

Chapter 8



Alone at the Brink of Ruin

For Barbe-Nicole—indeed, for the entire Ponsardin family and the wine industry in general—1810 was a year of great transitions. Barbe-Nicole had known that the contract with Alexandre would expire that summer, and the decision not to renew the partnership was no mystery. The continuing war with Great Britain and Napoléon’s Continental System were making export sales impossible, and profit margins were slender. She had known since spring that, soon, expensive licenses would be required for all shipments abroad.

Besides, Alexandre’s son Jérôme had now completed his commercial education, and Alexandre was understandably eager to set up his son in the trade. There was no reason to commit Jérôme to a long-term partnership in a failing family business with a young widow several years his senior—especially one who clearly wanted to run the family business herself.

Barbe-Nicole, it seems, had no intention of marrying again, although if she had, Jérôme Fourneaux might have been a convenient choice. Perhaps some small spark of romance or admiration had been ignited, for although Jérôme and his father had turned their energies to expanding their own family wine business—founded in 1734 by Alexandre’s grandfather under the name Forest-Fourneaux—the young man continued to help Barbe-Nicole with the finer points of winemaking in her first few years alone, despite the fact that she was now a competitor.

The family business to which Alexandre and Jérôme returned their attentions, now renamed simply Fourneaux and Son, never made either famous. If the direction of their company is any indication, they didn't have the same competitive ambition that always characterized Barbe-Nicole as an entrepreneur. Still, both were talented winemakers, and the tradition of delightful champagne wines that they initiated continues to this day. In 1931, the company they had nurtured was bought out by a family of winemakers who would turn it into one of the world's most prestigious estates. It is now known as Champagne Taittinger—thanks to Alexandre and Jérôme, the third oldest champagne house in existence.

That spring, when Barbe-Nicole's days were filled with preparations for the necessary liquidation and with plans for her own future as a sole proprietor, there were also monumental changes for the Ponsardin family. Their star was on the rise. Her father, Nicolas, always a charming and politically savvy man, had been currying favor with Napoléon since the early years of the century, when Napoléon and Joséphine had stayed as guests at the Hôtel Ponsardin during the year of the first Clicquot family vintage.

Poor Joséphine—unable to produce an heir and a bit too free with her favors—had been since then unceremoniously dumped, but Nicolas's reward for his hospitality and his zealous support of the new regime was to become the mayor of Reims, not by public election, as one might have expected of a former Jacobin revolutionary, but by the imperial decree of the emperor.

In the spring of 1810, even Barbe-Nicole was caught up in some of the excitement surrounding her father's new position and Napoléon's impending second marriage to the Austrian archduchess Marie Louise—niece to the ill-fated Marie Antoinette and, like her aunt before her, being sent to her future husband as so much checked baggage in a train of magnificent carriages from the east. Her destination was the Château de Compiègne, a grand royal palace some fifty miles northeast of Paris. The road passed very near to Reims. Barbe-Nicole certainly witnessed the arrival in the city of the pretty archduchess and her convoy. Living in the center of Reims, she would have found it hard to miss. But it was especially hard since her father, always a royalist at heart, had personally organized the extravagant celebrations to welcome her.

While more fashionable women like her sister were aflutter with talk of seeing the new empress and of the magnificence of her court, Barbe-Nicole had just one wish. She hoped that this new marriage to one of Napoléon's most powerful sparring partners would buy them some peace. The "marriage of the Archduchess Louise is fixed for the 25 of March at Compiègne [and] she will pass our village," she wrote to Louis Bohne. "If she can give us the peace it will be a great good for the people."

Whatever her father's personal feelings about Napoléon—and personal feelings don't seem to have guided his political allegiances unduly—Barbe-Nicole by now hated the man. She had no patience with his wars any longer, and she and Louis referred to him in their letters simply as "the devil." His open support for her competitor, Jean-Rémy Moët, undoubtedly played some small role in their antagonism.

