

MAZHAR-UZ-ZAMAN KHAN

The Last Show

THE CIRCUS TENT WAS FILLED to the rafters and the crowd sat spellbound as a man was about to put his head inside a lion's mouth. The tent was bathed in a pale blue light. The man who was about to put his head inside the lion's mouth raised both of his hands and looked at the crowd with a strange anticipation. A white bird was painted on the right side of his chest and on the left a scarlet thorn. A green sheaf of wheat grew on his belly. On his back sat a white dove. Before his eyes the macabre shadow of death danced. He was trying valiantly to smile. The crowd sat on the edge of their seats anticipating the terrible but fascinating spectacle that was about to unfold before their eyes. The man took one last round of the arena and came to a halt before the iron bars of the lion's cage. Inside the cage, a visibly irate lion slapped the iron bars with his mighty paw. Above the cage a man stood, waiting to lift the bars on a signal from the ringmaster.

A silent moment stretched between life and death. The ringmaster gave the signal and the man who stood atop the cage lifted the iron-barred gate. The lion stepped out with a huge roar. The ringmaster cracked his whip. But the lion growled angrily instead of opening his mouth. The ringmaster cracked his whip yet again. This time, the lion growled but opened his mouth. The man looked longingly at the crowd one last time and raised his hand in farewell to a young woman who stood at the far end of the stage. Then he put his head into the lion's open mouth. A moment separated life from death, from the first moment to the last. The man, the crowd of onlookers, the whole living pulsating world, in fact, the entire universe seemed to be fastened on the lion's powerful jaws with bated breath.

A rush of thunderous applause and life slipped out from the clutches of death. The man turned around to smile at the woman who, till a moment ago, seemed to be caught in the throes of a terrible agony. Now

the black clouds had lifted from her brow. Her eyes were amazing reservoirs. Every evening they filled with banks upon banks of black clouds. Then, magically, they emptied.

The show was over. Now the circus wouldn't be back for a very long time. The crowd had gone home. They must now look for other ways to fill the bowls of their empty lives. And who could be more needy than the man who put his head in the lion's mouth every night to eke out a living? And what about the lion? How was he to earn his livelihood?

God, too, had witnessed this entire spectacle and was now heading home—just as the creatures He had brought into being were now heading for their respective good, bad and indifferent homes. The crowd dispersed, bent on reaching home to fulfill their social obligations, to please wives and children. God and man alike had responsibilities to fulfill, responsibilities that each had been fulfilling for centuries.

And I, the Clown who just a short while ago had tied a black scarf over my eyes and, in the flickering light of fireflies, bound my little daughter to a dart board and outlined her tiny figure with my expertly aimed daggers—I now crouched in a corner mourning the sudden death of my beloved old friend, the horse that had fallen in the ring of fire while trying to jump across and been roasted alive. But the grass inside his belly had not been burnt. In fact, the fire had not even so much as withered the grass. Perhaps because the grass was more precious than the horse, my eyes were shedding copious tears over the grass.

My eyes are strange; they shed tears when I am happy and sad.

A fellow Clown who walks the tightrope came up to me and spoke suddenly, "Let's go now. The circus owner is waiting to have dinner with us." So I went off to fill the empty bowl of my stomach at the owner's table.

The owner said, "Tomorrow is the last day of our show in this town. By now, everyone must have seen our show. There were several empty seats at today's show. These empty seats are the growls of our empty stomachs which fill the entire circus tent with their echoes. And the tent is the sky which rests on our hands. Therefore, tomorrow, we must leave this town. This town has stolen two of our comrades from us—the white horse and the red monkey. Come now, let's observe two minutes of silence in their memory. After all, it's the legacy of civilization that we forget the camaraderie of years with a silence of two minutes. Friends, go and be with your wives and children for tomorrow we must leave this place ..."

The sun was buried beneath the mountains. And all around there was a dense darkness save for the glimmering lights scattered among the circus tents. In the circus grounds it looked as though a galaxy of twinkling stars had descended. Inside, a crowd of spectators had gathered to watch the season's last show. A Clown sat on a bear's back and sang a song: "One minute there's life, the other death // And we swirl hither and thither in these eddies // Life is an interlude in the Circus."

Suddenly, the ringmaster appeared and spoke in a thunderous voice, "At tonight's show, we have among us all the important people of this town. Ladies and gentlemen, the most dangerous, the most fascinating spectacle of our show is about to unfold before your eyes. Our circus lion lost his mate last night and he is angry and irritable tonight. Despite that, the show will go on and a brave member of our troupe will put his head into the lion's mouth."

"We've come especially just to watch this, otherwise parrots shooting off canons, pigeons walking on tightropes and crows swaying on swings are no big deal. A man putting his head in a lion's mouth—now that is something! We've come to watch that," chorused the spectators.

"All right, all right," said the ringmaster and signaled the man standing on top of the lion's cage to open the gate. The lion rushed out in a fury and growled, but obstinately kept his mouth shut. The ringmaster kept cracking his whip and finally coaxed the recalcitrant lion into opening his mouth. A deep crimson light was diffused inside the tent. The man who was supposed to put his head into the lion's mouth took one last lingering look at the crowd and raised a forlorn hand in farewell. The girl who stood at the far end of the stage looked on with tears running down her face, holding the man's remaining life in her tightly clenched fist lest it fly far away from her. She looked at him with her tear-filled eyes as he raised his hand one last time and prepared to put his head into the lion's mouth—his precious, unique head which contained countless thoughts, questions and desires. A beatific smile played on his face, it was so beatific that it seemed as though it encompassed all humanity. A deathly pall hung over the tent. Each individual in that crowd could hear his own breathing. Suddenly, the man stooped and placed his head inside the lion's mouth. The crowd erupted into a paroxysm of loud clapping and cheering. Buried in the echoing applause and the deep crimson light were a man's horrific scream followed by the crunching of a human skull and the grinding of mighty jaws! □

—*Translated by Rakshanda Jalil*