

CHAPTER XIX

Kutúzov's order to retreat through Moscow to the Ryazán road was issued at night on the first of September.

The first troops started at once, and during the night they marched slowly and steadily without hurry. At daybreak, however, those nearing the town at the Dorogomílov bridge saw ahead of them masses of soldiers crowding and hurrying across the bridge, ascending on the opposite side and blocking the streets and alleys, while endless masses of troops were bearing down on them from behind, and an unreasoning hurry and alarm overcame them. They all rushed forward to the bridge, onto it, and to the fords and the boats. Kutúzov himself had driven round by side streets to the other side of Moscow.

By ten o'clock in the morning of the second of September, only the rear guard remained in the Dorogomílov suburb, where they had ample room. The main army was on the other side of Moscow or beyond it.

At that very time, at ten in the morning of the second of September, Napoleon was standing among his troops on the Poklónny Hill looking at the panorama spread out before him. From the twenty-sixth of August to the second of September, that is from the battle of Borodinó to the entry of the French into Moscow, during the whole of that agitating, memorable week, there had been the extraordinary autumn weather that always comes as a surprise, when the sun hangs low and gives more heat than in spring, when everything shines so brightly in the rare clear atmosphere that the eyes smart, when the lungs are strengthened and refreshed by inhaling the aromatic autumn air, when even the nights are warm, and when in those dark warm nights, golden stars startle and delight us continually by falling from the sky.

At ten in the morning of the second of September this weather still held.

The brightness of the morning was magical. Moscow seen from the Poklónny Hill lay spaciouly spread out with her river, her gardens, and her churches, and she seemed to be living her usual life, her cupolas glittering like stars in the sunlight.

The view of the strange city with its peculiar architecture, such as he had never seen before, filled Napoleon with the rather envious and uneasy curiosity men feel when they see an alien form of life that has no knowledge of them. This city was evidently living with the full force of its own life. By the indefinite signs which, even at a distance, distinguish a living body from a dead one, Napoleon from the Poklónny Hill perceived the throb of life in the town and felt, as it were, the breathing of that great and beautiful body.

Every Russian looking at Moscow feels her to be a mother; every foreigner who sees her, even if ignorant of her significance as the mother city, must feel her feminine character, and Napoleon felt it.

“Cette ville asiatique aux innombrables églises, Moscou la sainte. La voilà donc enfin, cette fameuse ville! Il était temps,” * said he, and dismounting he ordered a plan of Moscow to be spread out before him, and summoned Lelorgne d’Ideville, the interpreter.

* “That Asiatic city of the innumerable churches, holy Moscow! Here it is then at last, that famous city. It was high time.”

“A town captured by the enemy is like a maid who has lost her honor,” thought he (he had said so to Túchkov at Smolénsk). From that point of view he gazed at the Oriental beauty he had not seen before. It seemed strange to him that his long-felt wish, which had seemed unattainable, had at last been realized. In the clear morning light he gazed now at the city and now at the plan, considering its details, and the assurance of possessing it agitated and awed him.

“But could it be otherwise?” he thought. “Here is this capital at my feet. Where is Alexander now, and of what is he thinking? A strange, beautiful, and majestic city; and a strange and majestic moment! In what light must I appear to them!” thought he, thinking of his troops. “Here she is, the reward for all those fainthearted men,” he reflected, glancing at those near him and at the troops who were approaching and forming up. “One word from me, one movement of my hand, and that ancient capital of the Tsars would perish. But my clemency is always ready to descend upon the vanquished. I must be magnanimous and truly great. But no, it can’t be true that I am in Moscow,” he suddenly thought. “Yet here she is lying at my feet, with her golden domes and crosses scintillating and twinkling in the sunshine. But I shall spare her. On the ancient monuments of barbarism and despotism I will inscribe great words of justice and mercy.... It is just this which Alexander will feel most painfully, I know him.” (It seemed to Napoleon that the chief import of what was taking place lay in the personal struggle between himself and Alexander.) “From the height of the Krémelin—yes, there is the Krémelin, yes—I will give them just laws; I will teach them the meaning of true civilization, I will make generations of boyars remember their conqueror with love. I will tell the deputation that I did not, and do not, desire war, that I have waged war only against the false policy of their court; that I love and respect Alexander and that in Moscow I will accept terms of peace worthy of myself and of my people. I do not wish to utilize the fortunes of war to humiliate an honored monarch. ‘Boyars,’ I will say to them, ‘I do not desire war, I desire the peace and welfare of all my subjects.’ However, I know their presence will inspire me, and I shall speak to them as I always do: clearly, impressively, and majestically. But can it be true that I am in Moscow? Yes, there she lies.”

