

A BALKAN HONEYMOON

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"THE Balkans" have recently been wiped from the political map of Europe. The eternal "Balkan Question" is for once in abeyance and it seems easier, for the moment at least, to let all thought of it sink into a decent oblivion. Yet, although I have not known them very intimately nor over a very long period, the impressions made on me by these countries of Eastern Europe are so strong that I feel impelled to write of them in this time of their eclipse. The grey hordes, with their locust-like efficiency, have overrun them and obliterated them from the rest of the world, but my mind is still filled with thoughts of the rugged, individual vitality in which they abound. I feel strongly that it will be impossible for the Nazis to make any lasting mark on peoples from whom they differ so widely in temperament and ideals.

For me, "the Balkans" begin somewhere in the South-East corner of Hungary. One has passed through Buda-Pest, that beautiful city where the West is touched—but only very lightly touched—by the East. It is an orderly, gracious city, where the Danube is still the "Blue Danube" of waltz time; but once one has driven a few miles further to the southeastward, the roads begin to deteriorate, the dust becomes almost intolerable, carts drawn by the tall, gaunt Hungarian horses have almost entirely taken the place of motor cars, and the villages abound in smells and flies. "The Balkans" have begun. Time, distance, and direction all have become vague and unimportant, obscured in the haze of heat and dust.

The A. A. (English Automobile Association) had provided us with beautiful maps of the district, marked in red with a suitable tour over a fine choice of highways. I suppose it must have upset their ideas of propriety to envisage a land without these amenities, for we soon found that their excellent road system was more idealistic than actual, and folded their map away without much regret.

About sundown, on that first evening, we came to a drab, dismal village in the plain. We tried several languages, we gesticulated, at last we rested our heads on our hands and closed

village, to the inn. Here we acquired a very comfortable, ground-floor bedroom, whose only draw-back was that its curtainless French windows led on to a *very* public passage; I dressed and undressed cowering behind a most inadequate chair! We had a very good supper of goulash washed down with tokay in a small room that was more than half-filled by the members of an excellent string band, whose violence of enthusiasm caused them almost to decapitate us with their fiddle bows as we tried to consume our meal. Soon the local soldiery brought in their lights-of-love, and the noise and heat became quite dazzling. We decided that, before retiring, it would be suitable to make a small donation to the orchestra. We tried to press a pengule into the hand of the landlord with the suggestion that he give it with our compliments, but he insisted instead on marching the three leading members of the band over to our table, where they all bowed low over the insignificant coin which we humbly proffered them. We beat a hasty retreat to our bedroom, where our night was somewhat disturbed by the stumblings of inebriated parties of soldiers along the passage on their way to deposit their more completely drunken comrades under the pump which stood in the courtyard outside.

In the next few days everything proved to be quite as vague as it had appeared on that first evening. Even the Rumanian frontier was hard to find, and we drove about for hours before discovering a small village that boasted a customs official, far more interested in chasing and beating the beggar children, who immediately gathered round the car, than in affixing the necessary stamps to our passports.

We only passed through the western corner of Rumania, and my impression of it was of a hot, dusty, dreary land; the peasants, however, seemed happy enough, and on Sundays their hand-worked cloths were a fine sight to see. Unfortunately the men seemed far more proud of their sheepskin coats—worn with the fleece turned inwards and the hide outside—than of their exquisitely embroidered shirts, and, as far as we could discover, they never removed them, no matter how high the thermometer soared. Consequently, by the early autumn, their aroma was anything but pleasant, and several times caused us to drive on precipitately, before we had been able to discover which road to take, from the thickly clustering crowd of peasants that gathered every time we stopped to ask the way.

The most remarkable thing about the peasants was that they seemed to be forever travelling about in ox-wagons. Where they came from, where they hoped to arrive, and why, we never knew; but on every mile of the road we overtook several of the carts apparently containing whole families on the move. Sometimes we passed long processions of them travelling together. Nobody kept to any particular side of the road, they wandered about to right or left (the roads made up in width what they lacked in other qualities!) searching for the parts with the least spine-shattering pot-holes. After a time our horn became clogged with dust, and progressed through various stages of hoarseness to total inaudibility, so that to pass these meandering vehicles we had to stand up and shout through the sun-roof at the sleepy drivers, who were usually so startled at the strange apparition that it took them a full five minutes to pull themselves together and manoeuvre their unresponsive beasts out of their accustomed ruts. Most of the animals seemed hardly to notice us, but one old cow was shocked into a most grotesque gallop, and we last saw her heading wildly over the fields in a cloud of dust, while her driver divided his efforts between trying to stop her and cursing us.

