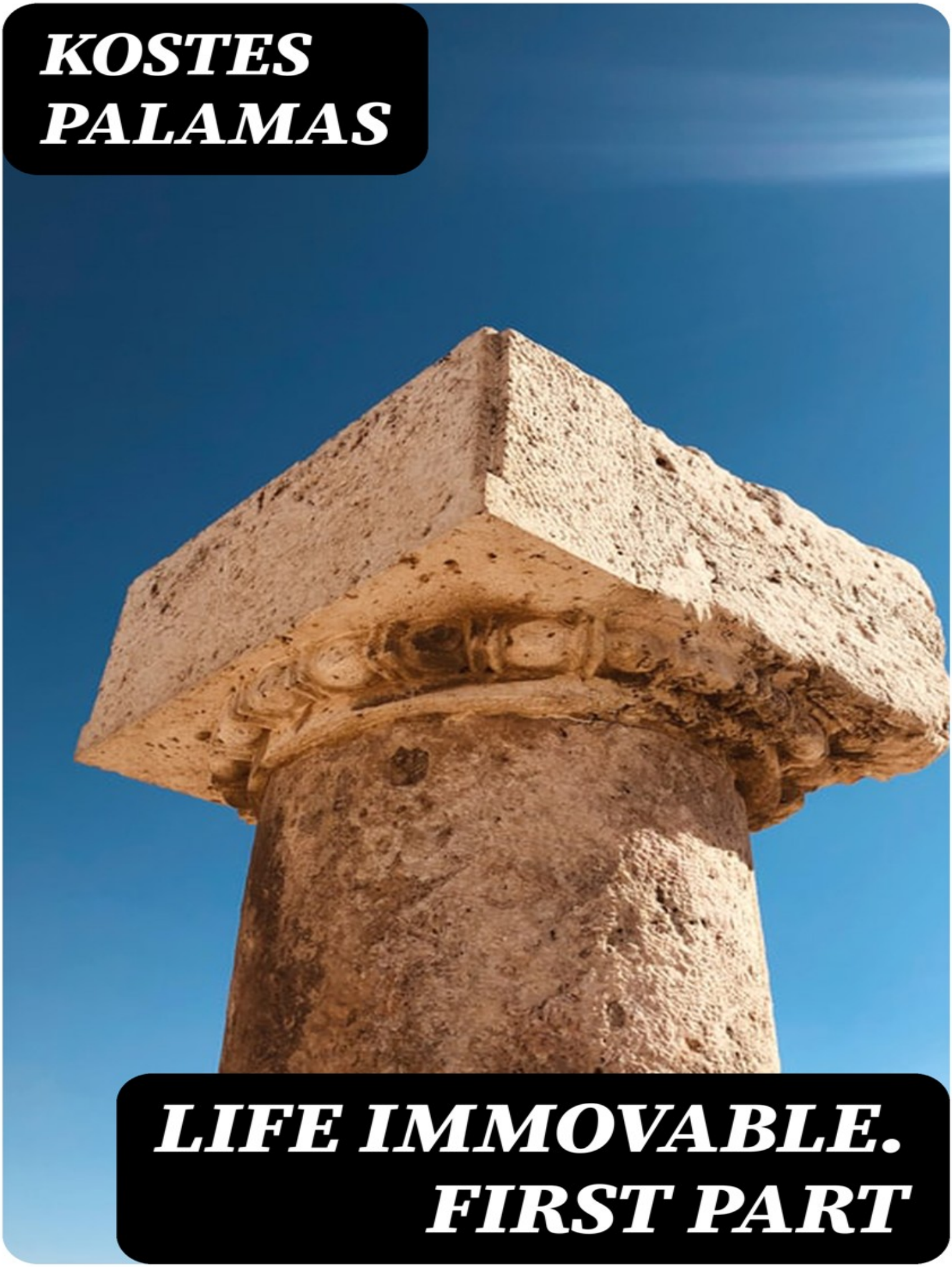
KOSTES PALAMAS



LIFE IMMOVABLE. FIRST PART

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EAN 8596547125389

DigiCat, 2022
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PREFACE

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The translations contained in the present volume were undertaken since the beginning of the great war when communication with Greece and access to my sources of information were always difficult and at times impossible. In hastening to present them to the English speaking public before discussing them with the poet himself and my friends in Athens, I am only yielding to the urgent requests of friends on both sides of the Atlantic who have regarded my delay with justifiable impatience. I am thoroughly conscious of the shortcomings that were bound to result from the above difficulties and from the interruption caused by my two years' service in the American army; and were it not for the encouragement and loyal assistance of those interested in my work it would have been impossible for me to bring it at all before the public. My earnest effort has been to be as faithful to the poet as possible, and for this reason I have not attempted to render rime, a dangerous obstacle to a natural expression of the poet's thought and diction. But I hope that the critics will judge my work as that of a mere pioneer. I know there is value in the theme; and if this value is made sufficiently evident to arouse the interest of poetry lovers in the achievements of contemporary Greece I shall have reaped my best reward.

I wish to express my thanks to Dr. Christos N. Lambrakis of Athens for the information which he has always been willing to furnish me regarding various dark points in the work translated; to Mrs. Eveleth Winslow of Washington for many valuable suggestions and criticisms; and above all to Professor Clifford H. Moore of Harvard University for the interest he has shown in the work and the readiness with

which he has found time in the midst of his duties to take charge of my manuscript in my absence and to assist in seeing it through the press.

ARISTIDES E. PHOUTRIDES.

WASHINGTON, D.C.
July 7, 1919.

INTRODUCTION

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KOSTES PALAMAS[1]

A NEW WORLD-POET

And then I saw that I am the poet, surely a poet among many a mere soldier of the verse, but

always the poet who desires to close within his verse the longings and questionings of the universal man, and the cares and fanaticism of the citizen. I may not be a worthy citizen; but it cannot be that I am the poet of myself alone. I am the poet of my age and of my race. And what I hold within me cannot be divided from the world without.

