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A BOOK OF THE WEEK.

THE SOUL OF THE GREEK PEASANT.*

THIS book could not have been produced at a more auspicious moment. War is always a great teacher of geography, and also of what may be called international psychology. The struggle over Crete has probably made every English man and English woman more interested in the Greek character than at any moment since Byron made Greece the inspiration of his song. And what we all want to know most is what kind of being is the average and the simple Greek man and woman; not the statesman nor the general—after all, we know all about them; nor the aristocrat nor the merchant. The aristocrat of every nation is now a cosmopolitan, and the Greek merchant has been long settled among us. It is of the common people we want to know—the peasant that tills the fields; that lives in the purely Greek atmosphere of his tiny Greek island and his native village; that is now rushing to the frontier, without uniform, and perhaps even without shoes, to renew the old heroic fight with the powerful and ancient oppressor.

This is the Greek we meet in the book before me. There is not one Greek in all the stories above the rank of the peasant. They are stories of peasant joys, peasant sorrows, of the hopes, and the struggles, the victims and the failures, of the tillers of the soil in the village communities of the scattered Isles of Greece. For the most part, there is an entire absence of that foreign and terrible element which plays so large a part in the lives of the Greek subjects of Turkey. Of the twenty-four stories but three introduce the Turk. It is all about the inner life of the Greek peasant, man and woman, as they live it among themselves. Let me say at once that the stories confirm that extremely agreeable impression of the character of the common people in Greece which every English traveller seems to take away with him. A hard-working, frugal, sober race—that every-body knew the Greek peasants to be; that the peasant is almost in every country where he owns the land he tills. The side of the Greek peasant which these stories reveal is the intensity and the nobility of his affections, and that is to a certain extent a revelation and a surprise. We know what kind of picture Zola has drawn of the peasant proprietors of his native country—the most repulsive and, I hope, the least voracious picture in all his gallery of many horrors. Greed, however, may be admitted to be a vice which finds a favourable soil in the peasant breast—the greed that sees in love, marriage, even in country, only the sordid side of gathering more or less money. Doubtless there is the same side in the peasant nature of Greece as well as in that of France; but if these stories be true to life—and they certainly strongly impress you with a sense of likeness to life—sordidness is the least potent of the passions of the Greek villager. Love of youth for maid, of husband for wife, of father for child—this is the feeling which dominates all others, which means hope or despair, life or death, to the Greek peasant. In one form or another this is the central theme of all the stories until, in the end, you get a sense that in the Isles of Greece emotion is a more supreme factor in life than in any other land. Over and over again, as we shall see, wounded affection, lost love, means death to man or to woman; until in the end you are driven to the belief that the relations of men and women to each other are tenderer, closer, more full of perfect music in those small communities than anywhere else.

Let me give, without further preface, some specimens of the stories which fill the book.

"There is a ghost," says the teller of the story, "in many a hamlet, many a hill, wood, or lonely chapel. . . . In the island village whither I am about to take you, the ghost of the place was for many years a certain Skipper Giorgis."

Picture to yourself a middle-aged man of medium height, his features regular, but so sunburnt that you might take him for a Moor. And not his face only, but his whole body was the same, for, except rags and tatters, other clothes had he none. Whenever they gave him clothes, down he would sit beside some rock, tearing them up into little shreds, which he pieced together again with string, and wore them so. He never told us why he did that; but we all knew of it, and, between you and me, I may as well say he was daft. Kapetan Giorgis used to speak a language all his own; here and there you might understand a word, but the most of it rattled off his tongue like pebbles falling upon the ground. He seemed altogether serious and wrapt in his thoughts. Even his laugh (and he laughed but seldom) had a strange gravity, as who should say, "All right, boy, my lass, I know thou'rt a trickster, but thou'l not trick me!" He never entered the village unless he was hungry. And then, of course, people used to give him something. That den of his was away outside, open to the four winds, towards the old city. There he loved to wander about; and, sooth to say, when I saw him at times amid the ruins, he seemed, as it were, the spectre of one of our forefathers, risen from the dead to bewail the desolation of his native land.

This was the history of Kapetan Giorgis. He was the son of a poor fisherman; but he was energetic, ambitious, and he loved and was loved.

