CHAPTER IV

After the encounter at Vyázma, where Kutúzov had been unable to hold back his troops in their anxiety to overwhelm and cut off the enemy and so on, the farther movement of the fleeing French, and of the Russians who pursued them, continued as far as Krásnoe without a battle. The flight was so rapid that the Russian army pursuing the French could not keep up with them; cavalry and artillery horses broke down, and the information received of the movements of the French was never reliable.

The men in the Russian army were so worn out by this continuous marching at the rate of twenty-seven miles a day that they could not go any faster.

To realize the degree of exhaustion of the Russian army it is only necessary to grasp clearly the meaning of the fact that, while not losing more than five thousand killed and wounded after Tarútino and less than a hundred prisoners, the Russian army which left that place a hundred thousand strong reached Krásnoe with only fifty thousand.

The rapidity of the Russian pursuit was just as destructive to our army as the flight of the French was to theirs. The only difference was that the Russian army moved voluntarily, with no such threat of destruction as hung over the French, and that the sick Frenchmen were left behind in enemy hands while the sick Russians left behind were among their own people. The chief cause of the wastage of Napoleon’s army was the rapidity of its movement, and a convincing proof of this is the corresponding decrease of the Russian army.

Kutúzov as far as was in his power, instead of trying to check the movement of the French as was desired in Petersburg and by the Russian army generals, directed his whole activity here, as he had done at Tarútino and Vyázma, to hastening it on while easing the movement of our army.

But besides this, since the exhaustion and enormous diminution of the army caused by the rapidity of the advance had become evident, another reason for slackening the pace and delaying presented itself to Kutúzov. The aim of the Russian army was to pursue the French. The road the French would take was unknown, and so the closer our troops trod on their heels the greater distance they had to cover. Only by following at some distance could one cut across the zigzag path of the French. All the artful maneuvers suggested by our generals meant fresh movements of the army and a lengthening of its marches, whereas the only reasonable aim was to shorten those marches. To that end Kutúzov’s activity was directed during the whole campaign from Moscow to Vílna—not casually or intermittently but so consistently that he never once deviated from it.

Kutúzov felt and knew—not by reasoning or science but with the whole of his Russian being—what every Russian soldier felt: that the French were beaten, that the enemy was flying and must be driven out; but at the same time he like the soldiers realized all the hardship of this march, the rapidity of which was unparalleled for such a time of the year.

But to the generals, especially the foreign ones in the Russian army, who wished to distinguish themselves, to astonish somebody, and for some reason to capture a king or a duke—it seemed that now—when any battle must be horrible and senseless—was the very time to fight and conquer somebody. Kutúzov merely shrugged his shoulders when one after another they presented projects of maneuvers to be made with those soldiers—ill-shod, insufficiently clad, and half starved—who within a month and without fighting a battle had dwindled to half their number, and who at the best if the flight continued would have to go a greater distance than they had already traversed, before they reached the frontier.

This longing to distinguish themselves, to maneuver, to overthrow, and to cut off showed itself particularly whenever the Russians stumbled on the French army.

So it was at Krásnoe, where they expected to find one of the three French columns and stumbled instead on Napoleon himself with sixteen thousand men. Despite all Kutúzov's efforts to avoid that ruinous encounter and to preserve his troops, the massacre of the broken mob of French soldiers by worn-out Russians continued at Krásnoe for three days.

Toll wrote a disposition: "The first column will march to so and so," etc. And as usual nothing happened in accord with the disposition. Prince Eugène of Württemberg fired from a hill over the French crowds that were running past, and demanded reinforcements which did not arrive. The French, avoiding the Russians, dispersed and hid themselves in the forest by night, making their way round as best they could, and continued their flight.

Milorádovich, who said he did not want to know anything about the commissariat affairs of his detachment, and could never be found when he was wanted—that chevalier sans peur et sans reproche * as he styled himself—who was fond of parleys with the French, sent envoys demanding their surrender, wasted time, and did not do what he was ordered to do.

* Knight without fear and without reproach.

"I give you that column, lads," he said, riding up to the troops and pointing out the French to the cavalry.

And the cavalry, with spurs and sabers urging on horses that could scarcely move, trotted with much effort to the column presented to them—that is to say, to a crowd of Frenchmen stark with cold, frost-bitten, and starving—and the column that had been presented to them threw down its arms and surrendered as it had long been anxious to do.

At Krásnoe they took twenty-six thousand prisoners, several hundred cannon, and a stick called a "marshal's staff," and disputed as to who had distinguished himself and were pleased with their achievement—though they much regretted not having taken Napoleon, or at least a marshal or

a hero of some sort, and reproached one another and especially Kutúzov for having failed to do so.

These men, carried away by their passions, were but blind tools of the most melancholy law of necessity, but considered themselves heroes and imagined that they were accomplishing a most noble and honorable deed. They blamed Kutúzov and said that from the very beginning of the campaign he had prevented their vanquishing Napoleon, that he thought of nothing but satisfying his passions and would not advance from the Linen Factories because he was comfortable there, that at Krásnoe he checked the advance because on learning that Napoleon was there he had quite lost his head, and that it was probable that he had an understanding with Napoleon and had been bribed by him, and so on, and so on.

Not only did his contemporaries, carried away by their passions, talk in this way, but posterity and history have acclaimed Napoleon as grand, while Kutúzov is described by foreigners as a crafty, dissolute, weak old courtier, and by Russians as something indefinite—a sort of puppet useful only because he had a Russian name.