



**STREET IN OLD MOSTAR**



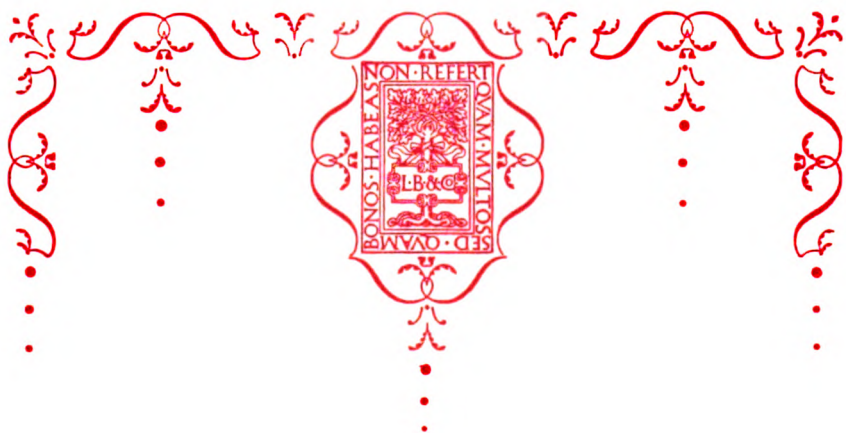
# B A L K A N S K E T C H E S

*An Artist's Wanderings in  
the Kingdom of the Serbs*

• • • BY • • •

L E S T E R G . H O R N B Y

*with* ILLUSTRATIONS *by* THE AUTHOR



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## XII IN HERZEGOVINA

**L**ORRINGTON had heard of a famous trout stream — the River Bosna. Since my destination was Sarajevo, close by, we took a compartment on the same train. Mostar, an old Turkish town, was halfway on our journey, and learning of an ancient bridge there, we decided to break the trip by stopping for a day or two, if it proved of interest. This long ride took us through Herzegovina along a shelf-like mountain road, twisting and climbing among blanched gray cliffs, high above a roaring gorge. For miles there were no signs of habitation; the cliffs, steep and forbidding, made life seem impossible. It was a wilderness of towering rock.



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Our train climbed steadily until we were some six thousand feet above sea level, where at the base of a cliff deep down in the gorge we saw the source of a wild mountain stream gushing forth. This was the divide, and from here on to Mostar we descended gradually, passing through the arid Karst.

Our way now lay along the broad, rock-strewn reaches of an ancient river bed, hardly less sterile than the rocky peaks rising on either side. Meager settlements appeared with a slight suggestion of green, where sparse gardens had been terraced here and there among the rocks. Small stone huts roofed with great slabs of shale came into view. Peasants stopped work to gaze at the little train, puffing its way along. Both men and women wore rough trousers of homespun and were seen only at rare intervals in the isolated patches of cultivation. Some of the scant gardens grew corn — tiny patches so small that a dozen or two stalks filled the wall-hedged patch of precious soil.

All the afternoon our train had crept slowly along, high above the crags and chasms of arid rock. There were long intervals during which no dwellings appeared — nothing but wild sterile peaks of rock. Late in the afternoon we passed through desolate stretches where we saw old monoliths — some standing on end and others held table-like by smaller rocks — and an occasional ancient watchtower — relics of Turkish times. We finally stopped at a small station where travelers, mostly peasants, left the train to

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gather round a small fountain on the platform, and fill their water bottles. The station itself was small and of stone.

A squad of youths in military uniform accompanied an elderly officer. They were evidently recruits for an officers' school. The younger men, hopelessly awkward in their ill-fitting uniforms, had obviously scrubbed and brushed themselves in a vain attempt to emulate their superior — oh, much superior — officer. The major stood there as straight and trim as the slender sword hanging at his side. The boys stood at a respectful distance, uncomfortably alert. From their glances one knew they admired the colors of many campaigns blazing from the officer's tunic. His shining scabbard, the polished belt from which it hung, his insignia of rank, and, ornamenting his cap, the royal arms of Serbia might indeed rouse admiration in any recruit. His gleaming black visor dropped down almost flat against his brow, bent back in points like those of his dark moustache. Snapping the last clasp of his immaculate gloves, he glanced toward one of the youths, who noticed a slight movement of his superior's left foot. Immediately stepping forward, the boy brought forth a handkerchief, dropped on one knee, and dusted each boot from knee to toe.

