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RUPERT BROOKE'S GRAVE

By S. CASSON

IN the northern part of the Ægean Sea, midway between the islands of Eubœa and Chios, lie the twin peaks of Skyros. The storms of history have broken round and near the island, but only spent waves have reached its shores. A few legends, a few of the minor events of Mediterranean history and the records of a few travellers are all that has to show. And now England, who has never yet figured in its history, must claim a place in its soil and tradition, for in Skyros is the grave and memorial of Rupert Brooke.

A wild and lawless island, inhabited even down to the days when Athens was at the height of its power by half-barbarous peoples, Skyros early became the home of the lonely and legend. Achilles spent his boyhood on its sands and cliffs before Troy called him :

> He scoured the lonely cliffs and valleys wild,
> Hearing the eagle call to mate another,
> While far below the great Ægean smiled
> (There dwelt the lady of the seas, his mother,
> In the old time). He heard the dolphins leap
> Far off amid the clouds those mountains high
> The cranes that race the storm. He heard
> The tale of Skyros where he lay beneath the sky.*

Theseus was killed by the king of the island when he fled there from Athens, and centuries later his mighty bones, revered almost as were the bones of heroes, were carried back by the Athenian general Cimon to the Athens that had disowned him.

Of these two the name of Achilles still survives in the name Akhili, which is given to a landlocked bay on the eastern shore, far the loveliest place in the island, whence on the clearest of summer days one can just discern the distant shores of the Troad.

A memorial of Theseus is perhaps found in a small temple site near the old castle high up on the cliffs. Other traces of old Hellenism linger on the island. The spring of Niphi, on the western side, preserves the name of the Nymphs, and the hilltop Areion that of Ares, and Artemi that of Artemis. None of these names is a revival, as is so often the case in modern Greece. In few places on the mainland can one find so many traces of antiquity as here, for Turk, Venetian, and Slav have swept most of the old place-names away.

In antiquity the island was famed mostly for its marble and its flocks. To-day it produces nothing else but these that the outside world requires.

* From *Achilles*, by the late R. M. Heath. (1911.)

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The marble is coloured, veined with rose and yellow, and there is hardly a Roman palace or an Italian church without it. From the milk of its goats and sheep are made the famous cheeses in the Mediterranean, hardly known outside Greece. Other industries it has none.

The island is divided almost into two parts ; there is a narrow strip of marshy land, to the north and south of which rise the twin peaks. On each are marble quarries ; the northern alone is wooded. The one village of the island is on the eastern side, and is almost an island in itself. It is the two great harbours of Skyros, Kalamitsa Bay, and Tris Boukes Bay remain desert harbours except for a few houses at the head of the one and some shepherds' huts at the other. On a valley off Tris Boukes Bay that the tomb of Rupert Brooke lies—a lonely valley in a lonely bay, with none but shepherds and storm-bound sailors to see it. But the war that created a new policy found new defences against it, and for a long time brought it about that the very harbours that of old had been the refuge of pirates now became a refuge against them ; while they were kept to the doubtful comforts of the depths of the sea many hundreds of tons of transports waited their time in these landlocked bays. So it came about that Rupert Brooke found himself in this desert bay, from which it was not his destiny to depart.

As its name denotes, Tris Boukes Bay is the bay of "Three Mouths." Two small islands lie athwart the entrance, thus forming the three narrow entries. Despoti, the larger of the two, is so called in island legend because it was once the home, and a barren one at that, of a family of transports waited their time in these landlocked bays. So it came about that Rupert Brooke found himself in this desert bay, from which it was not his destiny to depart.

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covered and abrupt. Southwards were the vague outlines of Andros and Tenos. A five-hour walk from the landing-place brought me to the valley in which, two thousand yards from the shore, lay the grave. The wooden crosses still stood undisturbed and intact. The stones over the grave were as when first they were placed there.

The work necessary for the landing of the marble slabs comprising the monument, and for their conveyance to the grave, had been done by some Hellenic Homeric about their simplicity. The *mandra*, or shepherd's camp, where I lodged, was the property of one family, its occupants an old patriarch of over eighty (he was quite certain he was over ninety-two or eighty-five) and his six nephews, varying in age from twenty to thirty. The dwelling-house at the *mandra* was built high up above the sea on the side of a rocky peak, a shaggy mass of boulders and rough stone-pines. Inside was a row of shelves, one above the other, that served as beds, a wide open fireplace, and a few low stools. Every evening at sundown the younger men would drive the flocks and herds down from their pastures to the pen and milk them, while the old uncle busied himself with lighting the fire and preparing the evening meal. Their work done, all the shepherds would come inside, flop down round the fire, eat in two of three relays, and we would eat a meal of bread and milk, cream cheese, and junket in front of the blazing fire. They were not meat-eaters, nor did they make wine or tobacco-very little of the latter was seen. Their beliefs, I found, had been in the same region as myself in the Struma Valley. Yet the war had not spoiled them, and they were once again island peasants wearing the island costume, and eating with wooden spoons from wooden basins. The Greek countryman has too much of the unchangeable Oriental in his nature to let new-fangled notions take deep root.

