

THE MARRIAGE OF MAXIMUS TZRNOYEVITCH

THE BALLAD

This ballad from which the King of Montenegro, Nicholas Petrovitch, drew inspiration for his drama, *The Empress of the Balkans*, is undoubtedly the finest Serbian national poem ever composed and chanted in Montenegro. To render it satisfactorily in its poetic form into another language, compact as it is of intensely national characteristics, metaphors and other figures of speech, religious conceptions, customs and superstitions, would be impossible for even the greatest of poets.

A French proverb says, “quand on n’a pas ce que l’on aime, on aime ce que l’on a”, and the hope may be expressed that the philosophic English reader will make the best of the following prose version, such as it is, of a most interesting national poem.

THE STORY

Ivan Tzrnoyevitch (Ruler of Zetta and Montenegro, which were separate states at the beginning of the fifteen century) sailed across the Adriatic to Venice, in order to pay a visit to the Doge and to ask his daughter in marriage for his son Maximus. He remained there three years, during which he spent three tovars of gold and upon his departure at the end of this period he arranged to return the following year with his son and with one thousand, or more, guests for the marriage festivities. The Doge and his two sons, as well as a hundred of the Doge’s high dignitaries, accompanied Ivan to his galley and the Montenegrin prince repeated his promise to come again the next year with his guests and with his son, than whom, he averred, no finer hero or handsomer youth could be found in any gathering of one thousand Montenegrins or on thousand Venetians. The Doge, exceedingly pleased to have for his son-in-law such a fine hero, embraced Ivan, saying: “I thank thee, my friend, for such words! How happy I am to have gained such a dear son-in-law, whose equal should in vain be sought among thousands! I shall love him more than the sight of my eyes; and shall prepare precious gifts for him; horses and falcons, helmets with golden crests and round him cloaks to wrap such as he may be proud to wear. But if he be not as handsome as thou hast said; woe to thee!”

After this Ivan sailed for Zablak. As he neared his castle he felt very happy and urged on his steed Zdral to sooner to reach home. His faithful consort perceived him from afar, and at once gave orders to the servants to make the necessary preparations for the arrival of their lord. She judged from the gay appearance of her husband that he must have succeeded in his mission.

When Ivan arrived in the courtyard of his castle, some of his servants helped him to alight from his steed, others took off his armor and arms, and his son Maximus brought him a silver settle that he might be seated and rest. Ivan turned to thank his son, but behold! A misfortune had befallen him! During his father’s absence Maximus had been

stricken with small pox, that terrible scourge, and his once handsome face was so pitted and seamed that it was now horrible to look upon. The bard assures us that it was hardly possible to find an uglier fellow than Maximus had become.

The prince immediately recollected his boast to the Doge, that there could not be found amongst thousands a handsomer youth than his son, and he felt very sad; his long moustache drooped down onto his shoulders, (this expression occurs in several of the poems and implies the most deeply felt depression of spirits and disappointment) and with eyes fixed on the ground he sat silent and gloomy. His consort saw with concern her husband's despondency and she endeavored to raise his spirits. Gathering up the folds of her flowing robe and the ends of her long sleeves, she came close and bending kissed his hand. "Pray, my lord," she said, "why art thou so sad? Hast thou, perhaps, not been successful in thy mission? Hast thou not betrothed the Doge's daughter to our son? Is she perhaps not fair enough to become thy daughter-in-law? Dost thou regret the three tovars of gold which thou has spent?"

Thereupon Ivan roused himself and replied that it was quite another misfortune which was troubling him. He told how he had successfully betrothed the Doge's daughter, and that she was so beautiful that even the veele could not be compared with her; that it was not the thought of the gold he had spent that tormented him, for his castle was heaped up with treasure, and the abstraction of three tovars of ducats had hardly affected the size of the store. No, the real cause of his misfortune was that he had promised the Doge to give him for his son-in-law a youth who was the handsomest to be found amongst thousands, and that if he were to present his son Maximus as he now was, the Doge would surely be angry and a war would ensue.

When the princess heard this, she reproached Ivan with having gone so far away for a bride, when he could have found in Montenegro itself a much finer maiden whose family would be worthy of an alliance with his own. Prince Ivan was persuaded that he had acted unwisely, and he decided to abandon the betrothal, and forbade his friends to congratulate him.

