

The Secret Dispatch

By JAMES GRANT

CHAPTER I.

"Heaven aid me! Where am I now— which way shall I turn—advance or retire?" exclaimed Balognie, 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 speaker, a mounted officer in Russian uniform, who seemed too surely to have lost his way, leaned on 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.

Though clad in the uniform of the Russian regiment of Smolensko, the traveler was cool, wary and determined, one of the many Scottish officers whom misfortune or ambition had drawn into Russian service, both by sea and land, from the time of Peter the Great down to the beginning of the present century.

The rider's green uniform, faced with scarlet velvet and richly laced with gold, was covered by a thick gray pelisse, trimmed with black wolf's fur; he wore a scarlet forage cap with a square top, long boots and a Turkish sabre.

"Swim the river I must," he muttered, after having traversed the valley in vain, looking for a bridge; "but death may be the penalty. Well," he added, with a gleam of ire in his dark-gray eyes and a bitter smile on his lip, "there was a time, perhaps, when I little thought that I, Charlie Balognie, would find a nameless grave in this land. I was to have found a bridge here. Can that Livonian villain, Podatchkine, have deluded and then left me to my fate?"

Balognie buttoned tightly his holsters, hooked up his sabre, assured himself that an important dispatch with which he was intrusted was safe in a inner pocket, and prepared seriously for the perilous task of swimming his horse across the stream.

With a brief invocation on his lips, he gave his horse the reins and gored it with the heels. A strong, active, un-sorized animal from the steppes of the Ukraine, with a fierce and angry snort, he 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, his horse trod firmly on the opposite bank. It emerged, panting, snorting, dripping and trembling in every fiber, from the flood, and then Captain Balognie found that he had escaped with his 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; but he proceeded with extreme difficulty, for the underwood was thick and dense; ere long, however, he reached a plateau, the border of a park or lawn, and saw the snow-whitened walls and turrets of an edifice towering before him.

The light in its many windows, the red and yellow colored curtains within, all indicated warmth and comfort; with the snowflakes freezing on his sodden and saturated uniform, his limbs benumbed, and his teeth well nigh chattering, Balognie hastily led his horse forward and applied his hand vigorously to the great brazen knocker on the front door.

It was speedily opened, and a white-bearded porter, wearing a long flowing 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.

CHAPTER II.

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

A valet, after supplying him with hot coffee, said that 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 special care to secure his dispatch unseen.

He was ushered into the presence of Ivan Mierowitz, whose name at once inspired him with confidence and satisfaction; for, by one of those singular coincidences, he had arrived at a mansion where he was not altogether unknown.

"I have to apologize for this apparent intrusion," said he; "but I have been misled or abandoned by my guide. I am Captain Balognie, 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, you are most welcome," replied his host, 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 thickset, with a venerable beard. 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.

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

"Some three months since; 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 discomfiture on hearing of that formidable fortress and prison—the veritable Bastille of St. Petersburg, and he said:

"A name to shudder at!"

"And, but for the feather in the wax of my dispatch," resumed Balognie, 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."

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

"You amaze me," 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."

"Podatchkine, an orderly of Gen. 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 Balognie," continued his host, introducing two young ladies who came through the curtains of a species of boudoir, "Natalie and Mariolizza Usakoff. Our visitor, Natalie, is that Ivanovitch Balognie of whom Basil has spoken so much and so kindly."

Without being a vain man, Balognie felt at that moment considerable satisfaction in the conviction that he was decidedly a good looking young fellow, with regular features, fine dark eyes, curling brown hair and a smart mustache; for Natalie Mierowna, like her cousin Mariolizza, was one of the most attractive women at the dangerous court of the Empress Catharine II.

"The friend and comrade of my brother Basil is welcome," said Natalie, presenting her hands to Balognie, 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.

