

THE APOCRYPHAL NAPOLEON

BOOK ONE

Chapter One *MOSCOW*

Old Russians have more than love for their ancient capital; it is devotion. For them, Moscow is the holy city, and its sight reminds them of God; so, when they arrive on Mount Salvation and they perceive their Jerusalem, they kneel down and salute it by making the sign of the cross.

The French army, arriving on the fourteenth of September on the summit of that mountain, had something of the enthusiasm of the Muscovites; and when the Emperor, having moved a few toises ahead of the silently climbing army, was the first to set foot on the topmost ridge, and he shouted "Soldiers! Behold Moscow!" that cry was repeated like thunder, and the last ranks, who could not see anything yet, also cried: "Behold Moscow!"

It was there, that city, with its thirty-two districts, its thousand bell-towers, its golden cupolas ; its Oriental, Indian, Gothic and Christian spires; an immense city undulating among the numerous hills on which it rests, as if a caravan of all the peoples in the world had paused there and erected its tents.

The French army, deploying over Mount Salvation, contemplated that magnificent spectacle, parading dazzled eyes over the heavy towers of the Kremlin with the great bell tower Ivan sparkling.

"There it is!" said the Emperor, spurring his white horse, and he traversed the ranks with the splendor of the conqueror illuminating his face.

Meanwhile, the army continued its march.

"Halt!" he cried; and his order tumbled like a cascade over all the ranks, a thousand obedient voices, from Maréchal to sergeant, shouting "Halt!" in their turn.

The generals gathered around him, and he held council before the holy city.

It appeared calm and submissive, like a vanquished enemy, trembling, but perhaps too silent.

The general was waiting for it to speak.

"They're not coming," he murmured; and he marched rapidly into the midst of his men, who stepped back as he approached, on the lookout for whatever thought escaped his lowered eyes.

Then, a quarter of an hour later, as he grew tired of waiting for something, he asked King Murat¹ what the calm signified.

"Who would have thought," he said, "that some boyar would not have come out of the capital with the useless golden keys of the city?"

At the same time, an orderly officer appeared; he announced that General Miloradovich² had evacuated the city and that his rearguard had already left.

Another officer came then with a few Frenchmen found at the gates of Moscow; they told him that it was deserted.

Two hundred and fifty thousand Muscovites had withdrawn from their Jerusalem.

Moscow was deserted.

¹ Joachim Murat (1767-1815) was Napoléon's brother-in-law, married to his sister, Catherine; he captured the canons that fired Napoléon's famous "whiff of grapeshot" in 1795 and fought beside him from then on; he was appointed King of Naples, or King of the Two Sicilies, in 1808. In our history he attempted to hold on to his crown after Napoléon's fall but was defeated in battle, and fled to Corsica; he tried unsuccessfully to organize an insurrection in Calabria, but was captured, charged with treason and shot.

² Mikhail Miloradovich (1725-1798) negotiated the surrender of Moscow in the wake of the battle of Borodino.

“Forward march, then,” said the Emperor. “It’s for my army to repopulate it.”

Chapter II
ROSTOPCHIN

Napoléon liked to sleep in the beds of other kings and to repose in the palaces from which his appearance exiled them. The army received the order to remain in the outlying districts, while he went straight to the Kremlin, and there, when evening came, he strolled in the highest towers, alone and silent, gazing at the calm of a city devoid of life and a sky devoid of sun; all that was bleak and dolorous for such an active soul.

He saw his army, established in the distant districts; in the city, a long silence reigned, and calm everywhere, except for a few scattered palaces that seemed to be animated by the presence of generals who had chosen them for their dwellings.

Only the barbaric cries, Scythian voices, were audible at intervals; one might have thought that they were responding to one another.

Midnight chimed. The horizon turned red. From the middle of the city flames rose up; it was the bazaar that was burning, then the churches, then the houses, and then the suburbs; fire burst forth everywhere; Moscow reappeared in the darkness, sparkling, with its thousand flaming bell-towers and its cupolas of fire.

The Emperor understood that disaster; he remembered Wilna, Smolensk and the burning villages that had strewn his route.

“Let it die, then!” he cried, and he gave orders for the army to leave the infernal city immediately.

The soldiers had already woken up before that order. The cry of “Fire!” resounded everywhere, but only uttered by French voices, and the first sleep in the conquered city had been troubled by the horror of the conflagration.

The orders were carried out. At five o’clock in the morning, the troops fell back outside Moscow and reclimbed the slope of Mount Salvation. Scouts had penetrated as far as Petrovsky, a palace of the czars a league from the capital, preparing it for the Emperor, who went there with his general staff, and, half a league further on, a manor of grandiose appearance having been identified, General Kirgener³ went there with the engineers in order to take possession of it and fortify the position.

Within view of the manor, however, only a few rifle-shots away, swirls of smoke were seen escaping from it, followed by bright flames and partial explosions. The magnificent habitation, enveloped completely, soon appeared to be nothing but an immense hearth. In the distance, a few carriages were drawing away with great rapidity. General Kirgener ordered their pursuit, but they were so far ahead that there was no chance of catching them, and they were already disappearing from view when they fell into the midst of a party of Frenchmen. Other soldiers arrived and took them to the general.

In the principal carriage there was a middle-aged man, tall and thin, with a grave face and a high forehead; at the first attack he had tried to defend himself, but, seeing that longer resistance was vain, he surrendered and appeared before General Kirgener, who, not recognizing any external sign on the stranger, asked him his name.

