Book VIII, Chapter IV

That very day (September the 14th), Napoleon, being at length persuaded that Kutusoff had not thrown himself on his right flank, rejoined his advanced guard. He mounted his horse a few leagues from Moscow. He marched slowly and cautiously, sending scouts before him to examine the woods and the ravines, and to ascend all the eminences to look out for the enemy's army. A battle was expected: the ground favoured the opinion: works were begun, but had all been abandoned, and we experienced not the slightest resistance.

At length the last eminence only remained to be passed: it is contiguous to Moscow, which it commands. It is called the Hill of Salvation, because, on its summit, the inhabitants, at sight of their holy city, cross and prostrate themselves. Our scouts had soon gained the top of this hill. It was two o'clock: the sun caused this great city to glisten with a thousand colours. Struck with astonishment at the sight, they paused, exclaiming, "Moscow! Moscow!" Every one quickened his pace; the troops hurried on in disorder; and the whole army, clapping their hands, repeated with transport, "Moscow! Moscow!" just as sailors shout "Land! land!" at the conclusion of a long and toilsome voyage.

At the sight of this gilded city, of this brilliant knot uniting Asia and Europe, of this magnificent emporium of the luxury, the manners, and the arts of the two fairest divisions of the globe, we stood still in proud contemplation. What a glorious day had now arrived! It would furnish the grandest, the most brilliant recollection of our whole lives. We felt that at this moment all our actions would engage the attention of the astonished universe; and that every one of our movements, however trivial, would be recorded by history.

On this immense and imposing theatre we marched, accompanied, as it were, by the acclamations of all nations: proud of exalting our grateful age above all other ages, we already beheld it great from our greatness, and completely irradiated by our glory.

At our return, already so ardently wished for, with what almost respectful consideration, with what enthusiasm should we be received by our wives, our countrymen, and even by our parents! We should form, during the rest of our lives, a particular class of beings, at whom they would not look but with astonishment, to whom they would not listen but with mingled curiosity and admiration! Crowds would throng about us wherever we passed; they would catch up our most unmeaning words. This miraculous conquest would surround us with a halo of glory: henceforward people would fancy that they breathed about us an air of prodigy and wonder.

…
At that moment, dangers, sufferings were all forgotten. Was it possible to purchase too dearly the proud felicity of being able to say, during the rest of life, "I belonged to the army of Moscow!"

…

Napoleon himself hastened up. He paused in transport: an exclamation of joy escaped his lips. Ever since the great battle, the discontented marshals had shunned him: but at the sight of captive Moscow, at the intelligence of the arrival of a flag of truce, struck with so important a result, and intoxicated with all the enthusiasm of glory, they forgot their grievances. They pressed around the emperor, paying homage to his good fortune, and already tempted to attribute to his genius the little pains he had taken on the 7th to complete his victory.

But in Napoleon first emotions were of short duration. He had too much to think of, to indulge his sensations for any length of time. His first exclamation was: "There, at last, is that famous city!" and the second: "It was high time!"

…

Anxiety, however, soon began to take possession of his mind. On his left and right he already beheld Prince Eugene and Poniatowski approaching the hostile city; Murat, with his scouts, had already reached the entrance of the suburbs, and yet no deputation appeared: an officer, sent by Miloradowitch, merely came to declare that his general would set fire to the city, if his rear was not allowed time to evacuate it.

Napoleon granted every demand.

…

Meanwhile the day was declining, and Moscow continued dull, silent, and as it were inanimate. The anxiety of the emperor increased; the impatience of the soldiers became more difficult to be repressed. Some officers ventured within the walls of the city. "Moscow is deserted!"

At this intelligence, which he angrily refused to credit, Napoleon descended the Hill of Salvation, and approached the Moskwa and the Dorogomilow gate. He paused once more, but in vain, at the entry of that barrier. Murat urged him. "Well!" replied he, "enter then, since they wish it!" He recommended the strictest discipline; he still indulged hopes. "Perhaps these inhabitants do not even know how to surrender: for here every thing is new; they to us, and we to them."

Reports now began to succeed each other: they all agreed. Some Frenchmen, inhabitants of Moscow, ventured to quit the hiding-place which for some days had concealed them from the fury of the populace, and confirmed the fatal tidings. The emperor called Daru. "Moscow deserted!" exclaimed he: "what an improbable story! We must know the truth of it. Go and bring me the boyars." He imagined that those men, stiff with pride, or paralysed with terror, were fixed motionless in their houses: and he, who had hitherto been always met by the submission of the vanquished, provoked their confidence, and anticipated their prayers.
How, indeed, was it possible for him to persuade himself, that so many magnificent palaces, so many splendid temples, so many rich mercantile establishments, were forsaken by their owners, like the paltry hamlets through which he had recently passed. Daru's mission however was fruitless. Not a Muscovite was to be seen; not the least smoke rose from a single chimney; not the slightest noise issued from this immense and populous city; its three hundred thousand inhabitants seemed to be struck dumb and motionless by enchantment: it was the silence of the desert!

