

INCOGNITO

Napoleon made his own plans for departure. Three sledges were provided, the first prepared to carry Napoleon and Caulaincourt, whose title as the Duke of Vicenza the Emperor proposed to assume whilst travelling incognito, although their figures were strikingly dissimilar, Caulaincourt being tall and raw-boned. But no one present saw fit to question the Emperor's plans. You didn't tell the Emperor Napoleon he was shorter and fatter than the travelling companion he was intent on pretending to be. And neither did Caulaincourt register any reservations about being reduced to the role of valet to himself. The Chief of Staff Berthier was to be left behind, separated from Napoleon for the first time in sixteen years. Upon realising this he protested vehemently, but Napoleon explained he was relying on Berthier's continued presence to maintain continuity with the troops. Although he fully realised what an honour it would be to travel in the Emperor's exclusive company for so long a journey, he was sure Berthier could see where his duties lay. Berthier looked at Caulaincourt, Caulaincourt looked at the ceiling. Berthier instructed his amanuensis to record his Emperor's observation for posterity.

There was a general audience, at which were present General Murat, Eugène and Marshal Ney. The Emperor appointed Murat as head of the Grande Armée in his absence, and promised to return with a fresh army of 1,200,000 men he would raise once he again reached Paris. He assured all present to have no fear, for the Russian pursuit was but temporary. Nor need they fear Prussian retribution as they marched westwards, for his new army would keep his reluctant Germanic allies well in line. No one dared ask Napoleon exactly where his new army was to come from.

Of the Austrians also he assured the assembled company there was no threat. After all, was he, the Emperor Napoleon, not married to the Emperor of Austria's daughter? There followed a happy nodding of diplomatic heads, for here was an incontrovertible fact about which all could agree. As to the ramifications of the marriage, if such had been discussed, there would still have been much rancour, but *that the Emperor was married, and to whom*, there could be no disagreement whatsoever. Napoleon then ordered Marshal Ney to Vilnius to reorganize the army, and to strike in all due course such a blow as would discourage further Cossack advance. Lastly, the Emperor wished his audience safe winter quarters westwards beyond the River Niemen. He then took their affectionate farewell, adding how pleased he was to leave them in such fine and courageous spirits. Finally, the Emperor Napoleon departed from Smorgoni at the late hour of ten o'clock at night. It was the 5th of December 1812, and he planned to be back in Paris before Christmas.

The sledges travelled as fast as the weather allowed. The first for Napoleon and Caulaincourt, the second for two officers of rank, the third for one Mameluke Roustan and another anonymous domestic. The sledgers shivered across Lithuania, their plight made all the colder by travelling at first only at night for greater safety, and because all spare clothing was given up to keep the pretend Duke of Vicenza as warm as possible. Caulaincourt suffered particularly in this regard, his master insisting he play the part of valet to perfection. Napoleon found playing the part of someone else had stranger effects than he'd anticipated. He found himself vomiting virtually whatever he ate, and started to wonder as to the real Duke of Vicenza's health. Had he taken on more of his companion's personality than he'd bargained for?

He had mad cravings for chocolates and ice cream. Rather like a pregnant woman he thought, before dismissing the notion as utterly ludicrous and beneath him.

Briefly, the thought of rendezvous with the Empress Marie-Louise brought a gallop to his heart, but then the stomach pains which had plagued him throughout the campaign started over again. He still missed Josephine, but what was done was done. There's had been a childless union after all, and Emperors need offspring. And male ones at that. Whatever her sadness, he was sure Josephine understood. He delighted at the thought of seeing his young son again, the infant King of Rome, for whom he had such great plans.

For some time as the sledges battled over the rucks and tranches of the frozen snow, Napoleon found himself comparing Marie-Louise and Josephine in bed. Josephine was the more experienced, and knew the more to please him, and yet there was a familiarity about her that had latterly dampened passion. Marie-Louise on the other hand was all innocence, her delicate fair skin as if untouched. The innocence had always excited him, as did the thought of entry, for it was more than sexual. When Napoleon entered Marie-Louise he was entering into the old aristocracies of Europe, he was uniting the Bonaparte dynasty with that of the ancient Habsburgs! When he entered Marie-Louise, he became the new Charlemagne! When he entered Marie-Louise he became more powerful than the Holy Roman Empire itself! He fell asleep at this pleasing juncture, dozed briefly, and woke up again still thinking of Marie-Louise's fair and delicate skin. And then he dreamed of Josephine again, her unembarrassed boudoir ease such a contrast to the innocent shyness of the new Empress. With Josephine there were no limits, she knew it all. With Marie-Louise it

was still rather like walking on egg shells. She still thought of etiquette in bed! How little did she know of rough passion! He smiled to himself as he reflected that what was *ideally* wanted was both of them in bed together. *Jouissance!* Josephine could teach Marie-Louise of all his needs. And then something odd happened. Or rather didn't happen. For the first time in his life, Napoleon found his loins were no longer stirring at the thought of womankind. Not even at the thought of his two favourite women together!

It was odd, and made him question the real Duke of Vicenza's personality still further. And if he was playing Caulaincourt, did the real Caulaincourt know what Napoleon was thinking? Another odd thought. He decided to think no more about it, save to put it down to the cold. But as he felt his loins through his gloves to confirm the absence of any rising, further odd thoughts beset him, each one seemingly odder than the last. He felt he'd put on weight, which seemed an impossibility given the meagreness of his fugitive diet. And so as the sledges sped on, he dismissed the possibility as a delusion. But was this the only delusion, or were there others? For the first time in his life since he was an *étoile* of the military school at Brienne, Napoleon found himself questioning his own judgement. *Very odd indeed.* The Emperor felt strangely ill at ease.

