

artillery bridge broke down, and the crowds upon it, being pressed forward by those in the rear, were precipitated into the water and drowned. Infantry, cavalry and artillery now rushed upon the other bridge, and dashed with their horses and gun carriages through the mass of people, crushing some beneath the wheels and horses' feet, like victims before the car of Juggernaut, and pushing others over the sides of the bridge.

"In these moments of agony, all varieties of character were exhibited—selfishness with its baseness, cowardice with its meanness, and heroism with its power and generosity. Soldiers seized infants from expiring mothers, and vowed to adopt them as their own; officers harnessed themselves to sledges, to extricate their wounded companions; privates threw themselves on the snow beside their dying officers, and strove at the risk of incurring captivity or death, to solace their last moments. In the midst of this terrific scene, Victor, who had nobly sustained the arduous duty of covering the retreat during the whole day, arrived with the rear-guard at the entrance of the bridge. His troops, with stern severity, opened a passage for themselves through the helpless multitude who thronged the bridge and the shore adjoining it, whom despair and misery had at length rendered incapable of exertion, and who now could not even be persuaded to cross to the opposite bank. These horrors continued throughout the night, and when the morning dawned, Victor saw the Russian advanced guard approaching; the destruction of the bridge, therefore, became indispensable, to the safety of the French army, and orders were given to burn it. A frightful cry arose from the host on the eastern bank of the river, who were too late awakened to the realities of their situation: numbers rushed on the burning bridge, and, to avoid the flames, jumped into the water, while the greater proportion wandered in helpless misery along the river, and beheld their last hopes expire with the receding columns of their countrymen.

"This dreadful passage of the Beresina completed the ruin of the Grand Army, which lost, during its continuance, twenty-five pieces of cannon, sixteen thousand men in prisoners, and twelve thousand in slain. The corps of Victor Oudinot were reduced to the deplorable state of the troops that came from Moscow, and the whole army, having lost all appearance of military order, marched in a confused mass along the road to Wilna, harrassed at each step by the Cossacks, who cut off every straggler and made constant attacks on the rear-guard. In the midst of the general ruin, a number of officers organized themselves into a guard, called the Sacred Squadron, for the Emperor's protection. The gentlemen

who composed it discharged with heroic fidelity the task assigned to them, and executed without murmuring all the duties of common soldiers: but the severity of the cold soon destroyed their horses, and they, as well as the Emperor, were again compelled to pursue their route on foot through the snow. At night, their bivouac was formed in the middle of the still unbroken squares of the Old Guard, who sat round the watch-fires on their haversacks, with their elbows on their knees, their heads resting on their hands, and crowding close together; striving by assuming this posture, to repress the pangs of hunger and gain additional warmth.

"On the 6th of December, Napoleon arrived at Smorgoni. He there collected his marshals around him, dictated a bulletin which fully developed the horrors and disasters of the retreat, explained his reasons for immediately returning to Paris—which was connected with a conspiracy soon to be related—and after bidding them all an affectionate farewell, set out in a sledge at ten o'clock in the evening, for the French capital, accompanied by Caulaincourt and Lobau, leaving the command of the army to Murat.

"The departure of the emperor increased the disorganization of the troops. The officers ceased to obey their generals, the generals disregarded the marshals, and the marshals set at defiance the authority of Murat. The private soldiers, relieved from the duty of protecting their emperor, forgot everything but the instinct of self-preservation. The colonels hid the eagles in their haversacks, or buried them in the ground; the inferior officers dispersed to look after their own safety; and indeed nothing was thought of but the urgent pangs of hunger, and the terrible severity of the cold. If a soldier dropped, his comrades instantly fell on him, and, before life was extinct, tore from him his cloak, his money, and the bread he carried in his bosom; when he died, some one of them would sit on his body, for the sake of the temporary warmth it afforded; and when it became cold, he, too, would often drop beside his companion, to rise no more. The watch-fires, at night, were surrounded by exhausted men, who crowded like spectres about the blazing piles; and, in the morning, the melancholy bivouacs were marked by circles of bodies as lifeless as the ashes at their feet.

"Nevertheless, the fatal retreat continued to Wilna; and although between Smorgoni and that city no less than twenty thousand men, in straggling detachments, had joined the army, scarcely forty thousand in all reached its gates. Here the troops found an abundance of food; but they had scarcely begun to refresh themselves from the immense stores that the city contained, when