KOSTES PALAMAS, Preface to *The Twelve Words of the Gypsy*.

Kostes Palamas… is raised not only above other poets of Modern Greece but above all the poets of contemporary Europe. Though he is not the most known… he is incontestably the greatest.

EUGÈNE CLEMENT, *Revue des Études Grecques*.

I
THE STRUGGLE

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Kostes Palamas! A name I hated once with all the sincerity of a young and blind enthusiast as the name of a traitor. This is no exaggeration. I was a student in the third class of an Athenian Gymnasion in 1901, when the Gospel Riots stained with blood the streets of Athens. The cause of the riots was a translation of the New Testament into the people's tongue by Alexandros Pallis, one of the great leaders of the literary renaissance of Modern Greece. The translation appeared in series in the daily newspaper *Akropolis*. The students of the University, animated by the

fiery speeches of one of their Professors, George Mistriotes, the bulwark of the unreconcilable Purists, who would model the modern language of Greece after the ancient, regarded this translation as a treacherous profanation both of the sacred text and of the national speech. The demotikists, branded under the name of [Greek: Malliaroi] "the hairy ones," were thought even by serious people to be national traitors, the creators of a mysterious propaganda seeking to crush the aspirations of the Greek people by showing that their language was not the ancient Greek language and that they were not the heirs of Ancient Greece.

Three names among the "Hairy Ones" were the object of universal detestation: John Psicharis, the well known Greek Professor in Paris, the author of many works and of the first complete Grammar of the people's idiom; Alexandros Pallis, the translator of the Iliad and of the New Testament; and Kostes Palamas, secretary of the University of Athens, the poet of this "anti-nationalistic" faction. Against them the bitterest invectives were cast. The University students and, with them, masses of people who joined without understanding the issue, paraded uncontrollable through the streets of Athens, broke down the establishment of the *Akropolis*, in which Pallis' vulgate version appeared, and demanded in all earnestness of the Metropolitan that he should renew the medieval measure of excommunication against all followers of the "Hairy Ones."