There were several scares, not least at the hamlet of Youpranoni, where the party only narrowly escaped being taken by the Russian partisan Seslavin. And the wolves tracked our travellers relentlessly each night, keeping their distance from the rifles, but only too eager to pounce at the first sign of calamity. Finally, the Emperor incognito and entourage reached Warsaw on the 10th of December 1812. Here they

encountered the Abbé de Pradt, then ambassador of France to the Diet of Poland, endeavouring to reconcile the various rumours which poured from every quarter as to his Emperor's and the Grande Armée's welfare. It wasn't outright victory, but that didn't mean it was outright defeat. He had heard from Vilnius of a victory crossing the Beresina, with some 6,000 Russian prisoners taken. This report however lived uneasily with the news of a general withdrawal across the River Niemen, but then the withdrawal could be tactical. The Emperor's strategic genius had often before seemed like foolhardiness until the final acts of the campaign. He was sure the Grande Armée would rise again. The Abbé had just so reassured himself, and practised a summarising speech of the above which he would diplomatically disseminate on the morrow, when a figure like a spectre, wrapped in furs stiffened with hoar-frost, stalked into his apartments, supported, for the figure was most weary, by the anonymous domestic of the third sledge. It was with shock and difficulty that the Abbé recognised the shivering traveller as Caulaincourt, the Duke of Vicenza (the real one).

"You here, Caulaincourt?!" said the astonished ambassador prelate. "And where is the Emperor?"

"At the Hôtel d'Angleterre, waiting for you"

"Why not stop at the palace?"

"He travels incognito"

"Do you need anything?"

"Some Burgundy or Malaga brandy"

"All is at your service - but whither are you travelling?"

"To Paris"

"To Paris! But where is the army?"

"It no longer exists", said Caulaincourt, looking downwards to the floor.

"And the victory at Beresina - and the 6,000 prisoners?"

"We got across, that is all - the prisoners were a few hundred men, and they escaped. We have had other business than to guard them".

The Abbé de Pradt's curiosity far from satisfied, he hastened to the Hôtel d'Angleterre. In the courtyard stood three sledges in dilapidated condition. The Emperor Napoleon had not travelled on such vehicles, surely?! And where were the horses? The Abbé was just remarking to himself on the seeming absence of stabling facilities, when he was ushered most mysteriously into a back room, where a servant was blowing a fire made of green and incombustible wood. Then he saw the Emperor. He seemed at once both drawn, pale cheeked and yet much plumper than in recent portraits by David or by some rogue-ish copyist. And he seemed to be eating some kind of sweets from an inside pocket. Aniseed, if the aroma was to be believed. "Your Majesty", said the Abbé, wisely limiting himself to formal greetings in such unusual and testing circumstances. "Are you yourself?". It seemed a reasonable question. He had heard of the travel incognito, and here was his Emperor, dressed in a green pelise, covered with lace and lined with furs, and all the while walking agitatedly around the apartment as if to generate from his own movements the warmth the fire refused to create. "Monsieur l'Ambassador!" said Napoleon, turning suddenly round and standing stock still. The greeting seemed one of gaiety, which, given the news he had heard from Caulaincourt, the Abbé found most surprising. And so the Ambassador prelate limited himself once more to formal greetings and ingratiations as he helped Napoleon off with his cloak.

"Is everything to your Majesty's satisfaction?" he then inquired. Napoleon came closer to the inconstant fire, rubbing his hands vigorously against the flames. To the Abbé they seemed strangely hairless. And he noted silently Napoleon had not asked of his welfare. A sure sign the Emperor had weighty matters on his mind. "I would guess", said the Emperor, at length turning round from the fire, "that the minds of the inhabitants of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw have been much changed since they were led to believe the Grande Armée would free them from the Russian yoke. And, since they think they cannot be free Polanders, I would assume they are making renewed overtures to Prussia". "Most perspicacious your Majesty" replied the Ambassador.

The entrance of two Polish ministers checked the burgeoning conversation before its deliberations had proceeded further. Caulaincourt had obviously been busy relaying news of the Emperor's arrival. The Emperor's attention turned to the new arrivals immediately. "We must levy ten thousand Poles" he said, "and check the advance of these Russians. The French and the Poles are natural allies against the Muscovite barbarians of the east. A sword and a horse are all that is necessary. There is but a single step between the sublime and the ridiculous". The immediate relevance of this last remark struck the Abbé de Pradt as tangential to say the least, but he let it pass, assuming the mind of Napoleon to be much quicker and more fertile than his own. Clearly, he surmised, there had been set backs, but the mood of the Emperor reassured him nonetheless. At a time of crisis, once more it was clear that Napoleon Bonaparte knew *exactly what to do*.

The two Polish ministers congratulated the Emperor Napoleon on evading so many dangers.

"Dangers!", replied the Emperor, "none in the world. I live for agitation. The more I bustle the better I am. It is for the kings of old Europe to fatten in their palaces - horseback and the fields are for me. Why do I find you so much alarmed, gentlemen?"

"We are at a loss to gather the truth of the news about the Grande Armée" replied the two ministers. The Abbé could only admire the foolhardiness of such a bold observation, for it was the question much on his own mind. But then the ministers had never met Napoleon before.

"Bah!" replied the Emperor. "The Grande Armée is in a superb condition! I have 120,000 men - I have beat the Russians in every action. The army will recruit anew at Vilnius - I am going to bring up three hundred thousand men - Success will render the Russians foolhardy - I will give them battle once or twice upon the River Oder, and in a month I will be again on the Niemen!".

This was the news of regrouping the Abbé had been waiting for! Whatever the setbacks, to Napoleon's quick and agile mind the future seemed assured. Whereas to any common observer it would seem that by again reaching the Niemen the Emperor would only be marching to the same position he had gained without force the previous spring, in fact it was all part of a master plan to draw Alexander's army and the Cossacks from their snowy lairs! Oh, what genius did France still possess at her helm! The Ambassador moved closer to the fire, as if warmly reassured.

