THE BROKEN ROAD

FROM THE IRON GATES TO MOUNT ATHOS

PATRICK · LEIGH · FERMOR

Contents

Also by Patrick Leigh Fermor

The Traveller's Tree
The Violins of Saint-Jacques
A Time to Keep Silence
Mani
Roumeli
A Time of Gifts
Between the Woods and the Water
Three Letters from the Andes
Words of Mercury, *edited by Artemis Cooper*
In Tearing Haste: Letters between Deborah Devonshire and Patrick Leigh Fermor, *edited by Charlotte Mosley*

Translated and edited
The Cretan Runner *by George Psychoundakis*

The Broken Road

From the Iron Gates to Mount Athos

PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR

Edited by Colin Thubron and Artemis Cooper

JOHN MURRAY

www.johnmurray.co.uk

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by John Murray
(Publishers)
An Hachette UK company

Maps drawn by Rodney Paull

Title page and chapter opener drawing by John Craxton

Photograph of Patrick Leigh Fermor at the Rila monastery, Bulgaria, from the Patrick Leigh Fermor Archive, reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland

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

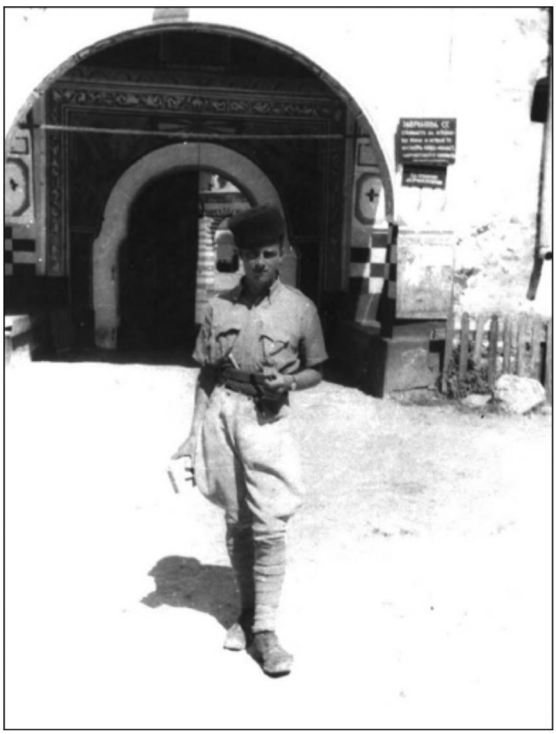
ISBN 978-1-84854-753-7

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

www.johnmurray.co.uk

In memory of Joan

Maps



Patrick Leigh Fermor at the Rila monastery, Bulgaria, autumn 1934
'I must have been an uncouth spectacle with long, unkempt and dust-clogged hair bleached to a shaggy tow and a face burnt to the hue of a walnut sideboard by the sun; rumpled clothes, a rucksack and a carved Hungarian walking-stick; also – I blush, now, to set it down, but honesty compels it – a scarlet and yellow braid belt bought in Transylvania, a steel-hilted dagger and a brown kalpack from the fair in Berkovitza.'

Introduction

There is something poignant and mysterious about incomplete masterpieces. The pair of books that preceded the present volume – *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water* – remain the magnificent two thirds of an unfinished trilogy. They are unique among twentieth-century travel books. Forty and fifty years after the event, their journey – and its prodigious feat of recall – reads like the dream odyssey of every footloose student.

The eighteen-year-old Leigh Fermor set out from the Hook of Holland in 1933 to walk to Constantinople (as he determinedly called Istanbul). But it was only decades afterwards that he embarked on the parallel journey – the written one – looking back from maturity on his youthful rite of passage. *A Time of Gifts* (1977) carried him through Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. *Between the Woods and the Water* (1986) continued across Hungary and into Transylvania and left him at the Danube's Iron Gates, close to where the Rumanian and Bulgarian frontiers converge. He was still five hundred miles from his destination in Constantinople.

The literary completion of this epic would have been a triumph comparable to that of William Golding's sea trilogy or, in a different genre, to Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour.* But there, at the Iron Gates, Leigh Fermor's remembered journey hung suspended. Impatient readers gathered that he had succumbed to writer's block, frozen by failed memory or the task of equalling his own tremendous style.

But on his death in 2011 he left behind a manuscript of the final narrative whose shortcomings or elusiveness had tormented him for so many years. He never completed it as he would have wished. The reasons for this are uncertain. The problem remained obscure even to him, and *The Broken Road*

is only its partial resolution. The book's fascination resides not only in the near-conclusion of its youthful epic, but in the light that it throws on the creative process of this brilliant and very private man.

At the age of eighteen Paddy (as friends and fans called him) thought himself a failure. His housemaster at King's School, Canterbury, had memorably labelled him 'a dangerous mixture of sophistication and recklessness', and he had been sacked from most of his schools. His parents were separated, his father – a distinguished geologist – was far away in India, and although Paddy toyed with entering the army, the prospect of its discipline irked him. Instead, he longed to be a writer. In rented digs in London's Shepherd Market, between wild parties among the remnant of the 1920s Bright Young People, he struggled with composing adolescent verse and stories. But in the winter of 1933, he wrote, gloom and perplexity descended. 'Everything suddenly seeming unbearable, loathsome, trivial, restless … Detestation, suddenly, of parties. Contempt for everyone, starting and finishing with myself.'

It was then that the idea of a journey dawned on him – a solitary walk in romantic poverty. An imaginary map of Europe unfurled in his mind. 'A new life! Freedom! Something to write about!' As 'a thousand glistening umbrellas were tilted over a thousand bowler hats in Piccadilly', he set out with a parental allowance of a pound a week and a copy of the *Oxford Book of English Verse* and Horace's Odes in his rucksack.

His walk up the Rhine into the heart of Middle Europe, down the Danube and across the Great Hungarian Plain to Transylvania, became a counterpoint of nights in hovels and sojourns in the castles of kindly aristocrats. But above all, as he travelled – exultantly curious – through the landscapes and histories of the unfolding continent, this was a young man's introduction to the riches of European culture. The journey took him a year. But it was over forty years before he began to publish it.

Other matters intervened. For four years after he reached Constantinople, he lived in Rumania with his first great love, Princess Balasha Cantacuzene. It was during this time that he first began to write up his youthful walk, but 'the words wouldn't

flow,' he wrote, 'I couldn't get them to sound right.' And none of this first effort survives.

Then came the war, and his period as an SOE officer in occupied Crete, culminating in his legendary abduction of General Kreipe, divisional commander of the island's central sector. It was not until 1950 that literary success arrived, with a travel book on the Caribbean, followed by a novel and the resonant account of his retreat into monasteries, *A Time to Keep Silence*. Above all, his travels in Greece, where he settled with his wife Joan Eyres Monsell, yielded two books – *Mani* and *Roumeli* – that celebrate not the sites of classical antiquity but the earthy, demotic *Romiosyne*, the folk culture of the land he had come to love.

