

CHAPTER XXXIII

The chief action of the battle of Borodinó was fought within the seven thousand feet between Borodinó and Bagration's flèches. Beyond that space there was, on the one side, a demonstration made by the Russians with Uvárov's cavalry at midday, and on the other side, beyond Utítsa, Poniatowski's collision with Túchkov; but these two were detached and feeble actions in comparison with what took place in the center of the battlefield. On the field between Borodinó and the flèches, beside the wood, the chief action of the day took place on an open space visible from both sides and was fought in the simplest and most artless way.

The battle began on both sides with a cannonade from several hundred guns.

Then when the whole field was covered with smoke, two divisions, Campan's and Dessaix's, advanced from the French right, while Murat's troops advanced on Borodinó from their left.

From the Shevárdino Redoubt where Napoleon was standing the flèches were two thirds of a mile away, and it was more than a mile as the crow flies to Borodinó, so that Napoleon could not see what was happening there, especially as the smoke mingling with the mist hid the whole locality. The soldiers of Dessaix's division advancing against the flèches could only be seen till they had entered the hollow that lay between them and the flèches. As soon as they had descended into that hollow, the smoke of the guns and musketry on the flèches grew so dense that it covered the whole approach on that side of it. Through the smoke glimpses could be caught of something black—probably men—and at times the glint of bayonets. But whether they were moving or stationary, whether they were French or Russian, could not be discovered from the Shevárdino Redoubt.

The sun had risen brightly and its slanting rays struck straight into Napoleon's face as, shading his eyes with his hand, he looked at the flèches. The smoke spread out before them, and at times it looked as if the smoke were moving, at times as if the troops moved. Sometimes shouts were heard through the firing, but it was impossible to tell what was being done there.

Napoleon, standing on the knoll, looked through a field glass, and in its small cirlet saw smoke and men, sometimes his own and sometimes Russians, but when he looked again with the naked eye, he could not tell where what he had seen was.

He descended the knoll and began walking up and down before it.

Occasionally he stopped, listened to the firing, and gazed intently at the battlefield.

But not only was it impossible to make out what was happening from where he was standing down below, or from the knoll above on which some of his generals had taken their stand, but even from the flèches themselves—in which by this time there were now Russian and now French soldiers,

alternately or together, dead, wounded, alive, frightened, or maddened—even at those flèches themselves it was impossible to make out what was taking place. There for several hours amid incessant cannon and musketry fire, now Russians were seen alone, now Frenchmen alone, now infantry, and now cavalry: they appeared, fired, fell, collided, not knowing what to do with one another, screamed, and ran back again.

From the battlefield adjutants he had sent out, and orderlies from his marshals, kept galloping up to Napoleon with reports of the progress of the action, but all these reports were false, both because it was impossible in the heat of battle to say what was happening at any given moment and because many of the adjutants did not go to the actual place of conflict but reported what they had heard from others; and also because while an adjutant was riding more than a mile to Napoleon circumstances changed and the news he brought was already becoming false. Thus an adjutant galloped up from Murat with tidings that Borodinó had been occupied and the bridge over the Kolochá was in the hands of the French. The adjutant asked whether Napoleon wished the troops to cross it? Napoleon gave orders that the troops should form up on the farther side and wait. But before that order was given—almost as soon in fact as the adjutant had left Borodinó—the bridge had been retaken by the Russians and burned, in the very skirmish at which Pierre had been present at the beginning of the battle.

An adjutant galloped up from the flèches with a pale and frightened face and reported to Napoleon that their attack had been repulsed, Campan wounded, and Davout killed; yet at the very time the adjutant had been told that the French had been repulsed, the flèches had in fact been recaptured by other French troops, and Davout was alive and only slightly bruised. On the basis of these necessarily untrustworthy reports Napoleon gave his orders, which had either been executed before he gave them or could not be and were not executed.

The marshals and generals, who were nearer to the field of battle but, like Napoleon, did not take part in the actual fighting and only occasionally went within musket range, made their own arrangements without asking Napoleon and issued orders where and in what direction to fire and where cavalry should gallop and infantry should run. But even their orders, like Napoleon's, were seldom carried out, and then but partially. For the most part things happened contrary to their orders. Soldiers ordered to advance ran back on meeting grapeshot; soldiers ordered to remain where they were, suddenly, seeing Russians unexpectedly before them, sometimes rushed back and sometimes forward, and the cavalry dashed without orders in pursuit of the flying Russians. In this way two cavalry regiments galloped through the Semënovsk hollow and as soon as they reached the top of the incline turned round and galloped full speed back again. The infantry moved in the same way, sometimes running to quite other places than those they were ordered to go to. All orders as to where and when to move the guns, when to send infantry to shoot or horsemen to ride down the Russian infantry—all such orders were given by the officers on the spot nearest to the units concerned, without asking either Ney, Davout, or Murat, much less Napoleon. They did not fear getting into trouble for not fulfilling orders or for acting on their own initiative, for in battle what is at

stake is what is dearest to man—his own life—and it sometimes seems that safety lies in running back, sometimes in running forward; and these men who were right in the heat of the battle acted according to the mood of the moment. In reality, however, all these movements forward and backward did not improve or alter the position of the troops. All their rushing and galloping at one another did little harm, the harm of disablement and death was caused by the balls and bullets that flew over the fields on which these men were floundering about. As soon as they left the place where the balls and bullets were flying about, their superiors, located in the background, re-formed them and brought them under discipline and under the influence of that discipline led them back to the zone of fire, where under the influence of fear of death they lost their discipline and rushed about according to the chance promptings of the throng.