seemed to know how she felt at that moment as he had never done before. He came out to reassure her, cheer her.

‘What’s the matter, old thing?’ he asked.

And then he did a thing he never did, he smoothed the whitening hair on the wizened, bent head. But that merely upset her the more.

'Ohhh! I can't do it! Marko dear, you know I can't!'

This Stana said in a voice, and with a light in her eyes that there had not been for many a long year. But once in her life,— on the marriage night — had she spoken with the feeling that she spoke now with. In sacred happiness at his strange show of love she seized his hand and drew it over her cheek and began to kiss it. As she did so she felt his fingers stroking her.

'Come, come,' he said.

He too was moved.

'Come, come, don't. . . .'

And when he had thus heartened her he went back into the great room of the house.

CHAPTER XII

GAZDA-MARKO'S STORY

AFTER the betrothal feast the whole history of Gazda-Marko became known.

He had but recently come from Turkey. His native village was there, not far over the new frontier, just on the other side of the Monastery of the Holy Father – a poor village in a dour land – small houses of stone, stone roofed. Gazda-Marko's house was the largest, a sort of castle in the centre of the village, for the whole village more or less derived from his family.

But though the exterior was sombre there was wealth within. People said that they alone had built a whole storey of the local monastery and repaired all the stone work of wells and springs; moreover, that they supplied the monastery with whatever it needed, in particular their menfolk and villagers to aid the monks in war defend the monastery. For generations they had been famous *comitadjis*. Never was any Turk who lost his way or pried in their domains seen alive again; nor dared any Turkish magistrate or petty lord put his nose in claiming any tax or tithe. Their village

was silent in the heart of the mountains, ringed in too by a handful of Albanian hamlets.

But it was Gazda-Marko, for all that he could never read or write, who had most added to the wealth of the family. His father had sent him to the monastery to learn the three R's when he was already a married man – for Marko had been married according to the custom, when a mere boy – but Marko was not long kept there. His father was afraid lest he learned too much and was softened, or hankered after town life. And about that time when boy Marko, married, was withdrawn from the monastery school, the father died suddenly, and Marko took over the house. Wise instinct guided him. He established friendlier relations with the Albanians round them and worked up a lively business in supplying livestock to the Turkish army.

Then all was ruined. Marko and a certain notorious Albanian, Akhmed, head of the greatest and strongest clan for many miles around, were bound, not only by common interest in their houses and dependents being at peace together (as nobody then dared touch them), but also by ties of real affection – so much that Akhmed and Marko had taken a blood-brother oath before a monk in the monastery, and drunk blood from each other's opened arms – and that in spite of Akhmed's being of another faith. And Marko's house was dearer to Akhmed than Akhmed's own; nor

was there anything kept from Marko in Akhmed's house, not even the harim.

The two were much alike, powerful men, handsome; they delighted in the sight of each other, quivering each from satisfaction he could look on the other; and they were always together, at all markets and village assemblies and the feasts of the monasteries round. The pair of them had the whole of their district, the Ptchinia, in their hands. And whenever Marko had arrived home after a long absence, his first thought was to go to see Akhmed his blood brother. He would arrive at his house, and spend some hours in talking to him, and resting; and only after that would he go to his own home. And it was a recognised thing that no feast of Bairam was allowed to pass without Marko's being in Akhmed's house at the jollification; just as whenever Marko or any of his household had a feast to celebrate, Akhmed was there.

Now, there was a nephew of Akhmed's, a youth named Yussuf, who to all intents grew up in Marko's house, and everybody knew that Akhmed, who had no children, was most fond of this youth and intended to make him his heir. And it was the greatest mark of his love for him that he let him live thus in his blood-brother's house. Marko's house was nearer to the monastery, so it was easier thence for the youth to go for lessons. Marko's house, moreover, was a more civilised

and worldly house than Akhmed's, and in it, both men agreed, Yussuf could best fit himself to become head of the clan. And no son ever received the attention that Yussuf did in Marko's house. He was the pet of all the men in the household, a young animal that they over-caressed to tame it. He was treated better than any of theirs. He was never known by any but the pet name, Yussuftché.

But too long that pitcher went to the well. Marko had a sister, an only sister, and he wanted to spare her marrying some peasant and having to bear the hard lot of poor mountain folk, and so he put her aside and she remained at home in his house. He even sent her to be taught to read at the monastery. And later, being the only woman in the house, she looked after the youth Yussuftché, and taught him everything from reading to how to dress himself and how to speak; and they could kiss before the whole house and no one think ill of it, because she was older than the boy, and also because she was Marko's sister, sister of the head of the house, and was herself head of the house in his absence. No one would have thought for a moment ill could come of it.

But at last the day came when Marko returned from a long absence and found his sister so far gone with child that she dared not appear before him. Only the pleading and weeping prayers of the whole household held Marko from tearing her to pieces when he heard of the disgrace.

Nor did he suffer himself to be appeased till it was finally reported to him that she had left the house – had been taken on horseback secretly by night to a nunnery – and he was shown her shorn-off hair and a fragment of her black nun's gown.

But the real horror and awe of the household was in their chieftain Marko's well of sorrow – not for himself, he could bear that, – but for Akhmed his blood-brother. For everyone knew that beloved Yussuftché must die. And the prayer was on their lips, Lord grant it end there, Lord stay his hand from slaying Akhmed his blood-brother and from rasing his house to the ground.

Vainly Akhmed assembled the whole clan, to guard beloved Yussuftché by day and by night. Vainly they took him away to another clan to hide him from Marko. The youngest of Marko's house, a stripling who had not yet seen powder, with the features of a child, walked through the villages of the Albanians as though his path led under the ground, and he learned in which village and in which house they were concealing Yussuftché.

No one knew how he climbed to the roof, how he contrived to spend a whole day in the chimney, enduring the stifling smoke from the damp wood fire – but they all knew how, one evening, when they were seated round the hearth, fully armed, – at the evening meal, their rifles on their knees and

sentinels before the house, that lad sprang down the chimney right into the centre of the hearth; and how in the gloom they saw him cut off the head of Yussuftché; and how he escaped with it, and came under the protection of those who had accompanied him and were waiting for him up the hillside, and brought him to Marko's house where he stuck Yussuf's head on a spike, so wiping the sin and shame from the ancient stones of Marko's house.

And immediately after this, not for his own safety, but to preserve his only son, the future chieftain of them all - Marko brought his wife and son to the town, and bought the house they now lived in. He brought too all their wealth from the village; wealth, it is true, in kind, but enormous wealth; huge bundles of carpets and mats, stores of grain and flour, wool and wine, the best cattle and the best horses. And, as he could not cut himself off entirely from the village, for, without him, it would be rased to the ground by Akhmed's men, he acquired a whole chain of highroad inns along the frontier, and used them for harrying the Albanians, to hold them in fear.

He lived in these outposts. He rarely came home to the town, three or four times a year at most. His linen went to and fro; that was all - usually coming back on a Saturday, when heavy ox-carts brought stores to the town to pay

accounts. On the inward journey these *traders*, all Marko's men, brought in the fruits of his raids. On the outward journey blocks of rock salt or casks of oil usually concealed powder and lead for Marko's riflemen.

But his wife, Stana, did not move from the town, she and the manservant Arsa, who was no longer considered a servant, for he had grown up in the family and was part of it.

Stana had not changed since she first came to the town. She was already old then: tall and thin, with a wizened thin face, and patient, pale eyes and lips. Although she had all she needed for fitting the house, she never did anything to it. The bales stood as the day they arrived; carpets, rugs, cushions, coverings, enough to fill several houses of that size. But she put the furnishing off week after week till it grew into habit, all as if hoping for something. Although she knew it to be quite impossible, she hoped they could go back to their village.

She could not take to town life. Neighbours came to visit her, other incomers from Turkey. She returned their visits, and that was the end. Friendship with no one. The only part of her clothing that suggested town was a blouse, a costly silk one, but out from under it always stuck her coarse peasant shift. On her head she still wore her yellow kerchief, and about her

middle wound her belt. And, if Arsa did not stop her, she would still wind her old sandals on her feet.

What would she have done without Arsa. He was everything to her. He went into the town and brought her the news; she never went out. It was from Arsa she knew what the town was like – the shops, the craftsmen booths and the inns – particularly the Turkish *Shareni Khan*, the Inn of Many Colours, where their peasants put up – were like.

Marko did not even leave her son, Tomtcha, with her to comfort her in her isolation. As soon as ever the boy was big enough, at about ten, Marko began to take him about with him as if afraid the Albanians would cross the frontier and come right to that house in the town for his blood. He scarcely ever let the boy out of his sight. Only at Christmas and Easter was he brought to his mother.

Stana never saw enough of her son; could never, when he came, make up kissing him – and the boy was already like his father – at eleven wore a knife in his belt, shouted at her and ordered her about, often would not let her kiss him or caress him. The only consolation was that Tomtcha sometimes came on a Saturday with the goods waggons in place of his father; though even then she scarcely saw him. He had to be up betimes the next day for the journey back.

Stanta was an old and lonely woman. Now even those brief hours of her boy's homecomings were to be snatched from her by another.

CHAPTER XIII

SOPHKA BETROTHED

WHEN the news of Sophka's engagement went round, the town heaved a sigh of relief. The town was sick of her. At last, then, that arrogant wench was settled. If malicious hearts had prayed specially for it, a more perfectly evil marriage could not have come. A coarse peasant house, a boy bridegroom, of some fourteen years – not twelve, as Sophka had overheard her aunt say – that she would have to teach to belt himself and wash his grubby face. Nobody had been good enough for her and now she was getting what she deserved. And there were slanderous tongues to say it was quite understandable, that was the best they could be expected to get for her, she being what she was!

And the fouler the slander, the more easily it slips from tongue to tongue – and the more visitors there were thronging through the ever-open gates of Sophka's home to peek at the eleventh-hour bride.

But Sophka had foreseen that, and bore with it heroically. She knew how they would be lusting

to see how miserable she was – as if she could really love a boy-husband like that. She knew too that the most shameless leers and whispers would come from those who once feigned to be her friends. That was why she was her most magnificent, lavishly dressed, in heavy blood-red silk *shalvari*, with heavy gold stitching about the pockets and the anklets of the trousers. On her bosom she wore the heavy string of ducats that Marko gave her, and the mass of gold covered her whole bosom. That, Sophka knew, made a vast impression on them all.

She received them all with eyes in deep frames of paint and lips blood-red, for she knew those blue hollows under the eyes and those bursting red lips would in any bride be taken as tokens of her happiness and her desire.

At evening, wearied by the visits, she stretched herself out on the couch that served as bed for her. Magda knelt before her with a tray of food and pressed her to eat.

And after supper those nights Magda dozed through the whole night beside her, pretending it was in case she needed something, actually afraid for her, nursing her; because, though the girl's resolve was firm, she was every night as if in fever. Sense of time left her, and all about her was hot. The air of the room was hot on her lips. Time and again she would turn her head towards the window, for there in the sky, among the clouds, she

could clearly see the outline of *him* rising there, and *he* was real. Strong, tall, strong-armed. And he would move towards her, take her in his hands, lift her to himself like a feather and kiss her, and his kisses came from him like quick tongues of flame so that without the touch of him being on her they were together.

So real was it that once she started up. She snatched at Magda's arm and pointed through the window to the sky.

'Magda, can you see?' she asked.

Magda seemed to have expected all this, whether by experience or by divination, and through the night she damped Sophka's forehead with water and moistened her lips with a damp cloth. Then Sophka would try to hide it from Magda, and, as if ashamed, would turn face downwards and tell Magda to cover her.

The house had now got back to its onetime famous brilliance – a gaiety and withal a look of calm and tranquillity and plenty. Her father was wearing new linen – he did not cast off his old clothes yet lest the world said it was on Sophka's money he did it, on money got from her father-in-law. He spent the whole day at home, walked about in the house and garden inspecting everything. He was very often in the cellar, in which now lay various barrels sent by his friend Marko. By mid-day he was fidgeting if lunch was not ready, and

himself went into the kitchen and poked about round the hearth, discussing the cooking, reserving his favourite parts for himself. . . .

Sophka's mother too, was in a fever. She was dressed all the time in her best, and never lifted her head from the making of cakes, from the pounding of sugar and nuts and the roasting and brewing of coffee. The cupboards and shelves and window-sills were covered with the sweets and cakes and delights that had proved too many to be eaten. All that was being done for him, for Effendi-Mita. He had always liked all those cakes, and as he could not eat all that were made his instructions were always for them to be kept for him till the next day. But he could never eat them the next day as the next day new cakes or perhaps a *pita* would take his fancy, and it would be some of those that had to be kept. Thus the air of the house grew heavy with the stifling, heavy aroma of sweet, fat and honied cakes, for that was Effendi-Mita's delight. And that luscious atmosphere of plenty still more made Sophka's nerves quiver.

A further distress for her was that she could not protect herself from the presents that her father-in-law Marko sent up for her the whole long day. Since the engagement his journeys round his outposts had stopped; he was making preparations for the wedding at that house in the town. And the whole long day he was thus able to send

presents and sweetmeats to Sophka; and every evening, at dusk, just as if he was trying to conceal his movements, conscious, no doubt, that it was not all quite as it should be, he would come up to the house. From down by the courtyard gate his full voice could be heard

‘Where is my Sophka?’

When he came in he filled the whole house with the power and fulness and passion of that voice of his, at the vibrations of which Sophka in her upper room, trembled. She would lift her *shalvari* from round her ankles, not to hinder her, and toss her hair back over her shoulders, and run down to him, crying

‘Here I am, Tata!’

Then he would give her her latest present, with some bald excuse, such as ‘I chanced to be up in the bazar on business, and these ear-rings struck my eye.’

Far into the night, when he had been entertained and had drunk with her father, or even dined with him, as he left, Sophka would light him out to the gate, and on the sly, so that no one could hear, he would ask her

‘Do you need any money? Does your own Tata give you any?’

‘Yes, yes, Tata, we’ve enough,’ she would say.

‘Not *that* I’m thinking of, not that,’ he would say, ‘but for yourself, for your own, so that if you want anything you can buy it.’

He would stop there, and Sophka, when she kissed his hand when he left, would find a ducat in her own.

CHAPTER XIV

BRIDAL BATHING

WHEN she first saw her groom, Tomtcha, Sophka, who knew everybody in their town, did not even recognise the boy. He scarcely reached to her shoulder. Yet though he was too young for her even to have noticed him, she did not shed a tear.

But on the eve of the wedding, that Saturday when she went according to custom with all the virgins and newly-married women of her relations and their part of the town to the *amam* to bathe herself for the wedding day, she did shed tears. The whole *amam* was taken for that evening.

Her mother and her aunts and the elder women stayed at home. The only one of that older generation to go was old Mother Simka, famous as a *rubber*. That was her profession. She was to bathe Sophka.

When she was quite a girl old Mother Simka had opened her career by running away from home with a Turk. The Turk abandoned her at last and she then became a harim servant. Then at last she had grown old, and come back to her

native town. From that time she had bathed and *rubbed* every bride at the marriage eve bathing in the public *amam*.

It was said she knew magic; and also that while she bathed brides she whispering taught them certain things, with occult recipes, for pleasing their husbands; being desirable to them the next day and ever after.

Thus Sophka in her turn went with old Simka. From the house immense quantities of food, pastries and cakes, were sent to the *amam* to entertain everybody. It was there, long before, together with clean linen, before the midday meal; only the customary presents the towels and stockings for the *amamdjika* and the servants of the place, did not go till Sophka went. Old Simka carried them.

They were seen off at the gate, and watched to the end of the street. Then they turned down the narrow, crooked street that branched off it; that always seemed to be full of piles of stones for mending it, and deep pools to be filled in, so that it was only possible to go in single file.

At every gate they passed there were waiting girls, who knew it was Effendi-Mita's Sophka going to the *amam* for her ceremonial washing. Simka walked blissful, as if this was the best advertisement of her excellence she could have desired. She said her *good day* to every woman on the way, and had

her crack with her; and they all smirked as if it was their greatest joy, a feast day to them, this sign that Sophka was getting married the morrow. From everyone's lips slithered the formal farce of words

'O Happy, Happy, Baba Simka, be the bride!'

And old woman Simka would wriggle and smirk.

'Thank you, Thank you, God grant your daughter soon come to it too!' she would say.

Sophka walked in the middle, wrapped in a new and costly bridal gown, a present from her father-in-law. She too enjoyed the progress; in her case because she knew they were all eyeing her. The new gown wrapped her warmly and closely, and held her firm at shoulders and hips, so that she knew that her body's shape was more clearly delineated in it than in anything she had ever worn in public before. The raised collar, soft and gentle, stroked her neck.

They climbed that narrow alley and drew near to the *amam*. They drew near the last corner down which they had to turn, to go up straight through the bazar to it. At that corner, as Sophka had known beforehand, there was the usual group of young men. How often had not Sophka passed them when she went with her mother to the *amam*, and felt the stir among them as she and

her mother, luscious both, appeared in their fine clothes. And now that she was going for her bridal washing there were, she saw, more of them to look on her than ever before. Their glances were like wine to a hungry man. Her head rose more proudly in the air. She felt sureness in a tread that had been faltering a moment before. While the girls, especially the young ones, blushed, shrieked, and ran like harried fawns ahead, Sophka looked through the men's curious and insolent eyes and trod magnificently on.

