

First of a trilogy of historical novels based on the life of Alexander Bulatovich, a Ukrainian/Russian explorer in Ethiopia, a cavalry officer during Russia's conquest of Manchuria, and later a monk at Mount Athos and a religious leader.

The Bulatovich Saga: The Name of Hero

By Richard Seltzer

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RICHARD SELTZER



**THE
BYLATOVICH
SAGA**

THE NAME OF HERO

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The Bulatovich Saga is a trilogy of historical novels based on the life of Alexander Bulatovich, a Russian explorer in Ethiopia, a cavalry officer during Russia's conquest of Manchuria, and a monk at Mount Athos.

This, the first of that trilogy, is an expanded and heavily edited version of *The Name of Hero*, which was originally published in 1981 by Tarcher/Houghton Mifflin. The rights have reverted to the author.

You'll find historical sources and related materials, including transcripts of interviews with Bulatovich's sister, Princess Mary Orbeliani, at <https://www.seltzerbooks.com/sourcesandrelateddocuments.html>

The author of this novel also translated Bulatovich's books about Ethiopia. See *Ethiopia Through Russian Eyes* at Amazon.

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Table of Contents

Chapter One: End of the Line.....	19
Chapter Two: Facts and Faith.....	29
Chapter Three: Life or Death	37
Chapter Four: Old Oak	41
Chapter Five: A Team of His Own.....	50
Chapter Six: The Battle of Ongun	57
Chapter Seven: First Blood	65
Chapter Eight: Naming Names.....	75
Chapter Nine: Half-Baked.....	81
Chapter Ten: Consequences	90
Chapter Eleven: Masha.....	99
Chapter Twelve: The Making of a Hussar	105
Chapter Thirteen: Tutor to a Princess.....	113
Chapter Fourteen: An Unexpected Hurdle	124
Chapter Fifteen: Ethiopia Through Sonya's Eyes.....	129
Chapter Sixteen: Hailar Taken Without a Shot	139
Chapter Seventeen: Chinese Sonya	148
Chapter Eighteen: The Second Conquest of Hailar.....	156
Chapter Nineteen: To Believe or Not to Believe.....	169
Chapter Twenty: Cross-Purposes	187
Chapter Twenty-One: Domestic Tranquility.....	197
Chapter Twenty-Two: Temptation	212
Chapter Twenty-Three: The Flying Detachment	219
Chapter Twenty-Four: Smolyannikov	231
Chapter Twenty-Five: Great Expectations	234
Chapter Twenty-Six: A Clash of Cultures.....	240
Chapter Twenty-Seven: Adoption.....	247

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Battle of Yakeshi	255
Chapter Twenty-Nine: Even Elephants Pray	265
Chapter Thirty: Battle of the Greater Hsing-An Mountains	275
Chapter Thirty-One: For Mine is the Kingdom	279
Chapter Thirty-Two: Asalafetch	283
Chapter Thirty-Three: Thy Kingdom Come	289
Chapter Thirty-Four: Race for Glory	297
Chapter Thirty-Five: A Tale of Two Sonyas	302
Chapter Thirty-Six: The Saga of Madame B.	315
Chapter Thirty-Seven: The Challenge	326
Chapter Thirty-Eight: Luck Runs Out	332
Chapter Thirty-Nine: About Face	343
Chapter Forty: Through the Valley of Death	352
Afterword	375

Chapter One: End of the Line

Chita in Eastern Siberia, July 20, 1900

The train screeches to a halt. Bulatovich wakes up — glasses awry, eyes unfocused. He hears the conductor call, “Chita! End of the line!” In the corridor, short-tempered passengers are wrestling with luggage. He pries open the window and leaps, feet-first, onto the platform.

He stretches his arms, then stamps his feet, easing the stiffness in his legs. Around him, confused and anxious passengers shout questions above piercing blasts of the train's whistle and the hiss of the steam brakes. In the dust kicked up by the train's arrival, soldiers mill about.

Bulatovich rips off wet cloths wrapped round his close-cropped hair and drops them to the ground. Despite the heat, he is wearing the white and red dress uniform of an officer in an elite Russian cavalry unit. The red stripe indicates he belongs to the Tsar's Life-Guard Hussar Regiment. "Hussars" are light cavalry, short in stature and without armor — selected and equipped for maximum speed. His bearing signals confidence and authority. He's accustomed to being respected and obeyed.

His dark eyes, magnified by thick lenses of wire-rimmed glasses, dart back and forth as he observes the scene. Chita? His trip from Saint Petersburg to Moscow and then eastward on the Trans-Siberian Railway took more than a week. He's nowhere near his destination. Why is everyone getting off here?

He strides up to a young lieutenant who's shuffling through papers on a clipboard. "Why have we stopped here?" he asks. "My orders are to Port Arthur."

Noting the newcomer's rank and Guard stripes, the lieutenant jumps to attention and salutes. Bulatovich waves back casually.

"I'm Lieutenant Sidorov, sir. At your service, sir. This is the end of the line. Chita, sir. Capital of Trans-Baikal Territory."

"I was told that the rail line runs east to Vladivostok and south from Harbin to Port Arthur."

"That was the plan, sir. But for now, this is the end of the line."

Bulatovich flinches at the finality of that phrase. He continues, "How far are we from the Chinese border?"

"Two hundred thirty miles, sir." Sidorov salutes again, sharply.

Bulatovich ignores the salute. "Where can I find a fast horse? I have to get to Port Arthur."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but that can't be done."

"But it must be done, Lieutenant."

"Begging your pardon, sir. The Chinese are at war with us. They control all of Manchuria; and Port Arthur is at the other end of Manchuria, over eleven hundred miles from here."

"I'm not asking for a geography lesson. I need a horse."

