

SHOLEM ALEICHEM

Tevye the Dairyman
AND
Motl the Cantor's Son

Translated from the Yiddish by ALIZA SHEVRIN
Introduction by DAN MIRON

PENGUIN BOOKS

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TEVYE THE DAIRYMAN AND MOTL THE CANTOR'S SON

SHOLEM ALEICHEM is the pen name of Sholem Rabinovitch (1859-1916), the most beloved writer in Yiddish literature and the creator of the famous Tevye character in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. His hundreds of short stories, plays, novels, poems, and feuilletons are still read, studied, produced, and translated all over the world.

Born in a small town in Ukraine, he began writing in Hebrew at an early age and first supported himself as a teacher of Russian. He also worked as a government rabbi, a clerk, and a businessman-speculator. He married the daughter of a wealthy landowner, upon whose death he became the administrator of her family's large estate in Kiev. He turned to writing Yiddish fiction in 1883 and encouraged a number of Jewish writers, who were writing in Hebrew, to write in Yiddish as well, offering to publish their work as an incentive.

After the 1905 pogrom in Kiev, Sholem Aleichem and his large family left Russia, seeking refuge in Italy, Denmark, Switzerland, and America. He returned to Europe a year later, making personal appearances to great acclaim, but in 1914, at the start of World War I, he settled in New York, where his wit and writings caused some to call him the "Jewish Mark Twain." He died two years later after a long illness, writing until his last day. His funeral procession was witnessed by one hundred thousand mourners.

ALIZA SHEVRIN is the foremost translator of Sholem Aleichem, having translated eight other volumes of his fiction as well as novels and stories by Isaac Bashevis Singer and I. L. Peretz. The daughter of a rabbi, she grew up in a Yiddish-speaking household in Brooklyn and attended Farband Yiddish schools until the age of fifteen. She holds a bachelor's degree in agriculture from Cornell University and a master's degree in social work from the University of Kansas. The recipient of a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship to preserve Yiddish works

by rendering them into English, she has also been a visiting scholar at the Rockefeller-Bellagio Study Center in Italy, where she translated Sholem Aleichem's novel *In the Storm*. She lives with her husband in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

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*For my family, with love:
Howie
our four children and their spouses
our seven grandchildren*

Introduction

SHOLEM ALEICHEM

Sholem Rabinovitch (1859-1916), born in the Ukrainian regional center of Peryeslav but raised throughout his childhood in the tiny village of Voronkov (where he was steeped in the ambience of the eastern European Jewish hamlet, the shtetl), first received a traditional Jewish *cheder* (primary school) education. Then, the family having moved back to Peryeslav, he attended a Russian high school—his father’s partial exposure to modernity (as a follower of the Hebrew Enlightenment) made this possible. Thus he amassed Jewish booklore, was fully proficient as a Hebraist, and was inspired by modern Russian literature and liberal ideals. A scion of the old-style Jewish middle class (the family’s business was the cutting and shipping of timber)—which, under the circumstances of the relatively advanced capitalism in Russia of the late nineteenth century, came down in the world—he was motivated since childhood by two dreams: to become fabulously rich and to become a famous Jewish writer who would elevate Jewish literature to the level of its Russian counterpart. The former dream sent him to the stock exchanges of Kiev and Odessa, where he squandered the considerable wealth of his in-laws, the Loyev family. (That fiasco engendered his first literary masterpiece, an epistolary story based on the correspondence of the misguided speculator and broker Menachem-Mendl and his wife Sheyne-Sheynd, which he started in 1892.) The second dream he managed, to a considerable extent, to realize.

Initially Rabinovitch intended to become either a Russian or a Hebrew writer. (He would try both options with scant success.) But in 1883 he “bumped,” as if by accident, into Yiddish, the spoken language of eastern European Jews, and soon became obsessed with the *meshugas*, the dizzying idiomatic energy of that language as a writing tool. No one else was to tap the immense resources of Yiddish as he did, while endowing his entire corpus, no matter how varying and uneven the artistic level of its many hundreds of units (the twenty-eight volumes of his official collected edition barely cover half of his output), with unparalleled linguistic élan and unflagging rhythmic drive.

In the 1880s the use of Yiddish did not bestow upon a writer literary status, so the young author, driven by high ambitions, decided to gentrify and elevate it forthwith as the language of a respectable European literature. He proceeded to publish “thick” and very selective literary almanacs in the contemporary Russian format; launched a critical campaign against Yiddish *Schund* (trash) and for realism in Yiddish writing; and produced a series of realist novels that he dubbed “Jewish novels,” which tried to synthesize romance (considered an essential ingredient of the novel genre) and realities of the Jewish traditional milieu (where romance was not allowed to play an important role). In the process he managed to establish intimate contact with the then rapidly growing Yiddish reading public through the “funny” persona Sholem Aleichem (an absurd appellation meaning “how d’you do”). Comic, folksy personae were rife in Yiddish writing of the time, mediating between the semitraditional, barely educated reading public and modernist, “enlightened” authors. In this respect and in others Sholem Rabinovitch learned much from the practices of his mentor Sh. Y. Abramovitch and his persona Mendele the Book Peddler. However, Sholem Aleichem, crafted as a whimsical, clever, high-spirited, but quite unruly and unpredictable vagabond, caught the imagination of the readers as did no other persona. People fell in love with his jocular causerie and regarded him as a welcome guest. The success of the persona was such that Rabinovitch could not afford to part with it, and its features merged with the core of his literary-performative identity.

This was one reason that novel writing, in spite of the author’s high aspirations, never became his highest level of achievement. As a chatty, omniscient narrator, Sholem Aleichem rarely allowed for a sophisticated novelistic synthesis. Always aware of the limitations of the reading public, he simplified and overexplained his characters and their interactions and insisted on being entertaining even where the narrative hardly justified his intervention. His stories were far more subtle; in them, the characters were allowed to speak for themselves, and Sholem Aleichem was reduced to the role of a silent but omnipresent interlocutor, one whom the characters wished to impress, cajole, or even attack. Informed by this formula, the author created his chief masterpieces, *Tevye der milkhiker* (*Tevye the Dairyman*, started in 1894) foremost among them. Here and in a long series of brilliant monologues written between 1900 and 1910, Sholem Aleichem, having “regressed” from the novelistic synthesis to its “primitive” rudiments (monologue, letter), achieved the shimmering brilliance of a world-class master.

Following the failed revolution of 1905 and the subsequent pogroms, he decided to leave forever his Ukrainian homeland. He tried and failed to establish himself as a playwright in New York, then began a life of wandering in western and central Europe. In summer 1908 he collapsed with an attack of open pulmonary tuberculosis, which for some years bound him to sanatoria and southern winter resorts. The pace of his literary production, however, did not slacken. Moreover, his writing gained in depth and scope from an exposure to modernistic trends, particularly those of contemporary Russian “Silver Age” literature. Sholem Aleichem reassessed his views of men, women, and children and felt free to expose undercurrents of egotism, frustrated sexuality, and nihilism in his characters’ behavior. He also reassessed his earlier liberal and Zionist ideals and concluded that Jewish existence depended on making a shift from an idealistic eastern European culture to the materialism and hedonism he detected in the Jewish immigrant community in the United States. *Motl Peyshe dem khazns (Motl the Cantor’s Son)* was the masterpiece he produced during this phase of his development.

The outbreak of World War I caught him in Berlin as the subject of a hostile country; he thereupon managed, with great difficulties, to reach New York, where he attempted to resume his writing career. His health, however, was failing, and the bitter news that his son had succumbed to tuberculosis in Europe overwhelmed him. He died in May 1916 in New York, the most popular Yiddish writer ever. A large part of the eastern European Jewish community of the city came into the streets in a state of mourning comparable to that which would follow the death of Rudolph Valentino, the film star. Sholem Aleichem bequeathed to the Jewish world not only his literary works but also a universal recognition that the new American Jewish community was a resourceful sociopolitical entity with its own culture and a distinct role to play both in American affairs and in those of world Jewry.

WHO WOULD WANT TO LISTEN TO TEVYE?

I will speak, that I may find relief; I will open my lips and answer.

—JOB 32:20

For over a century *Tevye der milkhiker* (*Tevye the Dairyman*) has been universally acknowledged as Sholem Aleichem's masterpiece. Endowed with a deep humanity, a delicate equilibrium between tragedy and comedy, and a vivacious comic narration, *Tevye* soars above the author's other achievements, brilliant as they are. Its vitality is such that it has survived a score of translations of uneven quality and questionable fidelity; various stage adaptations (including one prepared by the author himself), which for ideological or commercial considerations wrenched the story's heart out of its ribcage, crudely transmuting and obfuscating its meaning; and even a successful stage version as one of Broadway's schmaltziest musicals, *Fiddler on the Roof*, which superimposed upon the popular imagination a *Tevye* figure—a diluted, semi-Judaized Zorba—that tenuously, if not accidentally, resembles Sholem Aleichem's original creation no more than a beautified postcard resembles the reality of a foreign city. To withstand all this treatment, a work of art has to possess a formidable inner strength. Our task here is to point to the sources of that strength.

In the last century scholars and critics dwelled mainly on *Tevye's* social and cultural implications or on the character of *Tevye* and his symbolic or archetypal significance. Both topics are, of course, of considerable importance, but neither yields a full understanding of the work's unique qualities.

Its social and cultural significance is far-reaching. A historical panorama, the unfolding of which would normally necessitate the writing of a cycle of voluminous novels, is here squeezed into eight short novellas. The affairs of a provincial dairyman and the fortunes of his daughters become prisms that refract much of what is essential in the history of the Jews in the czarist empire during the last two turbulent decades of its existence. Because the eight tales were written intermittently, in each one the author was in a position to look at a different aspect of progressively endangered Jews living amid a hostile non-Jewish population and under a hostile autocratic regime. Starting with the rustic mock-idyll of *Tevye's* "miraculous" deliverance from penury, the tales gradually shed light on wider historical arenas, pointing to realities that loom far beyond the protagonist's provincial circumference: the revolutionary mood that swept the czarist empire in the first years of the twentieth century; the pogroms triggered by the failed 1905 revolution; the egotistic and hedonistic culture that emerged in the wake of the stillborn revolution, with its emphases on unbridled sexual gratification and the liberation of women from traditional restrictions on

the one hand, and its epidemic of suicides on the other; the rise of a new Jewish plutocracy during the Russo-Japanese War; and finally the waves of vicious anti-Semitism that engulfed the Jewish population in the years preceding the outbreak of World War I, finding expression in the famous Beiliss blood-libel trial (1911-13) and the expulsion of Jews from the countryside. Thus the cycle, from its quasi-pastoral beginning to the pandemonium of its ending (where Tevye, once a rooted villager, roams as a homeless refugee by foot, cart, and train throughout Ukraine), is chock-full of historical vistas and sociocultural insights. But the greatness of *Tevye* does not inhere in this historical panorama. Sholem Aleichem's narrative art, while making full use of the given milieu, transcends its sheer mimetic presentation. It is not as a historical pseudo-novel that *Tevye* carries this art to the ultimate realization of its aesthetic potential.

Nor does this realization occur through a presentation of Tevye as an archetypal hero, a folksy philosopher symbolizing Jewish fortitude and tenacity, able to hold on to life due to a well-balanced personality and an unbreakable *bitokhn* (confidence) in a divine providence. Tevye, as reflected in his monologues (all his tales are written in the form of dramatic monologues recited by himself for the benefit of the literary persona Sholem Aleichem, the silent but solidly present interlocutor), has nothing exemplary about him. In all aspects of his personality but one—his extraordinary talent as a raconteur—he is a deeply conventional, limited, and flawed person of his time and class. His vast respect for money and social status amply illustrates his conventionality, as does his disrespect for women and his nagging need to assert his male superiority. (“Tevye is not a woman” and “a woman remains no more than a woman” are his mantras, and he parades, in the most inappropriate situations, his Jewish “erudition”—book learning being in traditional Jewish society the exclusive prerogative of males.) Hardworking as he is, Tevye lacks faith in his ability to become affluent, leave the village, and join the traditional shtetl society, where he would be respected as a learned and generous philanthropist. Were he to achieve such goals at all, it should have been through the efforts of others; his beautiful daughters, through lucrative matches, were in a position to free their father from hard work, while a millionaire son-in-law might trust him with a well-paid job. But not for the life of him could Tevye understand how these successful others had achieved the power and riches he coveted. To him, self-improvement and will are divorced. Enterprise, acumen, courage, and practical cleverness never count as means of self-elevation, for which only sheer luck or the unfathomable will of God is responsible.

From the very beginning of the first tale, Tevye sticks to the formula: man cannot improve his lot by his own volition or *seykhel* (cleverness). For all his piety and purported intimacy with God, his religious *bitokhn*, when examined closely, rarely amounts to more than fatalism or rather a passive acquiescence to “things as they are”; for if things are the way they are, it must be because God wanted them so. Tevye more than once compares his troubles with those of biblical Job, but the comparison is misleading; the Book of Job makes the point that one must question God’s ways and rebel against divine injustice if one is to retain active faith in Him. Tevye’s self-serving need to view himself as a latter-day Job (because he wishes to see himself, like the great biblical sufferer, not at all responsible for the disasters that befall him) is rooted in nothing like Job’s moral courage, let alone readiness for a confrontational (and therefore vital) I-Thou dialogue with God such as the Bible ascribes to such moral paragons as Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, and Job. Indeed, Tevye’s position amounts to the very opposite of the courage and risk taking that Abraham displayed as he challenged God: “Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18:25).

The only domain where Tevye can be seen as “great” is that of narrative performance. What he inadvertently tells about himself as a husband and a father is far from appealing or morally acceptable. But the telling itself is nothing less than seductive, and the best proof is the critics’ (and readers’) love for Tevye, which blinds them to his many shortcomings. Tevye’s “greatness” belongs to the realm of the aesthetic rather than the moral or intellectual. The artistic brilliance of his tales emanates neither from his moral presence nor from the social background they unfold but rather from the narrative and rhetorical formula that is repeated from one tale to another, in which a loquacious Tevye endlessly talks to his ubiquitous interlocutor, Sholem Aleichem. *Tevye der milkhiker*, like many other creations of Sholem Aleichem’s, is above all a story of talking and listening and their complementary dynamics, of a nagging need for verbal self-exposure and the will to absorb what is told. Such verbal interaction rather than the tales’ content defines and prescribes the essence of *Tevye’s* reality, a rhetorical rather than a mimetic one. Whatever mimetic reality Tevye’s narrative conveys is, of course, interesting—indeed, it is riveting—but it is not half as real or fascinating as the talking itself, its meandering progression and changing rhythms.

Tevye knows how to make the best of a good story and takes great pleasure in doing so. No matter how tragic or even personally humiliating his stories may

be, we can count on him to tell them as effectively as he possibly can. His impotence in the face of life's vicissitudes never contaminates its dexterous and clever narrative articulation. On the contrary, the impotence is counterbalanced, and to a certain extent overcome, by plenipotentiary narration. As good raconteurs often do, Tevye tells the truth but not necessarily the whole or the exact truth, for no genuine storyteller would allow the facts to undermine the dramatic effect of his story. If one succumbs to the charm and warmth of the narration or accepts its confessional tonality at face value, the little discrepancies strewn all over the stories will help in maintaining one's vigilance. Tevye skillfully manipulates the rhetoric of sincerity, but he is not always in full control of it, and when he momentarily slips, we have our chance to glimpse through the cracks in his mask.

Some discrepancies can be attributed to the fact that the tales were composed at different times and places.¹ Others, by far more significant, cannot be explained away. For example: in "Shprintze," the sixth and most tragic of the tales, Tevye tells of his daughter's suicide by drowning after being seduced by a rich city boy (to whom she had been introduced by Tevye himself). Starting the woeful tale by describing how the strapping young man and his friends are invited by Tevye to his cottage, Tevye waxes lyrical about the beauty of the village in springtime, the magnificent canopy of the blue sky, and the pleasures of living in the lap of bountiful nature. (Even the cows, he says, smile as they chew their cud in the meadow.) Yet he has told Sholem Aleichem often enough how distasteful is his life in the countryside and how fervently he wishes to move to a proper Jewish shtetl. "No," he concludes, refuting an imaginary objection, "say what you will, I wouldn't trade it for the best job in the town, I would not for the world swap places with you."² This, of course, does not hinder him from reverting a few pages later to his original pro-urban position. Once he starts fantasizing about his daughter marrying her affluent lover boy, he sees himself again in town, an important, well-to-do member of the community. What explains this blatant discrepancy? The inherent needs of the story itself. Tevye is about to tell a very painful tale, which he feels he has to organize aesthetically and morally around the binary oppositions of nature/civilization, innocence/moral irresponsibility, naïveté/cunning, village/city if it is to have its full impact. His daughter (and by inference himself as well) represents the virtues of nature, innocence, naïveté, and the village, whereas the seducing young man's rich relatives stand for the corrupt civilization of city, money, and

moral irresponsibility: Tevye and his daughter are the blameless rustic victims of heartless city predators. Ever the expert storyteller, Tevye knows that such a melodrama also minimizes, perhaps even obliterates, his own responsibility for orchestrating the disastrous meeting of the youngsters. (The boy's uncle justifiably asks him what, as a reasonable man, he could have thought when he had brought the two together.)

Clearly we are permitted to characterize Tevye as an unreliable narrator. He manipulates the truth because he needs to charm his listener and buy his sympathy as a way to avert, or at least soften, the harsh judgment that his listener would otherwise pass on him. Tevye knows he has much to account for. He has never taken good care of his family, and he has let trouble run its full course without doing anything to stop it. More often than not he brings trouble on himself, exhibiting a strange pattern of self-defeating, passive-aggressive behavior, the origins of which he cannot fully gauge. In his second tale Tevye loses his meager savings by bringing home a distant relative, the irresponsible and unrealistic stock-exchange speculator Menachem-Mendl (the protagonist of Sholem Aleichem's other chef d'oeuvres), and allows himself to be tempted by the charlatan's wild promises of riches. How could he have made such a fool of himself, Tevye wonders, ascribing his silly behavior, as always, to God's will: "If God wants to punish a person, he deprives him of his good sense." This pattern reemerges in some of the other tales, and Tevye, unable to control it, keeps wondering, "What was at the root of this? Perhaps my innate gullibility, which makes me trust everybody?—But what am I to do, I ask you, if, in spite of everything, such is my nature?" Of course this behavior, which becomes progressively more self-destructive, is caused by more than sheer gullibility. Tevye never faces the fact that each of his mistakes corresponds to a need or desire of his: his craving for riches, the need for self-importance, his yearning for young men who either intellectually or even physically and erotically attract him, allowing him to fantasize about playing the role of father figure to them and unconsciously or semiconsciously transmitting to his daughters, who are very much attuned to their father's secret wishes, his interest in these men, and when the daughters establish a connection with them, he savors their closeness, which he craves for himself. Tevye cannot know much about the workings of these underground motivations, but he still feels that somehow, by following his desires and fantasies, he has let down those who are closest and dearest to him.

By the same token, Tevye seems aware of the fact that he systematically

evades people, particularly family members, when they urgently need his attention or help. Shprintze, realizing that she is about to bring shame on the heads of her parents, starts her downward slide toward lethal depression that will end in her self-destruction. By refusing to talk to her, Tevye reinforces her sense that her out-of-wedlock pregnancy is unacceptable. More commonly he pushes people away by talking to them in a manner that is both irrelevant and offensive. Much has been written about Tevye's wit, his playful game of quoting and mistranslating the sacred texts.³ What has rarely been noticed, however, is how much of a defense mechanism his clever pseudo-scholarly discourse is, or how much aggression it releases. On the one hand, Tevye intentionally talks above the head of a certain kind of interlocutor (particularly the kind who has a social or financial advantage over him) in order to humiliate him. On the other hand, he is quick to hide behind his quotations and references as soon as a serious issue is to be discussed or a difficult decision made. When his wife, Golde, reminds him that they urgently need to marry off their older daughters, he responds by referring her to a series of midrashim (exegetical, narrative, and homiletic glosses appended to the sacred texts), whereupon Golde, only too familiar with his subterfuges, cuts him short, maintaining that "grown daughters are a good enough midrash in their own right." After his daughter Chava's elopement with her Gentile lover (which Tevye could have seen coming and might have prevented), he pounces on poor Golde: how could she, a mother, not have seen what was going on under her nose! And why did she not alert him in time? Once again, Golde's answer is cutting: how and why would she tell him anything? "When one tells you something, you immediately respond with a biblical quotation. You buzz my head off with quotations and think you have done your share!" For a moment Tevye seems struck by the bitter truth of his wife's rebuke, then takes shelter behind his habitual disrespect for women. "She has a point," he thinks; he should not have blamed her, for "what does a woman understand?"

The most blatant example of Tevye's strategy of shutting off reality with clever words is found in the opening section of the seventh tale, when Tevye tells about Golde's last days. Golde, depressed, desperately sick, and aware of her impending death, was never properly taken care of. Tevye never thinks of seeking medical help for her. (When he finally does bring in a physician, she is already dead.) Instead he offers her some argument concerning God's handling of the world's affairs. Once again Golde stops him short and in a whisper puts to him a simple question, her ultimate response to his intentional obtuseness: "I am

dying, Tevye; who will cook your dinner?” Never has our protagonist been so floored by such a direct, authentic, and devastating existential question. Never has the hollowness of his wit been so sweepingly exposed. But Tevye holds on for dear life to his quibbling—his only defense. As much as Golde’s words touch him, his response consists of a proverb, a biblical quotation, a midrash and yet another midrash. Under the circumstances, what is left for him to say? Throughout his life he has wrapped himself with this insulating stuff, and it’s too late to tear open his cocoon. Indeed, by tearing it open he probably would have exposed himself to the same withering radiation that killed Golde. Tevye has to go on talking, narrating, being clever and funny, quoting and playfully mistranslating. This is his hold on life, for what is he if not a Jewish Scheherazade, whose head will be cut off the morning after he loses his ability to charm and please through narrating?

Talking, however, does not altogether assuage his guilt. He divulges his sins halfheartedly, only when he can explain them as resulting from sheer naïveté. Other, graver sins, both of commission and of omission, he cannot afford to admit, but we can glimpse them in the narrative. For example, toward the end of “Shprintze” he suddenly puts to Sholem Aleichem an uncharacteristic question, which, he says, he has intended to ask his learned and worldly friend for some time: Why are the eyes of people who have died by drowning always open, whereas dead people’s eyes are usually shut? But Tevye does not wait for an answer—he cuts the conversation short and bolts. Both the unexpected question and the sudden haste hint at what Tevye was about to divulge, had he not caught himself. Haunted by the wide-open stare of his dead daughter as she was being fished out of the river, he was on the verge of acknowledging his guilt. His question was as clumsy as it was disingenuous: most people do not die with their eyes shut; rather, their eyes are shut to produce the semblance of sleep for the benefit of the mourners. But Tevye had seen his daughter before this could be done, and her horrible stare was burned into his memory.

