

**KOSSOVO: HEROIC
SONGS OF
THE SERBS**

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Kosovo: Heroic Songs of the Serbs by Helen Rootham & Maurice Baring

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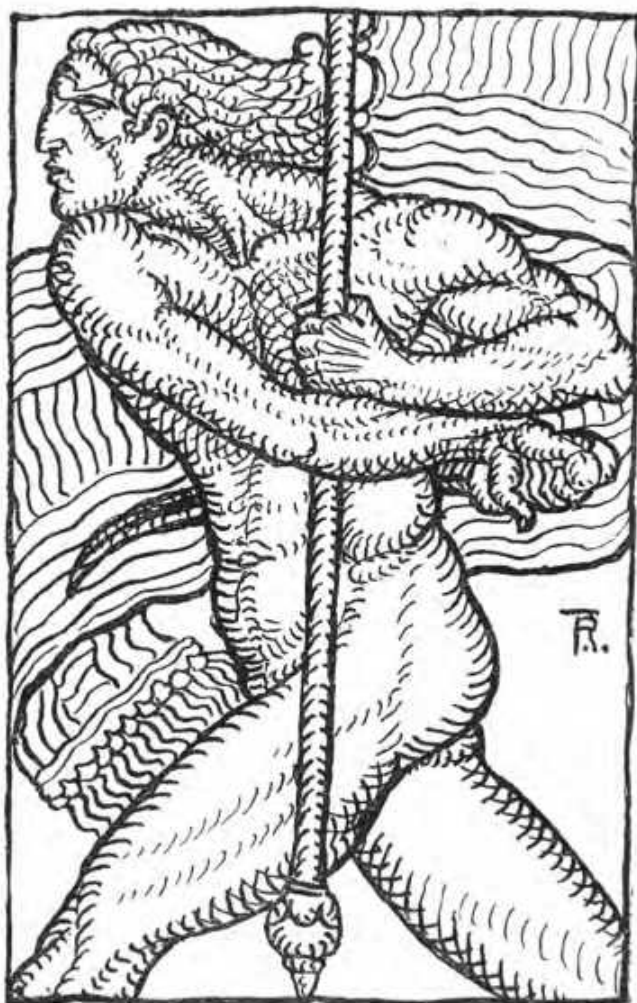
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HELEN ROTHAM & MAURICE BARING

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BOSKO JUGOVITCH

KOSSOVO

HEROIC SONGS OF THE SERBS

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INTRODUCTION

BY MAURICE BARING

I HAVE been asked by Miss Rootham to write a few words of introduction to her translation of some of the Epic Songs of Serbia. No sooner had I read them than I realised what I had already suspected, that the poems speak for themselves and need no introduction.

They have that quality which is common to all great epic poetry; the quality we find in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in the "Chanson de Roland" and in the "Word of the Fight of the Prince Igor," in the Bible, in Villon, and in some of the very great poets when they are sufficiently inspired to forget when their "style" disappears that they are poets. It is a quality which arises from the natural and direct observation of life by man.

The writers of these ballads saw the world with the eyes of a child and with the heart of man, as it is shaped by life.

The similes used are such that any worker in the fields would understand and recognise.

"Like a cloud their battle-standards streaming
And their tents stretched like the snow in winter."

"If the gentle rain should fall from heaven,
Not one inch of ground could then receive it."

"And he threw the Turks into disorder
As the falcon strikes the homing pigeons."

It is very seldom that modern poets succeed in achieving what Monsieur Anatole France calls "ces traits de nature qu'on dit le comble de l'art quand l'art a le bonheur de les trouver."

In the Slav literature these happy moments occur more often. Pushkin, thanks to his genius and to his old nurse, succeeded in catching in his fairy tales and sometimes in his poems the authentic *Volkston*, and a line such as

" I mor'yé gdye bezhali korabli "

might have come out of these ballads.

Translate the line (and this is always the trouble in translating epic speech from one language into another), and you get a bald statement of fact,

" And the ships flying upon the sea."

In the original, the words are simple to nakedness but they are not bald, and they call up the picture like magic: they are the last word of felicity. Compare this with the treatment of a similar impression by a great poet who has not the gift of epic simplicity, and you will at once see the difference.

Tennyson—and Swinburne quotes the line as being a signal example of Tennyson's miraculous gift of evoking landscape—says :

" And white sails flying on a yellow sea."

But Pushkin reaches a higher, a more magical effect without the aid of epithet or colour.

And so it is in these ballads. The colours are primitive like those of the primitive painters who painted the holy figures because they believed in

them, and not because they wanted to make an arrangement of line and colour. The similes are taken from a first-hand communion with the sights and facts of nature. The emotions are the primitive emotions of man, "Not sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." But the mention of the emotions leads us to the second fundamental characteristic of these ballads: to the soul of them which differs from that of Grecian epics, and which is more akin to the "Chanson de Roland," to the *Gestes* of the mediæval knights, and to the Celtic epics, but which has a quality and savour which is entirely its own and entirely Slav.

The soul of these ballads is saturated with Christian faith, the faith of the crusaders, of the Morte d'Arthur of Villon; the faith of the *gracieux galans* who stormed Jerusalem with young Lord Raymond. The "Ballad of the Fall of the Serbian Empire" gives us the key-note of all this song.

A message comes from Jerusalem to the King:—

"Say, dost thou desire a heav'nly kingdom,
Or dost thou prefer an earthly kingdom?
If thou should'st now choose an earthly kingdom,
Knights may girdle swords and saddle horses,
Tighten saddle-girths and ride to battle,—
You will fight the Turks and crush their army.
But if thou prefer a heav'nly kingdom,
Build thyself a church upon Kossovo,
Let not the foundations be of marble,
Let them be of samite and of scarlet. . . .
And to all thy warriors and their leaders,
Thou shalt give the sacraments and orders,
For thy army will most surely perish,
And thou, too, wilt perish with thine army."