"I have more weight upon my throne, than at the head of the Grande Armée" said Napoleon, thinking darkly to himself of Malet's conspiracy. He noted the silence of the room that wrapped itself around his words, and mentally observed his own great insight. "Certainly, I quit my soldiers with regret. But I must watch Prussia" he continued. He thought of the Emperor Francis, the father of his beloved Marie-Louise. "And Austria too", he found himself adding. The head of the Habsburgs was an inconstant calculator! Why hadn't he seen it earlier? The Emperor had visions of his alliances unravelling around him in the Russian aftermath. And then his composure settled him once again. The situation was tenuous certainly, but only bold actions could remedy it. Turning abruptly, he fixed the Ambassador's eye.

"I have seen worse affairs than this. All that has happened goes for nothing - a mere misfortune, in which the enemy can claim no credit. It was the weather". Looks of alarm spread across the faces of the two Polish ministers. No less than the independence of Poland depended on Napoleon's success! The Emperor changed his tack. "I beat them everywhere - they wished to cut me off at the Beresina - but I made an ass of them all. I had good troops and cannon - the position was superb - five hundred metres of marsh we trudged across - a river. The river, usually of course it would be of no consequence, but the weather...". The Emperor's voice trailed off, lost in thought. Once more Napoleon felt the cold, and the sickness stirring in his stomach.

"Your Majesty". The Abbé received no answer. "Would your Majesty care for some brandy?". The Abbé poured some anyway. Napoleon sipped at it somewhat gingerly, and seemed to revive. "Gentlemen, I have said what must be said in the 29th Bulletin, which is already in urgent dispatch to Paris. There are men of strong and

there are men of feeble minds. It is whether we conquer ourselves that really matters". Napoleon wasn't quite sure whether he believed this last or not, and found himself crossing the Beresina once again. The ice floes cracked and creaked beneath the bridges. "All the world knows how such things are managed when I am in the field. I couldn't help that the river should have risen so with the rain and snow. It was of no consequence when we advanced. But still, I am the Emperor Napoleon!". The Emperor laughed. "And I am married to an Habsburg Princess!" The Emperor laughed some more, and the Abbé and the two ministers laughed with him. Such is the power of Emperors.

"In Russia, I could not help it freezing" the Emperor continued. "They told me every morning that I had lost 10,000 horses during the night - Well, farewell to them! Our Norman horses are less hardy than the Russians - they sink under ten degrees of cold below zero. It is the same with the men. There is but a short step from the sublime to the ridiculous. Look at the Bavarians. There is not one left. Perhaps it may be said that I stopped too long at Moscow; that may be true, but the weather was fine - the winter came on prematurely - besides, I expected peace. I sent Lauriston to treat for peace! I thought of going to St. Petersburg, and I had time enough to have done so. Bah! Well, we will make head at Vilnius. Ney is left there. Ha, ha, ha! It is a great political game, gentlemen. Nothing venture, nothing win after all".

"Quite so" said the Abbé. The two Polish ministers nodded uneasily. It seemed to them the venture was more theirs than Napoleon's. If the defeat of the Grande Armée was as they began to suspect, they would await the advance of the Cossacks into the Grand Duchy, whilst the guarantor of both their dreams and their forthcoming

disaster would most certainly depart. "It is but a small step from the sublime to the ridiculous" observed Napoleon once again. The two ministers coughed in alarmed agreement, the step seeming far too small for comfort.

Napoleon clapped his hands in front of the dying fire. "The Russians have shown great character. Their Emperor is beloved by his people - they have clouds of Cossacks. The peasants of the crown love their government. The nobility are all mounted on horseback. I made regular war on Alexander, but who could have expected the burning of Moscow?" The burning of Moscow! The hairs on the heads of the three listeners stood rigid at the very thought. What scale of calamity was this? "Aye, gentlemen". Even Napoleon seemed to acknowledge the dark destructions of bloody and hellish war that had been waged. How would it be if it were Paris that so burned? The Emperor's voice lowered to a penetrating, almost defensive, whisper. "Now they would lay it on us, but it was Rostopchin that did it. That sacrifice would have done honour to ancient Rome".

The fire went out. The Abbé and the two ministers stood in frozen despair as the Emperor paced ever faster up and down the room, desperate himself to keep warm, but still more desperate to find some brilliant manoeuvre that would yet engineer his and the destroyed Grande Armée's recovery. He returned to his project of raising 10,000 Polish swordsmen. The ministers explained the difficulties in conscripting such a number. Who would feed them? And where would the horses come from? The Polish stock was much diminished by the war already. Napoleon continued to walk, faster and faster, up and down, backwards and forwards across the room, seemingly oblivious to the reservations to his new strategy so raised. "I must

have them" he said. At last, as if exhausted, and nothing new concluded, his monologue ended, terminated finally by another utterance of the aphorism he had just rendered immortal concerning the close proximity of the ridiculous to the sublime. When finally the Emperor stopped pacing up and down, he discovered his three companions had their heads pointing firmly down towards the floor.

Eventually, the Abbé de Pradt inquired whether Napoleon intended to make way to Paris through Silesia. "Ha! Prussia" said the Emperor. "Do you think it no longer safe for me to travel through that kingdom?". The Ambassador lied, and observed he'd meant no such thing. "It's not safe for me anywhere outside the Tuileries" replied Napoleon. "There are rogues and opportunists everywhere". The burning of Moscow, the passage of the Beresina and the conspiracy of Malet all flamed at once to full fruition in his mind's eye. He raged within, his stomach sickened him once more, the flames grew higher and higher. "Is it my fault I am cast as the dictator of the world?" he screamed.

