



Vasiliev's Travels in the Balkans

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# Introduction

*Cetinje, Montenegro*

“I can tell you frankly, Count, what I won’t miss are the head-hunting stories.” Alexander Ionin, the Russian minister at Cetinje, Montenegro, leaned forward from the ornately carved back of his Venetian chair and tipped the end of his cigarette into a small silver ashtray standing on the polished surface of a wooden table of the same Venetian design. His servants in the Russian consulate considered his Italianate tastes eccentric, but he was proud of the effect of his furnishings on his guest, the Italian ambassador in Constantinople. Count Luigi Corti nodded slowly in rhythm with the minister’s mellifluous, Russian-accented French but his eyes were fixed on the ashtray, reminding him of the main reason for his presence in the Principality of Montenegro, the interest of certain highly placed individuals in Rome in the silver mines.

“Yes, deplorable, *caro mio*,” he muttered softly, his own French sounding more like that of Marseilles than Paris. As he half-listened to his friend’s familiar recounting of his recent experiences among the Northern Albanian highlanders, his mind wandered from silver mines to the more genial landscape of the great oaken forests where he and the Russian had spent a few pleasant hours hunting. Yes, he thought, glancing up at the menacing stuffed head of a brown bear looming over the entrance to the Baron’s study. He would miss this moment of relaxation from the tense atmosphere in Constantinople and the even tenser negotiations at Berlin.

Ionin relished the prestige he would acquire by entertaining Italy’s foremost diplomat. To be sure, the man looked more

like a Milanese barber, at first glance, than an aristocrat who had been foreign minister in Rome. He was small in stature and rather ugly, Ionin had to admit. Now that he had a chance to study him he changed his mind, describing him to his wife as more Japanese-looking than Italian with his small, piercing eyes and flattened nose. But he was a wily sort and was involved in the most delicate negotiations that might avert war in the Balkans. They managed to get on well enough— their love of Voltaire and intense dislike of Victor Hugo— so long as they avoided politics. Beyond this, their views on their foreign colleagues dovetailed like the exquisitely wrought joints of the Venetian chairs. Their mutual dislike of the Austrian military expert, Lt. Colonel Thömmel, provided an especially rich source of spiteful anecdotes.

Ionin was frank, too, about the distaste with which he regarded his current residence.

“You know, Count that I much preferred Ragusa, although my rank was lower.” Ionin had switched to Italian which he also spoke with a pronounced Russian accent.

A servant entered the room bearing a tray with two glasses of *slivovitz*. Ionin welcomed the interruption. It gave him an opportunity to temper his frankness, without abandoning his confidential tone.

Having emptied their glasses in honor of the King of Italy and the Tsar of All Russia, they paused to enjoy the effect. Then Ionin began to spin his embroidered tale.

“The capital of Montenegro is an overgrown village. Prince Nikola sits in his palace and plots to become the leader of all the Serbs. You know of course that the Montenegrins consider themselves more Serbian than the Serbs. No one can deny they are great warriors. But such arrogance! I do my best to restrain the Prince.”

Did Corti detect the half truth? Ionin did not notice a change in his features. As he spoke his mind went back to the glorious summer of 1875 when the Serbs and Montenegrins had risen in rebellion. He had given his support to the Montenegrins. But much had changed since then. The Turks had beaten them badly. Ionin had been recalled to Russia. When the Russians finally entered the war, he returned to Montenegro, knowing that he had backed the

wrong Slavic horse. Bulgaria had become the odds on favorite of the Petersburg Court.

Corti broke into his recollections. "Yes, but why then have you Russians proposed to hand over to these Montenegrins the Albanian tribes who despise them? They have been neighbors for centuries, and fighting one another most of the time. If it isn't over boundaries, it's over a blood feud."

Ionin sought to mask his disappointment. "I wish I could tell you, Count. But I am not privy to discussions at the highest level of our government. I only know that there are disagreements. Here we are, having won the war against the Turks, but undecided as to what to do with the peace. But you know all this better than I. You sit at the table with the masters of Europe in Berlin where, if I may use a colorful phrase, the fruits of our victory are being picked over by others."

"Not quite fair, *caro mio*. We are trying to save you from your own excesses. Prince Bismarck has assumed the role of honest broker. Your Count Shuvalov is a reasonable man. He is working hard with Lord Derby to prevent a war between you and the British. Yet, I understand that Disraeli and the Queen are all in favor of it. What a tragedy that would be!"

Ionin felt out of his depth. His Italian guest was the official representative of his government at the Congress of Berlin, rubbing shoulders with the great statesmen of the day. And he was stuck in this provincial backwater. What could he say?

