

CHAPTER XXV

Toward nine o'clock in the morning, when the troops were already moving through Moscow, nobody came to the count any more for instructions. Those who were able to get away were going of their own accord, those who remained behind decided for themselves what they must do.

The count ordered his carriage that he might drive to Sokólniki, and sat in his study with folded hands, morose, sallow, and taciturn.

In quiet and untroubled times it seems to every administrator that it is only by his efforts that the whole population under his rule is kept going, and in this consciousness of being indispensable every administrator finds the chief reward of his labor and efforts. While the sea of history remains calm the ruler-administrator in his frail bark, holding on with a boat hook to the ship of the people and himself moving, naturally imagines that his efforts move the ship he is holding on to. But as soon as a storm arises and the sea begins to heave and the ship to move, such a delusion is no longer possible. The ship moves independently with its own enormous motion, the boat hook no longer reaches the moving vessel, and suddenly the administrator, instead of appearing a ruler and a source of power, becomes an insignificant, useless, feeble man.

Rostopchín felt this, and it was this which exasperated him.

The superintendent of police, whom the crowd had stopped, went in to see him at the same time as an adjutant who informed the count that the horses were harnessed. They were both pale, and the superintendent of police, after reporting that he had executed the instructions he had received, informed the count that an immense crowd had collected in the courtyard and wished to see him.

Without saying a word Rostopchín rose and walked hastily to his light, luxurious drawing room, went to the balcony door, took hold of the handle, let it go again, and went to the window from which he had a better view of the whole crowd. The tall lad was standing in front, flourishing his arm and saying something with a stern look. The blood-stained smith stood beside him with a gloomy face. A drone of voices was audible through the closed window.

“Is my carriage ready?” asked Rostopchín, stepping back from the window.

“It is, your excellency,” replied the adjutant.

Rostopchín went again to the balcony door.

“But what do they want?” he asked the superintendent of police.

“Your excellency, they say they have got ready, according to your orders, to go against the French, and they shouted something about treachery. But it is a turbulent crowd, your excellency—I hardly managed to get away from it. Your excellency, I venture to suggest...”

“You may go. I don’t need you to tell me what to do!” exclaimed Rostopchín angrily.

He stood by the balcony door looking at the crowd.

“This is what they have done with Russia! This is what they have done with me!” thought he, full of an irrepressible fury that welled up within him against the someone to whom what was happening might be attributed. As often happens with passionate people, he was mastered by anger but was still seeking an object on which to vent it. “Here is that mob, the dregs of the people,” he thought as he gazed at the crowd: “this rabble they have roused by their folly! They want a victim,” he thought as he looked at the tall lad flourishing his arm. And this thought occurred to him just because he himself desired a victim, something on which to vent his rage.

“Is the carriage ready?” he asked again.

“Yes, your excellency. What are your orders about Vereshchágín? He is waiting at the porch,” said the adjutant.

“Ah!” exclaimed Rostopchín, as if struck by an unexpected recollection.

And rapidly opening the door he went resolutely out onto the balcony. The talking instantly ceased, hats and caps were doffed, and all eyes were raised to the count.

“Good morning, lads!” said the count briskly and loudly. “Thank you for coming. I’ll come out to you in a moment, but we must first settle with the villain. We must punish the villain who has caused the ruin of Moscow. Wait for me!”

And the count stepped as briskly back into the room and slammed the door behind him.

A murmur of approbation and satisfaction ran through the crowd. “He’ll settle with all the villains, you’ll see! And you said the French... He’ll show you what law is!” the mob were saying as if reproving one another for their lack of confidence.

A few minutes later an officer came hurriedly out of the front door, gave an order, and the dragoons formed up in line. The crowd moved eagerly from the balcony toward the porch. Rostopchín, coming out there with quick angry steps, looked hastily around as if seeking someone.

“Where is he?” he inquired. And as he spoke he saw a young man coming round the corner of the house between two dragoons. He had a long thin neck, and his head, that had been half shaved, was again covered by short hair. This young man was dressed in a threadbare blue cloth coat lined with fox fur, that had once been smart, and dirty hempen convict trousers, over which were pulled his thin, dirty, trodden-down boots. On his thin, weak legs were heavy chains which hampered his irresolute movements.