"But before he could propose for the girl he ought to dower and wed his three sisters, and then make a position for himself too. Well, they agreed between them to wait a few years, and then he was to send the matchmaker. . . . And so on goes Giorgis into the world; and, working with all his heart, in one year he managed to get a boat of his own. In another year the boat became a smack. And every year back came the skipper from his voyages, in high spirits, and with you, each year he married off one sister. . . . Each wedding brought him a step nearer to his sweetheart. At the third wedding I was the bridegroom. . . . The poor fellow tried to make his own match that time; and would to God he had made it! The dowers had swallowed up all he had, save money, but people knew him now for a clever fellow, and that was worth a great deal for Giorgis. But then, you see, even the smack was mortgaged with building house after house for his sisters. At last we told him, a proud man is the girl's father—go one voyage more, and marry your girl, and woo thy beauty. I well remember the evening when he took the musicians and went serenading beneath her windows, and sang to her as he went by, without stopping, for fear her people might smell a rat (they knew nothing about it):—

Now fare thee well, my golden dove, I soon shall be departed:
Forth from thy window peep above, that I may go light-hearted

And a window half opened in the upper storey. Next day the smack got under weigh, and Kapetan Giorgis was firing farewell salutes to his lady-love. Eleven months went by, and we had heard nothing. In the twelfth month a terrible rumour buzzed among us. . . . And true it was, too. The whole thing was begun and done in a twinkling. The girl protested, wept, beseeched; all in vain. She was lugged off to the priest, and before the week was out the stranger had carried her off to his home dower and all, to poison our life without blessing his own; for the poor lass fell into a consumption, and in a few months all was over. The wedding party left one day in the morning, and next evening late brought the caique with Giorgis into our bay. It was a peaceful evening, and once again his gun spoke out, and woke the echoes among the hills. No one answered, for the landing-place was unwell, and I knew him well, and heard the ... the rest might drive him mad some ... When he saw me standing ... perceive, and, half dropped, sank ... [illegible] ... knees, and, ... Anybody dead? Tell me, and have done with it." As I tried, faltering, to say that there had been no death, he brought me up sharp with, "Well, what is it then? Married?" I could hold out no longer, but began to sob. He stared hard at me, and turned as yellow as sulphur; but not a word, only gnawed his moustache in a mad sort of way, then suddenly into the boat, and off. I lost my head, for I should have jumped in with him. I called after him, and injured him by his father's soul, but he was out of the bay in no time. I could find another boat to carry me aboard him, he was at the helm of his caique, which now turned seawards again. In a little while she had disappeared over the sea.

Kapetan Giorgis let his vessel run before the wind, and the wind carried him straight on what you call the Broad Beach. 'Twas night, and about a league off the land the skipper called his men, and ordered them to get in the boat and go where they would. The men looked at each other in dismay, and hesitated, but the skipper seized the gun, shoved them off, and in earnest. The end of it was, they took the boat and headed her for the beach, but they still kept an eye behind, for it seemed as if something was wrong with the skipper. A little while and they saw the caique running full sail upon a headland some half a mile beyond the cape. In a trice the boat's head was round, and straight for the rock, but when they got there the caique had disappeared, and he with her. As soon as ever he came to the surface, half dead, one of them gript him, pulled him into the boat, and got him ashore. His breath came back to him by-and-bye, but neither wit nor speech ever again returned. . . . He must have lost his wits before ever he sank the vessel. When they had saved him and got him ashore they found him a hopeless imbecile. They tried to keep him in a house till one of us could go over, but he would not stir from the spot. When I came I found him stretched on the shingle by the seashore, and proposed that we should go home—'twas all one as if I spoke to a stone. Gradually he found voice to mutter as he does now, and from his half-words I soon perceived that the mischief was past curing. One day I got him aboard a caique by force, and he jumped like a cat and swam away. Now I pay him a visit twice in the year. I find him down yonder among the tombs of the Turkish cemetery; for mad though he be, he is sane enough to wish no one to know that I am anything to him. He wants to remain unknown here. I take his clothes and he first tears them to rags, and then wears them. He's a living shipwreck himself, poor soul, with his mind stopt short for ever, gone to the bottom as sure as that ship that sank with all he had in the world. . . . Next day . . . I saw Kapetan Giorgis tearing up a new cape muttering the while, and gazing upon the sea.