Late in 1962 the American *Holiday* magazine (a journal more serious than its name) commissioned Paddy to write a 5,000-word article on 'The Pleasures of Walking'. With no presentiment of what he was starting, he plunged into describing his epic trek. Nearly seventy pages later, he was still only two thirds of the way through – just short of the Bulgarian frontier, at the Iron Gates – and the discipline of compression had grown unbearable. Enormous seams of memory were opening up. Between one sentence and another he threw off the constraints of an article. Those first seventy pages were set aside, and when he resumed the narrative, writing at his journey's natural pace, he was composing a full-scale book – from Bulgaria to Turkey. Now all the stuff of his walk – the byways of history and language, the vividly etched characters, the exuberantly observed architecture and landscape – came swarming on to the page. On New Year's Day 1964 he wrote to his publisher, the loyal and long-suffering Jock Murray, that the narrative had 'ripened out of all recognition. Much more personal, and far livelier in pace, and lots of it, I hope, very odd.'

So, ironically, the last stretch of his journey – from the Iron Gates to Constantinople – was the first part of his walk that he attempted to write in full. He wanted to call the book 'Parallax', a word (familiar to astronomy) that defines the transformation that an object undergoes when viewed from different angles. It was a measure of how acutely he felt the change in perspective

between his younger and older selves. Jock Murray, however, balked at the title as too opaque (he thought parallax sounded like a patent medicine) and it was tentatively renamed 'A Youthful Journey'.

In the mid-1960s, with the manuscript still incomplete, Paddy put it aside and became absorbed with his wife Joan in the creation of their home in the Peloponnese. When eventually he returned to the project in the early 1970s, he realized that he must start all over again, from his journey's beginnings in Holland, and that there would be more than one book. For the next fifteen years he laboured over the Great Trudge, as he called it, to produce the two superb works that carried him to the Bulgarian border. The manuscript of 'A Youthful Journey', meanwhile, handwritten on stiff cardboard sheets, languished half-forgotten on a shelf in his study, enclosed in three black ring binders.

The spectacular success of the first two volumes drastically increased public expectation for the third. *Between the Woods and the Water* had ended with the irrevocable words: 'To be Concluded', and the commitment was to dog Paddy for the rest of his life. By the time he returned to 'A Youthful Journey' – which began at the Iron Gates, where *Between the Woods and the Water* ended – he was in his seventies; the text itself was some twenty years old, and the experiences remembered were over half a century away. This early manuscript was written in prolix bursts, barely edited. It lacked the artful reworking, the rich polish and sometimes the coherence that he had come to demand of himself. The slow, intense, perfectionist labour by which the first two volumes had been achieved – even their proofs were so covered in corrections and elaborations that they had to be reset wholesale – seemed a near-insuperable challenge now. And other events weighed in. With the death of Jock Murray in 1993, and of Joan in 2003, the two people who had most encouraged him were gone. The long ice age that set in was perhaps as bewildering to Paddy as to others. Even the help of a psychiatrist did little to ease him.

One of the astonishing facts about *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water* is that they were written from memory,

with no diaries or notebooks to sustain them. Paddy's first diary was stolen in a Munich youth hostel in 1934, and those that succeeded it, along with his picaresque letters to his mother, were stored during the war in the Harrods Depository, where years later they were destroyed unclaimed. It was a loss, he used to say, that 'still aches, like an old wound in wet weather'.

Yet curiously the absence of corroborating records may have been liberating. To a writer of Paddy's visual gifts, memories and associations would mount up together in vivid feats of reimagining. 'While piecing together fragments which have lain undisturbed for two decades and more,' he wrote in a reflective passage of *The Broken Road*, 'all at once a detail will surface which acts as potently as the taste of madeleine which made the whole of Proust's childhood unfurl. The haul of irrelevant detail, interlocking trains of thought and associations, and the echoes of echoes re-echoed and ricocheted, is overwhelming …' Without the constraints of a day-to-day logbook, these retrievals could develop less into a literal narrative than into memory-spurred recreations. Acts of poetic licence and conflation were, he admitted, all but inevitable.

In 1965, just after he had laid aside the unfinished 'A Youthful Journey' in order to build his Peloponnesian home, he was commissioned to write an article on the Danube, from its source to its end in Rumania's Black Sea. Communist Rumania, at this time, was easing open to the West, and he seized the opportunity of revisiting Balasha Cantacuzene. It was the first time he had seen her since leaving for the war in 1939. He met her secretly, at night, in the little town of Pucioasa, in the attic flat she now shared with her sister and brother-in-law. He was shocked by the toll that the past quarter century had taken, but moved to see her again. In 1949, already stripped of almost all their possessions, they had been evicted from their estate with just a quarter of an hour to pack, and she had thrown into her suitcase Paddy's fourth and final diary, which he had left behind with her. This precious remnant he took home to Greece. Written in faded pencil, the Green Diary, as he called it, carries his life forward to 1935 after his walk was over, and is appended with sketches of churches, costumes, friends, vocabularies in Hungarian, Rumanian, Bulgarian and Greek, and the names and

addresses of almost everyone he stayed with.

But strangely, although the diary covered all his walk from the Iron Gates to Constantinople and more, he never collated it with 'A Youthful Journey'. Perhaps its callowness jarred with the later, more studied manuscript, or their factual differences disconcerted him. The two narratives often diverge. Whatever the reason, the diary – which retained an almost talismanic significance for him – did nothing to solve his dilemma.

In 2008, while researching Paddy's biography, Artemis Cooper came upon a typescript of 'A Youthful Journey' in the John Murray offices in London. Paddy had never allowed her access to the manuscript in its black ring binders, and had forgotten that years ago he must have sent a copy of the unfinished work to Murrays; but now he asked for the typescript to be sent to him. He was in his early nineties. He had developed tunnel vision and could read only two lines of text at a time. But Olivia Stewart, a devoted friend after his wife's death, typed it up in an enlarged font size, along with the diary.

Now Paddy began painfully to revise once more, reading the typescript with a magnifying glass and correcting it in black fountain pen. Given his perfectionism, it was an all but impossible task. The whole narrative, he once said, needed 'unpicking', and if he had possessed the time and stamina he might have rewritten much of it wholesale. He was still editing, in a shaky hand, until a few months before his death.

It is this typescript, checked against the original manuscript of 'A Youthful Journey', that forms *The Broken Road*. It was mostly written in the onrush of creation between 1963 and 1964, with haphazard slips of grammar, style and punctuation, very different from Paddy's finished prose. Occasionally he hurled together data with the clear intention of clarifying it later. A few passages he expressly wanted cut.

As Paddy's editors and literary executors, we have sought, above all, to bring lucidity to the text, while minimizing our own words. There is scarcely a phrase here, let alone a sentence, that is not his. In attempting to preserve his distinctive style, we have respected the structure of his often elaborate sentences, with their train of subordinate clauses. We have retained his

characteristic punctuation, his occasional lists and his long paragraphs. Provisionally he broke the text into many numbered sections; we have separated it instead into eight chapters, mostly titled geographically, as was his custom. The footnotes (a handful are his own) are mainly inserted for the elucidation of history and the translation of languages (whose occasional, exuberant guesswork we have generally corrected in the main text).

Finally, we must take responsibility for the book's title. *The Broken Road* is an acknowledgement that Paddy's written journey never reached its destination. (It stops short at the Bulgarian town of Burgas, fifty miles from the Turkish frontier.) The title recognizes, too, that the present volume is not the polished and reworked book that he would have most desired: only the furthest, in the end, that we could go.

Paddy's decision to write about his teenage walk seems almost preordained. He had a natural empathy with his boyhood; he remained, in a sense, oddly innocent. In *The Broken Road*, his generosity of heart, his youthful bravura and occasional swankiness go hand in hand with an indulgent estimate of others and an intense gratitude for any kindness shown. But these are tempered by unexpected intimations of vulnerability, with hints of depression and homesickness. The book is franker and more self-revelatory than it might have become with varnishing. Faithfully he records his boyish delight in the high society of Bucharest – the naivety of an idealizing teenager – and his occasional prejudices.

