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**A TRUE YET SOMEWHAT IMPROBABLE
STORY OF THE PUSTOPOLSKI FAMILY,
THE HOUSE BY THE VARDAR AND THE
FOUR RINGS**

An old-fashioned novel

**A TRUE YET SOMEWHAT IMPROBABLE STORY OF THE PUSTOPOL-
SKI FAMILY, THE HOUSE BY THE VARDAR AND THE FOUR RINGS**
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THE FIRST RING

It was the summer of 1898.

One Sunday morning at the end of June, young Nikola Pustopolski got off the train at the Skopje railway station; after three days and three nights of travel, he arrived from Paris where he had completed his studies in pharmacology at the *Ecole supérieure de pharmacie*.

He was welcomed by his father Haralampie, a wholesaler, (an” engrosser “, as he liked to call himself), a supplier of all Skopje grocery shops with “mixed goods” imported from abroad. He hugged his son, patted him on the back, then moved away a little, tilted his head to his right shoulder, squinted and looked him up from head to toe, said that he seemed a little slimmer, asked him what was in his luggage. Nikola pointed to his suitcase, woven from willow rods and girded with leather straps, but said that in the *Gepäck-wagon*, where all the heavier shipments go, there were three more cases with books. Haralampie looked at his son with some astonishment, asked – as if he didn’t hear him well - “Books?” and, after receiving confirmation answer, he yelled at the porters who were swarming around them to find a cart, load the luggage and bring it to his home. Then he signaled the coachman, who was waiting in the shade of a large mulberry tree, to draw the carriage closer.

At that moment, a police officer approached them, dressed in the French style, but still with a fez on his head, and asked Nikola a question about what was in the cases, which at that moment were being unloaded from the baggage car. Hardly paying him any attention, Nikola said that there had only books and nothing else. The civil servant, in

charge of checking the passengers and goods arriving at the station, stood undecided as if hesitating whether to believe the word of this young hotshot who was coming from who-knows- where and carrying with him three heavy cases full of who-knows-what, but when Haralampie approached him and thrust a few shiny coins into his hand, he gave up his intention of carrying out the intended inspection, nodded and walked away in his most dignified manner.

When they arrived at the gate of the big house, not far from the bank of the river Vardar, Nikola's mother, Evdokija, sprinted from inside. She embraced him, crying and laughing at the same time, rising on tiptoe so that she could stroke his hair, repeating over and over: "Mother's handsome boy, mother's handsome boy!" Old Haralampie with a severe wave of his hand put a stop to this show of feelings before the eyes of strangers and signaled to the porters, who were in the other cart, to unload the suitcases..

In the yard, on the path that led to the house, three young girls stood. They looked at Nikola curiously, but did not dare approach him. "Your cousins," said Haralampie, "you remember them, don't you?" Nikola knew that they had come to live with them ever since their parents, first their father and then their mother — Evdokija's sister— had died suddenly, but in his memory they were still little girls with always teary eyes and scraped knees; they were now fully grown damsels looking shyly at their big cousin. "Despina, Dafina and Ali-la," said Evdokia, "my poor sister's girls," she added. "I know, I know," Nikola said. They didn't dare hug their cousin, so they offered him a hand, welcoming him with a few confused words.

They sat down in the guest room, and Evdokija ordered the little Gypsy servant to bring them Turkish delight and cold water. Nikola asked what's new. His father Haralampie spread his arms and said that, thank God, the deals are going well, there are more and more people who want to buy those things that come from far away, even if they might be expensive, they are still beautiful and "solid, by god", but that, well, a lot of money goes to bribery. "In the cities the police , in the