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The French Cotton

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On clear nights, a man can look to his heart's content at that infinitely long starry way across the sky, so bright and mysterious, that is called Kum's Hay. ¹ There is an ancient story that a kum had stolen some hay from his kum, and as he was carrying it, it started dispersing and leaving its trace after the kum. ² Some time ago, the same trace could also be seen across Bosnia, going from one end to the other, like the one above going from one part of the sky to the other. The difference between them was that the one above was all marked with stars and was all shiny, whereas the one below was marked with - cotton, and was all white. The other difference was in the fact that nobody saw any benefit from that starry way across the sky, whereas many of them did from the cotton one across Bosnia, because they got dressed in cotton shirts instead of hemp and linen ones.

It was the French cotton.

Unfortunate times have come for the French cotton... Instead across the sea, as it had been going from Egypt to France up to then, it had to change its direction across the land, and on that way go through Bosnia, because France was at enmity with England and its seas were blocked.

Nobody knew how much of that cotton kept entering Bosnia, but less of it exited Bosnia - because the thorns and branches beside the road picked it from bales in caravans, and simply blossomed with cotton like with some white flowers. Along with branches and thorns, people's hands picked some part of the cotton, and at night brigands removed the whole loadings from the road - and the whiter the cotton around the road was, the whiter the cotton shirts on people were - which they neither planted, sowed, nor harvested, but it came to them hanging down the thorns as if it had been grown there and needed only to be picked. And that was not difficult, because it could have been picked even by children; earlier they used to send children to the thorns to pick blackthorns, and now they were sent to collect the cotton, and regardless of how much they picked, the branches and thorns along the road kept flourishing with cotton; people got used to picking those flowers - and some of them even started to pray to God to have a more fruitful harvest in that Egypt or something, of which they had had no knowledge until then, because as long as cotton was grown there, there was no need for them to grow hemp, they did not sow it any longer, nor did they need any shirts scratching their backs, when they had the cotton ones almost

caressing them.

Instead of hemp, which had been wrapped to their distaff during spinning for centuries, village women started – all of a sudden, to wrap cotton, white and soft like some spider’s net, and to draw a thread among their fingers, different from the hemp thread – astonished that there was something beyond hemp that one could spin, weave and wear. At Bašćaršija in Sarajevo they would sit next to the goods they had for sale – and, in order not to waste their time, they would sell the dairy products and spin cotton at the same time. Looking at those spinners, – as well as at the shirts and pants which people coming from the villages along the cotton road wore, everybody could see that the devil took the French cotton passing through Bosnia on its way from Egypt; it was registered by the French, and it was requested from the kaymakam³ in Sarajevo to discontinue the practice and catch and punish the brigands. Once word got around, and with it also the kaymakam’s threat that any person wearing a cotton shirt would be imposed a death penalty, those wearing the cotton shirts took them off and went back to the hemp ones.

Except for one, a Bejtulah from Vitez, who neither knew nor could have known what the French had demanded from Bosnia, and what the punishment was that the kaymakam threatened with. It was the devil himself who led that Bejtulah to come from Vitez to Sarajevo at the worst moment, with no work to do or any other need – dressed in the French cotton shirt!

He had a few walks through the bazaar – going from here to there and back, like a fellow countryman would do without any work and in spare time, when the desire took him over to stroll along the bazaar ...It is that easy walk of a peasant, one foot in front of the other, his hands on the back – when he sells nothing and buys nothing, when it seems like, out of all his duties, there is only this one left: to use his eyes and legs to inspect the bazaar. White was the shirt below his neck, and everybody – even from afar, could see that the shirt was made from cotton. To those who stopped and looked at him – the only one in the bazaar wearing a cotton shirt, it seemed like the peasant disobeyed both the kaymakam and the French, and that of all the places, he had preferably chosen that bazaar – in order to walk along it, up and down, in the French cotton! They were surprised how he dared do that – when everybody took off the cotton and put on the hemp or canvas; they found that with that peasant was one of the two: either he was extremely brave or insane; and if it was neither of the two, then it was the following: he had not been informed on the persecution of those who had stolen the French cotton – and that, if one had been caught in that shirt, he would have been punished for all other shirts and all brigands. They looked at him and left him scrutinize the bazaar – feeling sorry for him that he would be scrutinized as well, with canes on his back, if they caught him in that shirt.