"But the Chinese are tearing up tracks, burning stations, wrecking the railway, attacking everything Russian. 'Kill the foreign devils,' they say. Cross the border and you're as good as dead, sir."

"As I told you, I have orders."

"Orders have been changed, sir — all of them"

"I assure you, mine are an exception. They were signed by the Tsar himself. I'm to report to the Commander-in-Chief of our operations in the Far East, Vice-Admiral Alexeyev, in Port Arthur."

"What did you say your name is, sir?"

"Staff-Rotmister Alexander Xavierevich Bulatovich of the Tsar's Life-Guard Hussar Regiment. You won't find that on your clipboard."

"Begging your pardon, sir. Here are your new orders. You've been reassigned to the Hailar Detachment."

"The what?" he asks, taking the papers from the lieutenant.

"A detachment assembling here in Chita to march on the Manchurian city of Hailar and regain control of that section of the Russo-Chinese Railway."

"That must be a mistake. Who's in charge here?"

"General Orlov."

"Where can I find him?"

"He's over there. In the red chair."

Two dozen officers and clerks are sitting at field tables set up in the dirt street. They're processing newly arrived soldiers.

In normal times, Chita has less than eight thousand inhabitants. But tens of thousands of conscripts have arrived for mobilization. The temperature is over ninety-five degrees. Scuffles erupt among impatient men in long lines.

Bulatovich strides up to the red chair from behind. "Your Excellency, Staff-Rotmister Bulatovich reporting. Apparently there's been a mistake. I have orders to Port Arthur."

"Bulatovich?" The General jumps up, turns, and squints in his direction. "Did I hear you say Bulatovich?"

"Yes, Your Excellency."

"Welcome! Welcome, Bulatovich!" The General clasps him and slaps him on the back. "I've heard of your exploits in the steeplechase at Krasnoye Selo, in front of the Tsar. You won two years or was it three in a row? And an African explorer, too, I hear. Ethiopia! I wrote an article about the Italians in Ethiopia. Perhaps you read it? No, of course not, nor have I had time to read your books, though I've heard good things about them. I'll write about this, whatever comes of it. And you will too, I'm sure. Once a writer, always a

writer. When orders arrived re-assigning you to my detachment, I was delighted. It isn't every day we get a celebrity, or that two men with such uncommon interests meet in the middle of nowhere. I look forward to having long talks with you in the coming months."

Bulatovich forces a smile.

General Orlov is heavy, in his late fifties, with white hair, bushy sideburns, chin whiskers. He's caked in sweat-soaked dust. His shirt is open to the waist. He punctuates his words with hand gestures as part of his friendly, informal style.

Bulatovich hesitates. The sun, the heat, the exhaustion. Is he seeing double? No. It's a memory of a photograph overlaid on the present scene. His father, also a general, died when Bulatovich was too young to remember. In the photograph, he looks reserved and exacting, in sharp contrast to this open, unguarded, effusive old man. As a Pole and a Catholic, Xavier Bulatovich had to be careful not to be suspected of sympathizing with rebels. It was a test of his loyalty when, early in his career, he was ordered to put down a rebellion in Poland. He had done so with ruthless brutality to make his allegiance clear. But he had gone to the same military engineering school as Dostoyevsky, around the same time. Had they known one another? Were they friends? Was it only by chance that Bulatovich's father had not, as a student, been involved in sedition? Because he was a Pole, even if he was innocent and loyal, he could have been arrested and sent to Siberia or executed. Then he would never have had a son.

Bulatovich stops that line of thought. All too often, he has fits of vanity, believing he's special, chosen. But chosen for what?

Now he's stuck in the middle of nowhere. Is that fate? Is that God's will? Those are thoughts for another place and time. Now he needs a place to sleep.

Orlov leads Bulatovich along the street, behind the rows of tables, past sullen recruits who reluctantly make way for them. He explains, "We're short on experienced officers. A few came to us from Kazan and Orenburg. But you — what a find! Your rank is a problem. Since you're a Staff-Rotmister, I can't put you in charge of a company. Too many officers here outrank you, though they lack your experience. Your title will be second assistant commander of the mounted regiment. Colonel Kupferman is commander; Major Strakhov, assistant commander. But I'll find ways to use your talents. When needed, I'll assemble hand-picked units for reconnaissance and attack — *flying detachments*. I won't let protocol stop me from putting you in charge of those."

Off to their left, a drunken brawl breaks out and a store window shatters. Two officers rush to the scene. Orlov pays no attention.

"Mobilization caught us by surprise, but we're muddling through," he continues. "Our recruiting lists were incomplete, and there was no way to tell how many men would answer our summons. So we called up every man of working age in all of Trans-Baikal: farmers, ex-convicts, miners, shopkeepers. That's an area larger than France. Over twenty thousand men showed up — far more than we need. We'll send some home at their own expense. For now, we have to cope with crowded conditions while we organize and plan.

"In addition to the raw recruits, we have some Cossacks, raised and trained as fighters. They supply their own uniforms and weapons,

whatever they can afford. I don't think you'll find two belts the same width and color among them. But they're crack shots, and they know the territory, from trading and herding in the Mongolian part of Manchuria.

"We have some aboriginals —Buryat tribesmen. It's best to leave them alone. Let them keep their native robes. We don't have supplies enough to uniform them, and they'd resent our meddling with their dress. It'll be hard enough keeping them in line. Why aggravate them? They'll handle our transport. It'll all work out in the end.

"Some of my new officers, familiar with garrison duty and parade drill but not combat, don't approve of my flexible style of command," says Orlov, coming to a stop. "I'm delighted that you've joined us. It's good to have someone with recent combat experience. The only time I saw action was more than twenty years ago, against the Turks.