But such was the incredulity of Napoleon, that he was not yet convinced, and waited for farther information. At length, an officer, determined to gratify him, or persuaded that whatever the Emperor willed must necessarily be accomplished, entered the city, seized five or six vagabonds, drove them before his horse to the Emperor, and imagined that he had brought him a deputation. From the first words they uttered, Napoleon discovered that the persons before him were only indigent labourers.

It was not till then that he ceased to doubt the entire evacuation of Moscow, and lost all the hopes that he had built upon it. He shrugged his shoulders, and with that contemptuous look with which he met every thing that crossed his wishes, he exclaimed, "Ah! the Russians know not yet the effect which the taking of their capital will produce upon them!"

Book VIII, Chapter VI

…

Two officers had taken up their quarters in one of the buildings of the Kremlin. The view hence embraced the north and west of the city. About midnight they were awakened by an extraordinary light. They looked and beheld palaces filled with flames, which at first merely illuminated, but presently consumed these elegant and noble structures. They observed that the north wind drove these flames directly towards the Kremlin, and became alarmed for the safety of that fortress in which the flower of their army and its commander reposed. They were apprehensive also for the surrounding houses, where our soldiers, attendants and horses, weary and exhausted, were doubtless buried in profound sleep. Sparks and burning fragments were already flying over the roofs of the Kremlin, when the wind, shifting from north to west, blew them in another direction.

…

It was at this moment that the furious flames were driven from all quarters with the greatest violence towards the Kremlin; for the wind, attracted no doubt by this vast combustion, increased every moment in strength. The flower of the army and the Emperor would have been destroyed, if but one of the brands that flew over our heads had alighted on one of the powder-waggons. Thus upon each of the sparks that were for several hours floating in the air, depended the fate of the whole army.

…
But on the 6th of November, the heavens declared against us. Their azure disappeared. The army marched enveloped in cold fogs. These fogs became thicker, and presently an immense cloud descended upon it in large flakes of snow. It seemed as if the very sky was falling, and joining the earth and our enemies to complete our destruction. All objects changed their appearance, and became confounded, and not to be recognised again; we proceeded, without knowing where we were, without perceiving the point to which we were bound; every thing was transformed into an obstacle. While the soldier was struggling with the tempest of wind and snow, the flakes, driven by the storm, lodged and accumulated in every hollow; their surfaces concealed unknown abysses, which perfidiously opened beneath our feet. There the men were engulfed, and the weakest, resigning themselves to their fate, found a grave in these snow-pits.

Those who followed turned aside, but the storm drove into their faces both the snow that was descending from the sky, and that which it raised from the ground: it seemed bent on opposing their progress. The Russian winter, under this new form, attacked them on all sides: it penetrated through their light garments and their torn shoes and boots. Their wet clothes froze upon their bodies; an icy envelope encased them and stiffened all their limbs. A keen and violent wind interrupted respiration: it seized their breath at the moment when they exhaled it, and converted it into icicles, which hung from their beards all round their mouths.

The unfortunate creatures still crawled on, shivering, till the snow, gathering like balls under their feet, or the fragment of some broken article, a branch of a tree, or the body of one of their comrades, caused them to stumble and fall. There they groaned in vain; the snow soon covered them; slight hillocks marked the spot where they lay: such was their only grave! The road was studded with these undulations, like a cemetery: the most intrepid and the most indifferent were affected; they passed on quickly with averted looks. But before them, around them, there was nothing but snow: this immense and dreary uniformity extended farther than the eye could reach; the imagination was astounded; it was like a vast winding-sheet which Nature had thrown over the army. The only objects not enveloped by it, were some gloomy pines, trees of the tombs, with their funeral verdure, the motionless aspect of their gigantic black trunks and their dismal look, which completed the doleful appearance of a general mourning, and of an army dying amidst a nature already dead.

