The Broken Road

'Colin Thubron and Artemis Cooper have put this book to bed with skill and sensitivity . . . Friends and fans, acolytes, devotees and disciples can all rest easy. It was worth the wait'
The Spectator

'For readers of the other two books, to see the odyssey at last . . . concluded, will naturally be irresistible. For everyone else there is the discovery of a unique writer' *Sunday Express*

'The first two volumes were a joy to read, not least for Leigh Fermor's ability to recapture in later life the intense excitement of being a young man lighting out. The latest book offers similar joys . . . Also evident are another of the joys of the earlier books – the pyrotechnics of his writing' *Observer*

'The pages are filled with brilliant evocations of his life on the road . . . A fitting epilogue to twentieth-century travel writing and essential reading for devotees of Sir Patrick's other works'
The Economist

'I set off along *The Broken Road* laden with expectations that I would have to make allowances. Yet almost from the off, I realised that I would have no use for these. Here was a wealth of descriptions that only Leigh Fermor could have conjured up'
New Statesman

In December 1933, PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR walked across Europe, reaching Constantinople in early 1935 and travelling on into Greece. He served in the war in occupied Crete, where he led a successful operation to kidnap a German general. After the war he began writing, and travelled extensively round Greece. Towards the end of his life he wrote the first two books about his early trans-European odyssey, *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water*. Unfinished at the time of his death in 2011, *The Broken Road* concludes the trilogy.

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

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In memory of Joan

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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

I

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* – 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

* PLF was hoping to receive a letter from Xenia Czernovits ('Angela'), a Hungarian woman whose relationship with him is recorded affectionately in *Between the Woods and the Water.*

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.

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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.

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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 sheep-skin 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.

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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* 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† 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

* Boris III, Czar of Bulgaria (1894–1943).

† Czar Alexander II of Russia, whose campaign against the Ottoman Empire liberated Bulgaria in 1877–8.

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,* 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

* Professor Thomas Whittemore (1871–1950), an American archaeologist and Byzantine scholar who had recently started important work uncovering mosaics in the basilica of Haghia Sophia in Istanbul.

suits and decorously panama-hatted, were Roger Hinks* and Steven Runciman† – 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.

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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

* Roger Hinks (1903–63), an art historian notorious for his later involvement in an injudicious cleaning of the Elgin Marbles.

† Steven Runciman (1903–2000), the celebrated historian of Byzantium and the Crusades.

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.

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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 hoisted on semicircular arches. In the centre of this courtyard, the great metal dome of a church, poised on a slit-windowed cylinder, floated above a bubbling swarm of shallow satellite cupolas, all of them gleaming and softly shadowed under the westerly sun. Sunbeams glittered in the intricacies of the topmost cross and lay the shadow of a yew tree across the wall-girt flagstones. As I descended from my hawkish height, the gold patches of light inside the walls shrank and faded and shadows accumulated in the well of walls. Suddenly a metallic tattoo struck up from the enclosure as though a musical smith were hammering out a rhythmic pattern on his anvil. The tempo gradually waxed to a brisker and still brisker pace and by the time I reached the dark archway of the barbican, the walls were reverberating. The noise stopped abruptly and left the dusk humming. A black-robed monk replaced his summoning hammer on a gong-like sheet of metal hanging from a cloister arch. Other monks, with black veils floating from their stovepipe hats, were entering the church which was already filled by a horde of laymen in all the costumes of northern Macedonia, hailed thither by the clangour from the trees under which they were camping. These rough gongs or semantra – *klapka*, I think, in Bulgarian – are sometimes replaced by long beams of wood; they play the part of bells in most Orthodox monasteries, as now for the feast of Sveti Ivan Rilski.

St John of Rila is only surpassed in venerability by SS Cyril and Methodius, the inventors of the Cyrillic script, and by St Simeon, in Bulgarian hagiography. The great monastery that he founded near his hermitage in these lonely mountains is, in a sense, the most important religious centre in the kingdom. The church, burnt down again and again in the disturbed past of Bulgaria, was rebuilt in the last century. The poor quality of the frescoes which smothered every inch of interior wall space and

the brazen proliferation of the ikonostasis was mitigated by the candlelight. The Slav liturgy of vespers boomed out by a score of black-clad and long-haired and long-bearded monks, all leaning or standing in their miserere stalls, sounded marvellous. It continued for hours. Afterwards, charitably singled out as a foreigner, I was given a little cell to myself, although the monastery was so full that villagers were sleeping out with their bundles all over the yard and under the trees. Many more arrived next day and the inside of the church virtually seized up with the pious multitude. There were an archbishop and several bishops and archimandrites besides the abbot and his retinue. They officiated in copes as stiff and brilliant as beetles' wings, and the higher clergy, coiffed with globular gold mitres the size of pumpkins and glistening with gems, leaned on croziers topped with twin coiling snakes. They evolved and chanted in aromatic clouds of smoke diagonally pierced by sun shafts. When all was over, a compact crocodile of votaries shuffled its way round the church to kiss St Ivan's ikon and his thaumaturgic hand, black now as a briar root, inside its jewelled reliquary.

For the rest of the day, the glade outside the monastery was star-scattered with merrymaking pilgrims. At their heart an indefatigable ring of dancers rotated in the *hora* to the tune of a violin, a lute, a zither and a clarinet, ably played by Gypsies. Another Gypsy had brought his bear with him; it danced a joyless hornpipe and clapped its paws and played the tambourine to the beat of its master's drum. A further castanet-like clashing came from an itinerant Albanian striking brass cups together, pouring out helpings of the sweetish, kvass-like *boza** from a spigot in a tasselled brass vessel four feet high, shaped like a mosque, its Taj Mahal dome topped by a little brass bird with wings splayed.

* *Boza*: a Bulgarian malted drink made with fermented grains and sugar.

Kebab and stuffed entrails were being grilled in culinary tabernacles as bristling with spitted and skewered meat as a shrike's larder. *Slivo* and wine were reaching high tide. The lurching kalpacked villagers offered every newcomer their circular flasks of carved wood. (Elaborate woodwork plays a great part in the lives of Balkan mountaineers from the Carpathians to the Pindus in Greece, where it reaches its wildest pitch of elaboration. The same phenomenon applies to the Alps: the conjunction of harsh winters, long evenings, soft wood and sharp knives.) Under the leaves, a party of bright-aproned women sat round the feet of a shaggy bagpiper pumping out breathless pibrochs.

On the edge of this vast Balkan wassail I fell in with a party of students from Plovdiv. Like me they had come over the mountains, and were camping out. The most remarkable of these was an amusing, very pretty, fair-haired, frowning girl 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.

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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* 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

* James David Bourchier (1850–1920), *The Times*' Balkan correspondent for many years, and an outspoken supporter of Bulgarian national claims.

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.

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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,* 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

* Aleksander Stambouliski (1879–1923), Bulgarian prime minister, deposed in 1923. He was tortured and executed by the army.

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.

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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?*' * 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

* 'Why are you angry with me, my love?'

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.