THE MESSAGE FROM THE DOGE

Nine years elapsed, and it seemed that the betrothal had been forgotten by all, and that the Doge's daughter, having heard nothing from Ivan, had surely wedded another prince. But one day a message from the Doge arrived, in which he reproached the Montenegrin prince with having allowed nine years to pass without sending a word to his daughter, who, "form only a bud had developed into a beauteous rose." He further requested Ivan to write to his still patient daughter, and to tell her plainly what he had decided with regard to the proposed marriage; for if he did not now deem his son worthy of such a precious maiden, he must at once tell her so, that a prince deserving of her might be found.

The prince was seized with great grief as he read the Doge's message. What could he say or do! After pondering long he sought his princely consort and addressed her in this wise: "O my sweet eyed darling! I pray you counsel me now what to do! Shall I dispatch a message to the maiden and tell her that she is at liberty to seek another in marriage, or how otherwise shall I write?"

The princess was a wise woman, and she advised her husband prudently: "O my lord, thou Tzrnoyevitch Ivo! Has ever any man been counseled by a wife? This has never been and never shall be. For we women have long hair, but little brains. But as thou hast asked for my opinion, I will venture to say that it would be a sin before God, and before the world a shame, to deprive a maiden of happiness by releasing her from a suitably arranged betrothal. Listen to me, dear lord! What an insignificant reason alarms thee! If the small pox has damaged thy son's visage, thy distant friends should make allowance for such misfortune resulting from illness, for who is exempt? Furthermore, if thou darest a conflict when thou comest to Venice, I would remind thee that thou hast dungeons full of pure golden ducats; in thy cellars there is old wine in abundance; thy granaries are overfilled with wheat and other grain; consequently thou are well able to gather a great number of svats. Thou hast promised the Doge to go thither with one thousand svats, but why shouldst thou not take two thousand chosen heroes and equerries with thee? When the Venetians see with how great a force thou journeyest, they will not dare to attack thee, even if thy son were blind. Therefore, gather the svats, and hasten to bring the bride. O my lord, lose no more time in vain musing."

At these bold words, the prince expressed his great satisfaction with a burst of laughter. He immediately inscribed a missive and dispatched it by a speedy courier. Its contents ran thus: "O my friend, thou Doge of Venice! Thou could'st hear, if thou didst but listen, the roaring of my thirty cannons, which I am about to fire from my fortress! O friend, do not lost a single moment, but send at once galleys to meet me, my son and all our svats. Farewell!"

Ivan sent to Milosh Obrenbegovitch, inviting him to be the stari-svat and to attend with as many chosen heroes as he could possibly find within the provinces of Antivari and Dulzigno. He wrote also to his cousin, Captain Yovan, inviting him to come to the wedding with as many of his friends as possible. Couriers were sent to other friends, who received Ivan's invitation gladly, and before long the plain of Zablak was studded with their innumerable tents.

One morning Ivan noticed Captain Yovan, the bride's leader, pacing sadly the ramparts of the castle, and casting frequent glances at the spearmen, equerries and standards in the encampment below. Prince Ivan would not suffer anybody to be unhappy in the midst of his festive preparations, and so asked Captain Yovan the cause of his gloom. Yovan said, that if he might speak of what was lying upon his heart, he would counsel the prince to prepare a great feast for those numberless Montenegrins encamped before his castle, after which couriers should be sent throughout the camp telling all to return home that their fields should not be ruined by neglect. Thus the land would not be deprived of defenders against their persistent foe, the Turk, who might attack the country

at any moment while they were away. Then Yovan went on to relate to the prince how the previous night he had seen in a dream the sky suddenly covered with dark clouds; from those clouds a thunderbolt had fallen upon his princely castle and razed every single stone of it to the ground; a fire had then broken out and consumed the beautiful capital Zablak. When the castle fell a tower has struck Maximus but without doing him serious hurt. "Nevertheless," continued Yovan, "if there be any truth in dreams, Maximus would either perish or be severely wounded in Venice, and if I should be offended by a Venetian, all my followers, five hundred men of Podgoritza, would die in my defense."

Prince Ivan laughed heartily when Yovan had ended, and said that his good friend owed his bad dreams to the fact that his pillows were either too high or too low. Then saying, "dreams are false, but God is true," he turned away to give orders to fire thirty guns from the fortress as the signal for departure.

When the cannon roared, especially the two famous guns Krgno and Zelenko, the whole valley quaked, the black mountains resounded and the water of Zetina was stirred to its depths. Some equerries were shaken from their steeds and those standing fell on their knees on the grass, for it is no light matter when siege guns roar!