Her feelings for the brazen emperor were probably not softened when she learned that Napoléon had been spreading his influence further in the vineyards of the Champagne. He awarded another competitor, Memmie Jacquesson, proprietor of Jacquesson and Sons in nearby Châlons-sur-Marne, with a gold medal intended to reflect the emperor's personal appreciation of "the beauty and richness of their cellars." Then, as an additional mark of his favor, Napoléon asked Jacquesson to supply the champagne for his wedding to Archduchess Marie Louise. It was discouraging. These were sales Barbe-Nicole hated to see go to a competitor—especially one who had been in business for just over a decade. In the luxury wine market, she was already learning that name recognition meant everything, and here was another newcomer nurturing a personal relationship with the most powerful man—and purchaser—in all of France.

The biggest change of all for Barbe-Nicole that year was the most obvious one: Against all the odds, she would soon be an independent woman running a well-funded international business. That fact alone makes her an exceptional woman in her era. A surprising number of women—widows especially—ran small companies in order to ensure their family's economic survival, especially in traditionally feminine businesses like dressmaking or innkeeping. But in the entire century, only a handful of women in France owned businesses with the sort of capital

that Barbe-Nicole commanded. She was already a pioneer, just by having taken these enormous chances.

On the last day of July, she opened her own new account ledger for the business that she would call, from that moment forward, *Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin and Company*. Her account book showed on the order of 60,000 bottles of wine in stocks, six dozen additional casks, 10,000 empty bottles, and nearly 125,000 corks. Her father-in-law, Philippe, still prepared to gamble on her ambition and talent, reinvested his 30,000 francs, maintaining a share in the company both were both determined to keep alive.

To hurry the liquidation and settlements, she began sending out announcements that summer to clients, asking for the prompt payment of outstanding accounts. She was anxious to settle the books. On some of these announcements, we see her elegant and carefully looped signature, reading simply: *Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin*. It is the same distinctive signature reprinted today on every bottle of the yellow label nonvintage champagne that bears her name.

In the cellar and with the direction of the business, she had other new ideas and new plans as well, but they were initiatives she wanted to discuss with Louis Bohne when he returned from his travels. Louis was in love, and he had delayed beginning married life during his long years on the road for the Clicquot family. Now he was engaged to Miss Rheinwald, the daughter of a town councilman. There are no other details about this young woman who captured Louis's heart. All we can guess about her is that, like Louis, she came from a German family. Louis planned to take several months off from work while the liquidation details were arranged. It would be an extended honeymoon, a chance to start a family for a man who had spent much of the past five years far from home.

Barbe-Nicole welcomed the opportunity to have Louis close at hand during the early months of her new solo leadership. The other salesmen would be back on the road immediately, bringing in new orders even as the final business of *Veuve Clicquot Fourneaux and Company* was resolved. Louis, however, would be able to advise, and she would be at leisure to talk

through her plans with this reliable—and undeniably expert—employee, just as she had heard François do in that long summer before his death. A number of important decisions needed to be made that would shape the future of the business profoundly. If Barbe-Nicole had the advantage of seeing things with the fresh eyes of inexperience, she also had the sense to learn from those she trusted.

There was the question of her trademark, but that was simple enough, at least. During her partnership with Alexandre, they had burned the symbol of the anchor into the corks of the wines blended and bottled by the company. It was as close to a trademark as any champagne house had at the turn of the nineteenth century, when wine labels were still virtually unknown. Shipping cases and casks were often labeled with the company initials and with some information to identify the client and the type of wine to avoid things going astray on the crowded docks of war-time Europe, but the colorful marketing of bottles that we know today had not yet been invented.

At this time, once a bottle of wine was unpacked, only the cork and the color of the resin sealing wax around the collar of the bottle distinguished the wine of one house from another. The sealing wax collar, the so-called *goudron*, was often elaborate and pretty, but it was not particularly reliable as a way to distinguish the wines of one vintner from another. Moët colored his caps in brilliant greens flecked with gold or silver. But Philippe Clicquot used exactly the same color scheme. So did Barbe-Nicole after him. Marketing was in its infancy, and at a time when many brokers still purchased their bottled wines ready-made from a variety of local suppliers, few champagne houses or few of their clients thought of particular wines as the distinctive product of an individual company.