Once round the corner old Simka rallied them
'Hey what are you all scattering for, ditherers!'

And the timid fawns became meek sheep so that the party all together reached the *amam* in proper calm.

The *amam* was a round building, of old stone, and the outside wall, long steamed through, was sweaty and damp. It was a large dome inside, resting on a circular wall. High in the dome were small barred windows. Not even from the surrounding houses could you see inside. The domed roof was blackened and sinking. Only at the very top could traces of whitewashed plaster be seen. The *amam* water came from a fountain which came from a natural hot spring. The water flowed through the *amam* and what was not used flowed away through part of the bazar. Above the *amam* came the rest of the bazar, and then the notorious gypsy quarter round the ancient clock-tower.

Thence already came the sounds of fiddles, *zourla* pipes and drums. The gypsy players in their hovels were warming up for when darkness spread through the town.

The *amamdjika* came out in front of the *amam* to receive them. Sophka kissed her hand and presented her with a shift of fine linen. The *amamdjika* then led her inside, and took her to the upper end of the reclining hall, to the place of honour. A bed of cushions had been laid there for her, whereas on either side of her were simple rush mats for all the rest of them.

A tiled floor; in the centre a lamp hanging lighted; for the high-up barred windows let little of the light of day through them. Light came from a great red-glowing brazier of charcoal, round which large linen towels were drying.

At last they were all in, and the *amam* doors were closed and locked behind them. And when they felt they were shut away from the world they immediately cast all restraint aside, and clambered quickly, laughing on to the couch that ran round the wall, and undressed. Soon the floor of the reclining room was bright with the stripped-off clothes, and the air chattering voices, the gigglings and blissful chirrups of young women fearing no male eye.

They were at it before there was any thought of bathing. They tickled one another and threw

clothes at one another; and by main force, as far as laughter did not weaken them, unfastened and undressed some young things too shy because that was their first time. The young wives, the recently married ones, were the most abandoned. They were the first out of their clothes and ready, and they chased the virgins about and jeered at them for their tight cramped virginity. There was a clatter too of the clogs of the gypsy serving girls. The bustle grew warmer.

Some of them, ready, stripped, could not wait to put on their clogs, but ran naked over the tiles with them in their hands, ran to the door into the steam room. And those that were slow came shrieking out again, splashed with cold water by those that had got in first. Then began a constant running to and fro to old Simka, as if she were mother and all to them,—running to her with complaints one against the other, but all their complaints were smothered in their laughter. They seemed to have forgotten Sophka in their romping play. As if she did not exist, and they there merely to be present, as custom demanded, at her bridal bathing, they chased one another and splashed one another and tripped one another up.

‘Look, look, Baba Simka,’ cried one, ‘see what Passa’s done, she’s bruised me,’ and through the answering laughter rang, loudest of all, the rich throaty voice of the culprit, till she, sluiced with cold water, cried loudly in her turn.

Slowly Sophka, separated from the rest, in the place of honour, on a mattress covered by a white new sheet, Baba Simka by her side, undressed. She had long known all this; once the betrothal, all that went to the whole wedding—the betrothal feast, the flowers and the presents, the men at the corner watching her, and then this in the *amam*, had all been clear before her. She had known before that the light would scarcely find its way through the high-up windows; that down below that brazier of coals would flicker; that under that thing she was sitting on would be cold wet tiles, and there on the way out would stand pots of cold water and a row of clogs and gypsy women in wet clothes, themselves thin and black, with bright eyes and white teeth: and that from the real *amam* would come hot steamy air, that languid *amam* air. . . .

So thus she sat; around her the cold wet tiles, half-lit by high windows and glowing brazier. There were the pots of cold water, the rows of clogs at the door, the thin black gypsy wenches; while from that doorway came the weary *amam* steam and the wild cries of the women whom now she had to join. They would then look on her with changed eyes, she thought; and those eyes, once admiring, would burn.

And she gave a sudden start. They were all naked there, waiting. Old Simka stayed by her side, blissfully croaking to the *amam*-keeper, in

speech a good half Turkish. She had known how it would be done, but she had not known how hard it would be to bear. And with fevered hands she suddenly flung off her remaining clothes and went.

The *amamdjika* nodded to a gypsy, and the girl quickly brought Sophka fine, gaily-coloured bridal slippers and humbly drew them on her small rosy feet, then went before her and opened the door for her. Sophka shook out her hair, and a shiver ran over her, as she felt it wave down her back and tenderly caress her. The gypsy opened the first door – heavy, sodden, old, rotted at the bottom, and she passed in, but when she heard the door shut behind her, and found herself so near the steam and damp and soapy smell and the wild cries she shrank, feeling a great misery and a burden she had not expected to feel. Yet she drove herself on, waved the gypsy servant aside and opened the inner door herself.

In the first moment she could see nothing for steam. The daylight came in only through the coarse glass in the centre of the dome and lit only the centre of the hall; the edge walls were deep in gloom pierced here and there by the dim red glow of holy lamps. The hot water was surging from the orifices into square marble basins. Then her eye could distinguish, in the centre of the *amam*, the forms of the prostrate bodies wrapped in their long wet hair.

Firmly erect she walked to her compartment, which she could tell by the two holy lamps lit at it, by the wooden screen at the entrance; but Baba Simka held her back.

'No, Sophka,' she said, 'first the sweating and steaming.'

She turned. All of them blissfully lying there welcomed her somewhat mockingly, and made room in the centre for her. She climbed up and lay down, but she could not lie on her back at ease, as they did. She lay huddled on her side, her breasts hidden by her arms, and rested her brow on an upturned *tass*. The heated tiles burned her body, fresh from the cold antechamber, but yet she was cold through that heat; cold because in her throat and in the very fingers of her clenched hands she felt a bitterness and a gnawing ache – a grudge against no other than herself – for being so weak. Why, when she had known all that was to come, should this be so difficult to her now? How dared she show herself to them thus miserable, dejected?

Old Simka came and sat beside her, legs crossed under her, and smoked and sipped the *rakia* that the amam-keeper had brought her. Old Simka had not lain down like the rest to be steamed, – she was merely waiting for Sopka, to bathe her and massage her for her wedding night; and that closeness of old Simka was still more painful to her – for it kept her clear that the worst, the most

difficult of all, was to come. The lull her arrival had created was but a lull before the last storm of merriment and songs of desire and love and being loved. . . .

And it soon began. The women still lay round her, but the virgins began. They could not any longer bear their prostration on the hot tiles. From a dark corner, from amid the medley of playing limbs, throbbed out the loud notes of a song:

'To thy sigh, my beauty, shall my breast too sigh. . . .'

It caught like a spark in chaff. All took it up, and the married women about Sophka got up and joined the virgins, and splashed and sluiced each other, singing together with the virgins; and their full-ripened voices stood out in their strength and the fulness of their sounds.

The hot tiles flooded with water, and Sophka and Simka soon were an island in the flood of water and sound. Song swelled louder and more passionate, song after song, all the fond words whips on Sophka's bare flesh – that wealth and silver and gold were not dear; that she had had a dear love, and they had often met, and now she must marry another. And when they saw how it hurt her they pitied her, and to console her they sang songs of parting, to show her she was not the only one, that among them too were those who were as unhappy and sorrowed and wasted as she was to be – but Sophka's soul rebelled

against this too, and their misguided and unwanted sympathy was cruel to bear.

She was huddled up in her isolation, feeling the steam stifling her, a choking sensation as if she had swallowed the very words of those songs; and the incessant clatter of the doors and the sliding wood blocks that closed them as the gypsies went out and in serving them, beat like a maddened hammer into her brain. The din of song and the dull thud of *jugums* of water grew stronger and crazier. And out of that hell came flying that same hot girl who had complained of Passa's biting her – a lissom, swarthy wench. Her hair clung in a black net to the rounds and the valleys of her beautiful lissom body. She flung herself down on to the hot tiles beside Sophka, and lying on her back stretched up her arms taut in abandon and flung back her head and sang so that the whole *amam* rang like a bell

*'O believe me, o believe me, my beauty
how I wilter for love of thee'*

then broke off as capriciously as she had begun and, as if it was she and not Sophka marrying to-morrow, began wailing and sobbing

*'Yao, yao, do you too care, beauty,
do you too care that we part?'*

'Come,' Sophka said to the old woman.

She felt she could not bear it, that she would be torn asunder by the heart within her. And when she entered her cubicle, and heard the screen drop

and close her in, she collapsed and clutched her head in her hands and burst into sobs. Old Simka was ready; she turned in a trice and prevented the gypsy servant coming in and told her to stand guard outside and hold the screen firm. Nobody was to see in.

The gypsy girl held the screen firm, and a mysterious smile lay on her full lips, for she thought she was doing it because Simka was now bathing and massaging Sophka, and giving her charms and spells and lessons how to manage her husband.

Outside, Sophka's retirement took the last vestiges of restraint from the women and virgins. Steamed to craziness, softened to the very bones by the seductive heat, they sang, and the *amam* throbbed with them. The singing grew so immense that it brought the *amamdjika* in; and though she had seen innumerable such scenes before, she stood locked there, enraptured. She had come from her room with her hair down, but she made no effort to put it up. That same virgin was dominating them all. She was in the midst of them, seeming to tower above them. She held a great copper *jugum* above her head, and sang in a merciless spate of sound. The *amam* rang with the words

*'Yao, yao, art thou sorry, beauty
art thou sorry we must be parted
must be parted and I. . . .'*

the ecstasy broke.

The *seïdakh*, the ecstasy of contemplated love, came to an unbearable strength, and, beside herself, she flung the copper jug from her, and it clattered on the tiles, bouncing, clattering, sliding over them. There was a desert hush, the spell broken. All the women stared, still and frightened, fearsome of what the *amamdjika* would say about that battered jug: but the *amamdjika* was motionless, at the door, as she had come, wrapt in admiration of the girl.

And all this time Sophka sobbed as she had never sobbed before, so that only excitement prevented her sobs being heard in the lulls in the singing. The whole world before her broke so that there was no misery because she was marrying a boy she did not love. It was the sobbing ruins of her life, now at the end of everything. The key of unruffled years had gone; a few more hours, and there would no longer be someone to hope for, to think of, even to dream of.

She choked; she thrust herself into Simka's lap, with her head against her shrivelled breasts, and wept and writhed. The suppression of the past days found its relief. Her mature, luxurious body, like a lovely rich marble, sweated and vapoured, gleamed and flashed in its fullness and beauty. And old Mother Simka bathed her. Slowly, expert, with a hand on which the skin was hard yet smooth as parchment, she moved about her, over Sophka's back and shoulders and round

her breasts, firmly pressing and kneading, for all Sophka's parts to be as beautiful and bold as could be for the wedding. It was as if Sophka's tempestuous weeping and sobbing did not exist. The old woman was rapt by Sophka's colossal beauty, for it was long since she had seen so fine a body, but her hand halted in awe at Sophka's distress, so that, to encourage herself, she muttered to herself as she watched Sophka weeping, 'Come now, surely this isn't the first you've done.'

The first indeed! Of late years there had been countless of these marriages; not one married for love; and scarce one but had wept as Sophka was weeping, and sobbed and bewailed their lot. . . . But what did that avail?

The old woman grew afraid lest the other women, tiring, quieted down, and Sophka's cries and sobbing were heard. To drown their sound, she began gossiping in a loud voice, crying quips to all those seated now in front of Sophka's cubicle. And at last Sophka regained control of herself and tranquilly went out from her cubicle.

And when Sophka said 'Let's go out,' all old Simka answered was

'Let us, then, Sophka.'

But though the old woman's 'Let's go' was all that she said to Sophka, and there was no mention of the weeping, the words were full of sympathy and consolation. They encouraged, too, in their

way. So was it written, their tone implied and there was no escape, and so – *let's go on with it*. And that understanding shamed Sophka. She left the cubicle with a bold step and a smile.

The women outside in the cool air of the outer hall, round the wall on the couch, dressing, were still somewhat heated by their bathing. Out of their shifts and their *zouaves* thrust their warm bodies, their rosy, full necks, and shoulders mapped with excitement and swollen veins. White towels flashed through the limp *amam* air, wiping the sweat from languid bodies, and as fast as these were soaked the gypsies brought more, warm and dry. And then they got each other to dry where they could not reach; and nothing could be heard but the murmur of breathing and of towels swishing. But that wiping of each others backs and shoulders brought inevitable toying and tickling, and the stilly silence was rent again, and there was no stemming their high spirits, and the play began all over again. But they were tired, and these final throes of laughter were soon ended. The outer *amam* breathed gently, and the wifing steam from within was as if the tiles streaming sighed for the youth and beauty that had left them.

Though the warm steam had more and more thinned down by the cooler outer air, the whole *amam* had begun to fill with damp and darkness, against which candelabra were lit: the evening murk had but excited them more. It had intoxi-

cated them; and they had become still more frenzied in their play.

But in a breath Sophka's appearance stopped it all. All turned towards her, and, with one voice, as if to taunt her, greeted her with

'O, the bride, the bride! Akh, Tomtcha!' Oh, get away with it! See what a beautiful bride shall be his, oh lucky lad!

But old Simka yelled at the top of her voice

'Shame on you, you bitches!'

And then, to turn her admonition off in humour she turned to the *amamdjika*.

'And you,' she yapped, 'what are you gaping there for? Why don't you assert your authority, you're in charge of this *amam*, aren't you? Calm these shameless hussies down a bit! . . .'

The quip was snatched from her.

'O, o . . . Auntie *Amamdjika*, let in Vaska's boy Rista for her . . . he is hanging about just outside!'

'And you want your Yovan!' came back Vaska's indignant voice.

'Mita, Mita, let Mita in!' came from the other side. And you could see the speaker's fiery eyes fixed on that dark loose girl who had dominated them with her song while they were at the bathing, and had flung down the water-vessel. In a full-throated voice the taunt came again—

'Mita, let Mita in for this little one!'

And she burst into singing,

*'Mito, oh Mito, O my Mitantché,
I'm dying, I'm bursting, o tyrant Mita,
Mito, oh Mito, O-Oh my Mito!'*

And they all took up singing 'Mito,' bringing out the words with such lusty passion and frenzy that the *amamdjika*, smiling, was obliged to go and shut the outside door of the *amam* firmer, so that nobody should hear. But on this precaution the riot suddenly ended, as if it had never been.

Simka was now dressed, and had taken her seat at the head of the table now set in the hall. Before her a jug of *rakia*, and sour grapes and pears and peppers. The company began to take their seats beside her and refresh themselves with the fruits and the sweetmeats. Sophka too was soon ready; and she too came from the couch and sat among them.

They offered her food, and, to the surprise of all of them, she did not merely pretend to eat; but ate heartily, and drank a number of glasses of the *rakia*. There was a restrained smile on her lips. Her eyes were a little closed as if she were dreaming. Her eyebrows were the slightest bit drawn, as if she were laughing at them all and pitying them. . . .

CHAPTER XV

EFFENDI-MITA'S WOMEN - FOLK PREPARE

WHEN it grew quite dark they made their way home from the *amam*. All through the bazar, over the bridge, they held themselves quietly, still wrapped in their cloaks, huddling together in a tight group. But as soon as they were in their own quiet streets they were at it again, whispering one to another and turning to one another. And when they found themselves at Sophka's street they broke into a run, racing to the house. Old Simka made great efforts to restrain them, but at last she gave it up. Sophka and she were left to follow on alone.

They reached the house. Over the gateway, between brightly shining lamps, hung a garland of box and white roses; and in the instant that Sophka, who had walked in a daze, realised this, the whole house took on an odour of death, of corpses. On the roof in the gloom the new tiles where weak places had been mended could scarce be seen, but they struck harshly on Sophka's eyes, tiles bought on money got by the sale of her.

In their raw redness on the background of the old moss-grown roof they looked like meat, like flesh. A shivering possessed her, but she kept control of herself, and went in with old Simka – not through the gate, which from now was for the bridegroom's people and the guests, but from behind the house through a wicket from a neighbouring courtyard.

Indoors everything was already astir, a confusion, a mass of people. Food was bubbling away in great pans in the kitchen, and over everything hung a rich, greasy steam. At the rear of the house a great wood pile was subsiding to scorching coals, and over these coals a number of young pigs, and lambs, were being spitted to roast. From the neighbours' courtyard, straight through the garden, where the fence had been broken down to make a passage, went a constant stream of children and servant girls bearing dresses and pillows and mattresses and eiderdowns, as the children of all the families coming to the wedding were to sleep over there that night. . . .

The house itself was already full of the women-folk. They were all finely dressed, in their most magnificent ceremony costumes, some of them thin, silk, transparent; and the kerchiefs they wore were covered with jewellery.

Their hair was freshly dyed, and was oily and black; their brows were pencilled in, their faces powdered white.

Their bosoms were carelessly covered and their ways were free, for they knew that that evening no stranger could come and see them. They were revelling in their untrammelled beauty and fine clothes.