THE WEDDING PROCESSION SETS OUT

The svats started on the journey in the best of spirits; some urged and raced their coursers, other were drinking and singing gay wedding songs as they marched. In their midst rode Prince Ivan on his courser Zdral, with two proud falcons on his shoulders; on his right rode Maximus, and on his left Milosh Obrenbegovitch. Prince Ivan glanced often at his companions, and involuntarily drew a comparison between the two. All at once he ordered a halt and spake aloud, saying: "Listen, O my brothers, ye glorious svats! I have a plan to propose, and hope that you will think it good. We are on the point of embarking, O brothers, and will soon arrive in Venice. But look upon my son Maximus, how much spoilt is his appearance by horrible disease; he is unquestionably the ugliest of us all! Alas! when I was in Venice nine years ago I praised him as the handsomest youth to be found amongst one thousand Montenegrins; yea, even amongst one thousand Venetians. Therefore, O brothers, I am very sad this morning, and have no pleasure in the thought of meeting the Doge. Hear that the Venetians may attack us, so great will be their disappointment. But behold! O ye my valiant svats! We have here with us a hero whose equal in manly beauty must be vainly sought amongst us, as also amongst the proud Venetians. I speak of Voivode Milosh Obrenbegovitch. Let us, then, take off the plumed helmet from the head of my son and place it upon Milosh's head, and thus make him the bridegroom for the time being, until we have peacefully gained possession of the maiden!"

The svats were greatly impressed by Ivan's scheme, but they hesitated to speak, fearing the hurt the feelings of Maximus, who was a spirited youth and might resent the proposal. But Voivode Milosh said graciously: "O Ivan, our lord! Why dost thou make vain appeal to the scats? Rather give me thy hand as a sign of firm faith that the plan

does not in any way offend thy noble son. Swear to me by the true God that thou hast suggested this after an understanding with thy son, and I will in return pledge my honor that I shall obtain the bride for Maximus without a fight. You shall consent, however, to cede to me as my reward for playing a false part all the presents that may be given to me as the bridegroom, and I shall not be expected to divide them with anybody, but shall retain them all for myself!"

Ivan burst into laughter, and exclaimed: "O Milosh, thou Serbian Voivode! As to the presents thou namest, I give thee my faith, firmer and harder than stone itself, that nobody shall seek to have a share in them with thee! Only secure the bride and honorably escort her till she reach our city of Zablak, and I promise to give thee two bootfuls of golden ducats, a golden cup to hold nine liters of wine, a mare 'Bedevia', the mother of studs like Zdral, and I shall girdle on thee a saber worth thirty purses of golden ducats."

So agreed, and having placed the distinctive hat and ornaments of the bridegroom on the head of Voivode Milosh they resumed their journey, and after some tossing upon the waters of the Adriatic they reached Venice without misadventure.

There came large numbers of curious to see the Montenegrins and especially to discover for themselves if Maximus was really the fine and handsome prince that they had heard he was.

When the Venetian princes heard from their servants that their future brother-in-law was really as handsome as his father had described him nine years earlier, they came eagerly with outstretched arms to embrace and welcome him. They showed him the apartments in their palace which had been prepared for the princely guests, and all were lodged in comfort.

The wedding festivities lasted for three days and then came the hour for departure. At the sound of cannon the svats assembled in the great courtyard awaiting the commands of Prince Ivan, and his noble son. They felt uneasy when they saw the gate of the palace closed, and on each side of it two Moorish and two Venetian soldiers standing with drawn swords the blades of which, and even their own arms, were covered with blood. Their uneasiness became alarm when after some time they saw no sign of their prince and the bride and bridegroom. They were beginning to murmur loudly when suddenly they heard the sound of horses' hoofs on the marble pavement and they saw Voivode Milosh trying to curb his destrier with his bit as he spurred him gently in order to make him bound and prance.

THE WEDDING GIFTS

Behind Milosh rode his two brothers-in-law bringing gifts. The elder of them led a black steed without a single blemish, bearing a silver saddle adorned with heavy gold, upon which sat their fair bride holding a gray falcon. "Accept, O my dear and noble

Maximus,” said the prince, “this fair maiden, together with her black steed and her gray falcon as a token of our love, for thou art in truth the pride of thy brothers!”

Milosh bowed deeply over his horse’s neck as he thanked the prince for his gracious words and accepted the bride with the gifts which she brought. The second brother now bestowed upon the bridegroom a saber in a golden scabbard, saying: “Wear this, O brother, and be proud of it!” Next came the father of the bride. What a beautiful present he placed in his hands! A helmet in the crest of which shone a precious stone dazzling like the sun so that one could not look at it long. But the gift which was given to him by the mother of the bride was more magnificent of all! This gift was a shirt of pure gold, which was neither woven nor twined, but had been made entirely with fingers; in its collar, representing a viper (‘and a viper will finally bite him’) there was fixed a brilliant diamond shedding forth such a blaze of light that he would never need a candle when he went to visit his bride in her bed chamber. All the svats were astonished at the magnificence of the present.