Apart from the colorful *goudron*, the only other way to identify a bottle of wine as coming from the cellars of the Widow Clicquot was the symbol branded on the cork. The family had first used the anchor as a company symbol just after her marriage, when Philippe and François started Clicquot-Muiron together, and she was determined to continue the tradition. Perhaps it reminded her of François's presence in the company that they had dreamed of building together. Perhaps it was a nod to the export markets and the ocean trade that François had worked to open. From the

beginning, it had always been used because it was the traditional symbol of hope. They had started using it when the future seemed promising, when they could look forward to a life together and to prosperous new directions. She would not give up on it now—and the symbol can still be found today on the labels of a bottle of the Widow's famous bubbly.

Now at the helm of her own company, she had other, more thorny questions to tackle about work in the cellars and the direction of her business in a disastrous economy. With the intensification of the blockades and the unstable currency rates, it was a difficult time to export wine, and Barbe-Nicole could not afford a major financial setback. She was risking her own independence, and the company had been struggling for several years. She retrenched and diversified. Under her new direction, the company began selling more local red wines by the barrel on the domestic French market, rather than going to the unnecessary expense of bottling these wines for an international luxury market that in many cases she could not reach. The largest proportion of these wines was from the grapes raised on her own estates, sold to clients within a few hundred miles of Reims.

When she did export bottled wines, Barbe-Nicole also made a point of including an impressive selection of high-end vintages from other, more fashionable parts of France. The red wines from the Champagne, which had once rivaled the wines of Burgundy in their bouquet and delicacy, were no longer so highly reputed. The exceptions were wines from a handful of renowned villages in the Champagne, villages that most fortuitously included Bouzy, where it was now left to her to manage the Muiron vineyards that she and François had inherited. She could still remember spending the long hours of the early morning watching the crush in the coolness of the pressing room, and she knew that it was excellent land. Involvement in every aspect of the business was to be her hallmark, and the barrels from the Bouzy estate are likely to have been the first wines that Barbe-Nicole could boast of being crafted under her sole direction. By selling them directly to customers, she maximized her slender profits.

She also continued making champagne. The obstacles to international trade made an exclusive focus on sparkling wine impossible for a young broker still establishing her name, and she would have to be prepared

for some proportion of her stocks to sit unsold in her cellars for months, perhaps even years. On those long summer nights before the harvest, when François and Louis had dreamed together of vast new markets in Great Britain or in Russia, Barbe-Nicole had been enchanted, and she still believed in their shared vision. Even as she turned to concrete sales in domestic markets, she kept her travelers seeking out new opportunities abroad and keeping up old contacts on the other side of closed borders.

Barbe-Nicole's workday, in the cellars or at her desk, began at seven in the morning, and she rarely set aside her account books and letters until nine or ten in the evening. Running a family business required a staggering amount of work, and she prided herself on quickly and carefully answering the endless correspondence she received. This commitment came at a high personal cost. At some point during her first years of running the business with Alexandre, Barbe-Nicole sent her daughter, Clémentine, away to a convent boarding school in Paris. Since six or seven was the usual age for girls to be enrolled in convents, it is likely the loss of her daughter as a companion coincided with the founding of the joint company in 1806. She had already learned, like so many single mothers, the heartbreaking challenges of raising a child while running a business.

Sending Clémentine away to school in Paris had not been a coldhearted decision. Barbe-Nicole's sister had been sent to school at the same age, and strange as it may seem to modern parents, who would no more send their young children away to a convent than leave them on the side of a busy street unattended, boarding school for young girls was normal. But that did not mean Barbe-Nicole didn't miss her daughter. Her letters show that she was a devoted and pragmatic mother, determined to protect her daughter's future and her happiness but also convinced that Clémentine, as the girl was known in the family, had not inherited the same sharp intelligence of her mother or grandfather. Still, Barbe-Nicole knew that the nuns would look after Clémentine and that she would be taught to read and write. Clémentine surely learned, as her mother had done before her, the art of fine needlework and the Catholic catechism, and Barbe-Nicole could rely on her mother's Paris cousins to keep an eye on the girl in the event of something unexpected. There was no doubt, however, about the life that Barbe-Nicole imagined for her daughter. It would

not be a future in business. It would be the same life of quiet domesticity and affluent privilege that Barbe-Nicole had rejected.

