

SOME SERBIAN POPULAR ANECDOTES

St. Peter and the Sand

A Townsman went one day to the country to hunt and came at noon to the house of a peasant whom he knew. The man asked him to share his dinner, and while they were eating, the townsman looked around him and noticed that there was but little arable land to be seen. There were rocks and stones in abundance, however. Surprised at this, the townsman exclaimed: "In the name of all that is good, my friend, how on earth can you good people of this village exist without arable land! And whence these heaps of rocks and stones?" "It is, indeed, a great misfortune!" answered the peasant. "People say that our ancestors heard from their forefathers that when our Lord walked on this earth, St. Peter accompanied Him carrying on his back a sack full of sand. Occasionally our Lord would take a grain of sand and throw it down to make a mountain, saying: "May this grain multiply!" When they arrived here St. Peter's sack burst and half of its contents poured out in our village.

Why the Serbian People are Poor

The nations of the world met together one day on the middle of the earth to divide between themselves the good things in life. First they deliberated upon the methods of procedure. Some recommended a lottery, but the Christians, well knowing that they, as the cleverest, would be able to obtain the most desirable gifts, and not wishing to be at the mercy of fortune, suggested (and the idea was instantly adopted by all) that each should express a wish for some good thing and it would be granted to him. The men of Italy were allowed to express their wish first, and they desired Wisdom. The Britons said: "We will take the sea." The Turks: "And we will take fields." The Russians: "We will take the forests and mines." The French: "And we will have money and war." "And what about you Serbians?" asked the nations, "What do you wish for?" "Wait till we make up our mind!" answered the Serbians; and they have not yet agreed upon their reply.

The Gipsies and the Nobleman

A very rich and powerful nobleman was one day driving through his vast estates. From afar four *Tzigans*¹ noted that he was alone, and greedily coveting his fine carriage horses, determined to deprive him of them. As the carriage approached, they rushed on to the road, respectfully took off their hats, knelt before him, and one of them began to speak, saying: "Oh how happy we are to have an opportunity of manifesting to you, O most gracious Lord, our deep gratitude for the noble deeds and many acts of kindness with which your late and generous father used to overwhelm us! As we have no valuable presents to offer you, allow us to harness ourselves to your carriage and draw you home." The haughty nobleman, proud of his father's good deeds, was pleased to assent to this unusual form of courtesy. Two gipsies thereupon detached the horses, harnessed themselves to the carriage and drew it for some distance. Suddenly, however, they cut themselves loose and ran back to the two other rascals who by this time had got clear away with the horses.

*The Era from the Other World*²

A Turk and his wife halted in the shadow of a tree. The Turk went to the river to water his horse, and his wife remained to await his return. Just then an Era passed by and saluted the Turkish woman: "Allah help you, noble lady." "May God aid you," she returned; "whence do you come?" "I come from the Other World, noble lady." "As you have been in the Other World, have you not, perchance, seen there my son Mouyo, who died a few months ago?" "Oh, how could I help seeing him? He is my immediate neighbour." "Happy me! How is he, then?" "He is well, may God be praised! But he could stand just a little more tobacco and some more pocket-money to pay for black coffee." "Are you going back again? And if so, would you be so kind as to deliver to him this purse with his parents greetings?" The Era took the money protesting that he would be only too glad to convey so pleasant a surprise to the youth, and hurried away. Soon the Turk came back, and his wife told him what had transpired. He perceived at once that she had been victimized and without stopping to reproach her, he mounted his horse and galloped after the Era, who, observing the pursuit, and guessing at once that the horseman was the husband of the credulous woman, made all the speed that he could. There was a mill near by and making for it, the Era rushed in and addressed the miller with: "For Goodness' sake, brother, fly! There is a Turkish horseman coming with drawn sword; he will kill you. I heard him say so and have hurried to warn you in time." The miller had no time to ask for particulars; he knew how cruel the Turks were, and without a word he dashed out of the mill and fled up the adjacent rocks.

¹ Tzigans or Gipsies in Serbia, and indeed in the whole Balkan Peninsula, deal mostly with horses. Stealing and selling horses is their main occupation.

² Era is a name given to the peasants of the district of Ouzitze (Western Serbia). They are supposed to be very witty and shrewd, and might be called the Irishmen of Serbia.

Meantime the Era placed the miller's hat upon his own head and sprinkled flour copiously over his clothes, that he might look like a miller. No sooner was this done than the Turk came up. Alighting from his horse, he rushed into the mill and hurriedly asked the Era where he had hidden the thief. The Era pointed indifferently to the flying miller on the rock, whereupon the Turk requested him to take care of his horse while he ran and caught the swindler. When the Turk was gone some distance up the hill our Era brushed his clothes, swiftly mounted the horse and galloped away. The Turk caught the real miller, and demanded: "Where is the money you took from my wife, swindler?" The poor miller made the sign of the cross³ and said; "God forbid! I never saw your noble lady, still less did I take her money." After about half an hour of futile discussion, the Turk was convinced of the miller's innocence, and returned to where he had left his horse. But lo! There was no sign of a horse! He walked sadly back to his wife, and she, seeing that her husband had no horse, asked in surprise: "Where did you go, and what became of your horse?" The Turk replied: "You sent money to our darling son; so I thought I had better send him the horse that he need not go on foot in the Other World!"

³ When Serbians are greatly surprised at anything they involuntarily make the sign of the cross.