

# The Cossack

## Anton Chekhov

MAXIM TORTCHAKOV, a farmer in southern Russia, was driving home from church with his young wife and bringing back an Easter cake which had just been blessed. The sun had not yet risen, but the east was all tinged with red and gold and had dissipated the haze which usually, in the early morning, screens the blue of the sky from the eyes. It was quiet. . . . The birds were hardly yet awake. . . . The corncrake uttered its clear note, and far away above a little tumulus, a sleepy kite floated, heavily flapping its wings, and no other living creature could be seen all over the steppe.

Tortchakov drove on and thought that there was no better nor happier holiday than the Feast of Christ's Resurrection. He had only lately been married, and was now keeping his first Easter with his wife. Whatever he looked at, whatever he thought about, it all seemed to him bright, joyous, and happy. He thought about his farming, and thought that it was all going well, that the furnishing of his house was all the heart could desire -- there was enough of everything and all of it good; he looked at his wife, and she seemed to him lovely, kind, and gentle. He was delighted by the glow in the east, and the young grass, and his squeaking chaise, and the kite. . . . And when on the way, he ran into a tavern to light his cigarette and drank a glass, he felt happier still.

"It is said, 'Great is the day,' he chattered. "Yes, it is great! Wait a bit, Lizaveta, the sun will begin to dance. It dances every Easter. So it rejoices too!"

"It is not alive," said his wife.

"But there are people on it!" exclaimed Tortchakov, "there are really! Ivan Stepanitch told me that there are people on all the planets -- on the sun, and on the moon! Truly . . . but maybe the learned men tell lies -- the devil only knows! Stay, surely that's not a horse? Yes, it is!"

At the Crooked Ravine, which was just half-way on the journey home, Tortchakov and his wife saw a saddled horse standing motionless, and sniffing last year's dry grass. On a hillock beside the roadside a red-haired Cossack was sitting doubled up, looking at his feet.

"Christ is risen!" Maxim shouted to him. "Wo-o-o!"

"Truly He is risen," answered the Cossack, without raising his head.

"Where are you going?"

"Home on leave."

"Why are you sitting here, then?"

"Why . . . I have fallen ill . . . I haven't the strength to go on."

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"What is wrong?"

"I ache all over."

"H'm. What a misfortune! People are keeping holiday, and you fall sick! But you should ride on to a village or an inn, what's the use of sitting here!"

The Cossack raised his head, and with big, exhausted eyes, scanned Maxim, his wife, and the horse.

"Have you come from church?" he asked.

"Yes."

"The holiday found me on the high road. It was not God's will for me to reach home. I'd get on my horse at once and ride off, but I haven't the strength. . . . You might, good Christians, give a wayfarer some Easter cake to break his fast!"

"Easter cake?" Tortchakov repeated, "That we can, to be sure. . . . Stay, I'll. . . ."

Maxim fumbled quickly in his pockets, glanced at his wife, and said:

"I haven't a knife, nothing to cut it with. And I don't like to break it, it would spoil the whole cake. There's a problem! You look and see if you haven't a knife?"

The Cossack got up groaning, and went to his saddle to get a knife.

"What an idea," said Tortchakov's wife angrily. "I won't let you slice up the Easter cake! What should I look like, taking it home already cut! Ride on to the peasants in the village, and break your fast there!"

The wife took the napkin with the Easter cake in it out of her husband's hands and said:

"I won't allow it! One must do things properly; it's not a loaf, but a holy Easter cake. And it's a sin to cut it just anyhow."

"Well, Cossack, don't be angry," laughed Tortchakov. "The wife forbids it! Good-bye. Good luck on your journey!"

Maxim shook the reins, clicked to his horse, and the chaise rolled on squeaking. For some time his wife went on grumbling, and declaring that to cut the Easter cake before reaching home was a sin and not the proper thing. In the east the first rays of the rising sun shone out, cutting their way through the feathery clouds, and the song of the lark was heard in the sky. Now not one but three kites were hovering over the steppe at a respectful distance from one another. Grasshoppers began churring in the young grass.

When they had driven three-quarters of a mile from the Crooked Ravine, Tortchakov looked round and stared intently into the distance.

"I can't see the Cossack," he said. "Poor, dear fellow, to take it into his head to fall ill on the road. There couldn't be a worse misfortune, to have to travel and not have the strength. . . . I shouldn't wonder if he dies by the roadside. We didn't give him any Easter cake, Lizaveta, and we ought to have given it. I'll be bound he wants to break his fast too."