For all his lighthearted prattling, Tevye is gnawed by guilt. But as a rule, when he talks about blows inflicted on the national collective, his mood immediately improves—indeed, it soars. No matter how many conventional expressions of sorrow he piles one upon the other (“What times we live in! What a miserable time to be a Jew!” etc.) or how many times he mentions the urgent need for the coming of the Messiah, he himself is in high spirits, and his dialogue with God, usually replete with bitterness and self-effacement, is for once spirited and

upbeat, refreshingly free of sarcasm as well as servility. This changed tonality dominates “Lekh lekho,” Tevye’s last tale, the main topics of which are pogroms, the Beiliss blood-libel trial, and the expulsion of Jews from the villages. Here Tevye is more than self-controlled; he is actually relaxed and almost happy, even though the expulsion decree has reduced him to beggary and vagrancy.

How is this mood shift to be understood? It is an expression of Tevye’s elation at being relieved, if only temporarily, of his guilt. For once the disaster—of being expelled from one’s home and cut off from one’s source of income—is not one he brought upon himself and his family. Taking care of the nation’s fate is God’s business, and the onus is on Him. Being the victim rather than the culprit feels good; and besides, when hundreds of thousands are afflicted, one’s personal losses are somehow minimized and marginalized. “*Tsores rabim khatsi nekhome!*” (“The tribulation of the many is half consolation”), Tevye says with obvious satisfaction when he learns that he is not the only local Jew to be expelled, and that the powerful householders of the neighboring shtetl Anetevke will soon follow, since the authorities, in their unfathomable wisdom, are about to redefine small provincial towns as villages and thus apply the decree of expulsion to their Jewish inhabitants. In short, Tevye is happy because for once, with easy conscience, he can shift responsibility for his and his family’s undoing to something bigger than himself. The tale “Lekh lekho” offers a catharsis of sorts, and this immense relief brings the *Tevye* cycle to closure. In fact, if the Tevye-Job analogy is at all valid, it is not because Tevye resembles Job but because God answers his complaints as He answered Job’s—“out of the whirlwind” (Job 38:1), the whirlwind or storm being national holocaust. Only through holocausts does God now speak to his chosen people and silence their complaints. In any case, Tevye, the obsessive talker, can be silenced, as Job was (“I repent in dust and ashes,” Job 42:6), because he has been purged, regaining through devastation a state of innocence.

If silencing Tevye signals the end of his story, then his talking constitutes the center. By obsessively verbalizing, he seeks to release the burden of his guilt and, in his roundabout and perhaps not entirely conscious way, inch toward a confession. Otherwise, why would Tevye seek the company of his “Pani Sholem Aleichem” in the wake of each disastrous event in his life?

Why does Tevye choose Sholem Aleichem as his father-confessor, and why does Sholem Aleichem acquiesce in playing that role, taking upon himself the

responsibility of purging Tevye's guilt and absolving him? The answer to both questions must be that Sholem Aleichem plays the role because he is a writer, a virtuoso storyteller, a man of words, a sublimator of real-life events into works of art. In short, Sholem Aleichem is chosen because he resembles Tevye, duplicating his behavior at a higher and more symbolic level. He can become Tevye's alter ego—or his superego and as such have the authority to judge and absolve. Absolution is activated particularly through humor, since humor is the strategy (the narcissistic strategy, according to Freud) that the superego employs for the purpose of shrinking or minimizing the ego's painful feelings of hurt and guilt.⁴

The foundations of this relationship between Tevye and his alter ego or superego are laid bare in Tevye's first tale, and even more so in Tevye's letter, which in the original 1894 version serves as its epilogue or appendix. (In the canonical editions it functions as a prologue to the entire cycle under the biblical title "*Kotonti*—I Am Unworthy," a reference to Jacob's humble acknowledgment of the mercies and goodwill shown to him by the angels in Genesis 32:10.) Ostensibly this is a mere thank-you letter for the author's intention of putting Tevye in a book, an honor of which the dairyman deems himself unworthy. The letter contains, however, implicit background information as well as explicit statements that belie Tevye's supposed gratefulness and humility. The most interesting is Tevye's reference to the fact that his acquaintance with Sholem Aleichem goes back quite a few years. Tevye remembers those earlier contacts, although he's not sure Sholem Aleichem remembers them, since the writer was a rich person in those years, who could afford a summerhouse in Boiberik (the suburb of Yehupetz-Kiev where most of Tevye's customers reside and where the present meeting between the dairyman and the writer takes place), and Tevye can hardly expect a rich entrepreneur (who also dabbled in writing) to pay attention to a mere dairyman. Circumstances changed, however, once Sholem Aleichem's fortunes took a dive (which they did in 1890), reducing him, now a writer eking out a living from his scribbling, to a position not unlike that of Tevye himself. Are they not on par as hardworking producers and suppliers of goods (dairy products, stories) who depend on the market and have to find buyers for their merchandise? Not that Tevye forgets the difference between a published author, who is by definition a learned person, and a rustic dairyman. He never fails to acknowledge this difference, to defer to his interlocutor in all matters pertaining to learning and erudition and to find other ways of giving him the ego-massage

at which he is an expert (having practiced for years the art of keeping disgruntled customers pleased). Nevertheless, Tevye does not refrain from discreetly reminding Sholem Aleichem of the shrinkage in the social gap between them. For instance, at the end of the first tale he urges both himself and his interlocutor to go back to work and attend to their respective businesses, since neither is in a position to indulge in pleasant conversation for its own sake. Both have to go back to their means of production: “*Ir tsu ayere bikhlekh, ikh tsu mayne teplekh un tsu mayne kriglekh . . .*” (“You to your little books, I to my little pots and to my little jugs”). The list of three diminutives (*bikhlekh*, *teplekh*, *kriglekh*) conveys not only Tevye’s understanding of books as mere containers (like pots and jugs) into which one pours one’s verbal merchandise, but also his sense that he and his interlocutor are both small fry, people who, far from playing important roles in the world, offer the public items to which the language of diminution is applicable.

But why should Tevye tell Sholem Aleichem his story? What, under the changing circumstances, could be the purpose of the telling? It could be quasi commercial: Tevye’s story is something valuable that Sholem Aleichem might want to buy, or as he delicately puts it, “It’s worth your while, I swear, to listen to the entire story from beginning to end.” Sholem Aleichem, in his turn, could pay Tevye back with money or advertisement, or even more desirable, he could pay Tevye by listening to his stories, not only because they are fresh merchandise, grist for an author’s mill, but also because as a writer Sholem Aleichem cannot fail to be charmed by them and thus offer Tevye his needed self-exposure.

This need for self-exposure explains, more than anything else, Tevye’s motivation for bonding with the literary persona, a bond that becomes on both sides progressively stronger, more emotionally charged, and more complex. Sholem Aleichem initially presents Tevye as a type, a jolly character, one of the many that he makes fun of and regales his readers with, but he stops doing so by the second tale, moving ever-larger parts of his mental being into alignment with Tevye’s interiority. As the Hebrew writer J. H. Brenner aptly put it, Sholem Aleichem becomes “Tevye’s bard,” even his “stenographer *de gracia dei*,”⁵ taking dictation and adding to his protagonist’s flow of speech the amenities of felicitous *écriture*.

This symbiosis between two such different entities—a traditional, half-

educated, provincial dairyman and the literary persona of a modern writer—may seem strange, but it actually is inevitable, at least as far as Tevye and his needs are concerned. Tevye understands instinctively that only an artist, perhaps a storyteller like himself, can serve as his confessor. What other figure of intellectual or moral authority could he turn to? A rabbi or a Chasidic saint would regard the way he has brought up his daughters as scandalous, for it contradicts the basic tenets of both the Halacha and the tradition. No God-fearing person would permit his unmarried daughters to become friendly with young men of questionable morals, including a Gentile—what can he expect for such a sin other than a terrible retribution? By the same token, blaming God for the consequences of one's behavior amounts to the worst kind of blasphemy: Tevye should prostrate himself before God and dedicate the rest of his life to repentance—such would probably be the reaction of a traditional sage. Nor could Tevye expect a more positive reaction from a modern secularist or humanist, who would damn him for being passive, unable to fend for himself and protect his family; for evading his moral responsibilities; for shifting the burden of his failings onto an irrelevant God; for being deeply prejudiced against women; for being spiritually swaddled and mummified within an irrelevant textual cocoon; and so on. A moralist would point with derision to his craving for riches achieved through no effort of his own. A socialist would decry his respect for money, power, and social status. A Jewish scholar would laugh at his scholarly pretensions and pronounce him a fake, an ignoramus. In short, everybody but a Sholem Aleichem would regard him as blameworthy. Only a writer can accept him, even look up to him as towering above nondescript humanity through his inspired loquacity and riveting storytelling.

Besides, nobody but Sholem Aleichem would want to listen to Tevye. Even the people who surround him, almost without exception, are sick and tired of him, abhor his incessant talking, and stop listening at the first biblical verse or midrashic gloss. This is why he falls headlong in love with whoever does not immediately recoil from his discourse—like the young revolutionary Fefferl, whom he brings home and who will marry Tevye's most beloved daughter, Hodl. Tevye will do almost anything for whoever will listen to him. So much more so for Sholem Aleichem, who savors every word he utters, understands the subversive irrelevance of his quotations, and appreciates the wit of his mistranslations. (Of course, almost all of Tevye's mistakes are intentional and subversive, undermining, for the fun of it, the sacred sources to which he professes loyalty.) Such a listener is to him a heaven-sent boon.

But what is Tevye to Sholem Aleichem? For one thing, Sholem Aleichem does what any writer worth his salt would do: he sticks by his informant, the one who delivers first-rate stories. Sholem Aleichem also identifies with Tevye, with his pain and needs—he is himself a flawed person who seeks redemption in art, having squandered his in-laws' estate and doomed a large family to a life of permanent financial difficulty. Most important, the persona Sholem Aleichem, as an artist and a thinker (who cogitates through narration, characters, and situations), accepts the impotence of the protagonists, their passivity, and their ability to hold on to life only through sheer endurance, inertia, and garrulity. These are to him the people who experience the human condition authentically. Suspending judgment, eschewing ideological fiat, and allowing his protagonists to advocate for themselves, Sholem Aleichem embraces the kind of people other writers satirize. He is never offended by their lies or self-delusions, which are to him as precious as any truth, being, under the circumstances, the only truths they can afford. Never demanding from them heroics of any kind, he suffers them to bombard their own consciousness and that of everybody around them with words. He accepts their *bavardage* as their talisman, their sole means of avoiding mental breakdown, and he makes brilliant artistic use of it—nowhere more brilliantly than in *Tevye der milkhiker*, where he first discovers this winning formula.

And what about us, the readers? We, too, in our capacity as consumers of the aesthetic, embrace Tevye, suspending our judgment and abiding by artistic rather than moral or practical criteria. Were we to live with a Tevye-like person, we would reject him as impossible. Had he tried, as he must, to impress us with his stories and clever quibbling, we would flee him as a pest. Who would want to listen to a Tevye? Fortunately, we do not have to endure Tevye in real life. That's why we can love and look up to him—he is safely ensconced in a book. The same loquacity that in real life would turn us off acquires in the book the enticing quality of flowing honey, of which we cannot have enough. We are even willing to be hoodwinked by Tevye and say and write rather unwise things about the qualities he does not possess, for most of us still refuse to see where the greatness of Sholem Aleichem's chief creation lies.

In *Tevye der milkhiker* Sholem Aleichem wrote the most audacious critique of the heroic humanist ethos that dominated modern, secular, and particularly nationalist Jewish culture—and that he himself, as a run-of-the-mill Jewish intellectual (and Zionist) of the turn of the nineteenth century, swore by in his

many moments of mediocrity. But once he emerged as the genial artist who blazed paths into a new kind of Jewish culture, he started undermining this ethos, burrowing underneath it. Modern secular Jewish culture reprimanded traditional Jews; criticized them for being weak, passive, unrealistic, and tardy; and urged them both by positive exhortation and by biting satirical jabs to wake up, seize history by its horns, and replace texts and words with deeds and actions. Sholem Aleichem, however, in his moments of true greatness embraced passivity, weakness, wordiness, inertia, and minority—everything that almost everybody else rejected. In depth, originality, and authenticity, his acceptance of Jewish passivity was equal to that of S. J. Agnon and was surpassed only by that of Franz Kafka. In fact, the best introduction to *Tevye der milkhiker* can be found not in the misguided interpretations of the work as the epitome of Jewish spiritual fortitude, but rather in Agnon's stories about passive Jews and even more in Kafka's haunting explorations of Jewish weakness, texts such as Kafka's "Investigations of a Dog," "The Burrow," and "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk." Where Sholem Aleichem approximated the depth of Kafka's parables, there the modern Jewish literary imagination celebrated, by exercising a negative capability, its greatest triumphs.

THE BLESSINGS OF ORPHANHOOD

Motl Peyse dem khazns (Motl the Cantor's Son) is one of the two major works that Sholem Aleichem wrote in the last decade of his life (1906-16), the other being his exquisite *Railway Stories* (1909-10). Working throughout this hectic decade on many large-scale projects—long, panoramic novels, a multivolume autobiography—he nevertheless broke new ground and approximated the artistic level of his earlier masterpieces in these two somewhat less ambitious works. Conceived and started in 1906, during the author's disappointing—indeed, humiliating—stay in the United States, *Motl* was written intermittently in 1907 (the "European" part) and then in 1915-16 (the unfinished "American" part). It represents a revolutionary breakthrough and is perhaps the most subversive and unconventional of Sholem Aleichem's extended fictions, although cloaked in the innocent comic narration of a lively child protagonist.

Initially the *Motl* tales were not perceived as innovative, either thematically or technically. On the contrary, at a time when novelty in Yiddish fiction meant individualism, these stories seemed to move in an opposite direction, toward

collectivism (as a further treatment of the shtetl theme, which contemporary Yiddish fiction had already sucked dry) and social tragicomedy. In *Motl* Sholem Aleichem seemed to be projecting through a comic perspective—that of a child who hardly grasped what was taking place before his eyes—a dark panorama of eastern European Jewish traditional society as it succumbed to unstoppable historical forces. The author, it seemed, was up to his usual tricks.

But *Motl* was innovative neither in its social content nor in its method of narration. The two interconnected themes of *Motl*—the rapid disintegration of traditional eastern European shtetl society due to economic dysfunction, cultural irrelevance, and sheer physical vulnerability, and the resulting mass emigration to the West, which at the time assumed the dimensions of a veritable *Völkerwanderung*—were among the most prominent in Yiddish fiction of the time. That the author chose to present this theme through the perspective of the shtetl’s middle class and its culture agents (the so-called *kli-koydesh*, or holy vessels: rabbis, ritual slaughterers, cantors), rather than that of the poorer and less educated members of the community, was also reflective of the era. At the end of the nineteenth century, it was mainly the poorer members of traditional Jewish society who were affected by the decline of shtetl life, but as conditions worsened at the beginning of the twentieth, even the more stable and culturally entrenched members found reason to emigrate. As for themes of proletarianization; industrial exploitation; loss of human dignity (through numbing, underpaid labor, prostitution, labor-caused sickness, penury, and devastation); and the advent of Jewish trade unionism, socialist and anarchist agitation, and the like, which were to be treated in the “American” part of the story, they too were hardly new; this entire complex had been explored for almost two decades by both the poets and fiction writers of the so-called American Yiddish “shop” literature, from the first wave of eastern European Jewish influx into the United States.

Nor was there much novelty in child narrators. Sholem Aleichem, among many others, had repeatedly employed them since the publication in 1886 of his short story “*Dos messerl*” (The Penknife). In the tradition of Dickens, Dostoyevsky, and Mark Twain, he focused on children as the most vulnerable and oppressed, but also the most rebellious, members of the traditional Jewish community. He saw in the lives of Jewish children, exposed to the traditional educational system, the clash between the “natural” man, still relatively untamed, and the broken-in, “socialized” Jew. In the many stories he wrote about

children, instinctual, libidinal, and aesthetic urges are pitted against a harsh and restrictive social and educational order, whose members, embittered by weakness, poverty, and harassment, scapegoat those who are even weaker than themselves. Encounters between children and adults offered many opportunities for comic, even hilarious narration. They would usually make for stories constructed as episodes replete with pranks—the satisfying of sinful appetites and wishes—but ending with a comic catastrophe, which started children in the process of internalizing the norms of their civilization and the limitations of the world they lived in. The same structural principle controls many of the *Motl* stories, rendering them stories of socialization and growth, albeit under the special circumstances of emigration and acculturation. In this way some critics saw Motl as father of the man. He would become, one said, a latter-day Tevye. ⁶

The narration of the *Motl* tales seems to follow the rules set in Sholem Aleichem's earlier stories narrated by children. In most if not all of those tales of childish crime and punishment, the narrators are the children-culprits themselves. Since the mind of a child, not to mention a child's linguistic abilities, cannot articulate all the insights that the stories are supposed to convey, the child narrator—in *Motl* as well as other stories narrated by children—is actually a kind of hybrid, in which the voices of a child and an adult complement each other. The attentive reader of *Motl* will detect this on the first page of the first episode, in the description of the child and his “friend,” the calf Meni, expressing their “*dankbarkeyt tsu der natur*” (gratitude to nature) through a wild dance and a “singing,” which is “a song without words, without notes, with no motifs, a kind of a nature-song of a waterfall, of racing waves.” Obviously, while the child and the calf are dancing and shrieking and bellowing, it is an adult narrator, well versed in the conventions of romantic hyperbole, who does much of the telling.

This artificial arrangement extends to the incredible subtitle of the *Motl* cycle: “*ksovim fun a yingl a yosem*,” writings of an orphan boy. How could a mere nine-year-old boy with no education produce *ksovim*, literary works? The implausibility of the subtitle has the effect of drawing attention to the author's role, and of undermining the status of Motl as a realistic, three-dimensional fictional character. (None of Sholem Aleichem's child protagonists would ever attain the realistic solidity and subtlety of Tevye.) The author aimed to create a child narrator who could nevertheless convey adult truth.

Motl is trusted with an extraordinary artistic mission: to say a truth about the crisis of eastern European Jewry in the first decade of the twentieth century that nobody else would dare to say, a truth that could be reported only by someone as innocent and guileless as a child—as in Hans Christian Andersen’s satirical parable of the child who pronounces the king naked. Motl is put forward to say, in his childish way, that the demise of the traditional eastern European Jewish civilization is not only unavoidable but also welcome; that it is high time for the shtetl culture to leave the historical stage for something else, no matter how primitive and crass, as long as it is alive and healthy; that being an orphan is, under certain circumstances, preferable to being burdened with a moribund ancestry.

As a fictional character, Motl is what Deleuze and Guattari, in their discourse on minor literature, refer to as *agencement*, an arrangement of traits and narrative inflections that convey an attitude rather than the reality of a specific fictionalized human being. The function that he is to fulfill demands a Peter Pan-like narrator, and therefore, while the locations and social environments that Motl observes and describes are in constant flux, he himself remains static, a fixture, his character immune to the process of aging and to being reconditioned by drastically changing life situations. This sameness subtly influences the presentation of the story’s plot, to the extent that it is determined by chronology. In fact, all the indications of time progression and linear sequential chronology in the story are blurry and indeterminate. As much as Motl’s age at the beginning is unclear (the author wavered on whether he should be presented as a five-year-old or a nine-year-old), his age at the end, left unfinished because of the author’s death, is even more ambiguous. How many months or years elapse between Motl’s family’s departure from Kasrilevke and their arrival in America? Six months? A year and a half? A few years? And how many months or years separate their arrival in America from their rise into the lower middle class as the owners of a newspaper and candy kiosk in New York? Nowhere in the story do we find firm chronological ground on which to base our calculations. The Jewish holidays, which in many Hebrew and Yiddish stories provide the key to chronology, are of little help here. Their significance is merely symbolic: Pentecost (as the story begins) stands in for the springtime recurrence of growth and instinctual vitality (and not for the reception of the Torah by Moses on Mount Sinai), and Yom Kippur (at the start of part 2) represents the crisis of the passage from the Old World to the New. Nature and its seasons play an even smaller role in the articulation of the story’s time sequence. Mysteriously, there

is no winter at all in *Motl*, as if cold weather, snow, and winter storms were unknown in Ukraine, western Europe, and North America. Just one autumnal sea storm is allowed, breaking up what seems an eternal summer. As much as the story necessitates a fixed, unchanging, and unchangeable observer-narrator, it also seems to require a continually bright, warm season. The heat complements Motl, allowing him to be himself—nimble, energetic, and bright, unencumbered by heavy clothes, never seeking the warmth of hearth and home, always Puck-like, ready to walk, to run, almost to fly.

Motl's personality consists of both "hot" and "cold" components. On the one hand, he flows with everything that is vibrant: appetites, vitality, effervescence, motility, optimism, lust for life, and freedom. On the other hand, he is a keen, unemotional, unflinching observer. The "hot" component informs the escapades he reports, his total rejection of the stasis of the shtetl, and his fervent identification with traveling—and the staccato rhythms of his short sentences. The "cold" component inheres in the devastating caricatures he draws of almost all the characters in the story, including those nearest and dearest to him, such as his widowed mother. The very emotional scene of his mother, about to start on the voyage to America, taking leave of her good neighbor Pessi displays how coldly observant he is: "Suddenly everyone is kissing, and crying and howling, worse than Tisha B'Av," the official day of mourning for the destruction of the two Jerusalemite temples. His red-eyed mother falls, as if in a swoon, into the big arms of the overweight Pessi, "whose double chin swings, and big tears as big as peas roll over her cheeks." Far from being attuned to the emotional states of the characters he portrays, Motl focuses on whatever is discordant and inviting ridicule, such as Pessi's shiny, fat cheeks. This is consistent with his passion for drawing cartoons that emphasize all kinds of unseemly metonymies: his mother's red eyes (highlighting her role as the Niobe of the story or mother Rachel bewailing the fate of her exiled children—everybody grows tired of her lachrymosity); his brother Elye's fledgling beard, which sprouts not from his chin but from his throat (exploding his brother's posture of virility and manly self-importance); Elye's wife Bruche's large, coarse, unfeminine legs and feet (indicating who in his brother's family wears the trousers).

Sholem Aleichem intended for Motl to be artistic in some way. As the scion of a cantorial family, Motl was originally meant to be musical, but even as the first episodes were being serialized, Sholem Aleichem reconceived him as a cartoonist. His Motl, he realized, should not be contaminated by any vestige of

the traditional shtetl culture; nor should he in any way be seen as an extension of his father, whose death at the beginning of the story is supposed to symbolize the final expiration of his world. Drawing, being essentially a non-Jewish art (did not the Lord prescribe through Moses: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” [Exodus 20:4]?), dovetails with the innovative, nontraditional aspects of Motl’s personality. Above all else, being a cartoonist rather than a musician goes hand in hand with his detached manner of observing and describing.

