

LEO TOLSTOY

The Cossacks

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with an Introduction by
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E V E R Y M A N ' S L I B R A R Y

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THE COSSACKS

This novel of love, adventure, and male rivalry on the frontiers of nineteenth-century Russia – completed in 1862, when Tolstoy was in his early thirties – has always surprised readers who know Tolstoy best through the vast, panoramic fictions of his middle years. Unlike those works, *THE COSSACKS* is lean and supple, economical in design and execution. But Tolstoy could never touch a subject without imbuing it with his magnificent many-sidedness. And so this book bears witness almost in passing to the instinctive feeling for every level of human and natural life, the brilliant historical imagination, and the passionately alive spiritual awareness that characterize its author's genius.

E V E R Y M A N ' S L I B R A R Y

EVERYMAN,
I WILL GO WITH THEE,
AND BE THY GUIDE,
IN THY MOST NEED
TO GO BY THY SIDE

THE COSSACKS



I N T R O D U C T I O N

In World War II there was a famous British destroyer, one of the 'Tribal' class, named HMS Cossack. Her name recorded a common western misapprehension: that 'Cossacks', like Gurkhas or Afridis, were an exotic race, who happened to dwell within the wide borders of the Russian empire, and who served the Tsar in the same way that warlike local nationalities had come to serve the British Empire. In fact the word 'Cossack' ('Kazak' in Russian) carries no ethnic significance, but meant originally something like 'piecemaker', or one who works in his own time. The Cossacks were runaway serfs, outlaws, and adventurers, mostly from Great Russia, whom early Russian governments attempted to control and organize as frontier guards and farmer-soldiers living in the border regions.

The Cossack has always seemed a picturesque figure to the Russians themselves, though not an ethnic one. Asked by a western novelist whether anyone could become a Cossack, the novelist Sholokhov, who came from the Don region and claimed ancestry in the Cossack settlements there, replied that Turks and Poles and orientals might all become Cossacks, but not Jews. The writer had the sense to retort: 'But what about Isaac Babel?' – referring to the famous Jewish author of short stories, notably *Red Cavalry*, who had become an officer and commissar in a Cossack unit during the revolutionary war. Sholokhov's reply is not recorded, but his own status has now been shown to be an equivocal one. His epic novel *Quiet Don* (translated under the title *Quiet Flows the Don*), recording the troubled years of the revolution in the Cossack lands, may in fact have been plagiarized from the writings of an officer who was killed in that conflict, and had known it at first-hand as the younger Sholokhov did not.

The point is of some importance in the context of Tolstoy's own early masterpiece, *The Cossacks*, for Tolstoy cleverly arranged a scenario in which his young hero Olenin *thinks* he knows and understands about the Cossacks and their way of

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life whereas in fact he does not and cannot do so, a situation beautifully emphasized by the ending of the story.

Tolstoy has things both ways. He does all he can, and with all his amazing creative skill, to suggest the reality of the Cossack mode of life – the hard simple facts about it – while at the same time he can record through the eyes of his hero the full romantic impact, for his Russian readers, of that way of life, and the wild untamed beauty of the Caucasus and the River Terek. Tolstoy's 'realism' is never reductive, never seeks to show up a false exotic picture by presenting his own as the genuine accurate one. At the same time he was very conscious as a young author that 'my hero is truth', as he put it in his introduction to *Sevastopol Sketches*, his account of his own experiences at the front in the Crimean War. Both in this great early story, *The Cossacks*, and his last tale of all, *Hadji Murad*, which takes an historical episode from the same region, he presents a picture of sober factuality, observed with a masterfully neutral eye. In this he learnt much of course, and perhaps unconsciously, from his great predecessor, the poet Pushkin, who had written poems about the Cossacks (a phrase from one of which, *The Captive of the Caucasus*, was borrowed for his title by Sholokhov).

