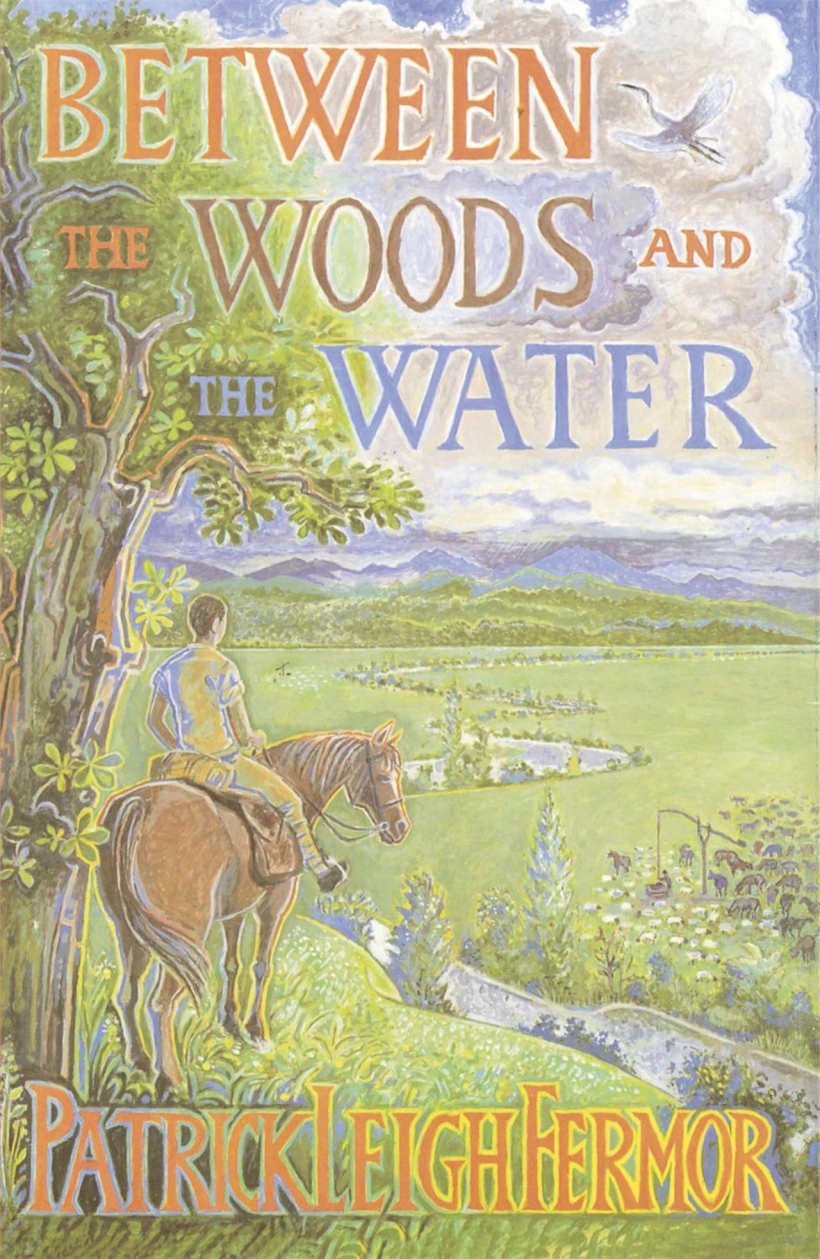
BETWEEN THE WOODS AND THE WATER



PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR

First published in Great Britain in 1986 by John Murray
(Publishers)
An Hachette UK Company

Map drawn by Rodney Paull

Title page and chapter opener drawing by John Craxton

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-84854-524-3

John Murray (Publishers)
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.johnmurray.co.uk

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Introduction

On Holy Saturday, 1934, the nineteen-year-old Patrick (Paddy) Leigh Fermor stood on a bridge over the Danube at Esztergom, some forty miles upstream from Budapest, and contemplated his situation.

He had quite recently been asked to leave King's School, Canterbury, because of conduct unbecoming (i.e. holding hands with a tradesman's daughter in the town), although his intellect was beyond the dreams of schoolmasters. His memory was brilliant, he had marvellous gifts of observation and description, his command of languages was instinctive, and he had already developed formidable powers of historical scholarship. But he was a born individualist, an adventurer, and it was as a cheerful dropout that he had, three months before, embarked upon a solitary walk across the continent of Europe, from the Hook of Holland to Constantinople.

Now he was about halfway there, having travelled, mostly on foot, through the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia, roughly following the courses of the Rhine and the Danube, but making detours and side excursions whenever he felt like it. He had usually travelled rough, consorting with tramps, gypsies, farmers and anyone else he met on the road, but occasionally he had stopped off for a few days in the house of some hospitable acquaintance, if only to use the library.

From the bridge at Esztergom, at the frontier between Slovakia and Hungary, while the citizens of the town swarmed about him preparing for their Easter celebrations, he looked expectantly for the first time towards the intoxications of Middle Europe – romantic bravado of the Hungarians, weird legends and traditions of Transylvania, the wild majesty of the Danube itself as it swept through gorge, marsh and forest towards the

Black Sea.

Before we join him on his journey we must pause for contemplation ourselves, because it is not exactly the Paddy Leigh Fermor we see at Esztergom who is the author of this book. Five years later the young backpacker was to become Major Patrick Leigh Fermor, DSO, OBE, a war hero celebrated for parachuting into Nazi-occupied Crete, kidnapping a German general, and smuggling him away to Egypt, and in the years after that he had written three books of travel which had given him literary fame too. It was only when he was in his sixties that he set about turning his youthful walk across Europe into a book. The first volume of the consequent work, *A Time of Gifts*, was published in 1977 and instantly recognised as a classic. This second volume, *Between the Woods and the Water*, appeared in 1986, and by then Leigh Fermor was seventy-one years old.

So half a century separates the experience from the book, and the author is looking back at himself across a great gulf of experience and of history. The Second World War has changed Europe forever since Paddy hoisted his rucksack at the Hook of Holland, and his alter ego too has been weathered by a lifetime of travel and accomplishment. It really is almost as though *Between the Woods and the Water* is the work of two separate writers, coming to the task from opposite directions, but blending their talents in a display of intergenerational collaboration.

