

#6

Under the Aeroplane

(Impressions)

Janko Polić Kamov

Italy is flying: in Turin, Milan, Verona, Naples, Bologna and on page three of the papers. Horse races, car races and roller skate races (all of them there on the agenda, the roller skate race having had the whole peninsula in an uproar for a week, or two) are of interest, but they do not enthrall. The earth is but dust, if it is not mud, even if it is asphalted. Humanity, symbolized by a reptile, seeks its symbol in a bird, and the twentieth century is beginning to develop its energy in the air just as the nineteenth developed its upon the earth and under it. At the sight of the first aeroplane, of the elegant, light and I might say agile Bleriot monoplane, that passed above my head with the roaring of an automobile and the lightness of a white bird with its wings outspread, I had an impression of simplicity, harmony and naiveté. And an impression of piety. I did not flinch for even a second: it will fall upon my head; just as *Idid* believe, when it rushed white along the green grass, that it would rise. Faith is great, for it is young, as among those who watched the Ascension, as shown to us by the old painters, especially by the mighty Titian. The scene is the same. That man, dressed up like a diver right up to the tip of his head, diving in space, gives the impression of a captain, of the greatest absolutist and autocrat on board and at sea. When he gets into his plane, the whole of the audience gazes at him, asking: "Shall we? Shan't we? Is it time? Isn't it?" When this one man flies, everyone around flies. His passion for space, his lust now for height, now for play, now

for speed, now to do battle with the wind, is felt by the crowd, in the eyes that ascend. And this crowd, with its aristocrats and its plebs, its old men and boys, is but one child in the face of the one miracle with the same feelings. And when the plane cannot fly, the crowd suffers like the aviator, we feel "we cannot fly — the machine is out of order, we've been deprived of one of our joys". And when the machine is hurt, all weep inside... It is not like the circus, a sensation of horror, curiosity and amazement. The public is child before the bird-man; our soul senses the heights, the clouds, the space; we are captivated, not irritated; something cools us, like the midnight breeze, when we look at the stars; we are nostalgic and contented, as when we lie on our backs, our eyes plunged in the blue: and above all: we hear the blessedness of the laughter of innocence, of freedom. Perhaps it is because looking at the plane we look at the sky? Because of it we have begun to observe the unspoiled beauty of space, where not even a bird leaves a trace? Because stories awaken inside us of transparent fairies that arose from the mists of the Slavic plains like the Greek goddess from the foam of the sea? Or because it puts us in mind of the flight of the eagle, envied by the prisoner of Sarajevo, world's soul Silvije Kranjčević? ... Or because the plane is a white traveller among the heights, like a cloud that returns to earth? And like a cloud can be likened to a sigh, and sighs fly in the sky and on its mirror the sea.

A gondola will submit to the most ardent of kisses and embraces; the automobile and the railway train irritate with animal-like friction, touching and tumbling; but in the aeroplane, lovers will have just the pressure of the hand, the most elevated, the deepest and most refined expression of love. Kisses are an illusion, an embrace is a moment like lust, and eyes are the more mendacious the lovelier they are. Air voyages' (and flight is a voyage) has become national since there have been so many international competitions. The car today is nothing but the servant of the aeroplane and in fact takes on the job of lackey, nurse, assistant. And in the last few years, thoroughly vulgarized through the existence of the public omnibus. *Matin*, who did the Peking-Paris trip, will do one again through France, but this time by plane. A year or two ago, we were enthralled by Itala and Brazini's account of travelling by car, but now we have already forgotten them. Centuries are years and we live by the second. Italy has four air races, and during the holding of the international exhibition, a celebration of Italian unification, there will be air trips from Turin to Rome and back again. Reading the outstanding Italian papers you will sense that the national megalomania or patriotism is suffering because in Verona Cattaneo (the Italian) is behind the Frenchman Paulham, while in Bologna Vivaldi trails the Belgian Olieslager. The Italians are moving feverishly to catch up and overtake the rest, and it is sport here that has by far the biggest audience, the *Gazetta sportiva* having