"I cannot disagree with you on one thing. My colleague, Count Ignatiev, probably made a serious error at San Stefano."

"You mean by forcing the Turks to surrender so much territory."

"Yes, by creating a big Bulgaria he violated our promises not to create a large Slavic state. He antagonized the British, who see themselves as protector of the Ottoman Empire, frightened the Austrians who fear a big Slavic state and alienated our good Serb allies by ignoring their needs for a port on the Adriatic. Quite a performance."

"Indeed, an untrustworthy man. I agree. A Panslav, like you! But he favors the Bulgarians, while you support the Serbs. As for the Montenegrins, they are pawns in a big game. Perhaps your government has set a little trap for Prince Nikola? Hand over some

fierce Albanians to tame— which is impossible—and keep him and his army occupied and more dependent on Russia for subsidies.”

Ionin had never thought of it that way. His heart was on the Montenegrin side. But there was no reason to quarrel with Count Corti who seemed to know more about his government’s intentions than he did. Or was there something else here, something for the Italians?

The minister decided to bring familiar litany of complaints to an end. “It’s the one thing they have in common,” he sighed, “the Montenegrins and the Albanians, the taking of heads of the hated Turk, or whoever falls under the curse of the blood feud, this taking of heads of the defeated enemy. It’s almost a past-time of theirs.”

“Ah, you go too far!” the Count murmured his reproach. “After all, as one of their clan elders said to our English friend Evans, “the French beheaded their king and queen, so who are you — well he meant a European of course — to talk.”

The minister summoned up a deep rumble, recognized by all who knew him as the prelude to a burst of laughter. His ample paunch moved up and down in a rhythm of its own.

The Count was about to change the subject when an ear-splitting scream shattered the stillness of the night outside, coming from below the balcony through the parted curtains of the open French door. Both men came to their feet, but Ionin put a restraining hand on the Count’s shoulder.

“No so fast, my friend, it could be a trick to lure us to the window. They are very good shots you know, even with their old flintlocks. And now they have Martini-Henry rifles!” The minister rushed into the hall calling on his orderly

“...and take your side arms,” he shouted. “Now we’ll see,” he moved toward the open door and pressed against the wall peering into the darkness as he heard the commanding voice of his orderly ordering a woman who was down on her knees in the street, to remain calm. But his commands were not having much effect. She uttered another piercing scream that shook Ionin to the core.

“What is it?” the Count had joined him leaning out before the minister pulled him back.

“All I need is a scandal just before I leave.”

“What is she doing now?” The woman had pushed aside the

restraining hand of the orderly and was fumbling with a large bag that she had placed in front of her, as she wrung her hands and threw back her head as if to scream again. The orderly struck her in the mouth and her head snapped back, then lowered like bull preparing to charge. She ripped open the bag and pulled out a misshapen object which she thrust in the face of the orderly. He recoiled as if he had been shot.

*"Mest'!"* she screamed.

"My god, what is that?" exclaimed the Count.

"That, my friend is a head, and she is holding it up to us by the hair as if to accuse us or perhaps to summon our help." He stepped onto the balcony and shouted a few words to the orderly ordering him to bring her into the consulate. At the same time, he reached behind him and pulled down a hand telescope from the nearest bookshelf.

As the woman struggled to her feet, Ionin focused on her features. Distorted as they were, she still appeared to him as the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Then he lowered his gaze to the horrible trophy which she held arm's length.

She repeated her cry, *"Mest'!"*

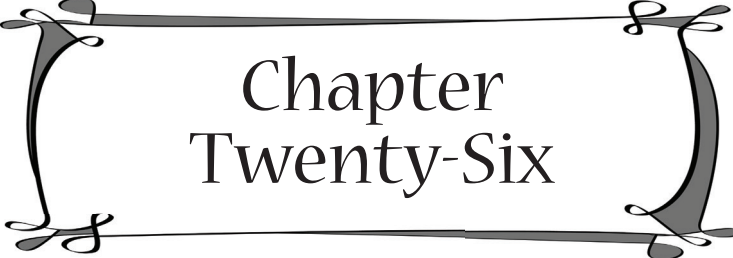
"My God," he exclaimed. "It's Grigoriev!"

"What is she screaming?"

*"Mest', Count, 'revenge'"*

"The head, then, of one of your men?"

"Not mine, but a volunteer with General Chernaiev. A noble Panslav, but an extremist. Worst of all, a man with influential friends at court. This is for me not only a tragedy but a disaster."



