

### CHAPTER III

The Emperor of Russia had, meanwhile, been in Vílna for more than a month, reviewing troops and holding maneuvers. Nothing was ready for the war that everyone expected and to prepare for which the Emperor had come from Petersburg. There was no general plan of action. The vacillation between the various plans that were proposed had even increased after the Emperor had been at headquarters for a month. Each of the three armies had its own commander in chief, but there was no supreme commander of all the forces, and the Emperor did not assume that responsibility himself.

The longer the Emperor remained in Vílna the less did everybody—tired of waiting—prepare for the war. All the efforts of those who surrounded the sovereign seemed directed merely to making him spend his time pleasantly and forget that war was impending.

In June, after many balls and fetes given by the Polish magnates, by the courtiers, and by the Emperor himself, it occurred to one of the Polish aides-de-camp in attendance that a dinner and ball should be given for the Emperor by his aides-de-camp. This idea was eagerly received. The Emperor gave his consent. The aides-de-camp collected money by subscription. The lady who was thought to be most pleasing to the Emperor was invited to act as hostess. Count Bennigsen, being a landowner in the Vílna province, offered his country house for the fete, and the thirteenth of June was fixed for a ball, dinner, regatta, and fireworks at Zakret, Count Bennigsen's country seat.

The very day that Napoleon issued the order to cross the Niemen, and his vanguard, driving off the Cossacks, crossed the Russian frontier, Alexander spent the evening at the entertainment given by his aides-de-camp at Bennigsen's country house.

It was a gay and brilliant fete. Connoisseurs of such matters declared that rarely had so many beautiful women been assembled in one place. Countess Bezúkhova was present among other Russian ladies who had followed the sovereign from Petersburg to Vílna and eclipsed the refined Polish ladies by her massive, so-called Russian type of beauty. The Emperor noticed her and honored her with a dance.

Borís Drubetskóy, having left his wife in Moscow and being for the present en garçon (as he phrased it), was also there and, though not an aide-de-camp, had subscribed a large sum toward the expenses. Borís was now a rich man who had risen to high honors and no longer sought patronage but stood on an equal footing with the highest of those of his own age. He was meeting Héléne in Vílna after not having seen her for a long time and did not recall the past, but as Héléne was enjoying the favors of a very important personage and Borís had only recently married, they met as good friends of long standing.

At midnight dancing was still going on. Héléne, not having a suitable partner, herself offered to dance the mazurka with Borís. They were the third couple. Borís, coolly looking at Héléne's dazzling bare shoulders

which emerged from a dark, gold-embroidered, gauze gown, talked to her of old acquaintances and at the same time, unaware of it himself and unnoticed by others, never for an instant ceased to observe the Emperor who was in the same room. The Emperor was not dancing, he stood in the doorway, stopping now one pair and now another with gracious words which he alone knew how to utter.

As the mazurka began, Borís saw that Adjutant General Balashëv, one of those in closest attendance on the Emperor, went up to him and contrary to court etiquette stood near him while he was talking to a Polish lady. Having finished speaking to her, the Emperor looked inquiringly at Balashëv and, evidently understanding that he only acted thus because there were important reasons for so doing, nodded slightly to the lady and turned to him. Hardly had Balashëv begun to speak before a look of amazement appeared on the Emperor's face. He took Balashëv by the arm and crossed the room with him, unconsciously clearing a path seven yards wide as the people on both sides made way for him. Borís noticed Arakchéev's excited face when the sovereign went out with Balashëv. Arakchéev looked at the Emperor from under his brow and, sniffing with his red nose, stepped forward from the crowd as if expecting the Emperor to address him. (Borís understood that Arakchéev envied Balashëv and was displeased that evidently important news had reached the Emperor otherwise than through himself.)

But the Emperor and Balashëv passed out into the illuminated garden without noticing Arakchéev who, holding his sword and glancing wrathfully around, followed some twenty paces behind them.

All the time Borís was going through the figures of the mazurka, he was worried by the question of what news Balashëv had brought and how he could find it out before others. In the figure in which he had to choose two ladies, he whispered to Hélène that he meant to choose Countess Potocka who, he thought, had gone out onto the veranda, and glided over the parquet to the door opening into the garden, where, seeing Balashëv and the Emperor returning to the veranda, he stood still. They were moving toward the door. Borís, fluttering as if he had not had time to withdraw, respectfully pressed close to the doorpost with bowed head.

The Emperor, with the agitation of one who has been personally affronted, was finishing with these words:

“To enter Russia without declaring war! I will not make peace as long as a single armed enemy remains in my country!” It seemed to Borís that it gave the Emperor pleasure to utter these words. He was satisfied with the form in which he had expressed his thoughts, but displeased that Borís had overheard it.

“Let no one know of it!” the Emperor added with a frown.

Borís understood that this was meant for him and, closing his eyes, slightly bowed his head. The Emperor re-entered the ballroom and remained there about another half-hour.

Borís was thus the first to learn the news that the French army had

crossed the Niemen and, thanks to this, was able to show certain important personages that much that was concealed from others was usually known to him, and by this means he rose higher in their estimation.

The unexpected news of the French having crossed the Niemen was particularly startling after a month of unfulfilled expectations, and at a ball. On first receiving the news, under the influence of indignation and resentment the Emperor had found a phrase that pleased him, fully expressed his feelings, and has since become famous. On returning home at two o'clock that night he sent for his secretary, Shishkóv, and told him to write an order to the troops and a rescript to Field Marshal Prince Saltykóv, in which he insisted on the words being inserted that he would not make peace so long as a single armed Frenchman remained on Russian soil.

Next day the following letter was sent to Napoleon:

Monsieur mon frère,

Yesterday I learned that, despite the loyalty with which I have kept my engagements with Your Majesty, your troops have crossed the Russian frontier, and I have this moment received from Petersburg a note, in which Count Lauriston informs me, as a reason for this aggression, that Your Majesty has considered yourself to be in a state of war with me from the time Prince Kurákin asked for his passports. The reasons on which the Duc de Bassano based his refusal to deliver them to him would never have led me to suppose that that could serve as a pretext for aggression. In fact, the ambassador, as he himself has declared, was never authorized to make that demand, and as soon as I was informed of it I let him know how much I disapproved of it and ordered him to remain at his post. If Your Majesty does not intend to shed the blood of our peoples for such a misunderstanding, and consents to withdraw your troops from Russian territory, I will regard what has passed as not having occurred and an understanding between us will be possible. In the contrary case, Your Majesty, I shall see myself forced to repel an attack that nothing on my part has provoked. It still depends on Your Majesty to preserve humanity from the calamity of another war.

I am, etc.,

(signed) Alexander