There are few Russian ladies who do not speak, with equal facility, German, French and English, and Natalie Mierowna and her cousin were mistress of them all. Thus their acquaintance with European literature enabled them to excel in an easy and well supported conversation of which their kinsman could make nothing; and which they could embellish by their wit and power of quotation, and with an exquisite charm peculiarly their own. When this was added to the great beauty of Natalie, she could but prove a perilous acquaintance for the young Scottish wanderer.

She took his arm and led the way to the dining room, which was lit by brilliant crystal chandeliers. 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, Balognie found it almost impossible to partake of the supper that was pressed upon him. The jaded traveler could only make a pretense of eating.

After a time he mastered sufficient energy 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 the chamber by his host 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 ice, had all proved too much for his system, and brought on a relapse of an old camp fever from which he had suffered once when serving with the army in Silesia—and in the morning he was delirious.

"Though weak, bewildered, scared by the prospect of loitering thus when proceeding on urgent duty, enduring a raging thirst and a burning pang that shot with each pulsation through his brain, stiff in every joint and covered with livid bruises, he had still strength left as dawning day stole through the double

sashes of his windows, to stagger from bed, and search for the dispatch, which, on the hazard of his life, he was to place in the hands of Bernikoff, the Governor of Schlusselburg.

He hurriedly, and with a tremor that increased, examined each of his pockets in succession, then his sabretasche, and lastly the pocket of the robe de chambre; but the dispatch—the dispatch of the Empress—intrusted to him as a chosen man by Lieutenant General Weymarn was gone!

Lost or abstracted, it was irretrievably gone! Was he the victim of treachery or of a snare? Was it a dream that the beautiful Natalie, with her snowy skin, her dreamy eyes, and her fascinating smile, had been hovering about him—a dream or a reality?

Alas! he knew not; for again the walls and windows were whirling round him in wild career, and he sank on the floor insensible.

Poor Charlie Balognie knew not that the morning on which he made this alarming discovery was that of the second day since his arrival at the Castle of Louga.

CHAPTER III.

Scarcely had Charlie Balognie achieved the passage of the Louga, and forced his panting horse up the wooded bank than guide and orderly, Corporal Michail Podatchkine, who, for reasons which were his own, had decoyed him many, many miles to the southward of his proper route and then abandoned him, while he still cautiously followed, and watched him plunge into the perilous stream—watched him in the hope that he might perish in its icy current; Corporal Podatchkine had barely seen the officer's safety was certain and assured, than he turned his horse's head, and with a hoarse malediction on his bearded mouth, rode away in an opposite direction.

Ere long, with a grunt of satisfaction, he struck upon a track that led to the right and left, and he unhesitatingly pursued the latter. Finally he came to a place where the forest was partially cleared, and there stood a little hut, built of squared logs. The walls of this edifice were whitened by a coat of the fast freezing snow. A single ray of smoky light streamed from the window near the door, on which Podatchkine, without dismounting, struck three blows with the but of his lance.

"Nicholas Paulovitch," he exclaimed, "are you within?"

The door was soon unfastened, and thereat appeared a figure not unlike an Esquimaux, bearing a pine torch. He was a man of great stature and muscular development, clad in a coat of coarse, thick and warm material, girt by a broad belt in which a long rusty knife was stuck. He held up the pine torch, and its flaring light tipped with a lurid, weird and uncertain glow his fierce, tawny and repulsive visage.

"Is it you, Michail Podatchkine—and alone?" he asked, surlily.

"Yes; even so, alone. Dost think I have the evil eye about me that you stare so, Nicholas Paulovitch?"

"Heaven forbid!" cried Nicholas, with a shudder, for this idea is the grossest and the greatest of all Russian superstition; "but I expected two—yourself and another."

"Who told you so?"

"Olga Paulowna, my sister, who yesterday saw you at Krejo."

"True, I remember. Now listen, old friend and comrade—"

"Hush, the girl is within and may hear you."