“Ah!” said Rostopchín, hurriedly turning away his eyes from the young man in the fur-lined coat and pointing to the bottom step of the porch. “Put him there.”

The young man in his clattering chains stepped clumsily to the spot indicated, holding away with one finger the coat collar which chafed his neck, turned his long neck twice this way and that, sighed, and submissively folded before him his thin hands, unused to work.

For several seconds while the young man was taking his place on the step the silence continued. Only among the back rows of the people, who were all pressing toward the one spot, could sighs, groans, and the shuffling of feet be heard.

While waiting for the young man to take his place on the step Rostopchín stood frowning and rubbing his face with his hand.

“Lads!” said he, with a metallic ring in his voice. “This man, Vereshchágín, is the scoundrel by whose doing Moscow is perishing.”

The young man in the fur-lined coat, stooping a little, stood in a submissive attitude, his fingers clasped before him. His emaciated young face, disfigured by the half-shaven head, hung down hopelessly. At the count’s first words he raised it slowly and looked up at him as if wishing to say something or at least to meet his eye. But Rostopchín did not look at him. A vein in the young man’s long thin neck swelled like a cord and went blue behind the ear, and suddenly his face flushed.

All eyes were fixed on him. He looked at the crowd, and rendered more hopeful by the expression he read on the faces there, he smiled sadly and timidly, and lowering his head shifted his feet on the step.

“He has betrayed his Tsar and his country, he has gone over to Bonaparte. He alone of all the Russians has disgraced the Russian name, he has caused Moscow to perish,” said Rostopchín in a sharp, even voice, but suddenly he glanced down at Vereshchágín who continued to stand in the same submissive attitude. As if inflamed by the sight, he raised his arm and addressed the people, almost shouting:

“Deal with him as you think fit! I hand him over to you.”

The crowd remained silent and only pressed closer and closer to one another. To keep one another back, to breathe in that stifling atmosphere, to be unable to stir, and to await something unknown, uncomprehended, and terrible, was becoming unbearable. Those standing in front, who had seen and heard what had taken place before them, all stood with wide-open eyes and mouths, straining with all their strength, and held back the crowd that was pushing behind them.

“Beat him!... Let the traitor perish and not disgrace the Russian name!” shouted Rostopchín. “Cut him down. I command it.”

Hearing not so much the words as the angry tone of Rostopchín’s voice,

the crowd moaned and heaved forward, but again paused.

“Count!” exclaimed the timid yet theatrical voice of Vereshchágín in the midst of the momentary silence that ensued, “Count! One God is above us both....” He lifted his head and again the thick vein in his thin neck filled with blood and the color rapidly came and went in his face.

He did not finish what he wished to say.

“Cut him down! I command it...” shouted Rostopchín, suddenly growing pale like Vereshchágín.

“Draw sabers!” cried the dragoon officer, drawing his own.

Another still stronger wave flowed through the crowd and reaching the front ranks carried it swaying to the very steps of the porch. The tall youth, with a stony look on his face, and rigid and uplifted arm, stood beside Vereshchágín.

“Saber him!” the dragoon officer almost whispered.

And one of the soldiers, his face all at once distorted with fury, struck Vereshchágín on the head with the blunt side of his saber.

“Ah!” cried Vereshchágín in meek surprise, looking round with a frightened glance as if not understanding why this was done to him. A similar moan of surprise and horror ran through the crowd. “O Lord!” exclaimed a sorrowful voice.

But after the exclamation of surprise that had escaped from Vereshchágín he uttered a plaintive cry of pain, and that cry was fatal. The barrier of human feeling, strained to the utmost, that had held the crowd in check suddenly broke. The crime had begun and must now be completed. The plaintive moan of reproach was drowned by the threatening and angry roar of the crowd. Like the seventh and last wave that shatters a ship, that last irresistible wave burst from the rear and reached the front ranks, carrying them off their feet and engulfing them all. The dragoon was about to repeat his blow. Vereshchágín with a cry of horror, covering his head with his hands, rushed toward the crowd. The tall youth, against whom he stumbled, seized his thin neck with his hands and, yelling wildly, fell with him under the feet of the pressing, struggling crowd.

