

“Extracts from a Serbian letter by Dr Dalyell”
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Here there is a queer fantastic existence that doesn't seem quite real at any time. I enjoy myself well, which may seem odd, but isn't if you knew all about it. I don't know how to tell it all. Nothing here is orderly or regular or usual, and since I left England the constant feeling has been that of living poised on one foot and ready for instant flight-such flights taking place in devious places at odd hours, so that one is prepared for anything at - all at any time, and thus it is not easy to convey an exact account of things to you; but I'll try. Last October the first Serbian Relief Fund Unit came out here (that was Lady Paget's section). They did surgical work in this town, which used to be called Uskeeb by the Turks. It was a Turkish town till two years ago, when the Serbs got it, all this region being Macedonia. The 1st unit was to stay six months, and their place was to be taken by the 2nd unit - that was us; and we left London on February 9th, and were called Lady Winbourne's unit When we arrived we found most of the Pagets ready to return, but six intrepid souls - namely, Lady Paget, three doctors and two nurses-had dashed into the typhus fight. It was then raging in Skopje among Austrian prisoners, and there was no decent way to treat the poor wretches. The Paget people had been given two unfinished buildings and a dirty Serbian barracks, and were struggling to make a fever hospital out of them. The Winbourne unit had three surgeons and a physician, and a bacteriologist - myself to-wit had been thrown in to make up good measure. So the surgical section took on the Pagets' surgical place and work, and Dr. B-S. [*Dr Bellingham-Smith*] and I, and four sisters from the Winbornskas (that is the Serbian rendering) came up to lend a hand at the fever colony of the Pagetitches (my adaptation of the Serbian:). Promptly Lady Paget, two doctors, and a Paget sister all got typhus themselves, the remaining doctor had to look after them, for they were all shockingly bad, so that virtually B.S. and I took on all this hospital with two Winbornska sisters (the other two had to nurse the sick Pagetitches), and for a month we worked in that way. We had telegraphed for more sisters, and it took a month to get them out, but they arrived four or five weeks ago, and since then things have been simpler, but we have had to bustle a good deal. It has all been good. I have felt splendidly fit all the time, and we are in a wonderful situation - the beauty round us takes one's thought from the wretchedness and misery we grapple with, and I think that saves the situation altogether. We are on a high plateau, the River Vardar runs through the plain below, and there are foothills about two miles off which lead up to the hoary Balkans themselves, and the nearer mountains are twenty miles away, but in this clear air it seems like five. The line of dazzling snow against a clear blue sky is the most wonderful sight I have yet seen. After we had worked hard here for about three weeks my primeval yearnings asserted themselves, and I said we must have a day out. You can picture my Australian mind working and evolving the idea of a picnic - it did evolve, too and one Sunday morning I sent notes to Dr. M. [*Dr Maitland*] and Dr B.-S. :saying the car started at 11- and it did punctually. We had the Ford ambulance car that had been used by the Pagets, the driver thereof, and the medical staff of three. We had a fowl (cold), three bottles of lemonade (cold), two thermos flasks of coffee (hot), and a bottle of beer, also a jelly in a mould, biscuits and cheese, and hard-boiled eggs. Does it sound good? There were only the four of us, and as usual at a picnic, we ate to repletion. The run was gorgeous. We went out about twenty miles, through magnificent country, and the whole expedition was highly successful-so successful that every Sunday since the medical staff has gone 'holivain" to its huge content. That word is Serbian, and means

