Peaks of Shala

By

Rose Wilder Lane

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THE ROLLER THAT IS SMOOTHING THE NEW BOULEVARD IN TIRANA

INTRODUCTION

I would not have this book considered too seriously. It is not an attempt to untangle one thread in the Balkan snarl; it is not a study of primitive peoples; it is not a contribution to the world's knowledge, and I hope no one will read it to improve the mind. It should be read as the adventures in it were lived, with a gayly inquiring mind, a taste for strange peoples and unknown trails, and a delight in the unexpected.

Here I give you only what I saw, felt, and most casually learned while adventuring among the tribes in the interior northern Albanian mountains. It is not even all of Albania, that little country too small to be found on every map. It is simply a fragment of this large, various, and romantic world, sent back by a traveler to those who stay at home.

R. W. L.

Annette Marquis accompanied the author on her trip through Albania and it is to her skill that the photographs are due.

Peaks of Shala

CHAPTER I

SHADOWS ON SCUTARI PLAIN—THE VOICE IN THE CHAFA BISHKASIT—THE LANDS OF THE HIDDEN TRIBES—A WOMAN OF SHALA.

When the sun rose over the blue, snow-crested mountains that are the southernmost slopes of the Dinaric Alps, it made, on the Scutari plain, a pattern of our shadows; shadows of four small wooden-saddled ponies, each led by a mountaineer with a rifle on his back, of two tall, ragged gendarmes, and of a small trudging boy in a red Turkish fez—all moving single file across an interminable plain shaggy with blossoming cactus.

The wooden saddles were three-sided boxes made of peeled branches; padded beneath with sheepskins, they fitted over the ponies' backs. On top of them our blankets were packed; saddlebags hung from the four corners; enthroned in the midst we rode, comfortable as in an easy-chair, sitting sidewise, our knees crossed, smoking cigarettes and rocking gently with the ponies' pace. And all this was to me an enchantment suddenly appearing above the surface of well-arranged days, as new South Sea islands rise before a mariner in hitherto familiar waters.

Three days earlier the mountains of Albania, indeed, Albania itself, had been unknown to me, and disregarded. I had meant to go by Scutari as a hurried walker brushes by the stranger on the street. Scutari had been merely a place to pass on the way from Podgoritza to Constantinople. And now, in this

brightening dawn upon the Scutari plain, I was riding to unknown adventure among the hidden tribes of Dukaghini.

This was the doing of Frances Hardy. That impetuous and efficient girl had seized upon me and my small affairs as six months earlier she had seized upon the refugee situation in Scutari, taking control, making adjustment, creating a new pattern. A thin, athletic, sun-browned girl, so full of energy that her very finger tips seemed to crackle electrically—that was Frances Hardy. An Albaniac, I called her at our first meeting, perceiving that one might disagree with her, argue with her, even poke fun at her, and still be her friend. She had seized on the word with delight—the perfect word, she said—and had returned at once to her attack.

"Constantinople's nothing. Everyone goes to Constantinople. But if you don't see Albania, you're wasting the chance of a lifetime. Up in those mountains—right up there in those mountains, a day's journey from here—the people are living as they lived twenty centuries ago, before the Greek or the Roman or the Slav was ever known. There are prehistoric cities up there, old legends, songs, customs that no one knows anything about. No stranger's ever even seen them. Great Scott, woman! And you sit there and talk about Constantinople!"

"But if nobody goes there, how can we do so?" I said.

"How does anyone ever do anything? Simply do it. Hire horses, get on them, and go."

"Carrying our own guns?"

“Oh, we’ll be safe enough! We may run into a blood feud or two, and get our guides shot up, but nobody ever harms a woman. Nobody even shoots a man in her presence.”

“She means no Albanian ever does,” said Alex.

“Bless ’em!” said Frances, and added, in Albanian, “Glory to their feet!”

I had the vaguest notion of Albania. I knew it was the smallest and newest member of the League of Nations; I knew it was in the Balkan wars, and I knew that recently the Albanians had driven from their shores the Italian army of occupation. If some one, testing my intelligence or psycho-analyzing, had said to me, “Albanians,” I should have replied, “Bandits.”

