CHAPTER VII

While this was taking place in Petersburg the French had already passed Smolénsk and were drawing nearer and nearer to Moscow. Napoleon's historian Thiers, like other of his historians, trying to justify his hero says that he was drawn to the walls of Moscow against his will. He is as right as other historians who look for the explanation of historic events in the will of one man; he is as right as the Russian historians who maintain that Napoleon was drawn to Moscow by the skill of the Russian commanders. Here besides the law of retrospection, which regards all the past as a preparation for events that subsequently occur, the law of reciprocity comes in, confusing the whole matter. A good chessplayer having lost a game is sincerely convinced that his loss resulted from a mistake he made and looks for that mistake in the opening, but forgets that at each stage of the game there were similar mistakes and that none of his moves were perfect. He only notices the mistake to which he pays attention, because his opponent took advantage of it. How much more complex than this is the game of war, which occurs under certain limits of time, and where it is not one will that manipulates lifeless objects, but everything results from innumerable conflicts of various wills!

After Smolénsk Napoleon sought a battle beyond Dorogobúzh at Vyázma, and then at Tsárevo-Zaymíshche, but it happened that owing to a conjunction of innumerable circumstances the Russians could not give battle till they reached Borodinó, seventy miles from Moscow. From Vyázma Napoleon ordered a direct advance on Moscow.

Moscou, la capitale asiatique de ce grand empire, la ville sacrée des peuples d'Alexandre, Moscou avec ses innombrables églises en forme de pagodes chinoises, * this Moscow gave Napoleon's imagination no rest. On the march from Vyázma to Tsárevo-Zaymíshche he rode his light bay bobtailed ambler accompanied by his Guards, his bodyguard, his pages, and aides-de-camp. Berthier, his chief of staff, dropped behind to question a Russian prisoner captured by the cavalry. Followed by Lelorgne d'Ideville, an interpreter, he overtook Napoleon at a gallop and reined in his horse with an amused expression.

> * "Moscow, the Asiatic capital of this great empire, the sacred city of Alexander's people, Moscow with its innumerable churches shaped like Chinese pagodas."

"Well?" asked Napoleon.

"One of Plátov's Cossacks says that Plátov's corps is joining up with the main army and that Kutúzov has been appointed commander in chief. He is a very shrewd and garrulous fellow."

Napoleon smiled and told them to give the Cossack a horse and bring the man to him. He wished to talk to him himself. Several adjutants galloped off, and an hour later, Lavrúshka, the serf Denísov had handed over to Rostóv, rode up to Napoleon in an orderly's jacket and on a French

cavalry saddle, with a merry, and tipsy face. Napoleon told him to ride by his side and began questioning him.

“You are a Cossack?”

“Yes, a Cossack, your Honor.”

“The Cossack, not knowing in what company he was, for Napoleon’s plain appearance had nothing about it that would reveal to an Oriental mind the presence of a monarch, talked with extreme familiarity of the incidents of the war,” says Thiers, narrating this episode. In reality Lavrúshka, having got drunk the day before and left his master dinnerless, had been whipped and sent to the village in quest of chickens, where he engaged in looting till the French took him prisoner. Lavrúshka was one of those coarse, bare-faced lackeys who have seen all sorts of things, consider it necessary to do everything in a mean and cunning way, are ready to render any sort of service to their master, and are keen at guessing their master’s baser impulses, especially those prompted by vanity and pettiness.

Finding himself in the company of Napoleon, whose identity he had easily and surely recognized, Lavrúshka was not in the least abashed but merely did his utmost to gain his new master’s favor.

He knew very well that this was Napoleon, but Napoleon’s presence could no more intimidate him than Rostóv’s, or a sergeant major’s with the rods, would have done, for he had nothing that either the sergeant major or Napoleon could deprive him of.

So he rattled on, telling all the gossip he had heard among the orderlies. Much of it true. But when Napoleon asked him whether the Russians thought they would beat Bonaparte or not, Lavrúshka screwed up his eyes and considered.

In this question he saw subtle cunning, as men of his type see cunning in everything, so he frowned and did not answer immediately.

“It’s like this,” he said thoughtfully, “if there’s a battle soon, yours will win. That’s right. But if three days pass, then after that, well, then that same battle will not soon be over.”

Lelorgne d’Ideville smilingly interpreted this speech to Napoleon thus: “If a battle takes place within the next three days the French will win, but if later, God knows what will happen.” Napoleon did not smile, though he was evidently in high good humor, and he ordered these words to be repeated.

Lavrúshka noticed this and to entertain him further, pretending not to know who Napoleon was, added:

“We know that you have Bonaparte and that he has beaten everybody in the world, but we are a different matter...”—without knowing why or how this bit of boastful patriotism slipped out at the end.

The interpreter translated these words without the last phrase, and Bonaparte smiled. “The young Cossack made his mighty interlocutor smile,” says Thiers. After riding a few paces in silence, Napoleon turned to Berthier and said he wished to see how the news that he was talking to the Emperor himself, to that very Emperor who had written his immortally victorious name on the Pyramids, would affect this enfant du Don. *

* “Child of the Don.”

The fact was accordingly conveyed to Lavrúshka.

Lavrúshka, understanding that this was done to perplex him and that Napoleon expected him to be frightened, to gratify his new masters promptly pretended to be astonished and awe-struck, opened his eyes wide, and assumed the expression he usually put on when taken to be whipped. “As soon as Napoleon’s interpreter had spoken,” says Thiers, “the Cossack, seized by amazement, did not utter another word, but rode on, his eyes fixed on the conqueror whose fame had reached him across the steppes of the East. All his loquacity was suddenly arrested and replaced by a naïve and silent feeling of admiration. Napoleon, after making the Cossack a present, had him set free like a bird restored to its native fields.”

Napoleon rode on, dreaming of the Moscow that so appealed to his imagination, and “the bird restored to its native fields” galloped to our outposts, inventing on the way all that had not taken place but that he meant to relate to his comrades. What had really taken place he did not wish to relate because it seemed to him not worth telling. He found the Cossacks, inquired for the regiment operating with Plátov’s detachment and by evening found his master, Nicholas Rostóv, quartered at Yankóvo. Rostóv was just mounting to go for a ride round the neighboring villages with Ilyín; he let Lavrúshka have another horse and took him along with him.