And it is a triumph of this book that we, the readers, understand them both. We know what goes through both their minds, because the artistry of its author makes the boyish enthusiasm of the young man as immediate as the tempered experience of the old.

So, off we go with the pair of them, away from the bridge at Esztergom and headlong into Mitteleuropa. This is a generic place that no longer exists – almost a fictional place now. In 1934 it was still recognisably within the cultural penumbra of the lost Austro-Hungarian Empire, given a fading unity by the long, long heritage of the Habsburgs.

In particular the ruling caste of Hungary was still archetypically aristocratic, almost Ruritanian – high-spirited, frequently

eccentric, often Anglophile, and distinctly welcoming to the clever and attractive young Englishman who, during this second part of his long walk, all too often came knocking at its doors. Although in Western Europe Paddy had generally stuck to his resolution to live as a tramp lives, using his charm to mix easily and happily with working people of every kind, by the time he reached Hungary his resolution was less austere, and he spent weeks at a time in more comfortable circumstances.

For along the road he had picked up introductions. Friends had passed him on to friends, a count here had recommended him to a baron there, and by the time we join him he is almost as often being picked up in a limousine, or riding a borrowed thoroughbred, as he is plodding along a highway. The passages describing his sojourns among the patricians of Middle Europe are among the happiest in the book, but among the saddest too: for we know, as the author knows, but as the young traveller never did, that all that happy, reckless and cultivated society, which answered his knocks at the door with such instant generosity, was doomed. Within Paddy's own lifetime, it would be eliminated.

He seems to have had no sense of it at the time. He was not much interested in politics. Hitler had come to power in 1933, but Leigh Fermor took little notice as he hiked through Germany, and when he heard that the Austrian Chancellor Dr Dolfuss had been assassinated, another ominous step towards catastrophe, 'the gloom didn't last much longer than breakfast'. Nobody yet knew the worst of it. Leigh Fermor, as he said himself, didn't give a damn, and as he proceeded through Hungary into Romania his several hosts, whether sporting or scholarly, seldom seemed to have raised contemporary political issues. They were obsessed with their pasts, and perhaps preferred not to dwell upon their futures.

But we know better, as does the author six decades later, and this gives the narrative an element of melancholy to balance its learning, its learning and its fun. For fun it undoubtedly was for the young Leigh Fermor, in those mansions of the swells. There was the terrific fun, for a youth of his sensibilities, of spending undisturbed hours in splendid private libraries, exploring the histories of the countries all around, wandering through their

languages and indulging what was already his particular intellectual speciality, historical linkage – finding connections between cultures, peoples and pedigrees.

And there was the more obvious fun of social life in such times and places. The inhabitants of those exotic castles were just Leigh Fermor's style. He could talk histories and traditions with scholarly old gentlemen, he could ride and drink and frequently flirt with the young. One of the book's most characteristic (and best-loved) passages tells of a hilarious game of bicycle polo on the lawn of Count Józsi Wenckheim at his ochre-coloured house in the Great Hungarian Plain, described by Leigh Fermor as having 'pinnacles, pediments, baroque gables, ogees, lancets, mullions, steep slate roofs, towers with flag flying and flights of covered stairs'.

But delightful though those interludes are, they do not stand at the heart of this book. Leigh Fermor's was a carefree but not a frivolous journey. Throughout his months on the road he was really most truly fulfilled, it seems to me, not at play among the patricians, but walking alone through the countrysides, watching, listening, and making friends among the shepherds, woodsmen and innkeepers of his route. Then his powers of recollection are given superb expression by the vocabulary of his other self, fifty years later, and we enjoy the incomparable richness of the Leigh Fermor style, a style of person as of prose.

There are lyrical delights in every part of *Between the Woods and the Water*, but I think they reach an apogee in the passages that see Paddy at large in the wild Carpathian uplands. Here all his young enthusiasms are let loose. He discusses Romany pronunciations with Gypsy fossickers. Uniat shepherds lead him to thoughts about Christian orthodoxies. A rabbi at a lumbercamp recites verses from the Psalms in Hebrew, and he copies them down phonetically. Merry peasant women chaff him. And constantly through his mind all the peoples of the tangled Carpathian past, Dacians and Goths and Gepids and Lombards and Huns and Mongols and Kabars and Karaite schismatics, rumble and argue down the ages, clashing their scimitars, beating their drums, and playing upon shinbone flutes.

Best of all, to my mind, in those high empty places Leigh Fermor is inspired by the presence and friendship of Nature. In

the 1930s Central Europe teemed with wild creatures, bears and foxes and wildcats, hoopoes and golden orioles, and he loved the proximity of them. When a flock of sheep passes by him in the night it is ‘a liquid rippling’ that he hears, caused by ‘hundreds of little cleft feet trotting by’. When he comes face to face with a stag, the two of them stand there transfixed for a moment until the animal hurls itself ‘headlong through a screen of branches like a horse through a hoop’. Nobody has ever described a golden eagle as Leigh Fermor does, with all the fellow-feeling of one free wanderer for another, and you might think he had actually lodged with storks, so intimately and so affectionately does he analyse their grace and ungainliness.

But then, as he says of those Carpathian forests, ‘a kind of spell haunts wooded slopes like these,’ just as this book is haunted by his own memories of starlit nights among the rustle of the bushes, or the liquid rippling of sheep hoofs through the silence.

Leigh Fermor never does reach Constantinople in *Between the Woods and the Water*. Out of Transylvania he sailed down the Danube, through the heroic Iron Gates, to emerge at Orsova on the border of Bulgaria, still five hundred miles from his destination, where the call of the muezzin welcomed him to the gates of Islam too. Perhaps we never shall walk the last miles with him, to stand beside him on the Bosphorus: but he ends this book with the words TO BE CONCLUDED, so perhaps somewhere even now, after another twenty years, on a terrace in Greece perhaps, with dolphins playing in the blue gulf below, a cat by his feet, and a jug of retsina on his table, Paddy is writing the finish to his life’s masterpiece.