Some beat and tore at Vereshchágín, others at the tall youth. And the screams of those that were being trampled on and of those who tried to rescue the tall lad only increased the fury of the crowd. It was a long time before the dragoons could extricate the bleeding youth, beaten almost to death. And for a long time, despite the feverish haste with which the mob tried to end the work that had been begun, those who were hitting, throttling, and tearing at Vereshchágín were unable to kill him, for the crowd pressed from all sides, swaying as one mass with them in the center and rendering it impossible for them either to kill him or let him go.

“Hit him with an ax, eh!... Crushed?... Traitor, he sold Christ.... Still alive... tenacious... serves him right! Torture serves a thief right. Use the hatchet!... What—still alive?”

Only when the victim ceased to struggle and his cries changed to a long-drawn, measured death rattle did the crowd around his prostrate, bleeding corpse begin rapidly to change places. Each one came up, glanced at what had been done, and with horror, reproach, and astonishment pushed back again.

“O Lord! The people are like wild beasts! How could he be alive?” voices in the crowd could be heard saying. “Quite a young fellow too... must have been a merchant’s son. What men!... and they say he’s not the right one.... How not the right one?... O Lord! And there’s another has been beaten too—they say he’s nearly done for.... Oh, the people... Aren’t they afraid of sinning?...” said the same mob now, looking with pained distress at the dead body with its long, thin, half-severed neck and its livid face stained with blood and dust.

A painstaking police officer, considering the presence of a corpse in his excellency’s courtyard unseemly, told the dragoons to take it away. Two dragoons took it by its distorted legs and dragged it along the ground. The gory, dust-stained, half-shaven head with its long neck trailed twisting along the ground. The crowd shrank back from it.

At the moment when Vereshchágín fell and the crowd closed in with savage yells and swayed about him, Rostopchín suddenly turned pale and, instead of going to the back entrance where his carriage awaited him, went with hurried steps and bent head, not knowing where and why, along the passage leading to the rooms on the ground floor. The count’s face was white and he could not control the feverish twitching of his lower jaw.

“This way, your excellency... Where are you going?... This way, please...” said a trembling, frightened voice behind him.

Count Rostopchín was unable to reply and, turning obediently, went in the direction indicated. At the back entrance stood his calèche. The distant roar of the yelling crowd was audible even there. He hastily took his seat and told the coachman to drive him to his country house in Sokólniki.

When they reached the Myasnítski Street and could no longer hear the shouts of the mob, the count began to repent. He remembered with dissatisfaction the agitation and fear he had betrayed before his subordinates. “The mob is terrible—disgusting,” he said to himself in French. “They are like wolves whom nothing but flesh can appease.” “Count! One God is above us both!”—Vereshchágín’s words suddenly recurred to him, and a disagreeable shiver ran down his back. But this was only a momentary feeling and Count Rostopchín smiled disdainfully at himself. “I had other duties,” thought he. “The people had to be appeased. Many other victims have perished and are perishing for the public good”—and he began thinking of his social duties to his family and to the city entrusted to him, and of himself—not himself as Theodore Vasílyevich Rostopchín (he fancied that Theodore Vasílyevich Rostopchín

was sacrificing himself for the public good) but himself as governor, the representative of authority and of the Tsar. "Had I been simply Theodore Vasilyevich my course of action would have been quite different, but it was my duty to safeguard my life and dignity as commander in chief."

Lightly swaying on the flexible springs of his carriage and no longer hearing the terrible sounds of the crowd, Rostopchín grew physically calm and, as always happens, as soon as he became physically tranquil his mind devised reasons why he should be mentally tranquil too. The thought which tranquillized Rostopchín was not a new one. Since the world began and men have killed one another no one has ever committed such a crime against his fellow man without comforting himself with this same idea. This idea is *le bien public*, the hypothetical welfare of other people.

To a man not swayed by passion that welfare is never certain, but he who commits such a crime always knows just where that welfare lies. And Rostopchín now knew it.

Not only did his reason not reproach him for what he had done, but he even found cause for self-satisfaction in having so successfully contrived to avail himself of a convenient opportunity to punish a criminal and at the same time pacify the mob.

"Vereshchágín was tried and condemned to death," thought Rostopchín (though the Senate had only condemned Vereshchágín to hard labor), "he was a traitor and a spy. I could not let him go unpunished and so I have killed two birds with one stone: to appease the mob I gave them a victim and at the same time punished a miscreant."