"You must be exhausted from your journey. Better rest now. Tomorrow we leave for Abagaitui, a station on the Chinese border. Our first goal is Hailar, a district capital, about a hundred miles from there. Then we'll push on toward the rail junction at Harbin and hope to link up with other Russian detachments advancing into Manchuria from the north and east. There's no telling what kind of opposition we'll meet.

"Colonel Kupferman!" Orlov signals to a nearby officer. "I'd like you to meet your new second assistant commander, Staff-Rotmister Bulatovich. He's one of the finest horsemen in Russia. You remember my telling you about him? Find him a place where he can spend the night."

Kupferman, older than Orlov and overdue for promotion, expects to retire soon. A large man, his face is clean-shaven, with heavy jowls and a triple chin, accentuated by a stiff posture. His stomach protrudes. His belt is stretched near breaking. Every piece of metal and leather in his uniform is highly polished.

Nearby, another officer in his early thirties stands at attention. His eyes are clear and blue; his hair blond. He's half a foot taller than Bulatovich. From the whiteness and smoothness of his beardless skin, he seems more like a doctor or a lawyer than a soldier. His uniform is in impeccable condition.

When Orlov leaves, Kupferman explains, "Accommodations are hard to come by. I brought my own carriage, a *tarantass*, that I've fitted with all the comforts of home. There's only one hotel in town. It's small, shabby, and overcrowded. I suggest that you make the acquaintance of our officers in hopes that one will let you share his space."

"What about the enlisted men?" asks Bulatovich.

"They pitch tents wherever they can."

"Thank you sir," says Bulatovich, saluting and taking his leave.

He proceeds to the baggage car, picks up his gear, then, pitches his tent.

Kupferman and Strakhov look in disbelief at what bears no resemblance to a regulation army tent. It's smallish, with a multitude of pockets and other contrivances. From the outside, they see a patchwork of irregular stitching and bulges, and, through the flaps, a potpourri of gear, arranged for ready access. There are straps for photographic and surveying gear and loops for saber, rifle, and pistol. Tucked into one side of the tent, near the peak, are a photo of Tsar Nicholas II, and an icon of Christ.

As they watch, Bulatovich, unselfconscious, kneels before the icon and prays reverently. Then, opening the flaps even wider to let in fresh air, he stretches out, fully dressed, on his back, his hands behind his head.

He feels a twinge of guilt for having considered the troubles in China as an opportunity for personal advancement, a chance to restart his military career after failure in Ethiopia. Now he's marooned in a place where nothing of importance is likely to happen. For him, this is *the end of the line*.

Then he hears Kupferman's hushed voice. "I don't know what we're going to do with him. This flamboyant contraption of his is an affront. It's one thing for a regimental commander, like me, to show eccentricity. I've earned my comforts. But for a junior cavalry officer to flaunt a gypsy tent like that is an act of insubordination, even if he is from a prestigious regiment. It's his duty to set an example of orderliness, decorum, and discipline for these unruly and untrustworthy troops of ours."

"Perhaps we should bring this to the attention of General Orlov," suggests another voice in a barely audible whisper.

"I already told Orlov. I described the tent in detail, and he replied, 'Sounds marvelous. I wish I had one myself.' Bulatovich is going to be a problem," Kupferman continues, loud enough to make sure he's overheard. "Mark my words, Strakhov. You saw the way the General treated him. You heard that business about the steeplechase and Africa. This Bulatovich is too much of a celebrity for our little operation. His presence upsets the command structure. It's disruptive for a junior officer to be friendly with the commanding general."

"Yes, sir," Strakhov agrees. "There's something peculiar about Bulatovich. Did you notice his earring?"

"Earring?"

"There's a gold one on his left ear, like a gypsy."

"Peculiar, yes. What's he doing here, anyway? Orlov corralled him passing through, but he must have volunteered to be sent to the Far East. What's he after? If he were simply ambitious, he'd stay in Saint Petersburg, cultivate acquaintances, play regimental politics. That's how to get ahead in this army. Foreign duty looks good on the record, but you have to spend time in your own regiment to make something of it. This chasing about from one end of the world to the other reeks of scandal," concludes Kupferman. "There must be some nasty business he'd like everyone to forget. A woman, I'd wager. A woman, no doubt."

In the background, the train starts up again, beginning its four-thousand-mile trek back to Moscow.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Great Expectations

They fall silent, passing the bottles around. Volf seems to have an infinite supply of champagne.

Tired of standing, Bulatovich sits stiffly on the ground and nurses a bottle by himself. His mind wanders back to Saint Petersburg and Sonya. On his return from Ethiopia, the third time, for good, he was insensitive; no, cruel. He sent a message to her father asking to see him, saying he needed to ask him for permission, but not saying for what. With the wisdom of hindsight, he now realizes her father must have told her, and she misunderstood. That's why she had that anxious look the last time he saw her. Her eyes flashed now green, now blue. He remembers every gesture, every word, as if it were happening now.

She's thinking two steps ahead. Permission must be permission to marry her. They'll write a book about his third trip, and this time he'll acknowledge her as co-author. They'll adopt Vaska.

"What happened?" she asks him as he leaves her father's office.

"He gave me permission."

"Wonderful." She rushes to hug him.

He pulls back and says, "I'm surprised you're pleased."

"Surprised? What nonsense. You've known how I feel about you for years. There was never any reason to say so explicitly. We carried on our dialogue with our eyes."

"For years? I don't understand. This just came up. How could you have anticipated it?"

"What just came up?"

"The crisis in Manchuria."

"What crisis in Manchuria?"

"Don't you read the papers? Didn't your father tell you?"

"What does Manchuria have to do with us?"

"What us?"