Jan Morris

Völker verrauschen,
Namen verklingen,
Finstre Vergessenheit
Breitet die dunkelnachtenden Schwingen
Über ganzen Geschlechtern aus

Schiller, *Die Braut von Messina*

Ours is a great wild country:
If you climb to our castle's top,
I don't see where your eye can stop;
For when you've passed the corn-field country,
Where vine-yards leave off, flocks are packed,
And sheep-range leads to cattle-tract,
And cattle-tract to open-chase,
And open-chase to the very base
Of the mountain, where, at a funeral pace,
Round about, solemn and slow,
One by one, row after row,
Up and up the pine-trees go,
So, like black priests up, and so
Down the other side again
To another greater, wilder country.

Robert Browning, *The Flight of the Duchess*

Introductory Letter to Xan Fielding

Dear Xan,

The first part of this narrative, *A Time of Gifts*, ended on a bridge over the Danube between Slovakia and Hungary, and as it must be unlucky to change in midstream, please let me begin the second part with a letter to you, as I did before. Nor will this be the last; there is one more book to come which will carry us to the end of the journey and beyond.

I had set out from Holland in 1934 meaning to mix only with chance acquaintances and fellow-tramps, but almost imperceptibly by the time I got to Hungary and Transylvania I found myself having a much easier time of it than I had expected or planned: ambling along on borrowed horses, drifting from one country-house to another, often staying for weeks or even months under patient and perhaps long-suffering but always hospitable roofs. Many things made this part of the journey quite different from the rest. It was a season of great delight; all seemed immeasurably old and at the same time brand new and totally unknown and, thanks to my dawdling rate of progress and those long sojourns, lasting friendships sprang up.

I suffered occasional pricks of conscience about straying so far from my original intentions, but when I look back now after putting these months together in writing, these twinges vanish. The next decade swept away this remote, country-dwelling world and this brings home to me how lucky I was to catch these long glimpses of it, even to share in it for a while. A subconscious wisdom might almost have been guiding this stretch of the journey and when it came to an end south of the Danube, it struck me, climbing through Balkan passes at my earlier brisk pace, how unusual were the regions I had just traversed: they had begun to take on a glow of retrospective magic which the intervening half-century has enhanced.

The notebook covering this period, lost in Moldavia at the beginning of the War and restored a few years ago by a great stroke of luck, has been a great help, but not the unfailing prop it should have been. When I came to a standstill during those long halts, writing stopped too: as I was keeping a journal of travel, I wrongly thought there was nothing to record. I was often slow to take it up again when I moved on and, even then, jotted notes sometimes took the place of sustained narrative. Fearing some details might have got out of sequence when I started writing the present book, I surrounded these passages with a cloud of provisos and hedged bets. Then the thought that these pages were not a guidebook persuaded me that it didn’t matter very much, so I let the story tell itself

free of debilitating caveats.

Books about this part of Europe incline to be chiefly, sometimes exclusively, devoted to politics, and this abundance lessens my guilt about how small a part they play in this one, where they only appear when they impinge directly on the journey. I had to give some account of how I thought history had affected life in Transylvania – its aftermath was all about me – but my inconclusive ponderings are offered with well-founded diffidence. Nothing could be less professional or 'inside Europe', and my political torpor at this early stage of life is touched on at some length in *A Time of Gifts*. News of grim events kept breaking in from the outside world but something in the mood of these valleys and mountain ranges weakened their impact. They were omens, and sinister ones, but there were three more years to go before these omens pointed unmistakably to the convulsions five years later.

Place names are a minor problem, but a vexing one. For well-known ones I have stuck to the forms longest established by history, and for the lesser, those in force at the time of the journey. Political fashion has altered many; more changed later; Rumanian spelling has been reformed, and earlier shifts of sovereignty have affected the precedence of the three place names that often adorn the smallest hamlet. I have tried to cite the official name first, followed by the others if they are needed. I know there is confusion here and there, but as this is not a guide nobody will be in danger of losing his way. I must apologise for these shortcomings and I hope it will be clear that they have nothing to do with partisanship. A few people's names have been changed when it seemed expedient but very sparingly, and usually of friends who are still actively on the scene from which many of the others have vanished. 'Von' is 'v.' throughout.

The debts a writer owes in a book of this kind are enormous and longstanding and if I fail to thank everyone I should, it is from neither forgetfulness nor ingratitude. I am deeply beholden to my old friend Elemer v. Klobusicky; to the Meran family, then and now; to Alexander Mourouzi and Constantine Soutzo. I would also like to thank Steven Runciman for encouraging words after the first volume, Dimitri Obolensky for wise advice during this one, and David Sylvester, Bruce Chatwin, Niko Vasilakis, Eva Bekássy v. Gescher and, as ever, John Craxton. Also many retrospective thanks to Balaşa Cantacuzène for help in translating *Mioritza*, in Moldavia long ago. My debt to Rudolf Fischer is beyond reckoning. His omniscient range of knowledge and an enthusiasm tempered with astringency have been a constant delight and stimulus during all the writing of this book; his vigilance has saved it from many errors, and I feel that the remaining ones may be precisely those when his advice was not followed.

Many thanks to Stella Gordon for her patient Champollion-Ventris flair for decyphering an illegible hand.

Lastly, devoted thanks for kindness and haven during restless literary displacements to Barbara and Niko Ghika (to whom the book is dedicated) for many weeks among the loggias and swallows of Corfu; to Janetta and Jaime Parladé for high-perched Andalusian asylum at Tramores; to the proprietors of the Stag Parlour near Bakewell for

fevered sessions of revision and for the all-but-irresistible suggestion of *Shank's Europe* as an overall title for these books; to Jock and Diana Murray for editorial patience and shelter during the last phase; and lastly, dear Xan, to you and Magouche for diligent spells of cloistered seclusion in the Serrania de Ronda.

Kardamyli, 11 February 1986 P.

