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An Interlude on the Balkan Express

"I TRAVEL NOT TO GO ANYWHERE BUT TO GO. I travel for travel's sake. The great affair is to move." This spoke Robert Louis Stevenson, famous American writer. I adhere to this philosophy myself--an ever changing scenery, new faces and new adventures.

A few days ago I began a train journey from Paris to Istanbul. Between Paris and Budapest the journey could be described as quiet, comfortable and uneventful. At Budapest I changed trains and boarded the "Balkan Express" which can only be described as slow, noisy and not too clean.

The Balkan Express passes through Serbia and Bulgaria. It is at the borders of these countries that small adventures and inconveniences occur. Overzealous immigration officials cannot properly interpret your visa stamps. Bribes and sometimes strange official taxes are demanded. Only American dollars or Deutschmarks are accepted as payment. Don't try to pay in liras, dinars or levas. You will be yanked off the train until you are able to pay in real money. It always seems strange when they refuse their own national currency.

On this trip, I found myself involved in an adventure that can only be described as bizarre. Upon leaving Budapest only one other passenger shared my compartment, a Bulgarian textile engineer who spoke good English. Being an engineer myself, we talked shop, especially the state of the engineering profession in Bulgaria. Upon reaching Sofia there was the usual jostling and pushing as new passengers boarded and began hunting for empty seats. Our compartment door was slid open and an exquisitely beautiful face with wide spaced green eyes and a flawless complexion peered in and inquired if the seats were available. Upon being assured that they were, she entered, dragging a huge cardboard container. Picking it up, she had it shoulder high before I leaped from my seat and assisted her in placing it on the high luggage rack. This container was very heavy--almost 50 pounds. Another commotion at the door and a second woman entered dragging a similar container. Another beauty--just as beautiful as the first, but totally different in appearance. A marvelous wealth of black hair surrounded a heart-shaped face with high cheekbones and large sparkling black eyes.

My eyes were drawn to this face again and again during our time together. Even when she smiled and showed nothing but silver crowns on everything behind her teeth on both sides, it did nothing to detract from her beauty. Hers was a face that could only be described as exotic. I assisted her in placing her package, equal in weight to the first container, upon the luggage rack. No sooner was this done than a third container was pushed through the door accompanied by a rather small chubby woman with a dark pixie like face topped with a piled high mop of black hair. She smiled, showing a mouthful of gold crowns. It took the combined efforts of three to wrestle this container up on the rack. This one was the heaviest of all and I feared that the luggage racks might give way under the huge load.

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Almost as an anticlimax, a fourth woman of nondescript appearance entered the compartment carrying a rather small container which was squeezed into the rack with the others. The six seat compartment was now fully occupied.

My engineering companion began carrying on a conversation with these four ladies and informed me that these ladies were Bulgarians and although they did not mention it--he was certain that they were Romany (Gypsies), and the containers contained goods for the Turkish markets.

After exchanging business cards my new friend disembarked not far south of Sofia. My four new traveling companions and I soon discovered that a serious language barrier existed. After trying three different languages and getting nowhere, they began conversing among themselves.

This gave me the opportunity to observe them closely. It was difficult to determine their exact shapes because of the voluminous clothing they wore--pantaloons, skirts, boots, brightly embroidered jackets--and numerous sweaters. Three of them were about 5'3" and Pixie face was probably under 5'. Considering the way they had handled the heavy containers, they were obviously quite strong.

Things ran rather smoothly until we reached the Turkish border. Customs and Immigration officials boarded the train and began checking passports and baggage. A customs official began questioning the ladies about the contents of the containers. The conversation was carried on in loud tones with much gesturing of hands. Something was obviously not right. A male passenger riding in the adjacent compartment, who had stopped by several times to converse with the four ladies, now appeared and began arguing with customs. Apparently all the containers were his and the ladies were merely transporting them. He argued to no avail. They and their goods were ordered from the train.

