

Ermis LAFAZANOVSKI: HRAPESHKO

1.

“In our neighbourhood there is a gardener so deft with his tools he could lop off that Romantic goatee of yours that you value so highly without your even noticing, without his even batting an eyelid. Hrapeshko is his name!”

This is how the interpreter translated the response of a certain centenarian—the oldest member of the assembled crowd—to a question asked by Monsieur Georges which that same interpreter had just relayed to the audience: to wit, whether in this forsaken land of theirs there was any person or thing for which its inhabitants were renowned and which made them proud.

“Interesting!” replied the interpreter, glossing over the mutterings of Monsieur Georges that persisted faintly beyond his own loud voice, “Would it in any way be possible to see this man?”

The crowd exchanged glances and eventually a weakling amongst them was sent off to summon the man so famously endowed with these skills, a man who lived neither in the country nor in the city but in a rotten suburb by the River Vardar.

Idlers, the crowd remained waiting for his arrival. What else would they do in such a wasteland?

2.

Hrapeshko arrived unshaven.

From afar, he resembles a bandit.

Close up, like a young lad.

Closer still, his head appeared disproportionately small above his shoulders and huge chest that heaved broad and square like a knight’s breastplate. His legs were short and his arms extended only to his waist. His midriff was tightly squeezed by a wide leather belt with sheaths from which protruded various tools for gardening and pruning vineyards: cutters, pruning knives, pairs of shears.

He stopped in front of Monsieur Georges and the interpreter, without uttering a word, inquiring only with his gaze as to why he had been sent for and, above all, who these people were who had sent for him.

Each looked one other up and down for several moments.

Georges and his interpreter appeared to be members of the clerical class. Dressed *a la franca*, they were both somewhat dishevelled from their travels, neither bearded nor shaven but something in between.

“Respected citizens of suburbia!” announced the interpreter, “This gentleman before you is the great Georges de Bourgogne in person, a renowned and acclaimed explorer of the obscurest regions of darkest Europe, a scholar of comparative civilization and culture and a lover of adventure and good wine. The personal cultural attaché, indeed, of his Highness the French Prince Aberville de Grenoble. The documents in his possession will testify to his position. And what is more, they grant him unrestricted right of travel through these parts.”

Upon hearing which words, beads of sweat began to form, although it was yet the dead of winter, on the foreheads of the people in the crowd, including Hrapeshko himself.

“As for myself, I am merely an interpreter and my role in all this is so footling and insignificant that it is not worth even mentioning my name. For this reason, I shall refrain from introducing myself.”

And now.

“Are you the one?” asked the interpreter in the name of Monsieur Georges, who all the while stood quietly muttering to himself something half in French and half in German, so quietly as not to obstruct the interpreter, “Are you the one about whom these people gathered here spin such myths and legends?”

Hrapeshko spat upon the ground and stepped forward, neither bowing his head nor lifting his gaze from Monsieur Georges, who likewise did not avert his gaze from Hrapeshko. The latter slowly approached until he stood just nine inches from the other. Until both could smell the other’s breath, both equally malodorous.

“What a man!” the interpreter exclaimed in the name of Monsieur Georges, which gentleman in the meantime had retrieved from his pocket a piece of rope that he was now using to measure the man before him. “It is true that I have never before seen such a chest as yours. From this fact alone, however, I cannot assess the skill for which these people have vouched for you in your absence. But here! I’ll give you one lira if, here and now in front of all these people, you confirm their tales and legends.”

Hrapeshko took the coin, took a bite at it, and shoved it in his jacket.

He dropped his arms down by his sides. His hands hung by his waist, his waist drawn tight with a broad leather belt sporting loops and sheathes from which various types of pruning shears poked out: wide ones with thin blades, long ones with short blades and shortish ones with thickish blades. The crowd gathered around the three men now held their breath in solemn anticipation. Only the distant rustling of the aspens could be heard, mingled with the faint babble of the River Vardar from yet further off. No one dared draw breath, let alone utter a sound. What might have been the giggles of a few children at the back of the crowd alone hinted at what might be about to happen.