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Bridge Passage

Perhaps I had made too long a halt on the bridge. The shadows were assembling over the Slovak and Hungarian shores and the Danube, running fast and pale between them, washed the quays of the old town of Esztergom, where a steep hill lifted the basilica into the dusk. Resting on its ring of columns, the great dome and the two Palladian belfries, tolling now with a shorter clang, surveyed the darkening scene for many leagues. All at once the quay and the steep road past the Archbishop's palace were deserted. The frontier post was at the end of the bridge, so I hastened into Hungary: the people that Easter Saturday had gathered at the river's side had climbed to the Cathedral square, where I found them strolling under the trees, conversing in expectant groups. The roofs fell away underneath, then forest and river and fen ran dimly to the last of the sunset.

A friend had written to the Mayor of Esztergom: 'Please be kind to this young man who is going to Constantinople on foot.' Planning to look him up next day, I asked someone about the Mayor's office and before I knew what was happening, and to my confusion, he had led me up to the man himself. He was surrounded by the wonderfully-clad grandees I had been admiring beside the Danube. I tried to explain that I was the tramp he had been warned about and he was politely puzzled; then illumination came, and after a quick and obviously comic conversation with one of the magnificent figures, he committed me to his care and hastened across the square to more serious

duties. The charge was accepted with an amused expression; my mentor must have been saddled with me because of his excellent English. His gala costume was dark and splendid; he carried his scimitar slung nonchalantly in the crook of his arm and a rimless monocle flashed in his left eye.

At this very moment, all eyes turned downhill. The clatter of hoofs and a jingle of harness had summoned the Mayor to the Cathedral steps, where a scarlet carpet had been laid. Clergy and candle-bearers were ceremoniously gathered and when the carriage halted a flame-coloured figure uncoiled from within and the Cardinal, Monsignor Serédy, who was also Archbishop of Esztergom and Prince-Primate of Hungary, slowly alighted and offered his ringed hand to the assembly and everyone in turn fell on one knee. His retinue followed him into the great building; then a beadle led the Mayor's party to the front pews which were draped in scarlet. I made as though to slink to a humbler place, but my mentor was firm: 'You'll see much better here.'

Holy Saturday had filled half the vast Cathedral and I could pick out many of the figures who had been on display by the river: the burghers in their best clothes, the booted and black-clad peasants, the intricately-coifed girls in their coloured skirts and their white pleated sleeves panelled with embroidery, the same ones who had been hastening over the bridge with nosegays of lilies and narcissi and kingcups. There were black and white Dominicans, several nuns and a sprinkling of uniforms, and near the great doors a flock of Gypsies in clashing hues leaned whispering and akimbo. It would scarcely have been a surprise to see one of their bears amble in and dip its paw in a baroque holy-water stoup shaped like a giant murex and genuflect.

How unlike the ghostly mood of Tenebrae two nights before! As each taper was plucked from its spike the shadows had advanced a pace until darkness subdued the little Slovak church. Here, light filled the great building, new constellations of wicks floated in all the chapels, the Paschal Candle was alight in the choir and unwinking stars tipped the candles that stood as tall as lances along the high altar. Except for the red front pews, the Cathedral, the clergy, the celebrating priest and his deacons and all their myrmidons were in white. The Archbishop, white

and gold now and utterly transformed from his scarlet manifestation as Cardinal, was enthroned under an emblazoned canopy and the members of his little court were perched in tiers up the steps. The one on the lowest was guardian of the heavy crosier and behind him another stood ready to lift the tall white mitre and replace it when the ritual prompted, arranging the lappets each time on the pallium-decked shoulders. In the front of the aisle, meanwhile, the quasi-martial bravery of the serried magnates – the coloured doublets of silk and brocade and fur, the gold and silver chains, the Hessian boots of blue and crimson and turquoise, the gilt spurs, the kalpaks of bearskin with their diamond clasps, and the high plumes of egrets' and eagles' and cranes' feathers – accorded with the ecclesiastical splendour as aptly as the accoutrements in the Burial of Count Orgaz: and it was the black attire – like my new friend's, and the armour of the painted knights in Toledo – that was the most impressive. Those scimitars leaning in the pews, with their gilt and ivory cross-hilts and stagily gemmed scabbards – surely they were heirlooms from the Turkish wars? When their owners rose jingling for the Creed, one of the swords fell on the marble with a clatter. In old battles across the puszta, blades like these sent the Turks' heads spinning at full gallop; the Hungarians' heads too, of course …

Soon, after an interval of silence, sheaves of organ-pipes were thundering and fluting their message of risen Divinity. Scores of voices soared from the choir, Alleluiahs were on the wing, the cumulus of incense billowing round the carved acanthus leaves was winding aloft and losing itself in the shadows of the dome and new motions were afoot. Led by a cross, a vanguard of clergy and acolytes bristling with candles was already half-way down the aisle. Next came a canopy with the Sacrament borne in a monstrance; then the Archbishop; the Mayor; the white-bearded and eldest of the magnates, limping and leaning heavily on a malacca cane; then the rest. Urged by a friendly prod, I joined the slow slipstream and soon, as though smoke and sound had wafted us through the doors, we were all outside.

As the enormous moon was only one night after the full, it was almost as bright as day. The procession was down the steps

and slowly setting off; but when the waiting band moved in behind us and struck up the opening bars of a slow march, the notes were instantaneously drowned. Wheels creaked overhead, timbers groaned and a many-tongued and nearly delirious clangour of bells came tumbling into the night; and then, between these bronze impacts, another sound, like insistent clapping, made us all look up. An hour or so before, two storks, tired by their journey from Africa, had alighted on a dishevelled nest under one of the belfries and everyone had watched them settle in. Now, alarmed by the din, desperately flapping their wings and with necks outstretched, they were taking off again, scarlet legs trailing. Black feathers opened along the fringes of their enormous white pinions and then steady and unhastening wing-beats lifted them beyond the chestnut leaves and into the sky as we gazed after them. ‘A fine night they chose for moving in,’ my neighbour said, as we fell in step.