Fortunately, the head of the Greek Church in Athens saved the Institution which he represented from an indelible shame by resisting the popular cries to the end. But the rioters became so violent that arms had to be used against them, resulting in the death of eight students and the wounding of about sixty others. This was utilized by politicians opposing the government: fiery speeches denouncing the measures adopted were heard in Parliament; the victims were eulogized as great martyrs of a sacred cause; and popular feeling ran so high that the

Cabinet had to resign and the Metropolitan was forced to abdicate and die an exile in a monastery on the Island of Salamis. It was then that I first imbibed hatred against the "Hairy Ones" and Palamas.

About two years later, I had entered the University of Athens when another riot was started by the students after another fiery speech delivered by our puristic hero, Professor Mistriotes, against the performance of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* at the Royal Theatre in a popular translation made by Mr. Soteriades and considered too vulgar for puristic ears. This time, too, the riot was quelled, but not until one innocent passer-by had been killed. I am ashamed to confess that on that occasion I was actually among the rioters. It was the day after the riot that I first saw Palamas himself. He was standing before one of the side entrances to the University building when my companion showed him to me with a hateful sneer:

"Look at him!"

"Who is it?"

"The worst of them all, Palamas!"

I paused for a moment to have a full view of this notorious criminal. Rather short and compact in frame, he stood with eyes directed towards the sunlight streaming on the marble covered ground of the yard. He held a cane with both his hands and seemed to be thinking. Once or twice he glanced at the wall as if he were reading something, but again he turned towards the sunlight with an expression of sorrow on his face. There was nothing conspicuous about him, nothing aggressive. His rather pale face, furrowed brow, and meditative attitude were marks of a quiet, retiring, modest man. Do traitors then look so human? From the end of the colonnade, I watched him carefully until he turned away and entered the building. Then I followed him and walked up to the same entrance; on the wall, an inscription was scratched in heavy pencil strokes:

"Down with Palamas! the bought one! the traitor!"

At last my humanity was aroused, and the first rays of sympathy began to dispel my hatred. That remorseless inscription could not be true of this man, I thought, and I hurried to the library to read some of his work for the first time that I might form an opinion about him myself. Unfortunately, the verses on which I happened to come were too deep for my intellect, and I had not the patience to read them twice. I was so absolutely sure of the power of my mind that I ascribed my lack of understanding to the poet. Then his poems were so different from the easy, rhythmic, oratorical verses on which I had been brought up. In Palamas, I missed those pleasant trivialities which attract a boy's mind in poetry. One thing, however, was clear to me even then. Dark and unintelligible though his poems appeared, they were certainly full of a deep, passionate feeling, a feeling that haunted my thoughts long after I had closed his book in despair. From that day, I condescended to think of him as of a sincere follower of a wrong cause, as of a sheep that had been led astray.

Years went by. I was no more in Greece. I had come to another country, where a new language, a new history, a new literature opened before me. Here, at last, I began to assume a reasonable attitude towards the question of the language of my old country, and here first I could read Palamas with understanding. Gradually, his greatness began to dawn on me, and, finally, my admiration for him had grown so much that when on April, 1914, I reached Greece as a travelling fellow from Harvard University, I had decided to concentrate my studies during the five months I was planning to spend there upon him and his work. With his work, I did spend many long and pleasant hours. But him I visited only once. The man from whom I had once shrunk as from a monster of evil, now I shunned for fear I had not yet