Suddenly...

With the speed of lightning Hrapeshko drew the shears from his right hip, the longest shears of all, and swung them with unbelievable precision around the large and steely forefinger of his right hand. And as they slowly ceased their spinning, Monsieur Georges could not help but notice that the strap holding up his cape had been cut and that the cape—the cape of an enlightened Romantic—was now falling from his shoulder blades as gently as a snowflake to the ground.

Then, with equal skilfulness, Hrapeshko whirled the shears around his steely forefinger once more and returned them to their sheath.

All this happened in a matter of seconds.

No one had had a chance to detect the trick, neither its manner nor its intent.

A gale of laughter broke from the crowd, accompanied by loud applause.

“Bravo! And bravo again!” shouted the interpreter, this time in the name of the people. To which Monsieur Georges lashed out, berating him to the effect that there were certain words that needed no interpretation—such as ‘*bravo*’, for example. The smile on the interpreter’s face retreated beneath this onslaught.

“Nor do I want you to translate this!” shouted Monsieur Georges before hurling the words ‘You vandal!’ in French at the gardener.

And then...

“Since you are a gardener,” ventured the interpreter in the name of Monsieur Georges, who again stood mumbling faintly behind, “May we see you demonstrate your pruning skills on a more suitable example?” The answer to which question he reported immediately to Monsieur Georges, to the effect that Hrapeshko could, being a vintner, best demonstrate his skills in the vineyards situated a little distance from the suburbs. To which he gave Monsieur Georges’s response as “Very well! Let us go!”, though as a matter of fact it appeared from a distance as if the interpreter were talking to himself, asking himself questions and giving himself the answers.

And so they set off.

And presently arrived.

It was the month of February, the month of the first pruning, a month when the ice and cold are unsure what to do with themselves, whether to continue pestering people or withdraw to their underground caves.

Not a soul was about. All that could be seen were the vapours of the river in the distance, rising warmer than the surrounding air amongst the flocks of birds perched shivering on the banks. Rarely has the Vardar suffered so harsh a winter: indeed the only instances recorded are those in the years 1347, 1569 and 1799—and, of course, that day of which we are speaking: a Thursday in February towards the middle of the nineteenth century.

A line of about ten people was now winding its way through the vineyards.

Neither through the city nor through the country.

And when they had reached the first few vine saplings, Hrapeshko raised his hand and with a gesture commanded the attendant crowd to remain silent.

He glanced at one of his mates. This was a signal for the latter to dig another quart of wine out of his sack.

Hrapeshko lifted the quart and drained it to the last drop. Then he wiped his mouth on his jacket beneath his suede jerkin and once more commanded silence from the onlookers.

And suddenly his hands shot to his belt to draw out two pairs of shears, one in his right hand, the other in his left, whirling them like windmill blades above his head and snapping at the air.

He entered the vineyard.

The first row.

The first three saplings.

A battle.

The dry old twigs, monstrous fingers, lashed at his face and arms, whipping his back and shoulders and entangling themselves between his feet. Hrapeshko was enjoying himself. And though the odd branch cut him—on his upper arms and on his shins just above the tops his leather boots—Hrapeshko kept on snipping and snapping with the shears as if he were merely reaping hay. *Hrap! Hrap! Hrap!* He was even laughing.

The grandfathers’ dry and aged arms fell to the ground.

Grandmothers’ hair.

No leaves.

But he left the children intact.

Only dry soil, dry twigs and a little snow.

“He imagines they are people! He is a fantasist!” murmured the crowd, a sentiment the interpreter relayed to Monsieur Georges, who had time only to wipe the tears of stinging cold from his eyes with a flourish of his white handkerchief before the whole performance was over. That was as long as it lasted. He had heard only a purposeful rustling before removing his handkerchief to see Hrapeshko twirling the shears around his forefingers, the job done, and deftly returning them to their sheaths.

“Bravo! Bravo!” the people shouted, together with the interpreter who refrained this time from venturing a translation.

Monsieur Georges took out another silver lira.

A certain amount of grumbling started up amongst the crowd.

