



AN ARMY IN RETREAT:

To Moscow And Back With Sergeant Bourgogne

IT is expecting too much of the Russian winter to suppose that it will deal with Hitler's armies as it did with Napoleon's. Those who are waiting for a second retreat from Moscow are therefore indulging foolish hopes. But it is impossible not to think of Napoleon's armies as to-day's fighting surges over his old halting places, and there will never be a better account of a retreat than the "Memoirs of Sergeant Bourgogne," recently re-issued in a cheap edition by Jonathan Cape. Here are some notes on the book based on an article in the "New Statesman," by Peter Quennell.

ONCE again the Beresina may be choked with corpses. Across the forest and plains through which Napoleon made his rapid and triumphant advance and his slow and calamitous withdrawal between the June of 1812 and the January of 1813 rushes a tide, incomparably more gigantic, of blood and fear and suffering. Yet about the story of the retreat from Moscow there is a kind of dramatic completeness that still commands attention, and no record is more vivid than that of Sergeant Bourgogne, ex-Grenadier - Vélite of the Imperial Guard, who endured the worst horrors of the retreat, and emerged with his belief in the Emperor's genius and his devotion to his leader's memory yet unshaken. His fascinating, at times appalling, narrative (now reprinted in a convenient cheap edition), is a masterpiece of untutored straightforward reporting, comparable to Diaz's story of the conquest of Mexico from which Prescott drew much of his most interesting material.

The little we learn of his character we learn in spite of himself. Bourgogne was neither vain-glorious nor sentimental. He did not sentimentalise his own sufferings or the sufferings of his comrades; he did not revolt against a world in which such catastrophes were possible, or against the imperial system to which they owed their immediate

origin; he was content, quietly and simply, to chart the course of his adventures. Thus it had happened; thus his friends had died, frozen, burnt to death, sabred or speared by pursuing Cossacks, thus he had struggled home, with his scars and his loot, out of the Russian wilderness. He was delighted to remember; he did not attempt to analyse.

Much Curious Evidence

On one point he produces much curious evidence. The army that broke up along the road to Germany was already disorganised and demoralised before it had said good-bye to Moscow. Bourgogne was a good soldier and experienced campaigner, proud of his regiment, proud of the *Grand Armée*, proud of the splendiferous and resounding legend of which he felt he formed a part. But, in spite of the strict imperial order that forbade all plundering, he had begun to loot during his first day in the conquered city. Long before the ban was raised (as the conflagration caused by Russian incendiaries grew more extensive), the quarters he occupied were full of plunder and embellished by the presence of two female captives whose services he retained until they were borrowed from him good-humouredly, but peremptorily, by Adjutant-Major Roustan. Life for non-commissioned officers of the guard was a continual festivity; and every evening they would gather in a deserted palace, there

to recline "like pashas on ermine, sable, lion and bear skins, smoking costly tobacco in magnificent pipes," an



AN INCIDENT on the Retreat, as depicted by Faber du Faure, one of Napoleon's "official artists." Bonaparte, with his staff, halts for a moment while his men straggle on in the background



CROSSING THE BERESINA: The *Grande Armée* crowding the flimsy bridges thrown over the ice-choked river on November 26, 1812. In the distance a burning town, overhead, the carrion-crows flying heavily after the harried invaders. The above picture is from a lithograph by Adam in the *Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris*

cartridges. Into his knapsack he had stuffed an amazing collection of objects, both perishable and precious:

... Several pounds of sugar, some rice, some biscuit, half a bottle of liqueur, a woman's Chinese silk dress, embroidered in gold and silver, several gold and silver ornaments, and amongst them a little bit of the cross of Ivan the Great... A woman's large riding-cloak (hazel colour, lined with green velvet; as I could not guess how it was worn, I imagined its late owner to be more than six feet high), then two silver pictures in relief, a foot long and eight inches high; one of them represented the Judgment of Paris on Mount Ida, the other showed Neptune on a chariot formed by a shell, and drawn by sea-horses, all in the finest workmanship. I had, besides, several lockets, and a Russian prince's spittoon set with brilliants.

But that was not all:

I wore over my shirt (writes Bourgogne), a yellow silk waistcoat, wadded inside, which I had made myself out

(Continued on next page)