

## CHAPTER VII

After all that Napoleon had said to him—those bursts of anger and the last dryly spoken words: “I will detain you no longer, General; you shall receive my letter,” Balashëv felt convinced that Napoleon would not wish to see him, and would even avoid another meeting with him—an insulted envoy—especially as he had witnessed his unseemly anger. But, to his surprise, Balashëv received, through Duroc, an invitation to dine with the Emperor that day.

Bessières, Caulaincourt, and Berthier were present at that dinner.

Napoleon met Balashëv cheerfully and amiably. He not only showed no sign of constraint or self-reproach on account of his outburst that morning, but, on the contrary, tried to reassure Balashëv. It was evident that he had long been convinced that it was impossible for him to make a mistake, and that in his perception whatever he did was right, not because it harmonized with any idea of right and wrong, but because he did it.

The Emperor was in very good spirits after his ride through Vîlna, where crowds of people had rapturously greeted and followed him. From all the windows of the streets through which he rode, rugs, flags, and his monogram were displayed, and the Polish ladies, welcoming him, waved their handkerchiefs to him.

At dinner, having placed Balashëv beside him, Napoleon not only treated him amiably but behaved as if Balashëv were one of his own courtiers, one of those who sympathized with his plans and ought to rejoice at his success. In the course of conversation he mentioned Moscow and questioned Balashëv about the Russian capital, not merely as an interested traveler asks about a new city he intends to visit, but as if convinced that Balashëv, as a Russian, must be flattered by his curiosity.

“How many inhabitants are there in Moscow? How many houses? Is it true that Moscow is called ‘Holy Moscow’? How many churches are there in Moscow?” he asked.

And receiving the reply that there were more than two hundred churches, he remarked:

“Why such a quantity of churches?”

“The Russians are very devout,” replied Balashëv.

“But a large number of monasteries and churches is always a sign of the backwardness of a people,” said Napoleon, turning to Caulaincourt for appreciation of this remark.

Balashëv respectfully ventured to disagree with the French Emperor.

“Every country has its own character,” said he.

“But nowhere in Europe is there anything like that,” said Napoleon.

“I beg your Majesty’s pardon,” returned Balashëv, “besides Russia there is Spain, where there are also many churches and monasteries.”

This reply of Balashëv’s, which hinted at the recent defeats of the French in Spain, was much appreciated when he related it at Alexander’s court, but it was not much appreciated at Napoleon’s dinner, where it passed unnoticed.

The uninterested and perplexed faces of the marshals showed that they were puzzled as to what Balashëv’s tone suggested. “If there is a point we don’t see it, or it is not at all witty,” their expressions seemed to say. So little was his rejoinder appreciated that Napoleon did not notice it at all and naïvely asked Balashëv through what towns the direct road from there to Moscow passed. Balashëv, who was on the alert all through the dinner, replied that just as “all roads lead to Rome,” so all roads lead to Moscow: there were many roads, and “among them the road through Poltáva, which Charles XII chose.” Balashëv involuntarily flushed with pleasure at the aptitude of this reply, but hardly had he uttered the word Poltáva before Caulaincourt began speaking of the badness of the road from Petersburg to Moscow and of his Petersburg reminiscences.

After dinner they went to drink coffee in Napoleon’s study, which four days previously had been that of the Emperor Alexander. Napoleon sat down, toying with his Sèvres coffee cup, and motioned Balashëv to a chair beside him.

Napoleon was in that well-known after-dinner mood which, more than any reasoned cause, makes a man contented with himself and disposed to consider everyone his friend. It seemed to him that he was surrounded by men who adored him: and he felt convinced that, after his dinner, Balashëv too was his friend and worshiper. Napoleon turned to him with a pleasant, though slightly ironic, smile.

“They tell me this is the room the Emperor Alexander occupied? Strange, isn’t it, General?” he said, evidently not doubting that this remark would be agreeable to his hearer since it went to prove his, Napoleon’s, superiority to Alexander.

Balashëv made no reply and bowed his head in silence.

“Yes. Four days ago in this room, Wintzingerode and Stein were deliberating,” continued Napoleon with the same derisive and self-confident smile. “What I can’t understand,” he went on, “is that the Emperor Alexander has surrounded himself with my personal enemies. That I do not... understand. Has he not thought that I may do the same?” and he turned inquiringly to Balashëv, and evidently this thought turned him back on to the track of his morning’s anger, which was still fresh in him.

“And let him know that I will do so!” said Napoleon, rising and pushing

his cup away with his hand. "I'll drive all his Württemberg, Baden, and Weimar relations out of Germany.... Yes. I'll drive them out. Let him prepare an asylum for them in Russia!"

Balashëv bowed his head with an air indicating that he would like to make his bow and leave, and only listened because he could not help hearing what was said to him. Napoleon did not notice this expression; he treated Balashëv not as an envoy from his enemy, but as a man now fully devoted to him and who must rejoice at his former master's humiliation.

"And why has the Emperor Alexander taken command of the armies? What is the good of that? War is my profession, but his business is to reign and not to command armies! Why has he taken on himself such a responsibility?"

Again Napoleon brought out his snuffbox, paced several times up and down the room in silence, and then, suddenly and unexpectedly, went up to Balashëv and with a slight smile, as confidently, quickly, and simply as if he were doing something not merely important but pleasing to Balashëv, he raised his hand to the forty-year-old Russian general's face and, taking him by the ear, pulled it gently, smiling with his lips only.

To have one's ear pulled by the Emperor was considered the greatest honor and mark of favor at the French court.

"Well, adorer and courtier of the Emperor Alexander, why don't you say anything?" said he, as if it was ridiculous, in his presence, to be the adorer and courtier of anyone but himself, Napoleon. "Are the horses ready for the general?" he added, with a slight inclination of his head in reply to Balashëv's bow. "Let him have mine, he has a long way to go!"

The letter taken by Balashëv was the last Napoleon sent to Alexander. Every detail of the interview was communicated to the Russian monarch, and the war began....