Jusuf, the zaptiah⁴ of the bazaar, was the first one who caught him. The whiteness of the French cotton shirt stuck that Jusuf in his eye like an arrow – and he himself, like an arrow, bolted towards the whiteness; he caught the peasant by his jacket and grabbed him as much as he could, both by his jacket and neck. He did it as if both France and Bosnia were looking at him and telling him to grip him even more firmly; he was holding him tightly and responding to both France and Bosnia. – “This is for

the cotton, this is for the shirt!" As though he wanted to strangle him there in the middle of the bazaar - let other people see what will happen to those who steal the French cotton; the punishment for the cotton was otherwise not less from strangling, and the zaptiah was in charge of execution. This one could have been done with no verdict, because the death penalty for cotton thieves had already been fixed.

Folks flocked to see what the zaptiah was doing to the peasant, and Jusuf - more because of the gathered people to witness what he was doing than because of the shirt, was grabbing and strangling the peasant more and more; it was an easy job for him because the peasant was frail - he was short, with his back bent, thin and skinny; it was a poor peasant from Vitez near Travnik, but with a good, new shirt on his body, unluckily, made from the French cotton.

Since - by grabbing and strangling, he showed the people his authority of a zaptiah once he caught a French cotton thief, Jusuf ripped off everything but the shirt, and ordered him, in such a situation - only in his shirt, to stand in front of the people, motionless, to be silent and answer only when being asked; first he asked him about his name.

— Bejtulah — the peasant replied.

— Where're you from, Bejtulah?

— I'm from Vitez.

— And your shirt, where's it from?

— My shirt's from Egypt.

— How come, Bejtulah, that you've outstretched yourself till Egypt to get a cotton shirt? — Jusuf asked him mockingly.

— I haven't outstretched myself to it. — said Bejtulah. — My children've gone out, and picked the cotton from the thorns, and my wife's spinned and woven it. And, she's sewed a shirt, this one for me, and the children've got two each. I don't know why you've grabbed me by my throat.

— To tell me where you've got the shirt from.

— People've asked me about various things in my life, but nobody's asked me where my shirt's from; the children've picked the cotton, hadn't they done that, the wind would've blown it away — Bejtulah said.

— D' you know whose cotton it is? — Jusuf asked him.

— I've heard it's the French cotton. But, the one over the thorns is everybody's; it belongs to the person who collects it first. And to the first one who wears a shirt made from it; why're you keeping me in this shirt so that the people can look at me?

— Because you've been stealing the French cotton.

— I haven't stolen it, the children've collected it. Why should I steal it when it's all along the road: caravans carry it, and branches pick it. Children collect it.

Jusuf was not listening to him; he, the zaptiah of the bazaar, did not care about the truth if Bejtulah had or had not stolen the French cotton, but he wanted to show to the crowd around Bejtulah what he was entitled to once he had caught a guilty person - he, Jusuf, the zaptiah of the bazaar; if the people from the bazaar have not known it so far, let them know and remember it well now. A peasant from Vitez in a shirt from the French cotton - namely, a caught culprit, was an opportunity for him to show the furious passion of the little people, of local authority - which becomes the more supreme the more helpless the victim is.

— Look at you how little you are! — he said to Bejtulah.

— God's made me little; I'm this size by God's will. — Bejtulah answered to him.

— D'you know that due to that small shirt on you a conflict can arise between Bosnia and France?

— I don't know. - Bejtulah said.

— You'll know it if the French come to this very bazaar because of you yourself and that shirt on you; they don't buy cotton in Egypt in order to dress you in Vitez, Bejtulah; it can happen that tomorrow, at this very place, the Frenchman stands and asks you where from you've got that shirt on you made from his cotton. And what will you, Bejtulah, tell him, but that you've stolen his cotton.

— The children've collected it on the thorns — Bejtulah said.

— The Frenchman won't take it.

— I'll say that in front of everybody — Bejtulah said. — In front of God, in front of people, in front of that Frenchman; I'm an honest man, the children've collected it.

— The kaymakam will invite you as well and ask you — where you had got that shirt from, Bejtulah; you were wearing hemp, and now you wear cotton; are you, Bejtulah, from Egypt or from Vitez? Judging by the shirt, you're from Egypt. And he won't be waiting for you to tell him that the wind's blown away the cotton, and the children've collected it, but he'll send you to me, and I, Bejtulah, strangulate. The French can strangle you as well, don't think they're far away and that you shouldn't be afraid of them, they're situated at the Kolobara Inn - at the 'France Kolobara Inn' which they'd rented in order to monitor from it where their cotton was headed to. The kaymakam may hand you over to them to be tried, because you're wearing their cotton, and then they can hand you over to me to carry out the sentence; whoever's in charge of the trial, they'll hand you over to me to strangle you.

