SECOND TO NONE.

A Military Romance.

VOL. I.

BY

JAMES GRANT

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PREFACE.

In the following pages, and in delineating the character of my hero, I have chosen the ranks of the 2nd Dragoons, not because of any national partiality, but from the desire to describe the adventures of a soldier in a brave old regiment, which has served with distinction in every war since its formation—in short, from the battles of the Covenant to those in the Crimea; which had the proud distinction of capturing the Colours of the Regiment du Roi at Ramillies, the White Standard of King Louis' Household Troops at Dettingen, and the Colour and Eagle of Napoleon's 45th Foot at Waterloo.

Several historical incidents, and one or two traditions of the Service are interwoven with the story of Basil Gauntlet, the Scots Grey.

I may mention that the misfortunes of his comrade Charters are nearly similar to those which befel an officer of the 15th Hussars prior to the war in the Peninsula; and that the dark story and death of the engineer Monjoy and of Madame d'Escombas formed one of the *causes célèbres* before the Parliament of Paris during the middle of the last century.

EDINBURGH, 1st *May*, 1864.

SECOND TO NONE.

CHAPTER I.
BY THE WAYSIDE.

My adventures were my sole inheritance long before I thought of committing them to paper for the amusement of myself, and—may I hope—for the instruction of others.

Wayward has been my fate—my story strange; for my path in life—one portion of it at least—has been among perils and pitfalls, and full of sorrow and mortification, but not, however, without occasional gleams of sunshine and triumph.

On an evening in the month of February—no matter in what year, suffice it to say that it was long, long ago—I found myself near a little town on the Borders between England and Scotland, with a shilling in my hand, and this small coin I surveyed with certain emotions of solicitude, because it was my *last one*.

I sat by the wayside under an old thorn-tree whereon the barons of Netherwood had hung many a Border outlaw and English mosstrooper in the olden time; and there I strove to consider what I should do next; but my mind seemed a very chaos.

In this unenviable condition I found, myself on the birthday of my eighteenth year—I, the heir to an old title and to a splendid fortune—homeless, and well-nigh penniless, without having committed a crime or an error of which conscience could accuse me.

The rolling clouds were gathering in grey masses on the darkening summits of the Cheviot hills in the hollows of which the

snows of the past winter lay yet unmelted. The cold wind moaned in the leafless woods, and rustled the withered leaves that the autumn gales had strewn along the highway. The dull February evening crept on, and the road that wound over the uplands was deserted, for the last wayfarer had gone to his home. The sheep were in their pen and the cattle in their fold; no sound—not even the bark of a dog—came from the brown sides of the silent hills, and, affected by the gloomy aspect of Nature, my heart grew heavy, after its sterner and fiercer emotions passed away.

The last flush of sunset was fading in the west; but I could see about three miles distant the gilt vanes and round turrets of Netherwood Hall shining above the strove of leafless trees that surrounded it, and I turned away with a sigh of bitterness, for adversity had not yet taught me philosophy. I was too young.

With the express intention of visiting Netherwood Hall, I had travelled several miles on foot; but now, when in sight of the place, my spirit failed and my heart sickened within me; and thus, irresolute and weary, I seated myself by the side of the way, and strove to arrange my thoughts.

To be brief, I shall describe in a few pages, who and what I am, and how on that sombre February evening I came to be on such unfortunate terms with old Dame Fortune.

My grandfather, Sir Basil Gauntlet, of Netherwood, had so greatly resented his eldest son's marriage with a lady who had no fortune save her beauty, that he withdrew all countenance and protection from him. So far did he carry this unnatural enmity, that by will he bequeathed all his property to the son of a brother, and, with great barbarity, permitted my father to be consigned to the

King's Bench prison, by which his commission in the cavalry was forfeited; and there, though a brave and high-spirited officer, who had served under the Marquis of Granby, he died of despair!

My mother soon followed him to the land that lies beyond the grave; and thus in infancy I was left, as the phrase is, to the *tender* mercies of the world in general, and my old bruin of a grandfather in particular.

Yet this upright Sir Basil, who was so indignant at his son's penniless marriage, had been in youth one of the wildest rakes of his time. He had squandered vast sums on the lovely Lavinia Fenton—the original Polly Peachum—and other fair dames, her contemporaries; indeed, it was current in every green-room in London, that he would have run off with this beautiful actress, had he not been anticipated, as all the world knows, or ought to know, by his grace the Duke of Bolton, who made her his wife.