Nothing of this surprised Sophka. She knew they would be the same as they always were at wedding parties. They were as crazy as if they were looking madly forward to strange doings that night in the frenzy of the feast. Later that evening, Sophka knew too, when the bottle passed more freely and their husbands were already drunk and hot in wine, all the women would let themselves get more and more excited. And their behaviour began to suggest that this was the first time they had set eyes on husbands, by whom each had had so many children, for they seemed to aim at egging them on to drink more and more and be ever wilder, and vied one with the other in abandon, as if the honour and dignity of their men, and by them of their homes, depended on their fury.

Already they were putting aside, round the great hearth, the dish *he* liked best, and seasoning it as *he* liked. Some in their man-worship had even brought their own flour and butter from home, as they knew *their man* liked the home flour best; and there were even those who had brought pots of wine, fearing that on a strange, stronger wine *theirs* might go too far. And in all that fever not

one of them had thought for Sophka, let alone a feeling of gratitude – for after all, her they had to thank, her wedding, for all the joy of these hours of abandon. Their first thought of her would be the next morning, when, according to custom, at dawn, stranger visitors would begin to arrive – when it was her duty to dress and make herself ready for the ceremony. Then they would all cluster round her, and as if in remorse for having forgotten her in their great selfish merrymaking of the night, would all be at combing her and decking her up and sobbing and weeping about her and cooing and cossetting about her.

Sophka did not blame them for this. She knew that it was only at festivals such as her wedding that they could get right away from work and worries and children, and feel life. And when a wedding came they naturally gave themselves over to the debauch of it, not only because it was the only time they were allowed to unlace, both self and manners, but also because in spite of themselves they were heated by the marriage of a virgin.

Sophka smiled, in fact, as she watched them; smiled at their faces hot and red, with that unstable woman's flush, from drink and excitement; smiled at their combed-out hair disordered tumbling over their shoulders; smiled at their blouses and belts wriggling round out of place – smiled

as she saw that already they could scarce hold themselves in. Yet the revelry, reserved for night, had not even begun.

Then the gypsy players came, with dancing girls; could be heard playing as they approached the house, with children dancing and shrieking around them. And when the players were at the gate a great din arose in the courtyard.

'Oh, granny, Oh, granny!' they were shouting; and that referred to Sophka's mother now due to be made a granny. And Todora was so upset that she looked to be petrified from joy. She was paralysed; for there the moment had come – the moment for her, like all other mothers to whom that joy arrives, to lead the first dance.

The players filed in. They bowed to Todora, and ranged themselves along the wall, at the side of the gate, they and the nautch girls. The *ashtchika* – the marriage maker – then went up to Todora and bowed to her.

'Happy, granny!' she said.

Then she handed her a sieve of sweetmeats and small goodies which as she danced she should fling about her, for the new married life of her child to be full and sweet and luxurious.

The music began, and Todora began dancing the *oro*-dance. . . . But, either from over-bounding joy or from confusion that they were all watching her, she mixed her steps. But before she had time to falter the others had joined hands

on her and the dance was going aright, and she had pulled herself together. She danced vigorously, tossing back her torso in the pose of ecstasy, and magnificently throwing round her the sugar and sweetmeats, scattering far over the yard at the house wall, so that some even fell on the upper balcony of the house.

Meanwhile the darkness became quite dense. The house, lit by innumerable lamps and candles and full of the warmth of human bodies, men and women, their voices and their odours, began to gyrate and sway; while the *oro*-dance still went wildly on. It spread further and further; the string of hand-linked dancers encompassed the house and the whole yard; watched from the walls of the neighbouring courtyards by dozens of neighbours, mostly virgins brought out to watch the marriage of Sophka. The gateway too was wedged with people. There were unknown youths already worming their way in to join in the dancing.

And all had their eyes fixed upwards, on her, Sophka, though it seemed to Sophka that more than her were they watching the presents piled behind her that on the morrow she was to take to the bridegroom: silk eiderdowns, billowy pillows, and cushions; and principal of these the large, double, red silk eiderdown for the marriage night. And Sophka felt she was naked, and could not resist looking at herself to make quite sure

she was dressed, that nothing was missing on her. And then the thought came that she must not let them see her shrinking up there, for they might think she was miserable; and degrade her with their pity. So she threw on a shawl and came down; and heard her own voice crying wildly and defiantly

‘Let’s dance!’

‘The bride wants to dance, the bride wants to dance!’ the cry went up, and they closed in round her. No doubt some were glad she thus showed herself superior; wanted to dance herself; was not like other brides, who had to be hauled out of corners.

The music, which had stopped, began again. The singing girls, as if to honour her, placed themselves immediately in front of her. She cast one quick glance under her lashes at them all; and then, pursing her moist lower lip, so that her upper lip and her cheeks rose and were full, she led the dance. But how she led it! A curious self-confidence told her her foot would not betray her, though all eyes were most insolently boring into her; that every movement she made, every part of her body, feet, knees, hips, which in dancing would reveal itself, would be thought of in relation to the morrow’s events, to that husband of hers, to her first marriage night. And because of that she gave herself wholly over to the dance, eyes fixed on bosom and knees, toes,

and one hand raised on high. One knee did falter for a moment at the beginning, but she sprang up, and immediately after that her body began to sway warmly and smoothly to the music.

And the whole company, as if they had but waited for her to join them, followed her, and her presence dancing seemed to release enthusiasm hitherto forcibly contained.

Nor were Sophka's older aunts and cousins now to be outdone, and they danced too. And their joining in was welcome to Sophka, who was able to slip away and leave the whole company furiously treading in the furtive torchlight, the dance now linked, not by hand clasps, but by arms round each others' necks, each step, each movement, each spring taken as one; the line of dancers a snake. Soon the yard was a medley of them, the music powerful and forceful, and the dancing girls and gypsy players swarthy yet afire. . . .

CHAPTER XVI

EFFENDI-MITA'S FEAST

ALL day, for that was the usage, Effendi-Mita was out of the house. Late in the night, with smooth powdered cheeks and combed and curled hair, fresh from the barber, he arrived home. It was proper for him to come thus late, for that gave the women full time to make all preparations – Sophka's *amam* bathing, the laying out of her gifts on the balcony, the coming of the players, Sophka's mother dancing the first *oro* and the scattering the votive sweets. Then followed his part, the welcoming of the menfolk.

Firstly on arrival he inspected the kitchen. Then he gave the leader of the band a good present and a still better one to old Simka. Then he retired upstairs. And a sigh of relief passed over the women, as they knew he would not come down any more till the feast was over.

He disappeared in the lighted rooms upstairs, and inspected the huge *sophras* set out. It was already fashionable to have a high table, but he had scorned the new fashion and given orders for *sophras* to be prepared in the old style, as he knew

his house possessed more magnificent *sophras* than any – *sophras* round which a dozen people could lounge at their ease; nor had any such long towels for table, for thirty people, as they had; or as many candlesticks in silver and gold.

Then he could be heard shouting 'Magda!', for Effendi-Mita did not call people. He merely bawled out the name; and left it to the other, to find and despatch whoever it was.

Magda flew up to him, and he could be heard issuing orders – to put that *sophra* further at the head, to set the cushions better about it. Then the candles had to be set better in the sticks, and more lamps hung out on the balcony in front of the door, so as to light the stairs better; then benches and a table to be put along the wall on the balcony, that for the musicians to sit at. Finally, a three-legged stool with a small teased-wool cushion was set for him at the head of the stairs for him to sit on in state receiving the guests. His *rakia* to be brought – *rakia* ordered that morning to be put to chill – and ready-rolled cigarettes.

Then he sat down – not as he liked to sit, but as he knew he ought to sit at this wedding. He sat so that the light of a lamp flooded over his face, and he was clearly visible, seated with shoulder and elbow resting on the railing of the balcony, and hand raised to hold a cigarette to his lips, and at his feet the cigarettes and *rakia* and small meats laid out.



He was magnificent, triumphant, outwardly, but inwardly he was thinking of how he would now have to force himself to drink, for he would have to make himself drunk, to be able to do what every father has to do. The mockery of it now overwhelmed him. What was it all for? Why should he receive all these people and kiss them when his heart was heavy with sorrows? Yet it had to be done; and so the *rakia* was before him, and he drank steadily of it and smoked and tossed away cigarette after cigarette. But at frequent intervals he got up, as if to run away; though after a few paces he returned and sat down again and crossed his legs. He did not want the musicians upstairs till the last possible moment. Though he cursed the way he had achieved his liberation from squalor, he shrank from returning to it. He did not want those players near him. Their gypsy dirtiness and oiliness would offend his nostrils, and he had them play from beneath the balcony in the yard.

And as the gypsies knew what manner of man he was, only really skilled players had come; and they soon struck up the special song of Effendi-Mita's house, the song that had always been sung when there were marriages in the house –

'Hadji Gaika, Hadji Gaika's marrying a daughter,

but he cannot bring himself to yield her. . . .'

And those words of the song of their house

strangely moved and consoled him! For they reminded him that his family had never made a natural marriage.

'Hadji Gaika, Hadji Gaika's marrying a daughter,

but he cannot bring himself to yield her. . . .'

He threw a dinar down and called to the women in the kitchen below:

'Women, rakia for the players!'

The players were delighted, not so much by the *bakshish* or the *rakia* as by having pleased him – everyone knew how difficult he was to please – and they let themselves go. The women too sighed with relief when they saw he was in a good temper. Since his arrival they had not dared to show themselves, and if any of them had been obliged to go near him for anything she had slunk by in case he noticed something wrong about her: disordered costume or crumpled kerchief; and now they too let themselves go.

He of course knew that. That was partly why he ordered the *rakia* for the men. He was pretending to be vastly merrier than he was, because he wanted to set the women downstairs going. He drank more himself, and ordered the players to play the common, everyday songs, which he knew the company below liked. He leaned over the balcony and chattered with the players in Turkish; and began to pick out old acquaintances. He spotted and recognised old Moussa and it

amused him to see he was still alive, a mummy-figure, its head bent and wrapped in a dirty, old, woman's shawl, to protect the nearly sightless eyes from cold, squatting crossed-legs at the end, a little behind the rest. They always took him with them. He could not help them play, but as he held his guitar in front of him it looked as if he was playing; and that gave him the right to eat and drink.

'Moussa, is that you, Moussa?' Effendi-Mita cried, and the gypsies, overjoyed to find they had done right in bringing the old man to Effendi-Mita, set about prodding him to look sharp and come to his senses and answer. And the old man staggered to his feet and started forward.

'It's me, master, me,' he said.

'How's life?' Effendi-Mita asked him. 'How's life, eh? Moussa? How are you getting on? Have they given you any *rakia*?'

And the others then thrust the whole flask of *rakia* (which they had been hiding from him, only giving him a little glass or two of it), into his hands.

'Yes, yes, master!' quoth Moussa, and the shaking old hands held up the flask.

'That's all right then. Drink away! And when you've finished there'll be more at the asking.'

And Effendi-Mita turned away again.

The players heaved sighs of relief, and went on playing with greater freedom and skill than ever.

That sense of abandon so essential for merry-makings began to be felt. A new murmur arose as the women began to emerge from the low rooms and dance; and even Effendi-Mita responded to it. After all, this was the first and the last time, the only time that he was doing this with them. So he went downstairs, and, helped largely by the great amount of *rakia* he had drunk, he went into the kitchen and talked to the women. To put both them and himself at ease he began bandying free and dubious remarks with them, both the women and the girls. And the girls, who till then had always fled from him in terror, were intoxicated by the things he said, and let themselves go. Never had there been more excited or more loose gathering in Effendi-Mita's house before.

Everybody was at ease. Everybody had been thirsting for liberty and now they felt that *he*, for some strange reason, was with them. Not a girl was there now to care if her *shalvari* slipped a little lower than they should and waist or hips showed, or if shift or *zouave* opened and revealed the riches of her breasts. Effendi-Mita was with them, and their obvious lack of fear of him seemed to delight him, and when he embraced or squeezed any of them she made no effort to escape, for there was a curious gentleness in the way his smooth dry palm touched their flesh. And it was his very presence made their boldness seem to them innocent. Yet there were those who, feeling the

iron grip of his fingers, forgot themselves for a moment, and felt in that old and wrinkled hand the magic of a youthful touch; and swooned to it for a mad instant till, coming to their senses, they wriggled away from him, but coyly, with no anger, out of respect for him, for his years.

Then guests outside the family began to arrive. The house was soon full to overflowing. The men passed upstairs, and Effendi-Mita, now glowing with a youthful fire, among them. He had not the patience now to wait formally upstairs for them all and greet and kiss them all there. After the first had come he sat down at a *sophra* with them.

The dinner was long drawn out and trying, beginning with numerous toasts. There were all possible kinds of soup and spiced beginning foods – and it was far into the night that they came to the first real dishes, the dinner proper. And the whole was accompanied by the playing and song of the gypsies sitting out on the balcony. They sang now not short, tempestuous, erogenous songs, to stir a man, excite him and move him, but those well-known special songs for such dinners ‘*for sweetly to eat*’ – long and quiet and monotonous songs that soothe you and delight you and lull you as in a dream, so that you eat and drink at proper ease, tranquilly, softly, sweetly. . . .

CHAPTER XVII

THE FEAST CONTINUED

SOPHKA, who had withdrawn to their neighbour's house, was seated in the dark in a small chamber against a window whence, across the garden, she could view it all. About her, on the floor, were the children – the babies still at the breast, that the mothers, on account of the feeding of them, had not been able to leave at home, but had brought with them. They were all sleeping peacefully. That was why Sophka had come to this room – she knew that on account of those babies nobody would come there, whereas people were in and out of all the other rooms every minute. She had told no one but Magda where she was going.

It seemed she could find rest there, even sleep; and in time she dozed with her head resting on her arms laid on the window sill. The soft breathing of the babies murmured round her, and she inhaled the odour of their still milky lungs and mouths. The room was saturated with it. Their little fists were clenched against their oblivious faces; their little heads overlaid with

sparse hair were gently moist with perspiration. The odour to Sophka had a sort of sweet intoxicating fragrance, like that of the first damp of spring.

There was that vernal gentleness in the little room; but over at Sophka's home was a hot mature summer noise and bustle. She came to from her doze. A wild desire to flee had taken possession of her, and she got up to go – but at that moment in came Magda on tiptoe, sure she would find Sophka sound asleep. And Sophka would have pretended to be asleep, but she could not.

'What is it, Magda?' she asked.

Her voice must have held all her fatigue and misery for Magda began to fuss round her, as if genuinely alarmed.

'Sophkitza, aren't you asleep, Sophkitza, aren't you resting? I thought. . . .'

'No.' Sophka answered.

'Ao! and you haven't eaten or drunk anything, my child, not a thing.'

The old woman clapped her hands together, as she suddenly realised her Sophka perhaps could not sleep from hunger. Sophka had eaten nothing since the *amam* ceremony.

'Shall I bring you something? Can't I bring you something?' wheedled Magda.

'Nothing, I don't want anything.' Sophka answered.

'Then something to drink? Do have something, just a bite – do have a little something, a bite and then a drink. . . .'

'No,' said Sophka, 'I don't want to eat anything. . . .'

The thought of food simply revolted her.

'Then just something to drink?' the old woman pleaded, implacable, and went off for it. She was indeed troubled, because Sophka's refusal to eat meant that she only wanted to drink *rakia*; and that showed how badly she felt. That was the first time she had ever wanted *rakia*.

Magda soon brought it; though, lest anybody knew the *rakia* was for Sophka, she had brought it in a water-jug, even stopping the neck of it with vine leaves as if it was water. Sophka tipped up the jug, and then, with frowning brows, and lips quivering from the burning touch of the *rakia*, she drank with purpose and assurance.

She immediately felt easier. Her hands, resting on her knees, became firmer; but her whole body began to spin; the bed under her seemed hot, so that she could not bear to go on sitting on it. But her heart beat easier, with great easy throbs. . . . Once more she tipped up the jug and once again did not regret it, as she felt still more strength and warmth. The night air was now freshly cool in her nostrils. The garden swayed in her sight, the night grew more beautiful, more defined, and the song rang clearer

*'Hadji Gaika, Hadji Gaika's marrying a
daughter,
but he cannot bring himself to yield her. . . .'*

The moment when Sophka's peaceful, solitary life would end was tangibly coming nearer. She went on drinking, preparing for it. Her thoughts grew ecstatic, her eyes burned; and they burned with fear. Sophka was not afraid of the end of her solitary life. She was afraid of something much nearer, much more real. She was afraid that when the bridegroom's folk arrived, she would have to go there and receive them: and because in that moment everybody would be watching her in hot curiosity, gay excitement, waiting to see what she was like in that moment – if she was happy and gay, so that they should be able to get merrier still and drink and sing still more – she was afraid lest in the right moment she should show dull, show sad, show false to her ideal of herself.

Yet she succeeded in carrying it through. It was about midnight when Magda ran in, panting, and cried 'The bridegroom's folk are coming!' and she immediately arose and went with Magda. And as she went through the garden she could hear people running and bustling to and fro, and crying

'They are coming!'

And although the gates were lit up they all

took candles and hurried to the gates to add to the light as much as they could; for it was them, marching up with music; strains of *zourla* and fiddle, and village and town players, accompanied them.