Motl’s inclination toward caricature contributes to Sholem Aleichem’s objective to deconstruct shtetl literature, to dismantle its components and expose it as nonfunctional. Together they present the metamorphosis of a people, driven by the sheer instinct of survival, in the harsh terms of a comic epic that rarely if ever allows the pathetic fallacy to cloud its mimetic transparency. It has to be viewed as comic because the tragedy it supposedly is camouflages a sham. What died with shtetl culture had already, for a long time, not been really alive; shtetl culture had been for some time a caricature of itself. Its social order had been bankrupted; its ethos of communal unity and responsibility was a fraud, as Motl’s family discovers in their hour of need; its hallowed rabbinical culture went gaga, as the horrified Motl learns when he is hired to spend the nights with a demented scholar who carries the proud traditional name of Luria (the name of the great sixteenth-century cabalist known as Ha-ari, as well as that of a host of other rabbis, scholars, and writers); its texts, as represented by the Aramaic prayer for the dead, the kaddish, amount, as far as Motl is concerned, to sheer gibberish. If this culture has to be sloughed off in the process of emigration and acculturation, no tears should be shed over it. No matter how crass and culturally clumsy those denuded of it are, the option they represent is preferable to the one they reject. Motl at once incorporates the vitality and talent for survival that render their metamorphosis possible, and he functions as its epic recorder. His vivacity and health, contrasted with the ugliness he sees around him, define the message of the work as a whole: in the darkening world of eastern European Jewry, Motl’s vital spark represents the refusal of the shtetl Jews to loosen their hold on life, and that is what pushes them along to the new Canaan of economic self-sufficiency.

At the beginning of the book Motl is presented as a prospective victim. The analogy between him and his only friend, the calf Meni, speaks for itself:

healthy, normal, and equipped with the biological tools necessary for living and savoring life, Motl is primed for slaughter. His impoverished family, desperately trying to save some remnants of its middle-class status, first sells its furniture and sacred books; then in direct continuation its two sons. Elye, the older brother, an eligible youngster with *yikhes* (pedigree, good parentage) and no money, is sold into a marriage of convenience to the coarse daughter of a nouveau riche, while young Motl is sold to whoever will cover his basic expenses. He becomes a servant, a day laborer, the nanny of a miserable cripple, and finally a babysitter who is to spend his nights with a madman who threatens (in a demented parody of Maimonides' inductive logic) to eat him alive. Motl's environment—exploitative, grotesque, sick, vitiated both physically and mentally—is quite ready to swallow him, to quash his high spirits, to imbue him with its lugubrious moribundity, and to stunt his mental and emotional growth forever. Paradoxically, only the death of his father and the final downfall of his family as a result of the bankruptcy of Elye's in-laws save Motl from the life of bourgeois respectability that a marriage like his brother's would have locked him into.

When destitution and penury drive the family out of its hometown and middle-class decorum, Motl is finally allowed to be happy; and he is genuinely happy, the happiest among Sholem Aleichem's child protagonists, perhaps the only genuinely happy boy protagonist in a contemporary Yiddish literature rife with miserable orphans and dejected youngsters. Of all of Sholem Aleichem's books featuring children, *Motl* is the only one in which the fire of child rebellion is not extinguished, and the child's libidinous and instinctual egotism is not crushed by a brutal process of socialization. As the shtetl's oppressive system of education, along with its economy and social order, finally fall apart, Motl is spared the internalization of its punitive ethos—the fears, the guilt, the sense of sin, the endless chain of crime and punishment. When Motl's father, his superego, so horrendous in his decrepitude and decomposition, dies, Motl celebrates his independence. "*Mir iz gut—ikh bin a yosem*" (I have it good, I'm an orphan) is Motl's motto. It sounds like a paradox, but it actually articulates in one compressed sentence the historical truth: orphanhood and pauperization not only saved Motl's life but also freed the entire community from paralysis and propelled it in search of food and shelter. *Motl* is a book about an orphaned people who finally emerges from historical lethargy and, once whipped into wakefulness, gropes for the happiness that has evaded it for so long.

The first part of the book, in every way superior to its unfinished sequel, is subtly organized as a series of variations on the themes of sickness and death versus health and rebirth. They play out not just at face level—the obvious encounter between Motl and his father in the first chapter—but also through witty polysemies such as Motl’s joyful interjection “*a feld, a fargenign, a gan-eyden*” (“a field, what pleasure! sheer paradise!”), which he utters as the family’s beds are sold, reducing him and his brother to sleeping on the bare floorboards. Motl is delighted that he can now roll in his sleep across the empty room, as wide as “a field.” In Yiddish, however, *feld*, besides signifying a field, also means a cemetery, and paradise is where the souls of the saintly dead reside. Motl’s enjoyment of his enlarged sleeping space parodies the eternal rest of the dead in their graves and the ethereal pleasure of souls in paradise. In a later chapter Motl attempts a reentry into the forbidden paradise, in the form of an orchard whose gate is blocked by an angry, niggardly woman—a hilarious version of the cherubim positioned, flaming swords in hand, at the gate of paradise. Motl devises a means of reaching for the tree of life and enjoying its delectable fruit. The punishment promised by scripture (death) is reduced to a minor embarrassment, since Motl is protected by the armor of orphanhood. Then Motl fakes sickness, triggering his mother’s worst anxieties, only to miraculously recuperate without touching the bitter medicine that the local hack prescribes. False premonitions of death are replaced by a phony last-minute resurrection.

In the section following the marriage of Elye and the bankruptcy of his father-in-law, the themes of sickness and health are developed under a new and surprising guise. While Elye tries in vain to earn a fortune by producing suspicious commodities nobody needs, the family, like the putrefying social body it actually is, poisons the environment, selling beverages made of dirty soapy water, contaminating the local rivulet with ink, and spreading mouse poison. In these minor ecological disasters Motl, as his brother’s emissary, gleefully plays the role of contaminator and is almost caught by the police and incarcerated. He is saved by the final collapse of the family fortune, making emigration unavoidable. Thus commences Motl’s great adventure. The family’s slow movement along the emigrants’ trail is replete with sickness and suffering, but they somehow do not touch the boy, vibrant, upbeat, and impatient as he is to get on with the voyage. As they illegally cross the border of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the family is shot at by guards, and only quick movement—Motl’s specialty—saves them. The loss of their luggage pales in comparison

with the death, rape, and plunder that the pogroms' refugees are now fleeing. Eye ailments get pride of place in Motl's account, because healthy eyes are supposed to open the gates of America for the immigrants. Motl's mother's constantly red eyes loom ominously as a possible impediment to the family's entry into the promised land. But Motl's eyes are literally and metaphorically crystal clear, as healthy and coldly observant as ever. True, he temporarily develops a crush on a girl whose eye sickness has separated her from her family, and he lapses into sentimentality, promising to send the girl bluestone salve (an eye cure) as soon as he reaches America, but he quickly overcomes this weak moment, and as soon as he sets foot on the deck of the *Prince Albert*, he altogether forgets the poor girl. The short stay in foggy and rainy London and the difficult ocean passage amplify the theme of death and sickness and bring about its culmination. Throughout, Motl's high spirits counterbalance the hopelessness, fatigue, and frustration of those around him. Together with Mendl (an orphan he befriends along the way), Motl ridicules his mother and Bruche, his sister-in-law, eliciting from the two old ladies a hilarious scene of competition over who is more miserable. But it is Motl's spark of vitality, found in every one of the emigrants, that carries them forward through the maze of inefficient charitable organizations toward their destination: America.

The main themes of part 2, the American section of the book, are youth and freedom. Having concluded that only the young and unencumbered, those whose burden of shtetl culture is minimal, will find their place in America and successfully adapt to its pace and rugged individualistic ethos,⁷ Sholem Aleichem mobilizes Motl and Mendl in portraying America as a boys' paradise. His two child protagonists immerse themselves in New York's hectic ambience. They love the city's bustle, its noisy and quick subway and elevated trains; the new American art, the cinema, fascinates them, and they choose for their hero and model Charlie Chaplin, in his classic role as a small but nimble-bodied vagabond who always gets himself into but also out of trouble. The huge metropolis never strikes these newcomers as alien and threatening—it immediately becomes their normative habitat.

It is not entirely clear in what direction Sholem Aleichem might have sent his Motl had he lived to bring the book to a close. He hints that his friend Mendl would rise to prominence as a chief organizer of the Jewish trade union movement, whereas Motl himself might flourish as a successful cartoonist. (This single instance of a future perspective suggests that the American chapters of

Motl were written while the artistic discipline of the author was already in decline.) But how might the two boys, particularly our chief protagonist, arrive at their respective destinations unsullied and not coarsened? We have no answer. The book ends in the middle of the eighteenth chapter of part 2. Motl is about to throw himself into a family business, which would squeeze from him (and from every member of the family) all his energy and steal his last minutes of freedom. Would he have retained his high spirits and clarity of vision throughout many years of fierce struggle for upward mobility? Would his Peter Pan charm and Puck-like dexterity have withstood the test? Surely the *agencement* consisting of both naïveté and perspicacity, energy and meticulous observation, would have to be dismantled. And what about the sexual awakening that was certainly in store for this normal, full-blooded boy, whose sensuality has found expression in his craving for food and fondling (Motl enjoys sleeping in his mother's bed)? For the time being, as far as the story goes, Motl, although aware of the role of sex in the lives of the people who surround him, is almost sexless. His is the romance of the pleasure principle played out against the backdrop not only of eternal summer but also of eternal latency. If he were to grow, latency would have to be replaced by puberty. The author would have had to sentimentalize his protagonist's pubescence, cover it with Victorian drapery, or have him jump headlong into puerile sexuality, masturbation, erotic daydreams, and the like. In other words, Motl would have had to lose his honesty and straightforward attitude toward the facts of life, or allow it to be muddled. Both options would have destroyed the coherence of his story. Perhaps it is better for *Motl* to have been left unfinished as it tragically was. Unfinished, it can retain its narrative and ideological consistency and stand out as one of the author's best and most original works.

DAN MIRON
New York, 2008

NOTES

1 For example, the much-debated issue of whether Tevye “really” had seven daughters, since he tells about only five and barely mentions the sixth; the seventh altogether disappears. See Khone Shmeruk, “*Tevye der milkhiker*—

letoldoteha shel yetsira,” *Ayarot ukhrakim: prakim bytsirato shel Shalom Aleichem* (Jerusalem, 2000), pp. 9-32.

[2](#) All references are to *Gauts Tevye der milkhiker*, vol. 5 of the so-called Folksfond edition of Sholem Aleichem’s collected works, New York, 1917, and for the purposes of literary analysis, the translations are my own.

[3](#) See, for instance, Michael Stern, “Tevye’s Art of Quotation,” *Prooftexts* 6 (1986), 79-96.

[4](#) Sigmund Freud, “Humour,” *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 21 (London, 1961), 159-66.

[5](#) J. H. Brenner, “Leshalom Aleichem,” *Ktavim* 4 (1985), 1422-28.

[6](#) Shmuel Niger, “Sholem Aleichem,” *Vegn yidishe shrayber*, vol. 1 (Warsaw, 1912), 111-12.

[7](#) Khone Shmeruk, “Sholem Aleichem and America,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Research* 20 (1991), 211-38.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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A Note on the Translations

TEVYE THE DAIRYMAN

The greatest challenge in translating *Tevye* is Tevye's frequent (mis)quoting of scripture. For example, the biblical quotation "Thou shalt rejoice in thy fast" is rendered by Tevye as "Live it up, you paupers." In this manner Tevye often insinuates his own commentary into the text, reducing its high-flown rhetoric to the bitter reality of his circumstances. This is Tevye in action, whether he is debating with God or showing off his "erudition." My solution was to present the scriptural quotations in italics alongside Tevye's highly personal interpretations.

I was fortunate to have the use of the glossary that is appended to an earlier *Tevye* translation, by the noted Hebrew and Yiddish scholar Hillel Halkin. The glossary consists of transliterations of the original biblical quotations and their exact sources and English translations. I thank Hillel Halkin for his scholarly help. Rather than have the reader flip back and forth from text to glossary, I have incorporated within the text both the quotations and Tevye's interpretations of them. Every translator of *Tevye* must find a solution to this problem. I hope mine works for the reader of English.

Tevye is presented as Tevye's account of his life as he relates it to his friend Sholem Aleichem, who records Tevye's words. It is thus written in the first person, and its language is that of a simple, poor, and—except in religious traditions and biblical matters—uneducated man living in a Russian shtetl. Could I imagine Tevye using a sophisticated word, even though it might be the most accurate?

My husband, Howie, a gifted writer, Yiddish speaker, and frustrated actor, loved reading aloud from *Tevye* as we worked together. The film of *Fiddler on the Roof*, however wonderful, gives no hint of the many tragedies that befall Tevye throughout the novel, and we frequently had to pause in our work to cry. I will always remember this collaboration with the most heartfelt gratitude and pleasure.

MOTL THE CANTOR'S SON

Motl, like *Tevye*, is written in the first person, but its narrator is a clever, mischievous nine-year-old boy, high-spirited and insatiably curious, eager to try anything for the fun of it. His vocabulary needed to reflect these qualities, something I had great fun with.

Several years ago my friend the fine actress Suzanne Toren performed with me two of the episodes from *Motl* at a family program at YIVO, alternating Yiddish and English. The audience of children and their parents enjoyed it immensely. Sholem Aleichem's love of children is apparent in *Motl*, so it's no wonder the young audience responded so well.

Translating *Motl* was a great pleasure but also deeply sad, for it was as Sholem Aleichem was writing it that he died. The book ends in midsentence, and there's an explanatory epilogue by his son-in-law I. D. Berkovitch. Having translated Sholem Aleichem over many years and many books, I could tell where in the text he'd begun to grow weak, his powers dwindling as the story drew to a close. The dimming of his usual bright, sharp style alerted me to bad things to come. He was dying as he was writing the very words I was translating, and yet *Motl* the cantor's son lives on. May the reader enjoy this lovable little hellion.

ALIZA SHEVRIN
Ann Arbor, 2008

TEVYE THE DAIRYMAN

KOTONTI—I AM UNWORTHY

A letter from Tevye the dairyman to the author

WRITTEN IN 1895.

In honor of my dear, beloved friend Reb Sholem Aleichem, may God grant you health and prosperity together with your wife and children, and may you have great fulfillment whatever you do and wherever you go. Amen. *Selah!*

Kotonti!—I am unworthy! This I tell you in the language our Father Jacob spoke to God in the portion *Vayishlach*, when he went to meet Esau. But if this is not entirely appropriate, I beg you, Pani Sholem Aleichem, not to be upset with me, as I am an ordinary man and you certainly know more than I do—who can question that? After all, living one's whole life in a little village, one is ignorant. Who has time to look into a holy book or to learn a verse of the Bible or Rashi? Luckily when summer comes around, the Yehupetz rich folk take off to their dachas in Boiberik, and every now and then I can get together with an educated person to hear some wisdom. Believe me when I tell you how well I remember that day when you sat with me in the woods listening to my foolish tales. That meant more to me than anything in the world!

I don't know what you found so interesting that you would devote your time to an insignificant person like myself, to write me letters and, unbelievably, to put my name in a book, make a big fuss over me, as if I were who knows who. For that I can certainly say, *Kotonti!*—I am unworthy! True, I am a good friend of yours, may God grant me a hundredth portion of what I wish for you! You know very well that I served you in bygone years when you were still living in the big dacha—do you remember? I bought you a cow for fifty rubles that I bargained down from fifty-five. It was a steal. So she died on the third day? It wasn't my fault. Why did the other cow I gave you also die? You know very well how that upset me. I was beside myself! Do I know why she died? Even

with the best intentions things like that can happen!

May God help me and you in the new year. It should be—how is it said?—*Bless us as in days of old*. May God help me in my livelihood, may I and my horse be well, and may my cows give enough milk that, with my cheese and butter, I will be able to serve you for a long time to come. May God grant you and all the Yehupetz rich folk success and prosperity. May your lives be filled with great joy. And for the trouble you've gone through for my sake, and for the honor you do me through your book, I can only say again: *Kotonti!*—I am unworthy!

How do I deserve the honor of having a world of people suddenly learning that on the other side of Boiberik, not far from Anatevka, lives a Jew called Tevye the dairyman? But you must know what you are doing. I don't need to teach you anything. How to write, you certainly know. As for the rest, I rely on your noble character to see to it that I might earn a little something from your book, because it is sorely needed now. I soon have to think about marrying off a daughter, God willing. And if God grants us life, we might have two to marry off at the same time.

In the meanwhile, be well and have a happy life, as I wish you with all my heart, from me, your best friend,

TEVYE

Yes, one more thing! When the book is finished and you are ready to send me some money, would you please send it to Anatevka, in care of the town ritual slaughterer? I will be staying with him in the fall before Pokraveh, and another time around Novegod when I have to be in *shul* to say kaddish, which means at those times I am a city Jew. Otherwise, you can send me letters right to Boiberik in my name, Tevye.

THE GREAT WINDFALL

A wondrous tale of how Tevye the dairyman, a poor Jew burdened with many children, suddenly became rich through a most unusual circumstance, as told by Tevye himself and set down word for word.

WRITTEN IN 1895.

He raiseth up the poor out of the dust,
And lifteth the needy out of the dunghill. (Psalms 113:7)

If you are meant to receive a great windfall, do you hear, Pani Sholem Aleichem, it will fall right into your lap. As they say, it never rains but it pours. A stroke of good luck doesn't take brains or ability. But should it be the other way around—God forbid, you can talk until you are blue in the face, and it will do as much good as last winter's snow. The Talmud says: *Without wisdom and a good idea—* you might as well ride a dead horse. You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink. A man toils, a man suffers; he might as well save time and die right on the spot! And then all of a sudden, who knows why, who knows how—money pours in from all sides. As it is written: *Enlargement and deliverance shall arise for the Jews.* I don't have to tell you where that comes from, but this is the interpretation: a Jew, so long as he has a breath of life in him, cannot give up hope. I can tell you from my own experience how the Almighty set me up in my own livelihood. After all, how else would I come to be selling cheese and butter when, as far back as my grandmother's grandmother, no one in my family ever sold dairy? It's really worth your while to hear the whole story from beginning to end. Let's sit down here on the grass a bit. Let the horse nibble a little in the meantime, for as they say, "It's also one of God's creatures."

It was around Shevuos, or maybe, I don't want you to think I'm lying, even a week or two before Shevuos and . . . wait a minute, perhaps a few weeks after Shevuos. . . . Hold on a bit, it was, let me think a minute. . . . It was exactly nine

or ten years ago and maybe a little bit more. At that time I wasn't at all the man you see today. Of course, I was the same Tevye but not really the same. How do they say: the same *yente* but sporting a different hat. In what way was I different? May it not happen to you, but I was a beggar in rags. Come to think of it, I'm still far from being rich. The difference between me and Brodsky the millionaire, may you and I both earn between summer and Succos. But compared to that time, today I am a wealthy man. I own a horse and wagon, *kayn eyn horeh*, two milk cows, and another one about to calve. Forgive me for boasting, but we have cheese and butter and fresh sour cream every day, and we make it all ourselves. Everyone works, no one sits idle. My wife, long life to her, milks the cows, the children carry the milk pails and churn the butter, and I myself, as you can see, go out early every morning to the market, then drive from dacha to dacha in Boiberik. I drop in on this one, on that one, the biggest businessmen from Yehupetz, chat a little with each one like I'm also somebody and not, as they say, a lame tailor. And when Shabbes, the Sabbath, comes—then I am a king! I glance into a Yiddish book, read a portion of the Torah and a few commentaries, the Psalms, a chapter of Mishnah—a little of this, a little of that, and a bit of something else. You're looking at me, Pani Sholem Aleichem, and probably thinking to yourself, Aha! This Tevye is really some Jew!

So let's see now, what did I start to tell you? Oh yes! With a little help from God, there I was penniless, poor as a beggar, with a wife and kids, starving to death three times a day, not counting suppers, may it not happen to any Jew. I slaved like a jackass lugging full wagonloads of logs from the woods to the railroad station. I am embarrassed to tell you all I got was half a ruble a day, and not every day at that. Just try to feed, *kayn eyn horeh*, a houseful of hungry mouths, may they stay healthy, and, please forgive the comparison, a freeloading boarder of a horse like a starving yeshiva boy, but one who doesn't know from Rashi and insists on having his belly filled every day, no excuses accepted.

So how did God arrange it? He is, how do you say, a great and all-powerful God who nourishes and supports all living creatures. He manages this little world wisely and well. He sees how I'm struggling for a crust of bread and says to me, "Do you think,

Tevye, the end of days has come and the sky has fallen on you? Feh, you're a big fool! Soon you'll see how, if I so decree, your luck can change in a split second, and where there was darkness there will be light. It will be decided, exactly as it says in the Yom Kippur prayer *U'netaneh tokef*, *God decides who will ride and*

who will go on foot. The main thing is—hope.” A Jew must hope, must keep on hoping. So what if he goes under in the meantime? What better reason is there for being a Jew? As it is said: *Thou hast chosen us*—there’s good reason for the whole world to envy us. Why am I telling you all this? So you’ll see how God dealt with me, performed great wonders and miracles. It won’t hurt you to hear about it.

As it is said, *And there came the day.* It was a summer evening, and I was riding back home through the woods having just finished delivering logs. I was downcast, my heart heavy with worry. The little horse, poor thing, was on its last legs, barely stumbling along, no matter how hard I beat it or flayed its hide.

“Crawl on your belly,” I shouted, “*shlimazel!* Suffer like I suffer! If you’re going to be Tevye’s horse, you also have to know what it’s like to starve on a long hot summer day.” In the silence all around us, every crack of the whip echoed through the woods. The sun was setting, the day fading. The shadows of the trees grew longer like our Jewish exile. It turned darker and gloomier. Many strange thoughts and old memories ran through my head, and all kinds of images of people long dead came to me. Then I thought of my own home, God pity me! Inside the little hut it was dark, dismal; the poor children, may they stay healthy, were naked and barefoot, awaiting their father, that *shlimazel*, hoping he’d bring home a fresh loaf of bread or at least a baked roll. And she, my old lady, was grumbling, just like a woman, “I had to bear him children, and seven at that! I might as well throw them into the river, may God not punish me for these words!”

Do you like to hear such words? After all, a man is no more than a man. As they say, “We are all either of flesh or of fish.” You can’t fill the stomach with words. If you eat a piece of herring, you have a yen for tea. With the tea you need some sugar, and sugar, you’ll say, only Brodsky has. “A crust of bread the stomach can manage to do without,” says my wife, long life to her, “but without a glass of tea in the morning, I’m as good as dead. The baby,” she says, “drains me dry all night!”

