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978-1-107-67606-0 - The Revolt of the Serbs Against the Turks (1804–1813)

W. A. Morison

Excerpt

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I

Harambaša Ćurta

Since Médjednik¹ mountain has been standing
 And the deeds of haiduks been recounted,
 Since the times of old Stárina Novak,
 There was never a more doughty haiduk
 Than the hero hárambaša² Ćurta.
 He laid hands on Bosnia and Serbia,
 All the Turkish tyrants he laid hands on,
 With his wing his Serbian brothers shielded.
 Ćurta led a company of heroes;
 In the band were two and thirty comrades,
 Each one of them stronger than the others,
 And the first was Bjelopóljac Lodjo:
 Lodjo was of giant strength and stature,
 In him beat the heart of ancient heroes;
 And the second, Kolašínac Prelo,
 Just as sturdy, though a little shorter,
 And in strength and courage Lodjo's equal;
 Third amid the band was Mitar Nogić,
 Like a lad from Stari Vlah to look at,
 Thin and dry, but living fire burned in him;
 He would yield a single step to no man;
 Yet a fourth was Crnobárac Stanko,
 And another Nínković Jóvica;
 Next to him was Látkoviću Jovan:

¹ Mountain in Serbia between Valjevo and Užice.

² Leader of a band of haiduks.

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2

HARAMBAŠA ĆURTA

All the three like burning coals were ardent,
 Nor was there a lesser man amongst them;
 All the haiduk band was proud and famous
 That it numbered in its ranks such heroes.
 Over all was četobaša¹ Ćurta;
 In all things did he excel the others,
 So that they respected and obeyed him.

Much is there retailed in song and story
 Of the hero, old Stárina Novak:
 How he with the Turkish might played havoc,
 So that késedžijas² all had vanished,
 Not a tyrant was to be discovered,
 And the Christians raised their lowered foreheads,
 Blessings showered upon the hero Novak
 Who had freed the rayah from their tyrants.
 Never since the famous times of Novak
 Had there been a doughty haiduk chieftain
 Who could equal him in deeds of daring.
 Such as Ćurta, when he seized his weapons,
 To the mountains took, and fought the tyrants.
 He at midday fell upon the Moslems
 In the market, when he was not looked for,
 To protect his hapless Serbian brothers
 From the cursèd and blood-thirsty tyrants.
 All the Serbians that there were through Serbia
 And through Bosnia, Hércegovina,
 All had Ćurta with his wing protected:
 Evil-doers found no refuge from him;
 Everywhere the hero helped in trouble.

¹ Leader of a band of haiduks.

² Mounted Turkish highwaymen.

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HARAMBAŠA ĆURTA

3

Thus did Ćurta lead his band of haiduks
 From St George's¹ day to St Demetrius,²
 When the sun played false with its warm radiance
 And the cold was followed by the snowflakes.
 Then not even he could tarry longer,
 But he said unto his band of haiduks:
 "O my brothers, my stout haiduk comrades!
 Now the time for haiduks hath departed,
 Passed away, and we must leave our mountains
 Till the Feast of George brings back the sunshine.
 St Demetrius' day will dawn to-morrow,
 Winter is arrived, the snow hath fallen,
 And the time hath come for our departure
 From our fastnesses amid the mountains
 And from freedom, such as God doth grant us.
 Much have I been pondering, my brothers,
 Where each one shall pass the days of winter,
 That he may repose in peace and comfort
 Just as though he were in his own homestead,
 And that each may know about the others,
 Hear from them, and if he wish it, see them.
 All quite close about me I shall place you
 In the villages round Ljubóvija,
 By the Drina, close to Srébrnica,
 So that we shall have at hand the market
 And that each may purchase what is needful,
 So that he may have no need to worry
 Or to want a thing and not obtain it.
 Ere we leave the shelter of our forests
 And proceed unto our winter-quarters,
 We must make our reckonings, my brothers,

1 23 April.

2 26 November.

