

HEROES OF SERBIA

FOLK BALLADS RETOLD BY

Nada Ćurčija-Prodanović



Illustrated by

DUŠAN RISTIĆ

London

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

1963



THE FALL OF SERBIA



GREY falcon spread his wings and flew away from Jerusalem, carrying a swallow on his back. That was not a grey falcon, but it was Saint Iliya; and that on his back was not a swallow, but a letter from the Virgin which he was carrying to the Serbian Tsar on Kossovo. He dropped it on the Tsar's knees, and the letter began speaking by itself:

'Honourable Tsar Lazar, what Kingdom will you embrace now? Is it to be the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of this world? If you choose the earthly one, saddle your horses, tighten the reins! Let all your knights take up their sabres and rush all together among the Turks—all the Turkish hosts will perish by your hands. But if you prefer the Kingdom of Heaven, then build a church on the Field of Kossovo, not with marble but with pure silk and brocades, and let your host take holy communion in it, for they shall all die, and you with them, my Tsar.'

Hearing those words, the Tsar thought to himself:

'O Almighty Lord, what am I to do now? How shall I make up my mind which Kingdom to choose? Shall I embrace the Kingdom of

Heaven, or the earthly one? If I decide to embrace the secular Kingdom, it will not last long, being transitory as all on this earth is, whilst the heavenly one will last through all eternity.'

So the Tsar made up his mind and chose the Kingdom of Heaven. He built the church in Kossovo, as the bird had told him, all of silk and brocades, and not of marble, and invited the Serbian Patriarch as well as his twelve bishops to come and administer the last communion to his hosts.

Hardly had the last soldiers received it when the Turks made an onslaught on the Field of Kossovo. The old Yug Bogdan collected his army, and with his nine sons, the nine Yugovichi, each of them commanding nine thousand men, and with his own twelve thousand besides, he rushed at the Turks. They all fought fiercely and slew seven Pashas; when they were attacking the eighth old Yug Bogdan was slain, and after him fell his nine Yugovichi, his nine sons like nine grey falcons, and with them all their host.

The three lords Murniyavtchevichi rushed into the battlefield now: Despot Uglyesha, Duke Goyko, and King Vukashin, each of them followed by thirty thousand brave soldiers. They fought the Turks bitterly and slew eight Pashas; by the ninth Pasha, two brothers Murniyavtchevichi, Despot Uglyesha and Duke Goyko were killed, and the third one, King Vukashin, was badly wounded. The Turkish cavalry ran over him and their horses finally killed him, trampling upon him. The whole army of these three Serbian lords fell to the last man.

Now the Archduke Stepan made an onslaught, backed by his sixty thousand men. They fought the Turks like angry lions and slew nine Pashas, but as they reached the tenth, the Archduke Stepan was slain, and with him all his sixty thousand soldiers.

The Tsar of all the Serbs, Lazar, rushed among the Turks with his seventy-seven thousand men, chasing the Turks across the vast Field of Kossovo. They were so fiery and brave that it seemed as if they might carry the day. And so it would have been but for Vuk Brankovich who betrayed Tsar Lazar, his own father-in-law. Thus the Tsar perished and with him all his soldiers, the seventy-seven thousand Serbs.

And all that was holy and honourable and agreeable to God the Almighty.



THE MAIDEN OF KOSSOVO

THE maiden of Kossovo rose early of a Sunday; she went out long before sunrise, rolled up her long white sleeves above her elbows, put a bag full of white bread on her shoulders, and took two golden beakers into her hands, one full of cool water and the other of red wine. She went down to the vast Field of Kossovo and walked over the battlefield, looking at the fallen knights and soldiers, turning them over to see whether any of them were still alive. Those who showed signs of life she washed with cool water, gave them the red wine as the holy communion, and fed them with white bread.

Going thus from one warrior to another she came to Pavle Orlovich, the Tsar's young standard-bearer. He, too, was alive but very badly wounded. The maiden dragged him from the pool of blood where he was lying, washed his face and wounds, and gave him wine and bread. After a while, the young knight's blood began to pulse more vigorously in his veins and he spoke to the maiden:

'My dear sister, maiden of Kossovo, what sad and great misfortune makes you walk across this field and turn over warriors lying in blood? Whom do you seek on this battlefield, young maiden? Is it a brother, a nephew, or perhaps your old father?'

The maiden of Kossovo answered Pavle:

'My dear brother, unknown warrior, I am not seeking any one of my kindred, either brother, or nephew, or my old father. But perhaps you will be able to tell me what I want to know. When Tsar Lazar had the twelve bishops and thirty monks administering holy communion to his soldiers for three whole weeks, three famous Serbian dukes arrived at the church of Samodrezha. One of them was Duke Milosh, the other Ivan Kossantchich, and the third Milan Toplitsa. I happened to be in the doorway then and saw Duke Milosh approaching the church: what a wondrous sight he was then! His long sabre was clattering on the pavement, and on his head he wore a silk-lined helmet adorned with beautiful plumes. He had a silk scarf round his neck, and a fine cloak on his shoulders; he looked around and, seeing me, took his fine cloak off his shoulders and handed it to me:

'"Take this cloak, young maiden; by this cloak and by my name remember me, maiden: I shall die in the battle, fighting for our honourable Tsar. Pray for me, my dear soul, pray that I may return unharmed, and if good luck should be with you too, I shall take you as a bride for Milan, Milan my beloved sworn brother, and I shall marry the two of you and be your witness at the wedding, your wedding *koom!*"'

'After him came Ivan Kossantchich: he too was a fine sight to behold. His long, shining sabre hung by his side; a dazzling, plumed helmet adorned his head, and he too had a silken scarf round his neck and a fine cloak on his shoulders. On his finger glistened a large golden ring. He looked round, saw me, and came to me handing me his golden ring with these words:

'"Take this golden ring, fair maiden; by this ring and by my name remember me, maiden. I, too, am prepared to die on the battlefield, fighting for our honourable Tsar. Pray for me, my dear soul, and if God and good luck wills it that I should return unharmed, I shall take you as a bride for Milan, my sworn brother, and I shall be his best man, his *stari svat* at the wedding."