Still and all, a Jew is a Jew, and when it’s time for the evening prayers, pray you must. Imagine what kind of praying it was. I was standing alongside the wagon reciting the *shmone esre*, the Eighteen Benedictions, and right smack in the middle of them my horse goes crazy and takes off. There I am running after the wagon, hanging on to the reins for dear life and chanting, “God of Abraham,

God of Isaac, and God of Jacob.” What a way to recite the Eighteen Benedictions! And wouldn’t you know, just then of all times, I really had the desire to pray!

So there I was, tearing after the wagon and chanting at the top of my lungs as if I were, pardon the comparison, a cantor chanting in *shul*, “*Thou sustaineth the living with loving kindness and keepest thy faith with them that lie in the dust and are brought low.*” We have our own way of saying it: “Even those who lie in the earth and bake bagels.” Oy, I think to myself, do we lie in the dust! Oy, are we brought low! I’m not talking about those rich people from Yehupetz, you understand, who while away the whole summer in Boiberik in their dachas, eating and drinking and swimming and enjoying the good life. Oy, God in heaven, why do I deserve this? Am I not a Jew the same as any other Jew? For heaven’s sake, dear God, see our affliction. Look down, I said, and see how we are struggling. Stand by the unfortunate, the poor. Who else will look after them if not You? Heal us, and we shall be healed. Send us the cure—the affliction we already have. Bless us with a good year. May crops flourish—the corn, the wheat, and the barley. As I think of it, what good will all that flourishing do a *shlimazel* like me? Does my horse care whether oats are expensive or cheap?

But feh, God doesn’t ask for advice, and a Jew in particular has to accept everything on faith and say, “That too is for the best. God probably wants it that way. And for the slanderers,” I sang on, “and for the slanderers and the high and mighty who say there is no God, just wait till they arrive over *there*. They will pay for their scoffing with interest because *He hath a long memory, He keeps His word*. You don’t trifle with Him, with Him you walk humbly, you pray to Him, cry out to Him, ““Oh merciful Father! Compassionate Father! Hear our cries. Have pity on us. Have pity on my wife and children. They are, alas, hungry! Accept Your beloved people Israel, as in olden days of the Holy Temple, as Thou didst with the Priests and the Levites.’ ”

Suddenly—halt! The horse stopped in its tracks. I polished off the Eighteen Benedictions, lifted my eyes, and saw coming straight toward me out of the woods two strange-looking figures, their faces covered, and dressed oddly. . . . Robbers! flew through my mind, but I quickly caught myself: Feh, Tevye, you’re an idiot! Really, how many years had I been driving through these woods by day and by night? Why would I suddenly start worrying about thieves? “Giddyap!” I said to the horse, giving him a few extra smart blows on his rump, making as if I didn’t see them.

“Wait! Listen, I see you’re a Jew,” one of the two exclaimed in a woman’s voice, and waved to me with a corner of her shawl. “Stop for a minute! Don’t run off. We won’t harm you, God forbid!”

Aha! An evil spirit! I figured, but then reconsidered. Stupid, ignorant ass! Why did ghosts and demons suddenly fall onto my head out of nowhere? And I pulled up the horse and took a careful look at the two figures. They were ordinary women, the older one wearing a silk kerchief on her head, the younger one wearing a wig. Both were flushed red as beets and perspiring heavily.

“Good evening!” I tried to sound cheerful. “What can I do for you? If you want to buy something, you’re out of luck, unless you’re looking for bellyaches fit only for my enemies, heartaches enough for a full week, headaches, wracking pains, killing anguish, rehashed troubles—”

“Hush, hush!” they replied. “Just listen to how he goes on! Say one word to some Jews, and you’re not sure of your life! We don’t want to buy anything. We just wanted to ask if you know the way to Boiberik.”

“To Boiberik?” I almost burst out laughing. “That,” I said, “is like asking me if I know my name is Tevye.”

“Is that your name, Tevye?” one said. “A good evening to you, Reb Tevye! We don’t see what there is to laugh about. We’re strangers from Yehupetz staying at a dacha in Boiberik. We started out early this morning for a little stroll, and we’ve been going slowly around in circles in these woods all day, getting more and more lost. We can’t seem to get back on the right path. And then we heard this singing in the woods. At first we thought, What if it’s, God forbid, a highwayman? But then when we came closer and saw you were a Jew, thank God, we felt relieved. Now do you understand?”

“Ha ha ha, a fine highwayman!” I laughed. “Have you heard the story about the Jewish highwayman who fell upon a wayfarer and demanded a pinch of snuff? If you’d like, I can tell you the whole story—”

“The story,” they said, “you can leave for another time. Better just show us the road to Boiberik.”

“To Boiberik?” I said. “Look, you’re already *on* the road to Boiberik! Even if you don’t want it, this road will take you straight to Boiberik.”

“Why didn’t you say so?”

“Why should I shout it?”

“If that’s the case,” they said, “you must know how far we are from Boiberik.”

“To Boiberik,” I said, “it isn’t too far, a few versts, that is, five or six. Maybe seven versts, or maybe even all of eight.”

“Eight versts?!” both women cried out at the same time, wringing their hands and verging on tears. “Do you know what you’re saying? ‘Eight versts,’ he says, as if it were nothing!”

“*Nu*, what can I do about it?” said I. “If it were up to me, I’d make it a little shorter. A person has to find things out for himself. It can happen on the road that you drag yourself up a hill through the mud and it’s almost Shabbes. The rain is beating in your face, your hands are numb, your heart is pounding, and then—crash! An axle breaks—”

“You’re rattling on like a madman,” they said to me. “You can’t be in your right mind! All these nonsensical old wives’ tales from *A Thousand and One Nights*! We hardly have the strength to stand on our feet. Except for a glass of coffee and a butter roll, we haven’t had a morsel of food in our mouths all day, and here you come along with crazy tales!”

“If that’s the way it is,” said I, “that’s a different story. How do they say—you *don’t go dancing before you eat*. The taste of hunger I understand very well, you don’t need to tell me. I haven’t tasted or even laid my eyes on coffee or a butter roll for a year.” And as I was speaking, I envisioned a glass of hot coffee with cream and a fresh butter roll along with other delicious foods. *Shlimazel*, I was scolding myself, is that how I was raised, on coffee and butter rolls? A piece of bread and herring isn’t good enough for me? And he, the Tempter, may he be banished from our thoughts, insisted on coffee, insisted on a butter roll! I smelled the aroma of coffee, tasted the flavor of butter rolls—fresh, delicious, soul-satisfying.

“Do you know what, Reb Tevye?” both women said to me. “Since we’re both standing here, would it be such a bad idea if we got up on your wagon and you kindly took us home to Boiberik? How does that idea strike you?”

“That’s a fine how-do-you-do! I’m coming *from* Boiberik, and you want to go *to* Boiberik! How can I go both ways at once?”

“What’s the problem?” they said. “A clever Jew could figure it out. He’d turn

the wagon around and go the other way. Don't worry, Reb Tevye," they added. "Rest assured that, if God is willing and sees us home safely, we'll make it worth your while. May we suffer as much as you'll suffer for it!"

What were they trying to tell me? I wondered. Something out of the ordinary was going on here! There leaped into my mind ghosts, witches, demons, and who knows what else. Oh, what a blockhead I am, I thought, standing there like a bump on a log. I should show the horse the whip and make tracks for home!

But against my will, as bad luck would have it, out of my mouth came: "Climb into the wagon!"

My new friends jumped right on—they didn't wait to be asked twice. I turned the wagon around, cracked the whip—one two three, giddyap!

Nothing doing! We weren't going anywhere. The horse wouldn't budge from the spot, even if you cut him in half. *Nu*, now I understood what women could do. What had made me stop in the middle of nowhere to carry on a conversation with women? Just picture it—the woods on all sides, the stillness and gloom, night falling, and then these two creatures approaching, women. The imagination could really play tricks on a person. I recalled the story of a coachman who was once riding through the woods all alone when he saw a sack of oats lying on the road. He didn't waste any time—he quickly got off the wagon, hoisted the heavy sack onto his back with great effort, loaded it onto his wagon, and continued on his way. He drove for about a verst, then turned around to look at the sack. It was gone—no more oats. Instead a goat with a little beard was lying in the wagon. He tried to touch her with his hand, but she stuck out her long tongue at him, let out a weird, wild laugh, and vanished.

"Why aren't we moving?" the women said to me.

"Why aren't we moving? Don't you see?" I said. "The horse won't cooperate. He's not in the mood."

"Show him your whip," they suggested. "You have a whip."

"I thank you for your advice," I said. "It's a good thing you reminded me. But my boy here isn't frightened of a whip. He's as used to it as I am to poverty." I threw in a little saying to make light of it, but inside I was shaking with frustration.

Why should I bore you? I let out my bitter heart on the poor horse till finally

God helped me. The horse decided to move and we were able to continue through the woods.

Oh what a numbskull I was, I thought. I always *was* a pauper, and I'd always *remain* a pauper. God had arranged this encounter, something that happens maybe once in a hundred years—and I didn't settle on a price beforehand. What was I going to get out of it? I was acting according to fairness, decency, righteousness, and law, according to edict, and according to anything I could think of under the sun. But even so, what would have been the harm in earning a little something while I was at it? I should pull up the horse, idiot that I was, and tell them what was what. I should say, "If I am paid so much and so much, all right, and if not, I beg you, if you don't mind, please get out of the wagon!" But then I saw that I was being an ass. It's not a good idea to sell the bear's hide till you've caught the bear! I'd wait till we got there.

"Why aren't you going a little faster?" The women were poking me from behind.

"What's the rush? Haste makes waste." I glanced at them out of the corner of my eye. They were ordinary women, one wearing a silk head scarf, the other a wig.

They looked at each other, whispering together. "Is it still far to go?" they asked me.

"As close," said I, "as from here to there. Soon we'll be going down a hill and then up a hill. After that, again down a hill and again up a hill, and then comes the really big hill, and from there on the road is straight ahead to Boiberik."

"What a *shlimazel!*" one of them exclaimed.

"It'll take us forever!" said the other.

"It's the last straw!"

"Strikes me he's a bit crazy!"

She could say that again, I thought. I had to be crazy to let myself be led around by the nose!

"Where, pray tell, my dear ladies, would you like me to drop you?" I called out to them.

"What do you mean?" they said in alarm. "You're going to drop us?"

“It’s an expression,” I said, “that coachmen use. Someone who’s not a coachman would say, ‘Where would you like me to deliver you when we come to Boiberik safe and sound, if God will grant enough life?’ How is it said: ‘Better to ask twice than to err once.’”

“Ah, so that’s what you mean. If you would be so kind,” they said, “take us to the green dacha near the lake on the other side of the woods. Do you know where that is?”

“Why shouldn’t I know?” I said. “I know Boiberik like I know my own town. May I have as many thousands as I have delivered logs to people there. Why, just a year ago last summer I delivered to that same green dacha two loads of wood. This rich man from Yehupetz was staying there, a millionaire worth at least a thousand rubles and maybe even tens of thousands.”

“He’s still there,” both women told me, glancing at each other, whispering together and giggling.

“Wait,” I said. “Do you have some kind of connection to him? What I’m doing for you is no small thing. Would it be such a bad idea to put in a good word on my behalf, to do me a little favor, throw some business my way, a position maybe, or whatever? I knew a young man, Yisroyel was his name, who lived not far from our town, who was a good-for-nothing. He came to our town. To make a long story short, today he’s a regular big shot, makes maybe twenty rubles a week, if not forty, who knows? Some people have all the luck! Or take for example our ritual slaughterer’s son-in-law. What would have become of him if he hadn’t gone to Yehupetz? True, the first few years he starved, almost died of hunger, may it not happen to anyone. But now he even sends money home. He’s planning to bring his wife and children over, but they can’t live there without a permit. So, you might ask, how is he surviving? He’s really struggling. Never mind, where there’s life, there’s hope.

“Here we are at the river,” I announced, “and there’s the large dacha.” I drove boldly right up to the front porch.

As soon as the people inside saw us coming, there was great excitement; they shouted, made a real commotion! “Oy, Bubbe!

Mama! Auntie! Here they are! *Mazel tov!* My God, where were you? . . . We’ve been out of our minds all day! . . . We sent out scouts looking for you in every direction! . . . We thought—who can tell?—maybe wolves, robbers, heaven

protect us! What happened?”

“What happened makes a good story. We got lost in the woods and wandered quite far away, maybe ten versts. Out of nowhere a Jew turned up. And what a Jew! A real *shlimazel* of a Jew, with a horse and wagon. We barely talked him into taking us home.”

“What a terrible nightmare. . . . You ventured out alone, without escorts? What a story! Be grateful to God!”

To make a long story short, they brought lamps out onto the porch and set the table. They carried out hot samovars with glasses of tea, sugar and preserves, delicious omelets, fresh, wonderful-smelling butter cakes, and afterward all kinds of food, the most expensive treats, rich, fatty soups, roasts, geese, along with the finest wines and tarts. I stood off to the side and marveled at the way, *kayn eyn horeh*, the rich folks from Yehupetz eat and drink, God bless them. I’d pawn everything I own, I was thinking, if only I could be rich. The crumbs that fell off their table would have fed my children for a week, at least till Saturday. God Almighty, compassionate, faithful one, is a great God and a good God, a God of mercy and justice. Why did He grant this one everything and the other nothing? This one got butter rolls, the other the ten plagues. But then I thought I was a great fool. I was giving *Him* advice on how to run the world? Most likely, if He wanted it that way, that was how it should be. The proof was that if it were meant to be otherwise, it would be otherwise. Ay! Well, why shouldn’t it be otherwise? The answer is this: *Slaves we were once in Pharaoh’s day*, and that’s why we are the Chosen People. A Jew must exist on hope and faith. He has to believe, above all, that there is a God, and he has to have faith in Him who lives forever and hope that someday, with His help, perhaps things will be better.

“*Sha*, where did that Jew go?” I heard someone say, “Did that *shlimazel* take off?”

“God forbid!” I called out from the shadows. “Do you think I’d leave just like that, without so much as a goodbye? *Sholem aleichem!* ” I said. “A good evening to you all. Blessed be those who dwell in this house. May you all enjoy your food and prosper!”

“Come on over here,” they said to me. “Why are you standing there in the dark? Let’s at least have a good look at you, see your face. How about a little brandy?”

“A little brandy? Ach,” I said, “who would turn down a little brandy? How does it say in the Talmud: *Who giveth life giveth also the fruit of the vine*. Rashi interprets it as: God may be God, but brandy is brandy. *L’chayim!*” I said, and knocked back a glassful. “May God grant that you always be rich and enjoy life. Jews,” I said, “should always remain Jews. God should grant them health and the strength so they can withstand all their troubles—”

“What’s your name?” the rich man, a fine-looking Jew wearing a yarmulke, interrupted me. “Where are you from? Where do you live? What is your livelihood? Are you married? Do you have any children, and how many?”

“Children? I can’t complain. If each child,” I said, “were worth, as my wife Golde tells me, a million, I’d be richer than the richest man in Yehupetz. The problem is that poor isn’t rich and crooked isn’t straight, as it is said in the *havdalah* service: *He separateth the sacred from the profane*—whoever has the cash has it good. Gold the Brodskys have. Daughters I have. And if you have daughters, it’s no laughing matter. But never mind, God is our father and He prevails. He sits on high, and we struggle down below. You plod, you haul logs, what choice do you have? As the Gemorah says: *What place doth man have?* The tragedy is that you have to eat. As my grandmother, of blessed memory, used to say: ‘If the mouth did not exist, the mind would be free.’ Pardon me, but there’s nothing straight about a crooked ladder and nothing crooked about a straightforward word, especially when drinking brandy on an empty stomach.”

“Give the man something to eat!” the wealthy man called out, and there suddenly appeared before me every kind of food—fish and meat and roasts, quarters of chicken and gizzards and chicken livers in vast amounts.

“Won’t you eat something?” they said to me. “Go wash up.”

“A sick person you ask, a healthy one you give. But never mind,” I said. “I thank you. A little brandy with pleasure, but to sit down here and enjoy a whole feast while at home my wife and children, may they be well . . . you understand . . .”

They apparently got my meaning because each of them began packing food into my wagon. This one brought a baked roll, that one a fish, this one a roast, that one a quarter of a chicken, this one tea and sugar, that one a crock of chicken *shmaltz* and a jar of preserves.

“This you will take home as gifts for your wife and children,” they said. “And

now tell us what you want to be paid for the trouble you went through on our behalf.”

“You’re asking me,” I said, “to put a price on it? As much as you want to give, that’s what you should pay. How do they say, ‘One coin more or less won’t make me much poorer than I already am.’”

“No,” they said, “we want to hear what *you* want, Reb Tevye! Don’t be afraid. No one will chop your head off, heaven forbid.”

What was I to do? This was bad. If I said one ruble, I might get two, but that would be a shame. Then again, if I said two, they might look at me as if I were crazy—they’d wonder where I got off asking for two.

“Three rubles!” popped out of my mouth, and such great laughter broke out among them that I wanted to sink into the ground.

“Please don’t be offended,” I said. “That just slipped out. Even a horse with four legs stumbles, so what can you expect of a man with one tongue?” The laughter grew louder.

“Enough laughing!” the rich man called out. He drew from his bosom pocket a large purse and from it removed—How much do you think? Go on, guess!—a ten-ruble note, may you and I live so long! And he said, “This is from me. And now the rest of you, give from your pockets as much as you think is right.”

What more can I say? Flying onto the table came fives and threes and ones. My arms and legs were shaking, and I thought I was going to faint right then and there.

“*Nu*, why are you still standing there?” the rich man said to me. “Pick up your few rubles from the table and go home in good health to your wife and children.”

“May God reward you,” I said, “many times over. May you have ten times, a hundred times over what you possess now. May you have all that is good and enjoy great happiness!” I gathered up the money with both hands—Count it? Who had time to count?—and stuffed it into all my pockets. “Goodnight,” I said. “May you always be happy and healthy and enjoy much pleasure, you and your children and your children’s children and your whole family.” And I started toward the wagon.

Then the rich man’s wife called out to me, she of the silk kerchief: “Wait a moment, Reb Tevye! I want to give you a gift of my own. God willing, come

back tomorrow. I have a milk cow. She was once a wonderful animal, used to give twenty-four glasses of milk a day, but lately, maybe we bragged too much, she stopped giving milk. I mean,” she said, “she lets herself be milked, but there’s no milk.”

“Long life to you,” I said. “May you never have any troubles. At my house your cow will let herself be milked *and* will give milk. My wife, God bless her, is so capable that out of thin air she makes noodles, with empty hands she concocts delicacies. With miracles she prepares the Shabbes, and with nothing but a box on the ear for supper she puts the children to bed. Forgive me,” I said, “if without thinking I ran on too long. Goodnight and God be with you and be well.” And I was on my way.

I came out into the courtyard, went over to my wagon, and put my hand out to stroke my horse. *Oy vey!* A calamity, a disaster, a catastrophe! No horse! *Nu*, Tevye, I thought, now you’re really in trouble! I’d read somewhere an awful tale about a gang that spirited away a pious Jew, a Chasid, one evening. They took him to a castle outside the city, gave him food and drink, and then suddenly vanished, leaving him alone with a beautiful woman. The woman soon turned into a wild beast, the wild beast became a cat, and the cat a dragon. I’d better be careful, I thought, and make sure they weren’t putting something over on me!

“Why are you grumbling and fumbling around out there?” they asked.

“An awful thing has happened!” I answered. “I’ve suffered a terrible loss—my horse . . .”

“Your horse,” they said, “is in the stable. Over there.”

I went into the stable and looked around. Yes, as I am a Jew! My handsome fellow was standing there very cozily among the aristocratic horses, deeply absorbed in munching, burying his muzzle in the oats with great relish.

“Listen, smart aleck,” I said to him, “it’s time to go home. Don’t eat so much too quickly—it’ll make you sick.”

I finally convinced him to kindly allow me to hitch him up to the wagon. We headed home, both of us, in a lively, happy frame of mind, I singing “God Our King” tipsily. My little horse was not the same as before—he seemed to have grown a new coat of fur. He didn’t even wait for the whip but ran like the wind. We arrived late that night, and with great excitement and joy I woke up my wife.

“Good evening!” I said. “Happy holiday, Golde!”

“A dismal happy holiday to you, a miserable one,” she said. “What makes you so jolly, my worthy breadwinner? Are you coming from a wedding or from a *bris*, my gold spinner?”

“It’s a wedding,” I said, “*and* a *bris*! Just wait, my wife, and you’ll soon see the treasure I’ve brought home. But first wake up the children, let the poor things also enjoy the Yehupetz delicacies.”

“Are you crazy? Are you out of your mind or just delirious? You’re talking like a madman, heaven help us!” She treated me to all the curses in the Bible, as a woman can do.

“A woman,” I said, “remains a woman. No wonder King Solomon complained that even among his thousand wives he couldn’t find a proper one. It’s a good thing, believe me, that it’s out of fashion nowadays to have a lot of wives.”

I went out to my wagon, brought in all the wonderful things they had packed for me, and laid them all out on the table. When my little gang set eyes on the breads and sniffed the meats, they fell upon the table like starving wolves, poor things. It turned into a grab-fest, hands trembling, teeth working. As Rashi stated: “*Eat!*” They chomped away like locusts. Tears came to my eyes.

“Now tell me,” my wife said to me. “Where did you get this fancy banquet, this feast, and how come you’re looking so smug?”

“Be patient, my Golde,” I said. “You’ll soon know everything. Why don’t you blow on the coals under the samovar, and then we can all sit around the table and drink our tea properly? A person,” I said, “only lives once, not twice—especially now that we’ll have our own milk cow that gives twenty-four glasses of milk a day. Tomorrow, God willing, I’ll bring her home. Come on, Golde.” I pulled the banknotes from my pockets. “Come, let’s see if you can guess how much money we have here.”

My wife was dumbstruck, mouth agape.

“God be with you, Golde dear,” I said. “Are you afraid that maybe I stole it or robbed someone? Feh, shame on you! You’re Tevye’s wife so many years, and you can still think that way about me? Silly,” I said, “this is kosher money, honestly earned with my own cleverness and with my own hard work. I rescued two souls from great peril,” I told her. “If not for me, God knows what would

have happened to them!”

And I told her everything from A to Z, how God had dealt with me. And then we both counted the money. We counted it over and over again. There was exactly twice eighteen plus one, which comes to no less than thirty-seven rubles! My wife broke down in tears.

“Why are you crying, foolish woman?” I asked.

“How can I help crying when tears come? If your heart is full,” she said, “the eyes overflow. May God help me, my heart told me you’d come back with good news. One time my grandmother Tzeitl came to me in a dream. I was lying in bed asleep, and suddenly I dreamed about a milk pail, a full one. Grandma Tzeitl, may she rest in peace, was carrying the full milk pail under her apron so it wouldn’t tempt the evil eye, and the children were crying, ‘Mama, look!’—”

“Don’t put the cart before the horse, my dear,” I interrupted. “May Grandma Tzeitl have a bright paradise, but I still don’t know if something good will come of this dream. Still, if God could miraculously bring us our own cow, He could also make her give milk. Give me advice, Golde darling—what should we do with the money?”