Another feature which runs through all these stories of village love is its modesty and its purity. The youth looks at the maiden, but his eyes are sly; his lips dumb. He is scarcely allowed to touch even her hand till his and hers are joined by the priest. In that touching and tragic story which I have just quoted, for instance, one of the passages which struck me most was that in which the furtive and timorous visit which the passionate lover pays to his mistress is described. The lover with the musicians "went serenading beneath her window, and sang to her *as he went by, without stopping, for fear her people might smell a rat.*" Is there not something very exalted and touching in the delicacy of this love? This is on the part of the man; and equally exalted and touching is the delicacy of the woman's love. "And a window half-opened in the upper storey"—that is all; but what a world of meaning there is in it!

"Marinos Kontaras" gives a beautiful picture of how love can exalt and reform a nature that is wild, reckless, and violent. "Marinos Kontaras" is what I dare say was once a common type in the Greek isles—half-skipper, half-pirate. He lands in the island, where the narrator of his history was born, to "burrow" there. "He did not know what they wanted him for, and did not care; if it was not for murder, it was for robbery."

A most unmanageable fellow he was; his knife was smeared with blood, very often with his own, for when he got drunk he used to stick it in the muscles to show his pluck. Plucky the devil certainly was, and handsome too. No sooner had his boat come to anchor down yonder than over he jumped, and made straight for the vineyard of Giligoris Physicis; ran along the wall, picked his skirt full of grapes, and back again as innocent as a lamb. But no thanks to Marinos: thus the man was at the time the village champion, a terrible brawler. Well, he shouted loud enough when he saw the thief. Kontaras laughed, and made for his boat; Giligoris was after him; the neighbours heard the uproar, and came by one at a call gathered. Marinos was by this time sitting unconcerned on his boat, and sharing the grapes with his mates. Our people fired up, leapt aboard, and made as though they would lay hands on the man. But in an instant he was up, and on the sand, and out flashed his knife, and says he, "Ah, you devils! have you never hear of Marinos Kontaras?" This was a thunderclap. But Giligoris, however, did not mean to be thwarted so easily, and then have all the village twitting him by-and-bye; so says he: "Well, if you're Marinos Kontaras, I am Giligoris Physicis; and if you like to measure yourself against me, down with your dirk, and let's wrestle a fall here upon the sand." Marinos looked the other full in the eyes, and smiled. He doffed his vest, and threw it down upon the sand, laid the dirk beside it, drew to himself the wrestling lock, and stood as if he were going to dance. Giligoris did the same, and they closed. . . . Next morrow, they say, Marinos and he were fast friends. "Yes, and pots for the moor!" With fierce looks, they leapt upon each other. The whole thing took no longer than you might say, "Amen." Kontaras got Giligoris by the waist, and laid him flat. "That's enough, Giligoris," cried the bystanders, "your back has bit the dust!" Giligoris got up, shook himself, put on his waistcoat, and began to think it would have been better to put up with the loss of the grapes. That evening, the tavern of mine host Theodaires was full of merriment. All the village was assembled outside to see the notorious Kontaras. When it was a case of "business," he used to be like a wild beast; now he seemed like an angel.

At the feast, Kontaras sees Lemone, the sister of Giogoris.

She was a girl of eighteen, black-eyed and golden-haired. When they saw her, they all forgot their fun; but the man who was most taken aback was Marinos Kontaras. He twirled and twirled at his moustache, pretended not to see her, but do what he would, his eyes remained fixed upon the girl. . . . Songs and dances began anew, but no more taste for follies had Marinos. He made as though he had drunk too much, and sat in a corner, where he did nothing but twirl his moustache.

Finally, the fun is kept up till the morning, and—

"Giligoris, by this time as drunk as he could be, called to Lemone, and she came. That's where the mischief happened. Up got Marinos, took the glass, and, looking straight at the girl, said to her, just as if they two were there alone:

"'I entered where the vine grows fair, to find sweet grapes for eating;
Yet did not meet a thing so sweet as are thy kisses, sweeting!'

and as he said the words, he actually stooped down and kissed her on the lips! Such an insult was a thing unheard of in our honourable village. The girl blushed red, and disappeared from amongst us; she went out and sobbed like a little child. Then the mother came in for the first time, and spoke her mind to Giligoris. All the company fell silent; the musicians departed, the rest followed one by one. Giligoris was as though just awakened from a dream; one moment he looked about him, the next he threw himself upon Marinos. Now the angel became a wild beast again. Out flashed his knife; he glared at Giligoris with the look of a devil. . . . He rushed upon him, wrenched the dagger from his hand, and dragged him outside the house; then, hustling him along, they made their way towards his boat. On the way such as he passed his home dropped in, and got pistol, or knife, or hatchet; then, arrived at the landing-stairs, they formed in line, like soldiers on parade, and shouted to him to be off with his crew, or they would send them all to the bottom. There were only a few men with Marinos, and those mostly drunk, so as needs must, he seized the pole, and, pushing off, said, with a grim smile, "To our next meeting!" The boat moved slowly over the water. After a little while, Giligoris made his appearance, gun in hand. Finding that the boat was away, he fell in a passion, and leapt into the water to follow her. It was but a drunkard's folly; the people fished him out, and got him home again.

