

# *Contents*

Foreword by Patrick Leigh Fermor	v
Off	1
The Official Spy	5
Strawberry Roan	9
Dancing Bears	16
Gypsy Horse	20
Golden Orioles	25
The Reservoir	30
Kondoms and Oboriste	32
A Peculiar Theft	36
Farewell to a Friend	41
Karo	43
Valley of Roses	46
The Balkans	48
Runaway	53
Cut-throat	58
Across the Danube	63
Reflections	67
Stallion Man	69
The Road to Băbăița	72
The Bandit	76
Submerged	83
André and Pușa	84
Pușa	90
One Hot Slog	93
The Good Life	98
Birthday Kiss	102
His Saddle Slung Over His Shoulder	108
Bedfellow	115
Horse Talk	120
Ursa	125
Hungary	132

*Vagabond*

Blind in a Flatland	137
Hitch-hiker Csabika	144
Of Crooks and Goblins	148
A Train Journey	153
The Last Fart of the Ferret	158
Up Between the Toes	163
Gavin	168
Knight	171
A Promise	178
Rafał	183
Posse of Angels	190
The Gunnery Range	196
Vagabond	203
Acknowledgements	211

## *Foreword*

Jeremy James's easy-going style – as informal as chat leaning on the bar of a wayside drinking hall with a weather-eye for his grazing horse – is so much more often hit than miss that one can't help suspecting, after a time, that the philistinism or the pretence of it, that he scatters about his pages is a tease. He lets give-away sparks of cultivation escape. The oversights may make an aesthete moan, but the insights are instinctively sound and perceptive, always warm and generous and, again and again, extremely funny. He is particularly adept at piecing together the companionable blinds and hangovers of one's youthful travels in wild places but the heroes of the book are neither the author, nor the denizens of south-eastern Europe, nor the landscape but the two steeds he bought off the gypsies in Bulgaria and Rumania.

These pages are hard to beat and, here and there, the reader's eyes prickle as though we were reading *Black Beauty* for the first time, in the gorges of the Great Balkan Range, or in the Carpathian uplands or on the Puszta.

We are carried in his wake across the Puszta, through Slovakia and the plains of Poland and through Eastern and Western Germany at a time of great political change. There are moments of doubt and acute anxiety, but by the time he is safe home in the Welsh mountains all early reservations have vanished and the author has us eating out of his hand.

*Patrick Leigh Fermor*

## *Golden Orioles*

It felt good to have the horses, smell them, hear the creak of the leather, and see their feet push into the soft red earth. Old Mitko pumped away on his bike weaving about the track and there was Zhivko standing behind waving, and shouting, '*Pryaten Put!*' wishing us a good trip. We waved until he fell from sight.

Round us the fields were green and the willows by the stream silvery. And it was dead quiet: except for old Mitko and that funny whistle of his, and the clank his bike made every time the wheel turned and caught the mudguard. In the distance a golden oriole hooped away in the trees and I heard those birds for the next two thousand kilometres but I only saw one once.

Every now and then you'd see a little herd of cows grazing with their herders lying about in the grass either half-cut or half asleep and they'd eye us as we went by then roll over and doze again in the sun.

A few kilometres later the old man was heaving his breath out pushing that bike of his through mud in a lot of pine trees when he stopped. He was knackered. He laid the thing down and started gasping on about which way we should go because he'd had enough of showing us the way and now it was up to us. He spoke slowly and repeated everything, pointing here, there and everywhere but he might as well have said it all in Javanese because neither of us understood a word he said. It didn't matter much though and we headed off the way we thought he said which took us high into the hill and on to a wide dirt track and when we got there we heard the old boy yelling his head off because we'd gone wrong and so up he came puffing like a train, pushing that bike and shoving his deaf-aid into his ear and roared at us pointing out the way again and stomped away cheesed off, but he turned around, smiled and waved.

I liked old Mitko, even though he was touchy.

So we were on our own. I thought of Ahmed Paşa, the old stallion I rode through Turkey. His story is told in *Saddletramp*. How it all reminded

me of him and those big mountains north of Denizli. He was a good old horse, Ahmed Paşa. And Little Pink did exactly what he did, gazing about him as though he'd never heard of any of this stuff before, as though he'd never seen trees or a forest or been high on a mountain and felt the wind in his mane. He was like that because he hadn't. I know he hadn't. It was new to him and he reacted to it. He wanted to see round the next corner, look round the next tree and he felt free, I know he did. He'd have spent his life in Samokov, that young horse, born in some filthy stable and when big enough he'd have joined his mother in harness, tied to her with a bit of string and trotted round town all day, in the cold and the heat and that's all he would have known until he was big enough to pull the cart himself and his mother died or got killed, or was taken away or sold and he would have been left to work alone. But now here he was with Karo who was doing the same.