“Well,” she said, “what do *you* think we should do with the money, *kayn eyn horeh?*”

“Well, again and yet again,” I said, “what do *you* think we should do with this kind of capital?” And we racked our brains trying to come up with an idea. We considered every kind of business: we would buy a pair of horses and sell them for a profit; we would open a grocery store in Boiberik, sell out the stock, and then open a dry-goods store. We would invest in timber, find a buyer, make some money, and get rid of it. We would buy an Anatevka tax-collecting contract and with the profit go into the moneylending business.

“Are you out of your mind?” my wife finally exclaimed. “Do you want to squander these few groschens and be left with nothing but your whip?”

“What, then?” I said. “Is it better to sell grain and go bankrupt?

Everyone is going broke selling wheat. Just see what’s happening in Odessa!”

“What do I care about Odessa?” she said. “My family never was there, and my children will never be there so long as I can stand on my own two feet.”

“What do you want?” I said.

“What do I want?” she said. “I want you to stop talking nonsense.”

“So now you’re the smart one. As they say: ‘If the money comes, the schemes follow, and if you are rich, you’re certainly clever.’ It’s always like that!”

In short, we had a spat but soon made up. We decided on a plan: in addition to the milk cow we’d have tomorrow, we would buy another cow, one that would also give milk.

You will probably ask, Why a cow and not a horse? To which I will answer, Why a horse and not a cow? Every summer all the rich folks from Yehupetz go to their dachas in Boiberik. And these Yehupetz folks are all very refined people who are used to having everything served up to them—wood for the fire, meat and eggs, chickens and onions, peppers and radishes. Why shouldn’t someone make it his business to bring to their doorstep every morning milk, cheese, butter, and sour cream? And as the Yehupetzers like to eat well and don’t give a fig about money, you can charge high prices. But it’s important that the merchandise be of the highest quality, and my merchandise you can’t get even in Yehupetz. May we both have as many blessings as the number of times that people, even high-up Christians, have begged me to sell them my merchandise.

“We hear, Tevel,” they say, “that you’re an honest man even though you’re a filthy Jew.” Would you ever hear a compliment like that from a Jew? May my enemies suffer until that ever happens! You never hear a kind word from our little Jews. They only know about looking into your private business. They see a new cow at Tevye’s, a new cart, and they’re breaking their heads: “Where did it come from? Is this Tevye possibly dealing with counterfeit banknotes? Or might he be cooking up some moonshine in a still?” Ha ha ha! Break your heads, boys, I am thinking!

I don’t know if you believe my story—you’re the first one I’ve told it to, how and what and when, but now I think I’ve gone on too long. Don’t be offended, but one must tend to one’s business. Or as they say, “Each to his own”—you to your books, I to my pots and my jugs. I would like to ask one thing of you, Pani. Don’t write about me in any of your books, and if you do, don’t mention my name. Be well and have a good life.

THE ROOF FALLS IN

WRITTEN IN 1899.

Many are the thoughts in a man's heart—isn't that what it says in our holy Torah? I don't need to interpret that verse for you, Reb Sholem Aleichem. But in Ashkenaz, or plain Yiddish, it means: "The best horse needs a whip, the smartest person—advice." About what am I telling you this? About myself, in fact, because if I had had the sense not to go to a good friend and tell him thus and so, and this and that, things would surely not have turned out as badly as they did. But what could I do? If God wants to punish a person, he takes away his good sense. How many times have I thought, Think about it, Tevye, you ass. You're no fool—why do you let yourself be led around by the nose in such a stupid way? I was already making a little living, *kayn eyn horeh*, with my dairy business, which had a good reputation everywhere, in Boiberik and in Yehupetz and where not. What was so wrong with that? How sweet and good it would have been now if those coins were still lying quietly in the money chest, safely hidden away, because whose business is it, I ask you, whether Tevye has any money or not?

I really mean it. Did the world show any interest in me when I was, may it never happen to a Jew, buried deep in poverty, perishing three times a day of hunger together with my wife and children? Only when God showed his favor to Tevye, suddenly made me rich so I could finally make something of myself, put away a few rubles, only then did the world take notice and Tevye become Reb Tevye—some joke! Many good friends suddenly began to show up, as the verse says: *All are beloved, all are elect*—when God grants a spoonful, people offer a shovelful. Every person came with his own advice. This one said a dry-goods store, that one a grocery; another one said a house, a good lasting investment. This one said wheat, that one timber, another auctioneering. "Friends!" I cried. "Back off! You are making a great mistake. Do you think I'm Brodsky? May we

all have the amount less than three hundred, even two hundred and even one hundred and fifty, that I really have. It's easy to imagine that another's wealth glitters like gold, but when you get closer, it turns out to be a brass button."

In short, our little Jews—don't even mention them—gave me the evil eye! God sent me a relative, Menachem-Mendl was his name—a fly-by-night, a who knows what, a wheeler-dealer, a manipulator, may he never find a resting place! He roped me in and spun my head around with dreams of things that never were and never could be. You will ask how I met Menachem-Mendl. I will give you an answer: *Slaves we were*—it was fated to be. Listen to this story.

One day at the beginning of winter I arrived in Yehupetz with my little bit of dairy—some twenty or so pounds of the best fresh butter you can buy, and two fine wheels of cheese worth their weight in gold and silver, may we both have as much! Of course, I sold out my merchandise completely, nothing at all was left even if my life depended on it. I was so busy, I had no time to chat with my summer customers, the Boiberik dacha owners, who wait for me as if I were the Messiah because the Yehupetz merchants' produce can't hold a candle to Tevye's. I needn't tell you, as the prophet said: *Let other men praise thee*—good products praise themselves.

Having sold everything and thrown some hay to my horse, I decided to take a stroll around town. As it is said, *Man is but dust*—a man is only human. I wanted to see a bit of the world, breathe the air, and look at the fine goods that Yehupetz displays in its shopwindows, which seem to say, "Look with your eyes as much as you like, but to touch—don't dare!" Standing just like that at a large shopwindow with a pocketful of coins and ruble notes, I thought, God in heaven! If I had a tenth of what I see here, I would never complain to God again. I'd make a match for my eldest daughter and give her a good dowry, besides wedding presents, a wardrobe, and wedding expenses. I'd sell the horse and wagon and the little cows and move right into town, buy a seat by the eastern wall of the *shul*. I'd get pearls for my wife, long may she live, and distribute charity like the biggest property owner. I'd see to it that the house of study had a metal roof, not a roof about to collapse any minute. I'd open a religious school in town and a hospital and a shelter like in other respectable cities so poor people wouldn't have to lie around on the bare floor of the house of study. I'd get rid of Yenkl Sheygetz, the head of the burial society—enough drinking brandy and eating gizzards and chicken livers at the community's expense.

“*Sholem aleichem*, Reb Tevye!” I heard someone call from behind me. “How are you?”

I turned and could have sworn I knew him. “*Aleichem sholem*,” I said. “Where do I know you from?”

“From where? From Kasrilevka,” the man said to me. “I’m a friend of yours. I mean, I’m your second cousin once removed. Your wife Golde is my second cousin.”

“Say now,” I said, “can you be Boruch-Hersh Leah-Dvossi’s son-in-law?”

“You got that right,” he said to me. “I am a son-in-law of Leah-Dvossi’s, and my wife’s name is Sheyne-Sheyndl Boruch-Hersh Leah-Dvossi’s son-in-law. Now do you remember who I am?”

“Be quiet a minute,” I said. “I believe your mother-in-law’s grandmother Sora-Yente and my wife’s aunt Frume-Zlate were cousins, and if I’m not mistaken, you are the middle son-in-law of Boruch-Hersh Leah-Dvossi’s. But do you know, I’ve forgotten your name, it’s just flown out of my head. What is your name? What do they actually call you?”

“They call me Menachem-Mendl Boruch-Hersh Leah-Dvossi’s—that’s what they call me at home in Kasrilevka.”

“If that’s so, my dear Menachem-Mendl,” I said to him, “I really have to give you a proper *sholem aleichem*! Tell me, my dear Menachem-Mendl, what are you doing here? How are your mother-in-law and father-in-law, long life to them? How are things going for you? How is your health, and how is business?”

“Well,” he said, “as for my health, thank God, one lives, but business is not so rosy these days.”

“God will help.” I stole a glance at his shabby clothes, patched in many places, the shoes almost worn through. “You can be sure God will help you and things will get better. As it says in the Bible: *All is vanity*. Money,” I said, “is round, one day it rolls this way, another day it rolls that way, so long as you are alive. The most important thing is faith. A Jew must have hope. Ay, what if things really go bad? For that reason we are Jews. As they say, if you’re a soldier, smell gunpowder. The whole world is but a dream. But better tell me, my dear Menachem-Mendl, what brings you to, of all places, Yehupetz?”

“What do you mean? I’ve been here for a year and a half.”

“Is that so? Are you a native? A Yehupetzer?”

“Sshhh,” he said, looking around. “Don’t shout so loudly, Reb Tevye. I am living here, but it must remain between us.”

I stared at him as if he were crazy. “You’re here illegally,” I said, “and you’re out in the open in the Yehupetz market square?”

“Don’t ask, Reb Tevye,” he said. “That’s the way it is. You obviously aren’t acquainted with Yehupetz regulations. Come, I’ll tell you, and you’ll understand what it means to be a resident and *not* a resident.” And he gave me a long, drawn-out account of how you go crazy trying to get a permit to live there.

“Listen to me, Menachem-Mendl,” I said, “come to my place for a day, and you can at least rest your bones. You’ll be my guest,” I said, “and a welcome one too. My wife will be happy to have you.”

In short, he agreed. We drove home together, and everyone was delighted to see him—a guest! Here was our own second cousin, no small matter. As they say, “One’s own are not strangers.” Golde’s grilling began: “How are things in Kasrilevka? How is Uncle Boruch-Hersh? How are Aunt Leah-Dvossi and Uncle Yossil-Menashe and Aunt Dobrish? And how are their children? Who died? Who got married? Who got divorced? Who has given birth and who is expecting?”

“Why do you need to know about other people’s weddings and other people’s *brises*?” I said. “Better see that there is something to eat. *Let all who are hungry come and partake*—you can’t dance on an empty stomach. If you have a borscht, good, and if not, it doesn’t matter,” I said. “We’ll have knishes or kreplach or *knaidlach* or maybe even blintzes. You can decide, but be quick about it.”

We all washed our hands and ate well, as Rashi said: *And thou shalt eat, as God commanded*. “Eat, Menachem-Mendl,” I said to him. “As King David said: ‘It’s a foolish world and a false one.’ Health, as my grandmother Nechama, of blessed memory, used to say—she was a wise woman, sharp as a tack—‘seek health and pleasure in the dish before you.’ ” My poor guest’s hands were trembling, and he couldn’t praise my wife’s cooking enough, swearing to God he could not remember the time he had eaten such a delicious dairy meal, such tasty knishes, and such savory *knaidlach*. “Nonsense,” I said. “You should taste her *taiglach*, her poppyseed cookies, and then you’d know what paradise really is!”

After we finished eating and saying the blessings, we chatted, I about my

business, he about his, telling stories about Odessa and Yehupetz, how one day he's rich and the next a pauper. He was using strange, complicated words that I had never in my life heard of, like *stocks* and *shares*, *selling high* and *buying low*, *options*, the devil only knows, and *accounts* and *reckonings*, ten thousand, twenty thousand—money like water!

“To tell the truth, Menachem-Mendl,” I said to him, “what you are telling me about your financial dealings is impressive. You must know a lot about such things. But there's one thing I don't understand. I'm surprised your wife lets you run around like this and doesn't come after you riding on a broomstick.”

“Ah,” he said to me with a sigh, “don't remind me of it, Reb Tevye. I have enough problems with her. You should see what she writes me. You yourself would say I'm a saint to take it. But that's a small matter. That's what a wife is for, to put you down. I have a much worse problem. I have, you understand me, a mother-in-law to deal with! I don't need to tell you. You know her!”

“You are telling me it's like in the Bible: *streaked*, *speckled*, and *spotted*, which means a blister on a boil on an abscess.”

“Yes, Reb Tevye,” he said, “you said it exactly. A boil is a boil, but the abscess, oy, the abscess is worse than the boil!”

We went on chatting idly this way till late into the night. His stories of wild business deals involving thousands of rubles flying up and down in value, and the fortune that Brodsky was earning, made my head spin. My dreams that night were a tangle of Yehupetz shopwindows, half shares, Brodsky, Menachem-Mendl, and his mother-in-law. Not until morning did he finally get to the point: “Here's how it's been going for us in Yehupetz for some time now. Money is scarce, and goods are just sitting there not sold,” he said to me. “You now have the chance, Reb Tevye, to make quite a few groschens and also save my life, literally bring me back from the dead.”

“You're talking like a child,” I said. “The difference between what I have and what Brodsky has, we should both earn between now and Passover.”

“Yes,” he said, “I know that. But you really don't need a great deal of money. If you were to give me a hundred rubles right now, in three or four days I would make it into two hundred, three hundred, six or seven hundred, and why not a thousand?”

“That's certainly possible,” I said, “but what would make it possible? You

must have something to invest. But if there aren't a hundred rubles, then as Rashi says: *If thou investeth in an illness, thy profit shall be the ague.*"

"Really now," he said, "are you telling me you can't find a mere hundred, Reb Tevye, with your business, and your reputation, *kayn eyn horeh?*"

"What good comes from a reputation?" I said. "A reputation is certainly a good thing, but what of it? I have my reputation, and Brodsky still has the money. If you want to know, I can barely pull together a hundred, and there are eighteen holes to fill with it. First of all, I have to marry off a daughter—"

"Listen to me," he said, "that's the point I'm making! When, Reb Tevye, will you have another chance to put in a hundred and take out, God willing, so much that you will have enough to marry off your daughter and then some?" And in the next three hours he gave me a song and dance about how he had made from one ruble three and from three ten. "First of all," he said, "you take a hundred, and you tell them to buy ten shares" or whatever he called them. "You wait a few days till they go up. You send a telegram and tell them to sell, and for that money you buy twice as many. Then you start all over again and again send off a telegram, until finally from the hundred you have two; from the two, four; and from the four, eight; from the eight, sixteen—wonder of wonders! There are," he said, "in Yehupetz those who were not too long ago going around without shoes, were nobodies, servants, porters. Today they have their own houses made of stone surrounded by high walls. Their wives complain about their indigestion and go abroad for a cure, while they ride around Yehupetz on rubber wheels and pretend not to know anyone!"

To make a long story short—why should I carry on?—I developed a yearning, and it was no laughing matter. Who could tell? I asked myself. Maybe he was a heaven-sent messenger. I was hearing that ordinary people get lucky in Yehupetz, so why should I have been worse than they? He didn't strike me as a liar, making up tall tales out of his head. And what if things did turn around as he had said, and Tevye could become a bit of a mensch in his old age? How long could a person struggle and slave day after day, again and again the horse and wagon, again cheese and butter? It's time, Tevye, I said to myself, for you to rest, to become a respectable man among respectable men, to step into the synagogue once in a while and look into a Jewish book. Why should I not? Was I afraid that it wouldn't work out, that the bread would fall butter side down? I could argue the other way around.

I asked my old lady, “What do you say? How do you like his plan, Golde?”

“What can I say about it? I know Menachem-Mendl isn’t someone who would cheat you,” she said. “He isn’t, God forbid, from a family of tailors or shoemakers! He has a fine father, and his grandfather was very brilliant, studied Torah day and night, even when he went blind. And Grandma Tzeitl, may she rest in peace, was also not a common sort.”

“What has all this got to do with the business we’re talking about? What do your Grandma Tzeitl, who baked *lekach*, and your grandfather have to do with it?” A woman remains a woman. Not for nothing did King Solomon travel all over the world without finding a single woman with a brain in her head.

And so it was decided that we would become partners. I would put up the money, and Menachem-Mendl the brains, and whatever God granted us we would share fifty-fifty. “Believe me, Reb Tevye,” he said, “with God’s help you will do well with me, really well, and I will make lots of money for you.”

“Amen, the same to you,” I said. “From your mouth into God’s ear. But I must ask you, how does that cat get across the river? I am here, you are there. Money,” I said, “is a very delicate material, you understand. Don’t be offended—I’m not trying to criticize you, God forbid. It’s simply, as Abraham our Father said, *They that sow in tears shall reap in joy*. It’s better to be warned than to weep.”

“Ach!” he said to me. “Maybe you think we should put it down in writing? With great pleasure!”

“Wait,” I said, “let’s look at it another way. What difference will that make? If you want to ruin me, what good will a piece of paper do? It’s not the piece of paper that pays, it’s the person, and if I am already hanging by one foot, I might as well hang by both.”

“You can believe me, Reb Tevye,” he said. “I swear to you, let God punish me if I cheat you. I will honestly share everything with you, right down the middle—for me a hundred, for you a hundred, for me two hundred, for you two hundred, for me three hundred, for you three hundred, for me four hundred, for you four hundred, for me a thousand, for you a thousand.”

To make a long story short, I took out my few rubles and counted them over three times with trembling hands. I called over my wife as a witness and once more made it clear to Menachem-Mendl that this was money I sweated blood

for. I gave it to him, sewed it into his bosom pocket so no one could steal it, and arranged with him that no later than a week from Saturday he would write me a letter with every detail. We parted like the best of friends and kissed affectionately, as is usual between relatives. Standing by myself after he left, lively thoughts and daydreams raced through my head, such sweet dreams that I wanted them never to end, to go on forever. I imagined we lived right in the middle of town in a mansion covered with a tin roof, with stables and rooms and pantries full of good things. My wife Golde, a regular lady, keys in hand, goes from room to room, in charge of the household. She's not to be recognized, I tell you. She has a different face, the face of a rich man's wife, with a double chin and pearls around her neck. She's all puffed up and curses the servants. My children are all wearing their Shabbes clothes, no longer needing to do chores. The courtyard is packed with chickens, geese, and ducks. Indoors it is well lit, a fire burns in the stove, supper is cooking, and the samovar is boiling as if possessed! At the head of the table sits the head of the household, Tevye himself, in a frock coat and yarmulke. Around him sit the most prominent Jews in town, flattering him: Pardon me, Reb Tevye, no offense, Reb Tevye—"Ay," I say out loud, "so this is what money can do for you!"

"What are you talking about?" my Golde asks.

"Nothing," I reply. "My mind's just wandered—thoughts, dreams—forget about it. Tell me, Golde my love, do you know what your relative Menachem-Mendl does for a living?"

"May all my nightmares fall on my enemies' heads! Do you mean to tell me you sat up all day and night with him talking and talking, and you are asking *me* what he does for a living? You two just made a deal," she said, "didn't you?"

"Yes," I said, "we made a deal, but what we made I don't really understand, even if you took my head off! There's nothing about it I can grab hold of. But that has nothing to do with it. Don't worry, my wife, my heart tells me it's all right. God willing, I imagine we will make money, and a lot of it. Say amen and go cook supper!"

In short, a week passed, and two and three—no letter from my partner! I was going out of my mind, walking around in a daze, not knowing what to think. He couldn't have just forgotten to write, I thought. He knew very well that we were waiting to hear from him. Then I began to wonder what I could do to him if he were to skim off the cream and tell me we hadn't earned anything. Would I call

him a liar? I told myself it couldn't be, it wasn't possible. I'd treated the man like one of my own, been ready to take on his troubles. How could he play a trick like that on me?! And then I thought, The profit be damned. *Deliverance will come from the Lord*. May God at least keep the principal intact! A cold chill ran through my body. Old fool! I said to myself. You made your bed, now lie in it, you ass! How much better it would have been to buy a pair of horses for my hundred rubles, the kind my ancestors never had, and to trade the wagon in for a carriage with springs.

"Tevye, why don't you think of something?" my wife said.

"What do you mean?" My head was splitting from thinking, and she was asking me to think!

"Something must have happened to him on the way home," she said. "Maybe thieves attacked him and robbed him blind. Or maybe he fell sick, God forbid, or may my mouth not say it, he may be dead."

"What will you think of next, my dear soul?" I said. "Robbers!" Still, you could never tell what might happen to a man while traveling. "Why do you always think the worst?" I asked Golde.

"He has that kind of family. His mother," she said, "may she protect us before God, died not long ago, still young. He had three sisters, may our fate be different from theirs. One died young, another did marry but caught a cold in the bath and died, and the third went out of her mind after her first childbirth, struggled and struggled and finally died."

"You live and you die. We will all die," I said to Golde. "A carpenter lives, and in the end he still dies. And how is any man different from a carpenter?"

And so it was decided that I would go to Yehupetz. In the meantime the dairy business had grown a bit. We had a nice little shop in which we sold cheese, butter, and sour cream, first-class merchandise. My wife harnessed the horse and wagon, and as Rashi says: *And so they journeyed forth*. On to Yehupetz! As I was riding along, melancholy and downcast, as you might imagine, with a bitter heart, alone in the woods, all kinds of fears and thoughts beset me. It would be a fine thing, I thought, if, once I got there and asked about my man, I was told, "Menachem-Mendl? Oh ho, he's really made it big, has the world by the tail, owns his own house, rides in a carriage. He's not to be recognized!"

In my imagination I pulled myself together and then courageously took myself

straight to his house. A servant would receive me rudely at the door with an elbow in the ribs. “Don’t push yourself in that way, Uncle,” he’d snarl. “Around here you don’t push.” “But I’m a relative,” I’d say. “Menachem-Mendl is my wife’s second cousin once removed.” “Congratulations!” he’d say. “Happy to make your acquaintance, but you still must wait here at the door. It won’t do you any harm.” He was hinting to have his palm greased. Well, grease the wheel, and you’ll ride. I was taken up to see my cousin right away.

“Good morning to you, Reb Menachem-Mendl!” I said in my imagination. But he made *no speech or utterance*. He did not recognize me! “What do you want?” I imagined him asking me. I almost fainted. “What is this, Pani,” I’d say. “You don’t know your own relative? I’m Tevye!” “Ah?” he’d say. “Tevye? That’s a familiar name.” “Familiar?” I’d say. “Maybe my wife’s blintzes are familiar! Do you remember her knishes, her *knaidlach*, her blintzes?”

Then I imagined that the very opposite happened. I would go in, and he’d greet me with a broad “*Sholem aleichem*.” A guest! A guest! “Sit, Reb Tevye,” he’d say. “How are you, how is your wife? I’ve been expecting you. I want to settle accounts with you.” And he’d fill my hat with money. “This,” he’d say, “is the earnings, and the principal remains the same. Whatever we earn, we will divide in half, fifty-fifty, half for me, half for you. For me a hundred, for you a hundred, for me two hundred, for you two hundred, for me three hundred, for you three hundred, for me four hundred, for you four hundred.”

I dozed off as my imaginary relative was speaking and didn’t notice that my horse had wandered off the path and somehow hooked the wagon onto a tree branch. Seeing stars, I felt as if I had been kicked from behind. Everything turns out for the best, I said to myself. Thank God an axle didn’t break.