Caulaincourt re-entered the room, and seemed to have a calming effect on all present. The Duke of Vicenza's sledge was ready once more to depart. The Emperor immediately took on the Duke's identity again, as if relieved to be freed from himself. Meanwhile, Caulaincourt took a swig of brandy before resuming the role of his own valet, that sanguine breed to whom no man is a hero, as the Abbé could not at this juncture avoid reflecting. Napoleon broke briefly from his disguise to cut short the respectful wishes of all present for the preservation of his health, adding finally "I could not be in better health were the very devil in me". The two ministers were still anxious to raise the matter of Polish defence against the imminent Cossacks, but

Napoleon would brook no word of it. Caulaincourt coughed. He waited by the door impatient to escape, and the pretend Duke of Vicenza seemed in no mind to delay him. Duke and valet thus exited, the door was closed, and the horses sprung forward, nearly overturning the sledge as it crossed the courtyard and sped through the gate. And so the dictator of the world disappeared into the darkness.

The sledge sled on, making good progress for the addition of fresh horses, or rather horses and ponies, Caulaincourt having been unable to procure sufficient horses alone during the brief stop in the Grand Duchy. There were two horses and a pony on the right, one horse and two ponies on the left. The average stride on the left being thus shorter than on the right, the postillion had to frequently compensate the equine team's direction to the right in order to keep them on a straight path. Caulaincourt much admired the easy skill with which this was effected. Napoleon didn't notice.

Caulaincourt hadn't shaven for five days. He felt uncomfortable bearded, but remarked to himself that at least it helped fend off the cold from his face. His was a woolly, wholesome growth, thick with hoar-frost, yet warming nonetheless. Caulaincourt noticed that the Emperor was protected by no such abundance. For such an awesome specimen of heroic manhood, his beard was but light. Under Napoleon's chin was only a fine downy growth, and his cheeks lacked even that. So exposed to the elements, they were rosy red, almost like those of an over-aged cherub. Napoleon had to rub his cheeks for warmth with his gloved hands, whilst Caulaincourt's could remain firmly clasped in his lap throughout. The cold inside the sledge was so intense that the travellers breath froze on their eyebrows and formed icicles beneath their noses. The clothwork of the upholstery more properly resembled metallic sheets of

ice. Caulaincourt was desperate for sleep, but to sleep in such frozen circumstances for more than half an hour was to risk death, and the Emperor so obviously preoccupied with matters of state, Caulaincourt didn't trust to be woken in time from any slumbers he might take to, however welcome they might be. He thus resolved to stay awake until Paris.

The Emperor dozed off.

He was in Notre Dame. The gargoyles looked down on him, chanting mournfully. This is a prayer for the souls of the departed, for all the young men who've died before they'd even started, for all the mothers of France weeping broken hearted, this is a prayer for the souls of the departed. The souls came in a multitude from the altar, rising upwards towards the vaulted cathedral ceiling, which miraculously parted, allowing their journey to continue ever upwards, towards the Heavens. This is a prayer for the souls of the departed. Josephine was there too, holding in her arms a dead baby, which for one horrifying moment looked to Napoleon like the King of Rome. "This is for our love" she said, beckoning him to hold it. The Emperor declined, and, asking of its sex, and was relieved to hear it was a girl. Josephine burst into tears, and was led away arm in arm by a naked woman come to tend her grief. As the naked woman turned towards him, Napoleon recognised her for the Empress Marie-Louise. She was wearing a tiara and nothing more. Her Emperor couldn't help noticing the fullness of her breasts, or the inviting swing and swagger of her backside. She had been taking lessons from Josephine after all. The gargoyles turned on him, as if aware of his innermost thoughts. This is a prayer for the souls of the departed, for all the young men who died before they'd

even started. *More and more dead souls, a seeming infinitude, came up from the altar, with faces that seemed to Napoleon to be outside the spheres of retribution or forgiveness, knowing only an untroubled beatitude he had never seen before. The vaulted ceiling continued to open wider and wider, letting in an unearthly light that beckoned on the spirits ever skywards.* For all the mothers of France weeping broken hearted, this is a prayer for the souls of the departed, *sang the gargoyles, louder and louder, but with a perfect pitch in seeming contradiction of their distorted features.*

The Emperor woke up. Caulaincourt shivered, a sudden shaft of cold running down his back as if he was sitting next to the devil himself. The Emperor told Caulaincourt to stop singing. Caulaincourt said he hadn't been singing anything. The sledge came abruptly to a halt. They were at the Prussian border.

"Who is it?", said the guard

"The Duke of Vicenza and his valet", said Caulaincourt, at once dismounting.

"Where are you going?"

"To Dresden"

"What for?"

"It is private business"

This was the moment Caulaincourt had been dreading. Had news yet reached the border that Napoleon had left the Grande Armée? And if so, had news travelled also of the parlous state of the Grande Armée itself? If so, the Prussian king could have already switched allegiances, and issued the necessary warrants for his Emperor's arrest. Luckily it was dark, but his travelling companion retained the most famous visage in Europe. The guard walked around the sledge.

The Emperor-as-fugitive thought the real Duke of Vicenza. "Has he luck?". The Emperor always asked that to assess a man's practical value. And now, as Caulaincourt nervously observed, it applied to him. Would the guard open the door, or would he not? If he did, would the Emperor be recognised, or would he not? Or would he give himself away with his imperial presence? All these speculations seemed but small ways of raising the larger question. *Was Russia a temporary set back or the beginning of the end?* The guard rubbed on the window glass of the sledge, warming the frost with his elbow to partially dislodge it. "Have I luck?" Napoleon thought to himself from inside. He had wrapped his head, all but his nostrils and forehead, in furs, and was feigning sleep. "Have I the luck?". The guard peered inside. "Have I still the luck?" For the first time since he was an *étoile* of the military school at Paris, Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of the French, found himself questioning his *own sense of destiny!*

"He could die like that", said the guard

"He's not been asleep long", replied Caulaincourt. "And he's well wrapped up"

"More than we are"

The guard stamped his feet on the snowy ground.