Yet the youth encountered in these pages is recognizably the protagonist of *A Time of Gifts* or, for that matter, of *Mani*. The mature man's interests and obsessions are already in place: his fascination with the dramas and quirks of history and language, the delight in costume, folklore, ritual, the excitement at changing landscapes. However uneven the text, there are passages that are as purely characteristic as any he wrote. Who will forget the dog that trots beside him in the Bulgarian dusk, barking at the moon as it rises again and again over the switchback hills? Or the migrating storks that cloud the Balkan skies, or the gabbling barber's apprentice who plagued him

through northern Bulgaria, or the fantasy – a conceit which only Paddy could fashion – of an intermarried human and mermaid people surviving the second Flood?

Paddy's exuberance, of course, was not reflected in the Europe through which he was walking. The Austro-Hungarian empire had disintegrated only fifteen years earlier, and its old rival, the Ottoman empire, was still a living memory in the southern Balkans. The post-war Paris peace treaties had left a tinderbox in their wake. Bulgaria, 'the Prussia of the East' (as the Greek premier Venizelos dubbed her), had fought alongside Germany, and was now so stripped of territory as to feel dangerously bereft. A land of rural poverty, whose independent Orthodox Church was rife with nationalism, it retained an old Slavic bond with Russia. Rumania, on the other hand, had sided with the Allies, and had been rewarded with a huge extension of its frontiers as a bulwark against the Bolsheviks.

These two countries where Paddy's journey ends – Bulgaria and Rumania – were culturally very different, but they were both agrarian and poor, largely composed of small-holdings, and their ruling classes were no longer landed aristocracy. In Bulgaria this class had scarcely existed, while the Bucharest *haut monde* with whom Paddy fraternized were increasingly beleaguered in a world which was passing to a young and fragile bourgeoisie.

In retrospect it seems as if the whole continent through which he travelled was sleepwalking towards disaster. The Balkans were still in the grip of the Great Depression, and of deep peasant misery. The twin behemoths of Nazism and Bolshevism were already looming huge. In Germany Hitler had come to power the January before, and many of those whom Paddy encountered – the dashing aristocrats, the Rumanian Jews, the Gypsies – seem marked, in retrospect, by foreboding.

Although it was Paddy's intention to end his journey at Constantinople, his only writings on the city were diary jottings with no mention, inexplicably, of Byzantine or Ottoman splendour. His real love and destination became – and remained – Greece. Just eleven days after reaching Constantinople his surviving diary records him leaving for Greece's religious heartland, the monastic state of Mount Athos. On 24 January

1935 this diary ceases to consist of impressionistic notes and becomes a fully written record, which ends only as he leaves the Holy Mountain. And here – beyond Constantinople – we have chosen to end the present volume.

Uniquely the Athos narrative was written virtually on the spot. Paddy was just twenty years old at the time of its composition, and later he corrected and recorrected it more persistently than he did 'A Youthful Journey'. Even towards his life's end he left wavering marginal directions (perhaps to himself): 'Cut all these pages fiercely', for instance, and once enigmatically: 'Keep my eyes open.'

More than 'A Youthful Journey' the diary gives us the author's earliest voice: the guileless pleasures and misgivings of a youth. It betrays his insecurities, even his panics, as well as his delight in grappling with a Greek world of which he was later to become so knowledgeable and so fond. In our choice of the diary's corrected versions – there were sometimes at least four – we have tried to preserve its raw freshness, while cleansing it of some repetition. Rarely, when his corrections in old age seem less sure than earlier ones, we have kept the original.

In the end, of course, we have had to confront the difficult question: would Paddy have wanted these two records published? While he was alive, the answer might have been No. But there were signs, in his last months, that he was relinquishing their editing to half-imagined others. There were pieces he wanted cut, he said, and some impressions he wanted modified (and these of course we have done). A contract for the book, signed with Murrays in 1992, was among his papers. By the time of his death, he had expended so much labour and thought on the texts that their relegation to an archive seemed sad and wrong. *The Broken Road* may not precisely be the 'third volume' that so tormented him, but it contains, at least, the shape and scent of the promised book, and here his journey must rest.

Colin Thubron and Artemis Cooper
Spring 2013

1

From the Iron Gates

At Orşova, there was the Danube again. It was nearly a mile broad now, but immediately west it swirled and boiled through the narrow mountain defile of the Kazan – the Cauldron – which is only one hundred and sixty-two yards across. Since I had turned my back on it at Budapest, this insatiable river had gorged itself with the Sava, the Drava, the Tisza, the Maros, and the Morava and a score of lesser known tributaries. A little way downstream from Orşova, in the middle of the river, the small island of Ada Kaleh divided the current. Plumed with poplars and mulberries, the line of the wooden roofs was suddenly broken by a shallow dome and a minaret, and in the lanes strolled curious figures in Turkish dress; for the island still remained ethnically Turkish – the only fragment in Central Europe, outside Turkey's modern frontiers, of that huge empire which was halted and driven back at the gates of Vienna. The steep low mountains that form the opposite bank were Yugoslavia.

Early next morning I found a letter from Budapest waiting in the poste restante[fn1] – I had been writing letters and firing them off in volleys dropped in hopeless-looking post boxes, ever since saying goodbye at the railway station at Deva – and I boarded the Danube steamer in a state of excitement. We set off under a flicker of darting swifts. Soon the mountains soared on either side in precipices, and rushed towards each other to form the winding canyon of the Iron Gates. The river suddenly swelled and boiled in protest. Our siren echoed booming down the great causeway. In a few miles the mountains subsided and the Danube fanned out to its normal width. On the Rumanian bank, after the large town of Turnu Severin – the Tower of Severus,

where the emperor overcame the Quadi and the Marcomanni – the flat plain of Oltenia, often edged with reeds, and mournful and malarial-looking swamps, slid featurelessly away. The Serbian mountains wavering along the right bank were the beginnings of the Great Balkan range. The river meandered along the Serbian headlands in wide loops. Suddenly, the mountains had ceased to be Yugoslavia and became Bulgaria. Now and then we threaded our way through enormous tree-trunk rafts and overtook dark processions of barges a mile long. I had realized at Orşova, with a moment of shock, and then of delight, as my passport was being stamped August 14, that I had been dawdling in Transylvania for well over three months. Rightly, I thought, rereading the morning's letter for the tenth time.

These cogitations were distracted by the walls and towers on the south bank, of the old fortress town of Vidin. Clamorous boys crowded the landing-stage, selling watermelons. I chose one, then, rather crestfallen, had to give it back, as I had only two English pound notes in my pocket and a handful of Rumanian lei. A fellow passenger, a tall girl with fair straight hair, whom I suddenly realized was English, offered me some of her Bulgarian leva, so we slashed the green football open in bloody and black-pipped slices and then shared it.

It was strange, after these months, to be talking to someone English, and rather exciting. She was called Rachel Floyd and she became a treasured companion. She was on her way to stay with the British Consul's wife in Sofia, who was an old Oxford university friend. We exchanged life histories mingled between cool, gory munchings, and when, in the afternoon, we disembarked at Lom Palanka, we arranged that I should look her up when I reached the capital. She set off by train, and I began to mooch about in my first Bulgarian town.