With great effort, the containers were lowered from the racks and dragged to the station platform outside my window. The officials then cut the nylon lashings and tore the containers open. The contents, whatever they were, did not seem to please them. The women's companion was taken into custody and they were ordered back aboard the train. The train soon started up, all of us looking at those four ripped open containers lying forlorn on the platform.

My companions were much subdued and rather forlorn. They began talking in low voices. This charade that had just occurred was easy to interpret. Obviously no duty had been paid on the goods and or no declarations made as to the contents. Why the ladies were merely put back on the train and not taken into custody is still a mystery.

The conductor now appeared and requested our tickets. I dutifully showed him mine and it was punched and returned. He then asked my companions for their tickets. It was immediately obvious that they had none. "Nondescript" produced a huge roll of bills from inside her clothing and offered to pay. He took one look at the money and spit in derision and uttered what was probably some vulgar comment. A loud discussion began which was soon terminated. He held out his hand and ordered "passports"! Without hesitation, they were handed to him. He departed, slamming the door, and gloom once more descended over the group.

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For the next hour or so they talked among themselves, obviously trying to determine a way out of this bad situation. I indicated that they pay with the money they had hidden in their clothing. "Nondescript" produced this huge roll of bills. After only a glance I could identify their problem. The currency was Bulgarian liras, worth little in Bulgaria and worthless outside the border.

After some more earnest conversation among themselves, "pixie face", who was sitting opposite me, reached across and touched my knee. After getting my attention, she indicated by signs that I pay for their tickets. I gave no indication that I agreed to her suggestion or even understood her proposal. She waited for a response from me and getting none she looked at each of her companions in turn, tapped my knee again followed by the sign of my shelling out money. She followed this with the universal sign for sex--the middle finger of her left hand in a vertical position with the fingers of her other hand moving up and down on the vertical finger. She then pointed to the beautiful "Green Eyes". I glanced at "Green Eyes" who was looking into my eyes with no expression on her face. I was totally speechless but kept a dead-pan expression on my face.

She waited for my response and receiving none passed a few words with her companions and made the sign for sex again, waving her arm to include all four. They were all looking expectantly at me waiting for some response. This was just too much for me and I shook my head vigorously in the negative. They all began to smile and I was momentarily confused at their reactions. Then horrified, I remembered that Bulgarians use opposite shakes of the head to signify yes and no--side to side is yes and up and down is no. I immediately began shaking my head up and down to indicate no!

Now I had them really confused. I'm sure they were thinking--this stupid American who can't speak any civilized language, and probably doesn't even know the international sign for screwing, and if he does, can't seem to make up his mind.

This confused situation had to be straightened out. I placed my hand on my heart and indicated through the goodness of my heart that I would pay for their tickets. They now introduced themselves--Mira of the green eyes, exotic Katrin, pixie-face was Cela and nondescript was Ota.

Katrin jumped to her feet and went seeking the conductor. It was not long before they returned, Katrin with a large smile and the conductor carrying his small computer. He finally arrived at a sum of \$66 U.S.--the price of four tickets to Istanbul. First I tried to pay in Turkish lira or American Express travelers checks. He insisted on American dollars. As I had only \$50 in American currency, I made up the remainder in French francs. He refused the francs initially but I persuaded him that it was good money--almost as good as the Deutschmark. Not being totally convinced, he left us to verify this French money with some other authority on the train. I'm glad there were no French in the compartment--they would have been terribly hurt by this slur directed toward the franc.

The conductor must have had some difficulty verifying the validity of the francs because it was almost an hour before he returned. He was all smiles however and immediately turned over the passports. As he

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was leaving the compartment, he turned to me and said, "These are bad women. Be careful." I believe what he really meant was--they are Gypsies, watch your money. Thus everything was taken care of until we reached Istanbul. What then?

These ladies were way ahead of me. Before the train even started to slow down they were all saying "Hotel, hotel." I indicated OK and was surrounded by gold, silver and porcelain smiles. Upon reaching the station they wrestled my packframe from the rack, dragged it to the platform and despite all my protests, hoisted it upon Cela's back. I tried to take it from her but received such a look that I backed off.

