

THE WORLD AT WAR

THE SECRET DISPATCH

OR, THE ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN BALGONIE



JAMES GRANT

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PREFACE.

I need scarcely inform the reader of history, that most of the events narrated in the subsequent pages actually occurred in the manner stated; and I have done much to soften, or subdue, the actual barbarity of the story, though such barbarity was consonant enough to the days of her, whose "lust of power and contempt of all moral restraint" won her the name of "the Semiramis of the North."

For the betrothal of the young Lieutenant of the Valikolutz Infantry to his cousin, it may be mentioned that a dispensation was necessary, as the Russian Church—like the Catholic—forbids all marriages within four degrees of relationship.

As stated in the text, the little song of the gipsy is one of many current enough in Russia, where the destruction of the Crescent is always fondly predicted; but never so confidently as during our late Crimean War: and even at this very time, an aged Muscovite, named Alexis Alexandrovitch, after a seclusion of many years in the district of Samara, has come forth as a prophet on the same subject, and is now proceeding from place to place, like another Peter the Hermit, foretelling and preaching the downfall of "the sick man" at Stamboul, and the speedy substitution of the Russian Cross for the Turkish Crescent on the dome of St. Sophia.

26, DANUBE STREET, EDINBURGH.

CHAPTER I. THE LOST TRAVELLER.

"Heaven aid me! here am I now—which way shall I turn—advance or retire?" exclaimed Balgonie, as his horse came plunging down almost on its knees, amid wild gorse and matted jungle.

A cold day in the middle of April had passed away; a pale and cheerless sun, that had cast no heat on the leafless scenery and the half-frozen marshes that border the Louga in Western Russia, had sunk, and the darkness of a stormy night came on rapidly. The keen blast of the north, that swept the arid scalps of the Dudenhof (the only range of hills that traverses the ancient Ingria), was bellowing through a gorge, where the Louga poured in foam upon its passage to the Gulf of Finland, between steep banks that were covered by gloomy pines, when the speaker, a mounted officer in Russian uniform, who seemed too surely to have lost his way, reined up a weary and mud-covered horse on the margin of the stream, and by the light that yet lingered on the tops of the tall pines, and gilded faintly the metal-covered domes of a distant building on the opposite bank, looked hopelessly about him for the means of crossing the dangerous river.

"Where am I?" he repeated, almost despairingly; for, as Schiller sings in his "Song of the Bell,"—

"Man fears the kingly lion's tread;
Man fears the tiger's fangs of terror;
And still the dreadliest of the dread
Is man himself in error!"

Though clad in the uniform of the Russian Regiment of Smolensko, which was raised in the famous duchy of that name, the traveller was neither Muscovite nor Calmuck, Cossack nor Tartar, but a cool, wary, and determined young Briton, one of the many Scottish officers whom misfortune or ambition had drawn into the Russian service, both by sea and land, from the time of Peter the Great down to the beginning of the present century; for many Scottish officers served in the Russian fleet with Admiral Greig at the famous bombardment of Varna: and it was such volunteers as these that first taught the barbarous hordes of the growing empire the true science of war and the necessity for discipline.

The rider's green uniform, faced with scarlet velvet and richly laced with gold, was covered by a thick grey pelisse (like our present patrol-jackets), trimmed with black wolf's fur: he wore a scarlet forage cap with a square top, long boots that came above the knee, and a Turkish sabre that had once armed a pasha of more tails than one.

"Swim the river I must," he muttered, after having traversed the valley in vain, looking for a bridge, boat, or raft of timber; "but, egad, death may be the penalty. Well," he added, with a gleam of ire in his dark grey eyes and a bitter smile on his lip, "there was a time, perhaps, when I little thought that I, Charlie Balgonie, would find a nameless grave in this land of timber, hemp, and salted hides, where caviare is a luxury, train-oil a liqueur, and the air of Siberia deemed healthy for all who have any absurd ideas of political freedom, or are silly enough to imagine that a man may be the lord of his own proper person."