~

All through Central Europe, from the snowy Rhine, through Bavaria and Austria, the old kingdoms of Bohemia and Hungary and even in the forested confines of the principality of Transylvania, the aura of the vanished Holy Roman Empire and

of the realm of Charlemagne and the mysteries of western Christendom hung in the air. The Turkish overlordship of the eastern regions had ended long ago and few traces remained. But here, on the southern bank of the Danube, the mountains were haunted by the ghost of a different sovereignty. So recently had the yoke of Turkey been shaken off that Bulgaria seemed less the south-easternmost corner of Europe than the north-westernmost limit of a world that stretched away to the Taurus mountains, the deserts of Arabia and the Asian steppes. It was the Orient, and clues to the recent centuries under the Ottoman Turks lay thick and plentiful on every side; plentiful, too, was the evidence of the rugged Slavo-Byzantine kingdom which the Turkish wave had submerged. These different elements flourished their data everywhere: in the domes and minarets and the smoky tang of kebabs cooking on spits, in the jutting wooden houses and the Byzantine allegiance of the churches, in the black cylindrical hats, the flowing habits, the long hair and the beards of priests, and in the Cyrillic alphabet on the shop fronts which gave a fleeting impression of Russia. The Bulgars themselves, thickset, blunt-featured and solid, suggested a yet remoter past, the wild habitat beyond the Volga from which they had migrated to settle here, centuries ago, in a fierce Asiatic horde. Rough-hewn and tough, shod and swaddled in the same cowhide footgear as the Rumanians, they padded the dusty cobbles like bears. Thick and scratchy homespun clad them, sometimes dark blue but more often an earthy brown, adorned here and there with a stiff flourish of black embroidery: big loose trousers, crossed waistcoats, a short jacket and the waist enveloped in thick scarlet sashes a foot wide in which knives were sometimes stuck. They were hatted with flat Cossack-like kalpacks of brown or black sheepskin.

In the trellised outdoors eating-house in the little square where I settled down to a rather good, very oily stew of mutton, potatoes, tomatoes, paprika pods, courgettes and ladies' fingers, all ladled from giant bronze pans, I noticed that one or two young men at the next table had let their left little fingernails grow, emblematic of their emancipation from the plough and almost as long as those of mandarins. Three white-moustached and moccasined elders puffed in silence over the amber

mouthpieces of their hookahs, toying indolently with strings of amber beads, allowing the grains to drop one on the other with a lulling click, as though to scan their leisurely cogitations. A group of officers, in white tunics buttoning under the left ear in the Russian style, with stiff gold epaulettes, black, red-banded, Russian caps with short peaks, and high-spurred soft-legged boots, sat smoking and talking, or strolled under the trees with the hilts of their steel-scabbarded sabres in the crooks of their arms. No women. Dogs wrangled over a sheep's jawbone. A row of skinned sheep's heads gazed piteously from a shelf outside a butcher's shop, livers, lights and decapitated carcasses dripped, and entrails were looped from hooks in a baleful festoon. The wireless played rousing marches interspersed with the intriguing wail of songs in the oriental minor mode. The scent of jasmine was afloat. Mosquitoes zoomed and zinged.

It was a grave moment. I realized that everything had changed.

~

The way lay south through the roll of the Danubian hills and plains. They were tufted with woods. Here and there a green blur of marsh expanded and the road was plumed with Lombardy poplars. Let us stride across this riparian region in seven-league boots and up into the Great Balkan range. This immense sweep – the Stara Planina, as it is called in Bulgaria, the Old Mountain – climbs and coils and leapfrogs clean across northern Bulgaria from Serbia to the Black Sea, a great lion-coloured barrier of lofty, rounded convexities, with seldom a spike or a chasm: open, airy sweeps and rounded swellings mounting higher and higher to vast basin-like valleys and hollows where one could see the white road paying itself out ahead for miles and twisting among copses and hillocks and past the scattered flocks until it disappeared over the ultimate khaki slope. Now and then I would fall in with long caravans of donkeys and mules – their place was taken by camels in the south-east, towards Haskovo – and strings of carts. The lighter of these were drawn by horses – tough little animals and gangling, hollow-flanked jades – and the heavier, laden with

timber, by black buffaloes that lurched stumblingly along under heavy yokes, their eyes rolling and their moustache-like and crinkled horns clashing against their neighbours. The wooden saddles of the horses, ridden side-saddle with moccasins dangling, looked as unwieldy as elephants' howdahs. Watermelons were the chief merchandise, and giant basket-loads of tomatoes and cucumbers and all the garden stuff for which the Bulgarians are famous throughout the Balkans. Each village was surrounded by tiers of vegetable beds and every drop of water was husbanded and irrigated through miniature aqueducts of hollow tree trunk. 'Where was I from?' the fur-hatted, horny-handed men would ask. '*Ot kadè? Ot Europa? Da, da*', from Europe. '*Nemski?*' No, not German: '*Anglitchanin*.' Many seemed vague about England's whereabouts. And what was I? A *voinik*, a soldier? Or a student? A *spion* perhaps? I got my own back for these questions by extorting in return, with the help of interrogatory gestures, a basic vocabulary: bread, *chlab*; water, *voda*; wine, *vino*; horse, *kon*; cat, *kotka*; dog, *kuche*; goat's cheese, *siriné*; cucumber, *krastavitza*; church, *tzerkva*. These exchanges carried us many miles.

I slept out near a barn the first night, and the next two in the small towns of Ferdinand and Berkovitza: two nights plagued by vermin. By the fourth night we had surmounted the final and highest watershed, and joined a Sofia-bound caravan under a plane tree, which sheltered an old Turkish fountain. The spring gushed into its trough from slabs carved with a chipped and calligraphic swirl of Arabic characters which no one could read any more. They commemorated, it was said, a pasha long dead. We were joined at the fires by a party of shepherds, and, as a circular wooden wine-flask was slung from hand to hand, one of these shaggy men played a yard-long wooden pipe – *kaval* – and another a bagpipe – *gaida*. This was a blown-up sheepskin pelt with a wooden mouthpiece and the chanter was a cow's horn wrapped in skin into which the stops had been burnt with a red hot skewer. Their favourite song celebrated the Hadji Dimitar from Sliven, a guerrilla leader against the Turks in the gorges of the Shipka Balkans. The cross-legged figures with their turned-up footgear, the fifty sheepskin hats, the broad-boned, firelit faces, the sashes, the shifting animals, the occasional clang of a

sheep's or a goat's bell and the low glitter of a multitude of stars hinted at regions much further east than Europe, as though our destination might be Samarkand, Khorassan, Tashkent or Karakorum.

~

I got to Sofia the next day and made my way through a world of Gypsy shacks hammered together out of old planks and petrol tins, and then through a market with giant brass scales where all the livestock of western Bulgaria seemed to be gathered in a whinnying and braying hubbub. I passed by the dome, many metal cupolas and the soaring minaret of a fine mosque and under a network of tramlines reached the capital's heart.

