



The Town of the Little People

(an abbreviated excerpt)

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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 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 surrounding country, the town stands, orphaned, dreaming, bewitched, immersed in itself and remote from the noise, bustle, 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 railroad train.

“Such a thing could not be,” they said. “Why,” they said, “it’s a dream, a fairy tale. You might just as well talk of a merry-go-round in heaven!”

That’s how they 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, storytellers, a cheerful, light-hearted breed of men. Poor but cheerful. It is hard to say what makes them so happy. Nothing—just the 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!”

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 seeds. Some of the houses are built on the slope of a hill, and the rest are huddled 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 a plan, and besides, where is there room for such a thing? Why should there be a 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, parsnip 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, 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, 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?