"Well," said Podatchkine, lowering his voice, while the other extinguished his torch, half closed the door and drew near the speaker, "by order of General Weymarn, Governor of St. Petersburg, I am ordered to guide this Carl Ivanovitch Balognie, who is a stranger, to the gates of Schlusselburg, as he bears to Bernikoff a dispatch of importance; but I have been promised a heavy sum—"

"Ah! how much say you?"

"Two hundred silver roubles, if I, by fair means or by foul, prevent the delivery of that paper into the hands of old Bernikoff."

"He whose dagger tickled the throat of Peter III.; and by whom are you offered this, friend Podatchkine?"

"I can trust you; well, by the Lieutenant Apollo Usakoff."

"The grandson of the Hetman Mazzeppa!"

"The same; and by Basil Mierowitz—"

"Well, and what have I to do with all this?" growled the half breed.

"Much; fifty roubles will be yours, Paulovitch, if you will assist me," said Podatchkine, in a husky whisper.

"Let us talk over this; dismount and come in."

"Nay, there is Olga Paulowna; then I have other work to do. My next instructions are that the dispatch, which is from the Empress herself, and which bears the imperial seal, shall never be delivered; but must be obtained by me for Basil Mierowitz and the Lieutenant Usakoff, now detached upon the Livonian frontier, and who both know as little as I care, that its bearer is actually their own dearest and most valued friend! I misled the Hospodien Balognie, lured him to the river's brink, and left him there, in the hope that he and his horse might become frozen on the steppe or in the forest, where I could rob him at ease; but the man seems made of iron, and, to my astonishment, I saw him swim the Louga. I thought all gone, he, the dispatch and my two hundred roubles, when he plunged his horse into the river; but he stoutly won the opposite bank, and has made his way straight to the dwelling of Ivan Mierowitz, where now, I doubt not, he is safely housed."

"It seems to me, friend Podatchkine, that you took a great deal of useless trouble when you had your dagger and pistols," said the other, suspiciously.

(To be continued.)

Explained.

"What's a monologue?"

"That's the sort of conversation you have with your wife."—Detroit Free Press.



Miss Hapgood tells how she escaped an awful operation by using Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound.

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Ovaritis or inflammation of the ovaries or fallopian tubes which adjoin the ovaries may result from sudden stopping of the monthly flow, from inflammation of the womb, and many other causes. The slightest indication of trouble with the ovaries, indicated by dull throbbing pain in the side, accompanied by heat and shooting pains, should claim your instant attention. It will not cure itself, and a hospital operation, with all its terrors, may easily result from neglect.

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Alexander Gullmaot, of Paris, conceived to be one of the greatest organists of the present day. He will give a series of 36 recitals at the St. Louis Exposition extending over 6 weeks, beginning August 15. The assignment of dates to the other organists has not yet been completed and a great deal of shifting is still in progress. Most of the organists named will give two recitals each. Two, Clarence Eddy of New York, and E. H. Lemare of Pittsburg, will give three recitals each. Clarence Eddy has given recitals at 14 great exhibitions beginning with that at Vienna in 1873. He is at present giving concerts in Warsaw, Russia. In 1876 at the Hershey School of Musical Art in Chicago, of which he was General Director, he gave a series of 100 recitals without any repetitions.

For Growing Girls.

West Pembroke, Me., March 21st.—Mrs. A. L. Smith, of this place, says that Dodd's Kidney Pills are the best remedy for growing girls. Mrs. Smith emphasizes her recommendation by the following experience:

"My daughter was thirteen years old last November and it is now two years since she was first taken with Crazy Spells that would last a week and would then pass off. In a month she would have the spells again. At these times she would eat very little and was very yellow, even the whites of her eyes would be yellow.

"The doctors gave us no encouragement; they all said they could not help her. After taking one box of Dodd's Kidney Pills, she has not had one bad spell. Of course, we continued the treatment until she had used in all about a dozen boxes, and we still give them to her occasionally, when she is not feeling well. Dodd's Kidney Pills are certainly the best medicine for growing girls."

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