"Us us. In the name of God, what are you talking about? You came here to ask my father for permission. You tell me he said 'yes.' What's that got to do with Manchuria? When can we marry?"

"Marry?"

"Of course. You got his permission. How long do we need to wait? Can we set a date within the next few months? The sooner the better. There's no telling when you'll get orders back to Ethiopia."

"That won't happen."

"What?"

"Ethiopia. That's over. I won't be going back."

"But the Emperor loves you. He offered you a province to rule yourself, personally. You'll be a prince of Ethiopia."

"No. That's over. The Foreign Ministry won't permit it. Policy has changed. No African entanglements. I was recalled. My African adventure is over."

She rushes to him and embraces him. "Then there's no barrier. You're home. You'll stay. No wonder you asked Father for permission now."

"But that has nothing to do with us as us. Nothing to do with marriage. It's Manchuria."

"Manchuria?"

"Didn't you hear me? The crisis. The Boxer Rebellion. That's where the action is, where I'm needed. The Far East. Don't you see? It's an opportunity, and it comes at the perfect time for me. We haven't been at war in over twenty years. And now we are. What good is a cavalry officer in peacetime? Ceremony. Parades. Endless drills and training."

"The Far East?"

"Of course."

"But my father? His permission.?"

"He's my commanding officer. I need his permission to request transfer to Port Arthur."

She slaps him.

"Aren't you happy for me?" he asks.

"Happy for you? No thought of us, of marriage? After all these years of waiting?"

"I never led you on. I never spoke of marriage."

"You're a monster. I hate your guts."

After that, she must have talked to her father. He imagines how that must have gone.

"Is that it?" she asks. "Is that all, Father?"

"I understand your disappointment. Though he and I never spoke of it, I thought the two of you would make a perfect couple, in the fullness of time. But that isn't happening."

"Not when he comes back?"

"I doubt it. If so, he would have said something now."

"Did he say anything about me?"

"Indeed, he did. He thinks you're a genius, another Sonya Kovalevsky."

"Kovalevsky? The slut?"

"The renowned mathematician."

"I've heard of her. I read about her at his prompting."

"He suggested I read about her as well, and I did. You should be flattered by the comparison. The first woman to earn a doctorate in mathematics, and the first to become a professor of mathematics. She won the Bordin Prize. She had to struggle to even audit university lectures. Women were excluded. She broke that barrier by her brilliance and cleared a path that other women can follow. You can follow."

"And she was a slut."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Her father wouldn't give her permission to travel, much less to study. So she made a fake marriage with a man who would let her do what she wanted. Is that what he wants me to do? Marry someone not for love, but to free myself from my father's control?"

"There's no need for that. I'll give you whatever permission you need to get a passport and to apply for admission."

"So he wants me to go to Europe for two years? For four? Or for the rest of my life? And that's fine with him because he never wants to see me again? Marvelous. Simply marvelous. When they send him back from Manchuria in a coffin, don't expect me to go to his funeral."

"And Europe? University?"

"I'm no mathematician. I bet my life on a gross miscalculation."

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Even Elephants Pray

Bulatovich catches a fly in midair.

"Did you learn that trick in Africa?" Smolyannikov asks.

"No, in the Ukraine."

"Then what did you learn in Africa?" he follows up, slipping from light to serious. They're lying in a grassy ravine on a mountainside, fighting off flies, mosquitoes, and little black gnats, waiting for nightfall, when they'll be able to slip back to the main encampment. The night before, they crept here, within fifty paces of the enemy bivouac, where they can see the preparations the enemy is making.

Bulatovich is once again in command of the flying detachment, but he and Smolyannikov continue to treat one another as equals and friendly rivals. They're watching a new Chinese army, under General Chou Mien, in the Greater Hsing-An Mountains, a hundred miles east of Hailar. These soldiers, rather than advance and meet the Russians on the plains, are digging trenches and fortifying themselves on the mountaintops, taking advantage of abandoned railway ties and the log cabins that served as warehouses for railway construction crews. The mountains are heavily wooded, and the valleys that separate them are swampy and infested with bugs.

"I learned no more and no less than we can learn here," Bulatovich replies.

Smolyannikov laughs, but his eyes remain serious. "And what is that, my wise friend?"

"I'd call it 'the power of nature.'"

"That sounds Chinese. But you probably mean that differently, as if nature were negative, to be fought against and overcome. The way you look at life reminds me of a passage from Ecclesiastes. 'Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work nor thought nor knowledge nor wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.' Tell me, what do you mean by 'the power of nature?'"

Bulatovich pauses. He wants to impress this new friend, to spin a sophisticated philosophical argument that justifies his random words. But lying here in the lush mountainside greenery stirs memories of Ethiopia. "On my third trip to Ethiopia, I had a long bout of fever and was often troubled with dreams. In those dreams I returned to the scene of my first elephant hunt three years before. Or maybe I actually went back there; I don't know for sure. In dream or reality, I recognized the power of the jungle, the relentless force of nature, annihilating everything we do.

"*Dajazmatch* — that's governor-general in Amharic — Gabra Egziabeer of Lekamte was my host, an Oromo in the service of the Amharic Emperor. There were a thousand of us on the hunt. For the Oromo, an elephant hunt is serious business — like war — not because elephants pose a threat to villagers, not for meat or ivory, but because the Oromo have elevated killing to a cult. There are still tribes where a youth can't marry until he's killed an elephant, a lion, or a man. Having killed one of those, he greases his head with oil, wears bracelets, rings, and an earring, and returns home with songs.

A man can become a hero only by killing, and only a hero is a true man.