## Chapter Twenty-Six

### *Outside Ragusa*

Vasiliev had scarcely returned to the hotel when Serov arrived with that look of anticipation he knew so well. They sat in the garden with Tamara and exchanged their stories. She swiveled her head from one to the other, saying nothing until they had finished. Then they had their first quarrel. No shouting, screaming or weeping, but a serious disagreement, nonetheless. Tamara insisted on being the one to make the next contact. Vasili firmly contradicted her. Being left out of it, Serov watched the exchange and slowly realized to his astonishment that he was witnessing something resembling a lovers' quarrel. And to his even greater surprise, he thought Tamara was getting the best of it.

"All right, Vasili, here is my compromise," she was saying. "The Sergeant and I go back together. If the two of you go, then I will be left here alone for some time. You say you want to protect me. But I have to tell you, and the manager can back me up, that when you were both gone, a strange person showed up, asking for you. He did not give his name. The manager seemed to be intimidated by him. I was in the garden and then went up to my room and locked myself in, as you ordered. Someone tried the door. I don't even have my knife with me. I fear he will come back. Perhaps with others. Police? But perhaps not."

Vasiliev jumped to his feet. "I'll..."

"Please Vasili, hear me out."

"You think getting in touch with Serov's contact will be dangerous? I think not. It was an accidental meeting, don't you think so Sergeant?"

Serov nodded despite Vasiliev's villainous look.

"If we show up together, they will know that you are back here ready to intervene if we disappear. If you go with Serov, then both of you could be taken, and that would be the end of me as well. My last point, if there is a Russian refugee in hiding, then he is more likely to agree to meet with me, as a woman, than two Russian army officers. You forget. The Bosnians feel let down by your government. You are a representative of that government. They will be less suspicious of me.

"If you stay behind you can explain to the manager that I am going with the Sergeant in order to buy the fabulous girdle this woman offered to sell. It's the perfect disguise."

She turned again the Serov, who was dreading what she was about to ask him.

"What do you think, Sergeant? Isn't my plan the best one?"

How many times in his life had he been asked to oppose Vasiliev openly on this kind of question? How could he answer that she was right without angering the one man to whom he owed everything in life. 'Begin' your pardon,' was not going to get him through this.

"No need to put Serov on the spot, Tamara. I can tell from his expression that he agrees with you."

Vasiliev stood up again. "I'm going to ask the manager a few questions."

Tamara watched him walk away.

"Thank you, Sergeant," she said quietly.

While Serov was putting on civilian clothes and adding a false moustache to his modest disguise, Vasiliev looked on dubiously.

"No risks. Don't let her do anything rash. And when you have arranged a meeting with the source, come right back, and with her."

"I've never had any difficulty getting' up like a servant. That's what I was brought up to be, isn't that so?" He knew it was a feeble attempt to mollify Vasiliev. What else could he say? 'I'll guard her with my life?' That would be a stupid thing to say, even if it were true. "At least I know where to find the woman wearing the girdle with the jewels. I always struck a good bargain too," he said, flourishing the purse with Austrian kroner Vasiliev had handed him.



Tamara was wearing her travel outfit. She had put up her hair in coils and placed a transparent white veil on her head. If she thought that constituted an effective disguise, thought Vasiliev, she was mistaken. But was there anything she could do to produce that effect? She would have had to cut off all her hair and blacken her face. Even then..., he mused and brought himself up short.

"It's a good day for a shopping expedition." He ground out the words in the hope of covering up his anxiety. He had never felt quite so useless.

Serov kept looking behind them to make certain they were not being followed. Tamara asked him about his life, and he told her a few stories about his boyhood friendship with Vasiliev, the serf boy and the son of Count Vorontsov (he did not tell her the bastard son). She had a lovely laugh, especially when he told her how they used to wrestle one another in the fields of his father's estate, to the horror of the village peasants.

The woman was where he had last seen her.

"Very good, Sergeant. You look just like a native. And who is this beauty?"

Tamara had agreed with the deception.

"This is the fiancée of my commanding officer. She was interested in the girdle. Is it still for sale?"

"Is that all you have for me?"

"Of course not. But you warned me we should be careful. So, we're bein' careful. Let's move over there by the old stables and make as if we're hagglin'."

Serov took out his purse and opened it.

Tamara took the girdle in her hand. "Fine work," she said "Who was the craftsman?"

"How would you know his name even if I could tell you?"

"Oh, you'd be surprised. It looks like the work of a master in Travnik."

The woman was startled. She snatched back the girdle and looked as though she were about to run.

"Don't be frightened," Tamara said in a low voice that Serov had never heard her use. "We are friends, looking for followers of Cadmus and you are one." She took the woman's left hand and touched a ring in the shape of a dragon on her fourth finger. Then

she drew a thin silver necklace out of her blouse, at the end of which was an identical ring.