Now came the aged brother of the Doge, Yesdimir, with his beard reaching his waist, walking slowly and supporting himself with a golden staff. Bitter tears streamed from his eyes. He wept, it is true, with good reason. Seven wives he had had in turn during his long life, but no sons or daughters had been born to him. Therefore he bestowed all his affections upon his niece, whom he looked upon as a daughter, and who took in his heart the place of the children he had once hoped to be blessed with, and now that the beloved maiden was to depart to a faraway land he was greatly grieved. He had some ‘wonder’ folded under his arm, and as he approached the svats, he called the bridegroom by name. The latter appeared at once and the venerable lord laid upon the young man’s shoulders a magnificent cloak which reached from his shoulders down to the grass. Indeed when Milosh remounted his horse, the cloak concealed not only himself, but also his steed down to its very hoofs. How precious it was! and oh! that it might never be the cause of anything but happiness to the hero! It was said that thirty purses of gold had been spent on its lining alone, and what a sum of money the cloth itself must have cost! Prince Maximus watched and saw with envious eyes how Voivode Milosh received the presents which were intended for him, the real bridegroom. When the large gateways of the courtyard were opened, the svats, passing out in procession, received from the Doge’s servants each a piece of precious silk and a box containing various presents, and then they sailed away in galleys.

Soon they arrived on the field of Zablak, where they had met on starting out for their journey, and where they were now to separate. Prince Maximus had ridden a little ahead with his ten brothers-in-arms in order to hasten and communicate the joyful news to his mother and Voivode Milosh, being aware that Prince Maximus was out of sight, spurred forward his courser and coming up with the bride and the deceiver, he boldly took the hand of the noble maiden. The bride, thinking in her innocence that he was Prince Maximus, removed her veil and stretched out her hands to the pretended bridegroom.

THE PRINCESS LEARNS OF THE DECEPTION

Those who were near feigned not to have noticed the incident, but Prince Ivan himself happened to see what had occurred and it troubled him, and he rode up and addressed the bride thus: "Touch him not with thy hands, O my dear daughter-in-law! or may they be struck with a palsy! Veil thine eyes! or may thy sight forever fail thee! How canst thou act so in the presence of all the svats? Dost thou see that hero riding his black steed, and holding his lance? Dost thou see his shining shield and his face disfigured by small pox? That is my son Maximus, whom I praised to thy father, when I asked your hand for him, saying that there was no handsomer youth than he to found amongst thousands. But I was afraid to present my son with his ugly face to you and to your father, and so we had recourse to a stratagem and made Voivode your groom temporarily in order to succeed in bringing thee away in peace. For acting so Milosh is entitled to all the presents which were assigned to the bridegroom!"

To the noble maiden her father-in-law's words came as a thunderbolt. She halted her horse and refused to go any farther, saying: "O my dear father-in-law, thou Prince Ivan! Thou hast caused thine own son's misfortune by having made Milosh the alleged bridegroom. Why hast thou done so? May the true God give thee thy deserts for that! What matters it if his face is pitted? All are subject to disease, and might have to suffer even worse consequences. If his face is damaged, his eyes are certainly bright and his heart is as sound as ever. If thou hadst considered thy son to be still too young to be my husband, thou shouldst have told me so, and I would have waited in my father's palace for another nine years, but even then I would certainly never have caused you to blush with shame before your own nobles in Zablak. Now thou hadst better give up the presents to their rightful owner, thy son Maximus, else I shall not go a step further, even if thou shouldst threaten to put out my eyes."

Hearing this firm speech, Prince Ivan was greatly disturbed, and he called friends and Voivodes to counsel him as to what he should do. But none of them dared say one word, for they well remembered the arrangement made before sailing across the sea.

