

ROVER THROUGH THE BALKANS

THE STORY OF AN EPIC JOURNEY UNDERTAKEN
63 YEARS AGO BY ROBERT L. JEFFERSON, F.R.S.S.



R. L. Jefferson

Adapted from an article first published in Auto-Car.

I left Coventry with my companion, Mr. Robert Weallans, on the 21st September (1905) on the staunch little 8 h.p. Rover, which carried us so well right through.

Our route was to the coast at Harwich, via Northampton, Cambridge and Colchester. On the Dutch side we passed through Schiedam, Rotterdam, Gouda, Utrecht and Arnhem, to the German frontier at Enschede. Thence through Munster, Paderborn, Nordhausen, Sangerhausen, Halle, Leipzig and Dresden into Austrian territory on the Erz Hills. We crossed Bohemia to Prague, discovering that the roads from a motoring point of view were exceedingly bad, and ultimately reached Vienna.

From the Austrian capital to Buda Pesth in Hungary the roads were decidedly bad: in parts sandy and stony, in others rutty and muddy and intersected by deep gullies ranging from three to seven feet in depth. In one stretch of eighteen miles between Raab and Pesth we encountered no fewer than fifty-one of these gullies.

At Buda Pesth the petrol question became most engrossing. Before leaving England I had arranged for the supply of the needful spirit all along the route but on reaching Buda and making enquiries as to Servia, Bulgaria and Turkey, things looked more than blank. I wired London, only to learn that nothing could be done. However, I learnt of a firm in Vienna who supplied petrol to the Austrian and Magyar automobile clubs, and after



Left Before the start of the journey, outside the Autocar offices in Coventry.

Below (upper). A section of the rock strewn track over the Balkans which was negotiated without accident.

Below (lower). Crossing the river in the Dragoman Pass.

much telephoning they agreed to forward a supply for me to Semlin, the last Hungarian town before I crossed into Servia.

Our passage across the flat and swampy country from Pesth to Semlin was tedious in the extreme. The roads were narrow, sandy and rutty, while in the villages the mud was so deep that on several occasions we were axle-deep in mire. It was fortunate perhaps that the autumnal rains had rendered the mud of a consistency through which we could at least "touch bottom", although the experience of driving through a sea of liquid filth is not one to be recommended as the most enjoyable form of automobilism.

At Semlin the river Danube separated us from the Orient. On the opposite bank, three miles away, stood the important city of Belgrade, capital of Servia, and the starting point of our tour through the Balkan peninsula.

There is no road over the river (three miles wide here) and the steamer ferry was too small to take the car. Ultimately the British Consul at Belgrade arranged that my car and my petrol, which I found at Semlin, should be barged over, and I hired a barge at huge expense. But on the other side the Servian authorities refused to allow the car and spirit to be landed, and it was only after every member of the British Legation had made every effort that the prohibition was withdrawn.

As I have said, the journey to Semlin had been of an uneventful character, but we had now to enter lands hitherto unexplored by the motorist.



Right. A portion of the 'road' in Turkey, between Lule Burgas and Silivre.

Below (upper). No difficulties were encountered at the Turkish frontier.

Below (lower). One of the more picturesque areas on the road through the Balkans.



Four days after arriving in the Servian capital, Weallans had the car ready for the road. Our proposed destination for the day was Semendria, a matter of seventy kilometres, over some toughish hills and very inferior roads. This at least would prove a good test of our 8 h.p. engine, since with extra petrol and all up we scaled over a ton. It was a slow, bumpy drive through the outskirts of Belgrade. Dogs barked and horses bolted: plodding oxen and stupid mules continuously blocked our way: but at last the open country, rain-washed and miserable, enveloped us.

(The journey continued through Semendria, Jagodina, Paracin, and Alexinatz to Nisch. Four days after leaving Belgrade the travellers had their first taste of the Balkans).

We were now running through the valley of the Nisavar. Right and left the hills rose to quite respectable heights and, away ahead, the towering peaks of the Balkans stretched across our path. For twelve kilometres the road was dead level, then, after passing Konjesza we struck the first rise, and were appalled. I raced the engine for all it was worth, rushed at this 1-in-4 specimen of steepness, got half way up, and then the engine sobbed out its complaints; so it was out clutch and on brakes while Weallans groped for stones to scotch the wheels.

