

WHEN NAPOLEON INVADED RUSSIA

(Continued from previous page)

of a woman's skirt; above that a large cape lined with ermine, and a large pouch hung at my side . . . by a silver cord. This was full of various things — amongst them a crucifix in gold and a little Chinese porcelain vase . . .

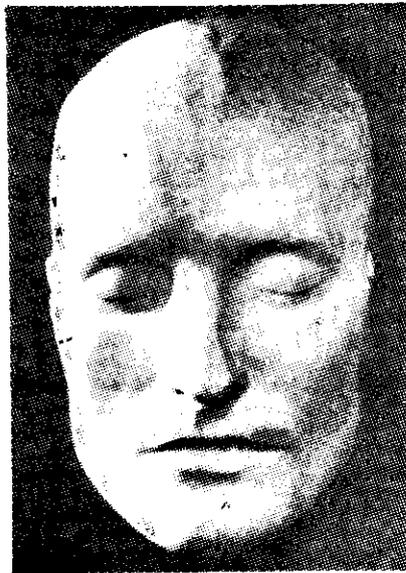
His spirits were high. Confusedly, Bourgogne and his friends would appear to have imagined that the Emperor's plans still included the conquest of the Orient; and, as he left Moscow, he was already looking forward to the "Mongol, Chinese and Indian" mistresses whom he would undoubtedly acquire. On the 19th of October, the long garish circus train got under way. There was rain on the 22nd, thick fog on the 25th; during the night of the 27th it began to freeze. Thereafter, the main outlines of the tragedy need no retelling. Bourgogne's story is memorable, because it depicts the fortitude, the despair, the misery; the eventual triumph of a single isolated and often frightened man. In addition to quick eyes, Bourgogne had that gift of cursory self-expression — of pinning down an episode in a line or a sentence — which is the despair of more practised and more ambitious writers. He saw much of pain — few men have seen so much in so brief a period — and his descriptions of human agony are as sympathetic as they are observant. The shapes assumed by death never ceased to horrify and interest him. Before the army had reached the Dnieper, dying men were being plundered as they lay in the snow:

I was walking now in a narrow foot-path in the wood . . . and with me was one of my friends, a sergeant in the same regiment. We suddenly came upon a gunner of the Guard lying right across the path. By him was another gunner stripping his clothes from him. We could see now that the man was not dead, as his legs moved, and every now and then he struck the ground with his fists.

Incident Near Smolensk

So violent and so continuous was the pressure of self-interest that some of the results it produced were almost comic. Near Smolensk a huge barn crammed with 800 men suddenly caught fire. The doors were barricaded against late-comers: "cries and shrieks of rage were heard, the fire becoming a vast, tossing mass, through the convulsive efforts the poor wretches made to escape." Meanwhile, from all around came running a horde of ragged, frozen and starving men. Some rifled the corpses that they dragged from the blaze. Others observed cheerfully: "It serves them right . . ." "Others again, stretched out their hands to the warmth saying, "What a beautiful fire!" . . ."

Yet although the retreat from Moscow had its grotesque and fantastic side — men with cracked lips and frost-bitten fingers fighting for the half-cooked flesh of broken-down horses; men devouring a few stolen potatoes in fearful stealth — through the squalor ran frequently a strain of splendour. With awe Bourgogne witnessed the devotion of the hundred and fifty dragoons, who, the whole of one hideous winter night, stood massed in their long white cloaks around their



DEATH-MASK OF NAPOLEON
But he survived the Retreat

hereditary chief, the young Prince Emile of Hesse-Cassel, "pressed tightly one against the other, protecting him from wind and cold. The next morning three-quarters of them were dead and buried beneath the snow. . . ."

The examples of disinterestedness that he encountered were as startling, if not so numerous, as the instances of abject greed and savagery. There was the cavalryman whose first thought was always for the mount that had carried him in a dozen major actions; and there was the old sergeant of Bourgogne's regiment named Daubenton who, league after league, supported on his back the regimental dog when poor Mouton's paws were frostbitten on the road to Wilna.

Memorable Pictures

His method of narration is sometimes chaotic and fragmentary; but Bourgogne has an astonishing aptitude for evoking a broad panorama in very few words:

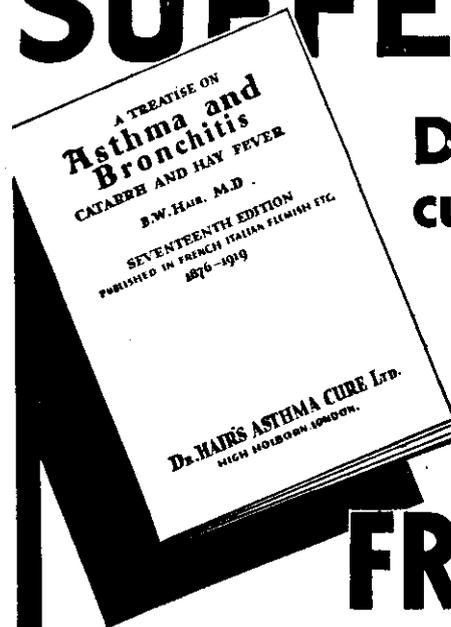
. . . We were roused by an extraordinary noise. This was the north wind travelling over the forests, bringing with it heavy snow and 27 degrees of frost, so that it became quite impossible for the men to stay where they had camped. We heard them shouting as they ran about towards any fire they saw; but the heavy snowstorms caught them, and they could soon run no more, or if they tried to do so they fell and never rose again.

Bourgogne himself survived, not much the worse for wear till 1867, and, in his last years, in a placid provincial hotel he would sometimes recognise beneath the traits of a stout *commerçant* the comrade who had suffered with him in the snows of Russia. Then wives and families would be forgotten; wine would be drawn; and the elderly pair would sit up far into the night talking of this incident and that, and of how with their own eyes they had seen the Emperor in fur-lined cloak and purple velvet cap trudging, baton in hand, among the marshals and princes of the Empire. The Emperor — ah, what a mighty genius! How good to think and talk of him in the reign of the citizen king!

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