Not a light showed in the town except for the flames of thousands of candles stuck along the window-sills and twinkling in the hands of the waiting throng. The men were bareheaded, the women in kerchiefs, and the glow from their cupped palms reversed the daytime chiaroscuro, rimming the lines of jaw and nostril, scooping lit crescents under their brows and leaving everything beyond these bright masks drowned in shadow. Silently forested with flames, street followed street and as the front of the procession drew level everyone kneeled, only to rise to their feet again a few seconds after it had moved on. Then we were among glimmering ranks of poplars and every now and then the solemn music broke off. When the chanting paused, the ring of the censer-chains and the sound of the butt of the Archbishop’s pastoral staff on the cobbles were joined by the croaking of millions of frogs. Woken by the bells and the music, the storks in the town were floating and crossing overhead and looking down on our little string of lights as it turned uphill into the basilica again. The intensity of the moment, the singing and candle flames and incense, the feeling of spring, the circling birds, the smell of fields, the bells, the chorus from the rushes, thin shadows and the unreality of the moon over the woods and the silver flood – all these things hallowed the night with a spell

of great beneficence and power.

When it was all over, everyone emerged once more on the Cathedral steps. The carriage was waiting; and the Archbishop, back in cardinal's robes and the wide ermine mantle that showed he was a temporal as well as an ecclesiastical Prince, climbed slowly in. His gentleman-at-arms, helped by a chaplain with a prominent Adam's apple and pince-nez and a postillion in hussar's uniform, were gathering in his train, yard upon yard, like fishermen with a net, until it filled the carriage with geranium-coloured watered-silk. The chaplain climbed in and sat opposite, then the gentleman-at-arms, sitting upright with black-gloved hands on the hilt of his scimitar. The postillion folded the steps, a small busbied tiger slammed a door painted with arms under a tasselled hat and when both of them had leaped up behind, the similarly fur-hatted coachman gave a twitch to the reins, the ostrich feathers nodded and the four greys moved off. As the equipage swayed down the hill, applause rippled through the gathered crowd, all hats came off and a hand at the window, pastorally ringed over its red glove, fluttered in blessing.

On the moonlit steps everyone was embracing, exchanging Easter greetings and kissing hands and cheeks. The men put on their fur hats and readjusted the slant of their dolmans and, after the hours of Latin, Magyar was bursting out in a cheerful dactylic rush.

'Let's see how those birds are getting on,' my mentor said, polishing his monocle with a silk bandana. He sauntered to the edge of the steps, leant on his sword as though it were a shooting-stick and peered up into the night. The two beaks were sticking out of the twigs side by side and we could just make out the re-settled birds fast asleep in the shadows. 'Good!' he said. 'They're having a nice snooze.'

We rejoined the others and he offered his cigarette case round, chose one himself with care and tapped it on the gnarled gold. Three plumes tilted round his lighter flame in a brief pyramid and fell apart. He drew in a deep breath, held it for a few seconds and then, with a long sigh, let the smoke escape slowly in the moonlight. 'I've been looking forward to that,' he said. 'It's my first since Shrove Tuesday.'

The evening ended in a dinner party at the Mayor's with

barack to begin with and floods of wine all through, and then Tokay, and in the end a haze surrounded those gorgeously-clad figures. Afterwards the Mayor apologetically told me that as the house was crowded out, a room had been found for me at a neighbour's. No question of my stumping up! Next morning, soberly dressed in tweed and a polo-necked jersey, my stork-loving friend picked me up in a fierce Bugatti and only the scimitar among his bags on the back seat hinted at last night's splendours. We went to see the pictures in the Archbishop's palace; then he said, why not come in his car? We would be in Budapest in no time; but I stuck reluctantly to my rule – no lifts except in vile weather – and we made plans to meet in the capital. He scorched off with a wave and after farewells at the Mayor's I collected my things and set off too. I kept wondering if all Hungary could be like this.

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From the path that climbed along the edge of the forest, backward glances revealed swamps and trees and a waste of tall rushes and the great river loosely dividing and joining again round a chain of islands. I could see the waterfowl rocketing up and circling like showers of motes and stippling the lagoon with innumerable splashes when they settled again. Then high ground put them out of sight. Foothills rose steeply on the other side, lesser hills overlapped each other downstream and the fleece of the tree-tops gave way to cliffs of limestone and porphyry, and where they converged, the green river ran fast and deep.

A village would appear below and storks stood on one leg among the twigs of old nests on thatch and chimney. There were flurried claps as they took to the air, and when they dropped level with the tree-tops and crossed the river into Slovakia, sunlight caught the upper sides of their wings; then they tilted and wheeled back into Hungary with hardly a feather moving. Landing with sticks in their beaks, they picked their way along the roofs with black flight-feathers spread like tight-rope-walkers' fingers fumbling for balance. Being mute birds, they improvise an odd courting-song by leaning back and opening and shutting

their scarlet bills with a high-speed clatter like flat sticks banging together: a dozen courtships in one of these riverside hamlets sounded like massed castanets. Carried away by sudden transports, they would leap a few yards in the air and land in disarray, sliding precariously on the thatch. Their wonderful procession had stretched across the sky for miles the night before; now they were everywhere, and all the following weeks I could never get used to them; their queerly stirring rattle was the prevalent theme of the journey, and the charm they cast over the ensuing regions lasted until August in the Bulgarian mountains, when I finally watched a host of them dwindling in the distance, heading for Africa.

It was the first of April 1934, and Easter Day: two days after full moon, eleven from the equinox, forty-seven since my nineteenth birthday and a hundred and eleven after I had set out, but less than twenty-four hours since crossing the frontier. The far bank was Slovakia still, but in a mile or two a tributary twisted through the northern hills, and the tiled roofs and belfries of the little tearful-sounding town of Szob marked the meeting place of the two rivers. The frontier wandered northwards up this valley and for the first time both sides of the Danube were Hungary.

