The Wonderful Adventures of Hlapič the Apprentice

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Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić

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Content Warning:

The story may contain scenes that are not suitable for all ages.

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About the Authoress

Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić, born in Ogulin in 1874, is considered the most important Croatian children's author and one of the most prominent female writers in the Slavic world. She was often called the "Croatian Andersen," a testament to her exceptional narrative gift and the universal appeal of her works.

Her writing career was marked by a rich intellectual heritage; she was the granddaughter of the famous Croatian ban (viceroy) and poet Ivan Mažuranić. Despite living as a mother of seven children and a housewife in Slavonski Brod, she created works that became the foundation of Croatian youth literature.

Her most famous character is the rascal Hlapič, the main hero of the novel The Marvellous Adventures of Lapich the Apprentice (1913), which is considered the first Croatian novel of its kind for children. With his cheerful and courageous character, Hlapič has been delighting young readers for over a century. Critics, however, consider the collection Croatian Tales of Long Ago (1916) to be the pinnacle of her work, in which she skillfully intertwined Old Slavic mythology with universal moral teachings, thereby creating a unique, magical world.

Her quality was also recognized abroad – in the 1930s, she was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature no fewer than six times, and in 1937 she became the first woman to become a corresponding member of the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts. She died in 1938 in Zagreb, but her work remains eternally alive and beloved.

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A Little Introduction

This is the story of the wonderful journey of Hlapič the apprentice.

Hlapič was as small as a cubit, as cheerful as a bird, as brave as Prince Marko, as wise as a book, and as good as the sun. And because he was all that, he managed to swim safely out of many troubles.

At first, Hlapič's journey was as easy as a children's game, so readers at the beginning of this book may say:

"Why would Hlapič need so much wisdom and courage for such an easy journey? Does he really need all that bravery just to lead a harnessed donkey by the bridle? Or his wisdom to look for lost geese?"

But later, Hlapič's journey became harder and more dangerous, as often happens. And when readers see little Hlapič in great danger and difficult troubles, they will say:

"Hlapič truly did well to take plenty of goodness, wisdom, and courage with him for safety when he set off into the world at early dawn."

And that is exactly why, in the end, everything turned out for the best.

Still, let no one run away from home. No one has it as bad as Hlapič had it with Master Mrkonja, and God knows whether everyone would have such luck on their journey as Hlapič. You will be amazed anyway that everything turned out so well for him.

So, get comfortable and read!

Characters and Concepts

Hlapič – the main hero, a shoemaker's apprentice; small, cheerful, brave, wise, and good.

Master Mrkonja – Hlapič's master; at first harsh and unjust, later he changes.

The Mistress – Mrkonja's wife; kind-hearted, secretly helps Hlapič.

Bundaš – Hlapič's faithful dog; smart and brave.

Gita / Marica – a circus girl, Hlapič's friend; later revealed to be Mrkonja's lost daughter.

Marko – a boy who tends geese; has a little house with a blue star.

The Black Man – a villain who steals and robs.

Grga ("Bad Grga") – the Black Man's helper; later repents.

The old milkman – leaves Hlapič a donkey and a cart.

The circus master – Gita's (Marica's) guardian; wicked.

The basket-maker – a poor maker of baskets whom Gita and Hlapič help at the fair.

The little shepherds (**Miško** and his brother) – kind shepherds with whom Hlapič and Gita spend the night.

The beggar woman Jana – an old beggar who brings news of a robbery in the forest.

The maid on the third floor – receives flowers from Hlapič.

Concepts (important objects / places)

Cubit – an old unit of length, 1.13 m.

Little boots – red boots, the reason for Hlapič's escape and search.

Green trousers – Hlapič's mocked, but later beloved trousers.

Blue star – drawn on Marko's little house; an important sign of recognition.

Red leather bag – Hlapič's backpack with an awl, twine, bread, and a handkerchief.

Awl and twine – Hlapič's "weapon" and shoemaker's tools.

Cart (wagon) and donkey **Kokodan** – Hlapič's inherited legacy.

Crossroads – a place of encounters and danger.

Thicket – dense forest undergrowth where Hlapič meets Master Mrkonja.

Heller – money.

Silver coin (forint / gulden) – money Grga receives from his mother and gives to Mrkonja.

At Master Mrkonja’s

I. Hlapič the Apprentice

There was once a small shoemaker’s apprentice who had neither father nor mother. His name was Hlapič.



Hlapič was still as small as a cubit, but as cheerful as a bird. All day he sat in torn trousers and a red shirt on a small three-legged shoemaker’s stool,

hammering little nails into boots and sewing shoes. All day he whistled and sang as he worked.

Hlapič's master was called Master Mrkonja, and he was harsh and frightening. He was so big that his head reached the ceiling of their little room. His hair was shaggy like a lion's, and his long moustaches hung down to his shoulders. His voice was as strong and clumsy as a bear's.

Once in his life, a great sorrow and misfortune befell Master Mrkonja, and from then on, he became very hard-hearted. What misfortune struck him will be revealed much later in this book.

Master Mrkonja was therefore hard-hearted and very unjust, and he cursed and shouted at Hlapič whenever he was in a bad mood.

The mistress was very good. The same sorrow had happened to her as to Master Mrkonja, but from those times she became even kinder and had a very good heart. She loved Hlapič very much. But she was also afraid of Master Mrkonja. Whenever she brought Hlapič fresh bread, she hid it under her apron so the master would not see, because he

had ordered that Hlapič be given only hard, old bread. But the mistress knew that Hlapič liked to eat soft bread.



Hlapič had only one pair of torn trousers and another pair that the mistress had made for him from green cloth. This cloth was left over from the master's green apron, so the master ordered his wife to make trousers for Hlapič from it. In these trousers, Hlapič's legs looked as green as a frog's,

so he did not like to wear them, because the other apprentices mocked him. Master Mrkonja ordered that he must wear them on Sunday.

Hlapič was always in a good mood, and when he saw that he had to wear these trousers, he began to joke about them himself. He croaked "ribbit-ribbit" like a frog whenever he put on the green trousers.

When the other apprentices saw that Hlapič was joking, they no longer mocked him. On Sundays they played with him and liked him very much. Only Master Mrkonja must not see Hlapič playing, because he would immediately send him home.

Thus Hlapič lived with Master Mrkonja, and it was not good for him. But he would nevertheless have stayed there God knows how long, if something had not happened that saddened Hlapič too much.



II. The Little Boots

A certain rich gentleman ordered a pair of little boots from Master Mrkonja for his young son.

The boots were very beautiful. Their shafts shone like the sun. Hlapič himself had hammered the little nails into them. But when the gentleman arrived with his son and the boy tried the boots on, they were unfortunately too tight. So the gentleman did not want to take them or pay for them, and Master Mrkonja tried to make excuses. The gentleman still refused to take or pay for the boots.