What has been called 'the anxiety of influence' is often found even in the greatest writers. There is no doubt that Tolstoy wished as a young man to add his own version of a work of art to those dramatic pictures of the Caucasus already created by Pushkin, and by Lermontov in *A Hero of Our Time*. The theme of the Caucasus presented, as it were, the stock challenge to an ambitious young Russian writer of the mid-nineteenth century. A sort of analogy in the twentieth century is to be found in Hemingway's development of the war stories of Stephen Crane, the predecessor who offered both a challenge and an example for his own genius.

The form of *The Cossacks* gave Tolstoy a great deal of trouble. He worked on it intermittently for ten years, between 1852 and 1862, interrupted by his service in the Crimea and his visits to Europe. (He had earlier served as a junior artillery officer in the campaign against the Caucasus tribesmen.) At one moment he even thought of attempting the subject as a

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poem, although so far as is known he only tried to write verses once in his life, and then only in a letter. The fact that he thought of it at all is none the less significant proof of the spell that the great poems earlier in the century, like Pushkin's *Captive*, and even more one of his narrative masterpieces, *The Gipsies*, had exercised on Russian readers. *The Gipsies* contrasts the simple heroic style of life of a wandering Gipsy tribe with the frivolous aristocratic outlook of a young Russian with a dubious past who hero-worships them and wishes to live among them. A tragic, even melodramatic, result ensues, when Aleko becomes insanely jealous of his Gipsy mistress and kills her and her new lover, and is left behind in broken solitude upon the steppe.

Tolstoy of course avoids any such dramatic outcome; but in the way in which he terminates his story, with Olenin tacitly snubbed and dismissed by his Cossack friends and the girl Maryanka, we can detect his subtle redeployment of the same kind of idea. It is in its way a version of the old cliché that east is east and west is west. The romantic young man who longs to join a different society, and become part of another way of life, finds out in the end that they are incompatible with his background and temperament. In terms of the development of romantic ideas and ideals since the late eighteenth century, when French authors had written hopeful and wildly popular novels about the Noble Savage, and the joys of abandoning civilized life for the American prairie or a tropic island, *The Cossacks*, like *The Gipsies* before it, presents a decidedly disillusioned picture. There is a great deal of *literature* at the back of *The Cossacks*, even though it gives us such an unsurpassably fresh and vivid picture of a natural setting, and of life in a Cossack community.

But even as a young man Tolstoy was always determined, as it were, to have his own say: to be dogmatic about experience, and to assert the truth as he himself is determined to see it. The dogmatist in him was always at war with the artist. And we can see the effects of this in the characterization and narrative pattern of *The Cossacks*. Although the subject was such a well-worn romantic one, and given a peculiarly Russian status by Pushkin and other Russian writers, Tolstoy is determined to

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add his own interpretation, as an author and an individual. He is determined to place his own experience in the most majestic form of literary context: not only the recent literary Russian one, but even that of Homer – whom he had come greatly to admire – and the tradition of the primitive epic.

And so, as frequently happens with this amazing author, several different and apparently incompatible literary forms and conventions – the romantic, the classical and epic, the personal – all come together in one brief and vivid ‘novel’. (Tolstoy always claimed that Russian authors ‘did not very well understand’ the novel as practised conventionally in western Europe; and he said both of *The Cossacks* and of *War and Peace* that they were not novels in the western sense, but just works of art in the form in which the writer could ‘most conveniently’ say what he wanted.) In his early stories in the form of a memoir, *Childhood, Boyhood and Youth*, Tolstoy had used the models of Rousseau and Sterne, in which the author, the ‘I’, was securely built into a nominal hero, like Saint-Preux or Tristram Shandy. The epic form has of course no ‘I’ in this sense; and the novels of Scott, on which Russian prose romances had naturally come to be based, used a generally rather passive and even feeble hero, such as Waverley, who merely acted as the focus of the tale, the figure in its historically and geographically picturesque landscape.