I reckoned Karo knew a bit more because I was sure he was a pinched horse from Pleven, so he would have had to have been brought to Samokov from Pleven somehow and maybe he'd legged it once already. Maybe he went in a truck, there's no telling; or maybe it was just his age and he was that bit more mature. All the same he gawped about like someone who'd just been set free after a few years in prison. They were great those horses that day. And when we stopped two or three hours later for a break, Karo put his head down and ate while Little Pink cavorted about too excited to eat. Really, Little Pink was much too young, not physically, because he was strong, but he was immature mentally and it showed. All the same, it's a good feeling to have a young horse and take him off the streets and introduce him to a world he has the right to live in.

That afternoon it poured. But just before the lightning got going an old shepherd came past with his sheep, stood up on the hill and played his flute, and that reminded me of Turkey too. We watched him. The music was repetitive but it stuck in your head: Little People music, reedy and weird. He had one goat with his sheep. The reason he had a goat is because it doubles the intelligence of the flock. They do it all over the eastern countries. He watched us for a bit, stayed a while longer then drifted off with his goat and his sheep and we had a bite of lunch, trying out a lump of pork fat Zhivko had given us. It must have weighed ten

pounds, neat fat. We ditched it. Only later we discovered we'd slung away an expensive delicacy.

Our first night's stop was in Novo Celo where we fell into the hands of the village drunks. The horses wound up in a collective and we wound up back in Samokov in one of those hellish high rise blocks with a dipso, his sour cousin and a drum majorette daughter who treated us as though we were invisible. We were glad to be away next day out on the trail for Ihtiman, travelling.

Now the thing about travelling with horses is that a lot of it is no more than a slog. You get going in the morning, you stop to graze the horses, then you get going again in the afternoon and start to get worried round about five or six because you haven't found anywhere to stay and maybe it looks like rain. Some people plan their routes first, going along organising stopovers, but I don't like it that way and can't see the point in doing it if you know where you're going to be. I like going blind. I like it because it's full of surprises and you get sucked up into a country fast. And the thing about Bulgaria was that we were in places where they'd never heard a foreign voice nor met foreigners nor had actually been allowed to speak to them. We were objects of interest in a sense, though I don't want to make too much of that.

And so we went along on luck and chance and the compass, and that's what I like best, but it's a slog. And what often makes it a slog is that although you've got a map, you can't tell anything from a map. They're not much use. Certainly you get a picture of where you're heading, but you can't tell if someone has built some great concrete drainage channel right across your path, and you can't tell if the river they've marked is swimmable or not swimmable, if it's full of sewage or drinkable. And you can't tell if the village is going to be friendly with people who are willing to help or unfriendly. You can't tell if the woods are thick or passable, if the dirt tracks are clay or sand – in other words, all the things you need to know, you can't get from a map so I don't think much of them. I prefer my compass and trust my eyes and the horse's feet and that's the way we go, but it's a long way. Sometimes you get to short-cut everything, but mostly, you go long.

*Vagabond*

And it's not much use asking people the way because unless they've been that way with a horse, then the chances are they don't know. I can't say how many times I've asked a fellow the way only to find him wrong not a hundred yards from where he directed us. Old Mitko was right though: he looked like the kind of bloke who is right, and you can trust him, and besides, he was an old horse coper himself and the chances were the way he pointed out to us he knew like the back of his hand because he'd ridden it a hundred years ago when he was young.

And the other thing is, the horses get to know the routine. They get to know you pack them in the morning then you set off riding them and they get excited when it's time for their grazing and they can't wait for lunchtime and they can be funny then because they think it's lunchtime when it isn't, and keep trying it on. Or when you stop to look at the compass, or check out you're going the best way, they put their heads down because they hope you're going to chuck it in early that day because it's hot or something and they can roll and drink and eat then doze in the sun.

And then after lunch they act like a couple of blokes with big hangovers and it takes a long time to get any pace into them, but by five they're looking just as hard as you are for somewhere to stay, and very often they find it before you because they smell other horses and you follow the way they're scenting and you arrive in some beaten-up bit of a place where there's some crippled old man poking his pig about and he breaks into a smile because he's got horses too; he knows what you want and he's your friend. So you get to trust your horse and he trusts you and you get to like the old gaffers and their pigs and their raki.

I remember Ihtiman too. I remember the poster on the wall in Ihtiman, a cartoon of a big thick guy holding a shovel looking down on to a little clever guy holding a pile of books, and the little one was wearing specs – a cartoon intellectual – and the caption read 'I'll think – you work.'

We saw other banners too, the CDC slogans, the democratic party, and BCNP, the agrarian party, who, by and large, had a grip of the rural areas. The idea of an election was strange to most people, of actually having a voice, unheard-of, and so no one really believed it. They didn't