Permanent sojourn here might evoke a groan of dismay, but the aspect and atmosphere of the little capital is rather captivating. The light, airy ambience of a plateau town reigns here, and above it all rises the bright pyramid of Mount Vitosha, throwing the sunlight back from its many facets, a feature as noble and as inescapable as Fujiyama. Then came Czar Boris's[fn2] palace with the rampant lion of Bulgaria fluttering from the flagpole, and then the Sobranie, where parliament sat, and a huge state theatre, gardens, trees and a small statuary population of Bulgarian heroes; then, presiding over the wide and leafy avenue of Boulevard Czar Ozvoboditel, the city's axis, the equestrian figure of Emperor Alexander II[fn3] of Russia, the Czar Liberator himself; and beyond it, the golden dome and the painted stucco pillars of the Cathedral of Alexander Nevsky. Along this, resurrected from their siestas in the cool of the evening, all the inhabitants of the city slowly strolled in that ritual tide which ebbs and flows each dusk through every European town east of Budapest or south of Biscay. In the cafés, over many a thimbleful of Turkish coffee, the intelligentsia told their amber beads and discussed the leading article in the *Utro*. Beyond them, the street shot straight as a bullet into a leonine tableland, dotted with hamlets of Shopi, who are said to be the descendants of the Petchenegs, that appalling barbarian horde from beyond the Urals who pillaged and slew for centuries all along the limits of the East Roman Empire and finally came to rest here and mended their ways.

Thanks to Rachel Floyd, my melon-sharing countrywoman from the Danube boat, I was rescued next day from the hutch I had settled in near the market place, by the British Consul and his wife, Boyd and Judith Tollinton, who charitably put me up. These were happy and luxurious days. It seemed strange to be among English people and talking English again, as strange as being in the midst of foreigners after a prolonged stay in England, and as stimulating. How very agreeable it was to hear all about Bulgaria from my kind, competent Rugbeian host, and to get up from breakfast, Earl Grey in hand, to gaze down at the Royal Guard goose-stepping along the Boulevard Czar Ozvoboditel. The unlimited baths, the clean linen, the huge Russian butler, the terrace, the books, the view over the town to the looming flanks of Vitosha, all seemed marvellous. Best of all the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; I leapt at it like a panther. What miracles such things appear after a primitive life! The Congress of Byzantine Studies was holding its sessions in Sofia that autumn. It was delightful to listen to the erudite and shrewish chat of Professor Whittemore,[fn4] that distilled essence of Jamesian Boston superimposed on the mosaics of Haghia Sophia. There too, suave and suede-shod, impeccably and urbanely clad in white tropical suits and decorously panama-hatted, were Roger Hinks[fn5] and Steven Runciman[fn6] – so kind, under his provisos and reservations and diverting regional prejudices, the one; so pleasantly feline the other. Most of their books were still unwritten, except, I think, Runciman's *First Bulgarian Empire*. We were often to meet many years later. It is odd how lucidly first impressions engrave themselves in the memory. I only retain the details of a late, strange evening in a café, however, as through a glass darkly.

~

I wrenched myself away from the pleasures of this capital for a few days and struck across the foothills and valleys of the eastern slopes of Vitosha, and stayed the night at the American School at Simeonovo: a large clean, airy establishment with a fine library and, although it was holiday-time, inhabited by a young and friendly staff who all seemed to be at work on theses. Over the hills next day, to Dolni Pasarel, reaching it after

nightfall, I stayed with a friendly peasant I met in the *kretchma*, the ramshackle tavern in the middle of the village where a number of villagers were drinking *slivo*, a rough plum-brandy that reeks like a whirled lasso. We staggered to his house and his wife cooked us a mass of herbs and potatoes and young cucumbers over a fire of thorns, which he, she and their children and I all ate out of the same plate, spooning in turn and seated cross-legged on the rug-covered floor round a low circular table, filling in the gaps with great slices of excellent dark bread and white goat's cheese. His wife had long fair plaits with the ends tied together, below the triangle of her headkerchief. She wore an apron striped in many colours and a red and blue bodice cut low and circular like an old-fashioned dinner jacket waistcoat, and trimmed by many breadths of braid. It ended at her elbows, where, from broad braid bands, pleated lace frills jutted for several inches, all old and worn, but pretty and odd nevertheless. We all five of us reclined on rugs chevroned with purple, yellow, scarlet and green, spread along the ledge that ran round the wall, all fully dressed, and, except for me, still thonged, swaddled and moccasined. Soon, after exchanges of *leka nosht* [good night], snoring and darkness prevailed except for the oil dip flickering in front of a corner ikon of the Blessed Virgin and another of St Simeon. I went out into the yard in the middle of the night and tripped over something soft and enormous; a struck match revealed the accusing eye of a couchant buffalo.

We rose before dawn with the first donkey's bray, sloshed off Turkish coffee with a burning swig of *slivo* and some bread and white cheese. Mirko refused all payment, tilting his head back and clicking his tongue in that odd negative way that runs all through the Balkans and the Levant. I set out with friendly wishes. This generous hospitality to anyone on the road runs all through the Balkans and reaches its highest peak in Greece. Nights like these dotted the rest of my itinerary through Bulgaria. The day was succeeded by an almost identical one the same evening, in the little town of Samokov, after a long trudge along a river valley with the hills growing steeper and a stiff range of mountains looming ahead: the Rilska Planina.

I was in amongst them next day. These were not huge

rounded barriers like the Great Balkan range but a sharp and steep sierra zigzagged with shadowy valleys and darkly thatched with fir and pine, and above it, after gruelling hours of climbing, I saw that these were the buttresses of a mass of cordilleras multiplying southwards in chaos. They reached their zenith a league or two to the east of my track, in the tall bare blade of Moussalà and to the west in a lesser peak called, I think, Rupitè, though I have searched maps for it in vain. This massif is the north-western curve of the Rhodope mountains. They swing south-east along the whole southern border, and the watershed forms Bulgaria's frontier with Greece; then it melts away into European Turkey.

Over the nearest watershed, I dropped into a high enclosed region. It was the wolf and the bear world once more, with eagles drifting on still wings from canyon to canyon. Here and there, under the sunless lee of wild horns of rock, a few discoloured patches of snow still lingered. The rest was a burning wilderness of boulders and dried-up torrent beds that must be a tangled spate in winter. Dead trees, bleached white by the sun, looked like the dismembered bones of prehistoric beasts. My footfall sent a long snake flickering to the shelter of a thyme thicket. All afternoon the valley descended from ledge to ledge in a giant staircase. The sound of a miniature landslide would echo and ricochet from rock face to rock face for many seconds, dwindling along the ravine and dying away in the universal hush. The trees changed from conifers to spreading deciduous shade. In basins of rock, one below the other, two circular tarns reflected the clear blue of the sky. Flocks tinkled out of sight, a pathway began to define itself, and the report of a woodman's axe hinted that habitation was near.

~

A twist in the valley and a leaf-fringed glance through a clearing brought my destination into sight. This was a fortress-like building, almost a small towered city, embedded in fold after fold of beech trees and pine. The southern ramparts sank into the gorge, and the five tall walls and the tiled roofs formed a lopsided pentagon round the deep well of a courtyard, lined within by many ascending tiers of a slender-pillared gallery

called Nadejda, who was studying French literature at Sofia University: a nimble *hora* dancer and endowed with unquenchable high spirits. She was staying on at the monastery three days to do some reading, which was exactly the length of my intended stay. We became friends at once. Apart from the stern rule of Mount Athos, women are just as welcome guests as men in most Orthodox monasteries. Bestowing hospitality seems almost the entire monastic function and the atmosphere of these cloisters is very different from the silence and recollection of abbeys in western Christendom. With its clattering hooves and constant arrivals and departures and the cheerful expansiveness of the monks, life was more like that of a castle in the Middle Ages. The planks in the tiers of galleries and catwalks were so worn and unsteady that too brisk a footfall would set the whole fabric shaking like a spider's web. The courtyards are forever a-clatter with mules. The father Abbot, the *Otetz Igoumen*, a benign figure with an Olympian white beard and his locks tied in a bun like a lady out hunting, spent most of his day receiving ceremonial calls: occasions always ratified, as they are everywhere else south of the Danube, by offering a spoonful of sherbet or rose petal jam or a powdery cube of *rahat loukoum*, a gulp of *slivo*, a cup of Turkish coffee and a glass of water, to help along the formal affabilities of the visit.