We held a council of war, and decided that the only way was to work our way over the mountains in sections. The magneto was switched off, and the accumulators were put into circuit since they would take the slower revolutions without the engine stopping. Then, with the ignition advanced to the last notch, and the engine buzzing like a bee, the clutch went in with a bang and the little car, with a scattering of rubble and stones from the back wheels, fairly sprang at the work, throbbed its way up with gradually diminishing pace and just crawled over the brow.

Ridge after ridge we climbed in this slow and tedious manner. Hats and coats were doffed for it was no light work making an even passable track for the car, and so, with a succession of stops and jumps, scotched wheels and racing engine we wound our way up to the top.

We negotiated the descent carefully, for the road was frightful. Then, a level run over an improving road took us the next day to the Servian outpost. Papers were handed in, the clustering soldiers touched their caps and I was free of Servia. Less than a kilometer away I perceived the fluttering Bulgarian flag — the other end of the neutral zone — and saw soldiers in long coats, astrachan caps, and rifles upon their shoulders. I pulled up the car.

Vivid recollections of the formalities at the Servian frontier came to mind, so while we lurked in the shadow of some trees, I took a desperate resolve. And that was to rush the frontier. The road surface was passably good; all I feared was that some hole might stop us at the crucial point, but Weallans thought it was worth the chance,



Above. The 8 h.p. Rover being driven carefully across the bed of a stream in Bulgaria.

especially as he wanted a couple of days in which to overhaul the car in Sofia, and time was pressing.

We dropped on the Bulgarian frontier at twenty-five miles an hour in a cloud of dust, and with our exhaust shooting out a volume of blue-white smoke. The soldiers at the frontier station fell back amazed. Although the steering wheel was joggling tremendously with the pace over that bumpy road, I raised my right hand to the military salute, saw with satisfaction that it was returned, and the next moment we were around the corner and out of sight.

Mid-day was passed when we entered the Dragoman Pass. Our narrow road wound in and out of great masses of rock, side by side with a roaring river. At times the pass narrowed so much that I feared there would not be room for the car. We reached Slivnitsa, site of that famous battle between Bulgar and Serb: miserable village it was but we managed to get a bite of bread and cheese and a bottle of beer. Then on again: the pass widened out, the open country came, and we seesawed along the Sofia road. And no one was more thankful than myself when the cobble stones of the Bulgarian capital took the place of the rough road we had experienced all the way from Nisch.

After leaving Sofia we passed through that portion of Bulgaria just then much infested by bands of marauding Macedonians, and met many parties of these gentry, all mounted and travelling in a southerly direction. They made no attempt to molest us, and unlike the ultra-civilised folk of the English countryside, did not even resent the terrible scaring the good Rover gave their horses. It would seem that at times is found more forbearance in the wilds of Bulgaria than in the narrow ways of cultivated England.

On the Turkish frontier no fuss whatever was made as to our entering the Land of the Prophet.

Upon reaching Adrianople I was informed that the Vali had had instructions that I must not proceed unless accompanied by an armed escort, and so thenceforward a body of Zaptiehs led, flanked and brought up our rear. At Babalski all semblance of a road disappeared, the way being indicated only by a deep and rutty track, where the mud was awful. The Zaptiehs and officials proved real sportsmen, and helped to work the car through and out of the quagmires.

Night had fallen, upon which we raised the minarets of Constantinople, so we halted at a little village and next morning entered the City of the Faithful and, after a gruelling drive of thirty-one days, I brought the car to a standstill outside the Pera Palace Hotel in the midst of an enormous crowd.

A gorgeous hotel porter swept the crowd right and left. "Anything I can do for you gentlemen?" he asked. "Yes", I replied. "Two glasses and a bottle of the best". And thus was the first motor car drive from England to Constantinople solemnly sealed and celebrated.

Below. Helping hands were often needed to push the car through the quagmires.