"Sorry?", said Caulaincourt, noticing he had already started to copy the guard's movements without realising it. The two of them compounded the snow in two pairs of footprints some two yards apart.

"He's got half your furs wrapped round him, hasn't he?", said the guard.

"I gave them to him", said Caulaincourt.

"Dukes, kings and emperors. They're all the bleedin' same"

"I've only ever served one"

"What's in the trunks?" said guard.

"Personal effects"

"Personal what? I could keep you here all night"

"Wouldn't you rather be in your hut?"

"It's my duty to stop you. I've got my orders"

Caulaincourt had come to the conclusion that bribery was unlikely to work with this man, and yet was aware their meeting must move on. But just what did the guard want? The two of them were still stamping their feet up and down whilst moving nowhere. At length the guard moved back towards the partially defrosted window, which was already refreezing up.

"So what does your Duke want with Dresden then?"

"It's private. Very private"

"How very?"

The guard rubbed ferociously with his elbow on the window glass, making a circular viewing space some nine or ten inches in diameter. He peered in, beadily. The Emperor coughed involuntarily, and then moved his head towards the area of the window through which the guard looked in, as if moving in his sleep. The idea had been to block the guard's view as if innocently, but the movement seemed only to make the Prussian prosecutor more suspicious.

"I could ask him myself you know", said the guard, fixing his hand on the sledge door handle.

"He'd say the same thing as me, only he'd be much ruder", replied

Caulaincourt.

Napoleon suddenly became aware he still had the Imperial seal on his finger. He thought of taking it off, but was aware the guard still had one eye fixed on the window. And besides, to take off the seal he would have to take off his gloves first,

which, even allowing for such a somnambulant practice, would appear very strange in such cold weather, be he asleep or waking. And then, he suspected his digits to be so swollen with the cold that any removal would prove prolonged and problematic of itself. With the acute wisdom of a born leader, Napoleon left the Imperial seal where it was. He would yet need it. The guard turned the door handle. Both the real and the pretend Duke of Vicenza held their breath. The guard pulled the door towards him. It stuck. It had frozen solid.

"Just as well", said Caulaincourt. "You wake up the Duke of Vicenza at your peril"

"Look. You can't just wander around Europe without a bye or a leave you know", said the guard, by now indignant. "Ever since that Napoleon marched on Russia, it's been the same. People and persons of all sorts coming and going across the border like it was nobody's business but their own"

Caulaincourt decided to risk naked innocence. "Have you any news of the Grande Armée?"

"I don't know anything. And I don't care. All I care about is my border. Now, for the last time, I want to know exactly where you and your Duke are going, who you're going to see, and why"

The guard stamped his feet up and down again, compounding two new patches of snow in the vain effort to keep warm. Caulaincourt again found himself following suit, and, observing the tedium of this repetition, decided at once to take the initiative. He would speak to this truculent fellow as a knowing equal. He would confide in him, man to man. Caulaincourt took the guard to one side, placing his arm around his obstructor's shoulder as if in lasting friendship.

"Between you and me, it's a woman"

"What sort of a woman?"

"A very beautiful woman, who is quite smitten with the good Duke, as he is with her. Our trunks are full of presents for her"

"If it's a woman", said the guard, "then why the big secret? There are lots of women"

"This is a woman the Duchess of Vicenza doesn't know about"

"OOOOOOhhhhhh!"

"Now you see the delicacy?"

"Of course"

Caulaincourt congratulated himself. At the suggestion of adultery, the guard had quite changed his tune. An adulterer himself, doubtless. The guard smiled.

"Last summer I found my wife in a haystack with my brother. I went straight down to the asylum and found a lunatic to run them both through. And then I cried in church at the funeral with the best of them"

At this the guard laughed heartily, and slapped Caulaincourt hard on the back. Caulaincourt cursed his luck. He'd played the wrong tactic after all! Here was a fellow so morally indignant he was likely to have both himself and the Emperor arrested as conspirator to illicit fornication and committer of the very act respectively.

"What d'you think of that then? What d'you think of that?", rejoiced the guard.

"Very... Forthright", mused Caulaincourt

"Nobody makes a fool out of me"

"Clearly"

"Got any drink?", said the guard with great purpose.

"Only a little vodka", said Caulaincourt

"Let's have it then"

"The door's frozen up"

"Not the one you got out of"

"It's very rough"

"The rougher the better"

Caulaincourt had no choice but to oblige, albeit with great regret. The vodka he had taken from the Hôtel d'Angleterre was the only thing he had to keep his innards warm. He reached inside the sledge, and fumbled beneath the seating. His predicament was doubly troublesome, since he had told not even the Emperor that the vodka was there.

"What's that?", whispered Napoleon

"A passport"

Caulaincourt duly handed over the vodka to its wrongful owner.

"Can we go now?"

"You must have some food as well"

"But we'll starve"

"D'you want to go, or don't you?"

Caulaincourt opened the unfrozen door once again, and reached back inside the sledge, fetching a half-ham and two somewhat frozen pieces of unleavened bread. As he was removing the ham, the gloved hand bearing the Imperial seal secured itself against his arm.

"I didn't know about the vodka, but I know about the ham. And I'm hungry", whispered Napoleon.

"So's the guard"

Caulaincourt looked at his Emperor. His Emperor looked at the ham.

"I think the ham will do it Your Majesty"

"It better", said Napoleon, "or I'll be out there myself"

This last was exactly what Caulaincourt dreaded. An indignant Emperor-pretending-not-to-be-an-Emperor railing at an obstreperous guard who was almost bound to recognise him if only because never in his life would such a small man have risen to such a great height before him. And the scene would be even worse if laced with alcohol! Caulaincourt walked with the ham to the already vodka drinking Prussian, and handed it over.