Then they appeared in sight, and Marko, father-in-law to be, could be distinguished in the midst of them. In front of him were lads carrying lanterns on poles, and these lanterns lit up his family behind him; largely peasants, crowded about him. He was cloaked in coat to his knees, his fur cap was tipped back on his head, his clothes at the neck were open showing his new silk lace-decorated shirt, Sophka's gift. He had not been able to do aught else, the moment it arrived, but show how dear Sophka was to him by putting on that shirt. As he progressed now he could be heard crying, turning left and right about him

'Let me be heard, let my son's wedding be heard!'—and he goaded the gypsies without cease to play more and play louder.

Hand-shaking and kissing began. Marko's peasants clung round him and one to another, as they were shy of such a fine house, so lit up, so full of people, and those people fine townsfolk. Marko, though, was not ill at ease. He was at home now in that house. Happily he cried

'Are you glad to see us, my friends?'

'More than glad, more than glad' rang out on all sides.

They had reached the stairway. He stopped looking for his friend, Effendi-Mita. Effendi-Mita was standing at the top of the stairs. He was bareheaded, and scarce able to stand, in the midst of the leading men of the family and their wives. Marko saw him, but what he cried was

‘Where is my Sophka?’

‘Here I am, Tata,’ she answered, and ran up to him and kissed his hand. And he noticed that Sophka’s kiss was soft, sweet from her bathing, and delightedly he drank in the fragrance, and stood there with his hand on her head, on her hair. Sophka bent from the heat and the weight of that hand on her head – while he thrust his other hand into that deep inner pocket of his and drew out a whole handful of money to give her. And Sophka, shy of so many gifts, tried to refuse.

‘Enough, enough, Tata!’ she said.

‘Everything Tata has is yours,’ he replied, and pressed the ducats on her.

And he began to go upstairs with her, holding her hand so that she seemed to lead him, as if he had never been up those stairs, did not know the way to go; and everybody clapped as they saw it, and cried

‘Bravo, father-in-law Marko, bravo, bravo!’

So Sophka led him up. She made a step, then turned and waited for him to follow her; she could feel the fingers of his hand in her hot perspiring hand simply tearing at her flesh. And

he watched her with attention and delight as in the eyes of them all she led him, held him by the hand. And he prepared to make her still another gift; and again his hand began to fumble round his pocket, but she signed to him with her eyes, in a way that no one else could notice, not to do it; and that intimate gesture of hers made him still happier. He was at a loss to know what to do with himself in his joy. He turned to his piper, who was at his heels, and muttered

‘Come on, Alil, come on.’

Alil, a half-gypsy, a white breeched, turbaned, grey-haired, tall man, with long arms, began piping on his shrieking instrument; and followed them up, accompanying them with music.

At the head of the stairs Effendi-Mita received Marko and his men. He kissed them all. Marko and Effendi-Mita sat down, but Marko’s peasants could not bring themselves to separate from him and sit at a distance from him on the chairs and cushions prepared, but huddled together in a compact group as near Marko as they could.

At the same time the household, for the benefit of these shy peasants, to show them how fond everybody was of their Marko, vied with each other in waiting on him. Todora was constantly before him, handing glasses and small meats with her own hand; and he had to consent to her taking off his long coat for him. She even got teased for it.

'Now then, Todora, gran'ma, gran'ma, you're very close round your new friend!' someone cried.

Marko, vast, sat square on a chair at the head of them all. He put his great hands with newly trimmed nails on his knees. His throat and lips were palsied with emotion. He did not know whom to thank most – whether it was Todora, who hovered at his elbow, and the warmth and fierceness of whose still healthy full breasts made him dizzy with desire, or whether it was Sophka, his own daughter-in-law, God grant, from the morrow, for her eyes were incessantly on him; she was always ready with a fresh-rolled cigarette for him, and lit them for him and put them between his lips. He felt hot with gratitude, too, even for his piper Alil, who was kneeling a little away, rocking to and fro piping as he had never piped before. The tension grew more than Marko could bear. He did not know how to release himself from it, so he sprang up, and, clasping his hands tightly behind his back, to still his heart of its true desire, walked up to old Alil,

'Play, Alil, play,' he cried, 'play till the very earth dances!'

And Alil was offended, and said

'Gazda-Marko, my playing is my face!' by which he meant that he was doing his utmost to please. But he bent still lower, kneeling to get greater

compression of breath, kneeling till his pipe was touching the floor, and played the so-called 'hard *oro*' as if it was a wild blast of cataclysmal sounds from the very bowels of the earth.

'Todora, Todora,' the cry went up.

And to everybody's amazement – for they all thought that however hard they pleaded she would probably not consent, especially before her husband and other, older, men, and in this particular hour – she immediately led the dance, and danced as she had never danced before.

They all began clapping to the beat. The old men craned to and fro to see her better; and Effendi-Mita's ecstasy grew so great that to relieve himself he threw glasses down into the courtyard, and poured vessels of wine out on to the night air.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WEDDING

THE next day the rising sun found the players changed into white clothes, their faces powdered thickly white to hide the wrinkles and the weariness on their faces from the night of playing. The yard and the balcony and the stairs still smelled of the wine poured about, the foods thrown down. In the garden all that remained of the fire of the day before was a little smoke, faintly redolent of manure, from the quenched coals.

From soon after dawn Sophka stood, on show in the downstairs large room, a waiting statue. She was in thin almost transparent silk from head to foot; but neither the voluminous *shalvari* about her shapely legs, nor her practically naked breasts loaded with strings of ducats, could be properly distinguished under the curtain of bridal veil that cascaded from head dress to feet. Nothing but the white of her throat and neck and her teeth showed. She stood motionless in her bridal finery; but for her lips which were never still; for incessantly she moistened them and nervously

swallowed. At moments in spite of the warmth of the morning and all her efforts she felt her hips quiver as if cold. At the same time the sweat oozed in great beads between her breasts and formed there into a thin stream that trickled down the ravine they made. Yet she did not dare now do anything to prevent it, for she knew that if now she put hand to hair or to smooth her *shalvari* so that she could move freely, or even if she wiped her sweating bosom dry, every eye that saw her would light in the derisive thought that Sophka was now getting ready for her husband's first glimpse of her. For this reason she stood as of granite in a corner of the room, stiffer, stiller, more petrified than any bride before her, so that they marvelled at her fortitude.

Nothing now that was done about the house existed for her. She knew only one thing, thought only one thing: of what would happen when the final agony began, and she crossed the threshold of that waiting room and appeared before the wedding guests and all the strange onlookers.

From outside came a constant noise and confusion; they were welcoming guests, and there was a wild spasmodic firing off of rifles, a frequent hard clatter of horses' hoofs. In the garden men and horses seemed to be stampeding, breaking down fences and trampling flowers. Every inch of space was invaded, but through it all she stood as if it did not exist. And at the moment of

starting only for a second did she falter – and that was when all her aunts rushed in weeping to say farewell to her, embracing her and kissing and decking her hair with flowers.

Then they brought in the best man: a full young peasant of Marko's, obviously most specially got up for the occasion; and then outside the gates the two bands of players together – Effendi-Mita's and Gazda-Marko's – struck up the same song '*Hadji Gaika, Hadji Gaika's marrying his daughter. . . .*'

Her mother was the last to run up, kissing her, sobbing 'Sophka, Sophkitza!' But Sophka's brow was already dead to her; and lips were cold. The hour had come; she kissed her mother briefly and silently and left the room.

She went out from the darkened room. The sun and brightness and outside noise smote her hard. Her veil caught on the latch of the door, and that gave her some respite. She stopped, turning aside a little, one hand held up as if to keep the sun off, while someone unhooked her veil; that moment enabled her to collect herself better in that sea of sunlight and curious eyes. She realised that that halt in the doorway flattened her appearance before them all, so that, when she was freed from the latch and left the doorway, the surprise was lessened. She heard no more than a general murmur wing through the air, and everyone take breath, especially Marko's peasant folk,

who were utterly astounded at the great beauty and magnificence of his daughter-in-law.

'Ah, *bata*, ah, *bata*!' they cried.

She walked straight through the courtyard to the gateway. As she passed beneath the arch of flowers, now dried and colourless, she caught her breath painfully at a close odour of mingled incense and dead blossom that struck her. But that vanished as she passed down the avenue of sightseers that was once their quiet street.

She walked slowly, tiredly. Far ahead were the dancing girls, now twisting and curvetting in their antics, surrounded by a crowd of children; but only the children watched them. All eyes were on Sophka, to see if she really was as beautiful, dressed in her wedding clothes, as people had boasted she would be. And knowledge of that enquiry in their eyes inspired Sophka, so that, although she knew she should not hurry, but should walk slowly, she found herself stepping briskly and proudly towards the church – more leading the best man than being led by him.

By the church the crowd was so dense it was only with difficulty they passed through it. As they appeared in sight of it the church bells clashed in on the gypsies' playing and the clamour of voices. Behind her came the wedding guests – her relations first, of course, all her aunts and cousins, and then their husbands, all in low town shoes the men, and their breeches cut short in the

leg to show their white pilgrim socks; and all of them, those relations of hers, pressed together in a group, of course, to show themselves different from the other guests – from the father-in-law's, those *peasants on horseback*. But behind them all came *he* – her father-in-law; bolt upright on his chestnut, in a new saddle, the whole a shining bronze statue. And that statue's wide-open eyes were far ahead, beyond the long procession, fixed on her. And at his heels strode his faithful Alil, piping as he went; and Marko, in his exuberance, every now and then unbent, and thrust a ducat into Alil's face. But her folk kept turning round, some of them morosely, some with a superior smile, and growled one to another – 'A peasant! A boor!'

Yet aloud their cry was –

'Father-in-law, is it well with thee?'

'Of course, of course it is!' Sophka heard him cry back once – and then he stooped forward – no doubt handing Alil another ducat.

They could not get near the church for beggars and children and gapers. It was a roomy church, with vaulted roof, and a cloister round it. The roof was decrepit. The old wooden pillars that supported it were charred by innumerable candles. It was floored with large flags, irregularly cracked, and was lit by a row of dark arched iron windows placed immediately beneath the eaves; and thus looked cold and stony. Yet it felt icier still to

Sophka when she entered the porch, and the priests in their black rustling cassocks, with their long hair falling on their shoulders, and their odour of tobacco and snuff and wax of candles, ran towards her.

Once inside, however, she felt easier, partly because all the din and music had stopped, and she was silently alone, against the doors of the altar. It was the first time in her life that she had stood thus up near the altar screen and felt the whole church behind her. Now it seemed immensely wide and high, and the smoke-soiled eikons of the Passion of the Lord seemed lost under the sweeping arches that soared to heaven. The reredos in front of her was covered with rows of holy lamps and eikons – the most important, no doubt – she had never given it thought – those with the greatest power of healing. The reek of wormwood and mould and incense and candle-droppings from that reredos and the altar behind it simply choked her, while the vast flagged floor behind her, with its damp and rotting dust wrapped her in its cold and brought shivers upon her. There was no sunlight there; but a few broken rays that came through a large round opening over the altar.

It was, too, the first time in her life that Sophka had seen, as she did now, through the half-open doors of the altar screen, the altar table, and that dead, so cold, so ancient spread-out chalice cloth,

and a row of chalices and crosses and candlesticks with lighted candles. Behind her she could hear the wedding guests shuffling in, then waiting, stifling their coughing as if afraid. That was Marko's folk, all grouped down by the door – hers were less afraid to disturb the peace of the church. Then she noticed that her legs were aching furiously – especially her shins, the result of standing stiffly for such long hours as she had that day.

Lit candles were then thrust into her hand, and to her side, in front of the reredos, her future husband, also clutching lighted candles, was led. She began to examine him under her lashes. This was the first time she had really looked at him. He was very young – but she noticed that his chest was already broad and his jaw and chin well developed. It was his shoulders and the bones of his wrists that were still clearly those of a child; the short cut hair too, fallen on the bulging forehead, was particularly childlike. He was clothed in the most costly woollen cloth, and belted with silk, but his clothes were big for him, as if Marko had wanted to make more of him. He was lost in them; neither hips nor knees showed through the bagginess. The pockets, too, heavily ringed though they were with braid, were lost on the belly and under the belt, and scarcely showed.

And now, in front of them, at the altar, the smoke of incense had begun to spread, and the

clink-clink of the swinging censer could be heard. Out of the lower, narrow door, the one next to the choir stalls, came the acolyte, bearing a small table with the silver flower-decked marriage crowns. At the sight of him a murmur swept over the congregation, for the end of maiden Sophka was in sight.

And then, like a flash of lightning so nearly followed by its thunder that to Sophka it was like a poleaxe blow on the forehead from which she staggered, the main altar door was flung open wide and the priest in his golden robes appeared. With a furore that suggested he was delighted in her dismay, he struck up in a loud voice

‘Pray to the Lord. . . .’

There was a blank period, throbbing with resonant prayer. Then, when they led her with her groom back away from the doors she found she automatically kept her eyes lash-hid fixed on him. He had suddenly become all she felt – though he scarcely came up to her shoulder; so little was he, walking beside her.

The dean himself took the service, assisted by all the priests and deacons and the acolytes from the cemetery chapel too. There was not one of them missing, for the news had gone round the vestries who Sophka’s father-in-law, Gazda-Marko, was, and the good ecclesiastics knew there would be plenty of ducats flying about. And, as though

to justify the great bill they were going to present to him, they went through every detail of the full ceremony. Prayer followed litany, and litany prayer; but apart from her boy-man by her side Sophka was conscious of nought but her folk responding. Responding was one of the fortes of Effendi-Mita's house.

The stench of candles seemed to get denser, and the congregation pressed closer and closer round her. The eyes of all the womenfolk of Effendi-Mita's house were fixed neither on the groom nor on Sophka, but between them – on the way Sophka kept hold of his hand, striving to keep that little child's hand in hers – and that holding of his hand was the hardest thing of all for her. The boy's stiff, frightened fingers seemed dead to her touch, and she had to hold them fiercely tight to hold them at all. She was glad that the ceremonial towels were thrown over their hands, the fine embroidered satin and silk, so that her struggles to keep her grip were hidden, for his fingers steadily slipped one by one out of her hand, till only one was left, and she had to snatch at his whole hand again.

The only one who seemed to realise her difficulties was Marko, and she could see him pushing closer and closer towards her, straining up on his toes, to catch sight of her over the heads of the congregation; and that attention of his somehow supported her.

And that attention of Marko's made a new bond between him and his daughter-in-law, for the infernal prolongation of the service increased Tomtcha's heat of fear and discomfort, till his small hand was too slippery with moisture to be held. Sophka did not know what to do in her distress as she endeavoured to maintain her grip of it. At last she raised her head and threw a despairing glance at Marko. He was smitten by fear. In her eyes he read that all her efforts had been in vain, all her driving of herself, and that at last, at the very tying of the marriage bond, she could bear it no more, and wanted to escape, and so looked at him in much despair, to ask him to forgive her for shaming and disgracing him so. And the tense communication of those moments made signs eloquent, and communion between them easy, and Sophka managed by signs to assure him that she was not false to him. Tutored by her eyes, he realised the cause of her distress, and happiness enveloped him.

And then he further endeared himself to her; for she saw him quickly call a verger and whisper in his ear; and the verger whispered to the dean, and the dean made a sign to the priests, and the priests, without more ado, struck up the concluding 'Isaiah, rejoice!'

By digging her nails into Tomtcha's palm Sophka contrived to keep hold of it till the end, and with the greatest relief she left the church.

Marko's understanding had bridged over the very pain of her marriage.

She did not mind at all as she saw her own folk, accompanied by their gypsy players, go their way, leaving her with her husband's folk; a sigh of relief even came on her when they began to wind their way down through the other part of the bazar, towards the new home, which she had never seen.

Marko was beside her. He had dismounted, as if he considered it his duty to be near her, to guide her. He walked at her heels with his elbows stuck out on either side, as if to prevent others from pressing against her; and that attention pleased her. She turned round with a smile to thank him; and he in his delight, could only stammer

'Don't fear, my Sophka! Don't fear, my daughter! Your Tata's with you. . . .'

They got free of the bazar; there were fewer and fewer shops. The streets were quieter here than on Effendi-Mita's side, and although the wedding procession did attract onlookers, there was not the crush there had been on the way to the church. It was the new edge of the town. Not far away stacks of hay and straw could even be seen along the streets behind the houses; and in the air, like immense scarecrow birds strung up by their long necks dangled the weights on the *shadoufs* of recently dug wells. And in the air,

mingling with the freshness, the spaciousness, was the smell of manure and rubbish, and the scent of milk and cheeses and bundles of raw hemp.

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN they arrived at Marko's gate Sophka felt how simple it was. None of the fear and terror she had expected was there. The gateway even seemed to be familiar. It was as high and strong-built, a keep in itself – indeed, must have cost more than the house itself.

