CHAPTER XVIII

This campaign consisted in a flight of the French during which they did all they could to destroy themselves. From the time they turned onto the Kalúga road to the day their leader fled from the army, none of the movements of the crowd had any sense. So one might have thought that regarding this period of the campaign the historians, who attributed the actions of the mass to the will of one man, would have found it impossible to make the story of the retreat fit their theory. But no! Mountains of books have been written by the historians about this campaign, and everywhere are described Napoleon's arrangements, the maneuvers, and his profound plans which guided the army, as well as the military genius shown by his marshals.

The retreat from Málo-Yaroslávets when he had a free road into a well-supplied district and the parallel road was open to him along which Kutúzov afterwards pursued him—this unnecessary retreat along a devastated road—is explained to us as being due to profound considerations. Similarly profound considerations are given for his retreat from Smolénsk to Orshá. Then his heroism at Krásnoe is described, where he is reported to have been prepared to accept battle and take personal command, and to have walked about with a birch stick and said:

"J'ai assez fait l'empereur; il est temps de faire le général," * but nevertheless immediately ran away again, abandoning to its fate the scattered fragments of the army he left behind.

> * "I have acted the Emperor long enough; it is time to act the general."

Then we are told of the greatness of soul of the marshals, especially of Ney—a greatness of soul consisting in this: that he made his way by night around through the forest and across the Dnieper and escaped to Orshá, abandoning standards, artillery, and nine tenths of his men.

And lastly, the final departure of the great Emperor from his heroic army is presented to us by the historians as something great and characteristic of genius. Even that final running away, described in ordinary language as the lowest depth of baseness which every child is taught to be ashamed of—even that act finds justification in the historians' language.

When it is impossible to stretch the very elastic threads of historical ratiocination any farther, when actions are clearly contrary to all that humanity calls right or even just, the historians produce a saving conception of "greatness." "Greatness," it seems, excludes the standards of right and wrong. For the "great" man nothing is wrong, there is no atrocity for which a "great" man can be blamed.

"C'est grand!" * say the historians, and there no longer exists either good or evil but only "grand" and "not grand." Grand is good, not

grand is bad. Grand is the characteristic, in their conception, of some special animals called “heroes.” And Napoleon, escaping home in a warm fur coat and leaving to perish those who were not merely his comrades but were (in his opinion) men he had brought there, feels que c’est grand, *(2) and his soul is tranquil.

* “It is great.”

* (2) That it is great.

“Du sublime (he saw something sublime in himself) au ridicule il n’y a qu’un pas,” * said he. And the whole world for fifty years has been repeating: “Sublime! Grand! Napoléon le Grand!” Du sublime au ridicule il n’y a qu’un pas.

* “From the sublime to the ridiculous is but a step.”

And it occurs to no one that to admit a greatness not commensurable with the standard of right and wrong is merely to admit one’s own nothingness and immeasurable meanness.

For us with the standard of good and evil given us by Christ, no human actions are incommensurable. And there is no greatness where simplicity, goodness, and truth are absent.