— Then, do that. The children've collected that cotton. - Bejtulah told him.

— You've said that a hundred times, I refuse it; and now tell me why you've come to Sarajevo when it's not a market day, why you have come precisely today when the kaymakam's meeting with the French consul -because of the cotton itself; why have you, Bejtulah, come and strolled along the bazaar in the shirt made from the French cotton?

— I've no idea why I came; I was idle, so I came to Sarajevo — Bejtulah said.

Somebody could have been heard from those ones standing there and looking at what the zaptiah was doing to the man because of the shirt, he said:

— If my mind's not deceiving me, this is an honest man.

Another man followed:

— He can't be an honest man if he's in a cotton shirt.

— The children've collected it... - said Bejtulah.

The third one was heard:

— He's lucky because he's little, so is his shirt and, therefore, his guilt's little, and his punishment should be fitting. One thing should follow another.

— It's right to have him punished according to the shirt — somebody agreed.

— His shirt will be measured — the zaptiah said. Our people will measure it with a yardstick, and the Frenchmen from the 'France Kolobara Inn' will do that using a meterstick, because they use meters, and not yards. This Bejtulah will be all measured both in meters and yards. They'll start from the shoulder and go downwards. They'll tell him to stretch his arms and they'll measure even his arms then. We'll do that in yards, and the French will use the metres. According to these two measurements they'll know exactly how much of the stolen cotton has gone to the shirt; after they

measure him, they'll define what he's like inside as well as outside. Based on that, they'll know if he's prone to stealing, and if he's stolen anything else but the French cotton. He'll be asked what he owns at home, and that will also be recorded both by us and the French.

— I've got a cow and some goats — said Bejtulah.

— You'll report that to the French. Folks, all the French people will know how many goats this Bejtulah possesses, how much land and how many children he has; with them everything is recorded when somebody's caught guilty.

— I've got children, I've got no land — said Bejtulah.

— And then — the zaptiah continued — the French will have his house and land sold to settle for their cotton.

— I've got a house and my children — said Bejtulah.

— They won't touch your children, but this shirt on you will be taken off and it won't be yours anymore but state's.

It was an opportunity for the zaptiah to show to the people how he knew what would happen to the peasant from Vitez when the two states started passing him from one to the other and interrogating him about his name, his place and why he had been stealing; through him they were going to discover other thieves as well, and that would be the end to the stealing of the French cotton in Bosnia. And if it was not brought to its end, the Frenchmen would be angry with Bosnia, and they would require payment for the cotton the easy way and if Bosnia did not do it the easy way, they would charge it by force, and on both sides, there would be blood spilled. He pointed his finger at Bejtulah and said:

— They'd spill blood because of this little guy!

— Let it be spilled — said Bejtulah. — I'm an honest man. The wind's brought that cotton, and the children've collected it.

— The blood would be spilled because of this shirt on this little guy — continued the zaptiah.

— Let it be spilled because of me little. God's created me little. And the children...that cotton...

Somebody was heard from the crowd:

— Folks, if we're humans, we ourselves can judge if this man's guilty or not. If he's guilty, we can judge him because he's been caught in the bazaar, and the bazaar people've judged many others and sent them to the other world, so it can be done to a peasant because of a shirt. We know who this man is: he's a peasant, he comes from Vitez, of the name Bejtulah. This Bejtulah wears a cotton shirt, and it's well known that the cotton's being stolen. The main thing we don't know is how much cotton's been used for the shirt. If, among us, there's any terziye,⁵ and he happens to have a yardstick with him, let him come and measure this shirt. Let justice win, let not our man be harmed by injustice.

— Let me be harmed by injustice — said Bejtulah. — I'm honest, the children've collected...

— Folks, does anybody have a yardstick? — continued the one who was in favour of justice.

— There're a few of us who can measure and cut — somebody was heard from the crowd and rose a yardstick.

The zaptiah did not allow him to be measured saying that the bazaar people had the right to measure what they sold and bought, and that the peasant was not for selling,

and not for buying, and the ones who had the right to measure and beat him were those to judge him.

— Let them measure and beat — said Bejtulah. — I'm an honest man.