The sun had risen, but whether it was dancing or not Tortchakov did not see. He remained silent all the way home, thinking and keeping his eyes fixed on the horse's black tail. For some unknown reason he felt overcome by depression, and not a trace of the holiday gladness was left in his heart. When he had arrived home and said, "Christ is risen" to his workmen, he grew cheerful again and began talking, but when he had sat down to break the fast and had taken a bite from his piece of Easter cake, he looked regretfully at his wife, and said:

"It wasn't right of us, Lizaveta, not to give that Cossack something to eat."

"You are a queer one, upon my word," said Lizaveta, shrugging her shoulders in surprise. "Where did you pick up such a fashion as giving away the holy Easter cake on the high road? Is it an ordinary loaf? Now that it is cut and lying on the table, let anyone eat it that likes -- your Cossack too! Do you suppose I grudge it?"

"That's all right, but we ought to have given the Cossack some. . . . Why, he was worse off than a beggar or an orphan. On the road, and far from home, and sick too."

Tortchakov drank half a glass of tea, and neither ate nor drank anything more. He had no appetite, the tea seemed to choke him, and he felt depressed again. After breaking their fast, his wife and he lay down to sleep. When Lizaveta woke two hours later, he was standing by the window, looking into the yard.

"Are you up already?" asked his wife.

"I somehow can't sleep. . . . Ah, Lizaveta," he sighed. "We were unkind, you and I, to that Cossack!"

"Talking about that Cossack again!" yawned his wife. "You have got him on the brain."

"He has served his Tsar, shed his blood maybe, and we treated him as though he were a pig. We ought to have brought the sick man home and fed him, and we did not even give him a morsel of bread."

"Catch me letting you spoil the Easter cake for nothing! And one that has been blessed too! You would have cut it on the road, and shouldn't I have looked a fool when I got home?"

Without saying anything to his wife, Maxim went into the kitchen, wrapped a piece of cake up in a napkin, together with half a dozen eggs, and went to the labourers in the barn.

"Kuzma, put down your concertina," he said to one of them. "Saddle the bay, or Ivantchik, and ride briskly to the Crooked Ravine. There you will see a sick Cossack with a horse, so give him this. Maybe he hasn't ridden away yet."

Maxim felt cheerful again, but after waiting for Kuzma for some hours, he could bear it no longer, so he saddled a horse and went off to meet him. He met him just at the Ravine.

"Well, have you seen the Cossack?"

"I can't find him anywhere, he must have ridden on."

"H'm . . . a queer business."

Tortchakov took the bundle from Kuzma, and galloped on farther. When he reached Shustrovo he asked the peasants:

"Friends, have you seen a sick Cossack with a horse? Didn't he ride by here? A red-headed fellow on a bay horse."

The peasants looked at one another, and said they had not seen the Cossack.

"The returning postman drove by, it's true, but as for a Cossack or anyone else, there has been no such."

Maxim got home at dinner time.

"I can't get that Cossack out of my head, do what you will!" he said to his wife. "He gives me no peace. I keep thinking: what if God meant to try us, and sent some saint or angel in the form of a Cossack? It does happen, you know. It's bad, Lizaveta; we were unkind to the man!"

"What do you keep pestering me with that Cossack for?" cried Lizaveta, losing patience at last. "You stick to it like tar!"

"You are not kind, you know . . ." said Maxim, looking into his wife's face.

And for the first time since his marriage he perceived that he wife was not kind.

"I may be unkind," cried Lizaveta, tapping angrily with her spoon, "but I am not going to give away the holy Easter cake to every drunken man in the road."

"The Cossack wasn't drunk!"

"He was drunk!"

"Well, you are a fool then!"

Maxim got up from the table and began reproaching his young wife for hard-heartedness and stupidity. She, getting angry too, answered his reproaches with reproaches, burst into tears, and went away into their bedroom, declaring she would go home to her father's. This was the first matrimonial squabble that had happened in the Tortchakov's married life. He walked about the yard till the evening, picturing his wife's face, and it seemed to him now spiteful and ugly. And as though to torment him the Cossack haunted his brain, and Maxim

seemed to see now his sick eyes, now his unsteady walk.

"Ah, we were unkind to the man," he muttered.

When it got dark, he was overcome by an insufferable depression such as he had never felt before. Feeling so dreary, and being angry with his wife, he got drunk, as he had sometimes done before he was married. In his drunkenness he used bad language and shouted to his wife that she had a spiteful, ugly face, and that next day he would send her packing to her father's. On the morning of Easter Monday, he drank some more to sober himself, and got drunk again.

And with that his downfall began.

His horses, cows, sheep, and hives disappeared one by one from the yard; Maxim was more and more often drunk, debts mounted up, he felt an aversion for his wife. Maxim put down all his misfortunes to the fact that he had an unkind wife, and above all, that God was angry with him on account of the sick Cossack.

Lizaveta saw their ruin, but who was to blame for it she did not understand.

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