



The Dales of Moldavia

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It may be rash to intrude this Rumanian feast where so many literary cornucopias are pouring their bounty; for it is the day and the occasion that single out this one, and shadow steals over substance here and veils every memory of what there actually was to eat. (We had set out to pick mushrooms, but they were for dinner.)

The picnic baskets may have contained all sorts of Moldowal-kechian wonders – *sarmali* wrapped in vine leaves, fragrant *mititei*, chicken croquettes as light as feathers, a *sterlet* from the Pruth, perhaps, or even, and by the ladleful, wonderful Black Sea caviar from Vâlcov in the Danube delta, on the fringes of Bessarabia; turkey in aspic, almost certainly. Apart from fine indigenous cooking this country seemed to be the meeting place of all that was most delicious in old Russia, Poland, Hungary, Mitteleuropa, France, the Balkans and the Levant. The picnic would have been more likely to start with fierce Moldavian *raki* than with a milder southern *tzuica* of distilled plums; excellent white and red wines, stored in tortuous catacombs, would have accompanied it throughout.

The point of departure was an old and many-legended Cantacuzene country house with inhabitants of indescribable charm. It lay at the heart of a once large but now much reduced estate in High Moldavia, and the time was September 1939. Apart from the two sisters who were our hostesses and their family, there was also, for the summer, Prince Matila Ghyka and three other young English people. (I had become a sort of fixture.) Matila Ghyka, traveller, diplomat, well-known writer on aesthetics – *Le Nombre d'Or*, *Sortilèges*