Envy.

3.

Georges: “Come with me and I will make you a rich man!”

Who could resist such a call?

No one. Hrapeshko least of all.

“But where to?” asked the others on Hrapeshko’s behalf.

“To France, the country of beautiful gardens and vineyards gone so berserk with ripeness that they yield wine without needing to be pressed!” shouted the interpreter on behalf of Monsieur Georges.

Some people, so the crowd observed, were simply born under a lucky star.

Hrapeshko stood silent.

This silence certainly had to do with his character. In no way, at least, was it the result of any previous experience. Rather it was a symptom of his insecurity. Insecurity, that is, only in respect of verbal expression, not in the domain of skills. That is why he accepted the invitation in silence.

Because the truth was that Hrapeshko, for all his tools and leather sheathes, was unable even to feed himself, let alone his family. However, it could not be said that excitement did not fight with hesitation within him as to whether he should really leave his beloved, unclean land, a land filled with nits and lice, the land on which he had been born infested with fleas and mange, to replace it with another land about which he knew nothing at all except that its inhabitants need not process grapes because the grapes yielded wine all by themselves.

“But first I must bid my folks farewell!”

“Please do so!”

He said his goodbyes very swiftly, informing his kin that he was going away for a few days to Niš, or perhaps to Belgrade, or somesuch, and that he would be back before long.

4.

“My dear Hrapeshko!”

This was the manner in which Monsieur Georges addressed him as they were travelling little by little toward Central Europe.

“My dear Hrapeshko! First you must learn the languages: German, French, and perhaps Italian, so that you can integrate with ease into the states through which we will be travelling.”

Hrapeshko remained silent, partly because he did not know the mentioned languages, and partly because the interpreter had remained in Skopje and there was no one to translate for him even a word of what Georges was saying. For these reasons, and primarily because he did not wish to offend his new master, Hrapeshko resolved to merely nod his head in approval at everything Monsieur Georges had to say.

And so, as the days of their journey toward Central Europe passed by with relative ease, Georges attempted to teach Hrapeshko the foreign languages just cited, never wishing to waste valuable time.

“Ich sprechen zie Deutsche!”

Monsieur Georges gestured with his head for Hrapeshko to repeat his words, but Hrapeshko simply shrugged his shoulders in incomprehension.

“Je parle français.”

The same response.

“Capito?”

In each case Hrapeshko would simply shrug his shoulders and immediately start nodding.

Until: “Capito!” Hrapeshko said suddenly, alarming Georges with the clarity of his pronunciation.

“You must be a very musical man,” exclaimed Monsieur Georges, “And you must hail from very musical people! And now: lesson number two!”

In lesson number two, Hrapeshko was familiarized with words such as *bread* and *water* in French, German and Italian, although he found it difficult to discern which word belonged to which language. In time, however, he would learn.

In this way Hrapeshko, almost without his knowing, started learning European languages. Staying overnight here and there, Hrapeshko learnt how to introduce himself with his full name and surname, even though he did not have a surname—if we disregard the fact that his relatives occasionally used his father’s name as his surname. Whereas it would have been more proper to use his mother’s name Anka as his surname because he knew her best. But that would not have been fitting, as in that case his surname would have been Ankin, which did not sound right.

5.

If he had only been able to speak a little French, Hrapeshko would have said the following to Georges:

“I thank you, most honoured Monsieur Georges, for your intention of showing me the endless beauties of Europe and making me a rich man, all on account of your sincere enthusiasm for my vine-pruning skills. First of all, the people of my city are grateful that you, with your determination and, above all, your impressive influence not only with European but also with Middle Eastern rulers, have managed to extract me from their own mutual feuds in which the victims are almost always people like myself: honest

gardeners. Moreover, I cannot find a suitable word to express my sincere gratitude for your attempts to teach me French—not wasting any time, at all, not a moment.”

6.