"holidays. " When Serbian soldiers from our hospital are convalescent we have to sign a paper giving them 30 days holivain, which they simply love. So we have adopted the phrase (and as I say, we go holivain every Sunday. Two Sundays ago we had a tremendous adventure. Three men doctors and I set out to climb a mountain for the day's holi- vain. We drove out in a droshtks,(carriage) to the foot, ate a substantial meal, sent back the food baskets by the carriage, took three thermos-flasks of tea, and set out to cross the mountain and return by another road, about 15 miles, we calculated. The heat was terrific as we climbed up and up, and we strode manfully on-right into the arms of a wild Serbian soldier, who took us prisoners! He loaded his gun and ordered us by signs to proceed in front of him. We protested, and explained, but he did not understand a word, - and did not know a word he said; but we did understand his gun- it had a bayonet about 3 feet long, which I could feel going through my quadratus lumborum a dozen times So we did what he wanted. He made us fairly bound up the hill in a sea of perspiration, and I was choking with heat and laughter at our American doctor, who would say in a cool tense voice, "Oh, you blame fool; I'll bat you one!" and the soldier just thrust out his gun, and away we went. He took us to some official in a village after about two miles, but the creature could not understand us, and we hadn't any passports, so they drove us on foot as before another mile to a second village, where they dug up an inhabitant who spoke about five words of German. We told him about one thousand times that we were the Inglesca Hospital, and we were all doctors. Then I had a shining thought, and pointed to myself and said, imperiously, "Lady Paget," and that fetched them. Her name is one to conjure with here, as they are all grateful to her for her work. Two officials came about five miles of the way with us, and then seemed convinced that we were harmless, and left us. The feeble-minded object with indifferent knowledge of German, had explained that the first soldier had decided that we were Hungarians, and so an enemy to be captured. We walked about 20 miles instead of 15, but enjoyed the experience. We went to the general after that and demanded a paper safeguarding us, which we could show for future holivains, but these soldiers in the hills cannot read or write as a rule, so we may be "pinched" again. The language, difficulty is always with us. You have no idea of the variety of languages spoken here. I don't think any - mortal creature could know them all. German is most useful, and I do the best with my scant supply. I have tried to learn some Serbian, but, of course, I cannot. There are some words everyone learns, and I can do my hospital rounds with the aid of "dobra," which means "all right" and "ne dobra," which is not. A great point about this language is that it must be declaimed in a raucous scream at the highest pitch of one's lungs, outside my lab. I have heard shouts suggestive of a fight to the death, and have fled forth intent on saving life and have discovered that the altercation was merely...a friendly conversation between the cook and the sour-milk vendor. In Malta, too, on the first morning, there were sounds which could surely be coming only from a wretched soul in mortal anguish, so I rushed to the window, and was greatly relieved to find it was merely the milk-boy who delivered milk "on the hoof" as it were, that is, to let the goats run along in small herds and stop obediently while the boy milks from them into a cup or glass 'brought by the householder. No, I did not drink milk at Malta-that is, fresh milk-but I take it from the tin with relish now when it can be got. Food is a problem. The things you really think are indispensable you find you cannot have-i.e. bread, butter, milk, -fresh fruit and green vegetables:. I have not had a salad since the succulent one Millie Armstrong and I had in our thrice blessed flat at the hands of incomparable Dawkins, and do not know when I shall have my next one, either. We have biscuits instead of bread, and jam instead of butter,

and milk from a tin. I do some of the wards rounds and there is always a lot of clinical pathology to be done. There are always doubtful cases of enteric, diphtheria is frequent, and there is much relapsing fever also tottt" cases of amoebic dysentery and occasional malaria - all quite enough for one to keep an eye on. My funniest experience here has been driving out here from the Winbornsky Hospital at 9.30 p.m. with an astounding collection of culture media, bundles of laundry, bedroom jugs (enamelled), and other properties, which I was out just after we first moved out here. It was an unusually ramshackle native conveyance and as we came through the old Turkish graveyard a-wheel came off, and I came out, and all my -bundles, too. The appalling thing was that I could do nothing, and had to just sit on a tombstone while the two drivers tied on the wheel with a piece of rag. I declined to trust myself to the lazy thing, and insisted that it must be made stronger; but think of trying to convey that information to two Turks, not knowing one single word of their language! I could only look firm and say "ne dobra",- that is, "no good." Finally I climbed in and one Turk walked alongside, holding the wheel on, and so I arrived ill with laughter, as you may imagine. There is tons more to tell, all about the hospital, and the 'Austrian prisoners who are in our house-servants.(Mine is Jacob; he is a tailor really, and makes an indifferent housemaid, mopping the floor with my sponge), and John, who is really Man Friday to the hospital. He speaks English, French, German, Serbian, Czech, Roumanian and Magar. He was rounded three times, taken prisoner, and had in succession scarlet fever, dysentery, diphtheria, and typhus (that alone for thirty-eight days in a Serbian hospital) and lives to tell the tale and to run our hospital on clean British lines. And there is our cook, also an Austrian prisoner, who is in happier times a tradesman in the United States, and had come to Bohemia on a visit, had to fight, and was taken prisoner, and given to us for a cook. He was discovered one day in a state of violent delirium making an omelette, and when questioned looked wildly round and seized and unoffending chicken and wrung its neck. Then it was seen that he had a marked typhus rash, and had to be put in hospital. He has recovered, and is again our cook, but we regard him with some nervousness. Then there are the markets, where I have spent some delicious hours - the weekly market is old women selling their embroideries and woven mats and knitted socks, and worked shirts, is unforgettable. And the shops in the old Turkish quarter are a marvel. They are about one yard square. And I have not told you a word of the spring flowers and the glory of poppies everywhere and cornflowers and banks and daisies; how the huge opium poppies are out in white fields that look like still lakes. But these things must wait for word of mouth.