"Of the thousand men, four hundred were on horse, each with three small spears. The other six hundred were on foot, half with small spears; the rest carried four-yard-long spears with yard-long metal blades. They call such spears *jambi*. They throw them from the tops of trees when elephants pass under. The force of the fall of the *jambi* is so great it sometimes pierces all the way through an elephant. Only I, my servants, and a few soldiers of the *dajazmatch* had guns.

"After a week, we spotted a huge herd — more than a hundred elephants, big and small, red from the clay of the stream bed. *Jambi*-bearers climbed the trees by the stream. Others set the grass on fire in a circle around the herd. Those of us on horseback crossed the stream to frighten the elephants from fleeing in that direction. The elephants panicked and scattered. In the forest, the *jambi*-bearers struck at them. At the edge of the forest, the spear-bearers on foot and my servants with guns waited for them. As the elephants charged through the circle of fire, those of us on horseback surrounded them and struck them however we could.

"The elephants pulled spears out of their bodies with their trunks and hurled them back at us. If an elephant charged after one hunter, others tried to distract the animal. I saw one elephant grab an Oromo from the saddle with his trunk and hurl him to the ground. Another threw a branch at an Oromo breaking his arm.

"When an elephant fell, it was considered the catch of the first hunter who had wounded it. That hunter would rush up to lop off the tail, the end of the trunk, and the ears as his trophies.

"All around, the grass blazed with a crackling sound. In the woods, I could hear shooting and cries of terror and triumph and the bellow and screech of the panic-stricken elephants, throwing themselves now at one man, now at another. At moments of desperation, elephants would pick up sand and grass with their trunks and throw it at the sky. The Oromo believe that's the elephants' way of praying to God.

"My mother would have seen it that way. She, too, believes that animals, even elephants, pray. No matter what God does to us, still we pray.

"The stream was red with blood. We killed forty-one elephants that day. I killed three myself and my servants two. Five men died that day, three crushed by elephants, two hit by stray bullets. The dead men got little attention. It was a day of triumph.

"That night the elders gathered and sorted out disputes about who first wounded what elephant. The Oromo would use anything, including bribery and trickery, to prove their claim.

"Since I was the only one with an elephant gun, no one challenged my claims. So I didn't wait for the end of the disputes. I left with my trophies.

"For the people of Lekamte, that was a great and memorable day, a day when boys became men, a day to sing of for years to come. For me, it was a day of unusual excitement, great sport, an exotic challenge. My life didn't depend on it, although I could have died there. My life didn't change because of it. I was an outsider with no sense of its importance aside from the danger and the struggle and

the hunt. I've always enjoyed hunting, and how could I pass up an opportunity to hunt the world's largest land animal?

"Only when I returned there in dream or in fact did I get an inkling of the meaning of that experience. Maybe it's only now in telling it to you that the pieces come together in my mind.

"Sometimes I wonder what our lives would be like if we never talked about what we do and what happens to us. Often, what we say, what that sounds like to others and to ourselves changes our thinking. With our words, with the names we give to others and to ourselves, we change the way we see the world, and that changes how we act."

"Well, what did you see? What did you learn?" insists Smolyannikov, swatting a mosquito that was biting Bulatovich on the back of his neck.

Disoriented, Bulatovich hits him back, and they wrestle until Smolyannikov pins him and slaps him playfully. "Wake up Sasha, come out of it. So we haven't slept for a couple days. That's no excuse to stop in the middle of a story. What did you learn in Ethiopia? Out with it, now."

Bulatovich shakes himself, picks up his glasses (fortunately, intact), and fans himself with his red cap.

"I learned something about myself."

"Well, what? Damn you."

"An Ethiopian general, Wolda Giyorgis said, 'You're a devil. I don't know how you got out of there alive.' You remind me of him, the same build. The Emperor had ordered Wolda Giyorgis to march to the south-southwest as far as Lake Rudolph and to conquer all the land between. He had an army of sixteen thousand, ten thousand of them armed with rifles, the rest with spears. We were going through territory — first jungles, then desolate dry wasteland — that no European had ever seen before, that wasn't on any map, that even the Ethiopians had never seen. I ran into trouble on the way back.

"Whenever I got a chance, I set up my surveying equipment on a hilltop to make measurements for scientific purposes and so I could chart the course to our destination and back. One time, when I was taking such measurements, my servants and I were suddenly surrounded by hostile natives, spears at the ready. There were five of us, dozens of them. I was unarmed, having removed my saber and revolver to take measurements. I had to act fast. I stared at the nearest native and shouted '*Khalio!*' which means *peace*. I walked toward him, with just my compass in hand. I concentrated my full attention on him, and he answered '*Khalio!*' When I got within five paces of him, I beckoned to him. He looked at me like he didn't know what to make of me. Apparently, the others were waiting to see what he would do. I kept my eyes on him. He came out of the bushes, walked up to me, and said, '*Komoru,*' which means *king*. I stretched out my hand, and he kissed it. Then I squatted and signaled him to do likewise. I took his spear and showed him that I wanted them all to lay down their weapons. Then I called to other natives who were near to him and signaled them to come forward. About twenty of them squatted in front of me. I showed them my compass, let them listen to my watch. Then I called to one of my servants and ordered him to take my place in the ceremony of hand kissing, while I quickly got

my weapons. Then, shouting *Khalio!* several times, we started to leave. We hadn't gone a hundred paces when we heard hunting horns and war cries. We were surrounded again. This time the natives were attacking in earnest. We opened fire and fought our way out and back to the main bivouac. One of my servants was wounded in the arm by a stone, and a mule was killed. The rest of us escaped without a scratch.

"That was when Wolda Giyorgis called me a *devil* and said, 'I don't know why your servants didn't scatter and leave. They must have believed you were as good as dead. But they stayed. What is this hold you have on others?' I was flattered by those words. I was proud of the way I had stared down hostile natives, had gained time, and had escaped with all my men."