The place relapsed into comparative quiet next day. The great company of pilgrims, after dancing and snoring the night through on the grass, reloaded their beasts and carried a thousand hangovers down the valley.

~

Nadejda turned out a splendid companion. Each morning we would take books and drawing things, buy cheese, bread, wine, purple and green figs and grapes (which arrived from the plains in immense baskets) from a canteen outside the walls, and then set off for the woods, passing on the way the slab under which J. D. Bourchier[fn8] is buried. (The passion of Bulgarians for this ex-Eton master and *Times* correspondent earned him a position in the country and a memory which is similar, in a lesser degree, to that of Byron in Greece.) We read and talked and finally picnicked on a shady ledge. Most of Nadejda's homework

seemed to be the learning by heart of Lamartine's *Le Lac* – 'He stayed in Plovdiv,' she said, to my surprise, 'I'll show you his house one day' – and, rather inappropriately, Théodore de Banville's *Nous n'irons plus aux bois.* I had to hear and correct her again and again. Then she would return to her books, putting on a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles that looked amazing and incongruous on that rather wild face, until she got bored with it and suggested something else like climbing a tree, which she did with great speed and skill, or, on the last day before she left, bathing in one of the pools in the canyon, or merely lying and talking on the grass. We discovered to our delight that we were within one day of being twins.

These delightful forest days sped fast in this comic and charming company. When the semantron began to clang from the cloisters the evening before she left, we set off down the hill to the monastery. She told me that it commemorated Noah calling the animals into the ark by beating on the lintel with his hammer: 'that's why they are usually made of wood.' I asked her what animals there were. She thought for a second, then bared her teeth and fixed me with scowling brown eyes and said, 'Wolves', and after a pause, 'young ones', and we charged down through the trees howling.

~

I left soon after Nadjeda, following the gorge downhill until it joined the deep valley of the Strouma. This great river, the ancient Strymon, flows into the heart of Macedonia between the Pirin mountains and the ranges of the Yugoslav border. (These mountains roll away westward across Yugoslav Macedonia until they reach the vastnesses of Albania and Montenegro and plunge into the distant Adriatic.) Then the road and the river corkscrew south through the baleful gorge of Rupel and into Greece under the battlements of Siderokastron: Demirhissar in Turkish times, the Iron Castle. All this is a hotly debated region, which all three countries claim should be theirs and they glower at each other from range to range with implacable hatred. This whirlpool of mountains has always been a theatre of strife. During the last decades of the Ottoman Empire until the Balkan wars, deadly warfare was waged here between the Bulgarian

Comitadjis – the partisans of the dissident Bulgarian Exarchate, revived from mediaeval times – and the Greek Antartes of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the nearest equivalent to the papacy in the Orthodox Church. These religious factors were as crucial as race and language in supporting claims to territory and in the ruling of frontiers when the Turkish power in Europe collapsed. It was destroyed for ever by the massed onslaught of the Balkan kingdoms in the brief concord of the First Balkan War: concord which turned into savage fighting over the spoils in the Second. The frontiers have changed again and again in all the subsequent conflicts, and each step in these struggles has been marked by horror: ambush, assassination, burnt villages, uprooting and massacres leaving behind them the curses of fear, hatred, irredentism and thirst for revenge.

The Balkan races overlap and dovetail in Macedonia with haphazard geography; ethnological rock pools and minorities are scattered in hostile regions far from their parent masses. These ancient hatreds burn as fiercely today as ever they did: one has only to hear the virulence with which the word *Grtzki* is snarled by a Bulgar, or the word *Voulgaros* by a Greek, to grasp their intensity. On the walls of many of the cafés in this region hung coloured prints of Todor Alexandroff, a Bulgarian Macedonian who had attempted, by propaganda and guerrilla warfare, to hack out a semi-independent state of Macedonia with the capital at Petrich (now in Yugoslavia) and himself at its head: a formidable black-bearded man he looks in his picture, scowling under a fur cap, slung with bandoliers and binoculars and grasping a rifle. Like many prominent Bulgarians – Stambouliski,fn9 especially, springs to mind, who was hacked to pieces with yataghans in the main street in Sofia – Alexandroff was assassinated, in 1924. But his secret society, the Vatreshna Makedonska Revolutzionerna Organizatzio – the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – still, it was darkly whispered, flourished clandestinely. Also prominent on many walls were maps illustrating the *terra irridenta* that Bulgaria claimed from her neighbours: lumps of Yugoslavia, the Dobrudja in Rumania and, preposterously, Greek Macedonia including Salonika.

Leaning over the Strouma bridge and gazing along the river, I

had no inkling how strongly, later on, I was to feel on the Greek side in these questions. I would have been still more surprised if I could have foreseen that five months later, I would be pounding across another bridge over the same river, at Orliako, a hundred miles downstream, alongside a squadron of Greek cavalry with drawn sabres, in the Venizelos Revolution. As it was, I dropped a vine leaf in mid-stream and wondered whether it would ever reach the Aegean Sea.

~

The way back to Sofia lay through the western foothills of the Rilska Planina: rolling dun-coloured country that turned red at sunset with prehistoric wooden ploughs drawn by buffaloes or oxen. In the villages, the houses were looped with festoons of tobacco leaves drying in the sun, the size, colour and shape of kippers. I slept in a rick, the first night, reached the little town of Dupnitza on the next and got to Radomir the following dusk. I was drinking a lonely *slivo* and feeling tired and a bit depressed when a bus stopped opposite with СОФИЯ inscribed across the top, and a roof laden with a host of roped baskets and bundles. Inside, it was a Noah's ark indeed, for, in every inch not occupied by my kerchiefed and kalpacked fellow passengers, were trussed chickens and ducks, a turkey and two full-grown lambs that bleated shrilly from time to time. We rocked and clanked through the darkness. The half a dozen passengers next to me sang quietly all the way: sad fluttering patterns of sound in the minor mode, quite different from the robust strains I had heard so often lately. I listened entranced. I asked for a particular one over and over again – '*Zashto mi se sirdish, liube?*'fn10 the first line ran – and determined to try and master it later.

After this brief absence in the mountains, the lights of Sofia glittered as brightly as those of Paris, London or Vienna, so resplendent and metropolitan did they seem. I must have been an uncouth spectacle with long, unkempt and dust-clogged hair bleached to a shaggy tow and a face burnt to the hue of a walnut sideboard by the sun; rumpled clothes, a rucksack and a carved Hungarian walking-stick; also – I blush, now, to set it

down, but honesty compels it – a scarlet and yellow braid belt bought in Transylvania, a steel-hilted dagger and a brown kalpack from the fair in Berkovitza. I had even taken off my heavy nailed boots to try out a pair of those cowhide moccasins they call *tzervuli*, but after a mile I found them – without the swaddling the peasants use – tormenting except on grass. This hybrid pseudo-Balkan guise was made all the more nightmarish now by a spectral envelope of white dust, and, no doubt, by a less palpable but far-flying aura of earth, sweat, onions, garlic and *slivo*.

