

CHAPTER IX

Bilíbin was now at army headquarters in a diplomatic capacity, and though he wrote in French and used French jests and French idioms, he described the whole campaign with a fearless self-censure and self-derision genuinely Russian. Bilíbin wrote that the obligation of diplomatic discretion tormented him, and he was happy to have in Prince Andrew a reliable correspondent to whom he could pour out the bile he had accumulated at the sight of all that was being done in the army. The letter was old, having been written before the battle at Preussisch-Eylau.

“Since the day of our brilliant success at Austerlitz,” wrote Bilíbin, “as you know, my dear prince, I never leave headquarters. I have certainly acquired a taste for war, and it is just as well for me; what I have seen during these last three months is incredible.

“I begin ab ovo. ‘The enemy of the human race,’ as you know, attacks the Prussians. The Prussians are our faithful allies who have only betrayed us three times in three years. We take up their cause, but it turns out that ‘the enemy of the human race’ pays no heed to our fine speeches and in his rude and savage way throws himself on the Prussians without giving them time to finish the parade they had begun, and in two twists of the hand he breaks them to smithereens and installs himself in the palace at Potsdam.

“‘I most ardently desire,’ writes the King of Prussia to Bonaparte, ‘that Your Majesty should be received and treated in my palace in a manner agreeable to yourself, and in so far as circumstances allowed, I have hastened to take all steps to that end. May I have succeeded!’ The Prussian generals pride themselves on being polite to the French and lay down their arms at the first demand.

“The head of the garrison at Glogau, with ten thousand men, asks the King of Prussia what he is to do if he is summoned to surrender.... All this is absolutely true.

“In short, hoping to settle matters by taking up a warlike attitude, it turns out that we have landed ourselves in war, and what is more, in war on our own frontiers, with and for the King of Prussia. We have everything in perfect order, only one little thing is lacking, namely, a commander in chief. As it was considered that the Austerlitz success might have been more decisive had the commander in chief not been so young, all our octogenarians were reviewed, and of Prozoróvski and Kámenski the latter was preferred. The general comes to us, Suvórov-like, in a kibítka, and is received with acclamations of joy and triumph.

“On the 4th, the first courier arrives from Petersburg. The mails are taken to the field marshal’s room, for he likes to do everything himself. I am called in to help sort the letters and take those meant for us. The field marshal looks on and waits for letters addressed to him. We search, but none are to be found. The field marshal grows

impatient and sets to work himself and finds letters from the Emperor to Count T., Prince V., and others. Then he bursts into one of his wild furies and rages at everyone and everything, seizes the letters, opens them, and reads those from the Emperor addressed to others. 'Ah! So that's the way they treat me! No confidence in me! Ah, ordered to keep an eye on me! Very well then! Get along with you!' So he writes the famous order of the day to General Bennigsen:

"I am wounded and cannot ride and consequently cannot command the army. You have brought your army corps to Pultusk, routed: here it is exposed, and without fuel or forage, so something must be done, and, as you yourself reported to Count Buxhöwden yesterday, you must think of retreating to our frontier—which do today.'

"From all my riding,' he writes to the Emperor, 'I have got a saddle sore which, coming after all my previous journeys, quite prevents my riding and commanding so vast an army, so I have passed on the command to the general next in seniority, Count Buxhöwden, having sent him my whole staff and all that belongs to it, advising him if there is a lack of bread, to move farther into the interior of Prussia, for only one day's ration of bread remains, and in some regiments none at all, as reported by the division commanders, Ostermann and Sedmorétzki, and all that the peasants had has been eaten up. I myself will remain in hospital at Ostrolenka till I recover. In regard to which I humbly submit my report, with the information that if the army remains in its present bivouac another fortnight there will not be a healthy man left in it by spring.

"Grant leave to retire to his country seat to an old man who is already in any case dishonored by being unable to fulfill the great and glorious task for which he was chosen. I shall await your most gracious permission here in hospital, that I may not have to play the part of a secretary rather than commander in the army. My removal from the army does not produce the slightest stir—a blind man has left it. There are thousands such as I in Russia.'

"The field marshal is angry with the Emperor and he punishes us all, isn't it logical?