Sir Basil had been wont to drink his three bottles daily, as he said, "without a hair of his coat being turned." He had paraded three of his best friends, on three different occasions, for over-night insults of which he had a very vague recollection in the morning; but then "after what had occurred," what else could he do? and so after bathing his head and right arm in vinegar to make his aim steady, he winged them all at Wimbledon Common, or the back of Montagu House.

In London he was the terror of the watch, and would smash all the lamps in Pall Mall or elsewhere, when, after losing perhaps a thousand guineas at White's among blacklegs and bullies, or after carrying the sedan of some berouged fair one through the streets with links flaring before it, he came reeling home, probably with a

broken sword in one hand, a bottle in the other, and his pockets stuffed with brass knockers and other men's wigs; consequently Sir Basil should have remembered the days of his youth, and have tempered the acts of his old age with mercy; but it was otherwise.

I do not mean to detain the reader by a long history of my earlier years; for if those of a Cæsar or an Alexander have but little in them to excite interest, still less must the boyhood of one who began the world as a simple dragoon in the king's service.

The good minister of Netherwood, and the English rector on the south side of the Border, frequently besought Sir Basil to be merciful to the orphan child of his eldest son.

"I pray you to recollect, Sir Basil," urged the rosy-faced rector, "that your own marriage was a love-match."

"It must have been so, if all you scandalous fellows at Oxford said truth."

"Why?"

"For there you said I loved the whole female sex."

The jolly rector laughed so much at the poor jest of the old rake, that the latter actually became commiserate; or it may be that my mother's death and my utter desolation, stirred some emotion of shame—pity he had none—in Sir Basil's arid heart; so, to keep me at a distance from himself, he consigned me on a pittance to the care of his country agent, a certain Mr. Nathan Wylie, who was exceedingly well-named, as he was a canting Scotch lawyer—in truth "a cunning wretch whose shrivelled heart was dead to every human feeling," and who by the sharpness of his legal practice was

a greater terror on both sides of the Border than ever the mosstroopers were of old.

He was the person who had prepared and executed the will which transferred my heritage to my cousin, Tony Gauntlet—a will which he framed with peculiar satisfaction, as he hated my father for making free with his orchard in boyhood, and in later years for laying a horsewhip across his shoulders at the market-cross of Greenlaw, so in his sanctified dwelling I was likely to have a fine time of it!

For ten years I resided with the godly Nathan Wylie, a repining drudge, ill-fed, ill-clad, and poorly lodged, in one of those attics which he apportioned to Abraham Clod, his groom, his pigeons and myself—uncared for by all; and not unfrequently taunted with the misfortunes of my parents for whom I sorrowed, and the neglect of my grandfather whom I had learned to abhor and regard with boyish terror.

I picked up a little knowledge of law—at least such knowledge as one might learn in the office of a Scotch country agent in those days. I mastered, I believe, even "Dirlton's Doubts," and other equally amusing literature then in vogue; while Nathan Wylie took especial care that I should know all the shorter catechism, and other biblical questions by rote, that I might be able to repeat them when the minister paid us his periodical visit, though my elbows were threadbare, my shoes none of the best, and my eyes and brain ached with drudging at the desk far into the hours of the silent night, penning prosy documents, preparing endless processes, and not unfrequently writing to dictation such an epistle as the following, which I give *verbatim* as it actually appeared in a Border paper:—

"DEAR SIR,—I am directed to raise an action against you to-morrow for the sum of one penny, together with the additional sum of three shillings and fourpence, sterling, the expense of this notice, if both sums be not paid me before 9 a.m.

"Yours, faithfully in the Lord,
"NATHAN WYLIE.

"To Farmer Flail, &c."

In early life he had married an old and equally devout female client for the money which he knew well she possessed; and as that was all he wanted, after her death he never married again, but devoted himself manfully to the practice of the law and extempore prayer—an external air of great sanctity being rather conducive to success in life in too many parts of Scotland.

Poor Nathan has long been laid six feet under the ground; but in fancy I can still see before me his thin figure, with rusty black suit and spotless white cravat; his sharp visage, with keen, restless, and cat-like eyes, that peered through a pair of horn spectacles, and with shaggy brows that met above them. Moreover, he had hollow temples, coarse ears, and a tiger-like jaw, which he always scratched vigorously when a case perplexed him, or with satisfaction when some hapless client was floored in the field of legal strife.

