

baskets and bunches of anemones picked in the wood. It was a moment of peace and tranquillity and we rode on in silence towards the still far-off samovar and the oil lamps and heaven knew what bad news. The silence was suddenly broken by an eager exclamation from Matila.

‘Oh look!’ he cried. One hand steadied the basket of mushrooms on his lap, the other pointed at the sky into which he was peering. High overhead some waterbirds, astray from the delta, perhaps, or from some nearby fen, were flying in a phalanx. (I shall have to improvise names and details here, for precise memory and ornithological knowledge both fail me. But the gist and the spirit are exact.)

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘it’s rather rare; the *Xiphorhynchus paludinensis minor*, the *glavionette*, or Lesser Swamp Swordbill – *Wendischer Schwertvogel* in German, *glodnic* in Moldavian dialect; I believe the Wallachians call it *spadună de baltă*. Varieties are dotted about all over the world but always in very small numbers. They live in floating nests and have a very shrill ascending note in the mating season.’ He whistled softly once or twice. ‘Their eggs are a ravishing colour, a lovely lapis lazuli with little primrose speckles. They have been identified with the Stymphalian birds that Hercules killed, and there’s a mention of them in Lucian’s *Dialogues* and in Pliny the Elder, and I think in Oppian. . . . The ancient Nubians revered them as minor gods and there’s *supposed* to be one on a bas-relief at Cyrene; there’s certainly a flight of them in the background of a *Journey of the Magi* by Sassetta – he probably saw them in the reeds of Lake Trasimene, where they still breed; and the chiefs of two tribes on the Zambezi wear robes of their tail feathers for the new moon ceremonies. Some people,’ he continued, with a slight change of key, ‘find them too fishy. It’s not true, as I learnt years ago near Bordeaux. On a spit, over a very slow fire – of hornbeam twigs, if possible – with frequent basting and plenty of saffron, *glavionette à la landaise* can be delicious. . . . Alas: I’ve only eaten it once. . . .’

His dark eyes, a-kinde with memory, watched the birds out of sight across the dying sky, and we all burst out laughing. The cosmic approach. . . . It had been a happy day, as we had hoped, and it had to last us for a long time, for the next day’s news scattered this little society for ever.

Patrick Leigh Fermor