If Hrapeshko had known any German, he would have said to Monsieur Georges: “Oh, such wonderful landscapes! How wonderfully these rocky parts drop into this vast water called the Mare Adriatico! Such magnificent cities erected from carved stone and such beautiful girls hanging out the washing on lines stretched between the windows of the buildings! What an amazing experience for my eyes was the moment I discovered that at daylight the sea and the sky overflow into each other somewhere faraway on the horizon, and at night when it is clear how the sea becomes the sky and the sky the sea so one cannot tell to which the stars belong.

And there! Those soaring peaks the human mind has named the Alps! Mountains whose peaks are continuously covered with snow-caps and dotted with firs! Oh, how long it has been since I last saw a fir tree! Allow me, my dear Georges, to express my sincere delight in the colours we are travelling past, as well in the fact that you have put yourself out so much as to teach me German. And all this for my own good!”

But, unfortunately, Hrapeshko could speak neither any French nor German yet and could not even think, let alone utter these words. In any case, however, he felt it from the bottom of his heart.

7.

They might have availed themselves of other opportunities!

But...

Georges decided that before they reached France he would most certainly take Hrapeshko to visit some of his friends, vintners who lived by the great Lac Léman, so that they could see for themselves the discovery he had made.

“Everything you see in the place where I am now taking you,” he explained to Hrapeshko, “differs from what you have been used to seeing back home. Here the winters are much colder and the lakes freeze over. In summer the gardens are always in blossom and the vineyards flourish on the banks of the lake. And, what is most important, no one bothers you!”

Hrapeshko. Taciturn Hrapeshko.

He still spoke but rarely.

And what could he say when it was all the same to him? When he could make no distinction between the lands of France and Germany, even less so between their languages.

They continued past many towns and villages whose names Hrapeshko would forget the moment he heard them.

Lac Léman they first saw as they descended from a snow-covered foothill of the Alps. Even at that time, this lake was renowned for the fact that no monsters inhabited its depths.

Both were swathed in thick furs which Georges had bought en route, furs for approaching the land of snow.

It was late afternoon. The sun was slowly setting and the lake had not yet frozen over. The rays of the sun threw a reddish tinge across its surface. The shores, like the mountains, were covered in deep snow. Here and there, projecting from a village green or town square, one could just catch sight of a tall church or cathedral spire. Hrapeshko found what he saw very pretty indeed, but nonetheless wished they could leave that place as soon as possible for it was most unpleasantly cold.

By the time they reached the western part of the lake, they were already tired. No sign of any vineyards! No blossoming gardens!
Just snow.

8.

Georges's friends.

"And how is my friend Georges?" bellowed Pascal. The vintner was seated at a table in a roadside inn together with a dozen other people who had no occupation in those winter months. Idlers are idlers everywhere in the world.

Georges began telling the company of the places he had visited and the people he had met. He told them that he had travelled to all the places referred to by the Romans of old as *ubi leonis*.

From all that was said, Hrapeshko understood only the word 'ubi'—a word that meant 'kill' in his native tongue of Macedonian—and instinctively reached for his shears. For you never know... in a foreign country among strangers.

Monsieur Georges had seen places, he told his listeners, with wide rivers and gentle fields full all spring and summer long with the aroma of mountain tea; he had seen people thriving in trades who were but modest in reason and thinking; churches so small that only two worshippers at a time could prey inside them; mosques so large they could hold a hundred at a time; small children with joyous gazes; lakes with clear and drinkable water.

And vineyards? Had he seen any vineyards?

"As many vineyards as you could wish for!"

At this, all of them opened their eyes wide and looked at Hrapeshko and his odd but dignified appearance.

"Is this man a vintner?"

"A gardener. A vintner and more!"

"What do you mean by 'more'?"

"This man is a professional, a master of his trade. But even more than that he is a fighter that always wins!"

The assembled Germans, French and Italians now commenced looking Hrapeshko over from head to toe. Then each of them in their own language asked Georges:

"Well, what can this friend of yours do?"

"What can he do? If you pay well, he can do a bit of everything. Hand over three coins for a start, and you will see."

Drunken business.

Drunken business can give you not only a sore head, but also a sore body. Especially if it comes to bodily confrontation amongst participants in the drunken business. And this is why.