As years stole on, that keen and honest sense of justice, which a boy seldom fails to feel, inspired me with indignation at the neglect with which my family treated me, and the story of my parents and their fate redoubled my hatred to my oppressors.

My cousin Tony, a harebrained fool, whose mad fox-hunting adventures formed the theme of all the Border side, and who, by my grandfather's lavish and misplaced generosity, was enabled to pursue a career of prodigality and extravagance, came in for a full share of my animosity, for he was wont to ride past me on the highway without the slightest recognition, save once, when, flushed with wine, he was returning from a hunting-dinner.

On that occasion he was ungenerous enough to draw the attention of his groom and whipper-in to the somewhat dilapidated state of my attire, as I was trudging along the highway on some legal message to Farmer Flail at the Woodland Grange.

On hearing their derisive laughter, my heart swelled with suppressed passion, and had a weapon been in my hand, I had struck them all from their saddles.

This crushing existence was not the glorious destiny my boyish ambition had pictured; but what could I do for a time, save submit? I had none to guide me—nor father, nor mother, nor kindred were there; and as a child, I often gazed wistfully at other children who *had* all these, and marvelled in my lonely heart what manner of love they had for one another.

I was conscious of possessing a fund of affection, of kindness and goodwill in my own bosom; but there it remained pent up for lack of an object whereon to lavish it, or rather it was thrust back upon me by the repulsive people by whom I was surrounded.

Business over, I would rush away to solitude. Sunk in reveries, vague and deep, I would stroll for hours alone in the starlight along the green and shady lanes, or by the silent shore, where the German sea rolled its creamy waves in ceaseless and monotonous

succession on the shingles, or from whence it rippled in the splendour of the moonlight far away—reveries filled less with vain regrets than with visions of a brilliant future, for my heart was young, inspired by hope and thoughts that soared above my present condition, and sought a brighter destiny!

I could remember a time—alas! it seemed a dream to me now—when I used to repose in a pretty little bed, and when a lady, who must have been my mother, pale and thin and gentle-eyed, and richly-attired too, for her satin dress rustled, and her presence had a sense of perfume, was wont to draw back the curtains of silk and white lace to caress and to kiss me. Once a tear fell on my cheek—it was hot—and she brushed it aside with a tress of her gathered hair.

Was all this a reality, or a dream? I strove to conjure up when and where I had seen this; but the memory of it was wavering, and so indistinct, that at times the treasured episode seemed to fade away altogether.

In the long nights of winter I saved up my candles—no easy task in the house of a miser like Nathan Wylie—and, retreating to my attic, read far into the hours of morning; poring over such novels and romances as were lent me by the village milliner, a somewhat romantic old maiden, who had been jilted by a recruiting officer, and for whose memory she always shed a scanty tear, for he fell at the bombardment of Carthagena. These books I read by stealth, such literature being deemed trash and dangerous profanity in the godly mansion of Nathan Wylie.

Then when the wind, that tore down the rocky ravines of the Cheviots, howled in the chimneys, or shook the rafters above me, I

loved to fancy myself at sea, for the life of a sailor seemed to embody all my ideas of perfect freedom—a bold buccaneer, like Sir Henry Morgan—a voyager, like Drake or Dampier—a conqueror, like Hawke or Boscawen—a wanderer, like dear old Robinson Crusoe, or worthy Philip Quarll; and then I went to sleep and to dream of foreign lands, of lovely isles full of strange trees and wondrous flowers, where scaly serpents crawled, and spotted tigers lurked; of cities that were all bannered towers, gilded cupolas and marble temples, glittering in the sunshine far beyond the sea.

A lonely child, I ripened into a lonely lad, and so passed my life, until the coming of Ruth Wylie, an event which fully deserves a chapter to itself.

CHAPTER II.
RUTH WYLIE.

Love occasioned my first scrape in life, and thus it came to pass.

About the period of my aimless existence, detailed in the last chapter, the mansion of Mr. Nathan Wylie received a new, and to him, in no way welcome inmate, in the person of an orphan niece from London, the daughter of a brother who had died in circumstances the reverse of affluent, bequeathing this daughter—then in her sixteenth year—to his care.

This brother's letter—one penned on his death-bed in an agony of anxiety for the *future* of his orphan Ruth—was deeply touching in its simple tenor; and some of the references therein to years that had long passed away, and to the pleasant days of their boyhood, should have been more than enough to soften even the heart of Nathan Wylie; but he read it unmoved, with a grimace on his thin mouth and his beetle brows knit.