That summer, Barbe-Nicole had reason to think about that life of luxury and the risks she was taking with the business. She had decided to sell some of her jewelry in order to finance the business. She could have spent her days finding occasions to wear it. Now, much of her capital was tied up in the company, and there must have been cash flow issues. Otherwise, it is unlikely she would have parted with these family assets.

During the first year of the transition, when her affairs were being disentangled from those of Alexandre Fourneaux and when joint holdings were being liquidated, the company would make only a small profit. She owned sizable vineyards and had some excellent stocks in her cellars. None of that was much help in paying the salaries of her cellar workers or settling the inevitable bills, however. By August, Barbe-Nicole had come up with a plan, asking her salesman Charles to sell her jewelry at the royal courts of eastern Europe.

The letters that she wrote about the sale are anxious ones, and worry about the jewelry occupied her mind for much of the autumn. Charles was using all his persuasive charms drumming up orders in Léopol (now Lviv, Ukraine), then part of the Austrian Empire, and Barbe-Nicole hoped he might also find a noble family to buy some jewelry: a large quantity of rose pearl necklaces and a diamond valued at an astonishing 3,000 francs—close to \$60,000. By mid-October, Charles had shipped half the necklaces to one of his friends, who had offered to act as an agent. She begged him not to let the diamond out of his sight. “I pray that you will keep it on your person,” she wrote him. It would be far too valuable to lose. A month later, the diamond remained unsold, and then it disappears from the account books in the company archives at *Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin*. Few people had money to spend on extravagances of this sort. Louis wrote from Vienna that the nobility were short of cash. For the working people, it was worse. It had been three years since the wheat harvest had been sold. People couldn’t afford to buy even this staple crop. It seems likely that Barbe-Nicole got to keep her diamond, although she needed the capital more.

Much of her energy that autumn was also given over to worrying

about technical difficulties in the cellars. Her chief winemaker was now Jacob, the same man who had worked for François and his father at Clicquot-Muiron, and they were in constant communication. Often, Jérôme Fourneaux could be found advising or lending a hand. Cloudy wine or ropery wines still frustrated her, and there were the inevitable disappointments of breakages.

Then there were problems with the bubbles themselves. Sometimes customers complained that they were too big and gassy, with a tendency to froth and leave an unappetizing thick and beady foam on the top of the glass. Barbe-Nicole and Louis referred despairingly to these large bubbles as *yeux de crapaud*—toad’s eyes. Louis, quite serious but with a bit of the honeymooner’s rakish charm, confessed, “This is a terrible thing that gets up and goes to bed with me: toad’s eyes! I like large eyes everywhere except in Champagne wine. May Heaven preserve us from their destructive effect.” He and Barbe-Nicole often shared flirtatious little jokes like this. Just because she was a widow and just because she educated her daughter in a convent didn’t mean she lived like a nun. But the concern about toad’s eyes was not a laughing matter, when it came down to it. The flaw, likely caused by allowing the wine to rest too long in wooden casks in the early stages of production, was a serious obstacle to luxury sales because clarity and *mousse* mattered more to their customers even than taste. And they had no clear idea how to solve the problem.

Unfortunately, the glasses used to drink champagne in the nineteenth century, although not the cause of toad’s eyes, would not have helped the problem. Barbe-Nicole drank her sparkling wine from the broad, shallow glasses that we call *coupes* and usually associate with the glamour of the Jazz Age and early Hollywood films. These glasses were first made popular during the seventeenth century, and wine lovers everywhere used them for drinking champagne well into the twentieth century, despite firm instructions to hosts and hostesses after the 1850s to “never use the present round saucer animalcula-catching champagne glasses, but . . . tulip-shaped ones.”

Today, the staunch preference is for the tall, slender champagne flute, and if you care about your champagne having the smallest possible bubbles—and many connoisseurs do—the flute is the glass to use. Owing to

basic mechanics, the bubbles are smaller and prettier in narrow glasses. Still, more often than not, which glass to choose and the size you like your bubbles comes down to a question of appearance rather than taste. Bigger bubbles do not taste appreciably different from smaller ones. The finest champagnes are celebrated for their small, slow bubbles, which rise with mesmerizing grace to the surface of the glass and leave a light and airy foam. This is because the older a champagne is, the smaller the bubbles become. Because only vintage champagnes are aged extensively, we naturally associate small bubbles with the finest-quality wines.