"I hope it's not off", he said

"Not very likely in this weather is it?"

The guard took it, greedily.

"Can we go now?"

"Of course. And you can tell your Duke that I hope he catches the pox.

Adulterers are the scum of the earth".

Caulaincourt climbed back into the sledge. The guard lifted the barrier. The postillion, silent throughout, cracked the horses and ponies forward, and the sledge slid on its way. The guard lowered the barrier, and retired into his hut for a night of inebriate denial of the cold.

Napoleon unwrapped the furs from his head.

"Is there no more vodka? My stomach is wretched"

"No Your Majesty"

"What did he say?"

"He said he hopes you catch the pox"

"You should have taken his name. I'd have had him punished when I restore my fortunes"

At this sign of Imperial determination, Caulaincourt reflected he should have been heartened, but instead he felt somewhat chilled. Did the Emperor know just how difficult it was going to be? And what would be the cost? Not another Russian campaign surely?

"The mistake I made Caulaincourt, is not the obvious one. It is not that I tried to accomplish in one campaigning season what should have taken two. It is that we failed to accomplish in six months what should in fact have taken merely four".

Caulaincourt confessed to being bemused. The Emperor proceeded to talk cheerfully of an imminent Polish revolution which would stop the Russians from crossing the Niemen, and so scare the Tsar Alexander he would treat for peace. "And even if he doesn't, Europe is so terrified of Alexander I will still find allies aplenty".

Caulaincourt decided upon direct contradiction.

"It is not Alexander they are terrified of Your Majesty. It is yourself. Europe fears your universal monarchy, your spreading family dynasty, the taxes your Empire imposes, the levies you place on the youth through conscription. All this makes the hatred of you into a national force".

"It is but only so in reversal. When we are winning, I am adored", replied Napoleon. To this Caulaincourt did not reply.

Napoleon found some aniseed in his inner pockets, and sucked on it surreptitiously. He was about to continue his strategic monologue, when he noticed they were passing through Walewice. The Emperor was at once enthusiastic to stop. He wished to visit the chateau of his mistress Maria Walewska, who he was sure would provide them with succour of all kinds. And though yet still many miles from

the King of Rome, he could see his other son Alexandre-Florian. Maria the Emperor knew to be devoted to him, and would be delighted.

"We could wash, and eat, and shave. And sleep", he said.

Caulaincourt doubted it was sleep that was most on Napoleon's mind, and chose to remind his Emperor of the urgency with which they must return to Paris. Quite apart from affairs of state, Marie-Louise would be frantic with worry.

"She will have worried for months", said the Emperor. "It makes no difference".

At length, Napoleon ordered the sledge to stop. There was then an argument, the Emperor wishing to make urgent haste to Walewice, Caulaincourt arguing any sojourn with the Countess Walewska was too pregnant with risk. The postillion sat immobilised, shivering to the sound of argumentative mumblings within, an extract of which ran as follows:

"Who's the Emperor in here?"

"Who's the Duke of Vicenza?"

Eventually, after much heated discussion, the party continued their journey to Dresden. The real Duke of Vicenza had won. The Emperor was, however, most offended by Caulaincourt's suggestion that his beloved Countess might betray him. He well knew that to women, power is the strongest of aphrodisiacs, and obviously, this made Napoleon alluring beyond all mere mortal measure. How little of women Caulaincourt understood! But somehow, as their journey continued, and night turned into an overcast and inhospitable morning, the thought of betrayal returned to Napoleon again and again like a homing pigeon. What did Caulaincourt think the chances were of the Prussians arresting them?

"Considerably higher if we involve the Countess Your Majesty"

"Yes, yes. But apart from her?"

"It is still the best part of a day to Dresden and Saxon safety. With each hour we must be sanguine"

Caulaincourt was aware of Napoleon's tendency to melancholy. He had probably sought the company of the Countess to cheer himself up. Caulaincourt tried to inject some humour into the proceedings.

"The Prussians wouldn't know what to do with us. They'd probably call a conference to avoid making a decision".

"And eventually I'd be handed over to the English. But then, I've always wanted to meet Wellington". Napoleon laughed.

"You could play chess together. You'd win"

"He'd cheat. The English would exhibit me in an iron cage in the middle of London, smear me with honey, and wait for me to be devoured by flies"

Caulaincourt laughed. "How fiendish"

"They'd do it to you too". Caulaincourt stopped laughing. So did Napoleon. For one who was used to striding continents as he pleased, the idea of captivity came abhorrent. "The English will never capture me", said the Emperor, darkly. Here he reflected was a fate worse than death itself.

At midnight on the 13th of December, the pair finally arrived in Dresden. Napoleon thought of the pomp that had surrounded his arrival in the Saxon capital only the previous May, but there were no dukes and duchesses, kings and queens or empresses and emperors for a reception committee this time. They were seeking the house of Monsieur de St. Aignan, the French minister, but had no written record of where it was, and so drove aimlessly around the streets until they found a lighted

window. Caulaincourt called up, and a man in a nightcap put his head out of the window to ask them what they wanted. Caulaincourt explained they sought the French minister on urgent business, at which the man slammed his window shut. The Emperor said it would have been better to say they were seeking the King of Saxony direct, but Caulaincourt thought such grand ambitions too conspicuous. He was adamant the Duke of Vicenza would say no such thing.