learned to admire in accordance with his greatness. Owing to the urgent demand of an old classmate, Dr. Ch. N. Lambrakis, who knew the poet, I went to see him one April afternoon in his office at the University with my friend and fellow traveller, Mr. Francis P. Farquhar. Mr. Palamas was sitting at his official desk; but as soon as we entered he rose to receive us and then sat modestly in the corner of a sofa. He had changed very little in appearance since the time of the riots, and the more I looked at him the more I recognized the very same image which I had kept in my mind from the first encounter I had with him in the University colonnade ten years before. Perhaps, the furrows of his brow had now become deeper; the white hairs, more numerous. His eyes were still the same fiery eyes penetrating wherever they lit beneath the surface of things and often turning away from the present into the world of thought. His hands moved quietly; his voice was clear and sonant; his words were few and polite. Unassuming in his manner, he seemed more eager to receive knowledge than to talk about himself and his work. He asked us questions about America and its literary life: Is Poe read and appreciated? Is Walt Whitman still popular? He admired them both; he had a great craving for the new; and to read things about America fascinated him. When we rose to leave, we realized that we had been doing the talking, but on both of us the personality of the man, reserved and unobstrusive though he was, had made a deep and lasting impression.

This was the only visit I had with him. But I saw him more than once walk in the streets of Athens and among the plane trees of Zappeion by the banks of Ilissus, or sitting alone at a table of some unfrequented coffeehouse, always far from the crowd. It was only after I had returned to America that I wrote to him for permission to translate some of his works. The answer came laden with the same modesty which is so prominent a characteristic of the man.

He is afraid I am exaggerating the value of his work, and he calls himself a mere laborer of the verse. Certainly he has been a faithful laborer for a cause which a generation ago seemed hopeless. But through his faith and power, he has snatched the crown of victory from the hands of Time, and he may now be acclaimed as a new World-Poet.

"The poetic work of Kostes Palamas," says Eugène Clement, a French critic, in a recent article on the poet, "presents itself today with an imposing greatness. Without speaking about his early collections, in which already a talent of singular power is revealed, we may say that the four or five volumes of verse, which he has published during the last ten years raise him beyond comparison not only above all poets of Modern Greece but above all poets of contemporary Europe. Though he is not the most famous—owing to his overshadowing modesty and to the language he writes, which is little read beyond the borders of Hellenism—*he is incontestably the greatest*. The breadth of his views on the world and on humanity, on the history and soul of his race, in short, on all problems that agitate modern thought, places him in the first rank among those who have had the gift to clothe the philosophic idea in the sumptuous mantle of poetry. On the other hand, the vigor and richness of his imagination, the penetrating warmth of his feeling, the exquisite perfection of his art, and his gifted style manifest in him a poetic temperament of an exceptional fulness that was bound to give birth to great masterpieces."

II
LIFE INFLUENCES

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Patras

Kostes Palamas was born in Patras sixty years ago. Patras is one of the most ancient towns in Greece, known even in mythical times as Aroe, the seat of King Eumelus, "rich in flocks." It became especially prominent after the reign of Augustus as a centre of commerce and industry. Its factories of silk were renowned in Byzantine times, and its commanding position attracted the Crusaders and the Venetians as a military base for the conquest of the Peloponnesus. The citadel walls that crown the hill, on the slopes of which the modern city descends amphitheatrically into the sea, are remnants of Venetian fortifications. In the history of Modern Greece, it is a hallowed spot; for it was here that on April 4, 1821, the standard of the War of Liberation was first raised before a band of warriors kneeling before the altar of Hagia Laura, while Germanos, the archbishop of the city, prayed for the success of their arms. The view which the city commands over the sapphire spaces of the Corinthian Gulf and the purple shadows of the mountains rising from its waters in all directions are superb, and the sunsets, that evening after evening revel in colors there, are among the most magnificent in Greece. A beauty worthy of life dwells over the vine-clad hills, while the mountain kings that rise about are hoary with age and fame. The eye wanders from the purple-laden cliffs of Kylene to the opal mantles of the sea and from the peaks of Parnassus to the lofty range of Kiona. This is the background of one of Palamas' "Hundred Voices," a collection of short lyrics in the volume entitled *Life Immovable*:

> Far glimmered the sea, and the harvest darkened the threshing floors;
> I cared not for the harvest and looked not on the threshing floors;

For I stood on the end of the sea, and thee I beheld from afar,
O white, ethereal Liakoura, waiting that from thy midst
Parnassus, the ancient, shine forth and the Nine Fair Sisters of Song.
Yet, what if the fate of Parnassus is changed? What if the Nine Fair Sisters are gone?
Thou standest still, O Liakoura, young and for ever one,
O thou Muse of a future Rhythm and a Beauty still to be born.

