

CHAPTER XXVII

The absorption of the French by Moscow, radiating starwise as it did, only reached the quarter where Pierre was staying by the evening of the second of September.

After the last two days spent in solitude and unusual circumstances, Pierre was in a state bordering on insanity. He was completely obsessed by one persistent thought. He did not know how or when this thought had taken such possession of him, but he remembered nothing of the past, understood nothing of the present, and all he saw and heard appeared to him like a dream.

He had left home only to escape the intricate tangle of life's demands that enmeshed him, and which in his present condition he was unable to unravel. He had gone to Joseph Alexéevich's house, on the plea of sorting the deceased's books and papers, only in search of rest from life's turmoil, for in his mind the memory of Joseph Alexéevich was connected with a world of eternal, solemn, and calm thoughts, quite contrary to the restless confusion into which he felt himself being drawn. He sought a quiet refuge, and in Joseph Alexéevich's study he really found it. When he sat with his elbows on the dusty writing table in the deathlike stillness of the study, calm and significant memories of the last few days rose one after another in his imagination, particularly of the battle of Borodinó and of that vague sense of his own insignificance and insincerity compared with the truth, simplicity, and strength of the class of men he mentally classed as they. When Gerásim roused him from his reverie the idea occurred to him of taking part in the popular defense of Moscow which he knew was projected. And with that object he had asked Gerásim to get him a peasant's coat and a pistol, confiding to him his intentions of remaining in Joseph Alexéevich's house and keeping his name secret. Then during the first day spent in inaction and solitude (he tried several times to fix his attention on the Masonic manuscripts, but was unable to do so) the idea that had previously occurred to him of the cabalistic significance of his name in connection with Bonaparte's more than once vaguely presented itself. But the idea that he, L'russe Besuhof, was destined to set a limit to the power of the Beast was as yet only one of the fancies that often passed through his mind and left no trace behind.

When, having bought the coat merely with the object of taking part among the people in the defense of Moscow, Pierre had met the Rostóvs and Natásha had said to him: "Are you remaining in Moscow?... How splendid!" the thought flashed into his mind that it really would be a good thing, even if Moscow were taken, for him to remain there and do what he was predestined to do.

Next day, with the sole idea of not sparing himself and not lagging in any way behind them, Pierre went to the Three Hills gate. But when he returned to the house convinced that Moscow would not be defended, he suddenly felt that what before had seemed to him merely a possibility had now become absolutely necessary and inevitable. He must remain in Moscow, concealing his name, and must meet Napoleon and kill him, and

either perish or put an end to the misery of all Europe—which it seemed to him was solely due to Napoleon.

Pierre knew all the details of the attempt on Bonaparte's life in 1809 by a German student in Vienna, and knew that the student had been shot. And the risk to which he would expose his life by carrying out his design excited him still more.

Two equally strong feelings drew Pierre irresistibly to this purpose. The first was a feeling of the necessity of sacrifice and suffering in view of the common calamity, the same feeling that had caused him to go to Mozháysk on the twenty-fifth and to make his way to the very thick of the battle and had now caused him to run away from his home and, in place of the luxury and comfort to which he was accustomed, to sleep on a hard sofa without undressing and eat the same food as Gerásim. The other was that vague and quite Russian feeling of contempt for everything conventional, artificial, and human—for everything the majority of men regard as the greatest good in the world. Pierre had first experienced this strange and fascinating feeling at the Slobóda Palace, when he had suddenly felt that wealth, power, and life—all that men so painstakingly acquire and guard—if it has any worth has so only by reason of the joy with which it can all be renounced.

It was the feeling that induces a volunteer recruit to spend his last penny on drink, and a drunken man to smash mirrors or glasses for no apparent reason and knowing that it will cost him all the money he possesses: the feeling which causes a man to perform actions which from an ordinary point of view are insane, to test, as it were, his personal power and strength, affirming the existence of a higher, nonhuman criterion of life.

From the very day Pierre had experienced this feeling for the first time at the Slobóda Palace he had been continuously under its influence, but only now found full satisfaction for it. Moreover, at this moment Pierre was supported in his design and prevented from renouncing it by what he had already done in that direction. If he were now to leave Moscow like everyone else, his flight from home, the peasant coat, the pistol, and his announcement to the Rostóvs that he would remain in Moscow would all become not merely meaningless but contemptible and ridiculous, and to this Pierre was very sensitive.

Pierre's physical condition, as is always the case, corresponded to his mental state. The unaccustomed coarse food, the vodka he drank during those days, the absence of wine and cigars, his dirty unchanged linen, two almost sleepless nights passed on a short sofa without bedding—all this kept him in a state of excitement bordering on insanity.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon. The French had already entered Moscow. Pierre knew this, but instead of acting he only thought about his undertaking, going over its minutest details in his mind. In his fancy he did not clearly picture to himself either the striking of the blow or the death of Napoleon, but with extraordinary vividness and melancholy enjoyment imagined his own destruction and heroic endurance.

“Yes, alone, for the sake of all, I must do it or perish!” he thought. “Yes, I will approach... and then suddenly... with pistol or dagger? But that is all the same! ‘It is not I but the hand of Providence that punishes thee,’ I shall say,” thought he, imagining what he would say when killing Napoleon. “Well then, take me and execute me!” he went on, speaking to himself and bowing his head with a sad but firm expression.

While Pierre, standing in the middle of the room, was talking to himself in this way, the study door opened and on the threshold appeared the figure of Makár Alexéevich, always so timid before but now quite transformed.

His dressing gown was unfastened, his face red and distorted. He was obviously drunk. On seeing Pierre he grew confused at first, but noticing embarrassment on Pierre’s face immediately grew bold and, staggering on his thin legs, advanced into the middle of the room.

“They’re frightened,” he said confidentially in a hoarse voice. “I say I won’t surrender, I say... Am I not right, sir?”

He paused and then suddenly seeing the pistol on the table seized it with unexpected rapidity and ran out into the corridor.

Gerásim and the porter, who had followed Makár Alexéevich, stopped him in the vestibule and tried to take the pistol from him. Pierre, coming out into the corridor, looked with pity and repulsion at the half-crazy old man. Makár Alexéevich, frowning with exertion, held on to the pistol and screamed hoarsely, evidently with some heroic fancy in his head.

“To arms! Board them! No, you shan’t get it,” he yelled.

“That will do, please, that will do. Have the goodness—please, sir, to let go! Please, sir...” pleaded Gerásim, trying carefully to steer Makár Alexéevich by the elbows back to the door.

“Who are you? Bonaparte!...” shouted Makár Alexéevich.

“That’s not right, sir. Come to your room, please, and rest. Allow me to have the pistol.”

“Be off, thou base slave! Touch me not! See this?” shouted Makár Alexéevich, brandishing the pistol. “Board them!”

“Catch hold!” whispered Gerásim to the porter.

They seized Makár Alexéevich by the arms and dragged him to the door.

The vestibule was filled with the discordant sounds of a struggle and of a tipsy, hoarse voice.

Suddenly a fresh sound, a piercing feminine scream, reverberated from the porch and the cook came running into the vestibule.

“It’s them! Gracious heavens! O Lord, four of them, horsemen!” she

cried.

Gerásim and the porter let Makár Alexéevich go, and in the now silent corridor the sound of several hands knocking at the front door could be heard.