

CHAPTER XIV

On November 1 Kutúzov had received, through a spy, news that the army he commanded was in an almost hopeless position. The spy reported that the French, after crossing the bridge at Vienna, were advancing in immense force upon Kutúzov's line of communication with the troops that were arriving from Russia. If Kutúzov decided to remain at Krems, Napoleon's army of one hundred and fifty thousand men would cut him off completely and surround his exhausted army of forty thousand, and he would find himself in the position of Mack at Ulm. If Kutúzov decided to abandon the road connecting him with the troops arriving from Russia, he would have to march with no road into unknown parts of the Bohemian mountains, defending himself against superior forces of the enemy and abandoning all hope of a junction with Buxhöwden. If Kutúzov decided to retreat along the road from Krems to Olmütz, to unite with the troops arriving from Russia, he risked being forestalled on that road by the French who had crossed the Vienna bridge, and encumbered by his baggage and transport, having to accept battle on the march against an enemy three times as strong, who would hem him in from two sides.

Kutúzov chose this latter course.

The French, the spy reported, having crossed the Vienna bridge, were advancing by forced marches toward Znaim, which lay sixty-six miles off on the line of Kutúzov's retreat. If he reached Znaim before the French, there would be great hope of saving the army; to let the French forestall him at Znaim meant the exposure of his whole army to a disgrace such as that of Ulm, or to utter destruction. But to forestall the French with his whole army was impossible. The road for the French from Vienna to Znaim was shorter and better than the road for the Russians from Krems to Znaim.

The night he received the news, Kutúzov sent Bagration's vanguard, four thousand strong, to the right across the hills from the Krems-Znaim to the Vienna-Znaim road. Bagration was to make this march without resting, and to halt facing Vienna with Znaim to his rear, and if he succeeded in forestalling the French he was to delay them as long as possible. Kutúzov himself with all his transport took the road to Znaim.

Marching thirty miles that stormy night across roadless hills, with his hungry, ill-shod soldiers, and losing a third of his men as stragglers by the way, Bagration came out on the Vienna-Znaim road at Hollabrünn a few hours ahead of the French who were approaching Hollabrünn from Vienna. Kutúzov with his transport had still to march for some days before he could reach Znaim. Hence Bagration with his four thousand hungry, exhausted men would have to detain for days the whole enemy army that came upon him at Hollabrünn, which was clearly impossible. But a freak of fate made the impossible possible. The success of the trick that had placed the Vienna bridge in the hands of the French without a fight led Murat to try to deceive Kutúzov in a similar way. Meeting Bagration's weak detachment on the Znaim road he supposed it to be Kutúzov's whole army. To be able to crush it absolutely he awaited

the arrival of the rest of the troops who were on their way from Vienna, and with this object offered a three days' truce on condition that both armies should remain in position without moving. Murat declared that negotiations for peace were already proceeding, and that he therefore offered this truce to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. Count Nostitz, the Austrian general occupying the advanced posts, believed Murat's emissary and retired, leaving Bagration's division exposed. Another emissary rode to the Russian line to announce the peace negotiations and to offer the Russian army the three days' truce. Bagration replied that he was not authorized either to accept or refuse a truce and sent his adjutant to Kutúzov to report the offer he had received.

A truce was Kutúzov's sole chance of gaining time, giving Bagration's exhausted troops some rest, and letting the transport and heavy convoys (whose movements were concealed from the French) advance if but one stage nearer Znaim. The offer of a truce gave the only, and a quite unexpected, chance of saving the army. On receiving the news he immediately dispatched Adjutant General Wintzingerode, who was in attendance on him, to the enemy camp. Wintzingerode was not merely to agree to the truce but also to offer terms of capitulation, and meanwhile Kutúzov sent his adjutants back to hasten to the utmost the movements of the baggage trains of the entire army along the Krems-Znaim road. Bagration's exhausted and hungry detachment, which alone covered this movement of the transport and of the whole army, had to remain stationary in face of an enemy eight times as strong as itself.

Kutúzov's expectations that the proposals of capitulation (which were in no way binding) might give time for part of the transport to pass, and also that Murat's mistake would very soon be discovered, proved correct. As soon as Bonaparte (who was at Schönbrunn, sixteen miles from Hollabrunn) received Murat's dispatch with the proposal of a truce and a capitulation, he detected a ruse and wrote the following letter to Murat:

Schönbrunn, 25th Brumaire, 1805,

at eight o'clock in the morning

To PRINCE MURAT,

I cannot find words to express to you my displeasure. You command only my advance guard, and have no right to arrange an armistice without my order. You are causing me to lose the fruits of a campaign. Break the armistice immediately and march on the enemy. Inform him that the general who signed that capitulation had no right to do so, and that no one but the Emperor of Russia has that right.

If, however, the Emperor of Russia ratifies that convention, I will ratify it; but it is only a trick. March on, destroy the Russian army.... You are in a position to seize its baggage and artillery.

The Russian Emperor's aide-de-camp is an impostor. Officers are nothing when they have no powers; this one had none.... The Austrians

let themselves be tricked at the crossing of the Vienna bridge, you are letting yourself be tricked by an aide-de-camp of the Emperor.

NAPOLEON

Bonaparte's adjutant rode full gallop with this menacing letter to Murat. Bonaparte himself, not trusting to his generals, moved with all the Guards to the field of battle, afraid of letting a ready victim escape, and Bagration's four thousand men merrily lighted campfires, dried and warmed themselves, cooked their porridge for the first time for three days, and not one of them knew or imagined what was in store for him.