— Your shirt proves you aren't an honest man.

— The children've collected...

Then a strong voice was heard and a strong man was seen in the crowd - that strong man shouted in his strong voice so that everybody became silent:

— People, it's no good for us...

They were waiting to hear what he was going to say next. And he continued even in a stronger voice:

— Folks, it's no good for Bosnia,...

They became quiet when they heard such a big word as Bosnia. They wanted to know what was no good for Bosnia.

— It's no good for Bosnia this man's like that...

— Like what? — they asked him.

— Little, brothers. Look how little this man is and he comes from Bosnia! It can't be that way ..., we're not like that ... We won't let those Frenchmen interrogate him and look at him from above and he to look at them from underneath. We can't let the Frenchmen laugh at him, and that way laugh at Bosnia; take me in front of the Frenchmen instead of him to see who would be laughing at who. And, my brothers, who will be the one looking from above, and who will be the one looking from underneath; take me instead of him. Bosnia is huge, folks, it's not as little as this Bejtulah. And it's not his fault that he's little.

— Let me be little, I'm an honest man — said Bejtulah.

— You be quiet, nobody's asked you anything; if you're little, your tongue's big - that strong, big man shouted at him. They turned to see who it was and they were looking at him from - underneath. Then, somebody, almost in a sad voice said:

— If only God had let you steal that cotton and not him.

— I'm going to steal it just to look at the Frenchmen from above!

He turned to the zaptiah, and told him:

— Don't take that man to the Kolobara; guilty or not guilty, don't take him to the Frenchmen.

— Now that I've caught him, I must take him to both our men and the Frenchmen, this is the law; if I didn't take him, I would be guilty as if I had stolen the cotton. I'd get dismissed.

— Get dismissed! - responded the strong, big man to him.

— So that you feed me! I haven't grown up in a day, so that I play with my bread. You won't feed me. You'll laugh at me — said the zaptiah stretching his neck and squinting.

— I'm not going to feed you, let that be clear to you, but get dismissed because of this little man; I'm not going to feed you, and I'm not going to laugh at you either.

— Will the bazaar people feed me? I know what it's like when the bazaar people feed you, I don't want to come down on it — the zaptiah defended himself, and that man kept repeating:

— The bazaar people won't feed you either, but get dismissed.

— So that I die of hunger!

— Die of hunger, but don't take this man. Take me. I'll go in front of you, you'll follow me, and then straight to the Kolobara.

— I won't take an honest man with me — refused the zaptiah.

— I'll tell them that I'm guilty — continued the man — I'll tell them that I'm from the middle of Bosnia and I'll tell them I look at them from above, as I'd look at the French, should you place me in front of them.

Then silence followed, from which a sad, melodic voice could be heard:

— Folks, that'd be so good for Bosnia! To have this man touch the ceiling, and look downwards at the French from above. And they - little, smaller than this Bejtulah. If only he'd come to this idea to steal the cotton. Folks, that'd be so good for Bosnia...!

Although he was ordered to be silent, Bejtulah spoke up and said:

— I'll stand there. The children've collected that cotton, the wind's blown it away, and the children've collected it.

He was told not to mention those children and that wind a hundred times, in Vitez it could be fine, but in the bazaar not, and the zaptiah could take him wherever he wanted because he seemed both guilty and mad - and that they themselves were mad if they could stand around him and waste their time due to some shirt on a peasant. The others said that the zaptiah should not take him anywhere but let him go wherever he himself wanted - to Vitez where he came from, even if he were guilty - that it was not fair that he was the only one punished for all those who were wearing the shirts made from the French cotton, and on the day, when the time came to be punished for the shirts, they all took them off.

They were arguing if they should let him go or not. The zaptiah answered to them, saying: the decision was not on the bazaar people but on him; the bazaar men were not paid to arrest those people, but he - Jusuf, and even if it was against their will, he was going to take that man to prison.

— Take me to prison — said Bejtulah. — I'm an honest man.

— I've told you to be quiet — the strong one said in his strong voice. — You're not innocent. That shirt tells what kind of man you are. But I won't allow the zaptiah to take you in front of the French. Neither lock you up, nor take you to them. Let him hear what I've said, and what I say, I stand behind it; such is my character.