Marinos returns; abducts the girl. He "treated her as a mother would treat her first-born child. He spoke to her, made her promises, fondled her, with never a hard word said, and never a hard word done." But Lemone will not answer him until they come to the house where Marinos is resolved they shall be married. Then

She called out and said: "If you will take an oath before the Virgin and St. Nicholas, and before the priest, that your life, now and for ever, shall be gentle and sweet as the words you have said to me; that you will renounce the sea and renounce the knife; and that you will return to our village with the priest, to bear witness that he received me with my honour unstained; and if you will live with me always, my answer is—Yes." Marinos wanted nothing else; he was ready to swear anything if he might win her love.

From that hour the "wild beast. . . . was turned into an angel"; and for fifty years they lived, "loving and beloved." The wife dies, and the narrator enters the church where the funeral service is being celebrated.

When the priest began to read his part of the service, I made an attempt to see the old husband. A strange old man he looked; he was trembling from head to foot, and they had to hold him up, as though he had but just arisen from some grievous sickness. He was yellow, and tall for all his stoop, with bushy brows that fell over his eyes, lips all a-tremble, hair and moustache snow-white—a fine old man, but what a wreck! Half an hour later we passed out into the graveyard which lies beside the church; yet a few minutes, and the last clods fell into the grave. Here the old man could bear up no longer. He rolled over upon the grass, groaned something, and never another word said he, but took little water upon him, and raised not, but all in vain. So they bore him into the priest's cell, where he lay, closed his eyes, cast one look at the icon of St. Nicholas, and stiffened. The old man was dead.

That is, as I have said, the note of all the stories; when one dies, then the other cannot live. "Charon's Victim" is even a more tragic example. "She was an orphan girl and eighteen years old when her aunt found her a husband." Lampros, the bridegroom, was "a fine young fellow with a house of his own." They have but one great drawback in their lives: first one baby and then the second died.

It might have been three months after they lost their baby that Lampros's friend, a great man of the place, endeavoured to get over to Roumelia to arrange some business for him, as he was being pressed to become a candidate for one of the Chambers. Then arose the question of parting. Their hearts almost broke. Still they said, "Let us be patient; it is not for long." So Lampros left his wife in her aunt's charge, and departed. The poor fellow did not know how he loved her until he had to part from her. He was broken-hearted over it all, and he had nothing to console him but his letters and hers, both full of longings and sighs. "God be praised," she wrote to him once, "that it will not be long before I have my dear lad again." And if she had only known! Lampros on his arrival found everything in confusion. He would have to stay at least one year to gather in the capital of his master's, which had been scattered to the four winds. He tried to muster courage for it. "Courage!" came out of his heart with a sigh. And how could he write to her? Until it would kill her, poor thing, better to keep putting it off from day to day. It was but a year, and a year will have an end. Only he must write to her every week. And every week he wrote, and his wife answered with half-suppressed impatience, which would have become a tempest of passion if she could have spoken to him. Thanks to the master, who pitied them, one day she learned the truth, and he quieted her, and took her promise to be patient for a few months yet. All months pass away, and so did these. It was a spring day, St. George's Feast, and all the village was starting out for the feast. Her good neighbours pitied the poor woman, and did their best to persuade her to come along with them. Why not go out and enjoy herself a little? Lampros must find her well and strong, not pale as she was then. Her aunt said the same, and, much against her will, she went to join the throng.

"Hurry up, Mitro, hurry up, let's get in before dark; an hour more, and there we are!" It was Lampros addressing his muleteer on the evening of the feast of St. George. He had got away from Roumelia a fortnight earlier than he expected, perhaps wishing to give his wife a little surprise. He was almost beside himself as he rode over the hills and through the woods. He talked to himself, he called out greetings, he laughed; he could see her before him already, his beloved wife in their peaceful home, sitting in a corner of it, and quietly spinning. Then he would steal upon her from behind, and then she would start