Long before dawn the younger men were up and about, leading their flocks to the pastures.

One night returning to the *mandra* I lost my way and wandered aimlessly and rather hopelessly over the mountain-side. For once shepherds' dogs proved a blessing, for, hearing me stumbling on the hillside a mile

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away, they started barking, and so guided me to the home that I could not see and had thought to be on the other mountain-side. As I approached they ran out barking at me, and were only driven off by the shower of stones that their masters hurled at them to enforce obedience. I remembered the passage in the Epistle to the Philippians : "Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers." Another simile, the Homeric one of the shepherds' dogs are used for guarding the flocks from attack of man or beast, or for retrieving lost lambs and kids, and there their duties end. They differ greatly in type from the shaggy beasts of the mainland, and are like nothing but an ordinary Welsh collies. The sheep and goats of Skyros are kept together in the same flocks, although there are separate cries used by the shepherds for each. The sheep are the finest, if he weeks, because his animals.

Cheeses are made from the milk of both animals mixed. One shepherd assured me that a great quantity of milk is lost owing to the snakes which come at night and suck the udders of the goats. This belief is, I think, almost universal in Europe wherever there are snakes in large numbers.

Such are the people to whose remote island valley lies this lonely grave ; honest, sturdy folk who will respect and honour one who lies there but, through it, the armies of which it is to them the symbol, armies which have achieved for them, and by land and sea, the emancipation of Constantinople from the Turk, that old ambition of Greeks.

Some of these shepherds had seen the actual burial, and all knew vaguely the story of Rupert Brooke and who he was. In anything that concerns them Greeks are not slow to learn.

The villagers of the one village of the island are of much the same stamp. Nearly all wear the island costume—a close-fitting jacket of white wool reaching to the waist, with a blue waistband and breeches and white woollen gaiters.

In the village to this day there survives a dance, unique among the islands or on the mainland of Greece, known as the " Dance of the Old Man." It is a curious primitive beast dance in which shepherds from the hills cover their faces with the skins of goats or mantras. They hang fifty or more sheep-bells round their waists and dance up and down the village until they drop from exhaustion. The dance takes place every day during the week before Lent, and its origin is wrapped in obscurity. It may perhaps have something to do with the old worship of Dionysus in Thrace, whence the present inhabitants are believed to have come some time in the Middle Ages. The villagers themselves have no explanation of the dance. but still

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keep it up vigorously and enjoy it. Although it comes in the week before Lent it has no religious significance. With the honesty of Pagans they admit it to be a purely pagan custom ; they could hardly do otherwise.

Above the village on a pinnacle of rock that stands out like a rampart above the long sandy coast known as " Vampires' Cape " is built the old mediæval town on the ruins of its predecessor Hellenic Skyros, the colony of ancient Athens. Round the ruins of this town run the walls, a double gate defending the entrance. The ancient Acropolis remains almost intact, for, and with them the monastery of St. George, with its wonder-working ekion. Below the old town lies the modern village, covering a hollow of ground as though purified from the sea. In this it is that we could find no trace of other burials. There is no proof as to who it was who was buried here save the fact that it was a Roman, and probably a woman, judging by the glass unguent-vases that were in with the skeleton. Perhaps it was the grave of someone drowned in the bay, or who had died when some ship had put in here for refuge, even as the ship that brought Rupert Brooke here. I am reminded of the valley in the Greek Anthology that commemorate the graves of men drowned at sea and buried hard by on the seashore in the lonely bays of Greece.

Save for these two graves the valley is as deserted as when first volcanic forces lifted the marble heads of the islands from the sea. But it is covered with a profusion of wild flowers such as one rarely finds in Greece. Pale blue anemones, orchids, rock hyacinths, and scarlet anemones ferbiaria star the turf, while everywhere is the scent of wild thyme and mint that grows thick between the bushes of wild olive.

The land belongs to the monastery of St. George, and one of the monks of the monastery was sent to carry out the ceremony of consecration of the tomb according to the rites of the Greek Church.

For once St. George of Skyros and St. George of England have met on common ground.

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