'At last came Milan Toplitsa, arrayed as splendidly as his two sworn brothers; on his arm he carried a fine veil woven of pure golden thread. Seeing me, he took the golden veil off his arm and gave it to me.

“Take this golden veil, fair maiden,” he said; “by this veil and by my name remember me, maiden. I also shall die fighting for our honourable Tsar. Pray for me, my dear soul, for if I come back unharmed, I shall take you for my dear wife.”

“Thereupon the three dukes went away. It is them I am seeking on this battlefield, unknown warrior.”

Pavle Orlovich shook his head, saying:

‘Can you see, my dear sister, maiden of Kossovo, can you see where those battling-lances are highest and most numerous? Blood was as high as the horse’s reins and the rider’s waist there: that is where all the three of them fell!’

‘Go home now, go home, lest you soil your skirts and your sleeves with blood, fair maiden.’

As she heard his words, tears streamed down the maiden’s face and she walked home wailing as loud as her voice would carry:

‘Woe to me, unfortunate that I am! If I was to touch a green pine-tree now, even that would dry up at the touch of my accursed hand!’



THE DEATH OF THE YUGOVICHI'S MOTHER



GOD Almighty, what a wondrous sight that was when the Serbian hosts pressed heavily down upon the Field of Kossovo! The nine young Yugovichi fought there and their father, the old Yug Bogdan, was the tenth Yugovich on the field.

Their mother prayed ardently, imploring God to give her the sharp eyes of a falcon and the mighty wings of a white swan to carry her above the vast Field of Kossovo so that she might see



her nine sons, the nine Yugovichi, and the tenth one, the old Yug Bogdan.

God heard her prayer and granted her the sharp eyes of a falcon and the mighty wings of a white swan, and she flew then as far as Kossovo.

She found them all dead, her nine dear sons, the nine Yugovichi, and the tenth one, the old Yug Bogdan. At their heads, nine battling-lances were stuck in the ground; nine falcons were perched on their lances; nine good chargers were tethered to the lances, and nine angry lions stood by the horses.

When they saw her, the nine horses neighed, the nine angry lions roared, the nine falcons screeched; but the mother made hard her heart and shed not a single tear.

She then loosed the nine horses and the nine angry lions, and collected the nine proud, grey falcons, and returned to her sad white mansion.

Daughters-in-law had been waiting for her and they saw her coming from afar off; they opened the gates and went forth to meet her. When they met, the daughters-in-law saw by her looks what had happened, and the nine widows wept bitterly for their lost husbands; their nine children cried for their fathers; the nine horses neighed for their riders, the nine angry lions roared, and the nine proud grey falcons screeched for their masters. But the mother

made hard her heart even then and shed no tear for her nine sons, the nine Yugovichi and the tenth one, the old Yug Bogdan.

At about midnight, however, Damyan's piebald whinnied in his stable. Calling her daughter-in-law, Damyan's wife, the mother asked:

'Daughter-in-law, and Damyan's beloved, could you tell me, why does Damyan's piebald scream so? Is he hungry for the good and white wheat? Is he thirsty for the Zvetchan water?'

'Mother-in-law, Damyan's own mother, he is not hungry for the good and white wheat, nor is he thirsty for the Zvetchan water, but he has been wont to munch his oats until midnight and then to carry his master off for a ride. He is mourning his dead master now.'

The mother made hard her heart then, too, and shed no tear at those words.

Early next morning two black ravens flew over their white mansion. Strange they were, the ill-fated birds: their wings were blood-bespattered up to their shoulders; their beaks and breasts covered by white foam. They carried a warrior's arm, with a golden ring glistening on the hand; and this they dropped in the mother's lap. The mother of the nine Yugovichi took the arm, and, turning it over in her lap, called her daughter-in-law.

'Daughter-in-law and Damyan's beloved, could you tell me whose arm this might be?'



'Mother-in-law, Damyan's own mother, this is the arm of our dear Damyan; I know it only too well, mother, for I know this golden ring. That is Damyan's wedding ring, dear mother.'

The mother took the hand again, and turned it over and over in her lap, speaking softly:

'My hand, my dear green apple, where did you grow, and where were you plucked off?'

'You grew on my own lap, beloved hand, and you were torn off on the Field of Kossovo!'

The mother could stand it no longer. Her heart broke with grief for her nine sons, nine sons, the nine Yugovichi and the tenth one, the old Yug Bogdan.



KRALYEVICH MARKO



FUR-LINED helmet low over his scowling brow, his bushy black moustache spreading wide above his mouth, jet-black eyes which looked daggers at whoever dared to cross him—and he was easily crossed, his temper being at its worst when he was roused from sleep—his fur-lined surcoat turned inside out when he was angry, Marko was a terrifying sight indeed. Endowed with extraordinary physical strength, he had an extraordinary appetite too: very fond of good red wine he was, but he seldom drank it out of a cup. Basins had to be brought out, golden or silver ones if possible, and Marko would enjoy himself by drinking the red wine and giving half of it to his inseparable companion, his brave steed, the huge piebald Sharats, or Sharin, as he was often called. There must have been a perfect communion between the two of them, and great love too, for neither of them failed to notice the slightest change in the other's mood, to inquire for the cause of it, and to try to put matters right again. The