For most of this journey the landscape had been under snow; icicle-hung and often veiled in falling flakes, but the last three weeks had changed all this. The snow had shrunk to a few discoloured patches and the ice on the Danube had broken up. When this is solid, the thaw sunders the ice with reports like a succession of thunderclaps. I had been out of earshot downstream when the giant slabs had broken loose, but all at once the water, halted by occasional jams, was crowded with racing fragments. It was no good trying to keep pace: jostling triangles and polygons rushed past, cloudier at the edges each day and colliding with a softer impact until they were as flimsy as wafers; and at last, one morning, they were gone. These were mild portents, it seemed. When the sun reaches full strength, the eternal snows, the glaciers of the Alps and the banked peaks of the Carpathians look unchanged from a distance; but close to, the whole icy heart of Europe might be dissolving. Thousands of rivulets pour downhill, all brooks overflow and the river itself

breaks loose and floods the meadows, drowns cattle and flocks, uproots the ricks and the trees and whirls them along until all but the tallest and stoutest bridges are either choked with flotsam or carried away.

Spring had begun as at a starter's pistol. Bird song had broken out in a frenzy, a fever of building had set in, and, overnight, swallows and swifts were skimming everywhere. Martins were setting their old quarters to rights, lizards flickered on the stones, nests multiplied in the reeds, shoals teemed and the frogs, diving underwater at a stranger's approach, soon surfaced again, sounding as though they were reinforced every hour by a thousand new voices; they kept the heronries empty as long as daylight lasted. The herons themselves glided low and waded through the flagleaves with a jerky and purposeful gait, or, vigilantly on one leg like the storks, posed with cunning as plants. Flags crowded the backwaters and thick stems lifted enormous kingcups among the leaves of pink and white water-lilies that folded at sunset.

Between the shore and the reddish-mauve cliffs, aspens and poplars tapered and expanded in a twinkling haze and the willows, sinking watery roots, drooped over fast currents. Tight-lacing forced the yellow flood into a rush of creases and whorls and, after my earlier weeks beside the Danube, I could spot those ruffled hoops turning slowly round and round, telling of drowned commotion amidstream.

The path climbed, and as the hot afternoon passed, it was hard to believe that the nearly mythical country of Hungary lay all around me at last; not that this part of it, the Pilis hills, tallied in the remotest degree with anything I had expected. When the climb had let the Danube drop out of sight, hills and woods swallowed the track and sunbeams slanted through young oak branches. Everything smelt of bracken and moss, sprays of hazel and beech were opening, and the path, soft with rotten leaves, wound through great lichen-crusted trees with dog-violets and primroses among their roots. When the woods opened for a mile or two, steep meadows ran up on either hand to crests that were dark with hangers, and streams fledged with watercress ran fast and clear in the valleys. I was crossing one of them on stepping-stones when bleating and a jangle of bells

sounded; then barking broke out, and the three demons that rushed down with bared fangs were called to heel by their shepherd. His sheep were up to their bellies in a drift of daisies; the ewes must have lambed about Christmas and some of them were already shorn. I had been in shirt-sleeves for several days, but a heel-length sheepskin cloak was thrown over the shepherd's shoulders; peasants are slow to cast clouts. I shouted, 'Jó estét kivánok!' – a quarter of my stock of Hungarian – and the same evening-greeting came back, accompanied by the ceremonious lift of a narrow-brimmed black hat. (Ever since I had come across the Hungarian population in southern Slovakia I had longed for some head-gear for answering these stately salutes.) His flock was a blur of white specks and faraway tinklings by the time I caught sight of a different herd. A troop of still unantlered fallow deer were grazing by the edge of the forest across the valley. The sun setting on the other side of them cast their shadows across the slope to enormous lengths: a footfall across the still acres of air lifted all their heads at the same moment and held them at gaze until I was out of sight.

I had been thinking of sleeping out, and those shorn lambs clinched matters; the wind was so tempered that hardly a leaf moved. My first attempt, two nights before in Slovakia, had ended in brief arrest as a suspected smuggler; but nothing could be safer than these woods high above the hazards of the frontier.

I was casting about for a sheltered spot when a campfire showed in the dusk at the other end of a clearing where rooks were going noisily to bed. A pen of stakes and brushwood had been set up in a bay of the forest under an enormous oak tree, a swineherd was making it fast with a stake between two twists of withy, and the curly and matted black pigs inside were noisily jostling for space. The hut next door was thatched with reeds and when I joined the two swineherds, both looked up puzzled in the firelight: who was I, and where did I come from? The answers – 'Angol' and 'Angolország' – didn't mean much to them, but their faces lit at the emergence of a bottle of *barack* which was parting loot from my friends in Esztergom, and a third stool was found.

They were cloaked in rough white woollen stuff as hard as

frieze. In lieu of goads or crooks, they nursed tapering shafts of wood polished with long handling and topped with small axe-heads and they were shod in those moccasins I had first seen Slovaks wearing in Bratislava: pale canoes of raw cowhide turning up at the tips and threaded all round with thongs which were then lashed round their padded shanks till half-way up the calf of the leg; inside, meanwhile, snugly swaddled in layers of white felt, their feet were wintering it out till the first cuckoo.

The younger was a wild-looking boy with staring eyes and tousled hair. He knew about ten words of German, learnt from Schwobs in the neighbouring villages (I heard later that these were Swabians who were settled nearby) and he had an infectious, rather mad laugh. His white-headed father spoke nothing but Magyar and his eyes, deep-set in wrinkles, lost all their caution as we worked our way down the bottle. I could just make out that the deer, betokened by spread fingers for their missing antlers, belonged to a *föherceg* (which later turned out to mean an archduke). Continuing in sign-language, the younger swineherd grunted, scowled fiercely and curled up his forefingers to represent the tusks of the wild boars that lurked in brakes hereabouts; then he twirled them in spirals which could only mean moufflon. The sign-language grew blunter still when he jovially shadowed forth how wild boars broke in and covered tame sows and scattered the pens with miscegenate farrow. I contributed some hard-boiled eggs to their supper of delicious smoked pork: they sprinkled it with paprika and we ate it with black bread and onions and some nearly fossilised cheese.