By December, as Barbe-Nicole was looking forward, perhaps with some trepidation, to her thirty-third birthday, the books had been mostly closed on Veuve Clicquot Fourniaux. The Clicquot family still owned cellars and offices on rue de la Vache, and Barbe-Nicole also owned a country estate outside Oger, in the heart of the Côte des Blancs, just south of the renowned vineyards at Avize and Cramant and on the edge of the great forest that stretched for miles to the west. Although architecturally imposing in the classical French style, with a broad hip roof and big open windows looking onto the fields, the house was her refuge, decorated for comfort, with soft sofas and chairs in the cheerful blue chintz that was then the height of fashion. From the rooms, Barbe-Nicole could watch the progress of her vines, chardonnay grapes destined to become champagne.

Despite the allure of Oger, she spent most of her time in Reims, running the business as often as not from one of the pleasant rooms at home. She still lived in the house she had shared with François before his death, on rue de l'Hôpital, named after the hospital that stood in that part of town. It was a serene and airy place, and the focal point of her private office was a pretty wooden desk, built in the popular style of the Empire period and still on display at the tasting rooms of Champagne Veuve Clicquot in Reims. From here, she maintained the account books and wrote pages and pages of correspondence to her salesmen, clients, and suppliers. It was reassuring to know that the cellars beneath her home connected, in their dark circuitous way, to the cellars underneath her childhood home at the Hôtel Ponsardin.

Less reassuring was the news from ports across Europe. The British had intensified their policing of the blockades, and conditions for inter-

national trade were growing steadily worse. Back on the road, Louis was exasperated, and he had nothing nice to say about the British, either. He called them “maritime harpies” and the “assassins of prosperity.” More bluntly, he wrote to Barbe-Nicole in a fit of pique, “The more I come to hate the English, the more I wish for the corruption of their morals. That God would give us peace so we could avenge their evil gullets . . . [and] make them addicted to habitual drunkenness.” Louis fantasized that drowning the British in the champagne of the Widow Clicquot would be a just retribution. How they would have suffered!

In fact, despite the closed ports, few British wine lovers were feeling very parched. During the holiday season, the British market was one of the strongest in Europe for champagne makers, and Louis himself made some lucky sales there. “Here,” he wrote to Barbe-Nicole, “2,000 bottles have been easily sold because of the season . . . on Christmas day all the English . . . drink their champagne wine, it is the day exclusively privileged in their homes for this drink.” Jean-Rémy Moët, with his far stronger contacts in Great Britain and his better name recognition in the island nation, was having even greater success. But the seasonal British market could not keep all the champagne makers in the region afloat. The next year they learned that one of their competitors, the firm of Tronsson-Jacquesson, was bankrupt.

By the summer of 1811, Barbe-Nicole could be forgiven for feeling a bit panicked. Despite the slow collapse that year of the French economic blockades, the allied counterblockades had lost none of their sting. That spring, she had orders for fewer than thirty-three thousand bottles. With Napoléon and the czar again at odds, in large part because of Alexander’s lackluster support for the French emperor’s crippling trade restrictions, the Russian market—where she had once been recognized as an emerging name in the champagne business—was effectively closed, and war on that front again seemed certain. The Russians were building up troops on the distant borders of French territories in the east, and the British ruled the English Channel. Much of Europe was still broke, and the continent was limping along on the brink of fresh economic collapse. All export required licenses, but Barbe-Nicole knew what they really were: heavy war taxes on her wines.

As France began to lose ground, everything seemed to become more vicious. Louis sent back to Barbe-Nicole letters from Austria telling her about the destruction and misery that he saw everywhere. Napoléon controlled Austria, along with Prussia and Denmark, as client states, but the “independence” of these “sister republics” came at a high and often humiliating cost for their citizens, and the very idea of offering to sell a luxury like champagne was offensive to people who had been brutalized by Napoléon’s armies. Louis quickly understood that he would not find a warm welcome.