They now led me to the nearest restaurant, not surprising because by now they had identified me as the world's greatest sucker for a sob story. At the entrance to the restaurant they stopped and rubbed their stomachs. Even a stupid American understands this language. We entered, selected a table and they began ordering.

The table was soon covered with various dishes. These four each ate two complete meals, numerous appetizers, washing it all down with four liters of orange soda pop. This was in addition to all my bread, cheese and sausage that they devoured on the train. They ate like famished wolves. Thank goodness Turkish food is inexpensive.

When finished with our meal, we started for a hotel, or so I thought. It was soon evident that we were entering the Grand Bazaar, a vast array of shops under a single roof. The shops and passageways seem endless. Cela is still carrying my packframe. Viewed from directly behind one can see only the pack and her heels. I made it a point to keep some distance from her, hoping that no one would associate this large unburdened male with this small overburdened female.

It soon became evident that they were window shopping and upon reaching a jewelry shop Cela dropped her burden and entered the shop. A few minutes later she exited and displayed several rings on her fingers and a pleading look on her face. I nodded my head NO! She returned the rings, loaded up the packframe and headed for another jewelry shop. Same charade. This time I spoke to her in English--let's stop the bullshit and get to the hotel. Even if they did not understand the words, the tone was quite plain.

We proceeded to a hotel of their choice. The price was reasonable and we settled into a large airy room with four beds. It was at this time that Ota disappeared. All my inquiries as to her whereabouts were answered with shrugs. All that walking had stressed a knee that I had injured some months ago. I sat on my bed and bent over to remove my boots. Upon seeing me untying my boots, Katrin rushed over, pushed my hands aside and proceeded to remove my boots and socks--carried my socks to the wash basin and scrubbed them--then placed them on the radiator. By this time I had removed my sweaty T-shirt and this received the same treatment as the socks. This treatment is somewhat different to what I am accustomed to. Those Eastern European women are probably marvelous wife material.

Until now I had been entrusting Cela to make small purchases as necessary. The change left over was never voluntarily returned and upon

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demanding it I was always short-changed. Katrin was the chosen for these small transactions and proved to be scrupulously honest.

My curiosity as to what their bodies looked like was never satisfied because they slept with their clothes on. At least they went to bed fully clothed. They did bare their legs from the knees down - very sturdy legs indeed.

I awoke the following morning to the low murmur of voices. My companions were already awake. A small problem now arose. I sleep in the nude and the previous evening had placed my clothing in the closet located across the room. The problem was that the call of nature would not wait. Upon sitting up and swinging my feet to the floor, all conversation stopped and three pairs of eyes focused on me. No time for inhibitions--springing from the bed, I strolled past the other three beds to my clothes locker. After getting into my pants and glancing toward my companions, I saw their eyes still focused on me. I then left the room to complete my toilet and shower. Returning to our room in about 45 minutes, and finding only Katrin, I invited her to breakfast.

Katrin needed new shoes, hers being badly ripped. The offer to buy new shoes was accepted and locating a shoe store close to the hotel she proceeded to pick out a new pair. After selecting her new pair, she proceeded to pick out other shoes of various sizes.

Upon inquiring of the shopkeeper as to what was going on--he informed me that she was selecting shoes for her four children. I put a stop to this by grabbing up the shoes and placing them back on the shelf and instructed the shopkeeper that I was buying only one pair. The tears began to flow and after much begging relented somewhat and agreed to purchase shoes for the two children who had the greatest need. Her five year old and nine year old received the new shoes.

After leaving the shoe store we did a little window shopping and allowed her to buy a few trinkets for her children. The others were waiting for us with good news when we arrived back at the hotel. They had located friends and had somehow acquired tickets back to Sofia. They thanked me and each gave me her address and insisted that visit them when next in Sofia.

I took my departure from these three unusual ladies, picked up my backpack and walked to my usual hotel and booked a room for 2 days. Some day when life seems dull and boring with not excitement in sight, I just might entertain the thought of visiting them.