"This is the first act. Those that follow are naturally increasingly interesting and entertaining. After the field marshal's departure it appears that we are within sight of the enemy and must give battle. Buxhöwden is commander in chief by seniority, but General Bennigsen does not quite see it; more particularly as it is he and his corps who are within sight of the enemy and he wishes to profit by the opportunity to fight a battle 'on his own hand' as the Germans say. He does so. This is the battle of Pultusk, which is considered a great victory but in my opinion was nothing of the kind. We civilians, as you know, have a very bad way of deciding whether a battle was won or lost. Those who retreat after a battle have lost it is what we say; and according to that it is we who lost the battle of Pultusk. In short, we retreat after the battle but send a courier to Petersburg with news of a victory, and General Bennigsen, hoping to receive from Petersburg the post of commander in chief as a reward for his victory, does not give up

the command of the army to General Buxhöwden. During this interregnum we begin a very original and interesting series of maneuvers. Our aim is no longer, as it should be, to avoid or attack the enemy, but solely to avoid General Buxhöwden who by right of seniority should be our chief. So energetically do we pursue this aim that after crossing an unfordable river we burn the bridges to separate ourselves from our enemy, who at the moment is not Bonaparte but Buxhöwden. General Buxhöwden was all but attacked and captured by a superior enemy force as a result of one of these maneuvers that enabled us to escape him. Buxhöwden pursues us—we scuttle. He hardly crosses the river to our side before we recross to the other. At last our enemy, Buxhöwden, catches us and attacks. Both generals are angry, and the result is a challenge on Buxhöwden's part and an epileptic fit on Bennigsen's. But at the critical moment the courier who carried the news of our victory at Pultusk to Petersburg returns bringing our appointment as commander in chief, and our first foe, Buxhöwden, is vanquished; we can now turn our thoughts to the second, Bonaparte. But as it turns out, just at that moment a third enemy rises before us—namely the Orthodox Russian soldiers, loudly demanding bread, meat, biscuits, fodder, and whatnot! The stores are empty, the roads impassable. The Orthodox begin looting, and in a way of which our last campaign can give you no idea. Half the regiments form bands and scour the countryside and put everything to fire and sword. The inhabitants are totally ruined, the hospitals overflow with sick, and famine is everywhere. Twice the marauders even attack our headquarters, and the commander in chief has to ask for a battalion to disperse them. During one of these attacks they carried off my empty portmanteau and my dressing gown. The Emperor proposes to give all commanders of divisions the right to shoot marauders, but I much fear this will oblige one half the army to shoot the other.”

At first Prince Andrew read with his eyes only, but after a while, in spite of himself (although he knew how far it was safe to trust Bilíbin), what he had read began to interest him more and more. When he had read thus far, he crumpled the letter up and threw it away. It was not what he had read that vexed him, but the fact that the life out there in which he had now no part could perturb him. He shut his eyes, rubbed his forehead as if to rid himself of all interest in what he had read, and listened to what was passing in the nursery. Suddenly he thought he heard a strange noise through the door. He was seized with alarm lest something should have happened to the child while he was reading the letter. He went on tiptoe to the nursery door and opened it.

Just as he went in he saw that the nurse was hiding something from him with a scared look and that Princess Mary was no longer by the cot.

“My dear,” he heard what seemed to him her despairing whisper behind him.

As often happens after long sleeplessness and long anxiety, he was seized by an unreasoning panic—it occurred to him that the child was dead. All that he saw and heard seemed to confirm this terror.

“All is over,” he thought, and a cold sweat broke out on his forehead. He went to the cot in confusion, sure that he would find it

empty and that the nurse had been hiding the dead baby. He drew the curtain aside and for some time his frightened, restless eyes could not find the baby. At last he saw him: the rosy boy had tossed about till he lay across the bed with his head lower than the pillow, and was smacking his lips in his sleep and breathing evenly.

Prince Andrew was as glad to find the boy like that, as if he had already lost him. He bent over him and, as his sister had taught him, tried with his lips whether the child was still feverish. The soft forehead was moist. Prince Andrew touched the head with his hand; even the hair was wet, so profusely had the child perspired. He was not dead, but evidently the crisis was over and he was convalescent. Prince Andrew longed to snatch up, to squeeze, to hold to his heart, this helpless little creature, but dared not do so. He stood over him, gazing at his head and at the little arms and legs which showed under the blanket. He heard a rustle behind him and a shadow appeared under the curtain of the cot. He did not look round, but still gazing at the infant's face listened to his regular breathing. The dark shadow was Princess Mary, who had come up to the cot with noiseless steps, lifted the curtain, and dropped it again behind her. Prince Andrew recognized her without looking and held out his hand to her. She pressed it.

“He has perspired,” said Prince Andrew.

“I was coming to tell you so.”

The child moved slightly in his sleep, smiled, and rubbed his forehead against the pillow.

Prince Andrew looked at his sister. In the dim shadow of the curtain her luminous eyes shone more brightly than usual from the tears of joy that were in them. She leaned over to her brother and kissed him, slightly catching the curtain of the cot. Each made the other a warning gesture and stood still in the dim light beneath the curtain as if not wishing to leave that seclusion where they three were shut off from all the world. Prince Andrew was the first to move away, ruffling his hair against the muslin of the curtain.

“Yes, this is the one thing left me now,” he said with a sigh.