1-2

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4

HARAMBAŠA ĆURTA

In accordance with the haiduk custom,
 Render satisfaction to each other,
 So that when we go among the people
 None of us shall shame himself, by roaring
 Like a bullock for his share of booty.
 Rather let our quarrels and contentions
 Lie beneath the snow here through the winter.
 Full of profit to us was the summer;
 We have everything in great abundance,
 And besides, of purest gold three okas¹
 Is the share of each of us in money,
 All in ducats taken from the tyrants.
 Take with you the gold that may be needful
 So that each may purchase what he lacketh;
 Leave the other booty in the forest.
 Let all know about the others' booty,
 How much 'tis, and where they have concealed it,
 If 'tis fated one of us shall perish
 That his jatak² may not steal his booty
 But that all his comrades may divide it.
 Only take sufficiency of money
 That ye shall not need to ask from others:
 Ye, my brothers, will have few expenses.
 From Demetrius' to George's feast-day
 I will keep you all in winter-quarters,
 Satisfy the claims of all your jataks.
 As I said before, my haiduk brothers,
 Make your reckonings and your agreements,
 Fix the hiding-places for your treasure,
 For we must descend this very evening

¹ Turkish measure (1·280 kg.).

² Concealer of haiduks during the winter months.

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HARAMBAŠA ĆURTA

5

To the white-walled Rača monastery
 For the vespers, for the benediction,
 There to-morrow all attend the service
 And make merry in the holy building.”

When the youthful haiduk band had heard this
 As from one throat all of them cried loudly:
 “Thou our leader, hárambaša Ćurta!
 We have neither quarrel nor dissension,
 Nor does one owe aught to any other;
 Nothing in the world is there to trouble
 Our blood-brotherhood or our close friendship;
 And we have arranged our hiding-places
 In accordance with our ancient custom;
 We are ready when the word thou givest.”
 Thus they spoke, then to their leader Ćurta
 All revealed the places in the forest
 Where their booty they had safely hidden;
 Hárambaša Ćurta showed the cavern
 Where he had concealed the share of treasure
 That had fallen to his lot that summer.
 When they all had thus made their arrangements
 In complete accord, like haiduk brothers,
 Then the haiduks stood to their devotions
 And they sent a prayer to God in Heaven.
 After that their white tents they dismantled
 And they left them in sure hiding-places
 To await them on St George’s feast-day,
 When for six months more they would defend them
 From the heat and from the raging tempest.
 After that they went unto the fire-place,
 Hid it, when the fire had been extinguished,

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6

HARAMBAŠA ĆURTA

With dry wood, and covered it with brambles
 From the rain, that it should not be ruined:
 In the spring they once more would be needing
 Fire upon the hearth, the doughty haiduks.
 And when they had set these things in order
 Then they said farewell unto their mountain,
 All in unison they sang their ditty:
 “Fare thee well, thou forest-covered mountain!
 We, because we must, now leave thy shelter,
 Hoping, if good fortune shall permit it,
 That thou mayst receive us well and happy
 When the winter and bad weather passeth.
 When thou once again with leaves art covered
 And the black earth’s gay with leaves and flowers
 And the blue-grey cuckoo-bird is calling
 And the time is come to seek the mountains,
 Thou again wilt see us in thy forests,
 Where there reigns the freedom of the heroes
 And save God there is none to command us,
 Where is naught that can torment or plague us,
 Nor subjection nor the power of tyrants,
 But equality and blessed freedom,
 And where excellence alone is master
 And the lesser man obeys the greater.”

When they leave had taken of their mountain,
 Said farewell, and all had made them ready,
 Down the mountain-side the band departed
 In the steps of hárambaša Ćurta.

Just as though the snow were filled with yearning
 To embrace the earth, it thickly tumbled;

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HARAMBAŠA ĆURTA

7

In a moment white was all the forest,
And the winter wind sped whistling through it
And built snow-drifts all along the pathways,
Made it hard for travellers to tread them.
When the band was half-way down the hill-side
Through the snow, good fortune they encountered,
For the haiduk band saw through the snowflakes
That the mountain-wolves were on the journey;
Seventeen in number were the grey-coats,
And descended like the band of haiduks
Down the hill-side one behind the other.
So the wolves and haiduks marched together,
Neither did one party fear the other
But like friends and comrades they descended;
Free from hostile feeling were their glances.
Wolf and haiduk never need to quarrel,
One is ne'er a hindrance to the other,
And it never has been known to happen
That the wolves have fallen on a haiduk
Or that haiduks have attacked a wolf-pack.
But instead it oftentimes has happened
That they have been helpful to each other:
There is ne'er a wolf-hunt in the mountains
Where a band of haiduks lies in waiting
For the common foe, the Turkish tyrants.
Now to-day the wolves are very useful
To the haiduk band, and lead them safely
Down the mountain-side through all the snow-drifts
Where the pathway by the snow is hidden,
That the haiduks may not blindly stumble
Into pits that by the snow are covered,
That the precipice may not devour them.