A toot from the forward engine was taken up by various honks and toots, and the platform was left almost deserted as the passengers scurried aboard. An old monk came puffing along, holding up his heavy brown Franciscan homespun. The guard raised his horn for the final signal and the

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gesture spurred on the pondering *religieux* in his elephantine advance, until he climbed aboard, mopping his brow and breathlessly uttering something between a curse and a prayer. Then at the guard's final toot, four peasant girls hurried on to the platform, all a-flutter in their gayest kerchiefs and starched skirts, screaming and laughing as they clambered into the third-class compartments. A boy with a basket of refreshments — his wares considerably diminished by the travel-weary passengers — lighted a cigarette and turned away as the train moved on.

We passed some peasant girls in rough trousers, standing



among the silvery branches of a fig tree and holding up handfuls of the rich purple fruit as though to tantalize us.

As evening fell, one occasionally saw old men taking their places in stone shelters in order to sit guard over the ripening crops during the night. At little stations we saw mountaineers costumed like the brigands of fiction in great red

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turbans, short jackets with silver buttons, swag-seated trousers. Some had leggings, others wore heavy woolen socks, and still others had bare legs and were shod with turned-up Turkish sandals. About their waists broad sashes of green or red were wound in voluminous folds and



served as pockets. One old veteran with great earrings and a heavy sweeping moustache wore a silver-studded belt, some eight or ten inches wide; it hung away in front, heavy with knives and pistols — as fine a touch for a brigand type as fiction ever invented. Lorrington and I were discussing him when the old monk, riding in our compartment, smiled complacently as he recognized the word brigand, and, in French, volunteered to inform us that he was doubtless a good old

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soul, but like many of these mountaineers carried arms for self-protection.

"But why arms — are there no brigands in these mountains?" Lorrington asked him, with a shade of disappointment.

"Oh, yes," the monk replied.

"Not an entirely safe place for strangers?" I suggested.

"Yes, perfectly safe."

He saw our evident desire for explanation.

"They seldom touch strangers, for fear the police and soldiers may hear of it. They would rather rob peasants. Then it is soon forgotten and they can come down again and raid another village. But there are no brigands here now."

Both Lorrington and I remembered that it was scarcely a week before that we had read of the capture of Black Ivan or some such name, a well-known brigand of this section.

The old monk straightened up and beamed pleasantly.

"That is the reason why it is safe here now. This was Black Ivan's territory." And the old priest told us of robber raids here years ago, before it was part of Yugo-Slavia, when villages were sacked and the cattle driven away into the mountains, leaving the poor peasants, glad to escape with their lives, hiding somewhere in the hills.

This might explain the custom of wearing jewelry of gold and silver coins, which even now is to be seen on the shepherd girls. Farther along the valley became more fertile, and pastures appeared; we saw dark-skinned gypsies in shawls



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and great pantaloons of red or white, wearing bands of gold or silver bangles across their foreheads, and others with bangled earrings and necklaces. Waiting at a small station was one black-eyed girl whose wrists were heavy with bracelets of silver coins that tinkled pleasantly as she moved about.

We had seen but one other train. It moved along at a great distance, against the face of a cliff, and was equipped with three engines — two pulling and one facing backward on the rear end. We passed it at a bridge an hour or so later. It was made up of some four or five small flat cars carrying automobiles, in which peasants were comfortably seated, enjoying perhaps their first automobile ride, and which were surely more comfortable than the hard-seated compartments of the third-class cars in which the peasants always travel.

Our course was still through the mountains as darkness fell. The little wood-burning locomotives puffed showers of sparks into the night to fall like a rain of gold down through the valley shadows. High above us timid stars sowed their pathway, gradually growing fainter in the glow of the moon.