But Frances Hardy is irresistible in more ways than one. Therefore, on this spring morning, while mists rose slowly from the blue waters of Lake Scutari and the shadows of the mountains retreated from its shores, we were riding northward toward the lands of the mountain tribes.

There were four of us, not counting our retainers. No, five, for at the last moment small, chubby-cheeked Rexh,[1] in his red Mohammedan fez, had gravely engaged Frances Hardy in argument as to the desirability of his accompanying us. Twelve years old, a stanch Mohammedan, self-adopted father of seven smaller refugee children for whom he maintained a family life in a hut he had found, he had made all arrangements for the trip without consulting us. He said that he had never seen the mountains and that he thought it necessary to learn about them as part of the education of a good Albanian. He pointed

out that he spoke excellent English, which he had learned in some three months of association with Miss Hardy, and that he would be valuable as an interpreter. It was true that we had one interpreter, but there were six men and many saddlebags; he would keep an eye upon them all. The care of his children he had arranged for; as to the Mohammedan school in which he was a pupil, it taught him nothing; he would take a vacation from it. He would be of use to us upon the trip; the trip would be of value to him. Having said this, he gravely awaited Miss Hardy's decision. When she said, "All right, Rexh," he permitted himself to smile and looked over the packs, suggesting some changes that would make us more comfortable. He now walked behind Miss Hardy's pony, a pistol and a knife in the belt of his American pajama coat.

Our interpreter was also a friend; Rrok Perolli, secretary to the Albanian Minister of the Interior. He was on a vacation, he said, but as the northern interior tribes were antagonistic to the new government, it might be as well not to mention who he was. We were going very near to the Serbian lines; he had recently escaped from sentence of death in a Serbian prison; there was a price on his head in Serbia. It would be easy for one of the tribes to hand him across the line. They could not kill him in our presence, of course, but, once out of our sight, they could in ten minutes find Serbians who would do it for them.

He was a care-free young man, black haired, dark eyed, dressed in the smartest of English tweed suits, with a businesslike revolver and one of the handiest of daggers swinging in leather holsters at the belt. His father was a merchant in Ipek, rich territory now held by the Serbs; the son had been educated in

London, Berlin, and Paris, and spoke their languages as well as his own Albanian, also Serbian, Italian, Turkish, and Greek. He enlivened the morning with songs in all these languages, illustrating a running discussion of comparative music. Swaying gently on his pony's back, he sniffed the sweet air, cool from the waters of Lake Scutari; he gazed cheerfully at the blue hills beyond the lake, held by the Serbian armies; he was altogether the happy office man off for a lazy vacation. Just the same, I wondered a bit, taking everything into consideration. It cannot be said that I was entirely unprepared for the interesting developments before us.

Fourth in our party was Alex. Sunshiny hair, softly fluffed; wide blue eyes; and that complexion of pink and white, like roses painted on a china plate, that drives a dagger of envy into every feminine heart and makes the fortunes of cosmetic makers. She wore a purple tam, a leaf-brown sweater with a purple tie, and the trimmest of riding trousers; she looked like a magazine cover. She was in reality the most hard-headed, soberly sensible of girls; to her finger tips an anti-Potterite. She and Frances were going into the mountains to decide where to establish three schools. They had themselves collected in America the money for them, and this was their vacation from Red Cross work.

At about noon we left the plain, and almost at once our ponies began to stand up like pet dogs begging for cake, their hind legs supporting their weight while front hoofs pawed for foothold above on the stairlike, rocky trail. An Albanian held each of us tightly by elbow or knee, ready to save us from squashy death if the pony lost its balance, and as the little animals strained,

clambered, gathered their feet together for desperate leaps, a sudden long high wail broke forth ahead. The two gendarmes were singing.

Walking easily up a trail that I could have overcome only on hands and knees, carrying their rifles and twenty pounds of canned goods on their backs, they were merrily singing. Thumbs pressed tightly against their ears, to prevent the air pressure of their lungs from bursting ear drums, they sent far over the crags the long, shrill, high notes, like nothing human I had ever heard. Frances Hardy, lying almost perpendicular along her pony's back, her chin on what would have been the saddle pommel had there been one, looked downward at me, similarly extended.