To add to his troubles and discomfort, though the month was April—usually the most serene of the year in Russia—

snow-flakes were beginning to fall, rendering yet greater the gloom of the gathering night.

"I was to have found a bridge here. Can that Livonian villain, Podatchkine, have deluded, and then left me to my fate?"

He knew that in his rear, the way by which he had come, lay half-frozen morasses, heathy wastes, and forests of spruce, larch, and silver-leaved firs—vast natural magazines for supplying all Europe with masts and spars—the haunt of the wolf and bear; he knew that to linger or to return were worse than to advance, and that he must cross the stream and seek quarters and guidance at the château, the name of which was yet unknown to him.

This was, if possible, the worst season for passing the Louga, which is always deepest and most navigable in spring. It rises in the district of Novgorod; and, after traversing a country full of vast forests for more than 180 miles, falls into the Gulf of Finland.

Balgonie buttoned tightly his holster-flaps, hooked up his sabre, assured himself that an important dispatch with which he was entrusted was safe in an inner pocket, and prepared seriously for the perilous task of swimming his horse across the stream.

Again he looked anxiously at the château, the abode evidently of some wealthy noble or boyar. Its outline had almost disappeared in the increasing obscurity; the last faint gleams of the west had faded away on the onion-shaped roofs of its turrets, and a central dome of polished copper, which was cut into facets like the outside of a pineapple (for there is much of the Oriental in the old Russian architecture); but lights were beginning to sparkle

cheerfully through its double-sashed windows upon the feathery and the funeral-like foliage of the solemn pine woods.

Could those who were comfortably, perhaps luxuriously seated within, but know that there was a poor human being on the eve, perhaps, of perishing helplessly amid the dark flow of that deep and roaring river!

"Courage, friend Charlie!" said the rider to himself; and then he hallooed loudly, as if to attract attention, but did so in vain. The night was becoming a very severe one; the flakes of snow fell thicker and thicker on the gusty and cutting blast.

"Ah! if I should perish here—such a fate!" thought he, shuddering. "Shall I be swept down this black and horrid stream, the Louga, to be cast a drowned corpse upon its banks, to be found stripped and buried by wondering but un pitying serfs and boors; or shall I be torn and mangled by bears and wolves; or borne even to the Gulf of Finland, far, far away, having thus an obscure and wretched fate, without winning the name I had hoped to gain—forgotten even by those who wronged me in Scotland, the land that never more shall be a home to me!"

He did not say all this aloud; but certainly some such painful surmises flashed upon him as he forced his snorting and reluctant horse, by a vigorous use of the spurs, through the thickly interwoven brushwood that grew on the bank of the river, the dull and monotonous rush of which, encumbered as it was by large pieces of ice, was sufficient to appal even a stouter heart than that of this young Scottish soldier of fortune.

With a brief invocation on his lips, he gave his horse the reins and gored it with the rowels. A strong, active, and clean-limbed, but somewhat undersized animal from the steppes of the Ukraine, with a fierce and angry snort, it plunged into the torrent, and breasted the icy masses bravely.

The slippery fragments that glided past, struck at times both horse and rider, forcing them to swerve down the stream; others were dashed by the whirling eddies against the projecting pieces of rock or roots of old trees; but after twice nearly despairing of achieving the passage, and believing himself lost, his horse trod firmly on the opposite bank. It emerged, panting, snorting, dripping, and trembling in every fibre, from the flood, and then Captain Balgonie found that he had escaped with life, and had safely passed the swollen waters of the Louga!

Leading his sturdy little steed by the bridle and caressing it the while, he made his way up the opposite bank, guided only by the lights in the mansion (or castle); but he proceeded with extreme difficulty, for the underwood was thick and dense as that which grew round the Palace of the Sleeping Beauty; ere long, however, he reached a plateau, the border of a park or lawn, and saw the snow-whitened walls and turrets of the edifice towering before him.

Rising from a balustraded terrace, with an arched portecochère in front, the façade was square, and three storied, having a central dome like an inverted punchbowl, and several little angular towers, tall and slender like minarets; these cut the sky-line, and were surrounded each by a broad cornice or gallery, and terminated by a bulbous-shaped roof, exactly like an onion with its acute end in the air.

