CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

The Cossacks

Leo Tolstoy · *1863 · Louise and Aylmer Maude translation (1916)*

Dmitri Olenin, a rich and idle young Moscow nobleman tired of society and debts, joins the army as a cadet and goes to the Caucasus, determined to start a fresh and simple life. He is billeted in a Cossack settlement on the river Terek. Tolstoy's first major fiction after his army years draws on his own life in the Caucasus in the early 1850s.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can an educated man throw off his own world and find happiness in a simpler one, or is he always an outsider?

Olenin sees in the old hunter Eroshka and in the Cossacks a life closer to nature and to truth. He falls in love with Marianka, who is promised to Lukashka. The story is clear that he is not one of them: his gifts and money are not wanted, and his love is refused. He leaves, and Tolstoy leaves his ideal in doubt without dismissing it.

KEY CHARACTERS

Dmitri Olenin
A rich young nobleman seeking a simple life.

Marianka
A Cossack girl, the object of his love.

Lukashka
A young Cossack, her betrothed.

Uncle Eroshka
An old hunter and talker.

Vanyusha
Olenin's servant.

Beletski
A fellow officer.

Grades 10–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

Leaving Moscow

CHAPTERS I–VIII, FIRST HALF

Olenin leaves Moscow after a farewell supper, tired of society, debts, and failed affairs. On the road he sees the Caucasus mountains for the first time.

- The farewell supper is a picture of the life he leaves.
- The mountains are the first great sight.
- He is determined to begin again.

02

The Stanitsa

CHAPTERS I–VIII, SECOND HALF

He comes to a Cossack settlement on the river Terek. We meet the village, the old hunter Eroshka, and Lukashka, who watches the river with other Cossacks for a Chechen raider.

- Eroshka is a talker and drinker with a creed.
- Lukashka is a young Cossack on watch.
- The village lives with the border always near.

03

Billeted Among the Cossacks

CHAPTERS IX–XX

Lukashka kills a raider and the village treats it as a feat. Olenin, billeted with the cornet's family, meets Marianka, goes out hunting with Eroshka, and in the forest thinks he has found the secret of happiness.

- The killing is celebrated as a feat.
- Marianka is a handsome, proud young woman.
- The forest scene is Olenin's great moment of joy.

04

Summer and the Vintage

CHAPTERS XXI–XXXIII

Olenin settles into village life, lends money and presents, and makes friends with a fellow officer, Beletski. Lukashka and Marianka are betrothed, and Olenin grows more drawn to the girl.

- Olenin's gifts do not buy him a place.
- Beletski is a man of the world he left.
- He sees that he is not one of her people.

05

Rejection and Departure

CHAPTERS XXXIV–XLII

Olenin offers himself to Marianka and is refused. Lukashka is wounded in a skirmish with the Chechens, and Olenin obtains a transfer and leaves. Eroshka says farewell, weeping and asking for a gift, and the girl does not look at him.

- Marianka's refusal is firm.
- Lukashka's wound is the price of his place.
- The farewell is bitter and comic.

Nature | Social Class | Love | Search for Simplicity

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. Notice how Tolstoy describes the mountains and the river.
2. Olenin's idea of a simple life is tested. Ask where it fails.
3. Eroshka is a talker with a creed. See what he says about the world.
4. Compare Olenin with Lukashka as two ways of being a man.

Summaries are original to Classics Library. Read the Louise and Aylmer Maude translation (1916) (Project Gutenberg #4761), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-cossacks/.