A severe judge might say that Tolstoy’s hero Olenin, in *The Cossacks*, has from this point of view the worst of all worlds. He is not very interesting in himself, as a personal hero should be, and he gets in the way of the epic and objective aspects of the story. That, roughly speaking, was the view of Tolstoy’s older fellow-writer Turgenev, who admired his brilliant younger contemporary very much, but who was always shrewd and penetrating in his technical judgements. The matter resolves itself into the question: Are we to have ‘The Cossacks’, or ‘The Cossacks as seen by Olenin?’ – and that is the dilemma Tolstoy cannot be said to have satisfactorily settled, partly because in some degree, of course, he was himself Olenin. The time and trouble he took over the book shows how conscious he was of the problem. In his first sketch Olenin is a much more positive, even strong-minded figure, who has lost enormous sums at

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gambling, and whose departure for the Caucasus is correspondingly more urgent. This Olenin, indeed, is more like Tolstoy himself at the time, the young officer and gambler who lost large sums, while the final version of Olenin is more like the young, naive and idealistic Tolstoy still in his teens. Indeed it could be said to have an element of self-satire; to be a slightly comical version of the youthful author himself, by himself.

This childish quality engagingly appears in the description of the hero's setting out from Moscow, going past houses he had never seen before, so that 'it seemed to him that only travellers starting on a long journey went through those streets'. There is more than a touch of the child David Copperfield in this (Tolstoy much admired Dickens' novel), and Tolstoy seems almost deliberately to exaggerate the self-consciousness and self-absorption of the young. But Olenin is seen far less sentimentally than the young Copperfield; and Tolstoy never indicated both the magic and the absurdity of being young more memorably than in this passage:

Now and then he looked round at some house and wondered why it was so curiously built; sometimes he began wondering why the post-boy and Vanyusha, who were so different from himself, sat so near, and together with him were being jerked about and swayed by the tugs the side-horses gave at the frozen traces, and again he repeated: 'First rate . . . very fond!' and once he even said: 'And how it seizes one . . . excellent!' and wondered what made him say it. 'Dear me, am I drunk?' he asked himself. He had had a couple of bottles of wine, but it was not the wine alone that was having this effect on Olenin. He remembered all the words of friendship heartily, bashfully, spontaneously (as he believed) addressed to him on his departure. . . . He remembered his own deliberate frankness. And all this had a touching significance for him. . . . 'Perhaps I shall not return from the Caucasus', he thought. And he felt that he loved his friends and some one besides. He was sorry for himself. But it was not love for his friends that so stirred and uplifted his heart that he could not repress the meaningless words that seemed to rise of themselves to his lips; nor was it love for a woman (he had never yet been in love) that had brought on this mood. Love for himself, love full of hope – warm young love for all that was good in his own soul (and at that moment it seemed to him that there was nothing but good in it) – compelled him to weep and to utter incoherent words.

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Olenin is one of those people whom we get to know so well so quickly that we are soon a bit bored by them. Amused and fond we may be, but is this the best company in which to meet the Cossacks? Perhaps it is, or at least Tolstoy makes it seem so, because of the very incongruity. We are aware, after all, that Olenin is not 'going anywhere'. He is not like the young Nicholas Rostov at the beginning of *War and Peace*, who exhibits in his homecoming, a similar incoherent ecstasy and self-satisfaction, but who is clearly destined for many other and further developments, as we can see from the number of pages stretching ahead. Olenin is the hero of a much briefer tale, which will abandon him on completion, just as the Cossacks themselves will do.

So why should he not, like the doomed Lensky in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, be filled with romantic longings? He dreams of 'Circassian maidens, mountain precipices, terrible torrents, and perils.' And as he nears the Caucasus the confinement of our first over-intimacy with this young hero soon begins to lift. We catch our first glimpse of the great mountains of the region through his eyes; but beyond his view are the real mountains themselves, their objective presences, looming in epic grandeur. The difference between the subjective and the objective here is subtly conveyed by Tolstoy in his account of Olenin's own response. 'So this is where it begins,' he thinks, and he keeps expecting to see the mountains as he has read and heard of them, but anything he actually glimpses seems disappointing. 'He thought the special beauty of the snow peaks, of which he had so often been told, was as much an invention as Bach's music and the love of women, in which he did not believe. So he gave up looking forward to seeing the mountains.'