Still less did she find it unpleasant (as she had feared it would be) when she saw her mother-in-law at the gate and kissed her hand. Stana's lips, cold and hairy with age, trembled on her cheek, and Sophka quickly realised that her mother-in-law, in a new town costume – and one could see she had been made to put it on, it was all so large and so crushed – was much more scared and put out of countenance by her, no doubt on account of her beauty and fine attire. Poor Stana could not get out a word, and it was Sophka who put her at her ease, kissing her hand a second time. And then her mother-in-law, all gratitude for the attention, stammered 'Thank you!' and in her happiness wiped the tears away, forgetfully doing it in peasant fashion, with the sleeves of her shift.

Sophka did not need that humble 'Thank you' to show her how afraid her mother-in-law was. It was obvious at the first glance. Stana had been afraid. She had been sure that when Sophka arrived and saw her in her humility she would curse the fate that had brought her to such a miserable mother-in-law. And there, not only was the girl not scornful, but, in front of everybody, she had kissed her hand. And the heartiness and sincerity of that kiss gave Stana courage.

She tried to release herself from Sophka's embrace, and to thank her, stammering 'Thank you, my child, thank you, my daughter!' Then she pressed close to her again, holding her back more as one would a sister than a young daughter-in-law.

The menfolk were delighted when they saw the incident.

'Ya, mother-in-law, ya, mother-in-law, won't let her daughter go!' they cried.

Marko too was delighted, and he teased his wife, pretending to push her away from Sophka.

'Ya,' he cried 'what do you want here? Your place is over there. . . .'

'Don't, Marko!' Stana pleaded. She melted with delight for she saw he was joking, and she clung closer still to Sophka; as if she, fragile and tiny, was going to protect that strapping woman from the wedding guests who were crushing and pushing in at the gate.

On the threshold, in front of Sophka, stood a trough of water over which, custom had it, Sophka could not step till her father-in-law threw a present of money into it and declared which field, which shop, was to be hers; and which rents and leases for her own privilege and use. So all Marko's men began impatiently to yell

'Father-in-law, what do you give, father-in-law, for your daughter?'

For after that ceremony was done all would enter the house, and the marriage feast begin.

'Everything, everything . . .' he said.

'None of your vague everythings, but *what, how much?*'

'But everything!'

'What, the inns, too?' they asked, as if to catch him out by mentioning those wayside forts.

'The inns and everything!' he declared shortly. And he turned round and cried to his wife

'Hurry up, get along!'

'What?'

'Bring "it".'

He nodded towards the house, to the little room in which were his bags of money locked in the chest. His wife left Sophka and ran off – but Arsa was there before her. He knew she would fumble in opening the chest and be slow, and so he took the key from her and ran ahead; and by the time she had reached the house there he was coming out with a bag, and handed it to her as it

was. She took it to Marko, and Marko in his impatience tore the leather open with his teeth and raised the torn bag above his head and let golden coins shower into the trough so that all should see and marvel.

‘There, there, all of it. . . .’

And Marko went on pouring, beside himself, bursting in his pleasure at the number of amazed and startled cries behind him when the assembled company saw the vast amount of gold that now flashed and shone like a dazzling fire, lit by the sunlight through the water in the trough.

His eyes turned from the gold to Sophka. He could not drink in the sight of her enough. With constant little cries to reassure her he took her hand and led her over the trough and into the house.

Then he handed Sophka over to the women. But even then he could not rest. His excitement was too intense. He stood in the courtyard, alone at last, like a man demented. Then, with a cry, he offed with his cap and tossed it into the air. He was a fine sight there in the sunlight, in new cloth breeches and silk shirt. His eyes were on his house, and his thoughts were on Sophka. And when she left the kitchen and went into that little room, to rest as she said for a moment, he was the first to realise what was the matter. He rushed into the kitchen.

‘Something to eat!’ he cried.

'For whom?' the *ashtchika* asked in amazement.

'For Sophka, of course! Is the child to eat nothing till I'm hungry?'

'She'll get something afterwards!' said the woman, offended at having her business meddled with, for the *ashtchika* was mistress of ceremonies, and it was not yet time to consider the bride. 'That's my affair – she'll get something after. She'll get something with the best man when the guests have finished. . . .'

'What's that about *after*? Is the child to be left hungry I ask?' Marko thundered – and the *ashtchika* was cowed.

And he himself took the finest parts of the roast to Sophka. He turned out all the women who were with her, especially angry with those fresh from over the border, who had probably now come to the town for the first and the last time, and had clustered round Sophka so that she had not an inch to move in in that little room. And of all his family, of all the women that were there he chose but one, the youngest.

'You, Milenia!' he said. 'Only you are to look after Sophka. And you, Sophka, whatever you want, you tell Milenia. And these others aren't to come in. Why should they get in here, making a mess? Outside – that's the wedding for them, in the courtyard, dancing. . . . And you, Sophka, as for your mother-in-law, don't you expect

anything from her. She's bad enough at the best, but now. . . .'

Milenia was delighted at her commission, yet afraid, lest the new bride should not be pleased with her, lest she might not know well enough how to wait on her. She knelt before Sophka and washed her hands before her to show how clean they were, and began feeding her with the roast that Marko had brought.

'Take a piece, little sister-in-law, take a piece, just try a piece . . . ' she said, holding a morsel up in her clean fingers. And when Sophka did take something and eat, she thanked her.

'Thank you little sister-in-law,' she said. 'Try another piece, take some more.'

And Sophka, to please her, again took food and ate; but she drank more than she ate. Thirstily she gulped down wine and water from a large half-litre glass of thick old glass so rough it could hardly be washed clean. And when Milenia saw how pleased Sophka was – and realised she was not proud as she had feared she would be – she was touched to tears by that love of Sophka's.

'Thank you, little sister-in-law, thank you. Take some more, take some more.' And she knelt before Sophka and when Sophka had swallowed a mouthful Milenia held the great glass up to her lips for her.

Never in her life before had Sophka seen so

sunburned and sun-hardened a face, yet so tender a one, as the face of Milenia before her. It was a very naive face, a servile and happy face, a face full of gratitude for the very privilege of being alive. Her clothes were coarse, but clean. The coarse shirt on her bosom smelled of linen and hemp and high mountain grasses; while, beneath that harsh shirt, under her sunburned face, and her calloused and yellowed hands and arms her tender delicate form showed as white as milk. This mountain girl was quite different from the peasants round about the town.

From the shade of the trees a great din rather than talking began to be heard, and like battle cries rather than toasts – '*Aj dedo*, to your health, *dedo*, may your days be long,' and and then, as empty glasses were banged down, a great 'Aha.'

Indeed, in the end Sophka began to imagine it was but the halting place of a horde bearing off its booty, and that it was the old songs come true. She was a famous beauty, taken off to a castle and concealed there – and these men of Marko's had gone marauding and had found her and had taken the castle, and destroyed it, and seized her, and now they were here with her, halting to rest. That, indeed, explained why none of them under the trees sat down or loosened his clothes, but all stood about armed while they ate and drank. And Sophka noticed that whenever Milenia went out they gathered round her at the door and

begged her to leave the door open a chink. And their curiosity merely increased the reality of her fancy.

But each time Milenia forced the door to in their very faces, and shouted at them
'Get out of the way! You pests!'

CHAPTER XX

SOPHKA SERVES

As the day wasted, the onlookers from the juniper trees and the walls around disappeared, till they were alone and the attempt to follow town customs in music and dance was finally abandoned and their own wild mountain habits had sway. There was an incessant beat of feet treading in their heavy, lengthy, monotonous dances marked by the long hops and heavy blows of heel on heel of high boots in spurs that broke the rhythm, or the clanking of the long strings of old silver money on the breasts of the women, hammering out sharp against the noise of their heavy skirts as they whirled round. Then there were the voices of the men in chorus, women in chorus, singing against each other – and one and the same line came over and over again, and they sang blocking one ear with a hand, to be able to make their voices powerful as if they were in the village on the mountain, and the sound of the singing had to cross the mountain-tops and be clearly heard on the farther side.

And as dusk passed to dark night they grew

even less restrained, till at last, well in their cups, they came one by one to Sophka's room without permission, to see Sophka – at first the old men who by age had the greatest right; then the younger men. At first they did come one at a time to present themselves to her, and shake hands with her, and give her some present; but eventually they came in groups, and soon the door of the room was permanently open.

None the less, in spite of their cups, they felt a sort of timidity as they came – not only knowing they worried her by it, but fearing their '*bata*', Marko, for when they set out for Sophka's room they would look round furtively about them, to make sure he did not notice them from the copse. But he was occupied all the time, drinking and toasting at the table. Only when they began to go in groups and the table was practically deserted did he realise what was afoot, and Sophka heard the whisper 'He's seen us!' as they scattered in fright.

Then Sophka arose and did what she felt was her duty to them all – she went out to them. It was full night. Along the house, from the low eaves and from poles, hung small lanterns lighting the way to the men under the trees; and there, hung from the trees, were long lanterns of fine ironwork with heavy, massive bases. They were all lying under the trees on cushions and saddles.

Further down, against a wall, sat the gypsy players in a row, their legs crossed under them, with *zourlas* and tomtoms. On the opposite side, along the house wall, crouched the women, already satiate with food and drink.

But when the men saw Sophka coming towards them they were all as if shamed, even the most drunk of them, and they froze stiff with their glasses held in their hands; while the women rose in their confusion as if to run. Sophka then saw Marko get up and run quickly towards her. He wanted to prevent her coming down to them under the trees. He was in great alarm and concern, and so nobody should hear what was said he simply pushed her back away from them.

'No, daughter, no, Sophka,' he whispered hoarsely. 'You can't come here. They're simple folk, and they're drunk.'

'No matter, no matter, Tata,' she replied.

'No, no . . . this is no place for you. You must not come. You are not for here. . . .'

But Sophka insisted.

'I want to, I want to be there. Why shouldn't I? I want to!'

Then, delighted because she saw what a marvellous surprise her words were for him, she smiled, and put up her face quite close to his.

'You want to? You'd like to?' Marko asked, looming over her and staring into her eyes, striving to learn from them whether it was truth

or not – whether she really liked him and his people, whether that was why she wanted to be with them, or whether it was purely for form's sake.

Sophka understood that, and she pretended to be insulted by his doubts and began to reproach in an almost tearful voice.

‘Why not, Tata, what sort do you think I am? Should I have come here, should I have got married, if I didn't want to be with you all?’

‘No, no, daughter!’ he said.

He was quite persuaded that she really did like them, and in immeasurable delight he turned to them all at table, to them all, but spoke to the eldest, at the head of the *sophra*, old and nigh blind Grandfather Mitar.

‘Grandfather Mitar,’ he cried, ‘and all of you, prepare your gifts, for here is your Marko's new daughter come to serve you.’

Whereupon, out of delight and happiness that she was coming to serve them like any other of their kind of woman, they all rose, and bowed most humbly all of them before her, and greeted her.

The women too were delighted, being put at their ease by Sophka's appearance and speech. They helped her in her *serving* – which consists in the young bride's kissing the hand of each of the men and handing him the cup of wine, waiting before him till he has drunk it, and then again kissing his hand, and taking the glass from him

to serve the next man. As she served them, with her lips she felt the hard calloused skin of each of them, and felt too their moustaches and beards on her face. As she pressed near to them, too, through her thin silk *shalvari* she felt the hard hairy homespun of their coats pricking her flesh.

All restraint now left the women, and at first timidly, but soon enough quite boldly, they stroked Sophka's shoulders and well-formed hips, delighting in their firm curves. . . .

CHAPTER XXI

SOPHKA AND MARKO

THEN Sophka knew she had done wrong. She herself warmed to the general gaiety, and revelled at first in being able to make these warrior folk happy by her presence; but she soon regretted her rashness, in spite of a madness that continued within her and lighted her whole countenance. Marko's menfolk began to behave like children in their pleasure. They fell at her feet to thank her for condescending to come among them; and they drained the largest of glasses to the last drop when they came from her hands. And there was no longer any stranger in that courtyard, but one body of folk in wild carousal.

And soon, as they no longer feared anybody could be bored by it, they insisted on the gypsies playing and singing one special song of theirs – a simple affair in words—

*'Nightingale, o sing not early,
awaken not my Lord!
o sing not early!'*

—but the words were so

descanted on, with a melody so full of catches and so shrill, and interlaced with the piercing notes of the *zourla* and knotted by the throbbing of the tomtom, that it would bring a stone to ecstasy. The candles in the lanterns burned out in sympathy, and the men were so brought to frenzy that they drew their yatagans from their belts and threw themselves on the tomtoms and slashed the parchments of them to pieces.

The women scattered, then as if by instinct clung round Sophka, for they knew no one would dare throw anything that way. Then new candles were lit in the lanterns and new drums were brought, and the drinking and the singing were resumed. But though Sophka stayed happily there through it all, still Marko could not bring himself to believe that she was really happy. His eyes did not leave her while, breathless and blissful, she went the endless round with wine, with as free a grace as if in her own house. That sudden murderous outburst had not alarmed her. She was only conscious of danger from her own self to herself, from the mood that had come on her, and she made no let to her abandon. When she stooped to pour wine the rich forms of her body were vivid to all, and her hair fell in great tresses from on her shoulders, and bared the firm flesh beneath it. And that firmness of her flesh was like pointed knives in Marko's brain. He could no longer bear the distance between her and

himself as she moved about, and had her sit beside him; as he said, to rest.

So Sophka sat beside Marko, and leaned her elbow with her full weight behind it on his knee, and as she thus leaned on him, as though he were her lover, and held his glass to his lips, envy of him, their head, their commander, filled the hearts of them all. A devil inspired her, and while she leaned on his knee, she raised herself so as to be able to bring her other arm right round him, as if embracing him, and thus brought the cup to his lips. At this a thundering cry went up, for through their envy they revelled in the beauty and fitness of what she did, and the gypsies pointed their *zourlas* to the heavens, and the pipes shrieked at the heavens. Marko drew a whole bag of money and tossed to the gypsies. Then he started to his feet and drew Sophka after him.

‘Sophka, my child, come . . .’ he murmured.

She did not know where he wished to take her, but yet she went. She watched him, throwing himself forward as something drew him fiercely on. But when she saw he was making for the little room she smiled, for she thought she knew him, and guessed his intention – to take a string of ducats or other gift from the treasure chest. As they passed the kitchen Arsa came out before her.

‘I too,’ he stammered, ‘I too am. . . .’

He could say no more, but she knew what he

meant. He wanted her to remember he existed, was her faithful man, Arsa, who loved her. She took him up gently, and smiled.

'I know, I know, Arsa,' she said.

And then she reached the little room. Through the gloom she could see Marko get off the padlock, not by unlocking it, but by kicking it off with his heavy highboot. He stood there before the broken chest. Behind him gleamed the wedding gifts and against the wall the whiteness of the bridal bed, with the flaming red eiderdown in the centre of it. Marko's eyes burned into hers. He pointed to the chest with the broken lock and could hardly speak.

'There you are, there you are, everything, everything, yours. Open it, take it, everything. . . . You have the key. But you don't need that now. What you want, for whom you want, when you want, have it, give it away, spend it. . . . it's all yours.'

'I know, I know, Tata.'

'But only one thing, Sophka, Sophka.'

And Sophka heard a voice she had never suspected before, a voice in which there was no 'daughter,' but 'Sophka.' And her neck grew stiff with the passion of it, and she trembled at the knees. She had reason to, for he towered over her and she saw he was trembling.

'Sophka, Sophka,' he stammered, 'only one thing. Only the truth.'

And to look into her eyes straighter and see more clearly in them, if she was speaking the truth, he seized her by the shoulders. Each hand seared her soft and rounded flesh like a hot iron.

'Tell me, tell me. . . . Is it true, is it really true that you love us all?'

A sort of madness came on her, an annihilation in emotion, when thus she learned the immensity of his love. Clearly and brazenly, though to herself she pleaded it was merely to calm him and console him, she assured him

'I love you, I love you, all of you, Tata.'

But she spoke more like mistress to lover.

'All of us?' he asked, and maintained the fatherly fiction, though his face belied him.

'All of you, the whole house. And you, most of all you.'

And then her strength left her. A fierce heat seemed suddenly to flow from his hands into hers; it was a strange feeling she had never known before. Then, to her horror, against her will, from the mere touch of hand on hand she felt her body flexing and her skin stirring with its own independent life.

He was gone. Through her amorous stupor she heard him crying, with some terrible sweetness of expectation and hope in his voice

'The gates, come, the gates, shut the gates, bar the gates, no one shall come in. . . . Akh! Akh!'

CHAPTER XXII

SOPHKA AWAITS THE ATTACK

AFTER that came blackness of the soul. They went into the great room that took up half the house; and for mad hours on end they did not leave it. Gypsy players came and went, in weary relays; and still that wedding banquet did not begin. The fires in the kitchen were banked and the cooks nursed their waiting pots. Fires burned too round the house, and even down by the stables and byres; where the very old men and women who could not stand the strain retired for refuge. Liquor was brought in great cauldrons from the cellar, and the cauldrons stood in a row along the kitchen wall, to be near at hand. The women who were cooking aided in their emptying, and no throat was dry. And in the great room roared a mighty wood fire, so that from the road the house seemed alight.