Well, I arrived in Yehupetz and, as usual, quickly sold my dairy products. Then I began to look for my man. I looked around for an hour and two and then three—the man was not to be found! I stopped people along the way and asked them if they had seen or heard of Menachem-Mendl. “If,” they said, “his name is Menachem-Mendl, that’s not enough. There are lots of Menachem-Mendls around here. What’s his last name?”

“I haven’t any idea,” I said. “At home in Kasrilevka he’s known by his mother-in-law’s name, Menachem-Mendl Leah-Dvossi’s. What more do you need? His father-in-law, an elderly Jew, also goes by her name—Boruch-Hersh Leah-Dvossi’s, and even she, Leah-Dvossi, is called Leah-Dvossi Boruch-Hersh

Leah-Dvossi's. Now do you understand?"

"We understand," they said, "but that's still not enough. What is his business? What does he deal in, your Menachem-Mendl?"

"What does he deal in? He deals in gold imperials," I said, "and options, and he sends off telegrams to Saint Petersburg, to Warsaw."

"Oh?" They began to laugh, then laughed louder and louder. "You mean the crook Menachem-Mendl! Why don't you just go across the street? There you'll find brokers running around like rabbits, and yours is probably one of them." The longer you lived, the more you learned, I thought. Rabbits—what were they talking about?

I crossed the street. Everywhere were Jews, *kayn eyn horeh*, like at a fair. It was crowded, impossible to push through. People were tearing around like madmen, this one here, that one there, one on top of the other—it was chaos. They were talking, screaming, waving their hands in the air: "Shares, stocks . . . he gave me his word . . . I need a down payment . . . a fee . . . you're an idiot . . . I'll bash your head in . . . spit in his face . . . what a speculator . . . chiseler . . . your father's father!" They almost came to blows. *And Jacob fled*. I thought I should run before they turned on me! But God is a Father, I am His servant, Yehupetz is a city, and Menachem-Mendl made money! Right here was where people got lucky with gold imperials. Was this what they meant by "doing business"? Woe unto me, Tevye, and *my* business, God help me.

To make a long story short, I stopped at a large shopwindow displaying trousers and saw in the reflection my so-called benefactor, Menachem-Mendl. My heart hurt when I saw him, so sorry did I feel for him! If ever I had an enemy, and if ever you had an enemy, may we hope to see them in the same state as Menachem-Mendl. His coat, his boots, were in terrible shape. And his face—God in heaven, a healthier face would have been delivered to the grave. So, if I died, that would be the end of me, I could kiss the few groschens goodbye. As they say: "Neither hide nor hair of them"—no merchandise, no money, only troubles.

For his part, Menachem-Mendl seemed abashed to see me, and we both stood as if frozen, unable to speak, just looking into each other's eyes like two roosters, as if to say, We're both miserable and cleaned out. We might as well take tin cups and go from house to house!

“Reb Tevye,” he said to me quietly, barely audibly, tears choking him, “Reb Tevye! Without luck, a man shouldn’t have been born! Rather than living like this, it is better to hang.” More he could not say.

“Surely,” I said to him, “for what you did, Mendl, you deserve to be laid out right in the center of Yehupetz and whipped so soundly you’d see Grandma Tzeitl from the Other World. Just think of what you’ve done. You took a household full of living souls, poor creatures, as innocent as lambs, and slit their throats without a knife! God in heaven,” I said, “how can I face my wife and children? Go on, tell me, you slaughterer, swindler, thief!”

“True,” he said, leaning against a wall. “True, Reb Tevye, may God help me.”

“*Gehennam*,” I said, “*gehennam*, you idiot, is too good for you, fool!”

“True, Reb Tevye,” he said, “true, may God help me. Rather than living like this, Reb Tevye . . .” He lowered his head. The *shlimazel* hung his head down and leaned against the wall, his hat sliding down his head. I heard every sigh and groan. My heart went out to him.

“If you think about it,” I said, “one can understand very well that maybe you aren’t entirely to blame. Let’s consider the whole thing from both sides. To say you did it on purpose would be foolish because we were equal partners, fifty-fifty. I put in the money, you put in the brains, God help me! Your intention certainly was, as it is said, *for life and not for death*—you meant it for the best. Ay, the roof fell in? Maybe it wasn’t destined to be; as they say, “Don’t rejoice today, because tomorrow . . .” Man proposes and God disposes.

“Take me, for example,” I said. “You would think I have a stable business, it can’t fail. Yet a year ago this autumn, it shouldn’t happen to anyone, my cow, a great bargain at fifty, laid down and died, and right after her a lovely little red calf, I wouldn’t take twenty for her. You see, I couldn’t do a thing about it. If it doesn’t go,” I said, “forget it!”

“I don’t want to ask you what happened to my money. I know myself where you put my money, my hard-earned money, woe is me. It went into the grave, into those worthless stocks, never to be seen again. And who is to blame if not myself, who let you talk me into striking it rich, a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, empty dreams? Money, my friend, one has to earn by the sweat of one’s brow. One must toil over it, slave over it.” I said, “I deserve a trouncing. But what good is my complaining? As it is written: *So the maiden cried*. Shout until

you're blue in the face! Wisdom and regret—always they come too late. It wasn't fated that Tevye become rich. As the Russian Ivan says, "The Jew never had any money and never will." Maybe," I said, "that's the way God wants it to be. *He giveth and He taketh away*, says Rashi. Come, my friend, let's have a little brandy!"

And that, Pani Sholem-Aleichem, is how the roof fell in, and with it all my dreams! Do you think I really took it to heart that I'd lost my money? May I know as much of evil! We know what it says in the Bible: *The silver is mine and the gold is mine*—money is worthless! The main thing is the person—that is, if he's really a person. So what was rankling me? It was the dream that had vanished. I wanted, oh how I wanted, to be a rich man, if only for a little while! But what good did it do me? It is written: *Regardless of thy will, thou livest*—you live in spite of yourself, and in spite of yourself you wear out your boots. "You, Tevye," says God, "have to keep your mind on butter and cheese, not in dreams." And what of hope and faith? On the contrary, the more troubles you have, the more faith you must have, and the poorer you are, the more hope you must have. Do you want any more proof?

But I think I've gone on too long today. It's time to go and tend to my business. As you'll no doubt say, "All men are false." Every man has his burden. Be well and have a good life!

TODAY'S CHILDREN

WRITTEN IN 1899.

You were talking about today's children. Here's what Isaiah said: *I have nourished and brought up children*—you bring them into the world, they make your life miserable, you sacrifice yourself for them, you slave away night and day, and what comes of it? You'd think that by raising them on what little you have, things would work out one way or the other. I'm not trying to compare myself with Brodsky, of course, but I'm not ready to sell myself short either. I'm not just anybody, and as my dear wife says, we do manage, and we don't come from tailors or cobblers. So I figured that with my daughters it would surely work out. Why? First of all, God blessed me with pretty daughters, and as you yourself have said, a pretty face is half the dowry. And second of all, with God's help I am these days not the same Tevye as before. I can aspire to the best match even in Yehupetz. What do you say to that?

But there is a merciful and compassionate God in this world, and He displays His great wonders and makes summer into winter for me, lifts me up and casts me down. He says to me: "Tevye, don't start thinking like a fool. Let the world run itself the way it will!"

Listen to what can happen in this great world. And who do you think has all the luck? Tevye *shlimazel*.

To make a long story short—why should I fill your ear?—you probably remember what happened to me with my cousin Menachem-Mendl, how nicely he worked out our business in Yehupetz, investing in all those stocks and shares and gold imperials, may his name and memory be obliterated. I lost everything, may it happen to all my enemies. I was sure it was the end of Tevye and his dairy business! I was really downhearted.

“You fool!” my wife said to me. “Enough moping! It won’t do you any good! You’ll just eat your heart out, so enough! Tell yourself it’s as if robbers attacked us and took the money. Why don’t you go for a little ride to Anatevka, to Lazer-Wolf the butcher? He wants to talk to you about something.”

“He wants to talk to me? If he thinks he’s buying our milk cow, he might as well take a stick and knock that idea out of his head.”

“What’s so wonderful about our milk cow?” she said. “Is it for all the milk we get from her and the cheese and butter?”

“No,” I said, “just the idea of it. It’s a shame to sell her to be slaughtered, a pity on a living creature. It is written in the sacred Torah—”

“Oh, enough with the Torah, Tevye! Everybody knows you’re a man of the Torah. Listen to me, your wife. Go over to Lazer-Wolf’s. Every Thursday,” she said, “when our Tzeitl goes to his shop for meat, he doesn’t leave her alone. ‘Tell your father,’ he says, ‘to come see me. It’s important that I talk to him.’”

Well, sometimes you have to listen to a wife. So I let myself be talked into it and went to Lazer-Wolf’s in Anatevka, three versts from us, but didn’t find him at home. “Where is he?” I asked a snub-nosed woman who was bustling about the house. “He’s in the slaughterhouse,” she said. “They’re slaughtering an ox since early this morning. He’ll be back soon.” I wandered around the house and admired Lazer-Wolf’s household—*kayn eyn horeh*, may all my loved ones have the like: a cupboard full of copperware you couldn’t buy for a hundred and fifty rubles, a samovar and another samovar, a brass tray and another one from Warsaw, a pair of silver candlesticks, many gold-rimmed glasses, a wrought-iron Chanukah lamp, and much porcelain bric-a-brac. My God! I thought, wishing my children could live like this. What a lucky man this butcher was! Not only was he rich, but his two children were married, and he was a widower into the bargain!

Finally the door opened, and an angry Lazer-Wolf came in, furious at the *shochet*, the ritual slaughterer. He had ruined him. He had declared an ox that was the size of an oak to be unkosher, after finding a tiny scar on the animal’s lung the size of a pinhead—may he have a stroke, may he sink into the earth! “God Almighty, Reb Tevye,” he said to me, “how come it’s so hard to reach you? How are you?”

“How can I be?” I said. “I do and I do, and I’m still just beginning to get

somewhere. As it says in the Torah, *Neither Thy sting nor Thy honey*—no money, no health, barely keeping life and limb together.”

“You sin, Reb Tevye,” he said to me. “Compared to the way you once were, may it never happen again, you are now, *kayn eyn horeh*, a rich man.”

“What I still need to be a rich man,” I said, “may we both have. But never mind, I thank God for what I do have. There is a saying in the Gemorah: *Neither from Your sting nor from Your honey.*” But in my heart I was thinking, You should live so long if you think there’s a phrase like that in the Gemorah, my fine butcher boy.

“You’re always there with a quote from the Gemorah,” he said to me. “Good for you, Reb Tevye, that you can read all that small print. But why waste time on all this learning and these quotations? Better let us talk about our business at hand. Sit, Reb Tevye,” he said, then yelled out, “Let’s have tea!” The snub-nosed woman appeared from nowhere, grabbed the samovar, and disappeared into the kitchen. “Now that we’re alone,” he said, “just the two of us, we can get down to business. This is the way it is: I have wanted to talk to you, Reb Tevye, for a long time now. I have asked your daughter many times to tell you, if you would be so kind to come talk to me. You understand I have had my eye on—”

“I know that you’ve had your eye on her, but it won’t work,” I said, “it won’t work, Reb Lazer-Wolf, it won’t work!”

“Why not?” He looked surprised.

“I have time to wait,” I said. “Where’s the fire?”

“Why should you wait,” he said, “when we can work things out right now?”

“I just gave you a reason. Second of all,” I said, “it’s simply a shame, a pity on a living creature.”

“Look at you putting on airs.” Lazer-Wolf gave a little laugh. “Someone would swear she was your only one! I imagine you have, *kayn eyn horeh*, enough, Reb Tevye!”

“*Let those who envy me not have anything themselves,*” I quoted.

“Envy? Who’s talking of envy?” he said. “On the contrary, it’s because she is so attractive, that’s the reason I want her, do you understand? Don’t forget, Reb Tevye, the advantage that could come out of this for you!”

“Sure, sure,” I said, “I know your favors, Reb Lazer-Wolf. You give ice in winter. We all know about that from before.”

“Eh! Why are you comparing then and now?” he said, as sweet as sugar. “*Then* was one story, but *today* is a different one. We’re practically in-laws, ha?”

“In-laws?” I said, surprised.

“Yes, in-laws!”

“What do you mean?” I said. “Reb Lazer-Wolf, what are we talking about?”

“On the contrary,” he said, “you tell me, Reb Tevye, what we’re talking about.”

“What else?” I said. “We’re talking about the milk cow you want to buy from me!”

“Ha ha ha!” he broke out laughing. “That’s some cow and a milk cow into the bargain, ha ha ha!”

“What, then, were *you* thinking, Reb Lazer-Wolf? Tell me so I can laugh too.”

“About your daughter!” he said to me. “I was speaking about your Tzeitl all this time! You know, Reb Tevye, I am a widower, may it not happen to you. I thought it over and decided, Why should I look elsewhere for a wife, bother with matchmakers and all that? After all, here we both are. I know you, you know me. And I’ve also taken to her. I see her every Thursday in the butcher shop, I’ve spoken with her several times, and she seems a quiet girl, not bad at all. I myself am, *kayn eyn horeh*, as you see, a bit of a success. I own my house, a few stores, and nice furnishings, as you can see, not to complain. I have some hides in the attic and money in the chest. Why should we have to haggle like gypsies? Let’s shake hands on it, one two three, do you get my meaning?”

Well, once he explained what he had in mind, I was speechless at the unexpected news. At first I thought, Lazer-Wolf? Tzeitl? He has children her age. But then I reminded myself that it was a stroke of luck for her. A stroke of luck! She would have everything she wanted! So he wasn’t the most generous man. Nowadays that wasn’t the greatest virtue. As the rabbis said: *A man is dearest to his own self*—if you were good to others, you were bad to yourself. He had one fault—he was somewhat common. Oh well, could everyone be a scholar? There were plenty of rich folks, fine people in Anatevka, in Mazepevka, and even in Yehupetz who didn’t know one letter from another. Still and all, if it

was destined, that wouldn't keep them from getting plenty of respect. As it is written: *If there is no flour in the bin, there is no Torah*— which means, the Torah lies in the chest, and wisdom in the purse.

“So, Reb Tevye,” he said, “why aren't you saying anything?”

“Do you want me to shout?” I said, as if considering the matter further. “This is, Reb Lazer-Wolf, you understand me, a delicate question that has to be considered from all sides. It's not a laughing matter. My first child!”

“It's really the other way around,” he said. “It's important *because* she's your first child. Afterward,” he said, “God willing, you'll be able to marry off your second daughter too, and later, in good time, the third, do you understand?”

“Amen!” said I. “Marrying them off is no trick if the One Above sends each one her intended.”

“No,” he said, “that's not what I mean, Reb Tevye. I mean something altogether different. I mean that for your Tzeitl, you no longer need a dowry, thank God. Her wedding dress and everything a girl needs, I will take on myself. And you,” he said, “will also find a little something in your purse.”

“Feh,” I said, “you're talking, please forgive me, as if you were in your butcher shop! What do you mean, in my purse? Feh! My Tzeitl is not for sale, God forbid! Feh feh!”

“If it's feh, it's feh,” he said to me. “That's not really what I meant. I meant it quite otherwise. But if you say feh, let it be feh! If you're satisfied, I'm satisfied. The most important thing,” he said, “is it should be soon. I mean right away. As they say: ‘A house needs a mistress.’ Do you understand?”

“All right,” I said, “I have no objections. But I have to talk it over with my wife. In these matters she has her say. It's no small matter. As Rashi says: *Rachel weepeth for her children*—a mother is not a pot lid. And Tzeitl herself,” I said, “has to be asked. As it is said: *All the relatives came to the wedding and they left the bridegroom at home.*”

“Nonsense,” he said, “why do you need to ask? You tell her, Reb Tevye. You go home and tell her this is the way it is and put up the wedding canopy. One word from you, and it's done!”

“Don't say that,” I said. “Don't say that, Reb Lazer-Wolf. The girl is not, God forbid, a widow impatient for a match.”

“You’re right,” he said, “a girl is a girl, not a widow, and that’s why you must talk to her soon, about dresses, about the trousseau and her wardrobe. And in the meantime,” he said, “Reb Tevye, let’s drink a *l’chayim*, ha, no?”

“That’s fine with me,” I said. “Why not? Isn’t peace always better than arguing? As it is said: ‘A man is a man, but brandy is brandy.’ There’s a saying in the Gemorah . . .” And I gave him a string of Gemorah quotes, one after another, on and on, from the Song of Songs and “*Chad Gadyo*.”

We drank the bitter drop, as God commanded. The snub-nosed maid brought out the samovar, and we drank glasses of punch, enjoyed ourselves, wished each other well, and chatted about the match many times over.

“Do you know, Reb Lazer-Wolf,” I said, “what a jewel of a girl she is?”

“I know,” he said, “believe me, I know. If I didn’t know, I wouldn’t have spoken!”

We continued our conversation. I shouted out, “A jewel, a diamond! You must take good care of her, not act like the butcher you are.”

“Don’t be afraid, Reb Tevye,” he said. “What she will eat by me during the week will be more than she ate by you on a holiday.”

“So,” I said, “what she eats is also your affair? The rich man,” I said, “doesn’t eat gold coins, and the poor man doesn’t eat stones. You’re a crude person, and you cannot appreciate her talents, her challah-baking, her fish, Reb Lazer-Wolf, her gefilte fish! It is a privilege to eat it.”

“Reb Tevye, you are, pardon me, really old-fashioned. You don’t know people, Reb Tevye, and you don’t know me!”

“On one side of a scale, put gold. On the other, Tzeitl. Do you hear, Reb Lazer-Wolf, even if you had thousands,” I said, “you still aren’t worth the sole of her foot!”

“Believe me, Reb Tevye, you are a big fool, even though you’re older than I am!”

We carried on this way for quite a while, louder and louder and getting tipsier and tipsier. When I arrived home, it was late, and my legs felt like lead. My wife, may she be well, saw I was drunk and gave me a proper welcome.

“*Sha*, don’t be angry, Golde!” I said to her cheerily, and I actually felt like

dancing. “Don’t yell at me, my soul. We have a *mazel tov* coming!”

“*Mazel tov*? A *mazel tov* for selling that poor milk cow to Lazer-Wolf?”

“Worse than that!” I said.

“You traded her for another?” she said. “You tricked that poor Lazer-Wolf? A pity on him.”

“Even worse!” I said.

“Enough! Speak!” she said. “Look how I have to pry out every word!”

“*Mazel tov* to you, Golde,” I said again. “*Mazel tov* to both of us. Our Tzeitl is a bride!”

“Now I know you’re really in your cups,” she said. “You’re talking out of your head! You must have had quite a few glassfuls.”

“I did have a few with Lazer-Wolf, and some punch,” I said, “but I still have all my wits about me. I want you to know, my darling Golde, that our Tzeitl has been blessed with good fortune and is engaged to marry no one else but Lazer-Wolf!” And I told her the whole story from beginning to end, how and what and when and about everything we talked about, not leaving out a word.

“Do you want to hear something, Tevye?” my wife said to me. “May God be with me wherever I go, but my heart told me that when Lazer-Wolf called for you, it was not for nothing. But what could he want? I was afraid to think of it. Maybe, God forbid, it would come to nothing. Thank you, dear God,” she said, “thank you, dearest, benevolent Father. May she have good luck, may it be all for the best. May she grow old with him in honor and respect, not like his first wife, Frume-Sarah, may I not suffer her fate. She did not have too happy a life with him. She was, please forgive me, an embittered woman, couldn’t get along with anyone, not at all like our Tzeitl, may God grant her many years. Thank you, thank you, dear God! *Nu*, Tevye,” she said. “What did I tell you, you dummy? Does a person have to worry? If it’s meant to be,” she said, “it will come right to your doorstep.”

“For sure,” I said, “there’s a particular passage about that—”

“Don’t bother me now with passages,” she said. “We have to start getting ready for the wedding. First of all, we have to make out a list for Lazer-Wolf of what Tzeitl needs to have for the wedding, starting with linens. She doesn’t have

enough underthings, or even so much as a pair of stockings. And,” she said, “dresses—a silk one for the wedding ceremony and a woolen one for winter, another for summer, and housedresses, and petticoats, and cloaks. I want her to have two of them: one cape with a cat-fur hood for weekdays, and another good one with ruffles for Shabbes. And she needs little boots with straps and buttons, a corset, gloves, handkerchiefs, a parasol, and all the things a girl has to have nowadays.”

“How come, Golde, my sweetheart,” I said, “you know about all these fancy things?”

“Why shouldn’t I?” she said. “Haven’t I been out in the world? And haven’t I seen in Kasrilevka how the fine people dress? Leave it to *me*,” she said, “and I’ll do the talking with him. Lazer-Wolf, you can be sure, is a wealthy man and will not like others to talk about him. If you must eat pig, at least let the fat run down your beard.”

That’s how we spent the rest of the night, talking almost till dawn. “It’s time to pack up the bit of cheese and butter, my wife,” I said to her, “and let me start out for Boiberik. True, everything is wonderful and good all around, but the business,” I said, “cannot be laid aside. As it is written in the Psalms: *The heavens are the Lord’s*—but life down here must go on.”

And while it was still dark, I hitched up my horse and wagon and was off to Boiberik. I arrived at the market and—aha! Can you keep a secret from Jews? The word was out. I was getting *mazel tovs* from all sides: “*Mazel tov* to you, Reb Tevye. When is the wedding?”

“May you all have luck as well,” I said. “It’s as they say: ‘Even before you can enjoy your own good luck, the whole world wants to join in.’”

“Nonsense,” they said. “You can’t get away with it, Reb Tevye. You must buy us all a drink. After all, what a lucky break—you’ve stumbled on a gold mine.”

“The gold runs out,” I said, “and leaves a deep hole behind. But still,” I said, “you can’t be selfish and exclude your friends. As soon as I finish my Yehupetz deliveries, we will have a glass of whiskey and a bite to eat, live it up, and to hell with it. Rejoice and be glad.” Celebrate, you beggars! I said to myself.

And so, as quickly as always, I finished my rounds, and together, as it is supposed to be, my good friends and I had a few drinks, wished one another well, and I rode home in my wagon, lively and happy, if a bit tipsy. As I rode

along in the woods on a lovely summer day, the aroma of the pines quickened the soul, and the sun beat down; the trees on either side of the road softened it with their shadows. I leaned back like a count and eased up on the reins. “Go on by yourself, my boy,” I said to my horse. “You know the way by now.” I sang a little tune. My heart was full. I was in a holiday mood. But for some reason I was singing bits from the High Holidays service.