Then he carefully folded and docketed it among others, with a gleam of irritation in his cat-like eyes; and equally unmoved by sympathy or compassion did he receive his charge, when she arrived by the stagecoach from London, pale with sorrow, weary with travel, and clad in cheap and simple mourning for the father she had lost.

One generally imagines a Ruth to be solemn, demure, and quiet—something between a little nun and a Quakeress; but Ruth Wylie sorely belied her name, being a merry, kind, and

affectionate girl, with bewitching dark eyes, full of fun and waggery, especially when uncle Nathan was absent, for she failed to conceal that his hard, short, and dry manner, and his cold, immoveable visage chilled and saddened her.

New and strange thoughts came into my mind now; and soon I conceived a regard for Ruth, notwithstanding her hideous relation, the lawyer; for to me old Nathan was a bugbear—an ogre!

Despite his angry and reiterated injunctions, she frequently brought her workbasket or book into the room where we plodded with our pens, day after day, for she loved companionship, and Nathan's churlish old housekeeper bored her.

Then sometimes, when we would be writing, and she was sewing or reading near us, I might pause, for irresistible was the temptation to turn to the soft and downcast face of Ruth; and it was strange that however deeply interested in her book—however anxious about her needlework, by some hidden or magnetic influence, she, at the same time paused, and raised her eyelids with a bright inquiring smile, that never failed to thrill my heart with joy, to make my hand tremble, and every pulse to quicken, as our glances instantly met and were instantly withdrawn.

"Here is a little bit of romance at last!" thought I; "already our thoughts and aspirations draw towards each other."

So I resolved to fall in love—most desperately in love with Ruth Wylie—and did so accordingly.

In the full bloom of girlhood, she was at an age when all girls are pretty, or may pass for being so; but Ruth was indeed charming!

She had very luxuriant hair of a colour between brown and bright auburn; its tresses were wavy rather than curly, and her complexion was of the dazzling purity which generally accompanies hair of that description, while her eyes were dark, and their lashes black as night.

Our residence in the same house brought us constantly together, and my love ripened with frightful rapidity. In three days my case was desperate, and Ruth alone could cure it. I was sleepless by night—feverish and restless by day; yet I dared scarcely to address Ruth, for love fills the heart of a boy with timidity.

On the other hand, it endues a girl with courage, and so Ruth talked to me gaily, laughed and rallied me, while my tongue faltered, my cheek flushed or grew pale, and my heart ached with love and new-born joy.

There is a strange happiness in the first love of a boy and girl—the magnetic sympathy which draws heart to heart, and lip to lip, in perfect innocence, and without a thought of the future, or of the solemn obligations of life, and of the world—the weary world, which, with all its conventionalities, is more a clog to us than we to it.

However, I soon perceived that Ruth changed colour, too, when we met; and my heart leaped joyously, when playfully she kissed her hand to me at parting. I felt that I loved her dearly and deeply, but how was I to tell her so?

In all the romances lent to me by my friend, the milliner, the tall and handsome heroes, cast their plumed beavers and ample mantles on the ground, and flung themselves on their knees before their mistresses, beseeching them, in piercing accents, to make

them the happiest of men, by giving them even the tips of their snowy fingers to kiss; but I lacked the courage to imitate these striking proceedings; moreover, I possessed neither velvet mantle nor ostrich plume.

One evening, old Nathan was absent on business, and Ruth and I were seated in the recess of a window, looking at a collection of Hogarth's prints. We sat close, very close together, for the window was narrow, and then the volume was so large that we both required to hold it. I felt Ruth's breath at times upon my cheek, and our hands touched every time we turned a leaf.

Her pretty bosom, that heaved beneath her bodice, which was cut square at the neck, and somewhat low in front; her snow-white arms, that came tapering forth from the loose falling sleeves of her black dress, and her delicate little hands so bewildered me, that I never saw the prints with which we were supposed to be engrossed. I saw Ruth—Ruth only, and felt all the joy her presence inspired.

I knew that we both spoke at random, and were somewhat confused in our questions and answers; still more confused in our long pauses. I would have given the world to have clasped this plump little Ruth to my breast; yet I dared scarcely to touch her hand.

As we stooped over the print of "Love à la Mode," her bent head, her white temple, and rich soft hair touched mine, and she did not withdraw.

For a few seconds we sat thus, head reclined against head; then I panted rather than breathed, as my arm stole round her waist, and my trembling lips were pressed upon her pure forehead.

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