The swineherds were called Bálint and Géza and their names have stuck because, at this first hearing, they had so strange a ring. The firelight made them look like contemporaries of Domesday Book and we ought to have been passing a drinking-horn from hand to hand instead of my anachronistic bottle. In defiance of language, by the time it was empty we were all in the grip of helpless laughter. Some kind of primitive exchange had cleared all hurdles and the drink and the boy's infectious spirits must have done the rest. The fire was nearly out and the glade was beginning to change; the moon, which looked scarcely less full than the night before, was climbing behind the branches.

There wasn't much room in their stifling den and when they

As much German as Magyar was to be heard on the half-awake quay of Visegrád, for the speakers were Géza's Swabians. When the Turks were driven out, thousands of peasant families from South Germany had boarded flat-bottomed boats and set off from the cities of the Upper Danube, chiefly from Ulm; sailing downstream, they landed on the depopulated shore and settled for good. Their language and their costumes on feast days were said to have remained unaltered since the time of Maria Theresa in whose reign they had taken root. There must have been a lot of intermarriage but spotting people with obligingly tow-coloured or raven hair, I thought – and probably wrongly – I could pick out a typical German from a typical Magyar.

When the path along the Danube turned east, the radiance of morning poured along the valley. Soon the cape of a slender island, plumed with willow trees and patterned with fields of young wheat, divided the river in two. Nets were looped from branch to branch, fishing boats were moored to the trunks of aspens, poplars and willows and pewter-coloured stems lifted a silvery pale-green haze against the darker leaves of the riverside woods. The island followed the river's windings for nearly twenty miles. A trim steamer ruffled the current now and then, and as the day advanced, the sparse traffic of barges multiplied.

But within an hour or two, the river began to conduct itself in a fashion unprecedented since our first snowy meeting at Ulm eleven weeks earlier. (Only eleven weeks! It seemed half a lifetime already!) Indeed, ever since the river had first bubbled out of the underworld in Prince Fürstenberg's park in the Black Forest. For the Danube, after describing two congruent semicircles, was turning due south; and so it would continue, flowing clean across Hungary for a hundred and eighty miles – from the top to the bottom of the atlas page, as it were – until it turned again and streamed eastwards under the battlements of Belgrade. It was an exciting moment.

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By late afternoon, towards the end of the island which had kept me company all day, I reached Szentendre, a little baroque country town of lanes, cobbled streets, tiled roofs and belfries

for England. Absorption and enjoyment are catching and my attitude to life resembled a sea-lion's to the flung bloater. They were amused by accounts of the journey: some said they wished they had done the same; and they were impressed that I only took lifts in really bad weather. Nobody else was travelling like this in those days, so the expedition had the value of rarity: it is almost past belief, but only once during the whole journey did I meet another soul who had set out in the same way.

A couple of months earlier, on the road between Ulm and Augsburg, I had dived out of a snowstorm into a lonely Gasthaus and the only other customer taking refuge there was a strange-looking boy of about my age, dressed in a black corduroy jacket and a scarlet waistcoat with brass buttons, who was banging the snow off an already very battered top-hat with his forearm; back askew on his head, it gave him a look of Sam Weller. He told me, as we threw schnapps down our throats, that he was wearing the traditional costume of a Hamburg chimney-sweep's apprentice. Emblematic of a secret sweeps' guild which stretched all over Europe, it ensured a welcome from his colleagues everywhere; his circular brushes and his slotted bamboo staves were strapped to the bottom of his rucksack, just in case. While he explained that he was heading south to Innsbruck and the Brenner and then down into Italy, he unfolded his map on the table and his finger traced Bolzano, Trento, the Adige, Lake Garda, Verona, Mantua, Modena, Bologna and the Apennine passes leading to Florence; and as he uttered the glorious names, he waved his hand in the air as though Italy lay all about us. 'Kommst du nicht mit?'

Why not? It was tempting, and he was an amusing chap. Then I thought of the registered envelope I hoped was waiting in Munich and of all the mysteries of Eastern Europe that I would miss. 'Schade!' he said: what a shame. Warmed by another schnapps or two, we helped each other on with our burdens and he set off for the Tyrol and Rome and the land where the lemon trees bloomed (*Dahin!*) and waved his top-hat as he grew fainter through the snowfall. We both shouted godspeed against the noise of the wind and wondering whether I had done the right thing I plodded on, eyelashes clogged with flakes, towards Bavaria and Constantinople.

through a mouth full of toffee. It means that the words are never inflected as they are in Europe, and that changes of sense are conveyed by a concatenation of syllables stuck on behind the first; all the vowel sounds imitate their leader, and the invariable ictus on the leading syllable sets up a kind of dactylic or anapaestic canter which, to a new ear, gives Magyar a wild and most unfamiliar ring. So, when at the dance I was listening to the vernacular sentences of my monocled and stork-loving Esztergom friend while he poured whisky out of a cut-glass decanter, and then to his marvellous-looking partner – as, with a deft langour, she took a cigarette out of a gold and shagreen case that snapped shut with an emerald, and answered him through the smoke – it was impossible not to wonder among what unconjecturable scenery of marshland and desert and woods, when the Magyar tongue was beginning to shake itself loose from the primitive Ugrian magma, these sounds could first have been uttered.

On a printed page the fierce-looking sentences let slip no hint of their drift. Those tangles of S's and Z's! Gazing at the peppery strings of diaereses and the tempests of acute accents all swaying one way like wind-blown corn, I wondered if I would ever be able to extort a meaning.

My first effort was discouraging. There was a snug *kávéház*, a coffee-house (if only all Magyar were as easy as this!) less than a minute's walk away in Holy Trinity Square (I could just manage Szent Háromság Tér, Saint Three-ship Place) and I was spending a morning of showery weather there with books and writing things. The coffee-house windows surveyed ancient palaces and the tall restored gothic steeple of the Coronation Church, and just in front, a plinth sprang from the cobbles and lifted a bronze horseman called Andreas Hadik into the raindrops; he was a commander in the Seven Years War who had dodged the armies of Frederick the Great, swooped on Berlin with a cavalcade of hussars, looted the place at lightning speed and galloped away again. At the next table, the only other person in the coffee-house was a frail, white-haired man reading the *Pesti Hirláp*. I couldn't take my eyes off the headline. It ran: O *boldog Angolország!* I knew that the last word meant 'England', and the rest was obvious: it could only mean 'O

bulldog England!', 'O English bulldog!' or something of the kind. The photograph below showed the Prince of Wales in a golfing pullover with a bold lozenge pattern and a tweed cap; but, very puzzlingly, the dog under his arm, which simultaneously stole the picture and turned it into an enigma, was a fox-terrier; they must have muddled the breeds. I couldn't resist asking the reader in German if I had understood the words correctly. He laughed, and answered in English. No, it was nothing to do with dogs; 'boldog' is 'happy'; 'O fortunate England!' was what the caption meant, and the gist of the article was England's good luck in having so promising a Crown Prince. Hungary was a kingdom too, my neighbour ruefully added, but they only had a regent. The apostolic crown was empty.