I looked up toward the heavens, but my thoughts were a confused tangle here on earth. *The heavens are the Lord’s, but the Earth He hath given to the children of Adam*—so they would fight like cats for the honor of being called up to recite the opening and closing prayers for the Torah reading, and for the honor of mourning at the grave. *The dead cannot praise God*—they can’t appreciate that you must praise Him for the favors He does for you, while we, the living, the poor and destitute, when we have one good day, we thank and praise Him. I love my God because when He hears my voice and my entreaties He bends His ear to me, *even as the sorrows of death doth encompass me*. I am besieged on all sides with suffering, with sorrows, with afflictions. Here a cow suddenly drops dead in midday, here I am suddenly visited by a *shlimazel* of a relative, this Menachem-Mendl from Yehupetz, who cheats me out of my last bit of life, and I am thinking the world has come to an end. *All men deceiveth*—there is no honesty on earth.

But what does God do? He puts a thought into Lazer-Wolf’s head that he should take my daughter Tzeitl without a dowry. For that I say again and again, *I praise Thee for Thou hast answered me*—I thank you, dear God, for looking down on Tevye and coming to his aid so that he might have a bit of gratification from his child. May I visit her, if I live to see it, and find her a well-to-do mistress of her home with everything she needs, chests full of linens, cupboards full of Passover *shmaltz* and preserves, coops full of chickens, ducks, and geese.

Suddenly my horse went tearing down the hill, and before I could see where I was, I was lying on the ground with all the empty pots and jugs and the wagon on top of me! With a great effort I crawled out and stood up, battered and bruised, and let out my bitter heart on the horse: “May you sink into the earth! Who asked you, *shlimazel*, to show off and go galloping downhill? You almost killed me, you Satan!” I gave it to him for all he was worth. My boy seemed to understand what he had done and bowed his head in shame. Still cursing, I righted the wagon, gathered the pots and jugs, and we continued on our way. It was not a good sign, though, and I feared that something bad had happened at

home.

And so it was. I drove on for a verst or two, when not far from home I saw in the middle of the road coming toward me a figure in the shape of a woman. I drove closer and saw it was—Tzeitl! I don't know why, but I felt a pang in my heart when I saw her. I sprang down from the wagon. "Tzeitl, is that you? What are you doing here?"

And didn't she fall on my neck sobbing! "God be with you," I said, "my daughter, why are you crying?"

"Oy," she said, "Papa, Papa!" and her face was drenched in tears. My heart sank, and I imagined the worst.

"What is it, daughter?" I said. "Tell me what has happened to you." I embraced her, patted her, and kissed her.

"Papa, Papa, dear, beloved father," she wailed. "Have pity on me, on my youth!" She dissolved in tears, unable to speak another word.

Woe is me, I was thinking. I was preparing myself for the worst! What evil spirit had taken me to Boiberik?

"Why do you cry?" I said to her, stroking her head. "Little silly, why do you cry? Never mind," I said. "If you say no, it's no. No one will force you, God forbid. We only meant it for the best, for your own good," I said. "But if that's not what your heart tells you, what can we do? Most likely," I said, "it wasn't meant to be."

"Thank you, Papa," she said, "long life to you." And she fell on my neck and again kissed me and wept, the tears gushing.

"But enough crying," I said. "*All is vanity*—even eating kreplach can be tiresome. Climb into the wagon, and let's go home. Your mother will begin to think who knows what!"

Well, we seated ourselves in the wagon, and I began to calm her down with whatever came to mind. I told her we had meant no harm. God knew the truth, that we wanted only to spare our child from need. "Ay, it seems God does not want that," I said. "It's not meant to be, my daughter, that you marry without a dowry, that you have riches and all the comforts of life with a fine household, and that we have joy in our old age after all our hard work, day and night, harnessed to a wagon, without a happy moment, only suffering, poverty, squalor,

only bad, bad luck in every way!”

“Oy, Papa,” she said, again weeping, “I’ll hire myself out to haul rocks, dig ditches!”

“Why are you still crying, silly girl?” I said. “Am I complaining? Am I blaming you? It’s just that whenever I feel miserable and wretched, I pour my heart out to the ruler of the universe about the way he deals with me. He is a merciful Father. He has pity on me, but He also turns against me, may I not be punished for these words. I try to reason with Him as with a father, but you might as well cry out to the heavens! But most likely,” I said, “that’s the way it has to be. He is high above, and we are here below, forever bound to the earth on which we lie, so we must say that He is right and that His judgment is just.

“But think about it another way. Am I not a great fool? Why am I crying out? Why am I making such a fuss? Who am I,” I said, “to confront Him with my foolish reasoning and try to give Him advice on how to run His little world? I’m no more than a worm crawling on the earth whom the slightest little breeze, if God so wills it, will destroy in the wink of an eye. If He says so, that’s the way it has to be. What good are complaints? Forty days,” I said, “it is written in our holy books that forty days before the child is created in the mother’s womb, an angel comes and cries: ‘Let Tevye’s daughter take this one or that one, and you, Lazer-Wolf, be so kind as to go somewhere else to find someone fit for you. She is waiting for you.’ And you, Tzeitl,” I said, “may God send you your intended, but the right one, and the sooner the better, amen, may it be so. Let’s hope your mother doesn’t take out after me—I know what I’ll get from her!”

And so we came home. I unhitched the horse and sat down on the grass near the house to try to figure out how to tell my wife a *Thousand and One Nights* tale in order to avoid trouble. It was evening, and the sun was setting, a lovely time of summer. The frogs were croaking in the distance while the horse, his legs hobbled, was nibbling grass. The cows, having just come in from the pasture with the herd, were standing in their stalls waiting to be milked. The delicious aroma of grass filled the air all around—a paradise! I sat and drank it all in as I was thinking how cleverly the Creator of the universe had made His little world so that every creature, from a man to a cow, forgive the comparison, should earn its keep—nothing comes free! If you, cow, want to eat, then you must give milk, provide a livelihood for a man with a wife and little children! You, horse, do you want to chew? Then run back and forth day in and day out with pots to Boiberik!

And the same goes for you, O man. Do you want a crust of bread? Then go toil, milk the cows, carry the jugs, churn butter, make cheese, harness the horse, and drag yourself every morning to the Boiberik dachas, bow and scrape to the Yehupetz rich folks, smile for them, charm each one, and be sure they are satisfied and that their pride hasn't been hurt!

Ah, but the question from the Haggadah still remains: *Wherefore is this night different?* Where was it written that Tevye had to labor for them, to wake up so early that God Himself was still asleep? Why? Was it so the rich folks could have a fresh piece of cheese and butter in time for their coffee? Where was it written that I had to break my back for some thin soup and a loaf of barley bread while the Yehupetz tycoons rested their bones in their dachas, didn't have to lift a finger, and ate only roasted duck and hot knishes, blintzes, and *varnishkes*? Was I not as much a person as they were? Wouldn't it be just if Tevye could stay just one summer in a dacha? Ay, but then where would people get their cheese and butter? Who would milk the cows? The Yehupetz aristocrats? I laughed at that insane thought. There is a saying: "If God were to listen to fools, the world would look altogether different."

"Good evening, Reb Tevye!" someone called me. I turned around and looked—a familiar face. It was Motl Komzoil, a young tailor from Anatevka.

"And to you," I said. "Look who's here! Sit, Motl, on God's earth. What brings you here?"

"What brings me here? My feet," he said, and sat down beside me on the grass, all the time looking toward where my daughters were working with the pots and jugs. "I've been meaning to speak to you for a long time, Reb Tevye," he said, "but I haven't had the time. As soon as I finish one piece of work, I have to start another. Nowadays I work for myself as a tailor. There is, thank God, plenty of work—all the tailors have as much work as they can handle. It's a continuous summer of weddings: Berl Fonfatch is marrying off a daughter, Yenkl Sheygetz is marrying off a daughter, Mendl Zaika is marrying off a daughter, Yenkl Piskatch is marrying off a daughter. Moishe Gorgel is marrying off a daughter.

Meyer Kropelve is marrying off a daughter. Chayim Loshek is marrying off a daughter, and even Trihubeche the widow is marrying off a daughter!"

"Everyone is marrying off daughters," I said. "But I'm not at that point yet. Perhaps I'm not worthy in God's eyes."

“No, you are mistaken, Reb Tevye,” he said, looking toward where the girls were. “If you wanted, you would also be marrying off a daughter. It depends on you.”

“Really?” I said. “In what way Perhaps you have a match for my Tzeitl?”

“A perfect fit!” he said.

“Is it at least the right match?” I was thinking that it would be funny if he meant Lazer-Wolf the butcher.

“Like a glove!” he answered in tailor-talk, still looking toward the girls.

“Where is your match from? Do I know him? If he smells of a butcher shop,” I said, “I don’t want to hear of it!”

“God forbid! He doesn’t begin to smell of a butcher shop. You know him, Reb Tevye, very well!”

“Is it really a good match?”

“It’s made to measure! It’s custom made, one-of-a-kind, cut and sewn to order!”

“Who is it, this match?” I asked.

“Who is it?” His eyes always looked toward the girls. “The match is, please understand me, Reb Tevye, I myself.”

When he uttered those words, I leaped up as if scalded, as did he, and we stood facing each other like two bristling roosters. “Are you crazy?” I said. “Or are you just out of your mind? You are the matchmaker and the bridegroom? Will you be playing the music too at your own wedding? I’ve never heard of such a thing—a young man arranging a match for himself!”

“Are you saying, Reb Tevye, that I’m crazy?” he said. “May our enemies be as crazy. I am, you may believe me, in my right mind. No one has to be crazy to want to marry your Tzeitl. The proof is that Lazer-Wolf, the richest man in our town, wants to marry her without any conditions. Do you think it’s a secret? The whole town knows about it! You surprise me when you’re shocked that I am my own matchmaker,” he said. “You are, after all, Reb Tevye, a man who doesn’t need things spelled out for him. But what good is talking? This is the way it is: I and your daughter Tzeitl pledged to marry over a year ago.”

Had someone plunged a knife into my heart, it would have been less painful than those words. First of all, where did he, Motl, a tailor, come off wanting to be Tevye's son-in-law? And second of all, what kind of talk is that, pledging to marry? *Nu*, and where did I come in? "Don't I have a little something to say about my child," I said, "or don't you ask anymore?"

"God forbid," he said. "That's why, when I heard Lazer-Wolf was asking to marry your daughter, whom I have loved for over a year, I came to talk it over with you."

"All I know is," I said, "Tevye has a daughter Tzeitl, and your name is Motl Komzoil, and you are just a tailor. What do you have against her? Why do you hate her?"

"No, that's not the way it is at all," he said. "It's quite the other way around. I love your daughter, and your daughter loves me, and it's been over a year since we gave each other our pledge to marry. Several times I wanted to discuss it with you, and I kept putting it off until I had saved up some money for a sewing machine and was able to get some proper clothes for myself. Nowadays every young man has two suits and several shirts."

"I don't want to listen to this childish nonsense," I said to him. "What will you do after the wedding, pawn your teeth for food? Or are you going to support her by sewing shirts?"

"Ah, I am surprised that you, Reb Tevye, would speak that way," he said. "When you got married, I imagine you didn't have a mansion yet. Nevertheless you can see for yourself. The whole world manages, and I will manage too. Now more business is coming my way."

To make a long story short—why should I bore you?—he convinced me. Why should we fool ourselves? How do all Jewish children get married? In our walk of life, if we were to worry about how young people could make it, none of us would ever have married. But one thing still stuck in my craw that I could not understand, no matter what. They made a pledge to marry? What was our world coming to? A young man met a girl and said to her, "Let's pledge to marry." That was not done!

But Motl standing there, his head bowed like a sinner, looked so earnest, so guileless that I reconsidered. Let's look at it another way. What was holding me back, and why was I lording it over him? Did I have such a great lineage myself

—Reb Tzotzele’s grandson? Would I be giving my daughter a huge dowry and trousseau, for God’s sake? True, Motl Komzoil was a tailor, but he was a fine young man, a hard worker who would support a wife, and besides, he was an honest man too, so what did I have against him?

Tevye, I said to myself, stop your foolish arguing and say yes. As it is written: *I have pardoned according to Thy word*—may you have lots of luck! Yes, but what would I do about my wife? I would get it in the neck from her. How could I make her accept this decision?

“Do you know what, Motl?” I said to my soon-to-be son-in-law. “You go home, and I’ll take care of everything here. I’ll talk it over with this one, with that one, as it says in the Megillah: *And the drinking was according to the custom*—one must do everything properly. And God willing, tomorrow, if you don’t change your mind, we will meet.”

“Change my mind?” he cried. “I, change my mind? May I not live to leave this spot, may I turn into a stone or a bone if I do!”

“Why do you swear oaths?” I said to him. “I believe you without swearing. Go home,” I said, “and goodnight, and may you dream pleasant dreams.”

I too went to bed, but sleep wouldn’t come. My head was splitting thinking up one plan and then another, and then I came up with just the right one. What was the plan? Listen, and I’ll tell you what a brainstorm Tevye had!

It was the middle of the night, everyone was sound asleep, this one was snoring, that one was whistling. I suddenly sat up and screamed at the top of my lungs, “Help! Help! Help!” Naturally the entire household awoke, first of all Golde.

“God be with you, Tevye,” she said, and shook me. “Wake up! What’s the matter with you? Why are you screaming like that?”

I opened my eyes, looked all around, and said with a shaking voice: “Where is she?”

“Where is who? Who are you looking for?”

“Frume-Sarah,” I said. “Frume-Sarah, Lazer-Wolf’s wife, was standing right here.”

“You must have a fever,” my wife said to me. “God be with you, Tevye!

Frume-Sarah, Lazer-Wolf's wife, may she be far from us, is no longer in this world."

"I know she died," I said, "but she was just right here by my bed talking to me. She grabbed me by the throat and tried to strangle me!"

"God be with you, Tevye, what are you babbling about?" she said. "You must have had a bad dream. Spit three times and tell me what you dreamed and I'll tell you what it meant."

"Long life to you, Golde, for waking me up," I said to her, "or else I would have died of fright right on the spot. Give me a drink of water and I'll tell you my dream, but I warn you, Golde, don't be scared, and don't start thinking who knows what because in our holy books it says that only three parts of a dream can come true and the rest means nothing, absolutely nothing at all. First of all," I said, "I dreamed we were having a celebration. I don't know if it was an engagement party or a wedding. There were a lot of people, men and women, the rabbi and the slaughterer, even musicians. Then the door opened, and in came your Grandma Tzeitl, God rest her soul."

When my wife heard "Grandma Tzeitl," she turned pale as a ghost. "How did she look and what was she wearing?"

"How did she look?" I said. "May my enemies have such a face—as yellow as wax. And she was dressed, as you would expect, in white shrouds. '*Mazel tov!*' Grandma Tzeitl said to me. 'I am so happy that you've chosen for your Tzeitl, my namesake, such a fine, upstanding bridegroom. He is named Motl Komzoil, after my father, Mordecai, and even though he's a tailor, still he's a very honest boy.'"

"How did we get mixed up with a tailor?" cried Golde. "In our family we have teachers, cantors, beadles, cemetery officials, and just plain poor people. But not, God forbid, any tailors or cobblers."

"Don't interrupt me, Golde," I said to her. "Maybe your Grandma Tzeitl knows better than you. When I heard such a *mazel tov* from Grandma Tzeitl, I said to her: 'Why are you saying, Bubbe'nyu, that Tzeitl's betrothed is called Motl and he's a tailor? You mean his name is Lazer-Wolf and he's a butcher.'

"'No,' Grandma said again, 'no, Tevye, your Tzeitl's betrothed is called Motl. He is a tailor, and with him, God willing, she will grow old in wealth and in honor.'

“ ‘But Bubbe’nyu,’ I said to her again, ‘what shall we do with Lazer-Wolf? After all, just yesterday I gave him my word!’ As I spoke those words, I looked up, and Grandma Tzeitl was gone! In her place stood Frume-Sarah, Lazer-Wolf’s wife, and she said to me these words:

“ ‘Reb Tevye! I always thought of you as an honest man, a man of learning. How then can you do this to me, let your daughter take my place, live in my house, carry my keys, wear my clothes, my jewels, my pearls?’

“ ‘It’s not my fault,’ I said to her. ‘Your Lazer-Wolf wanted it that way.’

“ ‘Lazer-Wolf?’ she said. ‘Lazer-Wolf will come to a terrible end. And your poor Tzeitl, a pity on her, Reb Tevye, she will not live with him for more than three weeks. And when the three weeks are up, I will come to her by night and take her by the throat, like this. . . .’ And with those words Frume-Sarah grabbed me by the throat and began to choke me so hard that if you hadn’t woken me up, I would by now be far, far from here!”

“Tfu! Tfu! Tfu!” my wife said, and spit three times three. “May that dream fall into the river, may it sink into the earth, may it crawl over roofs, may it lie in the forest, but may it not harm us or our children! May that butcher be visited by such a dark, angry dream! May it fill his head and paralyze his arms and legs! He isn’t worth Motl Komzoi’s littlest fingernail, even though he is a tailor, because if he was named after my Uncle Mordecai, he is certainly not a tailor by birth, and if Grandma, may she rest in peace, took the trouble to come here from the Other World to give us a *mazel tov*, then we must say it is all for the best and could not be better. Amen *selah!*”

To make a long story short—why should I go on?—I had to be stronger than iron that night, lying under the blanket, to hold myself in and not burst into laughter. *Blessed be God that He did not make me a woman*—a woman remains a woman. The very next day we held the engagement party and soon afterward the wedding. The couple, blessed be His name, is living happily. He is a tailor, goes around Boiberik from one dacha to the next picking up work, while she is busy day and night cooking and baking and washing and scrubbing, carrying water from the well, barely a piece of bread in the house. If I didn’t occasionally bring her some milk and cheese, sometimes a few groschens, it would be very bad. I talk with her, and she says she is happy as can be as long as her Motl is healthy.

Nu, can you argue with today’s children? It turns out, as I told you in the

beginning: *I have nourished and brought up children*—you labor for your children’s sake, knock your head on the wall, and as Isaiah says: *They have rebelled against me*—they say they know better. No, say what you will, today’s children are too smart!

But I have a feeling I’ve filled your ear more than I usually do. Please forgive me, be well, and have a good life!

HODL

WRITTEN IN 1904.

Are you wondering, Pani Sholem Aleichem, why you haven't seen Tevye lately? Doesn't he look like he's suddenly aged, turned gray? Ah, if you knew what troubles, what heartache Tevye carries with him wherever he goes! How is it written—*Man is but dust and dust is all that remains of him*—a man is weaker than a fly and stronger than iron. That describes me perfectly! Wherever you find a misfortune, a problem, an affliction—it is not permitted to bypass me. Do you have any idea why this is so? Maybe it's because I am by nature an overly trusting simpleton. Tevye forgets what our sages told us a thousand times: *Respect him and suspect him*—in Ashkenaz that means a man can't trust his own dog. But what can I do, I ask you, if that's the way I am? As you know, I am a trusting soul and never complain about the ways of Him the everlasting. Whatever He ordains is good. Just try it the other way around and do complain. Will it do you any good? As we say in the Slichos during the High Holiday prayers: *The soul is Thine and the body is Thine*—what does a person know and what worth has he?

I always argue with my Golde: “Golde,” I say, “you are sinning! We have a midrash—”

“Who cares about a midrash?” she says. “We have a daughter to marry off, and after that daughter, *kayn eyn horeh*, there are two more, and after the two—three more, may no evil eye befall them!”

“Ah, don't worry your head about it, Golde! Our sages also prepared us for that. We have a midrash on that too—”

She doesn't let me speak. “Grown daughters,” she says, “are midrash enough.” Try to argue with a woman!

Anyway, from what I was just saying, you can see I possess goods to choose from, one prettier than the other, *kayn eyn horeh*, may I not be sinning with these words. It isn't proper for me to praise my children, but I hear what everyone calls them: "Beauties!" Especially Hodl—the eldest after Tzeitl, the one who fell in love with the tailor. Hodl is beautiful, believe me. As it is written in the holy Megillah: *For she was fair to look on*—pretty as a picture! And to make it worse, she has a head on her shoulders, writes and reads Yiddish and Russian, devours books like dumplings. You will ask, How does Tevye's daughter come to books when her father deals in cheese and butter? Listen, that's what I ask those fine lads who don't own so much as a pair of trousers, begging your pardon, and all they want to do is study. As we say in the Haggadah: *We are all wise, we are all learned*—everybody wants to learn, everybody wants to study. Ask them: "What are you studying? Why are you studying?" They know the answer about as well as goats know why they jump into other people's gardens! Especially when they aren't even allowed to look at a book. Guard the cream from the cat! Still and all, you should see how hard they study! And who are they? Workers' children, children of tailors and shoemakers, may God help me! They go off to Yehupetz or to Odessa, they sprawl in attics, they live on the ten plagues of Egypt, and for months on end they never see a piece of meat. Six of them can dine on a single loaf of bread and one herring, and as it is written, *Thou shalt rejoice in thy feast*—live it up, you paupers!

One of that crew made his way into our corner of the world, some *shlimazel* who didn't live far from us. I knew his father, he was a cigarette-maker; there are no poorer. Well, I don't blame the young man for that, because if the great rabbi Yochanan Hasandler could sew boots, why should this young man be above having a father who rolled cigarettes? There's one thing that bothers me: why should a pauper be eager to study, to learn? True, to give him credit, he has a good head, a very good head on his shoulders. Perchik is his name, the *shlimazel*, but we called him Fefferl in Yiddish, and he actually looked like a little pepper. You should see him—like a little squirrel, small, dark-haired, homely, with a quick sharp tongue, but bursting with confidence.

Well, one day I was riding home from Boiberik, having sold my wares, a whole wagonload of cheese, butter, sour cream, and greens. I was deep in thought about man and God, about this and that, of course not leaving out the Yehupetz rich folks, how well they live, *kayn eyn horeh*, and about Tevye the *shlimazel* and his horse, who becomes more wretched every day. It was summer,

the sun was hot, the flies were biting, and the world was in every way pleasant, ample. You felt like flying in the air, swimming in the river!

I raised my eyes—and saw a young man trudging along the path with a bundle under one arm, sweating profusely and panting heavily. “*Rise, O son of Reb Yuckel ben Fleckel!*” I said to him. “Sit down up here and I’ll give you a lift. I have plenty of room. If you come across your friend’s donkey it is written: *Thou shalt surely help him and not abandon him*—then why not a fellow human being?”

He laughed, the *shlimazel*, and didn’t need to be asked again before hopping onto the wagon. “Where is a young man like you coming from?” I said.

“From Yehupetz.”

“What,” I said, “is a young man like you doing in Yehupetz?”

“A young man like myself,” he said, “is preparing for his entrance exam.”

“What,” I said, “is a young man like you studying?”

“A young man like myself,” he said, “doesn’t know yet what he is studying.”

“If so,” I said, “why is a young man like you bothering your head for nothing?”

“Don’t worry, Reb Tevye. A young man like myself,” he said, “already knows what he has to do.”

“Then tell me, since you know who I am, tell me who you are.”

“Who am I? I am a person.”