MILOSH'S OFFER

Voivode Milosh saw that no one would speak, and he spurred his steed and addressed Prince Ivan in this wise: "O Ivan, thou our lord! Where is thy firm faith! If it fails now, may you yourself live to be betrayed! Hast thou not given me thy word that the wedding gifts should be mine intact? But now you frame a plan to break thy faith! Since thou art so little to be depended on, I agree, for the sake of peace among our brothers and svats, to give up the first two presents; I return to your son the fair bride and her steed with all its gold and silver trappings. In justice, and according to impartial judgment, I should be fully entitled even to marry the fair maiden, for she was presented to me by all, her parents and her brothers, but I shall say no more about that, and simply cede to you these two presents, together with the gray falcon. Here! I return to your son

even the golden scabbard and the bright saber, but I shall never consent to yield the helmet, the cloak, and the golden shirt; for I am determined to carry them to my own land, and show them to my friends and brothers, who, I am certain, will be proud of them. I swear by my faith in the true God that I shall not give up these three presents.”

All the svats, moved by Milosh’s fairness, agreed to the offer, and thanked him for his noble sacrifice for the sake of peace, but they were strongly opposed by the bride, who could not reconcile herself to the loss of the precious gifts, and especially the golden shirt. So she called aloud for Prince Maximus. This alarmed Prince Ivan very much, and he tried to quieten the maiden in these words: “O my sweet daughter-in-law, thou Venetian maiden! Do not call my son, for we have done him great injustice. Prince Maximus has a high sense of honor and is a brave man. I dread a fight above everything, and our festivities may so easily turn into mourning. I possess in Zablak a dungeon full of golden treasure, which I shall present to thee, and thou canst do with it whatever pleases thee!”

But the maiden was not easy to persuade, and she once more called Prince Maximus, who came with all speed to the scene. “O Maximus, thou only son of thy mother!” began his bride, “may she lose thee! May the warriors make a handbier of thy lance and with thy shield may they cover the tomb! May thy visage blush with shame on the day of judgment, as it does today at the contest with Voivode Milosh! Why didst thou agree to yield to another the presents which rightly belong to the bridegroom? I care nothing for all the other presents, let Milosh taken them away, and may a torrent take him away with them! But I cannot suffer the loss of the golden shirt, which I made for thee myself, and which took me three years to make, with three maidens assisting me. I nearly lost my sight before I finished working at this shirt, and all the time I was thinking of thee. Thou hadst better recover the shirt from Voivode Milosh at once, for I swear by the name of the true God that otherwise I will not take a step forward; but I shall rein back my steed, and, when I reach the seacoast, I shall pluck a leaf of aloe and shall scratch my face with its thorns till blood flows; then I shall write and send a message by my falcon to my aged father, beseeching him to call to arms all his force, to come and conquer and pillage thy Zablak and repay thee thus with mourning for thy shameful conduct!”

THE VIOLENCE OF MAXIMUS

The moment Prince Maximus heard this, he reined back his black courser, spurred it so vehemently that the skin of his courser’s stifle joint burst and blood besprinkled its hoofs. The frantic animal sprang the height of three lances in the air and the length of four lances forward, so that he sped like lightning. Milosh burst into laughter saying: “God be praised! What was suddenly the matter with that boy!” But his mirth was short lived, for Prince Maximus now turned his horse straight toward Milosh furiously throwing his lance at his head. He struck Milosh so vigorously that both his eyes burst and he fell from his steed. Maximus rushed in and cleft his head asunder; then he took his bride from her leader and sped into the castle.

When Voivode Milosh's warriors saw their chief fall, they fiercely attacked the followers of Prince Maximus, and a fight ensued from which but very few returned home.

MAXIMUS BECOMES A TURK

Prince Maximus, it is said, was so disgusted with what had occurred that he wrote to the Doge, inviting him to invade Zablak with a large force and to conquer Montenegro; as for him, he would go to Istanbul and embrace Islamism. This he did.

Now a brother of Milosh, namely, Yovan Obrenbegovitch, suspecting that Maximus' intention was to obtain from the Sultan a great force with which to conquer Montenegro, decided to go to the Sultan for the same purpose. But it was his intention, should he also succeed in obtaining an army from the Sultan, to use it, not against his fatherland, Montenegro, but against Prince Maximus.

On their way to Istanbul the two men met and they appeared together before the Sultan, who, knowing well who they were and deeming that they could be usefully employed in his service against the Christians, like many other malcontents from Christian courts, received them most kindly. They adopted the Mohammedan religion and were given Turkish names: Voivod Yovan was called Mehmed-bey Obrenbegovitch, and Prince Maximus, Scander-beg Ivanbegovitch. Having served as faithful Turks for nine years, the Sultan, pleased with their conduct, granted them both vizirates; to Mehmed-bey Obrenbegovitch he gave as fief the plain of Ducadyin, and Scander-beg (Prince Ivan's son) he granted Scutari on the River Boyana.