But then he *really* sees them. Gradually their majestic approach penetrates his callow, self-preoccupied consciousness, and he begins to *feel* them. 'From that moment all he saw, all he thought, all he felt, acquired for him a new character, sternly majestic like the mountains . . . "Now it has begun," a solemn voice seemed to say to him.' And for the next paragraph every thought and impression ends for him with that awed and ecstatic refrain – one of the great bravura passages

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in Tolstoy's usually sober and factual prose ... 'And the mountains!'

To combine what seems the reality of them with his hero's first idea of them is a remarkable feat: probably no writer but Tolstoy could have so effectively made the two into one. And from now on in the story this dual vision becomes more emphatic, and yet more effective. Eroshka, the old Cossack, and Maryanka the Cossack girl, inhabit and obsess Olenin's consciousness; and yet they are also solid figures in their own right, whom we seem to see apart from him. Though very far from being the Circassian maiden of his dreams, Maryanka remains for Olenin on the same plane of enchantment and strangeness. Romance is inverted but retained. Coming and going on bare sinewy feet across the yard, her pink print smock clinging to her powerful chest and buttocks (we even seem to hear her peeing at one point: an extraordinary concession in the always prudish context of the Russian novel), Maryanka none the less remains a magical and unattainable figure, a *princesse lointaine*, although the detail of her physical being is as present as is the odour of 'vodka, sweat, gunpowder, wine, and congealed blood', which accompanies Uncle Eroshka.

Tolstoy is of course substituting as romantic object the full-bodied Maryanka for the conventional sloe-eyed Circassian maiden. Romance is adaptable; and in the work of a genius writing in poetry or in prose it is always capable of such adaptations: seventy years later Yeats was to substitute 'great-bladdered Emer' and her fancy man for the pallid and 'pearl-pale' Niamh and Deirdre. Indeed from the point of view of romantic techniques *The Cossacks* is probably the most influential of Tolstoy's works, and the tale which had most effect on later literary innovators. Hemingway revered it. And so odd can be the perspective of literary influences that we may have the feeling today, if we ourselves are reading *The Cossacks* for the first time, that its author has been reading Hemingway!

But Hemingway could not manage Tolstoy's humorously Russian – in a sense Pushkinian – approach to the consciousness of his hero. The hero of a *A Farewell to Arms*, for example, is not detached from the author in the way that Olenin is; and

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the heroine of that novel is not a patch – objectively speaking – on the sturdy Maryanka: she remains a passive dream princess at the beck and call of the hero. Tolstoy, even when young, was a deeply ironic as well as an analytic artist; and yet in *The Cossacks* this irony at the expense of his hero is not an unmixed blessing. It draws attention too often to the naivety of Olenin's outlook, and sometimes merges that naivety into the objective flow of the action itself. This is evident at the end of the tale, when a detachment of Cossacks have surrounded a party of *abreks*, the hostile tribesmen from across the river with whom they are permanently at war.

Olenin was much impressed by the place in which they sat. In reality it was very much like the rest of the steppe, but because the *abreks* sat there it seemed to detach itself from all the rest and to have become distinguished. Indeed it appeared to Olenin that it was the very spot for *abreks* to occupy.

This description is strangely akin to the young hero's naive and magical apprehension, as he started out from Moscow, that 'only travellers starting on a journey went through those streets'. We seem almost to be back where we started.

But in a sense this may be a part of Tolstoy's plan and purpose, which gives his *nouvelle* its strangely original, almost dreamlike quality. True, there are moments, perhaps left over from earlier drafts of the work, when Tolstoy seems to try to evade Olenin altogether, and to describe the Cossack settlement objectively, with the kind of epical simplicity which Pushkin used in his own historical *nouvelle*, *The Captain's Daughter*, and Gogol when he described the settlement of the Zaporozhe Cossacks in *Taras Bulba*. But Tolstoy cannot quite evade, as it were, the spell cast by his youthful hero's own naive and vivid awareness. So fastened to it is he that we seem to be seeing the Cossack village through Olenin's eyes, even though in the sequence of the narrative he has not yet arrived!