But at last the hour came for the formal feast, and they called in the old men from their refuge without – to come to the *sophra* – because the great dinner could not be begun without their

toasts and blessings – what did any care now for food – because the ceremonial of the feast could not proceed without their presence and approval. They came in, wrapped in cloaks, stooping, slow, with small wrinkled faces. Fresh from sleep they were, and they wiped their faces as they came in. Sophka welcomed them to the *sophra* and kissed the hand of each and served each with a large cup of wine, which each was obliged to drain to the last drop before he sat down to table. And then the ‘gifts’ were brought in, the large *pitas* and the baked meats and the *gibanitzas* from which the abundant richness trickled. And as each ‘gift’ of food was brought in the donor was called in a loud voice: ‘This from Grandfather Mitar’s house.’ ‘This from Uncle Stosha’s house,’ ‘This from Grandmother Stana’s house,’ ‘This from Aunt Persida’s house.’

Now all boundaries ceased to exist. Large room and kitchen became one tipsy sea; and in their hotness they threw off garment after garment. The women sat now with the men, and as they lolled or tossed in horseplay bellies full from much eating and drinking showed bare above petticoats, and half-bared breasts, full or shrivelled, broke from shifts into the common gaze. And on their bosoms showed the motley stains the colours of their kerchiefs or shawls dissolved in sweat had made. The men threw off their cummerbunds and leather belts and boots, and sprawled with

bare and hairy chests and besocked feet; and the gathering became more and more confused and intermingled. Husbands no longer sat by wives, or wives with husbands; when man or woman came back from easing nature they threw themselves down where chance guided them.

And with horror Sophka, through the midst of her intoxication with self, realised that everything was becoming one – all the men one male thing, all the women one female thing; there was no more old or young, nor wife or daughter, nor uncle or aunt, not any other relationship either uniting or dividing. There was nothing but male and female, and female enticed male and male pursued and captured and toyed with female. And it all went so far that gentle little Milenia, attacked by too many men at once, hid by the *sophra* close by Sophka's side. The girl was broken with weariness, bitten and pinched all over; and yet she was in bliss, smiling and swooning from her immense delight.

'Don't let me go, little sister-in-law! Don't let me go, sweet. Don't let me go, our men have all. . . .'

Then to finish her sentence she pointed to her naked little breasts and her crumpled skirts and *zouaves*.

Yet nobody was shamed by that or blushed, but all laughed merrily; particularly the women, and the old women past their time laughed most

of all. For Milenia was the youngest of them all, and so naturally had to expect most from the men. And the old hags, blissful as they recalled the way they had once been the most chased and caressed and kissed at such affairs, mocked Milenia in loud, strident voices

'Ya, Milenia' they cried, 'you mother's pet you, you hussy. Pretending you don't want to. . . . Fiddlesticks!'

And then Sophka began to feel horror, and a trembling of fear took possession of her, for she began to understand that this wedding feast through the night, and that insistence that the gates were closed and locked and barred, was all a customary thing with them, and not a spontaneous outburst on her account. Separated as they were from the world, scattered about the mountains and grazing grounds with their cattle, it was only at feasts like this that they all met – or even saw their wives. And then, their bellies unaccustomed full, and sultry with abundance of powerful unused lusts, they lost themselves and forgot themselves, deliberately lost count of things, and ignored the barriers of blood and of age.

She saw daylight now through those unbelievable stories of what 'peasants' did. She recalled their old Magda's one and only phrase when asked about her kinsmen

'Don't talk about them, my dear, peasants only know for one thing.'

And then that story Sophka had never believed, of that famous forbear of hers Velia, of whom it was said that he had lain with all of his sons' wives. That all explained the number of children born in spite of the husbands spending most of their lives out in the mountains; and why all were so much alike; a whole village being as if it came of one father and mother; and not from a whole district.

She shivered as her brain worked with a fast bout of clarity; for now became clear those horrible stories heard and believed about the town, but never taken account of by her – how the peasants, to get as much labour as possible, married their sons when quite children, and married them to fully grown girls, well on in years, capable of bearing and of working at once. That had been done from time immemorial, from generation to generation, and nobody had considered it a sin; not even the husbands when they grew up, for such was the custom, and their turn was to come.

And, to Sophka's horror, the lewd hints and taunts and laughter in toasts to Marko and to her began to have meaning for her. . . .

CHAPTER XXIII

MARKO DEFEATED

ON Sunday the wedding was, and behind the locked and barred courtyard gates the wedding feast went on that night, over the next day and next night and so into the third day, Tuesday, and still Marko did not give in, but himself – because all were so drunk – went at intervals to see that the gates were closed. But his kinsmen could not stand it any longer; they were becoming quite frenetic, and in their madness had begun fighting among themselves and even slashing their own arms and legs with knives, till their wives dragged them away and sobered them, and escaped with them from the confusion by climbing over the wall.

Marko was demoniacal; cursing any who showed signs of wanting to go, and beating the servants for letting them escape.

At last Sophka could do no more. She could scarcely hold her eyes open, so tired she was. Her body was burning, and fear and apprehension had produced a sort of delirium in her. She

wrapped herself in a cloak and lay down. One by one the wedding guests departed; and there were fewer between Marko and herself. And in spite of her awareness that there was something terrible to come she was not afraid because of that, but because she was still not clear in herself what she would do when Marko actually tried to take her.

If only she were not Effendi-Mita's daughter Sophka knew what she would do. She would break away from him, and even though scratched to ribbons and stripped of her clothing she would escape. But what could Effendi-Mita's Sophka do if they found her in the streets, fleeing from her new home? Everyone would welcome the scandal of that. And so she lay down at the *sophra* next Marko's place and shivered and twitched.

And then something seemed to frighten her even more than her own indecision – that which she sensed in Marko's voice as she heard him prowling about the house cursing the men for letting everyone escape – especially old Grandfather Mitar. For there was fear in Marko's voice, fear at being left alone with her. While the others were there it seemed easy, for they had all done it in their time. . . . But he was left alone, and it was not the custom of the town, they did not allow it in the town. . . .

Then Sophka heard him coming back to her.

His breathing sounded so heavy in the empty room that the walls seemed to move. She could not find strength to rise to receive him as she should, and she apologised.

'I can't, Tata,' she said, 'I am tired.'

'Don't get up, don't get up, my child,' he answered her.

And he sat down beside her, yet a little away from her, as if in caution. That frightened Sophka still more, and she saw his difficulty in sitting, saw him, legs crossed, hands on knees, rocking to and fro and staring fiercely before him at the *sophra* still laden with food, splashed with wine, littered with gnawed bones and lumps of half-eaten bread, surrounded by disordered and crumpled cushions.

At the door into the kitchen stood the gypsies, dead tired, scarcely holding their *zourlas*, dozing. Outside, for the third time since the wedding feast began, dusk was falling, and everything should have been progressing to peace. Even the stones in the yard, churned up by the pawing of horses, seemed to be resting. The men who were left, still unslept, were washing and splashing at the well. In the kitchen too everything, as if it really was the end, had become deadly quiet, coarsely quiet. The great fire, now that its task was finished, was blackening and sinking under ash, and the only thing that could be heard was the flapping of a woman's slippers and her quiet

whispering with Marko's wife. It was the marriage-arranger thus whispering that still exasperated Marko.

'Play!' he yelled, and sprang up so suddenly that the whole house started; and Sophka, forgetting herself, actually got up and tried to stop him.

'No, Tata, no Tata!' she pleaded.

But he took no notice of her. He took one step over the *sophra* and went up to the players at the kitchen door. One of them was holding his *zourla* limply in one hand, and holding together his unfastened clothes with the other,— he bent double before Marko, and, in a limp and dreamy voice, but with decision, said

'Marko' then started quickly and corrected himself — 'Gazda-Marko, even if we are gypsies, we've got souls too. We can't do any more, we can't, you yourself can see that.'

Dead from fatigue they were. But Marko, instead of doing what on any other occasion he would have done for such insolence — instead of thrashing the man, he actually pleaded.

'I know, I can see . . . I can see, but I want it, I want it, I want it.'

He seemed to feel a sort of pleasure in that word *want*, and like a child he went on repeating it. The repetition intoxicated him, and he bent over the gypsies and raised his hands as if he might either embrace them or crush them down.

And once more the music began; wearily, jerkily, forced, but of itself still noisy and warm. The shrill sounds echoed into the deepening night; and Marko seemed but to have been waiting for that music; for, to Sophka's surprise, he did not come back to her. He went straight to the window, and there, in the corner of the room, in the darkness under the window, flung himself on the floor.

Sophka shivered, for she saw that his declaration of love for her had arrived. She understood that he had flung himself on the floor there in the corner so that she should not see his expression as he spoke of his love – just as the music would hide his words from his wife in the kitchen and mask his emotion from her.

And no doubt it would have come then, had the *ashtchika* not come in. By the woman's face you could see it had taken labour to persuade her to come, and that only enormous pressure and much pleading and weeping from Marko's wife had prevailed over her better sense. She was angry at the rôle she had been pressed to play; but she was still more angry with Marko. Even if his men, those peasants, did not know, at least he, who was a *gazda*, who had been about the town so much, at least he ought to know what was fitting in the town, and that it was high time the young bride and bridegroom retired to their room. And from nervous tension words broke from her almost before she was over the threshold.

‘Hurry up there,’ she said.

Then she made as if to hurry Sophka towards the door.

‘Come along, come along, then,’ she said.

Sophka then saw Marko fly forward from his dark corner to drive the *ashtchika* out as he would drive any of his servants; but he remembered in time that she was not one of his, and he could not do what he liked to her. If he turned her out he brought cruel scandal in, for she knew all about the marriage. But what put him aback as much as anything was her bared arm, clean and white; for she had not come from helping Stana in the kitchen, but from preparing the bridal bed.

‘Come along, Sophka, that’s enough, time now . . .’ she said, for Marko’s hesitation gave her courage.

Sophka knew where she was to be taken, the gulf she was going to, the daylight she was leaving behind.

‘Good-night, Tata,’ she said, and kissed his hand.

His fingers were stony cold and heavy. As she went out and crossed the kitchen she heard the *ashtchika*’s severe voice dismissing the gypsies. Then she saw the delighted gypsies rush past her, dragging their sheepskin coats behind them in their haste, and disappear at the run. Then Marko’s terrible voice rang out—

‘You, what are you meddling for?’

But the *ashtchika* was ready for that, and Sophka heard her hushing him. She knew she had won.

'Come, come, Gazda-Marko, I know best . . . ' she was saying.

'What do you know best, you town bitch, you, you town cow . . . !'

'All right, all right, Marko. Everything'll be all right, only you lie down, you take a little nap.'

But in answer to that came a sound of things breaking, obviously the dinner vessels thrown at *sophra* or window – glass and crockery crashed and tinkled, and metal pots clattered and rattled. The *ashtchika* flew out with a terrible squawk, which was drowned by a still greater din of destruction, the frames of the windows following the glass into the courtyard. Then Marko trampled on the *sophra* while from his lips came a confusion of oaths and croaking and moaning.

In abysmal fear Sophka flung herself on the bed in the little room and covered herself with the eiderdown, and trembled and waited. . . . Through the confusion of shouting words began to separate.

'Akh, you hound, you bloody hound, you old hound Mitar! Oh my mother, my whore mother Akh . . . you could, all of you could. . . . ' Then followed terrible curses.

Against her will Sophka felt for him. Of course he wanted to know why they should have been allowed to do it, marry their sons and lie with their wives, and he not be. He felt cheated,

for he had been married young by his father, and, Sophka thought, likely enough Tomtcha was not Marko's son, but Marko's brother. And now Marko was thwarted of his turn.

And who knows how long this storm would have gone on, or what it would have ended in, if the voice in the kitchen had not interrupted.

'You go on, perhaps you can calm him, get him to lie down, go to sleep, so the young folk can. . . . If not, I can do no more.'

And Sophka was amazed to hear old Stana say: 'I will go.'

What exactly took place between Marko and Stana no one could hear. Yet Sophka was sure, from the tortured, hissing, hollow sounds that came from behind the closed door, that Marko was, in his agony, cross-examining his wife, trying to make her admit she had lain with her father-in-law her first night. And Sophka felt that everything hung on her mother-in-law's admission. He needed that now; that would be his excuse; and if she confessed, in sheer perversity he would go to avenge himself against her with Sophka, and take Sophka. . . .

'Man! man!' she heard Stana, 'shhh! the Lord will destroy you! . . . Ohhhhh! You, her father-in-law!'

Then the old woman prayed.

'Open, o earth, for us all to be swallowed up,

oh, what have I come to! O! O Lord God,
Lord God!

Then there was Marko's terrible voice:

'I am your Lord God!'

and a dull, heavy blow, and a faint moan
from old Stana. Then Arsa's voice crying

'The master's killed the mistress.'

Sophka nearly lost consciousness, for now there seemed no way out, no hope, no saving herself. Blood would flow, he would destroy anything, everything, but she should be his. . . . And then a curious grating noise outside her door brought her quickly to again. It was some animal rolling about, croaking by the threshold. It was Marko. And she knew then that he had not fallen there by stumbling, but by his own fear of himself his legs were refusing to bear him. He had crawled, grovelling, to her door.

And from the great room, where Sophka's mother-in-law lay with a blood-spattered head, came a constant quiet whimper hopeless and defeated. The old woman in her desolation was whimpering for her long dead mother and her home.

But for him there, at Sophka's very feet, that whimper had no meaning. Nothing had meaning. Everything seemed ended, destroyed: his whole life, his childhood, his father, his mother, all were accursed.

And as in his self-agony Marko groaned on Sophka's threshold his supple nostrils quivered,

as if they were quick to the very scent of her. He seemed to feel her heavy heart beating, her ripe and passionate lips burning. Her hair, spread over the bed, he pictured winding over her body full and rich. . . .

And as in his agony of self-thwarted longing he croaked and rolled on the ground he strove to push open the door and come to her; but he could not, and he fell back. Hands and arms and legs betrayed him. That whimpering of his wife which he had thought he could ignore was like a rope round his neck, holding him back as on a leash from crossing that threshold to his prey. Yet go back there to his wife into that room he could not – that was all over! The beams and timbers and bricks and tiles of the accursed house seemed to be falling about him and crushing his head; with great difficulty he scrambled to his feet and mastered his legs and staggered away from Sophka's door over the courtyard.

'Arsa!' he called, 'my belts!'

His voice was faint and hoarse. He dragged himself to the house, and leaned on one of the timbers of it, and thus held himself up, waiting for Arsa to belt him.

Arsa ran up and, struggling, managed to belt him, though the whole of the lower part of Marko's body, from hips down, trembled and shook. Only by holding his shoulders against the house did he prevent himself from falling, and

he could scarcely raise his arms for Arsa to put a *zouave* on him. Then he croaked—

‘The chestnut!’

Arsa finished winding his cummerbund on him, and went for the horse. Though Marko strained his ears, he could catch no sound from the little room; not even Sophka’s sobs. From the great room, though, came Stana’s whimpering, and it seemed to Marko that her bloody face must be sunk in the earth of the beaten floor.

The night was dark, the stones in the yard were coldly still. From the corner of the yard used for rubbish came the stench of droppings and decay, and Marko took deeper and deeper breaths of that stink, for it pricked his nostrils and revived him. Arsa led up the chestnut. A shudder shook Marko. He wiped his running brow. His body was limp, and from his emotion a dull deep croaking came from within him, as if he was choking. Arsa guided his heavy feet to the stirrups, and helped him, heaving him up into the saddle. And the feel of the saddle seemed to put life into Marko, and a last flood of fury welled up in him. A knife flashed from out of his cummerbund, and with sudden strength he rose in his stirrups and slashed the chestnut over the flanks with the keen blade. The blood spurted, and the chestnut leapt madly into the night.

Sophka heard Arsa go into the kitchen and tell her mother-in-law.

CHAPTER XXIV

SOPHKA AND HER HUSBAND

WHEN Marko had gone they brought Sophka's husband in to her, but she had already fallen into a fevered oblivion. She did not come to herself till morning light. It was shortly after dawn. The great tallow candle in the stick above her head had just burned down and extinguished itself, with a vile smell of tallow. He, her husband, was sleeping at her feet, practically on the bare floor.

He had evidently fallen asleep the moment they brought him in; and he was still sound; his arms stretched out and his knees drawn up. Sophka could see too that he had been afraid, if he fell asleep, of putting his head on the eiderdown that covered Sophka, and so of dirtying it and harming it; and he had carefully folded the edge away from him.

Through the window the well head showed its black outline, and from the stables came the sound of animals waking and moving about; but no sound came from the house; everything there was dead.

And, so that the *ashtchika*, when she came to inspect, should find everything as it should be in marriage, Sophka had to get her husband up and undress him. She could not waken him for some time, so deeply was he asleep. She unwound his belt from off him, and undressed him, and drew him into the bed with her, and wrapped him and herself in the great red eiderdown, and waited for full day to come. She felt the hairs of his head pricking her neck and cheeks; for the hair was short cut as on a child. It had been recently washed, and smelled of soap.

