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Document Example:

❷ Napoleon in the Flesh

❶ *David A. Bell*

"The Emperor Napoleon had not yet left his bedroom and was finishing his toilet. Uttering little snorts and grunts, he presented now his stout back, now his plump hairy chest to the flesh-brush with which a valet was rubbing him down. Another valet, with his finger over the mouth of a bottle, was sprinkling eau-de-Cologne on the Emperor's pampered person . . ." There is something about Tolstoy's description of Napoleon Bonaparte on the eve of the battle of Borodino that is not only wonderfully funny, but marvelously revealing about nineteenth-century attitudes towards the French emperor. After all, the great novelist never depicted Tsar Alexander I *en toilette*. Nor did he go so far as to undress General Kutuzov, although he did not hesitate to present the Russian commander as sliding towards the edge of mental and physical ruin. But there is something about Napoleon that invites the intimacy of the rubbed flesh and the little snorts. True, Napoleon himself, during the years of his rule, desperately tried to create monarchical distance between himself and his subjects. Borrowing indiscriminately from the Romans, from Charlemagne and from Louis XIV, he draped his person in ermine, his entourage in gaudy uniforms and gaudier titles (Duke of Ragusa, Prince of Benevento . . .), and his cities in grandiose stone monuments to glory. Yet to his subjects, and particularly his faithful *groguards*, he stubbornly remained the "little corporal" who shared the discomforts and privations of his troops, and who stepped in to help aim the artillery pieces at the battle of Lodi. Which is to say that

L. N. Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (London: Penguin, 1982) 924.

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