The lights in its many windows, the red and yellow coloured curtains within, all indicated warmth and comfort; while with the snow flakes freezing on his sodden and saturated uniform, his limbs benumbed, and his teeth well-nigh chattering, Balgonie hastily led his horse under the porte-cochère, and applied his hand vigorously to the great brazen knocker on the front door.

It was speedily opened, and a white-bearded *dvornick*, or porter, wearing a long flowing *shoubah*, or coat of fur, lined with red flannel, admitted him with many humble genuflections, at the same time summoning a groom to take charge of his horse.

By the bearing of these lackeys, one might almost have thought that the Captain had been expected, or was a friend of the family: but a uniform has ever been an all-powerful passport, and an epaulette the most mighty of all introductions in Russia, where everything is measured by a military standard; thus, in an incredibly short space of time, the wants of rider and horse were alike hospitably attended to.

CHAPTER II. THE CASTLE OF LOUGA.

Captain Balgonie, of the Regiment of Smolensko, soon found himself in a comfortable bed-chamber, where the genial glow of a *peitchka*, or Russian wall-stove, diffused warmth through his chilled frame, and where every current of the external atmosphere was carefully excluded by double window sashes, adorned with artificial flowers between.

When he chose to repose, a couch draped with snow-white curtains, and having a coverlet of the softest fur, awaited him; and above it hung a little holy picture of the Byzantine school, a Holy Virgin, with a halo of shining metal in the form of a horse-shoe round her head, if he chose to be devout and offer up a prayer.

A valet, after supplying him with hot coffee and a good dram of vodka (which somewhat reminded him of his native "mountain dew"), said that the Count, his master, would rejoice to have the pleasure of the visitor's society, after he had made a suitable toilet, and exchanged his wet uniform for a luxurious robe-de-chambre, in the pocket of which he took especial care to secure his dispatch, unseen.

Hospitality such as this, was not merely then a characteristic of the people, but was the result, perhaps, of a meagre population, and the absence of inns; thus the arrival of a stranger, especially an officer on duty, at this Russian mansion, created little or no surprise among its inmates.

He was ushered into the presence of Count Mierowitz, whose name at once inspired him with confidence and

satisfaction; for, by one of those singular coincidences "which novelists dare not use in fiction, but which occur daily in actual and matter-of-fact life," he had arrived at a mansion where he was not altogether unknown.

"I have to apologise to your High Excellency for this apparent intrusion," said he; "but I have been misled or abandoned by my guide. I am Captain Balgonie, of the Regiment of Smolensko, and have the good fortune to number among my friends your son, Lieutenant Basil Mierowitz, the senior subaltern of my company."

"For Basil's sake, not less than your own, Captain, are you most welcome to the Castle of Louga," replied the Count, lifting and laying aside his cap.

He was a man well on in years; his stature was not great, neither was his presence dignified; he stooped a little and was thick set, with a venerable beard, undefiled by steel; for, like a true old Muscovite, he contended that man was made in the image of God, and should neither be cut or carved upon. His eyebrows were white, but his eyes were dark, keen, quick, and expressed a spirit of ready impulse, for laughter or for ferocity—one, who by turns could be suave or irritable, especially when under the influence of wine, which generally made him fierce and stupid; for never, in all his life, had he suffered control or had his will disputed.

His silver hair was simply tied behind with a black ribbon; in his hand he carried a little cap of black wolf's fur, adorned by rudely set jewels; he wore a queerly cut coat of dark red cloth trimmed with fur, and wore breeches of the same stuff, and lacked but a dagger and pistols with brass Turkish butts at his girdle, to seem what he really was, in disposition and character, a type of the boyar of the old

school, who preferred quass to champagne, ate his pancakes with caviare, and was proud of being a specimen of the old Russian noble, as he existed in the time of Peter the Great, when his class first united some of the vices and luxuries of Western Europe to their native lawlessness and hardy ferocity.