The cash flow problems were becoming increasingly serious, and Barbe-Nicole urged him—and all her travelers—to bring in whatever sales they could. Lower the prices if need be, she wrote to Louis in Holland. By autumn, as he traveled through Belgium in search of clients, he could only report the same problem. He begged and cajoled, he lowered his prices, and still there were no sales. He was lucky if he was not insulted or abused.

Making matters a hundred times worse was something that should have been cause for celebration. The harvest of 1811 was marvelous. As one nineteenth-century tourist in the French wine country observed, “There had never been . . . a grape so ripe, so sugary, and one harvested under such favorable circumstances of weather.” Since spring, much of the northern hemisphere had been watching the passage of a great comet, and the vintage that autumn had coincided with its most brilliant appearance in the night sky. As far away as America, “the great comet was attracting all eyes,” and one man who saw it later recalled “how many superstitious terrors it gave rise to.” Throughout the Champagne, the rural people whispered that it was a portent of great change and of the fall of empire. In homage to a perfect harvest, winemakers abandoned their own trademarks and branded their corks with stars, the mark of the *Vin de la Comète*. Barbe-Nicole was among them.

This abundance meant that prices for wine plummeted. It would be one of the two greatest vintages of the century, but despite the falling prices, few people could afford it. Even barrel wines would go to waste,

so Barbe-Nicole did the sensible thing—what winemakers had done throughout the previous century when the market was soft. In the spring, when the cask wines had been racked and clarified, she bottled the wine and turned it into champagne. It would sit, slowly transforming itself, in her cellars for at least a year, and she could buy herself some time. An intelligent plan—but it did nothing to help cash flow.

Once bottled, the champagne of 1811—a vintage year, if ever there was one—would continue to improve for many months. Putting the wine down in bottles was not the catastrophe, least of all for the wines themselves. The problem was the time it would take to realize any money from the sales, at a moment when little ready cash was finding its way to the account books. Normally, Barbe-Nicole would age her champagne for a year or a year and a half, putting it down into the cool cellars before summer and not shipping it until the following autumn. This meant that sparkling wines generally went to market two years after harvest, and the winemaker could then expect to sell it at luxury prices. During these two years, champagne houses had a great deal of their money tied up in stocks; add to this the technical problems in producing a clear champagne and the risks of breakage, and it is easy to understand the attraction of barrel wines, which were ready for sale within months.

If barrel wines could not be sold quickly, their advantages disappeared. Wine in wooden casks might last a few years in ideal cellar conditions, but some slow exposure to oxygen was inevitable, and the wines deteriorated if held too long. The same wine in hermetically sealed glass bottles might age well for a decade or more. Champagne was more delicate. Before disgorgement—the process of removing the spent yeast cells from the bottle after the second fermentation—sparkling wines continue to improve, resting on the lees, for several years. Under French law, vintage champagnes today are aged for a minimum of three years. Some of the finest are aged as long as seven or eight years. After disgorgement, it is a different matter. Champagne rarely improves with additional cellaring, and there is cause to celebrate the expert advice: Drink it promptly.

Nothing improved during the winter of 1812. If anything, the political and economic situation grew worse. Napoléon was preparing for his invasion of Russia, and struggling family businesses were ordered to surrender

their property to the army, as requisition orders to fit out the soldiers. Young men were once again forcibly recruited into the military. There were rumors that, soon, older men would be conscripted as well. None of this was good for the champagne business.

Louis spent the spring of 1812 hunting orders in northern France. His wife was expecting the birth of their first child that year. Barbe-Nicole was to be the baby's godmother, and the impending arrival of the new addition to his small family may have played a role in his desire to stay close to home. The collapse of the international markets also made Louis's attention to the domestic market a sensible decision.

