

THE CHRISTIAN PEASANTS OF ALBANIA

ONE of the most frightening happenings in the last few years, and one from which we should take the greatest warning, is the complete subjection of Albania to Communism. Communism is alien to all the spiritual and social traditions of this small mountain people, which in 1939 was one of the most honest and hospitable, if backward, of Europe.

Although Albania is almost 80 per cent Mohammedan, there exist in the wild mountain valleys of the north two tribes of Christians, the Miridits, who somehow had managed to survive the centuries of Turkish rule when the country was part of the Ottoman Empire. This they doubtless owed to their rugged mountain barriers, and we must hope that these same barriers will enable them to preserve their simple faith against the new onslaught. During the War they fought to the bitter end with our Commandos against the Communist partisans, who, although they accepted the arms and supplies, which we dropped to them in the belief that they were a democratic force solely desirous of expelling the Germans, lost no opportunity to insult and humiliate our men. In fact, towards the end, when the Germans were already in full retreat, they openly turned against us. That the few men we had left there escaped was due to the heroic efforts of the Christian tribes under their feudal chieftains; many of these paid for their faith and honour with their lives, while some managed to escape and follow their king into exile in Egypt.

To reach their territory is a rough journey. In 1938 I left Scutari in a lorry full of peasants, all with their belts full of daggers and clutching their rifles; as we lurched and rolled over piles of loose boulders and bare ribs of rock, alternating with dried watercourses; they sang in unison weird oriental melodies, whose cadences wandered eerily up and down the scale. At last, after nearly two hours of Herculean efforts, the engine boiled, so I seized the chance to stretch my legs. Across a field lay a small oak copse, and here I had spied some crosses. It was a Miridit cemetery, very simple, just a few mounds headed by simple but graceful crosses, carved and ornamented, and atop the end of each arm and on the upright was a small carved wooden bird. The peasants believe that the birds are the protectors of the spirit, and should anyone try to violate a grave, the birds will swoop down and drive them away. So thus each cross is provided with three little wooden birds, either as a warning to would-be despoilers or perhaps as a reminder to the local feathered world.

Shouts warned me that we were ready to continue, so I dashed back to the lorry and for another hour we jolted onwards into the heart of the foothills, to the village of Bogë at the foot of the Thoria Pass. The country here was much greener, lush meadows watered by mountain streams, and square patches of maize, shaded

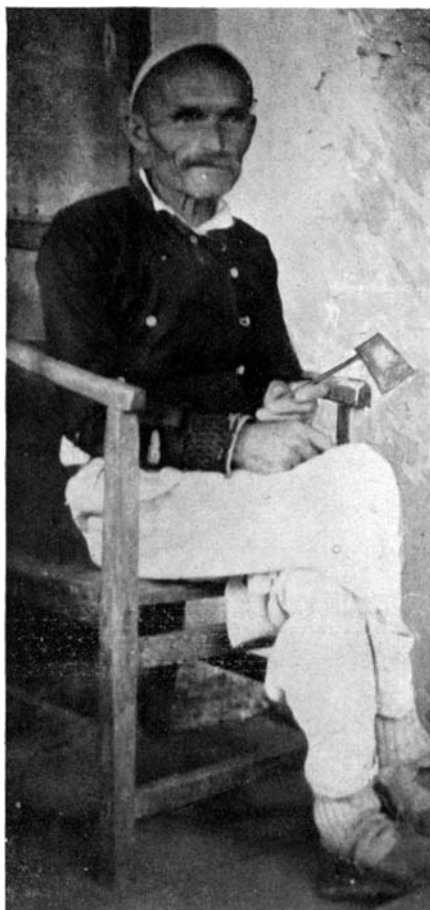


by groves of slender pointed beeches that struggled up the mountain sides to the foot of the rocks. Here we all got down and my guide and I tucked into a good solid meal of roast chicken, the last we were to get for nearly a week. The village was full of activity, peasants and pack-trains passing all the time to and from the high passes that lead to the real Miridit territory in the heart of the mountains. The men were impressive with their fierce black moustaches, high cheekbones and aquiline noses. In spite of their wild appearance the Albanian mountaineers, be they Christian or Moslem, are always dignified and hospitable people, and their house is always open to any traveller in need of shelter. They always go armed since the vendetta is still rampant in the wilder parts, and

also since the mountains are full of wild boar and the need for self-defence may arise at any time. But whatever the feud, the foreigner is always automatically regarded as an honoured guest whom it is their duty to pass on in peace. Their code of honour, however feudal and barbaric it may appear to us, and their honesty and self-respect are such an ingrained part of their nature that I cannot believe that Communism has destroyed it.

We were unable to get a pack-horse in the village, but as we had not very far to climb to the Thoria Pass we found a man who was willing to help us carry our baggage over for a small tip. We set off up a winding track through the beech forest; on and on we climbed, the stony path zigzagging up in hairpin bends, until suddenly the trees thinned out and we emerged on to the pass in face of a stupendous panorama of wild alpine scenery. The Pass led through a gap in the mountains and down a spur; to the right a precipitous slope, thinly clad with tall pines, overhung a deep wooded valley 3,000 feet below, above whose further slope towered huge limestone





peaks. To the left the main valley was framed by a cirque of high pink cliffs at the foot of 9,000 ft. giants, while opposite, a mile away across the blue abyss, a second pass could be glimpsed between even more impressive summits.

We set off down through the pines, the air scented with the smell of resin and the perfume of thousands of alpine flowers; as we neared the end of the spur we had a glimpse far down into the valley, where I could dimly make out a few scattered white cottages and the tiny patchwork quilt of their maize and tobacco plantations. Round a corner we surprised a dozen golden eagles on the branches of a dead, lightning-riven pine, who circled away up into the blue with loud, leathery flappings.

At last we reached the valley floor and walked down the stony bed of the river. A few tiny cottages lined the banks, windowless except for square holes in the masonry. Then we

met an old peasant, who eyed us curiously but gave a polite greeting. His small son was a most engaging infant in bright pink pantaloons. With him was also his daughter, who was busily spinning her wool into thread as she walked. Then the valley broadened and the track climbed the bank and led us to a flat meadow on which stood the church and the Franciscan monastery.

At Thethë, the main village, there has been a Franciscan monastery for many years, the last outpost before the Moslem valleys that lie beyond the high pass that cuts through the vast limestone peaks surrounding it. It is a calm and pleasant spot, this monastery, with its white plaster-walled church and the rows of beautifully carved wooden crosses that stand out in silhouette against the wall



of mountains, pink in the setting sun. The friars gladly welcomed me and gave me leave to pitch my tent in their meadow, and after dinner I was invited to coffee with the Father Guardian, a charming Austrian, and we talked until late in the night. He and his friars had formed a little school and were slowly teaching the people to read and write; during the winter, when the valley is sealed off from the outer world by the snow that lies twenty feet deep on the passes, they would instruct and comfort their simple and kindly flock. They were slowly managing to eradicate the old blood-feuds and the primitive law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and were happy in their work and its progress.

It is tragic to think of all this good work undone, and its unselfish workers driven away, many tortured and killed by the Communists. One can only hope that the good they did has merely been driven underground, and that the simple faith of the Christian Albanians has but been strengthened by persecution. There can be no doubt that religious faith is the greatest weapon we possess against Communism, and if it becomes, as it should, the spearhead of our psychological warfare, it is people like the Miridit mountaineers who will be our greatest allies in bringing the light behind the Iron Curtain.

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