Such was Count Mierowitz.

"When did you last see my son?" he asked, in tone more of authority than of anxious inquiry.

"Some three months since, Excellency: he has been detached on the Livonian frontier."

"And you, Captain—"

"I am proceeding on urgent imperial service from Novgorod where my regiment is stationed in the old palace of the Czars."

"To whither?"

"Schlusselburg."

The host changed countenance and almost manifested signs of discomposure on hearing of that formidable fortress and prison—the veritable Bastille of St. Petersburg, and he said:

"A name to shudder at—by St. Nicholas it is!"

"And, but for the feather in the wax of my dispatch," resumed Balgonie (showing a red government seal in which a piece of feather twitched from a pen was inserted, the usual Russian emblem of *speed*), "I had not, perhaps,

tempted the dangers of the Louga, but sought a billet on the other side, if such could be found."

"You know not, perhaps, that my woods are full of wolves; but this is not the way to St. Petersburg."

"Yet I was so directed, Excellency."

"You have been misled, and are only some seventy versts or so from the place you have left."

"You amaze me, Count," exclaimed the perplexed Captain; for in the Russian service, an error becomes a crime.

"Captain, you should have gone by Gori, Oustensk, Spask, and so on."

"That devil of a Podatchkine, an orderly of General Weymarn, who sent him specially with me, has either deluded or abandoned me."

"Yet we must thank your Podatchkine, in so far that he has procured us the pleasure of your society in this lonely place—my daughter and my niece, Captain Ivanovitch Balgonie," continued the Count, introducing two young ladies who came through the curtains of a species of boudoir, "Natalie and Mariolizza Usakoff. Our visitor, Natalie, is that Ivanovitch Balgonie of whom Basil has spoken so much and so kindly."

Without being a vain man, Balgonie felt at that moment considerable satisfaction in the conviction that he was—as his glass had often informed him—decidedly a good-looking young fellow, with regular features, fine dark eyes, curling brown hair, and a smart moustache; for Natalie Mierowna, like her cousin Mariolizza, was one of the most attractive

women at the dangerous Court of the Empress Catharine II.; for it was during her reign that the story and the atrocities we have unfortunately to record took place; when among us, in more civilised Britain, the grandfather of her present Majesty, old George III., was king, and the arts of peace and war grew side by side.

"The friend and comrade of my brother Basil is welcome," said Natalie, presenting her hands (very tiny and delicate they were) to Balgonie, who bowed and touched them lightly with his lips; "he has often written to us concerning you and your adventures together in Silesia."

"I am but too fortunate to be remembered thus."

"Nay," rejoined Natalie, "we could scarcely forget that daring act of yours, which won you the rank you hold at present. Ah, Basil told us all about that when he was last here," she added, with a beautiful smile, of which she knew that many had already felt the power.

"You mean my reconnoitring the enemy's position and avoiding being taken by them?"

"Yes, pray tell me about it?" said Mariolizza, her blue eyes dilating with pleasure; "my brother was there too—Apollo Usakoff, a lieutenant in the Regiment of Valikolutz."

"It was a very simple matter," replied Balgonie, bowing to each of the cousins, and not sorry to have a good personal anecdote to relate of himself, one which was certain to make him appear to advantage in the estimation of two very attractive women. "It was only a *ruse de guerre*, and occurred when our Regiment of Smolensko was with the combined armies in Silesia, and before the King of Prussia attacked Count Daun at the Heights of Buckersdorff. An exact account of the Austrian position was

required by our general, who had not then received the orders of the Empress to fall back upon the Russian frontier. The task was one of extreme peril; so I being a soldier of fortune, having all to win, and nothing to lose ——"

"Save your life!" interrupted Natalie.

"One in my position, among a foreign army, must not value that too much," said the Captain, in a tone not untinged with melancholy.

"Well?"

"I volunteered for it, despite all that your son, Count, my friend could say to dissuade me. Well armed, at midnight, I set out upon my solitary mission, unattended and alone, without relinquishing my uniform; for if taken prisoner when otherwise attired, I would infallibly be hanged as a spy; but ere long I found, that in such a dress, there were insuperable difficulties to making the reconnoissance required.

