"THE TOWN OF THE LITTLE PEOPLE" by Sholem Aleichem

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The town of the little people into which I shall now take you, dear reader, is exactly in the middle of that blessed Pale into which Jews have been packed as closely as herring in a barrel and told to increase and multiply. The name of the town is Kasrilevka. How did this name originate? I'll tell you:

Among us Jews poverty has many faces and many aspects. A poor man is an unlucky man, he is a pauper, a beggar, a schnorrer, a starveling, a tramp, or a plain failure. A different tone is used in speaking of each one, but all these names express human wretchedness. However, there is still another name-kasril, or kasrilik. That name is spoken in a different tone altogether, almost a bragging tone. For instance, "Oh, am I ever a kasrilik!" A kasrilik is not just an ordinary pauper, a failure in life. On the contrary, he is a man who has not allowed poverty to degrade him. He laughs at it. He is poor, but cheerful.

Stuck away in a corner of the world, isolated from the surrounding country, the town stands, orphaned, dreaming, be-witched, immersed in itself and remote from the noise and bustle, the confusion and tumult and greed, which men have created about them and have dignified with high-sounding names like Culture, Progress, Civilization. A proper person may take off his hat with respect to these things, but not these little people! Not only do they know nothing of automobiles, modern travel, airplanes-for a long time they refused to believe in the existence of the old, ordinary train. "Such a thing could not be," they said. "W said, "It's a dream, a fairy tale. You might just as we talk of merry-go-rounds in heaven!"

But it happened once that a householder of Kasrilevka had to go to Moscow. When he came back he swore with many oaths that it was true. He himself had ridden in a train to Moscow, and it had taken him-he shrugged his shoulders less than an hour. This the little people interpreted to mean that he had ridden less than an hour and then walked the rest of the way. But still the fact of the train remained. If a Jew and a householder of Kasrilevka swore to it, they could not deny that there was such a thing as a train. It had to be true. He could not have invented it out of thin air. He even explained to them the whole miracle of the train, and drew a diagram on paper. He showed them how the wheels turned, the smokestack whistled, the carriages flew, and people rode to Moscow. The little people of Kasrilevka listened and listened, nodded their heads solemnly, and deep in their hearts they laughed at him. "What a story! The wheels turn, the smokestack whistles, the carriages fly and people ride to Moscow-and then come back again!"

That's how they all are, these little people. None of them are gloomy, none of them are worried little men of affairs, but on the contrary they are known everywhere as jesters, story-tellers, a cheerful, light-hearted breed of men. Poor but cheerful. It is hard to say what makes them so happy. Nothing-just sheer joy of living. Living? If you ask them, "How do you live?" they will answer, with a shrug and a laugh. "How do we live? Who knows? We live!" A remarkable thing-whenever you meet them they are scurrying like rabbits, this one here, that one there. They never have time to stop. "What are you hurrying for?" "What am I hurrying for? Well, it's like this. If we hurry we think we might run into something-earn a few pennies-provide for the Sabbath."
To provide for the Sabbath—that is their goal in life. All week they labor and sweat, wear themselves out, live without food or drink, just so there is something for the Sabbath. And when the holy Sabbath arrives, let Yehupetz perish, let Odessa be razed, let Paris itself sink into the earth! Kasrilevka lives! And this is a fact, that since Kasrilevka was founded, no Jew has gone hungry there on the Sabbath. Is it possible that there is a Jew who does not have fish for the Sabbath? If he has no fish, then he has meat. If he has no meat, then he has herring. If he has no herring, then he has white bread. If he has no white bread, then he has black bread and onions. If he has no black bread and onions, then he borrows some from his neighbor. Next week, the neighbor will borrow from him. "The world is a wheel and it keeps turning." The Kasrilevkite repeats this maxim and shows you with his hand how it turns. To him a maxim, a witty remark, is everything. For an apt remark he will forsake his mother and father, as the saying goes. The tales you hear about these little people sound fabulous, but you may be sure they are all true.

For instance, there is the story of the Kasrilevkite who got tired of starving in Kasrilevka and went out into the wide world to seek his fortune. He left the country, wandered far and wide, and finally reached Paris. There, naturally, he wanted to see Rothschild. For how can a Jew come to Paris and not visit Rothschild? But they didn't let him in. "What's the trouble?" he wants to know. "Your coat is torn," they tell him.

"You fool," says the Jew. "If I had a good coat, would I have gone to Paris?"

It looked hopeless. But a Kasrilevkite never gives up. He thought a while and said to the doorman: "Tell your master that it isn't an ordinary beggar who has come to his door, but a Jewish merchant, who has brought him a piece of goods such as you can't find in Paris for any amount of money."

Hearing this, Rothschild became curious and asked that the merchant be brought to him.

"Shalom Aleichem," said Rothschild.

"Aleichem shalom," said the merchant.

"Take a seat. And where do you come from?"

"I come from Kasrilevka."

"What good news do you bring?"