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the most enthusiastic readership. Milan is going to open up an aviation school, while the poets of fashion call their poems "Aeroplanes". Thus young Buzzzi, an adherent of Marinetti's futurism or the ethos of Bazarov: Let us destroy the past, which has already given rise to one nihilistic title of a collection of poems: *Le revolverate*. The author of the novel *Forse che si, forse che no*, which sees biceps for the Latin in the plane, and imperialism, and has described flight in the air, having a readership for the choice phrase, leaves, instead of an impression of a harmonious, charming and slender Latin monoplane, an impression of the ponderous, tasteless German Zeppelin.

Apart from amusing aeronautic literature, the Italians also have an aerial review (*L'aviatore italiano*), and like everything else aerial — disappointments. I shall not mention the names, but shall begin by recalling the adventures of Petrica Kerempuh. Petrica Kerempuh, in a word, announced to the good burghers of Zagreb: "for a deal of money I will leap the tower of the Cathedral". Petrica, having taken the ticket money, took a run in full sight of the multitude, once, twice, three times, but nothing would come of it... The burghers were of a mind to thrash him, for cheating them, but Petrica was nothing if not ingenious, and said: "I will, but I cannot...."

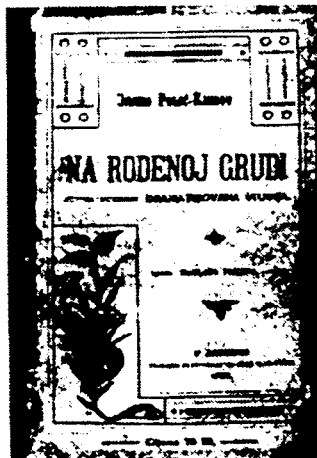
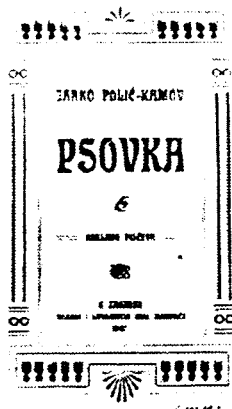
Every history begins with a tale: the history of inventions begins with anecdotes and jokes. The king and emperor is looking through his binoculars at the Zeppelin, and a common or garden beetle approaches him — begins the history of contemporary aerial voyaging. The first public was always the one to be afraid, or the one to jeer, and since there is a pretty large public that has begun to be bored, this is the most apparent sign that man has conquered the air as well. In Bologna in the most recent races there was the smallest crowd to date, and the least enthusiasm ... No one was hurt or killed...

Today there is still amazement at, for example, the winners of the Verona competition. Paulham, little and young, who achieved a maximum height of 1,260 m, and who took a bunch of flowers on his plane for the grave of the brothers who died at Solferino for the freedom of Italy. Then there is Efimov, that herald, aviator of the tempest, as he is called, they say he is like Gorky because he speaks Russian, and then Cattaneo, the boast of all Italy, known abroad too. Then here in Bologna is the powerful and mighty Van der Born and the other Belgian, Olieslager, who left the most pleasant of all impressions with his flight, now like that of the swallow, now like that of gull.

But in a few decades, when the plane becomes a mere means of transport, won't the flyer become just like the driver, who today has nothing particular on the coachman? And when old-clothes-men start flying, with the smell of the shoe-shop, barber-shop or sausage factory, won't the eagle's flight be debased to the flitting of gnats?

There is man for you: everywhere, he has left his filthy and violent steps of ravishment: in the forest, the field, in the mountains, in the earth... Now lust is driving him into the air... But here at least he will leave no trace. The blue-blond space will stay virginal, and air travel remain ideal.

*This section translated by
Graham McMaster*



Facsimile of the cover of works of Janko Polić Kamov