Sophka did not get up again that day. A fever came on her, and she was delirious at times, and at night only came to herself again for a space. When she opened her eyes once she saw, beside her, the candle burning in its spattered stick, and a dish of food and drink that her mother-in-law had brought in quietly while she was in fever; because from her shame for all that had happened she dared not yet face Sophka awake. And at the foot of the bed, on a bare rush mat, lay Tomtcha, her husband, half undressed only, curled up, sound asleep again. Sophka got up, and contrived to make the bed, and then took her husband to her, because she would have none of sparing herself and keeping him at arm's length. She would have none of being spared or pitied; for she had now gone through so much that the thing should be complete.

And so, weeping, she embraced sleeping Tomtcha and kissed him; and then, burning with a new excitement, half conscious of what she was doing, she got up and went out into the courtyard, in the empty and silent walled-in night. Arsa was there, crouching in a corner to protect her, and he came up to her to help her; but not only did she give him no orders – she stared at him as if she did not know him, and her dull and thirsting lascivious eyes made the hair of his scalp stiffen, and shivers course down his backbone.

This happened more than once. She would stride about in the night to tire herself, hair disordered, clinging to her moist temples, a demented sight as she held up her unbelted *shalvari* and her bosom showed beneath her unbuttoned shift. Then she would go back to her room and lie down again, and enfold and kiss her husband, and pray to God for it always to be like that, calm night.

Whole nights passed like that, till, by morning, worn out, she fell into a deep though fevered sleep, which would last on through the following day. And that fever was a good thing for her, since it allowed her to avoid all the customs that follow the bridal night – the inspection of the sheets and the coming of the women visitors, to whom she would have to pretend she was well and happy. . . .

CHAPTER XXV

MARKO DEAD

After several days, not because she was better, but for the sake of her mother-in-law and the family, she began to appear in the house in the daytime. But even with all her will it was not till after the midday meal that she found strength to appear. She was a shadow of what she had been. Under the edge of a sombre kerchief stared her eyes with dark circles round them, and her lips were hot and trembling, as if she were always weeping. But no tears passed her eyes now; her weeping was that quiet internal steady, tepid weeping, which at times is of great comfort.

With every day, however, her health improved. None of her own people came to see her, and most noticeable was the absence of her father and mother, who doubtless felt their guilt. Of her illness, that fever which followed the wedding feast, they took no more account than anyone else—that was quite a usual phenomenon in a bride. And so she was cut off from everyone—and through that perhaps felt but calmer. She began to take an interest in the life of the house, and even to work. The time came too when she took interest

in her clothes again, and wore flowers in her hair, and dazzled her mother-in-law and the household every day, for her beauty and her magnificence became even greater then before. A triumphant ease inspired her, for she was mistress in the house, and her unlaced waist and hips showed their sweeping curves. Her mother-in-law melted from delight as she looked at Sophka. Many a time, as Sophka crouched by the hearth at work her mother-in-law would timorously sit beside her, and attempt to put the finishing touch to her hair or her clothes.

Later in the day she would sit long in Sophka's room, drawn into a corner, and watch her at her preparations, drawing her frocks, her *zouaves*, her luxurious shifts and her silken kerchiefs from her chests.

And if it had not been for Marko's behaviour that night, and for his never returning to the house or giving news of himself, but living in the town or in one of the highroad inns, everything would have been well, though even that began to be forgotten, so that Sophka entirely forgave him. He had been drunk, and that largely explained his behaviour that night, so that all he had to be forgiven was his living in the inn, which all the world must notice, – and his silence towards them.

But time healed even that rift, though it was with further tears and pain.

One day, just before dark, a peasant, a man from the mountains, rode up on horseback. His clothes were in tatters and from his belt stuck a long, black revolver.

He sprang from his horse, and did not pause to tie it up, or to put his clothes straight or consider what he looked like, but strode straight into the kitchen, wiping sweat and dust from his bony neck as he strode. Sophka stood up and waited for him. Stana was, as usual, sitting beside her, by the door into the great room. Although Sophka had already suspected that something had gone wrong, she started in fear when she saw the man's face. Then, without looking straight at either of them, he stammered

'Mistress, I am sent to tell you that the Gazda is killed. The Master is killed, Mistress!'

He repeated it, all the time wiping sweat from bony face and neck.

Sophka felt her knees give way, and her eyes burned. She felt her mother-in-law behind her get up; turned round and saw her, in her dumb-foundedness, raise her hand to hold on to the door; and then, when the peasant's face and eyes confirmed that he was speaking the truth, she swung sideways and fell in a heap on the threshold. Her shirt sleeves flashed white as she fell. Hopelessly she cried

'No. No.'

And Sophka felt that those No's were Stana's

last, her only comment, a cry of protest against the Albanian who had murdered Marko, against Sophka, against the whole world, the market, the town, all of which, in such a short time, had brought her from her native mountains to this present misery of widowhood.

Sophka too nearly fell to the ground in her horror.

‘Where?’ she stammered, ‘when?’

‘I don’t know, Mistress.’

The man stood rigid before her, unmoving, except nervously to wipe away sweat, and tears.

‘But two days ago, at evening, nearly night, he was brought in from the Albanian country, wounded, to the inn. A bullet still in his bowels. Unconscious but alive. We started off with him, and when we got to Korbevat, where we put him in the room of the inn to rest a while, while we got a change of oxen, he came to, and the first moment he was alone madness came on him, and he tore the belts from himself so the wound opened and he bled and died. And I was sent to tell you, for you to get ready for him, and I was to stay here with you, if there is anything I can do, to be at hand.’

And then Arsa rushed in, and when he heard, he fell in his misery to the ground.

‘And you? all of you?’ he yelled at the messenger.

'Come now, Arsa, come now,' the man protested, quietly.

He knew what Arsa's reproach meant.

'Did we know he was gone, Arsa? You know what he is. Well, from the moment he came back from the wedding he seemed to be out to undo us, he was so gentle; without a harsh word for any of us. And whenever we saw him go into the country we followed him,— but if he noticed he would threaten to kill us for following him. And so no one could guard him openly. And now . . . there . . . that's the result.'

And Sophka understood that even if Marko had not exactly committed suicide for her he had to all intents done so by going alone into the Albanian country. And then, wounded, in order not to be brought alive home to her and have to face her and blush before her — as soon as he was alone he had torn off the bandages and belts round him so that his blood and his bowels had come out and he had died.

She could not look at her mother-in-law, who remained lying on the threshold of the room, nor at the peasant who stood rigid as ever in the centre of the kitchen. She stumbled away with heavy head that she felt she could hardly support, and flung herself prostrate in her little room, which now seemed black and deep as a grave.

Once again people crowded into that courtyard

and house, neighbours and relations, and the walls echoed with people.

It was at nightfall that most of the folk from the mountains came, some on foot, some on mules, some in carts, all broken with grief. Throughout the night they arrived – the same as had come to the wedding – and as each man entered the courtyard he cried

‘Alas, oh my Bata Marko!’

And none entered the house, but all gathered around the house and arranged themselves huddled in a row all round the walls, and folded their arms on their breasts and thrust their hands under their armpits and sat thus in their dejection, and did not speak.

And faithful Arsa got dead drunk, a thing he had never done before. He ceased to obey orders, but in his drunkenness cried threats to Akhmed the Albanian, who, it was believed, had shot Marko with his own hand.

‘Akh, my Akhmed,’ he cried. ‘Akh, you evil swine! Akh! you hound. . . . And I said to him, “Gazda, let me go and get behind that Akhmed and let me finish him off, let me let his blood for him” but he said “You stay here in the house, Arsa, you go to the town and look after the house there, there’s been enough blood and heads lost!” And now, now – what is that house?’

And he pointed derisively to the house, as if he was revealing it, splitting it apart, taking the roof

and chimney from off it to reveal its barrenness. In his frenzy he struck himself on head and neck, and in his paroxysms of grief even cursed his dead master, for being killed.

And when people told him sharply that he ought to be in the house, helping his mistress, his drunken answer was

'Let her die too! She wouldn't look after him; she wouldn't stir a finger to help; though she couldn't do a thing without him. I'm not going, I tell you, I'm not going!'

And he tossed the keys of the house to the ground, and rolled desperately round and round the courtyard.

But when, late in the night, the gate was flung wide and lighted, and a heavy merchant's cart, drawn by two old and powerful buffaloes, appeared, the cart full of fresh straw, on the top of the straw dead Marko lying, stretched and stiff under a sheepskin coat, Arsa was first there. His tipsiness quit him, and he would let no one else lift his master from the cart. With some superhuman strength he carried the great lolling body slung over his back. Only once did he stumble—when he seemed suddenly too aware of the stiffness of the limbs, and stooped under the burden that was monstrous to him, and his fingers clutched at the cold flesh over his shoulders, and a heart-rending cry came from him

‘Okh, Master, my Master! Okh, Master, my Master!’

Then others helped him, though he would not give in, but stumbled on till he lay Marko on the floor on a white sheet, and pillowed his pallid head. Then he crossed the hands and kissed them, those short thick hands from fear of which he had trembled so often; and ran out into the yard, and flung himself down against the house-wall and broke into weeping, feverish sobbing.

And at the same time from around the body of Marko, now lighted by candles, rose the drone of the women bewailing him; and above all the voices rose the older peasant women, and their simple monotonous cries made the thick walls seem transparent and the distant mountains near.

And all the women joined in the keening, while the men, each in turn, went up to him, lit a candle at his head, kissed the eikon he held in his crossed hands, and then tiptoed out, and joined the other men, all crouching on the ground round the wall of the house.

Each branch of the family lived separately, yet even those to whose house Marko had never gone, whom he never directly aided, felt in him a protecting shield, by his severity and roughness and renown. Now they felt headless; no one was there now by his mere name to be their defence and security. It had been enough to say ‘This is

Gazda-Marko's man' for everyone, in village or town, to treat him differently. Now they were at the mercy of the whole world.

In the deep of the night the moon rose, and its slanting light, fretted by the black outline of the walls, soaked into the house and quenched the glow on the hearth; and in its fluid light a conviction grew in Sophka's mind that Marko was not dead, that the house was not in the town, invaded and invested by mourners, but somewhere far away, on yellow sandy soil, in a deserted place. It was a limpid world, slowly turning, pivoted on her, and into that world at her behest the elements of that night of sorrow and lament came or went—horses whinnying in the courtyard, the men crouching along the house wall, asleep now in their fatigue, faces ridged in the moonlight; and *he* himself in there, in the great room, his head haloed by candles, his hands crossed, his lower jaw bound in position, and his wife Stana and all the women round him weeping, monotonously keening over him. Stana had one hand on his cold brow, and her fingers were toying with the locks of his black hair, coiling them, straightening them again, drawing them back smooth at his ears.

They buried him the next day. Then her own folk came, but Sophka, because she could not bear the thought of talking to them, kept her bed.

None but her mother came in to her; the others blocked the door outside, so that when the corpse was carried out she should see nothing, for it was not fitting for a bride to see anything of a funeral, least of all set eyes on the corpse; lest, being, please God, with child, it should bear a disfigurement or disease.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE YOKE GROWS LIGHT

AND, as Sophka had cynically thought before, everything that was horror passed; though when two and three summers had gone it still all seemed to her as but yesterday, or at most a month, that all had happened.

The first autumn and winter after the death of Marko passed in visits to the grave. The long autumn rains turned to sleet, then the snowdrifts of winter came. Partly on account of the bad weather, but largely because of the mourning they were in, they remained isolated from the world around them. His meteoric death, that avenging thunderbolt, had inspired them with inward terror, and they visited him regularly in the cemetery, taking food to partake of with him on his grave, while masses for his soul were said. In that assiduity they found liberation from him, and, to their surprise, in time they found themselves tending, in spite of those observances, to forget him. His presence was lost.

At first, of Sophka's folk, only her mother visited her; but for long Sophka felt curiously disturbed when her mother came, and her mother noticed this, and on account of it let some weeks pass between her visits.

Yet at last, though it still seemed to her it had happened but yesterday, Sophka began to feel hope of forgetting and finding peace. Everybody was considerate to her; and she was clearly mistress of the house. Her mother-in-law, whose whole life had been bound up with Marko, seemed she would never think or desire more. It was natural, then, that she should leave everything to Sophka. But the servants, especially Arsa, were the same. Arsa was ready to spend the whole day and whole night on his feet for a kind word from Sophka. His great joy was to be able to come to her and report that he had finished his task, and for her to see how reliable he was, and reward him with a smile.

To the neighbours too she was the 'young mistress.'

Even Tomtcha, her husband, was attentive to her. In two years a dark down of moustache appeared on his upper lip; his chin took on firmer shape and was squarer, and his lofty shoulders began to show bony beneath his coat. Sophka, though, was still mistress, and whatever Sophka told him to do he did with pleasure. It seemed to make him happy to think she should talk to him.

He never went near her except when she called him. She could do what she wanted with him, and often when he was going out she would call him back and put right his belt or fasten a loose buckle of his coat for him.

She kept the keys of the money chests. All the money received from the outpost inns he handed over to her, to add to the bank in the coffer; and when payment had to be made he asked her for the money, and she unlocked the chest and handed him exactly the sum he needed.

And in time Sophka felt she was growing accustomed to the new life – felt too that, if things continued that way, she would eventually learn to love them, all of them, but particularly him, Tomtcha, her husband. She felt presentiment too that her love for him would be a real love, such as she had never expected when she married him – perhaps even love much like that of her virgin dreams. . . . And at the foundation of that presentiment was not so much the fine male lines that were revealed in him, as the fact that with every day he was more particularly hers – not a stranger Tomtcha, but *her* Tomtcha, almost as if he were a child of hers, born of her, nurtured by her.

Indeed, he was hers, for she to all intents had taught him how to dress, how to belt himself properly, even how to speak, and all his manners. And if, she mused, as a young man he was so

handsome and so full of adoration for her, what would he be later, when he was a full man? Whenever he looked at her, stepped up to her, delight and happiness showed in his face. His black eyes would glow warmly, widely, and learned to quiver with passion for her, for her warm and luxurious body, he would press close to her, happy in advance at her smile.

And she felt in herself real love coming. The harsh feeling of so many months, as if she lay on the hard earth at night, was gone. Her rest was sweet to her, and her shoulders and hips were once again generously covered with flesh. For long enough she had hated, had shrunk from her own body. Now she began to luxuriate in the warm roundness of it.

CHAPTER XXVII
ANNUNCIATION

ALTHOUGH they were rich, the house was a low and mean house, with floors of beaten earth. Yet there came a day when those floors no longer seemed cold and bare, and the house itself no longer seemed a desert far from the human world. Though the floors were bare earth, and the low-raftered kitchen with the floor hearth and the great smoke hole in the centre of the roof was often choked with smoke, the cellars and stables were granaries chockful of raw wealth. It only needed a hand to manage it; and Sophka was that hand.

Carpets woven and cushions dyed and embroidered were laid over the floors and their harshness disappeared. Large shelves of strong wood held bright *sakhans* and *tepsias* and the kitchen was warm and inviting. The whole house gradually changed; comfort came where there had been Spartan misery.

But these years that brought this well-being, brought a care too with them. Whenever Tomtcha had work to do which kept him away for a few days, he seemed to forget her body and presence.

How she noticed this first she could not tell. She sensed it through the independence that began to grow in him; for in little things at first, where once he would have waited on her guidance, he began to decide for himself. One day when she went out into the yards to find him she came on him just as he had found one of the men at thieving, or some such peccadillo, and his rage was a revelation. His eyes blazed with a terrible inhuman fire and his teeth chattered and jaw quivered as if he were cold; and then, to her horror, Sophka noticed his hands. Those hands, that she had all these years remarked as the podgy boy's hands she had clutched through the wedding service, had become short, thick, hard, hairy. Tomtcha's neck, too, had become like his father – or his brother – Marko's, and he also had, she then saw, the same low brow and the high outstanding skull.

And after that moment of clear-seeing she found the resemblance to Marko whenever Tomtcha was in a rage, and, she dare not admit to herself why, it was a cold knife stabbing her heart. Yet, for some time yet, she was still mistress. At the sound of her voice that fury would vanish, and Tomtcha would again seem delighted to be called by her, to be able to do something for her, and would be her sweet Tomtcha again as he hastened to her to ask

‘What, my Sophka?’

When he came to full manhood, he and his mother more and more persistently tried to persuade Sophka to agree to sell the outpost inns, and build a fine large house by the gates, facing the bazar quarter. But Sophka, consistent to Marko's memory, refused. She would not have it said she had withdrawn support from their mountain kinsmen. Moreover, something instinctive in her guarded her against the foolish use of money which ruined her own family. At the same time she was afraid Tomtcha might put a wrong interpretation on her refusal. Now that he was a full man he was always very touchy, both hasty and timid with her, on matters of business,—almost as if afraid his disagreeing would make her stop calling him to her, to her room, to her bed. Because of the way he had grown up with her he could never quite free himself from restraint with her. And, in order for him not to find in her refusal to agree, a wish to keep the inns because that took him away for weeks on end, she consented to selling certain lands and building an inn and a number of houses for rent near the bazar—while their own house they would merely repair.

The next spring the garden was entirely uprooted, stoned, weeded and replanted. In the house, walls were newly colour-washed and wood-work painted. The stables were rebuilt. The great gate and the lych-roof above were taken

down, and this somehow freed the house and brightened it.