The apostolic crown … I had heard much about it. Reproduced on buildings, coins, flags, cap-badges and buttons and on the top of all public notices, it was seldom out of sight. Until it should be needed for some future coronation – but whose? and when? – the crown itself was guarded in the Royal Palace. Over the centuries the shrewd marriage policy of the Habsburgs had absorbed most of the neighbouring kingdoms and finally Hungary; and the last sovereigns had been King Karl and Queen Zita, who were also, of course, Austria's last Emperor and Empress. After the loss of both these thrones at the end of the Great War, and the breakdown of their brief and illicit return to Hungary, the lingering hopes of the dynasty had faded; and now the exiled King was dead. In photographs his son Archduke Otto, the present claimant, was usually dressed as a Hungarian magnate; but these pictures were seen more often in his native Austria than here. Nevertheless, the state was constitutionally a kingdom still, under the regency of Admiral Horthy. The beautiful Empress Elizabeth, their last queen but one, who had been assassinated in Switzerland in 1898 by an anarchist, was still their favourite. Framed on desks and tables and grand pianos, there she was, in nineteenth-century coronation robes, reading under a tree, clearing terrific fences in Northamptonshire or Meath or pensively at gaze, stroking her enormous wolfhound, Shadow. She had loved Hungary and the Hungarians, learnt Magyar and rushed to Hungary's defence in all discussions; above all, she flung herself with fearlessness

Transylvanian family. One recent but fairly distant member, exploring Ethiopia, had discovered Lake Rudolf and named it after the ill-fated Archduke; and the volcano at its southern tip was called Mount Teleki (but perhaps no longer). Mine – Count Paul – was a famous geographer too. He had mapped the whole Japanese archipelago and, across the table, he told us stories of travel among the Turks and the Arabs when he was helping to draw the frontiers of Mesopotamia. He broke off for lively descriptions of Abdul Hamid and Slatin Pasha, that strange Anglo-Austrian for years the prisoner and running-footman of the Mahdi. The Count's alert, pointed face behind horn-rimmed spectacles, lit by a quick, witty and enthusiastic manner, had an almost Chinese look. It is hard to think of anyone kinder. As Chief Scout of Hungary, he took my travel plans to heart, spread maps, indicated passes and routes, traced rivers, suggested alternative approaches and enlivened everything as he did so with anecdotes and asides. He had been Foreign Minister and later Prime Minister for a little less than a year, resigning to return to his geographical work when Horthy sent soldiers to stop the return of King Karl. He asked me back a couple of times and all his family were kind to me in various ways; and when I left, he recommended me to his relations in Transylvania. He even gave me a letter to an old Turkish pasha living on the Asiatic shore of the Bosphorus which suddenly made my journey's end seem something more than an abstraction.fn2

As Annamaria, the pretty girl I made friends with at the ball, was studying art history, she knew every picture-gallery and museum by heart; thanks to her I haunted them all. It must have been she who pointed out (but where?) a remarkable and untypical wrestling match by Courbet; and she acted as Open Sesame to a private house with a long room which was empty except for half a dozen tremendous El Grecos. I met a lot of people and the tempo of life quickened. One exploratory foray into high life led to the drawing-room of an ex-reigning beauty equally famous for her looks and her exalted rank. Afterwards, when Berta asked what I thought, I said that she was wonderful looking; but wasn't she a shade precious? Berta laughed; 'When we were nurses in the War,' she said, 'Ella insisted on working only in the blind wards, saying "I have to, you see! In the others

The great Gabriel Bethlen had been another benefactor and founded an Academy.fn1 Married to the sister of the Elector of Brandenburg, he was one of the most active of this succession of princes, a powerful westward-looking Protestant leader in the Thirty Years War, and an ally of the Elector Palatine, the Winter Queen and Gustavus Adolphus.

The earlier of the Rákóczi princes were also champions of the Reformation. To strengthen the cause by the dynastic support of England and the Palatinate – and perhaps of Bohemia regained – Sigismund, brother of George Rákóczi II, married the Winter Queen's daughter, Henrietta. So, for much of this strange period, Transylvania was not only a fortress of Hungarian liberties, but a refuge for the various Protestant sects that took root there; it was also a sort of golden age for the humanities. The Saxon part of the population followed Luther, the Hungarians adopted the Calvinism which was in the ascendant just over the border at Debrecen, while Unitarians of various kinds prospered; all of them out of anti-Habsburg feeling and in reaction to Jesuit intransigence. The princes contrived to impose a remarkable degree of tolerance between the jarring Churches. Sectarian fervour fell short of the passionate feelings that prevailed in Poland and Austria, and, even today, confessional rivalry was less acute. (István – though his personal leanings were strongly towards Catholicism – had been christened a Protestant like his father while his sister Ilona, like their mother, was Catholic. This arrangement with the children of mixed marriages was not uncommon in these parts.)

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Down a side turning a few miles further north, much was afoot. The path to the village ahead was noisy with farmyard sounds and when we had breasted the livestock and a barrage of dust clouds, costumes from a score of villages crowded in. Booths were laden with studded leather belts, sheepskin jackets, blouses, kerchiefs and black and white conical fleece hats; there were girths, bits, stirrups, harness, knives, sickles, scythes and festoons of brass and iron sheep-bells bright from the forge; also, icons framed in tinsel for the Orthodox and bunches of