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8

HARAMBAŠA ĆURTA

For the wolf is keen, and sharp of feeling;
 He is near the ground, and keenly senses
 Where the snow has gathered into snow-drifts,
 So that he avoids the pits and hollows,
 Passes everything that seems suspicious.
 Now the wolves just like the haiduks journey;
 In the old ones' steps proceed the youngsters,
 (My blood-brother!) all the same pace keeping
 And each stepping in the tracks before it,
 So that but a single trail is stretching
 Through the virgin snow upon the hill-side.
 In the wolf-pack's traces came the haiduks,
 After them descending from the mountain,
 Passing by Dub village and Zágľavak,
 At the saw-mill crossed the Rača river.
 There they turned in at the monastery,
 While the wolves pressed on towards the Drina,
 To pass round about, and spy the country,
 Look upon the sheep-folds by the Drina,
 That they too might live throughout the winter.

When the haiduk hárambaša Ćurta
 With his company of haiduk heroes
 Came unto the church upon the Rača,
 Hadži¹-Mélentije made him welcome
 Like a guest belovèd and supporter;
 And he kissed the cheeks of all the haiduks
 And all kissed the abbot's aged fingers,
 And the holy fathers of the cloister
 Gave the haiduk band a hearty welcome,

1 A hadžija is a man who has made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem (or Mecca).

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HARAMBAŠA ĆURTA

9

For they were a bulwark to the cloister
 And protected it from evil tyrants.
 As in their own homesteads were the haiduks
 In that large room with its open fire-place
 Which was cheerful in the cold of winter,
 For a mighty fire was burning in it,
 And the room was wide and far extending
 And had room enough for many people,
 So that all could find a place to rest in
 And that none would hinder his companions.
 Here the haiduk band sat down in comfort,
 Took their boots off and undid their waist-bands,
 Doffed their clothes and put on other garments,
 And upon their feet they put dry footwear;
 Then once more they girded up their waist-bands,
 Combed their hair and washed their hands and faces,
 Cast an eye upon their shining weapons;
 Then they to the white-walled church proceeded,
 To the evening prayer, the holy vespers;
 To the church the haiduks made their presents:
 Every haiduk gave the church ten ducats,
 And their hárambaša gave a hundred.

Once again they sent a prayer to Heaven;
 When the prayer was finished, sat to supper,
 To make merry after their devotions.
 Then the holy fathers made them welcome,
 With the best of food and drink they plied them
 In the true and noble Serbian fashion.
 When the glowing wine their tongues had loosened
 Then the toasts were drunk in ancient order;
 One began a song, and one continued,

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10

HARAMBAŠA ĆURTA

Made the haiduks' hearts rejoice within them.
And when they had sung the songs of feasting
Then the heroes sang the songs of heroes
To the music of the maple gusle,
Songs about the deeds of ancient heroes,
How this one was famous in the marches
And how he did honour to his brothers
By his courage and fair reputation,
And still lives to-day in song and story
As a pride and glory to the nation,
And his name will never be forgotten
But in years to come will be remembered
While there still exists the Serbian spirit;
Never will the Serbians forget him,
Ever they recount their forebears' doings.
When they all had eaten what they wanted
And the hearts within their breasts were gladsome,
Some of them by sleepiness were troubled,
Others by the wine they had been drinking,
So that by and by they fell to yawning,
And the eyes of some were closed with slumber,
And the time was come to seek their couches.
Then the fathers of the cloister seeing
What their guests the haiduks were in need of,
They brought in fresh meadow-hay in armfuls
That with blossoms wild was sweetly smelling,
And upon the hay they spread out blankets
All of wool, and white as are the snow-drifts,
Over them extending coloured carpets,
And embroidered cushions put for pillows.
(All was Serb embroidery and weaving,
Worked and woven by the Serbian women