This work marked a stage, not only of physical, but also of spiritual prosperity and peace. It was the golden time of Sophka's life. Often she stood and watched the masons at work, happily knitting as she watched the stones of that gloomy gateway go. She wore heavy satin *shalvari* with wide, golden anklets. Below them showed her slender ankles, in white cotton stockings. A string of ducats would be carelessly strung over her lace-ornamented shift. Her hips were no longer those of a girl, but of a young wife, rounded and replete with sweets. Her complexion was limpid, and her flesh, from the chin, of a fine milky whiteness. Her hair was parted in the middle and drawn to either side and at the back wound into a silk cloth. Its glossy black revealed the richness of her shoulders. She breathed out marriage purity, stability, satiety, content; which you could see too in her calm eyes, her happily languid, ever moist lips.

And if Tomtcha noticed her alone, he would leave his work to show her what they were doing at the moment, and the coming plans. And old Stana delighted in them, and even all the pans on the hearth could boil dry, but she would have her fill of slyly watching her two children. And one day, at about this time, Stana noticed that Sophka's belly was growing larger, and saw that before the

year was out there might be a grandchild. Joy choked her. She was at that moment secretly watching them both from the stables, but she had to sneeze and cough through the spasm which seized her, and that gave her away. And when Sophka saw her she guessed her purpose and gently teased her.

'I say, Nana,' she said, 'what if your pots boil over?'

And Stana was comically ashamed of being caught. As she ran back to the kitchen

'There was a little something down here I wanted to get,' she cried, 'and that accursed stench got up my nostrils.'

CHAPTER XXVIII

A NEW YOKE DESCENDS

IT was a feast day, and long after the church service, and the church bells had stopped ringing, and the buzz of people through the bazar on the way home had stopped. It was that feast-day dead silence, sun bright and warm, shadows sharp, hot air above the paving stones. Sophka was dressed and waiting happily for the midday meal in front of the house. Her mother-in-law was preparing the table. Tomtcha as usual was beside Sophka, softly talking to her. Then Effendi-Mita suddenly appeared at the gate.

Sophka nearly fell from her chair in her delight when she first saw him, and nearly forgot she was with child – wanted to run towards him. He was back then! She had heard that soon after Marko's death he had gone off again to Turkey.

And then something chilled her enthusiasm. His sharp, yet slow steps clearly showed he was badly out of humour. When his eye had taken her and Tomtcha in, and round them the well-kept courtyard and trim house, a strangely ironic smile twisted his thin, somewhat wrinkled and

already toothless mouth; and Sophka saw that cruel smile and froze.

Tomtcha, less observant, glad to see Sophka's father, ran quickly to have preparations made in the house. Sophka, like a stone, waited for her father to come up to her. How could she do more, when she saw him, a devilish spite spurting from him because she was happy in her husband and her home. She sensed envy in him and a cruel guess that she hated to admit was that all his money was now spent and he wanted more. But her mother-in-law had no such suspicions. She toddled out to meet the great Effendi-Mita; she was really glad and honoured to see him. She had come straight from her cooking, and wiped her hands clean of flour as she approached him.

'O, my friend,' she cried, 'let us scatter wheat on the hard ground of this courtyard, let us make two of the threshold, since you have at last condescended to see us.'

And Sophka heard her father, amused at old Stana, and noticing his daughter's stillness, ironically answer

'Come, come, are you really so glad to see me?'

And in his nervous agitation he began brushing and flicking at his breeches and his shoes as if he had dirtied them crossing their courtyard.

'How are you, Tata?' Sophka asked, and bent towards his hand.

He kissed her forehead.

‘Well, my child,’ he said, stiffly. He looked round him.

‘Where is Tomtcha? I’ve some business with him,’ he asked. And without waiting for Sophka’s answer he went straight in to Tomtcha.

Sophka went to her little room, but could not rest there. Without knowing quite why, she was trembling. A curious odour of death seemed to envelop her, and she feared misfortune.

And then her straining ears caught the conversation between her father and her husband. Tomtcha pressed him to sit down, but he would not. There was a silence. Then his voice could be heard, in stifled wheezy tones, and then Tomtcha replying, clearly and simply

‘I can’t say, I can’t say, Tata, I can’t say. Upon my word, I know nothing about any such money.’

Then she heard her father’s voice, again hoarse, and choking with spittle, in fury, at having to ask for money of that dribbling brat his son-in-law. Then she heard him absolutely lose his temper. She could imagine him leaning over Tomtcha, as if to strike him.

‘Do you think that if he had not promised me money I should have let you have my daughter, you little b——?’

Tomtcha seemed to stagger under it a moment, and then he awoke to the meaning of the words. His voice hardened.

‘Tata, I say, that won’t do, that won’t do,’ he said.

‘Yes it will,’ her father went on. ‘If he hadn’t promised, and big sums too, would I have let her marry you, would I have let her join the scorn of you, *my daughter*? What are you, what are you? You, you . . . peasant! And you now dare. . . .’

But Tomtcha strode away from him, into Sophka’s room. He was unrecognisable. His jaw was quivering, and incoherent sounds came from his tongue. He did not know what to do with his arms, clutching at his legs with his hands.

‘Money, money!’ he breathed at Sophka.

He could scarcely stand. In horror Sophka watched his hands toying with the knife in his belt. A fear came on her lest blood ran – no, a fear was on her lest, after that revelation of purchase, Tomtcha’s eyes saw her differently, thought of her as a thing that could be bought.

Tomtcha wrenched the lid off the chest as his father once had done, thrust both hands into it, and without looking in his agitation to see what they held, took out two bags and rushed panting away with them. And like a man tossing the weight, he cast the burden of those bags from himself with a slight gasp, as if they were already impure.

‘There, take it!’ he cried.

And she heard her father hurry away with the money.

Why had she no sense? Why did she too not get up and go away with her father? However terrible the after life with him would have been, it would have been better than her after life with Tomtcha: For, as soon as her father had gone, Tomtcha's terrible voice rang through the whole house – terrible just as had been Marko's in his rage

'Just think, Mother, we're filthy peasants, we're filthy peasants!'

'Shh, son, shh, Tomtcha. It's nothing . . .'

said his mother, quietly.

'What? Nothing? These creatures that sell their daughter, they are everything, we are nothing, we are swine! Akh!'

And to Sophka's dismay, malicious enjoyment rang in his voice, as if the revelation had freed him from something which, though dear to him, was irksome too. For never had Tomtcha before felt he was his own man. His voice was not his own, his movements were not his own, nor his eyes, nor the way that he looked, but were Sophka's – but they belonged to that Sophka who had existed before, and not to that Sophka there now, common like any other woman, a thing that can be bought.

He went up to her.

'You!' he cried, and stopped short.

Then he seized her. In vain his mother intervened; he held her by the hair of her head and struck her down.

He rushed from the room, yelling 'Arsa!'

Arsa started like a man shot, for that stern commanding voice was the voice of dead Marko.

'Yes, Master?' he replied.

'Horse – my father's horse and boots.'

His fury strangled his patience, and, without waiting for the chestnut to be saddled or the boots brought he sprang on to the horse and, to the astonishment of the market and the streets through which he rose, galloped away, making for the inn they still held on the frontier.

Late that night he came to a river and set across it at a ford above the bridge. The water was limpid and though it was dark reflected a faint light. Then, formed in the green leaves and mossy banks and thick willows, he saw as clearly as day a wonderful woman, naked, bathing and combing her hair and inviting him to her; and it was his Sophka, but he lay flat along the horse and clung to its belly and resisted her seduction. He stopped ears and eyes with his hands, and bit the horse's neck so that it dashed far away from the river.

And when he reached the inn he immediately inspected all his men and the stores. He thrashed certain men who had stolen. And though he enquired most minutely into the state of the farms there, they seemed glad to see him, because he was like their beloved Master, Marko risen from the grave.

Then he settled in to drink, and once drunk kept it up. He pursued the gypsy girls and the peasants' daughters, and those who rebuffed him he raped with the help of his servants and his churls their relations; and there were terrible rumours went abroad. In vain his mother sent word to him to come home, threatening to leave the house if he did not. He replied that with all respect and honour to his mother he could not come, that whatever it pleased her to do she should do, that he stinted nothing, but that she should expect no more of him.

And even Effendi-Mita, partly, no doubt, to preserve his own face, sent the *ashtchika* who had arranged the marriage to him with a message that he should come home and not bring shame on them all, or he would have to take his daughter back. Tomtcha received the woman with all politeness, but he sent back to his father-in-law a letter containing but one phrase, so vile that it was clear he had turned away from them for ever, and quite gone to the devil.

And Effendi-Mita sent for Sophka, but Sophka refused. She not merely refused. She sent word to her father never to come near her again, to leave her at peace, and to understand that everything was well, quite well, with her where she was.

CHAPTER XXIX

PROUD DESOLATION

BUT things did not remain long like that. When Tomtcha saw that no one interfered with him, that he had mastered the situation, he began to go home again; but always by night, always drunk, always breaking in the gate in a tempest of rage before Arsa had time to open it. He would dismount and stride to the house, and when Sophka came to him to greet him he would strike her; though she never uttered a cry. She would then take off his boots for him, though if she paused while doing it he would kick her. And when he came home the servants vanished and hid in neighbouring houses, because if he saw any one of them he immediately fired at him.

He brought up drink from the cellars, sometimes wine, usually *rakia*; and his bloodshot eyes would glare at Sophka as he drank; but she never showed him either astonishment or fear, but suffered it all with a kind of delight, and waited for what was to come next. Often he forced her to drink with him, till she fell into a drunken stupor, when he would kiss her and fondle her and use her lewdly.

She bore it all, and when he had worn her out, she would smile as if he had fondled her with the soft folding of doves' wings; and would drink more, till the *rakia*, burning her bowels, brought her to an insanity of pain and delight.

Then, at first dawn, he would be up and away. And when Sophka, bruised and broken, dragged herself to her scared mother-in-law's room, to show the old woman she was still alive, the tears would fall like rain, and Stana would cry

'Sophka, my child, my child, go away, leave him, Sophka! Go, go from him.'

'It's nothing, Nana, nothing. I fell down and bruised myself,' Sophka would say.

'Fell down? No, Sophka. I heard it all, dear child. Go away, save yourself, he will kill you, and I am no protection, so flee, child, flee from him.'

And then the time came when old Stana could bear Sophka's sufferings no more, and took to going away for days on end. She declared that she stayed with one or other of her relations, but God alone knows where and how the grief-demented old woman wandered. In vain did Sophka remonstrate with her. The old woman's heart was broken; her wanderings were a last paroxysm of the body protesting against it; and one day, when she came home, she took to her bed and did not leave it again alive.

And although a messenger was sent post haste to Tomtcha he did not come to his mother's funeral. And immediately after her death Arsa left the house. He said he was off to the mountain village, to find and kill Akhmed, that blood-enemy of his old master, but actually he found consolation with the new Marko, now so like the old, and he stayed at that inn on the frontier. The other servants too left the house, and Sophka was practically alone.

That made it better, easier, both for her and for him. His mother's death seemed to have removed the last restraint from him, and he now came home whenever his whim was, by day or by night; and did with Sophka what he liked. And for her it was easier because, whenever he went away, leaving her nearly insane, not so much from pain now as from a superexcitation, she had no fears anyone would see her in that naked state. For, even when sodden, Tomtcha knew the way of her, and often, out of devilment of revenge, he would embrace her and kiss her just so much as to leave her at the ultimate height of excitement, yet insatiate, so that for days and nights after she drank to deaden her desire.

And later, so it was said, she used to be so maddened when Tomtcha left her that she kept deaf-mute menservants, and used them to bring peace to her.

CHAPTER XXX

PROUD RESIGNATION

THERE was no tragic culmination. Even death did not come like a thunderbolt. Even more children were born to them, but what a brood! Only the firstborn son was any good. The others, born in disease, were pale and disproportionate and afflicted from birth.

This did not surprise her. It was all so clear. It seemed natural for things to repeat themselves. Just as her family had begun to go after Hadji-Triphoun, this one was declining after Marko. Her husband Tomtcha and she were the beginning of the end. If only the end could be quick! But she saw it being carried on into her children, and she trembled at the thought of the grandchildren who should come after.

Night was just passing. The outline of the well-head in the centre of the courtyard could be just distinguished; the stables and the courtyard wall too, but all else was in darkness. The wide ground window of the great room glowed yellow with the lamp lit within, and revealed the broken panes

blocked with sheets of paper. In the kitchen a tiny lamp shed a faint glimmer. The house was awake, though no sign of life was yet showing.

A chestnut, like Marko's chestnut, was ready saddled, and chewing the oats in its nosebag. It sneezed into the bag, and like an answer from the house came a rustling of clothes, then a stamping of feet as Tomtcha eased his highboots on, and a dull dry early morning coughing.

The dawn grew lighter, and revealed a man-servant standing on the kitchen threshold, head and shoulders resting on the doorjamb. In one hand he held saddlebags, in the other arm a heavy padded sheepskin coat. The horse's bridle was hooked over the door latch. Timidly every now and then the man peeped into the kitchen to see that the lamp on the little table was burning properly, to light his master out. By its light he could see the children, awake, lying in a row all under one covering.

'Where's my whip?' came Tomtcha's deep voice from the big room.

Quickly the man threw the coat and saddlebags over the saddle and led the horse round for Tomtcha to mount the moment he appeared. Heavy footsteps sounded in the kitchen, and Tomtcha appeared, issuing as he went his usual orders and cursing – not the servant – cursing *them*, his wife and his children.

'Tell that fool of a boy not to dare show his

face again if I hear he's been out on the loose!' he said.

'Very well, very well!' Sophka answered. Her voice was weak, but yet passionate. She followed him to the door.

The hand holding the stirrup trembled when Tomtcha appeared on the threshold. Tomtcha, through all forms of bodily excess, was prematurely corpulent, though he was still a powerful man. His mouth and chin vanished in a stocky neck; his cheeks were florid.

He scowled and mounted, settled his sheepskin at the knee, examined his pistols to be sure they were loaded and dry. The man rushed to the gate and held it open. Tomtcha drew in the reins, crossed himself, nodded a curt good-bye, and set off.

'God speed!' Sophka cried, and remained standing, lamp in hand, till he was out of sight beyond the gate. Then she waited for the man to close the gate, and went slowly back into the bright house. The children were up and had stirred the fire to a blaze. They were tousled and bleary from sleep. Their bare feet trod carelessly in the ashes round the hearth; their glance was bright and unrestrained. Sophka scolded them, for that was the customary morning greeting in that house, and then went through into the big room, and brought a cushion from it, and folded it under her and sat down on it by the fire.

She took two *giezvas*. In one she made coffee, in the other she heated *rakia*. The children, used to faring for themselves, opened a bin standing against the wall, propped up the lid with their heads, and fudged about till they found some lumps of bread, which they gnawed listlessly. They went into the great room and brought themselves cushions and blankets to sit on, but Sophka did not seem to notice them doing this. Once or twice she did look at what they were at, and thwacked the eldest with a slipper, but that attention had little apparent connection with what they were doing.

The man brought in an armful of wood for the fire. He sat down beside Sophka and made himself comfortable – took off his sandals and bared his legs to the knees to get the straw out of his breeches, and dried his socks in front of the fire. It was broad daylight; the blueness of dawn filtering through the smoke outlet in the roof deadened the fire. From neighbouring yards now came the blows of an axe, the creaking of *shadoufs*, the clatter of wooden slippers on the stones of the yards, and from the bazar quarter the noise of men calling *salep* drink and breads.

Some women came into the courtyard to draw water from their well, which was better than any other of the neighbourhood. The noise of the children showed them that Tomtcha had left, and so they did not hesitate to leave their vessels

at the well and come up to the house to Sophka, to drink coffee and sit awhile with her and gossip – till, in fact, they were sent for from their own houses.

Fifteen years of marriage had quite aged Sophka. Her waist, once so slender and lissom, was bony and stiff. Her black eyes had sunk. The skin of her nose was drawn tight back, so that the bone, and her cheekbones too, stood harshly out. Only her lips were still full, moist and fresh. Her gait had grown slow. She walked as if faltering, with her hands thrust in her bosom, from which habit her shift at her bosom was always creased and dirty.

She was never seen to eat. She scarcely ever did eat. She very frequently drank coffee. She would spend the whole day with her head wrapped, against a headache, in a cold poultice of garlic macerated in coffee; and as she sat she would toy with a poker and draw soft gentle shapes in the clean grey ash. Only a visit from one of her neighbours could bring her out of such dreaming. The cloth the woman was weaving, perhaps, had gone wrong, and she wanted Sophka to untangle it for her.

Sophka would go at once, and at one glance she would see where the weft was caught, and with a sure hand, without snapping the thread, she would put it right – and quite likely sit down on the bench and go on with the weaving as if it were her own work.

But she would not sit for long doing this. She soon tired; she had no strength; and she would go on to some other of her neighbours. Through the whole day, once started, she might go from house to house, and when she had gone the round of them all she would go home strangely refreshed. Yet soon after she was back she would become pensive again, resume her endless designs in the ashes, slowly brew coffee, and sup it slowly, peacefully, luxuriously, tasting the sweet stuff tenderly on her red, ever humid lips, which were young until the very end.