I put down the large basket of figs I had bought as a present to my hosts – and a tortoise I had found by the roadside – and let myself into the Tollintons' flat as the cathedral of Alexander Nevsky tolled eleven. The soft lamplight, afloat with the civilized murmur of a dinner party, revealed a shirt front in an armchair here and there, the glint of patent leather shoes, women's long dresses, and golden discs of brandy revolving in the bottom of balloon glasses. The coffee pouring from spout to cup in the hands of Ivan, the giant Cossack butler, dried up in mid-trajectory, the golden discs, arrested by this horrible intruding apparition, stopped rotating in their balloon glasses. A moment of consternation on one side, and dismay on the other, froze all. It was quickly thawed by Judith Tollinton's kind voice – 'Oh good, there you are, just in time for the brandy' – and the spell was broken.

pulled it from forked distaffs stuck in their silver-buckled belts, twisting it to a thread between finger and thumb, and winding it on to a weighted spindle that rose and fell rotating from the twiddling fingers and thumbs of their other hand. This enclosure, the huddled groups, the animals, the glow of the scattered charcoal fires and the quavering and melancholy songs filled the night with an outlandish and nomadic spell.

The road followed the Maritza all next day. This wide deep river, the largest in the Balkans after the Danube, slants across Bulgaria from north-west to south-east, then through the eastern Rhodope into Greece, whence, till it reaches the Aegean, it forms the Greco-Turkish frontier, and reverts for the final Greek stage of its journey to the ancient and hallowed name of the Hebrus. To Bulgarians the great stream symbolized their country, and the first line of their rousing and bellicose anthem (which I heard boomed forth by many a flagpole while the Bulgarian tricolour was raised or lowered, to presented arms and the salutes of sabre-grasping officers) began *Shumi Maritza* – 'Flow, Maritza'. I slept under a willow by its banks for an hour at midday and reached Plovdiv by nightfall, filled with expectation.

~

Nadejda, my all-but twin, joyfully reappeared next morning, and showed me Lamartine's house – a pleasant whitewashed building in the Turkish style with jutting upper storeys – exactly as she had promised. Better still, she asked me to stay in her own, which was just such another. No question here of the old Bulgarian proverb: 'an uninvited guest is worse than a Turk.' Knowing how strict, straitlaced and oriental the Balkan countries are about their daughters and wives, I had been astonished, at Rila, by Nadejda's freedom and independence. Had I known these countries then as well as I came to know them later, I would have been even more surprised at this friendly and unhesitating invitation. I thought it sprang from a natural independence of character, and so it did; but there were other reasons. Her mother and her father – he was, she told me, a well-to-do peasant from Stenimaka – had been killed in an earthquake a few years before along with a brother a year older, to whom she had been very attached.

She lived alone with her maternal grandfather, who was frail and bedridden, a charming old gentleman with a white beard, and, moreover, Greek. He was one of a former flourishing Greek community that had lived here since the town was founded by Philip of Macedonia, 'when the Bulgars', as he soon instructed me, 'were still a tribe of marauding hut-dwellers beyond the Volga!' He had run a chemist's shop for most of his life in the Taxim quarter of Constantinople. He spoke French fluently and he was steeped in the principles of Western liberalism. The names of Voltaire, Rousseau, Anatole France, Zola, Poincaré, Clemenceau and Venizelos were often on his aged lips; and, I was pleased and surprised to hear, Canning, Gladstone and Lloyd George. But the Englishman he mentioned with greatest reverence, an emaciated hand emerging from his patched pyjama-sleeve as I swallowed my ritual spoonful of *slatko* by his bedside, was Byron. I think it was mostly thanks to this lucky coincidence of nationality that I was welcomed so kindly. This was the first time, but not the last, that I understood and was struck by the tremendous aura, the apotheosis almost, which, among Greeks, enshrines the poet's name. Also, rather momentously for me, as things were going to turn out in the following years, my host was the first Greek I had ever met. I learnt from him the sad tale of the misfortunes of Hellenism under Bulgarian rule: a harrowing account of oppression, persecution and massacre that came as a timely antidote to many similar tales in reverse that I had heard, and was to hear again, from Bulgarians. Many Greeks had left Plovdiv for Greece during the past twenty years, and they were still leaving. He was too old and ill, he said, and his roots were too deep to be torn up now. It was thanks to his political leanings that his granddaughter was studying French as opposed to German, the universal second language among the Bulgarian intelligentsia. Her independence was partly due to his wider and more metropolitan horizon, partly to his infirmity and partly to the fact that, with the help of an old black-coiffed crone, she ran the house on her own. By some freak of exemption, her dashing and carefree ways, a kind of bohemianism, were tolerated and even admired: a true phenomenon in the stifling atmosphere of Balkan provincial life. Half Greek and half Bulgarian, she was a

walking battlefield of the strife between the Patriarchate and the Exarchate: a burden which, I must say, she carried lightly.

Though they lived in reduced circumstances, the house, in the back lanes of the Greek quarter of the town, bore many dilapidated traces of past elegance. The whole upper storey jutted on massive beams in that Turkish style which I imagine to have its roots in Byzantine domestic architecture just as the mosques derive from its ecclesiastical form. Away from the street, a gallery with an outside staircase surrounded a little courtyard sheltered by a vine trellis, heavy with clusters of grapes now, basil flourished in fluted jars and a pomegranate tree suspended its little arsenal of russet bombs. Martins' nests clung to the eaves. Indoors, broken plaster arabesques twirled in baroque designs over lintels and windows. All the way round the long room that filled the jutting upper storey ran a low wide divan reached by a shallow step, and the wooden ceiling was adorned by elaborate carved rosettes the size of wagon wheels. The space above the divan was more glass than wall; in the Turkish *haremlik* this casement would be covered with trellis work, through which the inmates could gaze down into the cobbled lanes unobserved – bright squares split up into many panes through which the sun streamed. A secret, calm, airy world, calling to mind the multiple facets of the poop of a galleon. One side looked over the undulating rose-coloured tiles, the radiating gullies of the lanes and over the chimneys, the nests, the bell towers and domes and the steep granite bluffs that elbowed through them, towards the foothills of the Stara Planina; and beyond them lay the great range itself. South beyond the courtyard lay the Maritza and a green-gold plumage of poplars, and, on the other bank, poplars again, and willows and, bright and distinct in the morning light, the faraway line of the Rhodope. Thrace! Two storks were gliding across the trees and, as we watched them sailing down to the banks of the Maritza and closing their wings, they alighted and paced geometrically through the reeds, their bills lowered in pursuit of the frogs whose giveaway croaking reached our ears; the floating veil of mist was no defence against the shrewd roof-dwellers. 'They're late this year,' Nadejda said. 'They'll soon be off.'

~

To wake up in this hanging glass box – for it was here, in one of the corners of the divan, that my bed had been laid – was to surface into felicity. How tempting to lie floating here under the long, level volleys of early light shooting, adrift with motes, from window to window, and to gaze up at the intricate cigar-box lid ceiling, or out through the morning gleam of glass, cocooned in crystal, into the pale and bird-filled sky. But the sound of hoofs on cobbles, the wheels of carts, the cry of pedlars and the clang of scales were too tempting a lure. After a quick wash under the brass tap in the courtyard, I was in the streets.