Then just when Barbe-Nicole thought the market had reached its nadir came another devastating blow, not just for Barbe-Nicole, but for the entire Champagne region. Napoléon had his heart set on the development of the French wine trade. He commanded ministers of state such as Jean-Antoine Chaptal to encourage the industry with scientific reforms, and he was pushing the development of new sugar sources for winemakers. He had nurtured the career of his favorite winemaker, Jean-Rémy Moët, and had listened when his friend complained about policy—although nothing could persuade Napoléon to lift the crushing trade restrictions that he believed would cripple his European enemies and lead to the greater glory of France. Still, in the midst of conquering much of a continent, he had found time for rest and relaxation in the heart of the Champagne, and the superiority of French wine was the source of pride and satisfaction to this self-made emperor. He wanted the winemakers of the Champagne to succeed in particular, and there was no secret about it.

So when the French invaded Russia that June, the czar issued an immediate decree banning the importation of French wines in bottles. Everyone knew that the target was champagne. It alone could not be transported in barrels; if it was, all the fizz would disappear. It was a small yet calculated and personal retaliation. Napoléon had championed the champagne industry. Russia would destroy it. In Reims, a good deal of the resentment was directed at Napoléon himself. In exasperation, Louis declared the emperor “an infernal genie who has tormented and ruined the world for five or six years.”

The borders to the east were now firmly closed, and after a long night

spent scouring the account books, filled with mounting despair, Barbe-Nicole knew she had no choice about what she would have to do next. Grim-faced and sorrowful, she broke the news to her salesmen, men who had faced all the discomforts and dangers of the road far from home and, against formidable odds, had brought back a handful of sales even in that dark year. She had no job for them. Only Louis would stay on, and the company of Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin faced an uncertain and unhappy future. As Louis put it that year, “The Good Lord is a joker: eat and you will die, do not eat and you will die, and so patience and perseverance.”

By the middle of September, the French army had captured Moscow, but it was not much of a victory. Unable to defeat Napoléon, the czar and his allies had retreated to Saint Petersburg, burning everything in their wake—Moscow included. The streets of the city were deserted. “All the houses of the nobility,” wrote a British witness, “all the ware-houses of the merchants, all the shops . . . were fired; and . . . the conflagration raged and rendered Moscow one flaming pile.”

Even Napoléon’s brother Jérôme saw the handwriting on the wall. Jérôme also had a soft spot for Jean-Rémy Moët and his sparkling wine, and he stopped in Épernay on his way to Rome, apparently keen to pick up a few bottles for the road. After ordering six thousand bottles of champagne, all of the *premier cru*, Jérôme lamented that it was so little. “If circumstances were less sad,” he told Jean-Rémy, “I would take double; but I believe the Russians won’t let me drink it.” When Jean-Rémy asked what he meant about the Russians, Jérôme shared with their old friend a state secret. He predicted that the war with Russia would prove a great misfortune.

Jérôme’s prediction was accurate. When Napoléon began marching his troops back to France in the final months of the year, it was a disaster. More than half a million men had been sent to fight in Russia, but only thirty thousand or so made it home. Many died of disease, malnourishment, and the freezing winter temperatures that had made Louis so anxious to avoid a fate in the prison camps of Siberia only a few years before. This meant in 1813 another round of forced recruitments, more taxes, more requisitions.

With Napoléon leading the war abroad, Empress Marie Louise was

left to govern France, and when a delegation was sent to offer her the money needed to raise more troops, Nicolas Ponsardin was among them. The reward for his loyalty would be the noble title that he had dreamed of in those long forgotten days before the Revolution. He was awarded that year the honorific of *chevalier*, or knight, and wore proudly the star of the French Legion of Honor. With the help of men like Nicolas, Napoléon had raised another army of half a million war-weary men by midsummer. By October, most of them had been killed in the Battle of Leipzig. This time, the Russians were coming after them. Napoléon crossed the Rhine, within a few days' march of Reims, with a mere sixty thousand men and prepared to defend the nation.

That autumn, looking eastward, her vineyards now harvested and bare, Barbe-Nicole knew that desperate times were on the horizon. Disaster and destruction were coming. By the end of 1813, the citizens of Reims found that war had come to their doorstep, and Barbe-Nicole's family was again faced with negotiating a treacherous and frightening political position. Her father, once a revolutionary and republican, had in new times served a new ruler. He had become mayor of the city and a noble baron by imperial decree. If Napoléon fell, there was every chance of Nicolas falling with him. In the aftermath, Barbe-Nicole's family could lose everything—perhaps even their lives.