

CHAPTER V

Davout was to Napoleon what Arakchéev was to Alexander—though not a coward like Arakchéev, he was as precise, as cruel, and as unable to express his devotion to his monarch except by cruelty.

In the organism of states such men are necessary, as wolves are necessary in the organism of nature, and they always exist, always appear and hold their own, however incongruous their presence and their proximity to the head of the government may be. This inevitability alone can explain how the cruel Arakchéev, who tore out a grenadier's mustache with his own hands, whose weak nerves rendered him unable to face danger, and who was neither an educated man nor a courtier, was able to maintain his powerful position with Alexander, whose own character was chivalrous, noble, and gentle.

Balashëv found Davout seated on a barrel in the shed of a peasant's hut, writing—he was auditing accounts. Better quarters could have been found him, but Marshal Davout was one of those men who purposely put themselves in most depressing conditions to have a justification for being gloomy. For the same reason they are always hard at work and in a hurry. “How can I think of the bright side of life when, as you see, I am sitting on a barrel and working in a dirty shed?” the expression of his face seemed to say. The chief pleasure and necessity of such men, when they encounter anyone who shows animation, is to flaunt their own dreary, persistent activity. Davout allowed himself that pleasure when Balashëv was brought in. He became still more absorbed in his task when the Russian general entered, and after glancing over his spectacles at Balashëv's face, which was animated by the beauty of the morning and by his talk with Murat, he did not rise or even stir, but scowled still more and sneered malevolently.

When he noticed in Balashëv's face the disagreeable impression this reception produced, Davout raised his head and coldly asked what he wanted.

Thinking he could have been received in such a manner only because Davout did not know that he was adjutant general to the Emperor Alexander and even his envoy to Napoleon, Balashëv hastened to inform him of his rank and mission. Contrary to his expectation, Davout, after hearing him, became still surlier and ruder.

“Where is your dispatch?” he inquired. “Give it to me. I will send it to the Emperor.”

Balashëv replied that he had been ordered to hand it personally to the Emperor.

“Your Emperor's orders are obeyed in your army, but here,” said Davout, “you must do as you're told.”

And, as if to make the Russian general still more conscious of his dependence on brute force, Davout sent an adjutant to call the officer

on duty.

Balashëv took out the packet containing the Emperor's letter and laid it on the table (made of a door with its hinges still hanging on it, laid across two barrels). Davout took the packet and read the inscription.

"You are perfectly at liberty to treat me with respect or not," protested Balashëv, "but permit me to observe that I have the honor to be adjutant general to His Majesty...."

Davout glanced at him silently and plainly derived pleasure from the signs of agitation and confusion which appeared on Balashëv's face.

"You will be treated as is fitting," said he and, putting the packet in his pocket, left the shed.

A minute later the marshal's adjutant, de Castrès, came in and conducted Balashëv to the quarters assigned him.

That day he dined with the marshal, at the same board on the barrels.

Next day Davout rode out early and, after asking Balashëv to come to him, peremptorily requested him to remain there, to move on with the baggage train should orders come for it to move, and to talk to no one except Monsieur de Castrès.

After four days of solitude, ennui, and consciousness of his impotence and insignificance—particularly acute by contrast with the sphere of power in which he had so lately moved—and after several marches with the marshal's baggage and the French army, which occupied the whole district, Balashëv was brought to Vîlna—now occupied by the French—through the very gate by which he had left it four days previously.

Next day the imperial gentleman-in-waiting, the Comte de Turenne, came to Balashëv and informed him of the Emperor Napoleon's wish to honor him with an audience.

Four days before, sentinels of the Preobrazhénsk regiment had stood in front of the house to which Balashëv was conducted, and now two French grenadiers stood there in blue uniforms unfastened in front and with shaggy caps on their heads, and an escort of hussars and Uhlans and a brilliant suite of aides-de-camp, pages, and generals, who were waiting for Napoleon to come out, were standing at the porch, round his saddle horse and his Mameluke, Rustan. Napoleon received Balashëv in the very house in Vîlna from which Alexander had dispatched him on his mission.