By luck and chance, at three o'clock on the morning of the 14th of December they eventually found St. Aignan's residence, and after that diplomatist's astonishment had passed, they were entertained in seclusion with wine, cheese, sausage and pickles served directly by St. Aignan himself. The Emperor drank a great deal of wine, but the condition of his stomach still denied him the consumption of much food. He did, however, sit down to dictate several letters, which Caulaincourt dutifully transcribed. The most prominent of these documents was a letter to the Emperor of Austria. In it, the Emperor of the French assured his Imperial equal (he meant no such thing) that he had no plans to ferment Polish revolution or independence, and never have had. In short, he wished the Emperor Francis to consider his northern borders permanently secure, and added artfully that if they weren't, he had the Russian Tsar to blame, not his loyal son by marriage. He went on to say he was safe and well, as he prayed was the Emperor's daughter, his own wife, whom he was greatly looking forward to shortly seeing. He ended the letter by informing his father-in-law of his hope and confidence, and of the army he would raise on the Niemen come the Spring, with, he trusted, Austrian corps attached. The alliance of the French and the Austrian Emperors was, he felt sure, as cordial and as secured by natural justice as ever.

Napoleon then instructed St. Aignan to call the King of Saxony immediately. St. Aignan replied it was an ungodly hour to do any such thing. The Emperor said he was awake, and so why should the King of Saxony be asleep? The King of Saxony was duly summoned, and appeared most nervous. The 29th Bulletin had already reached him, and it was obvious to Caulaincourt that the King was astonished at Napoleon's change of fortune. Napoleon, however, was convinced the King was simply beside himself for being so singularly in the presence of so great a rearranger of the world.

"It is only the matter of Polish independence that can so distress you", said the Emperor. "But let me assure you of this. I will return within a few weeks, more powerful than ever, and then I shall ensure that the kingdom of Poland, for so long an old and cherished Saxon dream, becomes yours at last. I will brook no argument on this point, as I have already informed the Austrians".

With this, the King of Saxony was dismissed, but not before he had promised many delicacies from the royal kitchens and wines from the cellars to accompany Napoleon on his continued journey in the morning. The sledge that had thus far traversed the Emperor would be of little use in the more mild country he and Caulaincourt had still to cross, and so the King's coach was commandeered with eight fresh horses, frisky beasts that much delighted the postillion. As yet, the coach was mounted on runners for the remains of the snow, but very soon they would go westwards by wheels on solid ground. From Dresden, real and pretend Dukes of Vicenza would travel with increased speed.

Over the next two days, they travelled through Leipzig and Auerstadt, through Erfurt and Frankfurt, finally crossing the Rhine at Mainz on the 16th of December 1812. The Emperor was within the natural boundaries of France once again! Here he was still the monarch absolute, undiminished by disaster, and he delighted in his new found freedom. He abandoned his incognito, restoring the title of Duke of Vicenza to its rightful owner, who was however chiefly gratified that the weather had grown warmer. The Emperor still wrapped himself up in furs, but he took off his gloves, and held up his Imperial seal to the light of the coach's window glass. It glistened, regally.

Caulaincourt, aware of his duty to posterity, started to consider an account of this most remarkable journey to be published as a journal, and so saw fit to question his Emperor on matters of strategy and statesmanship he felt remained unresolved.

"The French nation is the liberator of the world Caulaincourt!", exclaimed Napoleon. "Consider the revolution. We stand for the most sacred rights of peoples and nations, whereas the English only ever defend their self-assumed privileges".

"I see", said Caulaincourt. "And your thoughts on the Russian campaign?"

"We could have accomplished in four months what we failed to achieve in six. Consider this. I should have crossed the Niemen with an army of but 300,000. 600,000 was too large. With a smaller number I would have had greater flexibility, and my troops would have been mainly French alone. Our subject troops proved to have little stomach for the fight. I could then have pursued a narrow front at greater speed, ignoring the flanks save to invite the Prussians to defend Prussia, the Poles Poland and the Austrians Austria. I then declare the independence of Poland, guaranteeing Austria against any Polish threat from the north. That way, I could have crossed the Niemen in May to seize the Vitebsk-Orsha gap, moving so fast between

the two Russian armies of Barclay and Bagration that they were prevented from ever joining. Then Smolensk would have been easy. You see?"

"I see Your Majesty. But you have still fought no battles"

"We should have moved the main supply bases up to Smolensk. Danzig and Königsburg were always too far back, and at Vitebsk and Minsk, we let vast stores fall into Russian hands. By basing our supplies at Smolensk, we could have defeated each Russian army in detail as Barclay and Bagration attempted to move up ahead or behind us"

"But what of the revolution?"

"Ah", said the Emperor. "The French are the liberators of the world! We should have gained the mass of the Russians on our side, by announcing the freedom of the serfs, throwing aristocracy and peasants against each other, and insuring ourselves against partisan retaliation. The partisans would have been on our side! With serf support and a smaller army, feeding the mass would have been much easier, and so we would have reached Moscow earlier, in August. I could then have treated for peace with the Tsar, informing him that if he didn't co-operate, I would send half the army to capture St. Petersburg, and the other half to overwhelm the Russian bases at Kaluga and Tula. The Tsar would have been left with two choices. To treat for peace on my terms, or to leave Russia without either of her capitals, without an army, without supplies and with the vast majority of the people, the serfs, on our side. Simple! My mistake was to forget the revolution Caulaincourt. And a Frenchman must never do that. The revolution is our greatest asset"

Caulaincourt couldn't help reflecting the Emperor was truly a Corsican, but let it pass. Napoleon suddenly felt drowsy, and strangely passive.

"It's a shame our will deserts us as we get older", he said at length. "I am forty three. Alexander the Great never had this problem. He was dead at thirty two".

Caulaincourt was staggered. Here was his Emperor, at one moment replanning his most ambitious campaign, and at the next lamenting his declining powers!

"I was bored when I marched on Russia" said Napoleon. "And I still am. How far is it to Paris?"

"Forty eight hours more Your Majesty"

"I say thirty six"

Caulaincourt felt immediately relieved. The Emperor had clearly rediscovered his determination, and was impatient to be home. Some minor matters, however, yet delayed them. They had to stop several times to change from runners to wheels and back again, being consistently on wheels alone only from Verdun onwards. And just beyond Verdun, an axle breakage caused them to transfer to an open cabriolet. But this proved unreliable and rattlesome, and at Meaux they made their final change to a postmaster's post-chaise, a cumbersome carriage with two enormous wheels.