"They're making a song to the Chafa Bishkasit, the Road of the Mountaineers," she said. "That's the Chafa up there. We're going over it to-day, and then we'll be in the mountains. Aren't you happy?"

I could find no word emphatic enough for reply as I gazed up at the tiny notch in a wave of snow-crest that curled against the sky five thousand feet above us.

The sun swung to its highest and sank again while we climbed. It was low in the sky—it seemed on a level with us—when we made the last interminable hundred yards up into the Chafa Bishkasit. We were in the sky; there is no other way to say it, and no way in which to describe that sensation of infinite airiness. Forty miles behind and below us Lake Scutari lay flat, like a pool of mercury on a gray-brown floor. At each side of our little gay-colored cavalcade a gray cliff rose perhaps two

hundred feet, too sheer to hold the snow that thickly crusted its top. These cliffs were the posts of a gateway through which we looked into the country of the hidden tribes.

I had never seen or dreamed such mountains. Like thin, sharp rocks stood on edge, they covered hundreds of miles with every variation of light and shadow, and we looked across their tops to a far-away wave of snow that broke high against the sky. The depths between the mountains were hazy blue; out of the blueness sharp cliffs and huge flat slopes of rock thrust upward, streaked with the rose and purple and Chinese green of decomposing shale, and from their tops a thousand streams poured downward, threading them with silver white. A low, continuous murmur rose to us—the sound of innumerable waterfalls, softened by immeasurable distances.

Suddenly, clear and very far and thin, a call came out of the spaces. It was like a fife, and yet not like it. Instantly our guides were still, attentive. A moment of silence, and farther and thinner, hardly to be heard above the beating of blood in our ears, there was an answer. Then the first note began again and went on and on; there seemed to be a pattern to it, not a tune—words? I looked at the others.

Rrok Perolli was motionless, a cigarette between his lips, his hand arrested in the act of striking a match. Little Rexh, his round face intent beneath the red fez, his mouth slightly open, his eyes wide and blank, was an image of concentrated listening. The two gendarmes stood alert, like dogs straining at a leash, scenting something. Our four guides, in their long white trousers, black jackets, colored turbans and sashes, were like men frozen in attitudes of interrupted talk.

THE CHAFA BISHKASIT
The "Road of the Mountaineer"—the gateway to the northern lands.

The voice ceased. The other one came back like an echo, so faint I thought I imagined it. Then—Bang! Bang! Bang! The very mountains lifted up their voices and roared. It was like the cataclysm at the end of the world; mountain striking against mountain, the air smashed like glass and falling, clattering. Rrok Perolli lighted his cigarette. The others shifted their rifles, tightened their sashes, said "Hite!" to the horses, and we started on. All around us the echoes were still contending, striking and breaking against one another like ore in a mill.

"What was it?" I cried to Perolli, whose horse was slipping down the trail ahead, kept from going headlong by its owner, who held it by the tail, bracing his bare feet on every foothold.

“Telephoning,” said Perolli. “It’s the way they send news through the mountains. A man on one of the peaks calls, and another one somewhere hears him and answers. You’ve seen ’em hold their ears and throw their voices. That’s it. And three shots to show that the talk’s ended.”

“What was he saying?”

“Something about Shala. Shala and Shoshi are in blood, evidently.”

“Do we go through those tribes?”

My horse slipped just then and a man snatched me from the saddle. The horse, held by the tail, floundered on the trail, striking sparks from his hoofs, shod with solid thin plates of steel; the packs went over his head. My man set me on a shoulder-high rock and dashed to aid the rescue. It looked for a moment as though they would all go down upon Perolli below, but the horse got his footing and stood trembling, his head covered with streaming blankets.

I said then that I would walk, but it was not walking. It was jumping, scrambling, dropping. Those mountains were evidently created to be looked at, not to be walked upon. Bathed in perspiration, I stopped from time to time to eat a bit of snow, and twelve-year-old Rexh looked at me with compassion. He had walked nearly twenty miles that day and was still gay and fresh; the men were still singing.