The woman's eyes went wide with astonishment.

"Then the man you told the Sergeant about, isn't he one of us?"

Serov was startled. He recalled Vasiliev telling them about the myth of Cadmus but what did it mean here? He decided quickly to intervene. "Stay calm, friend, and pretend we have agreed on a price. How much do you want? My commanding officer authorized us to arrange another meeting."

The woman handed over the girdle and took the purse without counting the money.

"But who are you? How did you find us?" She seemed to have recovered her balance.

"It's not important for now. Later, when I can meet your comrade, I will tell you everything." Tamara spoke with a voice of authority.

Serov was as much baffled by Tamara's commanding tone as he was about the matching rings. But he could not think of a way to prevent what he saw happening. Vasiliev would be furious.

"We need to meet now," said Tamara. "We cannot fool the police forever."

The woman raised her hand to her face and looked around wildly

"No one is following us. We were very careful. Lead us to him. We can bring food too. What do I call you?"

"Maria." The woman nodded. Tamara took her by the arm and they went from stall to stall buying two bottles of the local wine, dried fruits and nuts. Serov felt he was in the hands of a female Vasiliev.

"In the caves," the woman whispered, "we have to take a boat. Wait here."

She returned in a few minutes with an older man. Serov glanced at his left hand, the dragon ring. He nodded to them but did not speak.

The boat was carried by the swift current against which they had battled when sailing upstream a few days earlier. The boat man kept close to the shore and beached the boat in front of a large cavern in the rocky cliffs.

Maria spoke a few words to him in a Bosnian dialect.

"She says to wait for us. We will not be longer than an hour."

Maria stared at her. "So you speak our language, too. Tamara smiled. "I like the way it sounds."

"Be careful, the ground is rocky and there are sharp stones on the side of the cavern. I must warn you he is not well."

They smelled him before they saw him. He was lying on a bed of straw. He had been a large man, Serov estimated, but his body was emaciated. His long hair and heavy beard almost obliterated his features.

Maria knelt beside him and handed him one of the wine bottles which she had already uncorked. He took a long draught, coughed violently, all the while nodding his thanks.

Only then did he peer at Serov and Tamara. With a sudden, jerky motion he swept to one side the curtain of hair hanging over his face. At the same time he raised his hand in what looked to Serov like a salute.

"Tamara!" his voice cracked with emotion.

"Is it you, Stanislav? By the prophet, what has happened to you?"

Serov felt an odd sensation as if the ground were shifting under him. He could only think of how he was going to tell Vasiliev what had happened.

"Ah, my dear Tamara, how beautiful you look, a vision appearing before a dying man. And who is this?"

"A friend who has come to help me seek revenge."

"For Borya. What can I tell you? I ..." He was seized with another spasm of coughing.

"Gently, gently. Sip the wine. There is bread and fruit here. You need strength to talk, to tell me about his last days."

Maria held his head as he took another swallow. She tore off a piece of bread and fed him, pushing away his filthy hands. He ate a few figs and lay back on his pallet.

"Yes. I will speak gently. So little time left. Maria has kept me alive this long. It must be just to await you." He pushed aside his curtain of hair again. Serov took notice of the dragon ring on his left hand. It shone in contrast to the darkened fingers that looked as if they had been burned



Mostar Bridge

"It must have happened outside Mostar. I left him outside the town."

"Yes. The last I saw of him he was crossing the Mostar Bridge. He said he had a meeting with some of our group in one of the towers of the old fortifications." Stanislav closed his eyes, and Serov feared he might not open them again.

"Yes, the Mostar Bridge..." Tamara bent closer. Serov could not imagine how she could stand the odor of putrefaction. The man must be rotting from the inside.

Suddenly, the dying man opened his eyes wide and gnashed his teeth.

"It was Omar who betrayed him. I am certain. I saw him slink out of the tower and disappear in the stalls of the town. I shall never forgive myself for not pursuing him."

"But you were the lookout, Stanislav. You were watching for enemies coming from without, not from within. You cannot blame yourself."

Stanislav had raised himself on his elbows and stared at Tamara as if he no longer recognized her.

"I waited too long. When I sought him out, I think the terrible

deed had been done. He was...missing. There was blood and the others had fled."

"Did you see...?"

His body began to shake. Serov wanted to close his eyes as she grasped the shoulders of the dying man. Stanislav moved his head, but was it a sign of yes or no? Then he fell back and lost consciousness.

Maria was weeping. There were tears in Tamara's eyes but she brushed them away.

"Let me see," said Serov, holding his neck cloth over his face. He forced himself to take hold of the man's wrist and found no pulse.

"He is gone," he muttered.