Most of the houses were built out of home-made, white-washed bricks—that we watched being fashioned from clay, straw and water. Many of them had roofed-over porches running along one side. The poorest people lived in hovels of straw and sticks that I had thought one would have to go to “darkest Africa” to see. Indeed I had never realized that so much dirt and squalor could be found in Europe, and I have since wondered, when I heard people relating with horror tales of the bad living conditions in Russia under the Soviet, if they realize the filth that exists in other parts of Eastern Europe that have not come under the Communist régime. It is possible that conditions actually a slight improvement on the past in Russia appear, to be uninitiated western visitor, quite incredibly bad, and they blithely blame the Communist experiment for a way of life that has existed from time immemorial. With us it became a routine for my husband to engage the landlord in conversation while I hastily examined the bedding for signs of vermin. Fortunately the former spoke adequate German, and someone always recognized the sound of it and fetched someone else who spoke it; so that it would appear that, even a few years before the present war, German “penetration” in the Balkans was well advanced.

My own few words of Italian were tested only once, in Yugo-Slavia, and then I became hopelessly involved in a conversation with a young matron who asked eagerly how many children I had. When I replied, "None," her face settled into an expression of bleak disapproval, but she persevered with the subject and asked how long I had been married. By this time my vocabulary was exhausted, and she had to help me out. Was it a period of years, she suggested. "No, not so long." "Just months, then." "No, no months." "Why, only weeks?" and we were immediately taken back into favour!

Leaving Rumania turned out to be a far more complicated business even than entering it. We arrived, again after much searching, in a dusty and desolate town on the banks of the Danube, across whose vast and sluggish expanse we had hasty glimpses of the equally desolate shores of Bulgaria. On approaching the river bank we immediately became entangled with a party of pilgrims, suffering from every grotesque sort of disease, returning from a journey made to visit a shepherd who had recently "heard the voice of the Lord," and been given the power of healing. They cannot well have been in any worse plight before they started out to receive his ministrations, but they all seemed to be quite pleased with the results of their expedition.

It soon came to our notice that the ordinary ferry could not carry a car. The nearest bridge was about two hundred miles away. After a wait of about six hours, and the gradual gathering of as many officials, a motor-ferry was triumphantly produced. This proved to be an oar-propelled, flat-bottomed boat, just big enough to hold one car. We and it cruised up and down the river bank for some time, looking for a suitable point for embarkation. Eventually we compounded on a spot where the drop was only a foot or two, and were fortunate enough to land in the boat and not in the river. Arrived on the other side, we wrestled once more with another set of even vaguer customs officials. It was here that they first insisted on treating my second name, Grace, as a surname, so that I appeared from henceforth to be travelling with very dubious propriety. Exhausted, we were at last permitted to repair to the "best" hotel. The city, Vidin, is one of the largest in Bulgaria, but at this establishment the coffee seemed to be made from burnt corn and the "toilet" was just a hole in the middle of the floor. (We had to be conducted several times to this apartment before we were convinced that it was really what we had asked for!)

Before we had travelled many miles the next morning, it was brought forcibly to our notice that a "general election" (in other words the lining up of the opposing parties in a trench with a machine gun at the end of it) had just taken place. Apparently some of the politicians had escaped, and, every few miles, ragged but efficiently armed men jumped out at us from behind trees and thoroughly investigated our car. We carried our luggage under a tarpaulin in the back seat, and they always approached this queer looking pile with obvious hope of finding their prey. Everybody, official or not, carried firearms, and I became quite used to looking from the windows when we stopped for petrol and seeing a veritable forest of guns waving outside as the whole village gathered around to watch us. On these occasions we made our reckonings for the petrol in the dust at the back of the car.

Food was quite easy to get, as every small town seemed to boast a large and abundant market. We used to hold out a small coin to the gaily dressed and ever cheerful peasant women, and they amply filled our baskets with whatever commodity we pointed to. We bought chiefly bread, cheese, (we once acquired a goat's milk cheese that unwound like a ball of wool) tomatoes and grapes. The meat, whose presence was indicated by large black masses of flies, was not attractive. Whole sucking pigs were often displayed in little wooden troughs made to fit them, and seemed to be a great delicacy. We partook of one once at an inn, and found it very much to our liking—it was probably just as well that we had undergone several inoculations before starting out! There was always good local wine to drink.

One evening we drove into a town where there had been a great stock market during the day. For miles outside we met the peasants, in their gorgeous holiday best, returning home, in ox-wagons and on foot, with their purchases. Some clung fondly to ducks and geese, others drove knobbly-kneed calves, and others again had whole litters of little pigs that they urged along with a cord tied to a leg of each. These proud new owners also carried with them bundles of hay and pockets full of roots with which to sustain their purchases on the barren homeward journey. When we reached the town itself, only a few loiterers and the dirt were left. Our supper, eaten on the pavement outside the Inn, was enlivened by the antics of a drunken old crone in the gutter.