“In a minute, Mrs. Lane, we will come to a resting place,” the pitying Rexh encouraged me, and in perhaps half an hour my trembling legs brought me around a bowlder to see the two

gendarmes stopped in the trail, crossing themselves. A wooden cross, blackened by storms and years, leaned forward above them, supported by a pile of stones on a small grassy knoll. Alex and Frances dropped from their ponies to lie panting beside me on the grass, while the guides, smiling at our whim, stopped also. Each of them crossed himself before sitting down, for the mountain tribes have been Catholic almost ever since St. Paul preached in the Balkans, and missionary priests have put the cross at each resting place on the trails, to bring thoughts of God to weary men.

Below our feet the cliffs fell away, down into blue haze; above us were forested slopes, and above them sheer, great cliffs throwing shadows across a dozen valleys. Our small grassy knoll was white with daisies and with fallen petals from a blossoming apple tree that arched above the cross. On it our men lay at ease, beautiful, graceful animals, their rifles swung from their shoulders and laid ready to their hands.

“Why are Shala and Shoshi in blood?” Frances asked, casually, biting idly at the stem of a daisy. Perolli did not know; he had gathered only the fact that there was a feud.

“Do we go through both tribes?” I wanted to know.

“Through Shala. Shoshi’s farther down the river. We’ll go around it.”

“Are our men Shala or Shoshi?”

Perolli glanced at them. “Shala, by the pattern of the braiding on their trousers. So we won’t have any troub——Hello! That’s a Shoshi man coming up the trail, now.”

It was Alex who acted quickest. She was sitting on a rock beside me, her arms clasped about her knees; she rose instantly and, flinging out a hand in the gesture of greeting, cried in her most feminine voice those Albanian words that sound like, “Tune yet yetta!” and mean, “May you live long!”

The Shoshi man’s hand was on his rifle, but his step had not faltered. He replied, coming on steadily, and the appropriateness of the greeting struck me, for if it had not been uttered by a woman he would at that moment have been dead. Our Shala men, with perfect courtesy, went through the formalities of greeting on the trail, and this is the form, translated to me by Rexh:

“Long life to you!”

“And to you, long life!”

“How could you?” meaning, “How could you get here?”

“Slowly, slowly, little by little.”

No one who has ever seen those trails can doubt it.

The Shoshi man sat down, our men offered him cigarettes, and up the trail came a woman of Shoshi. She wore a tight, bell-shaped skirt of horizontal black and white stripes, made of cloth heavier and thicker than felt, the twelve-inch-wide marriage belt of heavy leather studded with pounds of nails, and a jacket covered with three-inch-thick fringe. Two heavy braids of black hair hung forward on her breasts, a colored handkerchief was bound around her head, and her face, smoothly weather browned, large eyed, delicately shaped, was

the most beautiful that I had ever seen. On her back, held by woven woolen straps that crossed between her breasts, was a cradle tightly covered by a thick blanket; in one hand she held a bunch of raw wool, and from the other dangled a whirling spindle. Her feet were bare, and as she came up that trail which had exhausted me she sang softly to herself, dexterously spinning thread from the bunch of wool.

Cheremi, our gayer gendarme, rose quickly and went to meet her. He took her by the hand and laid his cheek caressingly against hers. He was like a child, Cheremi, with his happy face, deep wrinkled with laughter, the mischievous twinkle in his eyes, his bursts of wit and song. But he looked all of his forty years as he gazed tenderly at the woman of Shoshi.

“She is a woman of my people,” he said, leading her gallantly to us.

“Are you a woman?” said Frances Hardy, correctly, in Albanian.

“I am born of Shala, married in Shoshi,” she answered. Her voice was soft, and her hands and feet would have been madness to a sculptor. In any Paris restaurant those slender fingers, almond nails, and delicate wrists, aristocratic, well bred, would have been a sensation.

We admired the baby, excavating it from five folds of blankets to do so. How they live beneath the smothering I do not know; a Western baby would die in three hours. We asked the mother how old she was. Eighteen, she said, and she had been married three years.

“And have you been home since?”