In the dim light of the compartment's lamp I thought of the struggle for existence these peasants of Herzegovina must endure, and wondered why any one lived in this arid Karst. There are miles of rocky stretches with but the scantiest sprinkling of vegetation. Here shepherds — but



**A BALKAN SHEPHERDESS**

TO THE  
AMERICAN

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more often goatherds — graze their shaggy animals among the rocks — how they find nourishment, heaven only knows. One wonders what compensates for the privations these natives suffer, but recalling the smiling girls who boarded the train and those gathering fruit, one realizes how gracefully Nature consoles mankind, — and that contentment lies not in possessions but in the pursuit of them; all that is required is a belief in the importance of one's occupation. Since values must always be comparative, the herder whose goats win the admiration of other herders in his province is as happy as the owner of a thoroughbred who wins the Grand Prix at Longchamps.

To continue this line of speculation, is not the happiness of the child, making his first outline drawing of a cat, equal to that joy which must have been Franz Hals' in painting "Hille Bobbe"? Similarly do active men find happiness in hobbies, — collecting Lowestoft or beer mugs, Persian parchments or cigarette coupons, Tanagra figurines or cigar-store Indians, English mezzotints or comic valentines, ship models or souvenir spoons; it really doesn't matter.

One of the most contented men I ever knew had a hobby for collecting specimens of earth — small vials of earth of all colors and shades — hundreds of them from all corners of the globe. Among them were vials of ashes and lava dust — dust from temple floors in Burmah; and another vial was from a crumbling Maya ruin.

But for pleasant associations and the general approval of one's friends, I know of nothing to rival that dignified and

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time-honored custom of collecting famous vintages — a worthy mark of distinction that is still revered in the Old World. The Herzegovinan shepherd, in raising his gourd to his lips, suggests that a collection of wine containers offers great possibilities; it might well reveal the evolution of man. From this primitive gourd of the herder to the Spanish goatskin, the leathern bottel of merrie England, the bear bottles made famous by Russian kimmel, pinch bottles and so on. In America alone the early flint glass bottles, the "Liberty" bottle, the "Washington", "Jefferson", and "Jackson", the "Pine Tree", the "Log Cabin", and the "First Railway" bottle, are all significant in history.

For centuries these ashen peaks of limestone and the desolate waste of the Karst have made Herzegovina the neglected stepchild of the Balkan provinces. A few recent investigations, however, have revealed buried riches beneath this forbidding calcined surface. That silver, iron and silicate in great quantities are to be found in these rocks, has long been known, but for mining, coal is necessary, and although I believe there is no coal to speak of in Serbia, there is plenty of oil and that now may easily be exchanged for coal for mining purposes. Until Yugo-Slavia came into being, these resources, being in different dominions, naturally complicated the working of her mines. But now in the possession of both fuel and silicate, it would seem more than likely that Herzegovina before long may disclose her wealth. A Serbian, in telling me of a silver mine he could have had for a song, shrugged his shoulders with a hopeless gesture.



**FRUIT VENDOR, MOSTAR**



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“Ah, but what’s the use of a silver mine with no money to get the silver?”

Just before we reached Mostar a railroad official came into our section, carefully scrutinizing everything from the patched upholstery to the knobs and latches, not omitting a glance at the occupants. When I questioned the priest about this close inspection, he explained. “Oh, his task is to report any damage that has been done by occupants of the compartments.” And that threw some light on the manner in which he studied the occupants. It would undoubtedly be simpler to detect a guilty demeanor than the latest blemish in the dilapidated railway carriages.

The arrival in Mostar was at midnight. Our little locomotive had ceased puffing. The last tired wheeze had spent itself on the night stillness, when a nerve-wracking noise immediately started up from the street side of the station. It sounded like some fiendish mechanical device for smashing panes of glass on a tin roof. Emerging from the station, we beheld this “mechanical device” — an old Ford touring car, holding in the full glare of its one headlight another common sight: watermelons! A little fruit-shop’s display of Yugo-Slavian watermelons! But these greetings were to prove as deceptive as the well-known “English spoken” signs one finds scattered promiscuously about Europe. The one-eyed Ford and the watermelons were to be the only familiar sights in this old Moslem town.