"Stared them down?" asks Smolyannikov.

"That's not the point. Wolda Giyorgis added, 'Don't let this success swell your head. This bravery of yours isn't true courage. It's the daring of youth and inexperience. Only when you have retreated and been wounded will you understand danger; and then this daring of yours will change into the conscious courage of a battle-hardened warrior.'

"He was right. That reminds me of something my mother once said about *istina* and *pravda*, the truth of faith and the truth of fact. True courage, I suppose, comes from the depths of your being; you do what you have to do because you are who you are.

"So what did I learn? I learned that I had learned nothing, that that was my failing. I was cursed with good luck, and I have been ever

since. I've been sick with one fever after another, but I've never been wounded."

"Damn it, man, will you get to the point of the story? What happened when you went back to the scene of the hunt?"

"Yes, yes. I was in fever. I had moments when I was both awake and asleep, when I was lost and alone in the jungle at night and I saw people and places I had known in Saint Petersburg or in the Ukraine — right there in front of me, in the midst of the jungle. When fever struck, I relived those times, like I'm reliving them now."

Bulatovich, fanning himself with his cap, continues. "Oh, yes. The elephant hunt. I was on other hunts like that later, invited as a courtesy by local governors. Sometimes the trail went cold, and we never caught up with the herd. But at other times, amidst pomp, danger, and excitement, I shared in the joy of victory. A few times I should have been killed. Once my gun jammed, and I came within inches of being trampled. But always I was the lucky one. I'd thank the Lord that I'd lived to laugh about it. It was all a game to me, a fine sport.

"But when I returned to the site that first hunt, if I really did return, I expected to see the damage from the fire and from the desperate battle of a hundred elephants. Where there had been jungle, there should have been little more than brush and grass for a mile around. But it was all jungle again, as if nothing had happened there.

"I remembered the spot clearly — the fork in the stream, the waterfall, the boulder hollowed to the shape of a bowl by flowing

water. The battle should have left its mark, at least an ugly scar. But nothing."

"Yes," says Smolyannikov, nodding in agreement. "The Preacher says in *Ecclesiastes*: 'A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the Earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it rises. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.'"

"You accept that. I could not." Bulatovich continues. "On my return to that spot, the jungle frightened me. I took out a machete and started chopping wildly at the undergrowth. I didn't know why; I simply had to, until I fell from exhaustion and slept there on the jungle floor. When I awoke, drenched by a sudden rain, fresh growth had already sprouted where I had chopped.

"The growth was too easy, the growth of weeds. There was no struggle to it. How could it be worth anything, this growth and regrowth? A man's life is a struggle, and it can mean something, I'm sure it can — it must. But mankind? This perpetual re-creation, one generation after another, one war after another — how can this repetition mean anything?

"For me, that elephant hunt was just a game. But for the Oromo it was a test. For them, if you don't fight the elephant, you don't really live.

"They respect the elephants they kill. They watch them pray to the same God they pray to. They honor the trophies they take home with them. Next year there will be new elephants and new men to hunt

them and new jungle growth to hunt them in. And the Oromo are unafraid because they have met their challenge and they know it."

"But have they solved anything?" asks Smolyannikov, leaning back with his arms crossed behind his head, staring through the underbrush at the orange glow of sunset. "If I were going to remake the world," he laughs, "I wouldn't know how to do it. If everything keeps changing, how can there be meaning? And if everything keeps repeating, like in *Ecclesiastes*, what's the point of that either? We want to make a mark in the world, but millions before us have made their marks, and millions after us will, too. How can we expect to recognize our marks among the rest? It's hard to accept the fact that we're just human, that nature won't make any exceptions in our case. I'm just a man, not a god."

"Just a man?" asks Bulatovich. "It's not so easy to be a *man*, at least not in the sense the Oromo use the word. You aren't a *man* simply because of the body you're born with. *Man* is a name to be earned, like *hero*. Maybe we're born with the potential, but only through action, through meeting challenges, can we earn that name. Maybe that's what we're here for — to become whatever we have it in us to become."

Chapter Thirty-Six: The Saga of Madame B.

Ta-kushan, Manchuria, September 28, 1900

"What next?" In the absence of a close friend, Bulatovich shares his thoughts on the pages of a notebook. "Kirin fell, like magic. A fortified city with a hundred twenty thousand inhabitants. Rennenkampf took it with just two hundred men. It wasn't an attack. It was an unimpeded trot down the main street, straight to the governor's mansion. The Chinese surrendered without a shot. It turned out that the governor had received orders from Prince Ch'ing to suspend hostilities, but Renennenkampf didn't know that. Such bravery! Such foolhardiness! That will certainly earn him promotion.

"Heaven forbid that Russia ever fights another war in the Far East. Against a stronger foe, such hubris would lead to disaster.

"The war is as good as over. Orlov is heading to Harbin with the infantry, and from there home, maybe in time to bring in the last of the harvest. I'm stuck here with Orlov's and Rennenkampf's cavalry, waiting for the return of the conquering hero.

"I wonder if that's how God made man — crazed for glory? If so, why? Does a man's life have any higher purpose than that? Should mine? Sonya thinks so — this Sonya, Chinese Sonya. I like the me I see reflected in her eyes, eyes subtly out of alignment, eyes that see not what is but what should be. I want to be the kind of person she sees in me. I'll miss my talks with her when Strakhov comes back with Rennenkampf, perhaps today.

"What Sonya wants and expects of me has nothing to do with renown or public display. She explained that well to me. There are times when you know what's right and by inner compulsion you must do it, regardless of risk. You yourself, your true self is the only witness that matters. No, not witness. In doing what must be done, you become your true self, not with the public pride of self-righteousness, but with the quiet self-assurance that you are doing what you know you're meant to do."

