

CHAPTER XX

On the morning of the twenty-fifth Pierre was leaving Mozháysk. At the descent of the high steep hill, down which a winding road led out of the town past the cathedral on the right, where a service was being held and the bells were ringing, Pierre got out of his vehicle and proceeded on foot. Behind him a cavalry regiment was coming down the hill preceded by its singers. Coming up toward him was a train of carts carrying men who had been wounded in the engagement the day before. The peasant drivers, shouting and lashing their horses, kept crossing from side to side. The carts, in each of which three or four wounded soldiers were lying or sitting, jolted over the stones that had been thrown on the steep incline to make it something like a road. The wounded, bandaged with rags, with pale cheeks, compressed lips, and knitted brows, held on to the sides of the carts as they were jolted against one another. Almost all of them stared with naïve, childlike curiosity at Pierre's white hat and green swallow-tail coat.

Pierre's coachman shouted angrily at the convoy of wounded to keep to one side of the road. The cavalry regiment, as it descended the hill with its singers, surrounded Pierre's carriage and blocked the road. Pierre stopped, being pressed against the side of the cutting in which the road ran. The sunshine from behind the hill did not penetrate into the cutting and there it was cold and damp, but above Pierre's head was the bright August sunshine and the bells sounded merrily. One of the carts with wounded stopped by the side of the road close to Pierre. The driver in his bast shoes ran panting up to it, placed a stone under one of its tireless hind wheels, and began arranging the breech-band on his little horse.

One of the wounded, an old soldier with a bandaged arm who was following the cart on foot, caught hold of it with his sound hand and turned to look at Pierre.

"I say, fellow countryman! Will they set us down here or take us on to Moscow?" he asked.

Pierre was so deep in thought that he did not hear the question. He was looking now at the cavalry regiment that had met the convoy of wounded, now at the cart by which he was standing, in which two wounded men were sitting and one was lying. One of those sitting up in the cart had probably been wounded in the cheek. His whole head was wrapped in rags and one cheek was swollen to the size of a baby's head. His nose and mouth were twisted to one side. This soldier was looking at the cathedral and crossing himself. Another, a young lad, a fair-haired recruit as white as though there was no blood in his thin face, looked at Pierre kindly, with a fixed smile. The third lay prone so that his face was not visible. The cavalry singers were passing close by:

Ah lost, quite lost... is my head so keen,
Living in a foreign land...

they sang their soldiers' dance song.

As if responding to them but with a different sort of merriment, the metallic sound of the bells reverberated high above and the hot rays of the sun bathed the top of the opposite slope with yet another sort of merriment. But beneath the slope, by the cart with the wounded near the panting little nag where Pierre stood, it was damp, somber, and sad.

The soldier with the swollen cheek looked angrily at the cavalry singers.

“Oh, the coxcombs!” he muttered reproachfully.

“It’s not the soldiers only, but I’ve seen peasants today, too.... The peasants—even they have to go,” said the soldier behind the cart, addressing Pierre with a sad smile. “No distinctions made nowadays.... They want the whole nation to fall on them—in a word, it’s Moscow! They want to make an end of it.”

In spite of the obscurity of the soldier’s words Pierre understood what he wanted to say and nodded approval.

The road was clear again; Pierre descended the hill and drove on.

He kept looking to either side of the road for familiar faces, but only saw everywhere the unfamiliar faces of various military men of different branches of the service, who all looked with astonishment at his white hat and green tail coat.

Having gone nearly three miles he at last met an acquaintance and eagerly addressed him. This was one of the head army doctors. He was driving toward Pierre in a covered gig, sitting beside a young surgeon, and on recognizing Pierre he told the Cossack who occupied the driver’s seat to pull up.

“Count! Your excellency, how come you to be here?” asked the doctor.

“Well, you know, I wanted to see...”

“Yes, yes, there will be something to see....”

Pierre got out and talked to the doctor, explaining his intention of taking part in a battle.

The doctor advised him to apply direct to Kutúzov.

“Why should you be God knows where out of sight, during the battle?” he said, exchanging glances with his young companion. “Anyhow his Serene Highness knows you and will receive you graciously. That’s what you must do.”

The doctor seemed tired and in a hurry.

“You think so?... Ah, I also wanted to ask you where our position is exactly?” said Pierre.

“The position?” repeated the doctor. “Well, that’s not my line. Drive past Tatárinova, a lot of digging is going on there. Go up the hillock and you’ll see.”

“Can one see from there?... If you would...”

But the doctor interrupted him and moved toward his gig.

“I would go with you but on my honor I’m up to here”—and he pointed to his throat. “I’m galloping to the commander of the corps. How do matters stand?... You know, Count, there’ll be a battle tomorrow. Out of an army of a hundred thousand we must expect at least twenty thousand wounded, and we haven’t stretchers, or bunks, or dressers, or doctors enough for six thousand. We have ten thousand carts, but we need other things as well—we must manage as best we can!”

The strange thought that of the thousands of men, young and old, who had stared with merry surprise at his hat (perhaps the very men he had noticed), twenty thousand were inevitably doomed to wounds and death amazed Pierre.

“They may die tomorrow; why are they thinking of anything but death?” And by some latent sequence of thought the descent of the Mozháysk hill, the carts with the wounded, the ringing bells, the slanting rays of the sun, and the songs of the cavalymen vividly recurred to his mind.

“The cavalry ride to battle and meet the wounded and do not for a moment think of what awaits them, but pass by, winking at the wounded. Yet from among these men twenty thousand are doomed to die, and they wonder at my hat! Strange!” thought Pierre, continuing his way to Tatárinova.

In front of a landowner’s house to the left of the road stood carriages, wagons, and crowds of orderlies and sentinels. The commander in chief was putting up there, but just when Pierre arrived he was not in and hardly any of the staff were there—they had gone to the church service. Pierre drove on toward Górkí.

When he had ascended the hill and reached the little village street, he saw for the first time peasant militiamen in their white shirts and with crosses on their caps, who, talking and laughing loudly, animated and perspiring, were at work on a huge knoll overgrown with grass to the right of the road.

Some of them were digging, others were wheeling barrowloads of earth along planks, while others stood about doing nothing.

Two officers were standing on the knoll, directing the men. On seeing these peasants, who were evidently still amused by the novelty of their position as soldiers, Pierre once more thought of the wounded men at Mozháysk and understood what the soldier had meant when he said: “They want the whole nation to fall on them.” The sight of these bearded peasants at work on the battlefield, with their queer, clumsy boots and perspiring necks, and their shirts opening from the left toward

the middle, unfastened, exposing their sunburned collarbones, impressed Pierre more strongly with the solemnity and importance of the moment than anything he had yet seen or heard.