The hosts were already drunk from their drunken party and promised that they would give and put together the money, but only if it was going to be amusing.

Georges gestured at Hrapeshko and he stood up.

He threw his coat off and remained standing only in his shirt.

The hosts were stunned by the size of Hrapeshko's chest and immediately recognized him as a hero.

"Can we touch this wonderful chest?" they shouted out, and at the same time as they asked permission from Georges, they also sought approval from the landlord of the inn.

"Of course you may," said Georges, "but you will have to pay for it."

The landlord stood up and traversed Hrapeshko's chest with his hands.

"Hmm... this man is short in stature and yet very well-built. Anything might come of him. But let's see what this fellow can do!"

As the excitement grew in Hrapeshko, his chest swelled ever larger.

Georges turned around the room several times but couldn't find anything interesting upon which Hrapeshko could test his skills.

Suddenly his attention was caught by the landlord's large-brimmed Romantic hat. He gestured at Hrapeshko.

Hrapeshko understood.

Raising himself up from his place with a smile on his lips, he swiftly drew out a pair of pruning shears and swivelled them hissing through the air several times before replacing them in their sheath. To everyone's great astonishment, the brim of the landlord's hat now fell around his neck, leaving the top part pruned in such a way that it resembled more than anything a diminutive Turkish fez.

The assembled crowd, with Pascal at its head, laughed and shouted "Bravo!". This pleased Hrapeshko. For it suggested he might make a name for himself here, too. Naturally, the landlord was more than a little annoyed and did not resist the opportunity to mention that the damage done was somewhat greater than the pleasure of viewing this circus trick; the hat he had been wearing with such dignity had cost him five coins, while they were supposed to give him three, which meant that George actually owed his hosts two coins.

"And who is going to pay for Hrapeshko's performance?"

"You won three coins for it, but the damage cost five, so come on don't resist! Pay up!"

Georges shivered and glanced at his robust friend. The latter understood they were in danger and simply glared.

The hosts were not too keen to mess with 'the Balkan butcher' as they dubbed him, however, and so declared that on second thoughts they would forget all about the incident.

But they did not.

9.

Monsieur Georges and Pascal exchanged the following words.

"How much are you asking for this man?"

"What do you mean how much?"

This man is not for sale.
I'm going to take him to Bordeaux!
I'm going to contract him in the vineyards of Champagne!
I need him! I am not giving him up!"
“?”
“How about ten golden pieces?”

10.

It is general knowledge that every man has his own price.
Ten golden pieces! In a century when Victor Emmanuel II of Sardinia was devising great plans and Bismarck was beating his chest in belligerence, when armies were ravaging Central Europe and monarchies strived to solve all their problems at any cost through war or through taxation; at a time when Heinrich Heine, in his old age, was dabbling with his views on “Young Germany” and Petöfi wrote something about Europe and how the Hungarians were deprived of their rights in that entity; in a century when the echoes of the war between the United States and Mexico did not concern anyone in Europe whatsoever, while the question of whether Tahiti did or did not become a French protectorate concerned them even less; in a century when Franz Josef had already displayed certain affinities for the Austrian throne... That is to say, those ten gold pieces in such a time meant a very great deal indeed. Even if it all happened at the time of one of the Crimean wars in which Hrapeshko showed no interest at all.

Ten is a lot!

In any case, Pascal's reasoning behind it was that such a worker was simply a type of machine which he lacked and that these steep vine plantations surrounding the whole of Lac Lemman were crying out for such a worker.

But nothing is ever enough for one who believes that even a very little is enough.

No one noticed, but Georges lowered his voice and said to Pascal with a Swiss accent, in a language comprehensible only to the two of them, that actually this little fellow was a great professional and couldn't be treated in any way Pascal found fit, but only as a professional.

“11?”

Georges added that he was, by vocation, a passionate explorer of unknown landscapes, not only of geographical ones but also of the landscapes of human habits and the human soul. At that very moment he was writing a tract, he continued, a study, based on observation and concerning the adaptation of particular subjects to a particular objective reality, for which purpose Hrapeshko was more than indispensable to him.