The flap of the tent opens. Sonya appears. Dawn light shines behind her, like a full-body halo.

"Another missionary, I presume."

"How can you tell?" she asks.

"Well, Rennenkampf will be back soon. Such matters will be up to him."

"He's back already."

"Then Strakhov is, as well. You shouldn't be here. You should be with him, giving him a proper greeting, and asking him to save this missionary. I've already done my quota for this lifetime."

"I asked Strakhov as soon as I saw him. The matter is urgent. But he dismissed the idea as impossible. 'I'm on the good side of Rennenkampf now,' he tells me. 'I don't want to risk losing that by proposing a quixotic quest.' 'But Father Lavoisier is renowned for his godliness,' I object. 'You may have heard of him. His church is ninety miles north of here. He's besieged by a Boxer mob. One of his

followers got away and brought word to us. Go to Rennenkampf. He knows and respects you. Get permission to take a squadron and save Lavoisier. There's no time to waste.' 'Lavoisier?' he asks. 'That sounds French.' 'It is.' 'Then Roman Catholic?' 'Probably.' 'There's no way Rennenkampf would authorize that. End of discussion.'"

Bulatovich urges, "Go back to your Strakhov and ask him again. I've seen the two of you together. He'd do anything for you."

"We're no longer together. I left. I no longer live with him."

"What?"

"Not since I told him about Madame B."

"Madame B.?" asks Bulatovich.

"I don't know her full name. No one will say, not Lieutenant Zinevich, and not the dozens of people whose lives she saved. She asked them not to say. That's one way she's coping with the shame."

"What shame?"

"It's a fantastical story, but all too true. Repeatedly, I'm shocked by what people are capable of. I heard this from Zinevich, a lieutenant of railway guards. He heard it from people whose lives were at risk. A large group of refugees, more than a thousand, caught up with us yesterday — railway workers together with their wives and their women. By the wildest coincidence, Zinevich, their leader, was Orlov's student at a military academy more than a thousand miles

from here. I told Strakhov this story as soon as he arrived, just now. If I hadn't, I may never have found out."

"Found out what?" asks Bulatovich.

"Patience, please. It's a difficult story to tell. Zinevich told it well. He probably put on such a performance at every station and outpost where his band of refugees stopped on the way here. I'm not a story maker, like he is. I'll tell it the way he told it, from the beginning.

"Zinevich said, 'We had less than a hundred railway guards providing security for a thousand workers and their families. When news of the Boxer Rebellion arrived, just minutes before telegraph and telephone lines went down, we burned the warehouses where we had stored dynamite and construction material. We abandoned our houses, taking only what we could carry. The locals started looting before we left. Many of them got drunk and fought among themselves. We headed toward Hailar. We hoped that Smolyannikov with the main force of railway guards would catch up with us on the way.

"Some were panic stricken, our lives upended, our future uncertain. Others rejoiced, knowing they could profit by reporting inflated losses that the authorities wouldn't be able to check, including wages never paid to Chinese workers.

"As we advanced from the Greater Hsing-An Mountains toward Hailar, we were lucky We didn't encounter Boxers on the way. We were joined by more Russian refugees at each station, including a group of nearly a hundred who had just escaped from a harrowing situation. A renegade band of Chinese soldiers had captured them and would have killed them all if it hadn't been for Madame B. That's

the name she wants to be known by. You can see her over there, standing alone in the middle of camp, staring into the sky. She's the wife of a railway engineer. Stunning, isn't she?"

"'Exquisite,' said Orlov.

"'Breathtaking,' agreed Volf.

"'Her husband is a lucky man,' added Bodisko.

"'Unfortunately, she's mad, totally mad.'

"'Has she always been that way?' asked Orlov.

"'Some think the experience drove her mad. Others think she must have been crazy to have volunteered. That's what her husband says.'

"'And what did she volunteer for?' asked Orlov.

"'One look at her and the Chinese commander wanted her and her alone. He knew he had the power to take her, against her will. But that wasn't enough. He wanted her to come to him of her own free will and offer herself to him, for him to do whatever he wished with her. He announced that if she did so, he would free them all, including her. But if she didn't, he would kill them all, including her, one by one, painfully, by his own hand.

"'The hostages believed he meant what he said, but none would ask her to sacrifice herself. That would be inhuman.

"But her husband did. He begged her repeatedly. It wasn't for the rest of her life. Just a few minutes. Then it would be over, and they could go on with their lives. It was only her body the commander wanted. Her soul would be untouched. To do that for the sake of them all would be heroic, holy.

"So before the first hostage was due to die, she went to the commander and kneeled before him, looking up at him with pleading eyes, hoping that he would be satisfied with her willing submission and not ask for physical compliance. He laughed with joy, picked her up, and carried her into his tent.

"For three days the hostages waited, under close guard, not knowing if the commander would keep his word and free them, or if he would kill them all. Now and then, at all hours, they heard her screams.

"The Chinese commander delighted in her pain and fear. But he said that if she resisted him and struggled, he would go back on his word and kill her and all the rest."

"Finally, she stumbled out, barely able to walk. The commander kept his word. He set them all free, and the Chinese vanished into the desert. Now she thinks she's pregnant.'

"Pregnant?" asked Dr. Volf. 'How could she know so soon?'

"He raped her repeatedly. It was her fertile time of month. He claimed to have fathered dozens of children by force. He delighted in doing that to such a fair-skinned European beauty.'

"She's a martyr, a heroine,' declared Orlov. 'But you say she's mad?'

"Her husband says she is. She mumbles endlessly, incoherently.'