This *dual* outlook and method in the narrative, awkward as it undoubtedly can be, none the less contributes a great deal to the peculiar flavour of the tale. Take the fine set piece of the shooting of the *abrek* who is crossing the river. This is of course achieved in the absence of the hero by the alternative or epic

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hero, the young Cossack Lukashka; but it is recounted with the same detached, almost unearthly vividness with which it might have been seen through the eyes of Olenin. Lukashka goes on duty to the 'cordon', waits in ambush and shoots the *abrek*; but the general context and logic of the sequence remains largely unexplained. The extraordinary vividness of the description, the night, the shooting, and Lukashka's bringing in of the body as his spoil – all these epic details make a sharp contrast with the lack of information about the background. Their logic is that of Olenin's own vision: he is a young man who responds all the more vividly to events because he does not understand them, and because he is not really interested in their sober and factual background.

Tolstoy always likes to appear omniscient; and in his later work, and especially in his last story about the Caucasus, *Hadji Murad*, he takes a great deal of trouble really to be so. But in *The Cossacks* he cleverly conceals any shortcomings in knowledge behind his hero. Gogol, for instance, tells us that though the Cossacks live for booty their way of life is so careless and immediate that they often conceal their plunder, and then forget all about it. Granted the difference in time and place, this one touch tells us more about the Cossack mentality than all Tolstoy's vividness of detail. The vividness can have too much an air of artifice here, though Tolstoy's usual manner in his big novels seems so natural. His Cossack village remains strangely separated from the savage world of the Caucasus, as if it belonged to a different world.

We may even have the feeling that the *abrek* who swims across the river does so solely in order that the writer may make a fine set piece out of his killing. And masterly as his description of the dead *abrek* may be, Tolstoy seems to concentrate more on the description than on the man. 'Under the red trimmed moustache the fine lips, drawn at the corners, seemed stiffened into a smile of good-natured subtle raillery.' This comes near to the edge of 'fine writing' in a slightly derogatory sense. Robert Louis Stevenson could have written it, or Conrad. (It may remind us of the moment in *Heart of Darkness* when the Negro helmsman, transfixed by a spear, gives the narrator as he dies 'an extraordinarily profound

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familiar look'.) After the final episode of the fight on the steppe one of the Cossacks, before coming to aid his friend, the wounded Lukashka, 'fumbled for some time, unable to put his sword in its sheath: it would not go the right way. The blade of the sword was blood-stained.' All telling details, but there is a kind of relish about them very unlike the mature Tolstoy's accounts of war, violence and suffering. There is a particularly strong contrast, which cannot fail to be of interest to Tolstoy's readers, between this account in *The Cossacks* and Tolstoy's description of the last fight of Hadji Murad, in the story he wrote in his old age.

But again it is important to remember that the method in *The Cossacks* centres on Olenin himself, and in the contrast between his youthful eagerness, and the Cossacks' indifferent acceptance of the routines of their life, and the way things are. When Olenin rides up, hoping to take part in the final attack, he asks some question which to the Cossacks 'appeared quite meaningless': from their point of view he understands nothing. Lukashka is wounded – perhaps fatally, we never find out – by the brother of the man he has killed – and this element of the blood feud and the hereditary enmities of the epic life passes Olenin by. This ignorance finally separates him from the Cossacks and from Maryanka, who are deeply concerned with these personal internal matters of grief, loss, and revenge. Ironically, too, the fight, and the violent rejection of him by Maryanka which follows it, cures Olenin of that eagerness for the really significant experience ('Now it has begun, a solemn voice seemed to say . . .') which came from aimless living in the civilized world. She has flirted with the idea of him, but now the fight and the wounding of Lukashka have recalled her to the stern normalities of her existence. The daily realities of her world were for him romantic excitements which he felt might lead to 'the real thing'. And at the end he too sees this. He has learnt something at least.

Again as on the night of his departure from Moscow, a three-horsed conveyance stood waiting at the door. But Olenin did not confer with himself as he had done then, and did not say to himself that all he had thought and done here was 'not it'. He did not promise himself a new life.