We had wired for reservations in the one hotel, the

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Narenta — so called because of its location overlooking the river of this name, along which the Turks had built Mostar many hundred years ago. Our arrival was therefore expected and perhaps our thirst had been anticipated, but our hunger had been completely ignored.

This hotel was a huge place and we were shown into its café where the dozen or so habitués, probably business men of the town, sat about sipping Turkish coffee, playing picquet and dominoes, seemingly lost beneath the great loftiness of the smoky room. A frail blonde lady — whose frizzled hair was conspicuous, perhaps from its exposure to the sun, shall we say? — divided her attention between a tambourine, which she passed from table to table for contributions, and a piano which must also have been exposed to the devastating elements. I racked my mind trying to recall the vague familiarity of its tones; and I remembered the Ford we had heard at the station. The tones it lacked were more conspicuous than those it played. The only recognizable air must have been played for our benefit — “The Honeysuckle and the Bee” — which had been a favorite years ago during my student days in Paris but, even then, was of an old vintage.

Our appeal for food was in vain, and contenting ourselves with a small bottle and some dried-up champagne cakes, we retired for the night.

The garb of the women — the Turkish women, who seemed to predominate here — aroused my curiosity, as we

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strolled about Mostar. They seemed like animated hatracks holding one long, stiff, dark robe, which dropped away from a point above the head to the ground, where invisible feet seemed to move them along like some automatic and silent motive power. Neither face nor hands were visible. The front of this hood was open at the peak in a narrow vent, behind which one saw only the veil covering the face. After seeing several pass, I discovered the robe was a coat, a sort of coat-cape rather, made from a man's garment of heavy dark blue, the collar sewn together in a small ridge that formed a point above the head, the sleeves being folded back flat and unused.

We rambled through the bazaar, a conglomeration of little shops and stalls built about a place, of which an old Turkish fountain formed the center, and where girls with veiled faces, voluminous pantaloons, and shrouded in scarves of many colors came for water. Looking at the interesting old crocks and jars which they carried deftly on their heads, I thought what a harvest some enterprising antique dealer could realize here in this old village. These women doubtless were mostly servants and children of the near-by families, for the dark, shrouded figures of hatrack appearance seemed confined to the shoppers, the ladies of Mostar, who moved about from stall to stall, doing a great deal of bartering before they bought.

An old bridge rose in a slender arch high above the Narenta, terminating at either end in what were once for-

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tifications and turrets of masonry but which now serve as dwellings. That this bridge was the nucleus of Mostar is clearly evident from the crumbling walls of vine-clad ruins,



the jutting balconies, and picturesque projections that have been added since its erection in the fifteenth century. From the center of the bridge one gazes down into the parched river bed, shelved with time-worn rocks. A narrow stream winds its eternal course as if striving to hold its own against the relentless sun of the dry season.

At the back of the Narenta Hotel was a dining terrace of tall Moorish arches open on one side like a loggia — a cool retreat opening out on a garden of palms and flowering shrubbery interlaced with a tracery of gravelled paths. A

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minaret rose above the tree tops and here the muezzin appeared on his little balcony, calling in the name of Allah all good Mussulmans to prayer. To the right of this, overlooking the garden, were latticed windows of harems overrun with vines and fragrant flowers. Chameleon-like lizards darted here and there across the sun-splashed gravel to disappear in the shade of the verdure.

A hooded barouche, of obsolete model in almost any other part of the world, stopped at the end of one of the garden paths. As I was speculating on the reason for the careful concealment of its occupant, its closed curtains parted and a veiled lady, shrouded in the strange dark garb of Mostar women, stepped silently from its shadow for her morning walk. Unaware of my observance she moved her veil aside. No sooner had she exposed the shadowy mystery of her olive features, with eyes heavily marked with kohl, than she discovered my presence and immediately re-adjusted her veil, moving slowly along the path until she was lost like a dark specter — mysteriously reminiscent of the bygone realm of the Turks.