"Well, Mr. Rothschild, they say in our town that you are not so badly off. If I had only half of what you own, or only a third, you would still have enough left. And honors, I imagine, you don't lack either, for people always look up to a man of riches. Then what do you lack? One thing only—eternal life. That is what I have to sell you."

When Rothschild heard this he said, "Well, let's get down to business. What will it cost me?"

"It will cost you"—here the man stopped to consider."it will cost you-three hundred rubles."

"Is that your best price?"
"My very best. I could have said a lot more than three hundred. But I said it, so it's final."

Rothschild said no more, but counted out three hundred rubles, one by one.

Our Kasrilevkite slipped the money into his pocket, and said to Rothschild: "If you want to live for ever, my advice to you is to leave this noisy, busy Paris, and move to our town of Kasrilevka. There you can never die, because since Kasrilevka has been a town, no rich man has ever died there."

And then there is the story of the man who got as far as America . . . But if I started to tell all the tales of these little people I'd have to sit with you for three days and three nights and talk and talk and talk. Instead, let us pass on to a description of the little town itself.

Shall I call it a beautiful little town? From a distance it looks-how shall I say it?-like a loaf of bread thickly studded with poppy seed. Some of the houses are built on the slope of a hill, and the rest are huddled together at the base, one on top of the other, like the gravestones in an ancient cemetery. There are no streets to speak of because the houses are not built according to any plan, and besides, where is there room for such a thing? Why should there be vacant space when you can build something on it? It is written that the earth is to be inhabited, not merely to be gazed at.

Yet, don't be upset. There are some streets-big streets, little streets, back streets and alleys. What if they happen to twist and turn uphill and downhill and suddenly end up in a house or a cellar or just a hole in the ground? If you are a stranger, never go out alone at night without a lantern. As for the little people who live there, don't worry about them. A Kasrilevkite in Kasrilevka, among Kasrilevkites, will never get lost. Each one finds the way to his own house, to his wife and children, like a bird to its own nest.

And then in the center of the city there is a wide half-circle, or perhaps it is a square, where you find the stores, shops, market stands, stalls and tables. There every morning the peasants from the surrounding countryside congregate with their produce-fish and onions, horseradish, parsnips and other vegetables. They sell these things and buy from the little people other necessities of life, and from this the Kasrilevkites draw their livelihood. A meager one, but better than nothing. And in the square also lie all the town's goats, warming themselves in the sun.

There also stand the synagogues, the meeting houses, the chapels and schools of the town where Jewish children study the Holy Writ. The noise they and the rabbis make with their chanting is enough to deafen one. The baths where the women go to bathe are also there, and the poorhouse where the old men die, and other such public institutions. No, the Kasrilevkites have never heard of canals or water works or electricity or other such luxuries. But what does that matter? Everywhere people die the same death, and they are placed in the same earth, and are beaten down with the same spades. Thus my Rabbi, Reb Israel, used to say-when he Was happiest, at a wedding or other celebration, after he had had a few glasses of wine and was ready to lift up the skirts of his long coat and dance a kazatsky . . .

But the real pride of Kasrilevka is her cemeteries. This lucky town has two rich cemeteries, the old and the new, The new one is old enough and rich enough in graves. Soon there will be no place to put
anyone, especially if a pogrom should break out or any of the other misfortunes which befall us in these times.

But it is of the old cemetery that the people of Kasrilevka are especially proud. This old cemetery, though it is overgrown with grass and with bushes and has practically no upright headstones, they still value as they might a treasure, a rare gem, a piece of wealth, and guard it like the apple of their eye. For this is not only the place where their ancestors lie, rabbis, men of piety, learned ones, scholars and famous people, including the dead from the ancient massacres of Chmelnitski's time—but also the only piece of land of which they are the masters, the only bit of earth they own where a blade of grass can sprout and a tree can grow and the air is fresh and one can breathe freely.

You should see what goes on in this old cemetery a month before the New Year, during the "days of weeping." Men and women—mainly women—swarm up and down the paths to their ancestors' graves. From all the surrounding country they come to weep and to pour their hearts out at the holy graves. Believe me, there is no place where one can weep so freely and with such abandon as in "the field" of Kasrilevka. In the synagogue a person can weep pretty freely too, but the synagogue doesn't come up to the cemetery. The cemetery is a source of income for the Kasrilevkite stonecutters, innkeepers, cantors and sextons, and the month before the New Year is, for the paupers thereabouts and the old women and the cripples, the real harvest time.

"Have you been in `our field' yet?" a Kasrilevkite will ask you cheerfully, as though he were asking if you had been in his father's vineyard. If you haven't been there, do him a kindness, and go down into "the field," read the old, obliterated inscriptions on the leaning tombstones an will find in them the story of a whole people. And i happen to be a man of feeling and imagination the, will look upon this poor little town with its rich cemeteries and repeat the old verses:

"How beautiful are your tents, 0 Jacob; how good are your resting places, 0 Israel."