

CHAPTER XVII

On our right flank commanded by Bagration, at nine o'clock the battle had not yet begun. Not wishing to agree to Dolgorúkov's demand to commence the action, and wishing to avert responsibility from himself, Prince Bagration proposed to Dolgorúkov to send to inquire of the commander in chief. Bagration knew that as the distance between the two flanks was more than six miles, even if the messenger were not killed (which he very likely would be), and found the commander in chief (which would be very difficult), he would not be able to get back before evening.

Bagration cast his large, expressionless, sleepy eyes round his suite, and the boyish face of Rostóv, breathless with excitement and hope, was the first to catch his eye. He sent him.

"And if I should meet His Majesty before I meet the commander in chief, your excellency?" said Rostóv, with his hand to his cap.

"You can give the message to His Majesty," said Dolgorúkov, hurriedly interrupting Bagration.

On being relieved from picket duty Rostóv had managed to get a few hours' sleep before morning and felt cheerful, bold, and resolute, with elasticity of movement, faith in his good fortune, and generally in that state of mind which makes everything seem possible, pleasant, and easy.

All his wishes were being fulfilled that morning: there was to be a general engagement in which he was taking part, more than that, he was orderly to the bravest general, and still more, he was going with a message to Kutúzov, perhaps even to the sovereign himself. The morning was bright, he had a good horse under him, and his heart was full of joy and happiness. On receiving the order he gave his horse the rein and galloped along the line. At first he rode along the line of Bagration's troops, which had not yet advanced into action but were standing motionless; then he came to the region occupied by Uvárov's cavalry and here he noticed a stir and signs of preparation for battle; having passed Uvárov's cavalry he clearly heard the sound of cannon and musketry ahead of him. The firing grew louder and louder.

In the fresh morning air were now heard, not two or three musket shots at irregular intervals as before, followed by one or two cannon shots, but a roll of volleys of musketry from the slopes of the hill before Pratzen, interrupted by such frequent reports of cannon that sometimes several of them were not separated from one another but merged into a general roar.

He could see puffs of musketry smoke that seemed to chase one another down the hillsides, and clouds of cannon smoke rolling, spreading, and mingling with one another. He could also, by the gleam of bayonets visible through the smoke, make out moving masses of infantry and narrow lines of artillery with green caissons.

Rostóv stopped his horse for a moment on a hillock to see what was going on, but strain his attention as he would he could not understand or make out anything of what was happening: there in the smoke men of some sort were moving about, in front and behind moved lines of troops; but why, whither, and who they were, it was impossible to make out. These sights and sounds had no depressing or intimidating effect on him; on the contrary, they stimulated his energy and determination.

“Go on! Go on! Give it them!” he mentally exclaimed at these sounds, and again proceeded to gallop along the line, penetrating farther and farther into the region where the army was already in action.

“How it will be there I don’t know, but all will be well!” thought Rostóv.

After passing some Austrian troops he noticed that the next part of the line (the Guards) was already in action.

“So much the better! I shall see it close,” he thought.

He was riding almost along the front line. A handful of men came galloping toward him. They were our Uhlans who with disordered ranks were returning from the attack. Rostóv got out of their way, involuntarily noticed that one of them was bleeding, and galloped on.

“That is no business of mine,” he thought. He had not ridden many hundred yards after that before he saw to his left, across the whole width of the field, an enormous mass of cavalry in brilliant white uniforms, mounted on black horses, trotting straight toward him and across his path. Rostóv put his horse to full gallop to get out of the way of these men, and he would have got clear had they continued at the same speed, but they kept increasing their pace, so that some of the horses were already galloping. Rostóv heard the thud of their hoofs and the jingle of their weapons and saw their horses, their figures, and even their faces, more and more distinctly. They were our Horse Guards, advancing to attack the French cavalry that was coming to meet them.

The Horse Guards were galloping, but still holding in their horses. Rostóv could already see their faces and heard the command: “Charge!” shouted by an officer who was urging his thoroughbred to full speed. Rostóv, fearing to be crushed or swept into the attack on the French, galloped along the front as hard as his horse could go, but still was not in time to avoid them.