"At the cottage of a Silesian boor, near the base of the Eulanbirge (or mountain of the owls), I stopped to make some inquiries. The fellow proved to be partially tipsy; the contents of my pocket-flask, potent vodka, completed his happy condition, and after a few jests I prevailed upon him to change dresses with me. He donned the green coat, epaulettes, and boots of the Regiment of Smolensko; I, the ample canvas caftan and girdle of a Silesian boor,—a fur cap, and a visage daubed with grime, completed my costume. Thus attired, and retaining only my pistols, I reconnoitred safely and unheeded the Austrian position, noting the defences, trenches, fascine batteries, cannon, and general disposition; but I had a narrow escape, for

when returning to the cottage of my new friend the boor, a party of Count Daun's Imperial Cuirassiers, who had been patrolling the Eulanbirge, overtook me, and at once perceiving I was not a Silesian, questioned me rather closely and curiously.

"I succeeded in passing myself off as a Pomeranian, and pointing to the cottage, told them that there was concealed an officer of the famous Regiment of Smolensko. They at once galloped off and surrounded it, while I stole away to a thicket, and climbed into a tree, from whence I could see the poor boor, clad in my uniform, and still labouring under the influence of his late debauch, dragged a prisoner—despite all his bewildered protestations and denials—towards the camp of Count Daun, while I, under cover of night, reached in safety the lines of the allies, and made my report to General Weymarn, then commanding our division of the army.

"It proved of no use to us, as we fell back next day; but it enabled our ally, the King of Prussia, to storm with signal success the Heights of Buckersdorff, to drive back Count Daun, and invest Schwiednitz. He offered me rank in his army; but I declined, on which the Empress sent me the commission of Captain in her Regiment of Smolensko, thus enabling me to rank as a noble of the ninth class."

"May you soon rank as one of the sixth," said the Count, patting the Captain on the shoulder frankly.

"Ah, Excellency, it may be long ere I become a colonel; yet," he added, almost as if talking to himself, "when I got the letter of the Empress addressed to me, Carl Ivanovitch Hospodeen* Balgonie, I could not but smile at the thought of how such a title would have sounded in the ears of my good father, old John Balgonie, of that ilk!"

* Equivalent to Monsieur or Esquire.

"Let me repeat that you are most welcome," said the Count, who totally failed to understand the meaning of the last remark; "and luckily you have arrived just as the ladies and I were about to proceed to the supper-table."

To Balgonie it had become apparent that each time he mentioned the name of the Empress, the proud pink nostrils of Natalie seemed to dilate, and that a decidedly dangerous expression glittered in her splendid dark eyes.

Natalie Mierowna, whose beauty had caused such jealousy at Moscow and St. Petersburg (two duels are spoken of concerning her), had ever shone brilliantly in the "follow-my-leader" kind of dance, now so well known among us as the Mazurka,—the old Slavonian measure, in which all succeeding couples have to imitate the motions of the first; and the chief Russian peculiarity of the dance consists still in the circumstance of the ladies selecting their own partners—the brilliant Natalie, we say, having twice sportively, or in a spirit of coquettish bravado, chosen a handsome young aide-de-camp, whom the Empress was supposed to view with favour, led to her abrupt exile from Court, and to the detaching of Captain Vlasfief, of the Imperial Guards, to irksome and secluded duty at the state prison of Schlüsselburg. This unmerited affront filled her brother, Basil Mierowitz, with such fiery indignation, that but for the dread of compromising his whole family, he would have cast his commission at the feet of the imperious Catharine, and quitted the Russian army; but flight or exile must at once have followed the act.

As it was, though detached and distant on the Livonian frontier, he was now conceiving a scheme for vengeance, much more perilous to himself and to all concerned, and

which actually aimed at the dethronement of the Empress Catharine!

CHAPTER III. NATALIE.