The attire of women has been the subject of endless volumes, and somewhere there must be cuneiform tablets containing fashion notes of the times, referring to the coy angle at which the well-known fig leaf should be worn. But nowhere have I ever seen reference to this strange costume of the women of Mostar. It was obviously derived from a man's coat and may have been a punishment imposed upon

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some venturesome harem beauty for stealing out in the night, disguised as a man, to keep a moonlight tryst. This in a person of prominence might easily have made it *à la mode* and caused its adoption as permanent. Strange as this dark shroud seems to me, to them the stiff bowler hat that marks another civilization must appear equally ridiculous. There comes to mind an old Turkish story of the wife-beating hodja who used to thrash his favorite wife daily. A neighboring hodja, coming in one morning unannounced, found his friend in the midst of this strange practice.

"Aha," he cried, "so your little lady has been unfaithful!"

"No, not at all," replied the old husband calmly, "not at all. She is an excellent wife and never does wrong."

"Then why, pray tell me, do you chastise her so mercilessly?"

The old hodja, sending his pretty wife from the room, explained philosophically, "Because, my dear friend, if I wait until she has done wrong, then it will be too late."

The Turkish lady, having finished her morning stroll, had returned to her hooded carriage and, having closely drawn the shutters, was driven off beyond the garden to one of the houses where latticed harems overhung the street. Until this ancient vehicle passed from view my gaze followed it. It held my curiosity like a magnet.





### XIII

#### A MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS

**T**HE valley of the Narenta, along which this old Turkish city of Mostar raises its minarets, is surrounded by desolate peaks. They are lofty and arid — sky-piercing heights of a world where the voice of man is a thing unknown. Here is a bleak wilderness, as barren as the volcanic wastes shown in telescopic views of the surface of the moon.

There was something like defiance in their grim remoteness. Stung with curiosity, one afternoon Lorrington and I set out on a journey of exploration — in no way anticipating the thrill the evening held in store. We followed the semblance of a road, stopping at a mountain kavana for coffee.

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It was the last remote mark of man — a one-room hut where, in a smoky alcove, an old Turk hovered over a charcoal fire. I noticed stuck in a piece of black bread an ancient knife. Its obsolete workmanship caught my fancy and I persuaded the old innkeeper to sell it.

Our rock-strewn way wound up into the mountains and there lost itself in a small shelf-like pass. Lizards darted into crevices, as we disturbed their siestas. By late afternoon we had ascended high above all signs of habitation. Turning to look down into the valley, we saw Mostar like a toy village, where white minarets rose from the green banks of a twisting river. As the pass wound in among the mountains, the valley was lost to view. There were dark gorges and ugly chasms of jagged rock reaching down to unknown depths — down “as straight as a beggar could spit.”

We peered over the precipice and Lorrington speculated absent-mindedly, “I pity the poor chap who ever misses his step here. He could be swallowed up by the mountains for all the world would ever know!”

Sullen clouds darkened the sky, settling like a grim cowl over the loftiest eyries. A peal of thunder rumbled among the crags. Then came a deafening crash that echoed back and forth between the peaks, lingering like a dismal warning. We spoke of returning to the small kavana where we had stopped for coffee. But that place was now far down the mountainside. Darkness was already falling. Clouds had shut out the distant peaks, and the first large drops

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nearly drenched us before we found shelter in a cavelike recess in the rocks. The storm was of such violence that fragments of stone were loosened, hurtling down into these chasms of eternity. With the shifting of low clouds peak after peak was obliterated; darkness had fallen. The rain and lightning passed as suddenly as they had burst forth. Only a distant rumble of thunder lingered — and a soothing aftermath of dark, dripping stillness.

The storm over, we emerged from our shelter to watch the scurrying clouds. They appeared unusually close, like the sky in a theatrical transformation scene. A white moon rose above the peaks and into the rapidly clearing sky. Walls of rain-drenched rock revealed themselves in strangely fantastic forms, and in the moonlight took on a pale glow, iridescent and shimmering, like ghosts of mountains rising against an indigo firmament. Gazing at these weird formations, I must have lingered longer than I was aware, for when I turned to join Lorrington again, he was nowhere to be seen. A sense of loneliness seized me, and with quickening steps I hurried on to where the pass forked; it became more treacherous and narrower than ever. Should I follow the downward or the upward path? I called for Lorrington. There was no answer. Only my own voice, faintly echoing and reëchoing from the shadowy depths of the abyss.