After crossing the Danube, we drove for a day or so more on the dusty monotonous plains and then, one morning, we saw

hills. That day we ate our picnic lunch by a cold, swiftly moving river that really washed the dust off our hands, instead of merely depositing more mud upon them. After lunch the road began to climb swiftly, and beside it appeared a fantastic overhead wooden structure, that lost in sparkling jets more water than it carried, bearing some imprisoned mountain stream down to work in the plains. Up and up we went through endless beech woods. Deep green of leaves above shielded us from the fierce sun; deeper green of moss and ferns below sent up to us their damp cool smell. For the first time in many days I put on my sweater. We stopped by a stream and laved our hands and faces, and then washed some of the worst of the clinging dust of valleys off the ill-used car. Up and up we went: (the petrol was running out, anyone with more sense would have carried a spare can!) trees and more trees; still no sign of human habitation! At last the trees thinned and we were at the top of the range, to be greeted only by two ramshackle huts where even we did not like the thought of staying. So down we started again (thankfully freewheeling the car.) This side of the mountains was rugged and rocky, almost treeless. I succeeded in damaging our exhaust pipe on one of the rocks in the road, so that from henceforth our dilapidated vehicle belied its appearance by making a noise like a racing car. Arrived at the bottom we found, in the nick of time, a man who owned a few petrol tins—pumps were almost unknown—and drove on into Sofia about sunset.

Sofia is a small, very provincial town for a capital city. The King's palace stands in the middle of it, and has a homely inviting look, as if one might drop in at any time,—we did not try it, though! There are an odd mixture of old buildings, some almost oriental in style, with even a few mosques among them, and other strikingly modern blocks. We stayed in one of the latter; I was able to wash out our clothes, and my husband washed my hair, in a running-water bedroom basin. There was even a bath, but cockroaches and peculiar smells came up the waste-pipe. My husband gallantly bathed first, so as to scare away the former, before I would venture in.

What impressed me most about the city were the armies of shoe-blacks to be found at every street corner, the patient diminutive milk donkeys, and the leeches waiting all ready for immediate application by customers in big glass jars outside the chemist's shops.

The old cathedral, in its several warm shades of rose-red brick, pleased me far more than the glittering pile—something

like a wedding-cake in a chef's nightmare—of the new Alexander Nevsky cathedral. On entering here, one was greeted by what appeared at first to be a large slab of raw meat, but turned out, on further inspection, to represent the severed neck of John the Baptist, depicted in a vast fresco. The general effect of the interior was as of a super-expensive swimming-pool.

We stayed in Sofia longer than we had meant, because we had entirely run out of money and were unable therefore to leave our hotel. My newly-made husband had apparently forgotten, in making provision for the trip, that he would have to provide for two. Even at that time it was illegal to have money posted across the border, but with the help of a youthful member of the British Consulate, the connivance of his brother in the English air-force and of a Jew in the city, we eventually obtained some. This took much longer than we had expected, and all the relevant coins had been picked out of the handful of small change, containing currency from half the countries of Europe, that we held out hopefully to the shopkeepers.

We were reduced to eating stale buns—two of which could be bought for the price of one fresh one—that we hastily and ashamedly stuffed under our pillows when our succourer dropped in to see how we were doing. I think perhaps he caught a glimpse of them after all, for he asked us out to dine with him.

We had intended to drive through to Istanbul, but when circumstances at last released us from Sofia our time had so much dwindled, our financial outlook was so uncertain and the car was showing so many signs of disintegration from the strain it had already undergone on the fearful roads (which were said to be as finest macadam compared with those between Sofia and Istanbul!) that we turned back through Yugo-Slavia, over the mountains to the Adriatic coast. Even then Sofia tried to detain us, for the roads on the outskirts of the city were so bad that the car became suspended, with neither front nor back wheels touching the ground, on a sort of wall that ran across one of them. My husband had to get out and lift the back of the car till the front wheels had enough purchase for me to drive it forward. It was another oddity of this town that its streets were adorned by a large number of highly polished luxury cars, though the roads leading out of it were so poor that they could be driven only in about a-ten mile radius.

