

SASHA

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Sasha by A. Kuprin

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A. KUPRIN

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BY

A. KUPRIN

Translated from the Russian

BY

DOUGLAS ASHBY

With a Preface

BY

J. A. T. LLOYD

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PREFACE

IT is claimed that Kuprin is a complete contrast not only with the great Russian writers of the nineteenth century from Gogol to Tolstoi, but also with his contemporaries of the twentieth century from Gorky to Korolenko. Undoubtedly, it is exceedingly difficult to define his position, which has but slight kinship with the stoical greyness of Tchekhov and still less with the almost hectic impressionism of Andreev. His admiration for the works of Rudyard Kipling has probably as little significance as Gogol's perusal of "Pickwick" when on the eve of writing "Dead Souls." Kuprin, in fact, is too individual to be labelled, but it may be said of him that he gives on a small scale the very essence of that Russian realism which the great writers of the last century gave on a great scale. And if Maupassant may be said to have given us slices of life, Kuprin may be said to give us tastes of life. Not even Turgenev himself recalls the savour of an exquisite moment with a more physical insistence than does the author of "Sasha."

Born in 1870, Kuprin passed from the Cadet School to the Military School at Moscow and became a lieutenant at the age of twenty. He left the army in 1897 to devote himself, like Dostoievsky before him, to literature. He found fame through "The Duel" which, published soon after the Russo-Japanese War, was accepted as an indictment of the Army. But nothing was further from the author's mind than a story "with

a purpose." This phase of success displeased him and it was certainly no fault of his that another of his stories, "The Army Ensign," was accepted, not as a psychological study but as the representation of a stock type greeted by Russians very much as Colonel Newcome, until quite recently, was greeted by Englishmen.

It is then of no set intention, but rather in spite of himself, that the influence of the Army clings to Kuprin. It crops up again and again in his work and with it, in curious contrast, sympathy for the Jews, love of the Ukraine, and a profound sense of the indifference of Nature as opposed to the pathetic fallacy of man.

Readers of "Sasha" will have little difficulty in identifying the port as Odessa, and many of them will doubtless recognise "Gambrinous" as a real place. Sasha himself is a revelation of Kuprin at his very best. Against that squalid background, amid these orgies of international debauch, there emerges in one small fiddler the very genius of an ancient race. In "The Army Ensign," the boredom of the Army, that magnetic boredom which Kuprin knew so well, blends subtly with a too sophisticated comedy. In "Black Fog," the physical love for the very earth of the Ukraine translates itself. Finally, in "The Jewess," as in so many others of his stories, Kuprin conveys to us the tastes of things not logically and precisely, but as though he were fumbling after some delicate secret that one has blundered past in the endless blank distances of the steppe. It is perhaps just in this looseness, just in this roughness of touch, that this Russian renders life as it passes more unerringly, more profoundly, than Maupassant himself.

J. A. T. LLOYD.

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SASHA

I

GAMBRINOUS' is the name of a popular beer-shop in a vast port of South Russia. Although rather well situated in one of the most crowded streets, it was hard to find, owing to the fact that it was underground. Often old customers who knew it well would miss this remarkable establishment and would retrace their steps after passing two or three neighbouring shops.

There was no sign-board of any kind. One entered a narrow door, always open, straight from the pavement. Then came a narrow staircase with twenty stone steps that were bent and crooked from the tramp of millions of heavy boots. At the end of the staircase, on a partition, there was displayed, in alto-relief, the painted figure, double life-size, of the grandiose beer patron, King Gambrinous himself. This attempt in sculpture was probably the first work of an amateur and seemed to be clumsily hacked out of an enormous petrified sponge. But the red jacket, the ermine mantle, the gold crown, and the mug, raised on high with its trickling white froth, left no doubt in the visitor's mind that he stood in the very presence of the great Beer King.

The place consisted of two long, but extremely low, vaulted rooms, from whose stone walls damp streams were always pouring, lit up by gas jets that burned day and night, for the beer-shop was not provided with a single window. On the vaults, however, traces of