No sooner had I started to hurry than an uncanny sight stopped me abruptly. From a bend in the pass I saw emerging a sinister silhouette, clear-cut against the moon. Some

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huge winged creature was stealthily approaching. Beast or bird, I could not tell. But this indelible impression I can never forget. It was as tall as a man, but with a large head, and, instead of arms, great drooping wings that flapped at



times against two long shaggy legs. The slow threatening pace of the monster, never varying, bespoke its fearlessness. The moonlight was full upon me; I was clearly visible. To relate half the thoughts that passed through my mind in the short interval that followed would take pages.

One wing of the creature hung out over the precipice; the other scraped the inside wall of rock. By these rasping scrapes I measured the seconds of its approach. As the

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sound drew nearer, a piece of shale, loosened by the scraping wing, ticked its descent with a terrifying clearness down into the depths of the yawning gorge. Following the fall of this stone, a horrible silence settled in this mountain wilderness — and suddenly I remembered that Lorrington had not answered my call. Like a specter in a dream, the old Greek story of Ganymede, borne away on the wings of an eagle, obsessed me. I groped for a twig — for a handhold. There was nothing. To turn would have been folly. I must face the thing, whatever it might be. The knife! I remembered the old innkeeper's knife. Like a flash I had it drawn, setting myself for the encounter as a laboring breath from the oncoming shadow became horribly audible. What followed bewildered me.

A deep voice uttered strange words. As unintelligible as these words were, I knew them to be friendly. One's senses become extremely acute at such times. The moon now cast its wan light upon my "*bête noire*", revealing — a genial old peasant carrying on his back a lifeless eagle. I had never realized that eagles were so large. Its spread of wings must have measured eight feet. I flattened myself against the wall as the old man passed, muttering humble apologies. Following him back as far as the inn, I invited the old fellow inside for coffee. My peace of mind was restored on finding Lorrington sitting there comfortably smoking, trying to improve his Slavic vocabulary. While I added a few touches to some rough sketches, he was indicating various objects

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— tables, chairs, bread, etc., trying to repeat the innkeeper's names for them. I remember that beer was *pivo*, that coffee was *kava*, and bread was — well, I forget what bread was: it really doesn't matter. The innkeeper, admiring the old hunter's eagle, and now priding himself on his ability to make us understand, explained that it was the largest bird he had ever seen in the mountains. We treated the old mountaineers to *kava*, and gladly would have welcomed something stronger, but the innkeeper regretted that all he had was coffee.

When we left the inn, the moon was high in a star-strewn dome of velvet depths. The pass broadened into a rough road again, and we strode down the mountain, by the small stone huts of shepherds — spotted at long intervals here in the upland pastures.

At one rock-walled shelter we met gypsies. They were kindling a few fagots beneath a crude tripod of charred branches — drying out tattered clothes that had doubtless been drenched by the shower. We knew them for gypsies from the tinkle of coins worn by a swarthy girl. The silver glistened as she leaned forward, stirring the fire to a little burst of flame as we passed.

As we proceeded through the rock-studded pastures and across the valley toward the village, Lorrington and I discussed the psychology of fright. The object of my recent scare had actually been as harmless as a butterfly. I *was* frightened, but I cannot truthfully say, intense as those



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moments were, that my fright had eclipsed the mysterious phantasma of beauty enshrouding this adventure. Is it not so with all such reactions? We respond by intuitively summoning the keenest of our senses. Of course there are those phlegmatic beings — we all know at least one — who could undergo almost any ordeal unruffled. Can senses stifled by mental control know the full thrill of emotion — or only its intellectual counterpart? And we mused on the difficulties that arise from our popular conception of cultivation — that never-flagging criticism of Nature wherein the development of the senses is so frequently neglected that they may be subservient to the intellect. As Lorrington quoted from Burns,

But och! it hardens a' within,  
And petrifies the feelin'.

The village minarets soon rose pale and slender in the still blue night. Stars twinkled high above the silver-threaded valley of the Narenta — and the sleeping town of Mostar.