

## The Raid

Sandwiched between a shepherd and a mule I threaded my way along the Via Egnatia following the hairpin bends towards Mirake. I was walking across Albania and reckoned I was lost. Again. We coalesced at a water fountain.

'Which way? I enquired

'This, good?'

The response was unambiguous.

'*Dritto*, no problem...'

Keep going straight.

'*Brava!*'

This advice was quite at loggerheads with what my guidebook had to say: 'turn right, follow the steep track NNE for 1.5 km through the bushes until you meet the road again'.

Oh heavens.

My companions disappeared and another *dramatis personae* took the stage in the form of a woman the size of a bumblebee. Not for her the *dritto* approach. She nipped up the steep track towards the bushes as agile as a mountain goat. Seeing this I thought to myself 'Well, if she can do it, why the hell can't I? For Pete's sake she's twice my age and being a bumblebee a tenth of the size.' I took off after her.

It was another world up there among the bushes. For starters I could hear a constant tapping: tap, tap, tap, from across the gully; and voices conversing, one of which, I suspected, was the bumblebee's. The rocks were slippery, the way narrow and unclear, and it soon started to drizzle. Tap, tap, tap. Oh bother. I put up my hood, put my head down and bent my back under the weight of my rucksack. Mist, mud, crackle, raindrop. And then among the bushes I glimpsed a clearing in the middle of which, wielding a small hand-axe I spied her. Tap, tap, tap, she was cutting wood. The scene might've been lifted straight out of a fairy tale. As indeed may much of rural Albania.

I consulted my guide book and noticing that the next village was named Polis shouted over without thinking 'Polis? Polis?'

The bumblebee stopped tapping instantly, as if this was a raid.

'Polis? Polis?' I reiterated.

She wasn't amused. She started cursing and hollering

'Go away' she shouted thoroughly put out.

In other words

'Get off my back, scumbag'.

Feeling remorseful I headed back down the hill. Had I been scrambling NNE anyway, I reflected? Were those the wretched bushes specified in my guidebook? But what fun. Fancy conducting a police raid in the middle of nowhere.

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The Bumblebee's reaction probably had less to do with her feistiness than with Albania's recent history as a communist police state. She would've been brought up in an atmosphere of eavesdropping so to have been caught in the act of stealing wood must've been the last straw. And by a man carrying an orange rucksack into the bargain who didn't speak a word of Albanian except for the word *Polis*, and who might've been an erstwhile member of Sigurimi, the former secret police service. Of course, she spat and cursed and stamped her foot like Rumpelstiltskin, summoning upon my head all the malevolent spells she could muster. Who wouldn't?

But I was soon overcome by the beauty of my surroundings. How lovely were the valleys. How easy to lose myself in a landscape peppered with olive groves and bright tilting fields of young wheat surmounted by mist. I watched the woodsmoke and the mist shift slowly over the pantile roofs of the houses while in the distance the mountains were as luminous and blue as a jay's feather. Just as in Tuscany where the hills are pricked with juniper, golden Lombardy poplar rose up into the udder-pink sky lending perspective and harmony. There was a modesty to the way the houses interacted with the mountains. It was as if they were kneeling at their feet in prayer. A similar effect is felt on the Lincolnshire fens where the wide wilderness of the sky reminds us of our insignificance.

And so I progressed royally along the VE in the company of the mist and various shepherds whom I could just about fathom in the distance seated beneath umbrellas and as I went along they were singing and hooting at each other like owls and I fell into singing myself.

And then it happened. Call it what you will. A symbol of affirmation. A sign. I hooted and I was answered by a lone voice resounding across the valley. Its owner must've heard me. 'Albania?' it hooted back. A dog barked. And in that moment of recognition I was overwhelmed by a sense of forgiveness and joy.

The moment passed, as moments always do, and the voice was ridden away. All I could hear was the jangle and creek of a saddle.