

The Lion And The Sun

Anton Chekhov

IN one of the towns lying on this side of the Urals a rumour was afloat that a Persian magnate, called Rahat-Helam, was staying for a few days in the town and putting up at the "Japan Hotel." This rumour made no impression whatever upon the inhabitants; a Persian had arrived, well, so be it. Only Stepan Ivanovitch Kutsyn, the mayor of the town, hearing of the arrival of the oriental gentleman from the secretary of the Town Hall, grew thoughtful and inquired:

"Where is he going?"

"To Paris or to London, I believe."

"H'm. . . . Then he is a big-wig, I suppose?"

"The devil only knows."

As he went home from the Town Hall and had his dinner, the mayor sank into thought again, and this time he went on thinking till the evening. The arrival of the distinguished Persian greatly intrigued him. It seemed to him that fate itself had sent him this Rahat-Helam, and that a favourable opportunity had come at last for realising his passionate, secretly cherished dream. Kutsyn had already two medals, and the Stanislav of the third degree, the badge of the Red Cross, and the badge of the Society of Saving from Drowning, and in addition to these he had made himself a little gold gun crossed by a guitar, and this ornament, hung from a buttonhole in his uniform, looked in the distance like something special, and delightfully resembled a badge of distinction. It is well known that the more orders and medals you have the more you want -- and the mayor had long been desirous of receiving the Persian order of The Lion and the Sun; he desired it passionately, madly. He knew very well that there was no need to fight, or to subscribe to an asylum, or to serve on committees to obtain this order; all that was needed was a favourable opportunity. And now it seemed to him that this opportunity had come.

At noon on the following day he put on his chain and all his badges of distinction and went to the 'Japan.' Destiny favoured him. When he entered the distinguished Persian's apartment the latter was alone and doing nothing. Rahat-Helam, an enormous Asiatic, with a long nose like the beak of a snipe, with prominent eyes, and with a fez on his head, was sitting on the floor rummaging in his portmanteau.

"I beg you to excuse my disturbing you," began Kutsyn, smiling. "I have the honour to introduce myself, the hereditary, honourable citizen and cavalier, Stepan Ivanovitch Kutsyn, mayor of this town. I regard it as my duty to honour, in the person of your Highness, so to say, the representative of a friendly and neighbourly state."

The Persian turned and muttered something in very bad French, that sounded like tapping a board with a piece of wood.

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"The frontiers of Persia" -- Kutsyn continued the greeting he had previously learned by heart -- "are in close contact with the borders of our spacious fatherland, and therefore mutual sympathies impel me, so to speak, to express my solidarity with you."

The illustrious Persian got up and again muttered something in a wooden tongue. Kutsyn, who knew no foreign language, shook his head to show that he did not understand.

"Well, how am I to talk to him?" he thought. "It would be a good thing to send for an interpreter at once, but it is a delicate matter, I can't talk before witnesses. The interpreter would be chattering all over the town afterwards."

And Kutsyn tried to recall the foreign words he had picked up from the newspapers.

"I am the mayor of the town," he muttered. "That is the lord mayor . . . municipalais . . . Vwee? Kompreney?"

He wanted to express his social position in words or in gesture, and did not know how. A picture hanging on the wall with an inscription in large letters, "The Town of Venice," helped him out of his difficulties. He pointed with his finger at the town, then at his own head, and in that way obtained, as he imagined, the phrase: "I am the head of the town." The Persian did not understand, but he gave a smile, and said:

"Goot, monsieur . . . goot" Half-an-hour later the mayor was slapping the Persian, first on the knee and then on the shoulder, and saying:

"Kompreney? Vwee? As lord mayor and municipalais I suggest that you should take a little promenage . . . kompreney? Promenage."

Kutsyn pointed at Venice, and with two fingers represented walking legs. Rahat-Helam who kept his eyes fixed on his medals, and was apparently guessing that this was the most important person in the town, understood the word promenage and grinned politely. Then they both put on their coats and went out of the room. Downstairs near the door leading to the restaurant of the 'Japan,' Kutsyn reflected that it would not be amiss to entertain the Persian. He stopped and indicating the tables, said:

"By Russian custom it wouldn't be amiss . . . puree, entrekot, champagne and so on, kompreney."

The illustrious visitor understood, and a little later they were both sitting in the very best room of the restaurant, eating, and drinking champagne.

"Let us drink to the prosperity of Persia!" said Kutsyn. "We Russians love the Persians. Though we are of another faith, yet there are common interests, mutual, so to say, sympathies . . . progress . . . Asiatic markets. . . . The campaigns of peace so to say. . . ."

The illustrious Persian ate and drank with an excellent appetite, he stuck his fork into a slice of smoked sturgeon, and wagging his head, enthusiastically said: "Goot, bien."

"You like it?" said the mayor delighted. "Bien, that's capital." And turning to the waiter he

said: "Luka, my lad, see that two pieces of smoked sturgeon, the best you have, are sent up to his Highness's room!"

Then the mayor and the Persian magnate went to look at the menagerie. The townspeople saw their Stepan Ivanovitch, flushed with champagne, gay and very well pleased, leading the Persian about the principal streets and the bazaar, showing him the points of interest of the town, and even taking him to the fire tower.

Among other things the townspeople saw him stop near some stone gates with lions on it, and point out to the Persian first the lion, then the sun overhead, and then his own breast; then again he pointed to the lion and to the sun while the Persian nodded his head as though in sign of assent, and smiling showed his white teeth. In the evening they were sitting in the London Hotel listening to the harp-players, and where they spent the night is not known.

Next day the mayor was at the Town Hall in the morning; the officials there apparently already knew something and were making their conjectures, for the secretary went up to him and said with an ironical smile:

"It is the custom of the Persians when an illustrious visitor comes to visit you, you must slaughter a sheep with your own hands."

And a little later an envelope that had come by post was handed to him. The mayor tore it open and saw a caricature in it. It was a drawing of Rahat-Helam with the mayor on his knees before him, stretching out his hands and saying:

"To prove our Russian friendship
For Persia's mighty realm,
And show respect for you, her envoy,
Myself I'd slaughter like a lamb,
But, pardon me, for I'm a -- donkey!"

The mayor was conscious of an unpleasant feeling like a gnawing in the pit of the stomach, but not for long. By midday he was again with the illustrious Persian, again he was regaling him and showing him the points of interest in the town. Again he led him to the stone gates, and again pointed to the lion, to the sun and to his own breast. They dined at the 'Japan'; after dinner, with cigars in their teeth, both, flushed and blissful, again mounted the fire tower, and the mayor, evidently wishing to entertain the visitor with an unusual spectacle, shouted from the top to a sentry walking below:
"Sound the alarm!"

But the alarm was not sounded as the firemen were at the baths at the moment.

They supped at the 'London' and, after supper, the Persian departed. When he saw him off, Stepan Ivanovitch kissed him three times after the Russian fashion, and even grew tearful. And when the train started, he shouted:

"Give our greeting to Persia! Tell her that we love her!"

A year and four months had passed. There was a bitter frost, thirty-five degrees, and a

piercing wind was blowing. Stepan Ivanovitch was walking along the street with his fur coat thrown open over his chest, and he was annoyed that he met no one to see the Lion and the Sun upon his breast. He walked about like this till evening with his fur coat open, was chilled to the bone, and at night tossed from side to side and could not get to sleep.

He felt heavy at heart.

There was a burning sensation inside him, and his heart throbbed uneasily; he had a longing now to get a Serbian order. It was a painful, passionate longing.

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