“12?”

And that the term *objective reality* should stand for certain European countries and their mutual relations, including the notion of adaptation to one another and also the adaptation of non-European objects to European subjective reality. As a matter of fact, he had debated the subject of *adaptation* in many clubs and circles throughout Europe and his firm view was that not every subject was adaptable and that adaptation should commence with the study of languages.

“13?”

Even when it concerned a man not unlike this one here in your view, a skilled man, but all the same a man who hailed from a territory to which the Romans referred to as *ubi leonis*.

“14?”

But before Georges had finished expounding his own theories, he noticed that Pascal had already turned away, ready to abandon the bidding and lie down. So he rushed to say:

“You have swayed me!”

Thus said Georges and disappeared forever.

“Good!” said the innkeeper, “A done deal!”

Thus they both struck a verbal agreement that Hrapeshko should stay in Pascal’s service during the following season in return for 14 gold pieces.

Bravo!

11.

Hrapeshko was not a stupid man.

By no means!

He had an inborn instinct for survival. And for that reason he surrendered his own fate into God’s hands.

In foolish tales of foreigners lost abroad—in cases such as this—the stranger resides with his new landlord for the time being. Hrapeshko did likewise. His main aim of the moment was to apply himself intensively to the languages of this new land.

In all fairness he was forced by need, so that even he himself was surprised at how quickly he learned and even caught himself speaking these languages in his dreams. So that, too, was a done deal.

When all the snow had melted, Hrapeshko’s eyes were greeted with familiar landscapes. From beneath the snow by the lakeside there now emerged the shrivelled arms of vine saplings.

Hrapeshko was exceptionally happy.

It was as if he had come upon familiar faces and said to himself: here is Youssef the bandit; there is Bimbo the drunkard and Mare the whore; there are the grannies and the grandpas basking in the sun; there are the little children swimming in the Vardar; there is the bride...

He ran towards them, gasping with his great strong chest, and fell into their arms. And this time he did not pull out his shears but began shaking hands with the saplings, hugging them and singing old Macedonian folk songs to them. The vine saplings were happy that no one was pruning them back this time and tried to stroke his face and body. But their joy was short-lived.

From somewhere high up above, Pascal was watching Hrapeshko. He shook his head left to right, muttering to himself: “God forbid!”

Then:

“I think it’s about time you started work!”

Hrapeshko never waited to be told twice.

Several times, by all means, but never twice. And even if someone had wanted to repeat something a second time, he would not have managed because Hrapeshko would

certainly have started working the first time he was told lest he ever give the impression that he was lazy. To avoid any misunderstanding, then, he did not wait to be told twice. His mind became blurred and the blood suddenly rushed to his face. His arms became swollen. He entered the vineyard and started clearing and pruning with a skill equal to that of people who had done so all their lives.

Hrap... hrap... hrap!

All of a sudden, Hrapeshko was surrounded by branches whipping his face. The branches, too, sensed the presence of Pascal, who had joined Hrapeshko in the work—only at a far slower pace. The vintner was competing with Hrapeshko.

“We’ve always been soldiers, us Swiss! We have always fought!” yelled Pascal as the dead branches of dry vines fell to the ground either side of him, “My grandfather took part in all the battles of the French against the Germans, against the Russians and even against the French themselves. My father... hkrap... hkrap... fought for the independence of Switzerland and was wounded in that battle many times... hrap... hrap... And I myself have suffered several wounds in our attempts to expand this nation by a few more cantons.” To make his point, Pascal showed Hrapeshko a deep scar on his upper left arm that still impeded his movements. He had been wounded in a short battle, he explained, between the liberal-democratic powers and the Catholic cantons that opposed the revision of the Federal agreement. Or something along those lines. While his father had been personally involved on the side of the French in the battle against General Suvorov. Pascal hailed from a long line of soldiers as a matter of fact, but when eternal peace took over this country he had started plying his current trade of wine growing.

“Oh!” Hrapeshko responded.

They sat, both covered in sweat, on the ground in the midst of the pruned and mutilated branches.

“And we have won this battle too!”