I explored the town both alone and guided by Nadejda. The commonplace centre was full of modern public buildings; there was a Bulgarian and a Greek cathedral, and some trim, rather pretty gardens. This ordinary middle soon gave way to a rambling and fascinating circumference. The whole town is built between, up the slopes of, and round, three steep granite spurs – the *tepes* – and down their flanks the roofs poured, with houses hazardously perched on ledges and the rock projecting in blades and spikes: round and through them rose and fell a ravelled skein of cobbled alleyways. Some had awnings across them to shade the stones; it turned them into winding tented corridors; metal-workers, tobacco-sorters and wool-carders worked cross-legged in their open-fronted shops. These lanes were a cool penumbra crisscrossed by buckled and twisted tiger-stripes of sunlight. The wool-carders, squatting in a sea of fleece, worked with extraordinary instruments – huge curving bows rising three yards in the air and strung taut with a single wire, which resembled the harp, in bible illustrations, with which David assuaged the anger of Saul. Blacksmiths, coppersmiths, tinkers, leather-workers, gunsmiths, harness-makers, mule-saddlers – one of them, surprisingly, a Negro – planed away at their great howdahs, or stuffed the bulbous sheepskin quilting of saddles with wool. Green and yellow melons were piled like cannon balls, grapes and figs were arrayed in enormous panniers; red and green paprikas, ladies' fingers, and courgettes rose in heaps. Butchers' shops displayed their usual carnage, the Temple Bar display of gory heads, glassy-eyed trophies with

the front teeth projecting like those of English travellers in French cartoons, and the cobbles outside were a network of fly-haunted rivulets of blood. The stalls were threatened by the swaying of the giant mule-slung baskets; now and then the lane was stampeded by a tidal wave of sheep, entire flocks which overflowed baa-ing into the shops and were cast forth again, pursued by shepherds and barking dogs. Chinking his way through the crowd was the same Albanian *bozaji*, bowed under his great brass vessel, that I had seen at Rila. Sometimes the houses nearly joined overhead. Gateways led out of this pandemonium, to quiet courtyards, to interior glimpses of women click-clacking away at their looms, and, under vine trellises, sheepskin hats and wide scarlet sashes and moccasins clustered round the tables of coffee and wine shops.

There was a pinnacle mosque and the bubbling roofline of a hammam, and suddenly, Turks, the first I had seen except for the little Danubian outpost on the islet of Ada Kaleh, by the Iron Gates. They were sashed with red like the Bulgars, but they wore baggy black trousers and slippers and scarlet fezzes, often faded or discoloured by sweat and use to a mulberry hue round which ragged turbans, some of them patterned with stripes or spots and in every colour but green (except in the case of an occasional putative descendant of the Prophet) were loosely bound. They sat cross-legged, with amber beads in their hands, eyelids lowered over the quiet intermittent gurgle of their nargilehs. Although they were dressed almost the same, a group by a drinking trough, watering a team of donkeys, looked slightly different; some of these, in lieu of fezzes, were hatted with grey or white felt skullcaps that came to a point like an Arabian dome in miniature, or a Saracen's helmet stripped of its chain mail. Nadejda told me that they were Pomaks from the valleys of the Rhodope near Haskovo, in the south-east. Sometimes they arrived with little caravans of camels; but not, alas, just then. I would have given much to see them pad through this throng, with their humps and their nodding supercilious masks almost touching the awnings. If I had struck lucky, I might also have seen some Kutzovlachs, of whom a few are scattered in the Macedonian south-west: semi-nomadic Aruman shepherds, speaking a low Latin dialect laced with Slav and akin to

other tenets, included neglect of the Virgin Mary, detestation of the Cross, and a search for salvation through the abhorrence of matter and the eventual extinction of the human race) seemed, understandably, revolutionary to formal Christians, and also wicked and blasphemous. They encountered the merciless rigour of Church and State. Manichaeism, as the heresy is generally called, spread, in time, all over southern Christendom, darkly blossoming under a score of different names. A whole population of Manichaeans, locally known as Paulicians, were uprooted from the Euphrates by the Emperor Alexis Comnene in the ninth century, and exiled to the region of Philippopolis, today's Plovdiv. Here, under the style of Bogomils – so called from the name of the local heresiarch – an identical belief was already in full bloom. From Bulgaria it spread westwards; the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina are Islamized Bogomils. Eastern merchants, abetted locally, perhaps, by the troubadours, carried the forbidden doctrines yet further west and its votaries, the Cathars or Albigensians, abounded in the towns and castles of Provence and Languedoc. Simon de Montfort put them down with rigour in the Albigensian Crusade and the survivors were burnt alive after their last stand in the fortress of Montségur, in the foothills of the Pyrenees. The last adherents to survive as a coherent group, still – albeit heretically – within the framework of Christendom, were the original transplanted Paulicians of Philippopolis, who were finally won over to Roman submission by Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century. Their church, by the banks of the Maritza, still stands. In spite of its origins in Asia Minor, the heresy in the West has always been identified with Bulgaria. Thus, the mediaeval French styled their own heretics 'bougres'; and it is from the suspected belief that the Manichaean bias against reproduction misled them into sexual, as well as doctrinal, heterodoxy, that the word 'bugger' first came to enrich the English language.

There was much to wonder at. I loitered for hours in this labyrinth, and sat outside a coffee shop under a trellis, ears wide open – in spite of the dog-eared smack of cards resounding from the beamy shadows within and the clash and rattle of dice and backgammon counters – for the many languages and dialects which sounded in these corridors of shade. This total was now

the glass after spluttering, niminy-piminy sips; all, I observed with admiration, except Nadejda. She cried, '*za zdrave!*' and threw a tumblerful down her throat at one long gulp and then shuddered like a dog, tossing her fair mane amid applause. When, as always happens on such occasions, it was the stranger's turn to sing one of his native songs, I fell back, as I had learnt to by trial and error, on *There is a Tavern in the Town*, which I strongly recommend for those in a similar predicament. It can be sung *con brio* or *adagio*, depending on the prevailing mood, and it is soon over. Either this or *Those Endearing Young Charms*. I was impatient to return to their own tunes. At last, and with great delight, I heard, and finally learnt the words, of that strange wavering song the women had sung in the bus from Radomir. I got the students to perform it by humming what I could remember of the tune: '*Zashto mi se sirdish, liube?*' ('Why are you angry with me, my love? Why do you shun me? Is it that you have no horse, or that you have forgotten the way?')

… Sirdish, ne dohojdash?
Dali konya namash, liubé
Ili drum ne znayesh?

It ends in mid-air in an oddly unfinished fashion. They sang beautifully the slow and complex tune, with many modulations: an entrancing and melancholy sound over this moonlit river. I wonder what has become of them all?

~

We fished all the costumes out of the chest again next morning and I made Nadejda dress up in the most resplendent and romantic of them: a wide crimson velvet skirt and a tight green, heavily embroidered bodice stiff with galloons of gold lace and edged with small gold buttons and with slashed sleeves which hung loose from the elbow like tulip-petals; then came a belt with huge silver clasps, and all the hanging gold coins and chains we could find; and finally a low, flat-tasselled fez trimmed with gold red askew over the thick, straight-combed mass of her fair hair. Then I arranged her in an odalisque pose, a chibouk held aslant in one hand and the other arm flung negligently along the back