After leaving Sofia we became completely involved in the Balkan Mountains, an endless, arid maze of stony heights, where tiny infrequent fields were almost entirely obliterated

by enormous fences made of the stones that the cultivators had been obliged to pick from them. The peasants here seemed cleaner, more upright, hard working and self-reliant than the plains-people. Indeed this usually seems to be the case with mountain folk, in spite of, or more probably because of, the fact that it is far harder for them to wrest a bare living from the soil. Miles from any habitation one came upon tiny, eighth-of-an-acre patches that were tended as carefully as if they had stood by a cottage door. The houses, when we did see any, were very small, and were made from the stones that were picked from the fields, so that it was quite difficult to distinguish them from the rest of the landscape. Here, instead of sharing the field work with the men, the women appeared to do the greater part of it. If there was only one pony or donkey, the man rode it and the woman walked behind. It was, I felt at times, a rather unfortunate country to visit at the beginning of one's married life. Once we met a group of women, bent nearly double with the weight of huge faggots tied to their backs, driving a large and refractory flock of goats, and knitting as they went. Behind them strolled the lords of creation, hands in pockets, lazily discoursing. On their long journeys to the outlying fields the women usually occupied themselves pulling yarn from the raw wool and winding it on little spindles that they carried with them. In spite of all this, many of the young women were very handsome—a fact which perhaps accounted for the universal carrying of knives and pistols by the menfolk—and had a graceful upright carriage, obtained, no doubt, from the constant bearing of heavy burdens on their heads. If the Greek women, who are of the same breed, are really fighting in the mountains against the Italians, I can fully sympathize with the latter in their precipitate retreat. The Germans may also have met with some unpleasant surprises.

In this country of steep and rocky hills, trains of nimble-footed, musically-belled pack-donkeys, in charge of wild and ragged looking drovers, took the place of the slow plodding oxen of the plains. Moreover, our brakes began to give out, and we became a very fast two-man team at wheel-changing.

The inhabitants seemed well disposed towards us. In one Inn a mildly intoxicated old peasant insisted on showing "*sympatica per les Inglese*," (or some such phrase) by buying us drinks. He looked extremely poor, and we were anxious to hurt neither his feelings by refusing nor his pocket by accepting. At last, after long negotiations, in which the landlord acted as interpreter and intermediary, we compounded on coffee which turned out

to be of the black Turkish variety and rather disproved the "sympatica" by keeping me awake all night. It was at this hostelry, I remember, that several large pigs had to be prodded out of the way before one could approach the "toilet."

As we drove along, the people always waved at the car and begged eagerly for lifts—which we refused, for fear of the extra and not-so-easily-parted-with passengers that we might take along unawares. On one occasion, though, we stopped for two men who were leading an ill-looking boy, with enormously swollen legs, on a donkey. It appeared that the child had to go to Cetinje, about forty miles away, where there was a hospital of a sort: so we rearranged the luggage, and took the boy and his father in the back seat. As the lad appeared to be in pain, my husband tried to give him some sedative pills; but all our gesturing could not persuade him to swallow them whole, and when he discovered them to be bitter, he spat them politely but firmly from his mouth. The father resourcefully, and with touching faith in our efforts, signed to us to stop at a wayside hovel, where he appeared to be known, and more pills were washed down, and our own thirst quenched, with buttermilk. By the time we stopped for lunch we had abandoned, in exhaustion, all attempts at communication, but we amicably exchanged tit-bits from each other's provisions. A little later we stopped again, in a small town, for petrol. The father leapt from the car and hurried into a shop, from which he emerged a few moments later wearing a new round felt cap. He then placed his old one on the boy's head, threw the boy's in the gutter, and, thus hatted for the metropolis, we went on our way.

Cetinje, the capital of Montenegro, proved to be a small stone town built on the edge of a stony plateau, where the stone-walled fields looked like the chess-board in *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*. After leaving this dubious oasis, we crossed one last rugged mountain range and found ourselves looking down on a miraculously blue Adriatic and civilization—or rather the graceful sleeping remains of an old elegant civilization being rediscovered by a noisy new one.

We zigzagged down a seemingly perpendicular cliff, where the road performed forty-two hairpin bends, at every other one of which we were obliged to back up the car because of the sharpness of the curve. All the while the sea became nearer and more real, and the view less map-like, till, at the bottom, we found ourselves on the shores of the beautiful Gulf of Kotor. Here, instead of shacks made of mountain rubble, were exquisite,

medieval buildings fashioned from a warm creamy-white stone. Beside them grey-green olive orchards, whose ancient gnarled roots and branches—twisted into the shapes of all the dragons of fairy land—rested the eyes, and sombre groves of cypruses touched the gay scene with a reminder of the ultimate perfect peace of death. Out in the gulf, monasteried islets floated like a dream in the tranquil blue water, and on the lower hillside slopes goats were led out to graze on the lawns of ruined palaces whose gardens were overgrown with pomegranates and tiny wild cyclamen. Behind all, the gaunt grey mountains, mighty ramparts of the hard wild hinterland, cast a faint shadow of mystery.

Looking back on "The Balkans" and their people, so different in every respect from the Nazis that now encroach upon their lands, one wonders what will be the ultimate fate of "The New Order" among their arid plains and rugged wild mountains.