To his birth place, the poet dedicates one of his collection of sonnets entitled "Fatherlands" and contained in the same volume. It is the first of the series:

Where with its many ships the harbor moans,
The land spreads beaten by the billows wild,
Remembering not even as a dream
Her ancient silkworks, carriers of wealth.

The vineyards, filled with fruit, now make her rich;
And on her brow, an aged crown she wears,
A castle that the strangers, Franks or Turks,
Thirst for, since Venice founded it with might.

O'er her a mountain stands, a sleepless watch;
And white like dawn, Parnassus shimmers far
Aloft with midland Zygos at his side.

Here I first opened to the day mine eyes;
And here my memory weaves a dream dream-born,
An image faint, half-vanished, fair—a mother.

Missolonghi

But in Patras, the child did not stay long. His early home seems to have been broken up by the death of his mother, and we find him next in Missolonghi, another glorious spot in the history of Modern Greece. It does not pride itself on its antiquity. It developed late in the Middle Ages from a fishing hamlet colonized by people who were attracted by the abundance of fish in the lagoon separating the town from the sea. This lagoon lies across the Corinthian Gulf to the northwest of Patras, hardly an hour's sail from it. Its shallow waters, which can be traversed only by small flat-bottomed dories propelled with poles, extend between the mouths of the Phidaris and the Acheloös, and are studded with small islets just emerging above the face of the lagoon and covered with rushes. Two of these islets, Vassiladi and Kleisova, attained great fame by the heroic resistance of their garrisons against the forces of Kioutachi and Imbrahim, Pashas in the War of Liberation. The town itself is a shrine of patriotism for modern Greeks. For from 1822 to 1826, with its humble walls hardly stronger than fences, it sustained the attacks of very superior forces, and its ground was hallowed by the blood of many national heroes. Just outside its walls lies the "Heroes' Garden" or "Heroön," where under the shadows of eucalyptus and cypress trees, Marcos Bozzaris, Mavromichalis, the philhellene General Coreman, and Lord Byron's heart are buried. It was during the second siege that Byron died here in the midst of his noble efforts for the freedom of Greece. The fall of the city brought about by famine is the most glorious defeat in the history of the Greek Revolution. The garrison of three thousand soldiers with six thousand unarmed persons including women and children, unwilling to surrender, attempted to break through the Turkish lines. But only one-sixth managed to escape. The rest were driven back and mercilessly cut down by their

pursuers. Many took refuge in the powder magazines of the city and waited until the Turks drew up in great numbers; then they set fire to the powder and blew up friends and foes alike. The second sonnet of Palamas' "Fatherlands" is devoted to this lagoon city:

> Upon the lake, the island-studded, where
> The breeze of May, grown strong with sea-brine, stirs
> The seashore strewn with seaweed far away,
> The Fates cast me a little child thrice orphan.
>
> 'Tis there the northwind battles mightily
> Upon the southwind; and the high tide on
> The low; and far into the main's abyss
> The dazzling coral of the sun is sinking.
>
> There stands Varassova, the triple-headed;
> And from her heights, a lady from her tower,
> The moon bends o'er the waters lying still.
>
> But innocent peace, the peace that is a child's,
> Not even there I knew; but only sorrow
> And, what is now a fire—the spirit's spark.

Here then, "the spirit's spark" was first kindled, and here, in the city of his ancestors, the poet was born. The swampy meadows overgrown with rushes and surrounded with violet mountains, the city with its narrow crooked streets and low-roofed houses, the lagoon with its still shallow waters and modest islets, the life of townsmen and peasants with their humbles occupations, passions, and legends, above all, the picturesque distinctness of this somewhat isolated place, secluded, as it seems, in an atmosphere laden with national lore—these were the incentives which stirred Palamas in his quest of song. They have stamped their image on all his