“Qu’on m’amène les boyars,” * said he to his suite.

* “Bring the boyars to me.”

A general with a brilliant suite galloped off at once to fetch the

boyars.

Two hours passed. Napoleon had lunched and was again standing in the same place on the Poklónny Hill awaiting the deputation. His speech to the boyars had already taken definite shape in his imagination. That speech was full of dignity and greatness as Napoleon understood it.

He was himself carried away by the tone of magnanimity he intended to adopt toward Moscow. In his imagination he appointed days for assemblies at the palace of the Tsars, at which Russian notables and his own would mingle. He mentally appointed a governor, one who would win the hearts of the people. Having learned that there were many charitable institutions in Moscow he mentally decided that he would shower favors on them all. He thought that, as in Africa he had to put on a burnoose and sit in a mosque, so in Moscow he must be beneficent like the Tsars. And in order finally to touch the hearts of the Russians—and being like all Frenchmen unable to imagine anything sentimental without a reference to *ma chère, ma tendre, ma pauvre mère* * —he decided that he would place an inscription on all these establishments in large letters: “This establishment is dedicated to my dear mother.” Or no, it should be simply: *Maison de ma Mère*, *(2) he concluded. “But am I really in Moscow? Yes, here it lies before me, but why is the deputation from the city so long in appearing?” he wondered.

* “My dear, my tender, my poor mother.”

* (2) “House of my Mother.”

Meanwhile an agitated consultation was being carried on in whispers among his generals and marshals at the rear of his suite. Those sent to fetch the deputation had returned with the news that Moscow was empty, that everyone had left it. The faces of those who were not conferring together were pale and perturbed. They were not alarmed by the fact that Moscow had been abandoned by its inhabitants (grave as that fact seemed), but by the question how to tell the Emperor—without putting him in the terrible position of appearing ridiculous—that he had been awaiting the boyars so long in vain: that there were drunken mobs left in Moscow but no one else. Some said that a deputation of some sort must be scraped together, others disputed that opinion and maintained that the Emperor should first be carefully and skillfully prepared, and then told the truth.

“He will have to be told, all the same,” said some gentlemen of the suite. “But, gentlemen...”

The position was the more awkward because the Emperor, meditating upon his magnanimous plans, was pacing patiently up and down before the outspread map, occasionally glancing along the road to Moscow from under his lifted hand with a bright and proud smile.

“But it’s impossible...” declared the gentlemen of the suite, shrugging their shoulders but not venturing to utter the implied word—le ridicule....

At last the Emperor, tired of futile expectation, his actor's instinct suggesting to him that the sublime moment having been too long drawn out was beginning to lose its sublimity, gave a sign with his hand. A single report of a signaling gun followed, and the troops, who were already spread out on different sides of Moscow, moved into the city through the Tver, Kalúga, and Dorogomílov gates. Faster and faster, vying with one another, they moved at the double or at a trot, vanishing amid the clouds of dust they raised and making the air ring with a deafening roar of mingling shouts.

Drawn on by the movement of his troops Napoleon rode with them as far as the Dorogomílov gate, but there again stopped and, dismounting from his horse, paced for a long time by the Kámmer-Kollézski rampart, awaiting the deputation.