Napoleon fell silent after his mental reviewing of the Russian campaign. Caulaincourt was too stimulated by the wonders of seeing his native countryside again to do anything other than look around him in wide-eyed amazement. Miraculous!

The Emperor fell asleep.

He was recrossing the field of Borodino once again. There were lying on the field 80,000 dead soldiers, although Napoleon could not make out which were French and which Russian. All the uniforms seemed to be the same. Universally blood coloured.

"What did you expect?", said a dead soldier, rising one legged from the ground with the help of two others, one lacking an arm, the other an eye. "The same blood flows through all our veins"

The three dead soldiers beckoned the Emperor on. The Emperor followed. A dead horse, disembowelled but still chewing grass, fixed him in the eye, and winked.

"I haven't got a stomach left, but I still like the taste. Grass is wonderful. Don't you agree?"

The Emperor didn't know what to say. The horse continued.

"This isn't Borodino you know. This is the ghost of the revolution. How does it feel?"

The Emperor wasn't sure. A crowd started to gather around the horse. There were other horses, women, cattle, children, ponies, and soon, it would seem, eighty thousand men. Each of the dead was rising from the field, a multitude of walking-wounded afterlife, every single one of them broken and bloody, every single one of them defaced or deformed by the violence they had done to each other in someone else's name.

"It was in your name", said a child, "that my parents were killed"

"I was raped seventeen times" said the woman

"Who by?", said Napoleon

"Can't you see that's not the point!", said a cow with both ears and one leg missing. "You made us walk all the way from the fields of France to Moscow", the cow continued. "What was wrong with the fields of France?"

"You don't understand", said the Emperor. "The Russians were threatening me. Besides, they wanted the war"

"You wanted the war", said another child, sitting astride a blind pony.

The black skies opened. A shaft of light lit the scene. The disembowelled horse came to the front of the still gathering crowd, each mortal soul of which stepped sideways to let him through. The crowd of the dead, it seemed, was a gathering throng which would gather forever. The horse continued chewing the cud, clearly about to say something of great import. As he swallowed, the cud fell from a gaping wound below the horse's neck back to the ground. But the horse continued to chew nonetheless. He winked at Napoleon again.

"It's the taste". And then the horse raised his neck, looked down on the Emperor, and disseminated his wisdom:

"What a pity it has been to see a mind so great as yours devoted to trivial things such as empires, great historic events, the thundering of cannons and of men. You believe in glory, in posterity, in Alexander and Caesar. Nations in turmoil and other trifles of time absorb all your attention. Why is it that you cannot see what really matters is something else entirely?"

"What is it?", said Napoleon

"You either know or you don't know", said a chorus of dead soldiers. "You can't be told"

The Emperor was lost for words.

"What is it?", he said again

"You either know or you don't know", said the entire company of dead men and horses and children and ponies and women and cattle in unison. Everyone drew in closer to the Emperor in their midst.

"Don't kill me", said Napoleon. "Please don't kill me"

The Emperor was surrounded. The skies brightened, he was blinded by light. He closed his eyes in fear. And then, nothing. Tick, tick, tick. Nothing. Napoleon opened his eyes.

"Nothing has happened, and nothing is going to", said the horse.

The crowd stood, deathly silent. The Emperor fainted, but awakened again almost immediately, finding himself lying face upwards on the field of Borodino, staring at the sky. The sun shone brightly. The faces of the crowd peered blithely down on him. He noticed all the children were smiling, but couldn't think why. In fact, Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of the French, couldn't think anything at all. He was paralysed.

"I'm the emperor of the field I was born in", said a pony.

"I'm the empress of the village bar in Montailou", said a woman

"And I'm the emperor of the bakery at Smolensk" said a soldier.

"I'm the emperor of the village of Studenka"

"I'm the empress of the blacksmith's at Smorgoni"

The horse winked at Napoleon once again.

"We're all emperors and empresses here you know"

"I'm the empress of the world!", said a little girl, "I live everywhere"

"So do I", said a motherless foal.

"We all live everywhere"

"Emperors and empresses, every single one of us"

Napoleon could feel the ground collapse beneath him as he started falling straight down into Hell. He was scared to death, and too scared to admit it.

"Your Majesty!". Caulaincourt had great difficulty waking Napoleon from his slumbers. "Your Majesty!". The post-chaise had reached Paris, and was travelling up the Cours de Vincennes towards the Rue de Rivoli. As they passed the Hôtel de Ville, the Tuileries came fully into view. It was half-past eleven on the evening of the 18th of December 1812. The Emperor was home at last.

At so late an hour, Napoleon and Caulaincourt had difficulty in entering the Tuileries. The Empress had retired to her private apartment. Two muffled figures in furs entered the ante-chamber, and the shorter of them directed his course to the door of the Empress's sleeping chamber. Napoleon's thoughts returned to her fair innocent skin, and to the entry of the ancient Habsburgs. This time he could feel the rising in his loins. The lady in waiting hastened to throw herself between the seeming intruder and the entrance, but, recognising the Emperor, she shrieked out loud, and so alarmed Marie-Louise, who thus entered the room in her night-gown. The Empress looked with astonishment across the room at her Corsican conqueror, who, dishevelled and unshaven, could only stare back at her, dumbstruck. Marie-Louise had read the 29th Bulletin, and looked Napoleon up and down as if taking in his abrupt change of circumstance. Here stood her husband after all, whom she had previously presumed to be not so much a favourite of Fate, but rather Fate itself.

"It is I" said the Emperor, thinking once again of openly inhabiting his beloved dark-green uniform. "The Emperor. I'm still the Emperor. Still".