The zaptiah said in a lengthy, angry, mocking tone; he was very much offended by what he had heard:

— I don't know you, so tell me what force and what character of yours will forbid me to take this man to prison? Nobody can prohibit me to perform my duty, neither can you, even if you were double your size. I've taken to prison people like you as well, slowly, all along the bazaar, and they had their characters too...the same as you have; in prison everybody loses his character. I've asked some, after I forced their character out of them, what their name was, and they could remember neither their name nor their birthplace; you could forget where you came from as well.

— Take me - said Bejtulah. — And the children've collected that cotton.

— I've said what I've said; I won't let them take you — the strong one could be heard.

After him somebody who could not be seen was heard, but his voice was sharp and everybody was quiet wanting to hear him, because he was threatening by saying:

— I can also say my word to this zaptiah who eats the state's bread, so let him hear me, and all of you too: Jusuf, the zaptiah, if you don't take this man to prison, I'll report your name straight away, and then, Jusuf, the zaptiah, this uniform on you will be taken off - and, Jusuf, you'll be locked up to stay there instead of this peasant, and he'll be warmed by the Sun and laugh both at you, Jusuf, and all of us here. This is what I've told you and you've heard it, tomorrow don't tell me you haven't heard

anything.

Silence was all around; only shoes on the cobblestones could be heard. Through the silence the zaptiah was speaking slowly:

— I've heard it. But I don't know who's threatening me.

He was searching around with his eyes for that man, and found him, because he himself rose on his toes so that everybody could see him.

— Can you see me? — he said from over there.

— I can hardly see you — said the zaptiah — I can see you're not as powerful as you're claiming. If the whole of you is here, and not somewhere else.

— It's possible I'm somewhere else as well, but for you it's enough as much as there's of me here. You've seen me and now tell me if you've heard me — said the man.

— I've heard you — said Jusuf to him. — You're threatening a zaptiah of the bazaar. But Jusuf is not afraid of you even if you're double your size, even if the one who had threatened me before you and you make one whole man, Jusuf is not afraid of you — courageously and valiantly answered the zaptiah.

— Be afraid, Jusuf!

— Who is Jusuf you are threatening?

— You.

— Who is the zaptiah you are threatening?

— You.

— If you are threatening me and Jusuf and the zaptiah, the same one who is standing here, I'm going to release this man to spite you, so that you know and tell everybody that Jusuf is not afraid of anyone.

He turned to Bejtulah. And he raised his voice at him:

— I am releasing you out of spite. Let that one see that I'm not afraid of anyone; no mother has ever given birth to a son Jusuf is afraid of. Go wherever you want, exactly with that shirt on you've come with, you, devil! On this Earth there has been no walking creature that Jusuf's afraid of. You, devil, go — he said to Bejtulah.

— Lock me up — said Bejtulah. — The children've collected it... My wife's sewn it. I'm an honest man.

— Go! — Jusuf said sharply

— Folks, this hasn't happened as long as the bazaar has existed; all this has come with the cotton, and yet more is to come — somebody was heard. Then the one who was threatening could be heard:

— Jusuf, you're exactly like the one you've just released, even worse than him - and you'll go to prison instead of him if the people who have given you state clothes and bread want to listen to me.

— I'm like him out of spite — answered Jusuf to him. — and out of spite I'm worse than him, and to spite you I've freed him; you don't know it's my will whom I am going to free and whom to lock up, I don't need to account to anyone even if I'm in my uniform.

The threatening one said again:

— It'll be taken off and you'll walk naked.

— Even naked I'm not going to account to anybody — answered Jusuf to him. He turned to the people and shouted: — Break up before I make you do it. You, Bejtulah, when you reach Vitez, take that shirt off.

— I'll not take it off. The wind's blown away the cotton and the children've collected it. I'm as honest as you are. The children've collected it and my wife's done the sewing.

— Folks...
— Everything has come with the cotton!
Caravans have kept carrying it.
White was the cotton across Bosnia like the Godfather's Hay across the sky...

Translated by Ana Stanović Obradović and Mirjana Savić Obradović.

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Notes

1. Milky Way ↩
2. Traditionally and most often, a man becomes a 'kum' at a wedding ('the best man', i.e. 'the witness in front of the authorities and God' on behalf of the groom). Later, when children are born, the 'kum' is expected to baptize them. The 'kum' may also give the names to the children. It is a spiritual relationship, respected by both families, and it goes from generation to generation. The mutual addressing is always by 'kum.' ↩
3. The title used for the governor of a provincial district in the former Ottoman Empire. ↩
4. Police Officer ↩
5. Tailor of civil folk costumes ↩

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