The last of the Horse Guards, a huge pockmarked fellow, frowned angrily on seeing Rostóv before him, with whom he would inevitably collide. This Guardsman would certainly have bowled Rostóv and his Bedouin over (Rostóv felt himself quite tiny and weak compared to these gigantic men and horses) had it not occurred to Rostóv to flourish his whip before the eyes of the Guardsman’s horse. The heavy black horse, sixteen hands high, shied, throwing back its ears; but the pockmarked Guardsman drove his huge spurs in violently, and the horse, flourishing its tail and extending its neck, galloped on yet faster. Hardly had the Horse

Guards passed Rostóv before he heard them shout, “Hurrah!” and looking back saw that their foremost ranks were mixed up with some foreign cavalry with red epaulets, probably French. He could see nothing more, for immediately afterwards cannon began firing from somewhere and smoke enveloped everything.

At that moment, as the Horse Guards, having passed him, disappeared in the smoke, Rostóv hesitated whether to gallop after them or to go where he was sent. This was the brilliant charge of the Horse Guards that amazed the French themselves. Rostóv was horrified to hear later that of all that mass of huge and handsome men, of all those brilliant, rich youths, officers and cadets, who had galloped past him on their thousand-ruble horses, only eighteen were left after the charge.

“Why should I envy them? My chance is not lost, and maybe I shall see the Emperor immediately!” thought Rostóv and galloped on.

When he came level with the Foot Guards he noticed that about them and around them cannon balls were flying, of which he was aware not so much because he heard their sound as because he saw uneasiness on the soldiers’ faces and unnatural warlike solemnity on those of the officers.

Passing behind one of the lines of a regiment of Foot Guards he heard a voice calling him by name.

“Rostóv!”

“What?” he answered, not recognizing Borís.

“I say, we’ve been in the front line! Our regiment attacked!” said Borís with the happy smile seen on the faces of young men who have been under fire for the first time.

Rostóv stopped.

“Have you?” he said. “Well, how did it go?”

“We drove them back!” said Borís with animation, growing talkative. “Can you imagine it?” and he began describing how the Guards, having taken up their position and seeing troops before them, thought they were Austrians, and all at once discovered from the cannon balls discharged by those troops that they were themselves in the front line and had unexpectedly to go into action. Rostóv without hearing Borís to the end spurred his horse.

“Where are you off to?” asked Borís.

“With a message to His Majesty.”

“There he is!” said Borís, thinking Rostóv had said “His Highness,” and pointing to the Grand Duke who with his high shoulders and frowning brows stood a hundred paces away from them in his helmet and Horse Guards’ jacket, shouting something to a pale, white

uniformed Austrian officer.

“But that’s the Grand Duke, and I want the commander in chief or the Emperor,” said Rostóv, and was about to spur his horse.

“Count! Count!” shouted Berg who ran up from the other side as eager as Borís. “Count! I am wounded in my right hand” (and he showed his bleeding hand with a handkerchief tied round it) “and I remained at the front. I held my sword in my left hand, Count. All our family—the von Bergs—have been knights!”

He said something more, but Rostóv did not wait to hear it and rode away.

Having passed the Guards and traversed an empty space, Rostóv, to avoid again getting in front of the first line as he had done when the Horse Guards charged, followed the line of reserves, going far round the place where the hottest musket fire and cannonade were heard. Suddenly he heard musket fire quite close in front of him and behind our troops, where he could never have expected the enemy to be.

“What can it be?” he thought. “The enemy in the rear of our army? Impossible!” And suddenly he was seized by a panic of fear for himself and for the issue of the whole battle. “But be that what it may,” he reflected, “there is no riding round it now. I must look for the commander in chief here, and if all is lost it is for me to perish with the rest.”

The foreboding of evil that had suddenly come over Rostóv was more and more confirmed the farther he rode into the region behind the village of Pratzen, which was full of troops of all kinds.

“What does it mean? What is it? Whom are they firing at? Who is firing?” Rostóv kept asking as he came up to Russian and Austrian soldiers running in confused crowds across his path.

“The devil knows! They’ve killed everybody! It’s all up now!” he was told in Russian, German, and Czech by the crowd of fugitives who understood what was happening as little as he did.

“Kill the Germans!” shouted one.

“May the devil take them—the traitors!”

“Zum Henker diese Russen!” * muttered a German.

* “Hang these Russians!”

Several wounded men passed along the road, and words of abuse, screams, and groans mingled in a general hubbub, then the firing died down. Rostóv learned later that Russian and Austrian soldiers had been firing at one another.

“My God! What does it all mean?” thought he. “And here, where at any moment the Emperor may see them.... But no, these must be only a handful of scoundrels. It will soon be over, it can’t be that, it can’t be! Only to get past them quicker, quicker!”

The idea of defeat and flight could not enter Rostóv’s head. Though he saw French cannon and French troops on the Pratzen Heights just where he had been ordered to look for the commander in chief, he could not, did not wish to, believe that.