Every thing, even to their very arms, still offensive at Malo-Yaroslavetz, but since then defensive only, now turned against them. These seemed to their frozen limbs insupportably heavy, in the frequent falls which they experienced, they dropped from their hands and were broken or buried in the snow. If they rose again, it was without them; for they did not throw them away; hunger and cold wrested them from their grasp. The fingers of many others were frozen to the musket which they still held, which deprived them of the motion necessary for keeping up some degree of warmth and life.
Most of them, attracted by the sight of by-paths, dispersed themselves over the country, in hopes of finding bread and shelter for the coming night: but, on their first passage, all had been laid waste to the extent of seven or eight leagues; they met with nothing but Cossacks, and an armed population, which encompassed, wounded, and stripped them naked, and then left them, with ferocious bursts of laughter, to expire on the snow. These people, who had risen at the call of Alexander and Kutusoff, and who had not then learned, as they since have, to avenge nobly a country which they were unable to defend, hovered on both flanks of the army under favour of the woods. Those whom they did not despatch with their pikes and hatchets, they brought back to the fatal and all-devouring high road.

Night then came on—a night of sixteen hours! But on that snow which covered every thing, they knew not where to halt, where to sit, where to lie down, where to find some root or other to eat, and dry wood to kindle a fire! … The pines, laden with frost, obstinately resisted the flames; their snow, that from the sky which yet continued to fall fast, and that on the ground, which melted with the efforts of the soldiers, and the effect of the first fires, extinguished those fires, as well as the strength and spirits of the men.

When at length the flames gained the ascendancy, the officers and soldiers around them prepared their wretched repast; it consisted of lean and bloody pieces of flesh torn from the horses that were knocked up, and at most a few spoonfuls of rye-flour mixed with snow-water. Next morning circular ranges of soldiers extended lifeless marked the bivouacs (camps); and the ground about them was strewed with the bodies of several thousand horses.

…

It was in this manner that, after this deluge of snow, and the increase of cold which it foreboded, each, whether officer or soldier, preserved or lost his fortitude, according to his disposition, his age, and his constitution. That one of our leaders who had hitherto been the strictest in enforcing discipline, now paid little attention to it. Thrown out of all his fixed ideas of regularity, order, and method, he was seized with despair at the sight of such universal disorder, and conceiving, before the others, that all was lost, he felt himself ready to abandon all.

…

Book XI, Chapter XIII

Napoleon had just arrived there amidst a crowd of dying men, devoured with chagrin (shame), but not allowing the least emotion to exhibit itself in his countenance, at the sight of these unhappy men's sufferings, who, on the other hand, had allowed no murmurs to escape them in his presence. It is true that a seditious (rebelling) movement was impossible; it would have required an additional effort, as the strength of every man was fully occupied in struggling with hunger, cold, and fatigue; it would have required union, agreement, and mutual understanding, while famine and so many evils separated and isolated them, by concentrating every man's feelings completely in himself. Far from exhausting themselves in provocations or complaints, they marched along silently, exerting all their efforts against a hostile atmosphere, and diverted from every other idea by a state of continual action and suffering. Their physical wants absorbed
their whole moral strength; they thus lived mechanically in their sensations, continuing in their duty from recollection, from the impressions which they had received in better times, and in no slight degree from that sense of honour and love of glory which had been inspired by twenty years of victory, and the warmth of which still survived and struggled within them.

The authority of the commanders also remained complete and respected, because it had always been eminently paternal, and because the dangers, the triumphs, and the calamities had always been shared in common. It was an unhappy family, the head of which was perhaps the most to be pitied. The Emperor and the grand army, therefore, preserved towards each other a melancholy and noble silence; they were both too proud to utter complaints, and too experienced not to feel the inutility (uselessness) of them.

…

His manner was kind and flattering to them all; afterwards, having assembled them at his table, he complimented them for their noble actions during the campaign. As to himself, the only confession he made of his temerity (recklessness) was couched in these words: "If I had been born to the throne, if I had been a Bourbon, it would have been easy for me not to have committed any faults."

When their entertainment was over, he made Prince Eugene read to them his twenty-ninth bulletin; after which, declaring aloud what he had already confided to each of them, he told them, "that he was about to depart that very night with Duroc, Caulaincourt, and Lobau, for Paris. That his presence there was indispensable for France as well as for the remains of his unfortunate army. It was there only he could take measures for keeping the Austrians and Prussians in check. These nations would certainly pause before they declared war against him, when they saw him at the head of the French nation, and a fresh army of twelve hundred thousand men."

…

In conclusion, "I leave the King of Naples to command the army. I hope that you will yield him the same obedience as you would to myself, and that the greatest harmony will prevail among you."

As it was now ten o'clock at night, he then rose, squeezed their hands affectionately, embraced them, and departed.