There are few Russian ladies now, who do not speak with equal facility, German, French, and English; but Natalie Mierowna and her cousin were then each mistress of them all,—and this was in the comparatively barbarous time of Catharine II.

Thus their acquaintance with European literature enabled them to excel in an easy and well-supported conversation of which the old bovar, their kinsman, could make nothing; and which they could embellish by their wit and power of quotation, and with an exquisite *finesse d'esprit* peculiarly their own. When this dangerous charm was added to the great beauty of Natalie, she could not but prove a perilous acquaintance for the young Scottish wanderer.

Her loveliness was indeed great.

She was a large, showy, and snowy-skinned beauty, almost voluptuous yet very graceful in form, with fine dark eyes, that were dreamy or sparkling by turns as emotion moved her; long-lashed they were, and perhaps too heavily lidded. Her hair was of the darkest brown, almost black; her lips were full, but flexible, small and pouting when in repose, almost too large when she smiled, which was frequently.

It was when she spoke of the Empress, that her white bosom heaved, and a fiery expression seemed to pervade her whole features. She said little, and that little was generally said with assumed gentleness or real reserve, for language cannot be too guarded in Russia; but her dark

eyes flashed, her delicate nostrils dilated, her short upper lip quivered, she threw back her proud head, and more than once Balgonie saw her white hands clenched; for all the dove-like softness of her nature seemed to depart, when she thought of the affront that exile from Court had put upon her, and her whole family, even to delaying the marriage of her cousin Mariolizza to her brother Basil, to whom she was engaged—solemnly betrothed by a religious ceremony.

She took the arm of Balgonie, and led the way to the dining-room, which was lit by brilliant crystal girandoles, and heated, of course, by a peitchka, the greatest luxury of civilised life that can be found in a cold climate, and which warms a house more effectually than any grate of coals can do. Built on that side of the large, lofty, and magnificent room which was farthest from the windows, it was formed of solid stone, with several carved apertures, and lined with white shining porcelain; within it, blazed a constant fire of billets and faggots, under the care of the dvornick, or house-porter, and these were furnished by the Count's serfs or woodsmen from the adjacent forests.

All made a sign of the cross in the Greek fashion, and seated themselves; but weary and exhausted by his long ride and recent immersion in a swollen and icy river, Balgonie found it almost impossible to partake of the supper that was pressed upon him: caviare on slices of bread to begin with,—"caviare from the roe of the sturgeons of the Don," as the Count informed him,—roasted capon and jugged hare, dried figs and conserves, prunes, and pastilla of fruit and honey compounded, together with the champagne, Rhine wine, and vodka, in silver tankards and goblets of jewelled Venetian crystal.

The jaded traveller could make only a pretence of eating; but he could drink deeply, for he was athirst; and more than one foaming goblet of sparkling Moselle was filled for him, till he became giddy and confused. Were the fumes of the wine mounting to his head? What was the Count saying in an undertone? Was it of him that the cousins were talking in some strange language, and covertly exchanging smiles with their beautiful eyes? "Courage, Charlie," thought he, "this is a bad beginning!"

Though people were not very particular as to a bumper more or less in those days anywhere, in Russia least of all, an emotion of shame came over the young Scottish officer; he felt his cheeks and forehead burn, and he made a vigorous effort to rally his senses, but in vain: he heard the voices of Natalie and of Mariolizza; but he knew not what they said or what he replied, for he felt as one in a half-waking dream. They were talking merrily, however, in French, which is always spoken well by the Russians; perhaps because the tongue that can master Russ may achieve anything.

After a time he mustered sufficient energy and sense to beg that he might be permitted to retire, as he had his journey to resume betimes on the morrow; and he was escorted to his chamber by the Count in person. Its four corners seemed to be in rapid pursuit of each other now, and the floor and the ceiling to be incessantly changing places; then his senses reeled, and the light departed from his eyes. He found himself fainting.

The sudden and rapid journey from Novgorod, the lack of food and the toil he had undergone for one night and two entire days, while wandering with the treacherous Podatchkine, the crossing of the Louga, and the bruises he had unconsciously received from several pieces of floating