"Of course, she's in anguish,' said Orlov. 'She'd be mad if she weren't confused and distressed after such an experience. How can her husband forgive himself for pressuring her to do that? How can he not comfort her, help her heal?'

"He considers her broken, damaged. He's disgusted by her. He says he'll take her to Moscow for treatment and to divorce her. As far as he's concerned, they're divorced already.'

"Having saved all those people, surely someone must be willing to help her,' said Orlov.

"No one wants to take the risk, to assume such a burden, to accept responsibility for a pregnant woman with a broken mind and a contaminated, perhaps diseased, body. She's alone, unprotected, probably pregnant.'

"Someone has to marry her or she'll be ruined for life. What about you, Lieutenant?' asked Orlov.

"I'm married, Your Excellency.'

"As am I. But there must be someone among our officers willing to rescue this brave and noble woman.'

"When I recounted this tale to Strakhov," Sonya continues, "he was drunk, with the drunkenness that comes from exhaustion, having ridden all night. And I hadn't told him that I thought I was pregnant.

When I got to the end, I asked him if he knows anyone who might marry Madame B.

"Then he admitted to me, 'If it weren't for you, I'd be tempted to marry her myself.'

"But you've never met her. And she's pregnant.'

"It's the pregnant that tempts me. I've always wanted a child.'

"But we'll have a child. We'll have many children.'

"No. That can't be.'

"You doubt my womanhood, my child-bearing ability?'

"Not you. Me.'

"I don't understand.'

"An accident, during training, years ago.'

"But you did it, we did it repeatedly.'

"I can perform. Outwardly, I am as other men. But I'm broken. I have no seed. I will never conceive children.'

"But I'm pregnant.'

"Do you have symptoms?'

"No. Not yet. It's early. But I'm sure I feel the baby growing inside me.'

"Well, it's not mine. The doctors were clear. There's no cure for what happened to me.'

"There hasn't been anyone else.'

"Then you aren't pregnant.'

"And when were you going to tell me this?"

"Never. When Olga, my first wife, learned of it, she divorced me. I love you. I didn't tell you because I didn't want to lose you.'

"Didn't you think I should know that we could never make children together? You would have married me without telling me? You aren't the man I thought you were. Why didn't you tell me that you want a child badly and cannot have one by nature, by coupling. You deceived me. You didn't give me a choice. You decided on your own that I would never have a child. That's the kind of man you are. But yet you want a child. That's why you're tempted by this Madame B. She will have a child. And if you married her, you could raise her child as yours. But we could adopt. Adoption is good. By love, not just by birth, you make a child yours. We could have done that.'

"That wouldn't be the same. If I'm to have a child, everyone must believe that child is mine, flesh of my flesh. That may make no sense to you. But to me it matters.'

"If you had told me that, I would have understood, and I would have given you such a child.'

"What do you mean?'

"I would have had another man plant his seed in me, and everyone would think the seed was yours. You would have had the child you want.'

"You would have done that for me?'

"I would have done anything for you.'

"You still could.'

"But you lied to me.'

"I never said...'

"Yes. You never said. You lied by not saying. I cannot trust you. If I cannot trust you, I cannot love you. If I cannot love you, I cannot marry you. Marry Madame B., not me. She needs marriage more than I do.'

"What will you do?'

"I'll go to Mazeppa.'

"Mazeppa?'

"You call him Bulatovich.'

"Has he ...?"

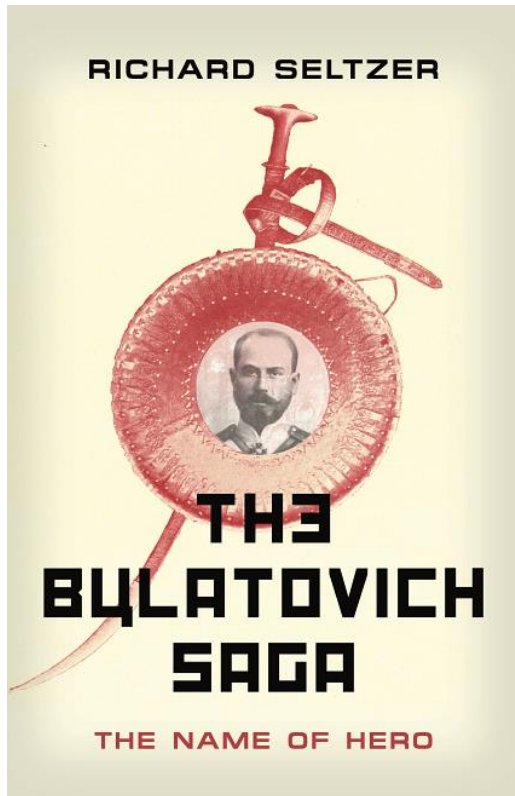
"I like the way he looks at me, with wanting, physical wanting, but yet respect. Maybe he will make children with me, or we will adopt children. He understands making a child yours by the love you give. He has a boy from Africa who he's raising as his own. And he understands that not being able to conceive a child doesn't make you less of a man.'

"Is he...?"

"No. I haven't heard that of him. But I heard that Vaska, the boy from Africa, was gravely wounded in his man parts. Mazeppa treated his wound and brought him home to Russia and loves him like a son and respects him as a man-to-be, who one day may adopt and love sons and daughters of his own."

Bulatovich stares at her, dumbfounded by such a flood of words and images.

She puts her hands on his head, runs her fingers through his hair, and draws near until the tips of their noses touch. Then she tells him, "Say something. Do something. If you want me, take me. I am yours."



First of a trilogy of historical novels based on the life of Alexander Bulatovich, a Ukrainian/Russian explorer in Ethiopia, a cavalry officer during Russia's conquest of Manchuria, and later a monk at Mount Athos and a religious leader.

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