“What does it matter to you?” replied the unknown man.

Irritated by that response, which he thought insolent, the General was already thinking that he ought to take vengeance for it when the unknown man said to him: “My position is such, Monsieur, that it is to the Emperor alone that I ought to speak and make myself known.”

The general hesitated, but the man’s self-confidence caused him to give in, and he sent him to Petrovsky.

³ François Joseph Kirgener, Baron de Planta (1766-1813).

The Emperor was visiting the posts of that residence and traversing one of the courtyards when the unknown man's carriage came into it. An officer who was following it dismounted and made known the circumstances of the capture and the prisoner's intention only to explain himself to the Emperor.

Napoléon looked at the stranger fixedly, gave the order to evacuate the courtyard, and, when he was alone with Duroc⁴ and the man he asked: "Who are you?"

"A man who thought he could escape Your Majesty's vengeance but who, charged with an immense action, has no fear of rendering himself responsible and making himself known. I am the governor of Moscow, Rostopchin.⁵

"And what is that action?" demanded the Emperor, going pale.

"Your Majesty knows that and can see it." And Rostopchin indicated with his arm the lake of fire on which the holy city was drowning.

"The fire!"

"Yes, Sire."

"It's the work of a barbarian, Monsieur; your consciousness of the crime ought to divine the punishment."

"It will be my last sacrifice, Monsieur; I await it calmly."

"A sacrifice! What do you mean?"

"I had my entire fortune in Moscow and in my manor house; it was in my own home that the fire was first set. I have sacrificed everything for my fatherland; all that is yet lacking is my life."

"Say that you have sacrificed your fatherland by inundating it with the flames that are reducing it to ashes."

"Since it is only flames and ashes that Your Majesty cannot vanquish!"

The Emperor strode back and forth rapidly, his lips pale and quivering. "What rage!" he said. "What madness! You wanted to be the Russian Brutus, Monsieur, but are they not your children that you have killed?"

"It is for my fatherland to judge me, Sire."

"Your fatherland!" He stopped, looking at him with glittering eyes. "Your fatherland! But what tells me that it is not a horrible holocaust that you have made to your sovereign? What tells me that it is not the sacrifice of Moscow to Petersburg, the old Muscovy that you are immolating to the new Russia?" Drawing nearer to him, he said, with a bitter smile: "How much did he pay you for your fire?"

Rostopchin frowned and went pale, perhaps with anger. "Russia will judge me after Your Majesty, and people will speak of me differently, Sire, when I have been shot."

"A firing squad is the execution of the brave, Monsieur, and fire..."

"Can only be a cowardice?"

"An infernal mystery!" murmured Napoléon, stepping back in astonishment. A few seconds later, he added: "If there's nothing in all that but blind patriotism..." He did not complete the sentence.

"Your Majesty has judged me," said Rostopchin, joyfully. "I can die."

"No! You don't deserve it, nor is it worth the effort, probably. Give him a safe conduct. Go, Monsieur, your action remains entirely yours, but whatever it might be, doubt will wither it. Go."

Rostopchin left, and the Emperor went back into the palace.

Chapter III *THE ARMY'S DEPARTURE*

⁴ Géraud Duroc, Duc de Frioul (1772-1813) was the Maréchal responsible for measures taken to secure Napoléon's personal safety, in France and on campaign.

⁵ Fyodor Rostopchin (1763-1826) ordered the evacuation of Moscow after Borodino, but left a contingent of police behind with orders to burn the city—he subsequently denied having done so, but eventually admitted it.

The French army had appeared before Moscow sooner than the Russians expected, so, instead of finding it in ashes, the fire had hardly started when it arrived. The military stores had not been consumed, and immense resources were still found in the city, where the Grande Armée could rest and wait for reinforcements.

Meanwhile, the Emperor, who did not want to let time go by uselessly and who wanted to take advantage of the season, still favorable, ordered the departure for the twentieth of September, and after having assembled a council he decided to march on Petersburg.

On the morning of the twentieth, the Grande Armée, which had been joined by the corps of Eugène and Poniatowski,⁶ set forth, numbering one hundred and sixty thousand men and four hundred pieces of artillery. Before its departure it witnessed the last sighs of Moscow; the sea of fire had devoured itself, and the palpitating city was only throwing off a few swirls of smoke and ash here and there. The Emperor, showing it to the army disdainfully, and for the last time, said: “There is only one capital of Russia now; let’s march on it.”⁷

⁶ Eugène de Beauharnais (1781-1824) was Napoléon’s stepson, the son of the Empress Josephine; he was appointed Viceroy of Italy by Napoléon and was in command of the Fourth corps during the Russian campaign; in our history he took command of the retreating army after Napoléon and Murat left it. Prince Jozef Poniatowski (1763-1813) was in command of the Fifth Corps during the Russian campaign; his Polish troops were the first to enter Moscow on 14 September, and he fought in the rearguard during the retreat.

⁷ In our history, Napoléon stayed in Moscow for a month, trying to negotiate a peace with Alexander I, unsuccessfully. He then advanced on Kaluga, but the Russians refused to commit themselves to a pitched battle, continuing to harass the exhausted French army until it was forced to retreat; hunger and cold devastated the forces, which eventually suffered fatal casualties well in advance of three hundred thousand, with a further hundred thousand taken prisoner—losses from which it never recovered.