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Hassan in Constantinople: Portrait of Bosnia from “Death and the Dervish”

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Hassan adapted badly. He was oversensitive about everything concerning himself and his homeland and convinced of human values that he thought would be recognized everywhere. Finding himself in the rich imperial city, with its intricate connections and relationships between people—necessarily merciless, like among sharks in the deep sea, falsely polite, hypocritically polished, interwoven like the threads of a spider’s web—the inexperienced honesty of one young man was drawn into a genuinely vicious circle. With his outdated attitudes, by which he tried to make his way through the Constantinople wilderness, with a naïve belief in honesty, he resembled a man who goes into battle empty-handed against skilled pirates armed to the teeth. With the benevolent serenity, honesty, and knowledge that he has gained, Hassan entered that den with the confident steps of an ignoramus. But as he was not stupid, he soon realized what a bed of coals he had stepped onto. He could either have agreed to everything, or remained unnoticed, or left. But he, unusual as always, rejecting Constantinople’s cruelty, began more and more to think about his kasaba, and to contrast its quiet life with that commotion. They mocked him and spoke scornfully about his remote, backward region. “What are you talking about?” he would ask with surprise. “Not an hour’s walk from here there are regions so backward you can hardly believe your eyes. Here, in your back yard, not far from this Byzantine splendor and wealth, which has been hauled in here from the whole empire, your own brothers live like beggars. But we belong to no one, we’re always on some frontier, always someone’s dowry. Is it then surprising that we’re poor? For centuries we’ve been trying to find, trying to recognize ourselves. Soon we won’t even know who we are, we’re already forgetting that we’ve been striving for anything. Others do us the honor of letting us march under their banners, since we have none of our own. They entice us when they need us, and reject us when we’re no longer any use to them. The saddest land in the world, the most unhappy people in the world. We’re losing our identity, but we cannot assume another, foreign one. We’ve been severed from our roots, but haven’t become part of anything else; foreign to everyone, both to those who are our kin and those who won’t take us in and adopt us as their own. We live at a crossroads of worlds, at a border between peoples, in everyone’s way. And someone always thinks we’re to blame for something. The waves of history crash against us, as against a reef. We’re fed up with those in power and we’ve made a virtue out of distress: we’ve become noble-minded out of spite. You’re ruthless on a whim. So who’s

backward?”

Some hated him, some scorned him, others avoided him; he felt an increasing loneliness and longing for his homeland. One day he hit one of his countrymen, who was telling jokes about Bosnians, and went out into the street, saddened and ashamed of both that man and himself. Then, by a market he overheard the woman from Dubrovnik and her husband. They were speaking his language. Never had a human language seemed so beautiful to him; never had anyone been more charming than that slender woman of noble appearance and the plump merchant from Dubrovnik.

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