

CHAPTER VI

The fifth of November was the first day of what is called the battle of Krásnoe. Toward evening—after much disputing and many mistakes made by generals who did not go to their proper places, and after adjutants had been sent about with counterorders—when it had become plain that the enemy was everywhere in flight and that there could and would be no battle, Kutúzov left Krásnoe and went to Dóbroe whither his headquarters had that day been transferred.

The day was clear and frosty. Kutúzov rode to Dóbroe on his plump little white horse, followed by an enormous suite of discontented generals who whispered among themselves behind his back. All along the road groups of French prisoners captured that day (there were seven thousand of them) were crowding to warm themselves at campfires. Near Dóbroe an immense crowd of tattered prisoners, buzzing with talk and wrapped and bandaged in anything they had been able to get hold of, were standing in the road beside a long row of unharnessed French guns. At the approach of the commander in chief the buzz of talk ceased and all eyes were fixed on Kutúzov who, wearing a white cap with a red band and a padded overcoat that bulged on his round shoulders, moved slowly along the road on his white horse. One of the generals was reporting to him where the guns and prisoners had been captured.

Kutúzov seemed preoccupied and did not listen to what the general was saying. He screwed up his eyes with a dissatisfied look as he gazed attentively and fixedly at these prisoners, who presented a specially wretched appearance. Most of them were disfigured by frost-bitten noses and cheeks, and nearly all had red, swollen and festering eyes.

One group of the French stood close to the road, and two of them, one of whom had his face covered with sores, were tearing a piece of raw flesh with their hands. There was something horrible and bestial in the fleeting glance they threw at the riders and in the malevolent expression with which, after a glance at Kutúzov, the soldier with the sores immediately turned away and went on with what he was doing.

Kutúzov looked long and intently at these two soldiers. He puckered his face, screwed up his eyes, and pensively swayed his head. At another spot he noticed a Russian soldier laughingly patting a Frenchman on the shoulder, saying something to him in a friendly manner, and Kutúzov with the same expression on his face again swayed his head.

“What were you saying?” he asked the general, who continuing his report directed the commander in chief’s attention to some standards captured from the French and standing in front of the Preobrazhénsk regiment.

“Ah, the standards!” said Kutúzov, evidently detaching himself with difficulty from the thoughts that preoccupied him.

He looked about him absently. Thousands of eyes were looking at him from all sides awaiting a word from him.

He stopped in front of the Preobrazhénsk regiment, sighed deeply, and closed his eyes. One of his suite beckoned to the soldiers carrying the standards to advance and surround the commander in chief with them. Kutúzov was silent for a few seconds and then, submitting with evident reluctance to the duty imposed by his position, raised his head and began to speak. A throng of officers surrounded him. He looked attentively around at the circle of officers, recognizing several of them.

“I thank you all!” he said, addressing the soldiers and then again the officers. In the stillness around him his slowly uttered words were distinctly heard. “I thank you all for your hard and faithful service. The victory is complete and Russia will not forget you! Honor to you forever.”

He paused and looked around.

“Lower its head, lower it!” he said to a soldier who had accidentally lowered the French eagle he was holding before the Preobrazhénsk standards. “Lower, lower, that’s it. Hurrah lads!” he added, addressing the men with a rapid movement of his chin.

“Hur-r-rah!” roared thousands of voices.

While the soldiers were shouting Kutúzov leaned forward in his saddle and bowed his head, and his eye lit up with a mild and apparently ironic gleam.

“You see, brothers...” said he when the shouts had ceased... and all at once his voice and the expression of his face changed. It was no longer the commander in chief speaking but an ordinary old man who wanted to tell his comrades something very important.

There was a stir among the throng of officers and in the ranks of the soldiers, who moved that they might hear better what he was going to say.

“You see, brothers, I know it’s hard for you, but it can’t be helped! Bear up; it won’t be for long now! We’ll see our visitors off and then we’ll rest. The Tsar won’t forget your service. It is hard for you, but still you are at home while they—you see what they have come to,” said he, pointing to the prisoners. “Worse off than our poorest beggars. While they were strong we didn’t spare ourselves, but now we may even pity them. They are human beings too. Isn’t it so, lads?”

He looked around, and in the direct, respectful, wondering gaze fixed upon him he read sympathy with what he had said. His face grew brighter and brighter with an old man’s mild smile, which drew the corners of his lips and eyes into a cluster of wrinkles. He ceased speaking and bowed his head as if in perplexity.

“But after all who asked them here? Serves them right, the bloody bastards!” he cried, suddenly lifting his head.

And flourishing his whip he rode off at a gallop for the first time during the whole campaign, and left the broken ranks of the soldiers laughing joyfully and shouting “Hurrah!”

Kutúzov’s words were hardly understood by the troops. No one could have repeated the field marshal’s address, begun solemnly and then changing into an old man’s simplehearted talk; but the hearty sincerity of that speech, the feeling of majestic triumph combined with pity for the foe and consciousness of the justice of our cause, exactly expressed by that old man’s good-natured expletives, was not merely understood but lay in the soul of every soldier and found expression in their joyous and long-sustained shouts. Afterwards when one of the generals addressed Kutúzov asking whether he wished his calèche to be sent for, Kutúzov in answering unexpectedly gave a sob, being evidently greatly moved.