Having reached his country house and begun to give orders about domestic arrangements, the count grew quite tranquil.

Half an hour later he was driving with his fast horses across the Sokólniki field, no longer thinking of what had occurred but considering what was to come. He was driving to the Yaúza bridge where he had heard that Kutúzov was. Count Rostopchín was mentally preparing the angry and stinging reproaches he meant to address to Kutúzov for his deception. He would make that foxy old courtier feel that the responsibility for all the calamities that would follow the abandonment of the city and the ruin of Russia (as Rostopchín regarded it) would fall upon his dotting old head. Planning beforehand what he would say to Kutúzov, Rostopchín turned angrily in his calèche and gazed sternly from side to side.

The Sokólniki field was deserted. Only at the end of it, in front of the almshouse and the lunatic asylum, could be seen some people in white and others like them walking singly across the field shouting and gesticulating.

One of these was running to cross the path of Count Rostopchín's carriage, and the count himself, his coachman, and his dragoons looked with vague horror and curiosity at these released lunatics and especially at the one running toward them.

Swaying from side to side on his long, thin legs in his fluttering dressing gown, this lunatic was running impetuously, his gaze fixed on Rostopchín, shouting something in a hoarse voice and making signs to him to stop. The lunatic's solemn, gloomy face was thin and yellow, with its beard growing in uneven tufts. His black, agate pupils with saffron-yellow whites moved restlessly near the lower eyelids.

“Stop! Pull up, I tell you!” he cried in a piercing voice, and again shouted something breathlessly with emphatic intonations and gestures.

Coming abreast of the calèche he ran beside it.

“Thrice have they slain me, thrice have I risen from the dead. They stoned me, crucified me... I shall rise... shall rise... shall rise. They have torn my body. The kingdom of God will be overthrown... Thrice will I overthrow it and thrice re-establish it!” he cried, raising his voice higher and higher.

Count Rostopchín suddenly grew pale as he had done when the crowd closed in on Vereshchágin. He turned away. “Go fas... faster!” he cried in a trembling voice to his coachman. The calèche flew over the ground as fast as the horses could draw it, but for a long time Count Rostopchín still heard the insane despairing screams growing fainter in the distance, while his eyes saw nothing but the astonished, frightened, bloodstained face of “the traitor” in the fur-lined coat.

Recent as that mental picture was, Rostopchín already felt that it had cut deep into his heart and drawn blood. Even now he felt clearly that the gory trace of that recollection would not pass with time, but that the terrible memory would, on the contrary, dwell in his heart ever more cruelly and painfully to the end of his life. He seemed still to hear the sound of his own words: “Cut him down! I command it...”

“Why did I utter those words? It was by some accident I said them... I need not have said them,” he thought. “And then nothing would have happened.” He saw the frightened and then infuriated face of the dragoon who dealt the blow, the look of silent, timid reproach that boy in the fur-lined coat had turned upon him. “But I did not do it for my own sake. I was bound to act that way.... The mob, the traitor... the public welfare,” thought he.

Troops were still crowding at the Yaúza bridge. It was hot. Kutúzov, dejected and frowning, sat on a bench by the bridge toying with his whip in the sand when a calèche dashed up noisily. A man in a general's uniform with plumes in his hat went up to Kutúzov and said something in French. It was Count Rostopchín. He told Kutúzov that he had come because Moscow, the capital, was no more and only the army remained.

“Things would have been different if your Serene Highness had not told me that you would not abandon Moscow without another battle; all this would not have happened,” he said.

Kutúzov looked at Rostopchín as if, not grasping what was said to him,

he was trying to read something peculiar written at that moment on the face of the man addressing him. Rostopchín grew confused and became silent. Kutúzov slightly shook his head and not taking his penetrating gaze from Rostopchín's face muttered softly:

“No! I shall not give up Moscow without a battle!”

Whether Kutúzov was thinking of something entirely different when he spoke those words, or uttered them purposely, knowing them to be meaningless, at any rate Rostopchín made no reply and hastily left him. And strange to say, the Governor of Moscow, the proud Count Rostopchín, took up a Cossack whip and went to the bridge where he began with shouts to drive on the carts that blocked the way.