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Letter to Anne

Lawrence Durrell

The British writer Lawrence Durrell (1912-1990) was a press attaché at the British Legation in Belgrade from 1949 to 1952.

To Anne Ridler
British Legation, Belgrade [1949]

Dear Anne,

A brief note from a troubled spot to wonder how you are and what you are writing—despite the patient motherhood 5 year plan. We have been traveling rather hard all this past week. The hardest trip was to Sarajevo—crossing the dusty plain and bumbling over the Zvornik bridge to climb the stone ladder into Bosnia. You would love the upland country—lovely smooth grassy slopes and pine-trembling mountain peaks all round. Cold air. And the Bosnian peasants in their dramatic costume—can you imagine the quaintness of Tyrolean costume stabbed here and there with an oriental touch, giving a rude masculinity to it. A whole day you crash across this great alpine plateau and towards evening the road begins to fall, to hesitate, to follow water like a hound through two beetling ravines. Torrents rushing, eagles flying. You come around a shoulder of rock and—guess what? A Turkish town—pure 1795. Soft pearl bulbs of minarets and trellised houses built up the steep sides of the mountains above a tinkling river that jingles through the town to chime with the clink of stirrup-irons and the soft blackish chatter of the veiled Turkish women. All the houses in the Turkish quarter have musharabaya trellis windows for purdah-ed girls. The cafés are fenced in with coloured wooden trellis. The older houses look like charming birdcages hung about the hills. The whole town gives the air of being some late 19th century drawing by Lear, say. Mosques, minarets, fezes—holding the gorgeous East in fee while the river cools the air, splashing through the town and the bridge on which whasisname was assassinated (now called the People's Bridge) stands gracefully but ominously where it has stood for some 80 years. After this filthy dank capital with its cloddish inhabitants Sarajevo was a treat. One was back in Jannina or some town in Epirus again. At least I was. It is by far the best trip we've done to date (in a borrowed jeep) and I was sorry to return here. Northward the great flat Hungarian plain stretches away interminably through its ugly villages—to some final oblivion. But the hills are west and south—and how one longs for them in Belgrade.

As you probably know we are enjoying a lovely little crisis whose end is as yet unforeseen. I have been trying to give London the impression that the whole thing is my doing. I somehow don't think they believe me. Meanwhile however, not a line of poetry or prose—O Lord. I can't work here.

Love to Vivian

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