“I see you’re not a horse. I mean *whose* are you?”

“Whose should I be? I am God’s.”

“I know,” I said, “you are God’s. It is written: *All creatures and all cattle*. I mean where do you come from. Are you one of ours or maybe from Lithuania?”

“I come from Adam, the first man,” he said, “but am from around here. You know me.”

“Who then is your father? Tell me already!”

“My father was called Perchik.”

“Damn!” I spat. “Did you have to string me along all this time? So you are

Perchik the cigarette-maker's son?"

"I am," he said, "Perchik the cigarette-maker's son."

"And you are taking classes?"

"And I am taking classes."

"Well, well, very nice," I said. "A man and a bird and a duck all try to move ahead in this world. Tell me, my young rascal, what do you live on?"

"I live on what I eat."

"Aha, that's good. But what," I said, "do you eat?"

"Everything," he said, "that they give me."

"I understand," I said, "you aren't fussy. If there is enough to eat, you eat, and if there isn't enough to eat, you bite your lip and go to bed hungry. But it's worth it so long as you are studying. You're comparing yourself," I said, "to the Yehupetz rich folks. As it says in the morning prayers: *All are beloved, all are elect.*" I quoted a portion to him, as only Tevye can.

Do you think he took this lying down? "May the rich not live to see the day when I compare myself to them! Let them all go to hell!"

"You seem all worked up about the rich folks. Have they divided up your father's inheritance among themselves?"

"You should know," he said, "that you and I and all of us have a large share in *their* inheritance."

"Let your enemies talk like that," I said. "I see only one thing, that you are not a hopeless young man and that you know how to use your tongue. If," I said, "you have time, why don't you come to my house tonight, and we'll talk some more and, while we're at it, have a little supper?"

You can be sure I did not have to repeat the invitation. He arrived exactly at the moment the borscht was on the table and the cheese knishes were baking in the oven. "You have perfect timing. Everything is all set for you," I said. "You can wash your hands or not, it's up to you. I am not God's watchman and will not be punished in the next world for your sins." As I talked with this young fellow, for some reason I felt drawn to him. Maybe it's because I like a person with whom I can talk, with whom I can discuss a biblical commentary, have a philosophical argument, speculate about life, on this, on that, and who knows

what else. That's the kind of person Tevye is.

From that time on, my young friend began coming to my house almost every day. After he was finished with his tutoring job, he would come for a rest and a visit. You can imagine how little he earned from that tutoring when you realize that the richest man in town would pay him eighteen kopeks an hour for teaching his sons while also helping him read telegrams, write addresses, and even run errands. And why not? As the passage goes: *With all thy heart and with all thy soul*—if you eat bread, you have to pay for it. Luckily he ate at my house, and in exchange he tutored my daughters. As it is said: *An eye for an eye*—a slap for a slap. He became like a member of our family. The children would bring him a glass of milk, and my wife made sure he had a shirt on his back and a pair of mended socks. We started calling him Fefferl, the Yiddish version of the Russian Perchik, and it is safe to say we all loved him as one of our own because he was by nature a fine person, simple, outgoing, a down-to-earth man, and generous, what's mine is yours, what's yours is mine.

But there was one thing I did not like about him: he kept disappearing. He would suddenly get up and leave, and as it is written in Genesis: *The child is not there*—Fefferl was gone! “Where have you been, my dear fly-by-night?” I would ask when he came the next day. But he was as mute as a fish. I don't know about you, but I hate a person with secrets. I like a person who talks to you and tells you things. But he did have this virtue: once he started talking, it was a passionate, unstoppable stream, *like fire and water*. What a tongue—not to be stopped! He spoke out against God, against the Messiah, and against injustice, conjuring up wild schemes, all upside down, all crazy. For instance, a rich man, according to his backward reasoning, was less worthy than a poor man, who to him was a jewel. A man who was a worker was beyond estimation because he worked.

“That's all well and good,” I said, “but will that get you any money?”

He became angry and tried to convince me that money was the root of all evil. “Money,” he said, “is the source of the world's falsehood, and everything not done in the world out of a sense of justice.” He gave me a thousand examples and illustrations that made no sense to me at all.

“Then according to your crazy way of thinking,” I said, “it is unjust to milk my cow, and for my horse to pull my wagon?” That's how I would confront him after every foolish statement, and I challenged his every opinion, as only Tevye

can! But my Fefferl could also argue, and did he argue! I wish that he didn't argue so well. If he has something to say, he speaks up!

One evening we were sitting in front of my house talking about philosophy. Fefferl said to me, "Do you know, Reb Tevye, that you have very capable daughters?"

"Is that so?" I said. "Thank you for that news. They have whom to take after."

"One of them," he went on, "the eldest, is really very bright, very mature."

"I know that without your telling me," I said. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." My heart swelled with pride, for what father, I ask you, does not love it when someone praises his children? How was I to have been a prophet and known that from that praise would spring a passionate love affair? May God protect me! You must hear this.

In short, *and there was evening and there was morning*, as it says in Genesis—it was between day and night when I was making my rounds of the Boiberik dachas with my wagon when someone stopped me. I looked and saw Ephraim the matchmaker. Ephraim, you must know, is a matchmaker like all matchmakers and makes matches. When Ephraim saw me in Boiberik, he stopped me and said, "If you please, Reb Tevye, I have to ask you something."

"Of course, as long as it's a good question." I stopped the horse.

"You have," he said, "Reb Tevye, a daughter!"

"I have," I said, "seven, may they be well."

"I know," he said, "you have seven. I also have seven."

"So together," I said, "we have fourteen."

"Let's not joke," he said. "This is what I want to talk to you about. As you know, Reb Tevye, I am a matchmaker, and I have a bridegroom for you, but a groom without compare, the cream of the crop!"

"Really?" I said. "What do you mean by the cream of the crop? If he's a tailor or a cobbler or a teacher, he can stay where he is. *Enlargement and deliverance shall arise for the Jews*—I will find my equal in another place, as the midrash says."

"Ah, Reb Tevye," he said, "you're starting in again with your midrash? To talk to you, one has to be well prepared! You scatter the midrash everywhere."

Better listen,” he said, “to what a match Ephraim the matchmaker has to offer you. Just listen and be quiet.”

Ephraim proceeded to rattle off all the virtues of this groom. Quite impressive, he comes from the best of families, not just anybody, and that is most important to me, because I myself am also not just anybody. In my family there are all kinds, as they say: ‘streaked, speckled, and spotted’—we have ordinary people, laborers, and property owners. In addition this groom is a learned man who understands what’s in the small print in the commentaries, and that’s not a trivial thing for me. I hate a coarse young man more than I hate pork. To me an ignorant person is a thousand times worse than a hoodlum. You can go without a hat and even walk upside down, if you like, but as long as you know what Rashi is about, you are a man after my own heart. That’s the kind of Jew Tevye is. It turns out the young man is also rich, stuffed with money, and drives a carriage with two spirited horses that leave a cloud of dust behind them! All right, I thought, that wasn’t his worst fault. Better a rich man than a poor one. As it is said: “God Himself must hate a poor man, because if God loved a poor man, the poor man wouldn’t be poor.”

“Well then, what more do you have to say?” I asked.

“I must tell you, he wants me to arrange a match, he’s dying for it,” he said. “He’s so eager—not for you but for your daughter Hodl. He wants a pretty girl.”

“Is that so?” I said. “Let him keep dying. Who is this treasure of yours? A bachelor? A widower? Is he divorced? What’s wrong with him?”

“He is a bachelor,” he said, “a little elderly, but he’s never been married.”

“What is his name?” He wouldn’t tell me.

“Bring her to Boiberik,” he said, “and then I’ll tell you.”

“What do you mean, I should bring her? You bring a horse to the market, or a cow to sell.”

As you know, matchmakers can talk you into anything. It was decided that after Shabbes, God willing, I would bring Hodl to Boiberik. All sorts of good, sweet thoughts came to my mind, and I was picturing her riding in a carriage pulled by a pair of spirited horses, and everybody envying me, not so much for the carriage and the horses as for the favors I would be doing for everybody through my daughter, the rich man’s wife. I would help out the needy with a loan

of twenty-five rubles, or fifty rubles, or maybe a hundred—they have souls too. So I was thinking as I was riding home before nightfall, whipping my horse and having a little talk with him in his own language: “Go on, my little horse, giddyap! If you move your legs a little faster, you’ll get your oats sooner because, as it says in the Pirkei Avot, *If there is no flour in the bin, there is no Torah*—if you don’t work, you don’t eat.”

And as I was chatting with my horse, I saw emerging from the woods a man and a woman, their heads close together, whispering to each other affectionately. Who could they be, I wondered, and peered through the bright rays of the sun. I could swear it was Fefferl! With whom was he walking so late, that *shlimazel*? I shielded my eyes from the sun with my hand and looked closer. Who was that woman? Oy! I thought. Hodl? Yes, it was she, as I am a Jew, it was she! So that was the way they were studying grammar and reading books! Oy, Tevye, what a fool you are, I thought.

I pulled up the horse and called out to them, “A good evening to you. What news do you hear about the war? How do you come to be out here?” I said. “What could you be looking for out here?”

Hearing that welcome, my couple remained standing, as it is said: *Not in heaven nor on earth*, which means neither here nor there, but embarrassed and awkward. They stood speechless for a few moments, lowered their eyes, and raised them and looked at me as I looked at them. Then they looked at each other.

“*Nu?*” I said. “Somehow you are looking at me as if you hadn’t seen me in a long time. I am, I imagine, the same Tevye as always, not changed a hair.” I said this half-jokingly and half-annoyed.

My daughter spoke to me, blushing even redder than before: “Papa, give us a *mazel tov*.”

“*Mazel tov* to you,” I said, “may you have good luck. What’s this all about? Did you find a treasure in the woods? Or were you rescued from great danger?”

“Give us a *mazel tov*,” Fefferl said. “We’re engaged.”

“What do you mean, you’re engaged?”

“We’re engaged,” he said. “Don’t you know what engaged means? It means I will be her husband and she will be my wife.” Fefferl looked me straight in the

eyes.

I looked him straight back in his eyes. “When was the contract signed? And why wasn’t I invited to the celebration? I imagine I would be somewhat involved as an in-law, don’t you think?”

You can understand that while I was talking, worms were gnawing at my innards. But I said nothing. Tevye is not a woman. Tevye likes to hear everything out to the end. I said to them, “I don’t quite understand—a match without a matchmaker, without an engagement party?”

“Why do we need a matchmaker?” Fefferl said. “We have long been engaged.”

“Is that so? God’s miracles! Why then,” I said, “didn’t you say anything till now?”

“Why should we shout it out? We wouldn’t have told you about it now except that we soon will be separated, and so we decided to get married first.”

That really hurt. As it is written in the Psalms: *The waters have risen unto my soul*—cut right to the bone! Well, it was bad enough that they were engaged—he wants her, she wants him. But to get married? What kind of gibberish was that?

My future son-in-law realized I was confused and said, “You understand, Reb Tevye, this is what is happening: I am leaving here.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Very soon.”

“Where are you going?”

“That,” he said, “I cannot tell you. It’s a secret.”

Do you hear that? It’s a secret! How do you like that? Along comes a Fefferl, a puny, dark, homely fellow, makes himself out to be a bridegroom, and wants to put up the wedding canopy, but he’s about to go away and won’t say where to! Isn’t that enough to make a person explode?

“Oh well,” I said to him, “a secret is a secret. Everything you do is a secret. But just explain something to me: you are an honorable person and are steeped in justice from top to bottom. How can you,” I said, “come here and suddenly take away Tevye’s daughter and then abandon her? Is that what you call honor? Justice? I’m just lucky you didn’t rob me or set my house on fire!”

“Papa!” Hodl cried out. “You have no idea how relieved we are that we told you our secret. A stone has been lifted from my heart. Come here, and let’s kiss.” And not thinking about it too long, both of them embraced me, she from one side, he from the other, and they began kissing and hugging me as well as each other. It was like a play on the stage, I tell you.

“That’s enough kissing,” I said. “It’s time to talk about practical matters.”

“What practical matters?” they said.

“About the dowry,” I said, “clothes, wedding expenses, this, that, and the other.”

“We don’t need anything,” they said.

“Then what *do* you need?”

“All we need is the wedding ceremony.” Have you ever heard of anything like that?

In short—I won’t bore you—but there was nothing I could do about it. They had a wedding, if you can call that a wedding! It certainly wasn’t the sort of wedding that befits Tevye. It was a very quiet wedding, God help us. Besides, I had my wife to deal with. She kept demanding to know why it had to be done in such haste. Try to explain to a woman what that rush was all about! Don’t you think I had to invent a story, a marvelous, wondrous story about an inheritance, a rich aunt from Yehupetz—anything so she would leave me in peace.

And sure enough, a few hours after that wonderful wedding I hitched up the horse and wagon, and the three of us got in, and off we went to the Boiberik train station. As I rode along with my young couple, I glanced at them from the corner of my eye. What a great God we have, and how cleverly He runs His world! I thought. What strange souls, wild creatures He has created! Here was this brand-new married couple: he was going away, who knew whereto, while she remained here without so much as a tear, not even for appearance’s sake! But I am not a woman. Tevye has time, watches, bites his tongue, and waits to see what will happen.

At the station several young fellows, good Kasrileukes with worn-down boots, came to say goodbye to my fly-by-night. One of them was dressed like a Russian peasant, forgive me, with his shirt over his trousers. They were whispering together quietly. Look out, Tevye, I was thinking. You may have gotten mixed up

with a band of horse thieves, pickpockets, housebreakers, or counterfeiters!

On the way home from Boiberik with my Hodl, I could not restrain myself and spoke openly to her of my suspicions. She burst out laughing and assured me that they were honest, decent men whose lives were dedicated to helping others, without any concern for their own welfare. “The one with the shirt,” she said, “is the son of a rich man. He rejected his wealthy parents in Yehupetz and refuses to accept a groschen from them.”

“How about that! God’s wonders!” I said. “Quite a fine boy. If God would add to the shirt he was wearing over his trousers and his long hair a harmonica or a dog to follow him, he would really be quite a sight!” I tried to settle the score with her, as well as with him, by letting out my bitter heart at her—poor thing. And her response? Nothing! *And Esther spoke not*—she pretended not to understand what I was saying. I talked about Fefferl, and she talked about the well-being of the community, the workers, and other such things. “What do I care,” I said, “about the well-being of your community and your workers if you keep it all a secret? There is a proverb: *Where there are secrets, there is thievery*. So tell me straight out—where did Fefferl go, and why?”

“I’ll tell you anything,” she said, “but not that. Better not to ask. Believe me,” she said, “in time you will know everything. God willing, you will soon hear much good news!”

“Amen, let us hope so,” I said. “From your lips to God’s ears! May our enemies,” I said, “have as much good health as I understand what is happening with you and what this game is about!”

“That,” she said, “is the trouble. You won’t understand.”

“Tell me, is it so complicated? It seems to me that with God’s help, I understand far more complicated things.”

“It’s not something you can understand with your mind alone. This is something you must feel, feel with your heart,” Hodl said to me, her face shining and her eyes glowing. These daughters of mine, I tell you, when they get involved in something, it is with body and soul and heart!

I can tell you, a week and two and three and four and five and six and seven passed, and *there was neither voice nor money*—no letter, no news. “Fefferl is gone!” I said, and glanced at my Hodl. Her poor face was drained of color. She kept doing small chores around the house, trying to forget her great sorrow, but

never once did she mention his name, as if Fefferl had never existed!

But one day I came home and found my Hodl walking around with eyes swollen from weeping. Not long before a *shlimazel* with long hair had come and taken her aside and had whispered something to her. Aha! I thought, it was that young fellow who rejected his parents and who wore his shirt over his trousers. So now I called my Hodl out into the yard and confronted her: “You must tell me, daughter, do you have news from him?”

“Yes.”

“Where is he, your husband?”

“He is far away,” she said.

“What is he doing?”

“He’s in prison!”

“He’s in prison?”

“He’s in prison.”

“Where is he in prison? Why is he in prison?”

She looked me straight in the eyes and remained silent.

“Tell me, my daughter, I assume it is not for theft. I don’t understand. If he isn’t a thief or a swindler, why is he in prison, for what good reason?”

She was silent. *And Esther spoke not.* She said not a word.

“If you don’t want to speak,” I said, “you don’t have to. He’s your headache, not mine. Serves him right!” But inside my heart was breaking for her. I am, after all, a father, as they say in the prayers: *Like as a father pitieth his children*—a father remains a father.

Well, it was the evening of Hoshana Raba, the last day of Succos. On holidays it’s a custom of mine to rest, and my horse also rests, as it says in the Torah: *Neither thou nor thine ox nor thine ass*—you and your wife and your horse. Also at that time of year in Boiberik there was almost nothing to do. One blow of the *shofar* at the end of Yom Kippur and off they all ran, the *dachniks*, like mice during a famine, and Boiberik was emptied out. At those times I like to sit on my stoop in front of my house. For me it’s the best time of the year. The days are rare gifts. The sun isn’t as hot as an oven but warms you gently, delightfully. The

woods are still green, the pines give off their pungent tar aroma, and the woods look like they're dressed for the holidays, like God's *succah*. Right here, I thought, is where God celebrates Succos, not in town where it is noisy with people running around, panting for breath, chasing after a crust of bread, and all you hear is money, money, money!

I have not yet talked about the nights of Hoshana Raba. They are like paradise. The sky is dark blue, and the stars twinkle, shimmer, shine, and blink like human eyes. And sometimes a star shoots through the sky like an arrow, leaving behind a momentary green trail. It is a falling star—someone's luck has fallen. As many stars as there are, that is how many Jewish fates there are. May it not be my bad luck, I thought, and Hodl came to mind. In the last few days she seemed to revive, to become livelier—her face changed. Someone had brought her a letter from him, her *shlimazel*. I really wanted to know what he was writing, but I didn't want to ask. If she wouldn't talk, I wouldn't talk. *Sha!* Tevye is not a woman. Tevye has time.

As I was thinking about Hodl, along she came. She sat down next to me on the stoop, looked to all sides, and said to me quietly: "Listen to me, Papa. I have something to tell you. I must say goodbye to you now—forever."

She said it so quietly, I could barely hear her. I will never forget the way she looked at me. I thought she meant she was going to drown herself. Why? Recently, may it not happen to anyone, a girl living not far from us fell in love with a village Gentile, and because of him—well, you know what happened. On account of that her mother became sick and died, and her father let his business go and became a pauper. The village Gentile thought it over and decided to go off with someone else. The girl then went to the river, threw herself in, and drowned herself.

"What do you mean?" I said. "You are saying goodbye to me forever?" And I looked down so she would not see my stricken face.

"It means," she said, "I am going away tomorrow, very early, and we will never see each other . . . never again."

Ah, she was not thinking of harming herself—my heart was eased. It could have been worse, but it could also have been better. "Whereto," I said, "if I may have the honor of knowing?"

"I am going to him."

“To him? Where is he now?”

“For the time being,” she said, “he is in prison, but soon they will be sending him away.”

“Are you going to say goodbye to him?” I was playing dumb.

“No, I am going to follow him there.”

“There? Where is that? What do they call the place?”

“We don’t know exactly what it’s called, but it’s far away, terribly far, and the way is dangerous.”

She seemed to be speaking with pride, as if he had done some great deed for which he deserved a medal made from a pound of iron! What could I say? Most fathers would have scolded her, slapped her, punished her, or they would have imagined all the worst that could happen to her. But Tevye is not a woman. I am of the opinion that anger is the work of the devil. And so I replied as usual with a commentary: “I see, my daughter, that you have made your decision. As it says in the Holy Torah, *Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother*. Because of Fefferl you are abandoning your parents and going off to a place you don’t know, somewhere—as I once read in a storybook—over a desert beyond the frozen sea, where Alexander of Macedonia sailed and was lost on a distant island among wild savages.”

I said it half-jokingly, half in anger, as my heart was breaking. But Tevye is not a woman, Tevye kept it inside himself.

Nor did Hodl lose her dignity. She answered every question I asked, quietly, unhurriedly, thoughtfully. Tevye’s daughters know how to speak.

And though my head was bowed and my eyes were lowered, I could see Hodl—her face was like the moon, pale and round, and her voice was muted, trembling. Should I throw my arms around her, beg her, plead with her not to leave? But it would be useless. Those daughters of mine—when they fall in love, it’s with body and soul and heart and life itself!

As you can imagine, we sat on the stoop quite a while, almost through the night, more silent than speaking, and when we spoke, it was almost like not speaking—no more than a word here, a word there. I asked her, whoever heard of a girl getting married to a boy for the sake of following him to the ends of the earth?

And she answered me: “With *him* it doesn’t matter. I will go anywhere with him, even to the ends of the earth.” I tried to explain with logic, as usual, how foolish that was. Then she explained to me with *her* logic that I will never understand. So I told her a parable about a hen that hatched ducklings. As soon as the ducklings were able to stand on their legs, they jumped into the water and swam away, while the poor hen stood there clucking. “What do you say to that, my dear daughter?”

“What can I say? It’s certainly a pity for the hen. But because the hen stood there clucking, is that a reason the ducklings shouldn’t swim?”

Do you appreciate those words? Tevye’s daughter spoke to the point.

Meanwhile time wasn’t standing still. Day was breaking, and my wife was stirring in the house. Several times she sent someone out to us, to say it was time for bed, but it did no good. So she stuck her head out of the window and said to me, with her usual fine blessing, “Tevye, what are you still doing out there?”

“Be quiet, Golde,” I said. “As it says in the Psalms: *Why do the heathens rage!*—you’ve forgotten that it’s Hoshana Raba today? That’s the day when our fates are decided and the verdict is sealed. So you must stay up. Listen to me, Golde,” I said, “please go and light the samovar, and let us have tea while I hitch up the wagon. I am going with Hodl to the train.”

And once again I manufactured for her a lie, saying that Hodl was going off to Yehupetz, and from there somewhere else, on account of you-know-who’s inheritance. “And it’s possible,” I said, “she’ll remain there all winter and perhaps over winter and summer and another winter. And so we have to give her provisions—some linens, a dress, a pair of pillows, pillowcases, a little of this and that.”

That’s what I ordered Golde to do, and I insisted Hodl and her sisters were not to cry. It was Hoshana Raba. “On this day,” I said, “you’re not allowed to cry. The law definitely prohibits it!” But they paid no attention to the law and did cry, and when it came time to say goodbye, they were all wailing—the mother, the children, and even Hodl herself. And my eldest daughter Tzeitl was also there—she comes to us for the holidays with her Motl Komzoil. Both sisters clasped each other closely—they could hardly be separated.

I alone was like steel and iron. That’s easy to say, steel and iron. Inside I was more like a boiling samovar, but for anyone to see it—feh! Tevye is not a

woman.

All the way to Boiberik we were silent, but when we were approaching the train station, I asked her once and for all to tell me what Fefferl had done. “Everything has to have a reason.”

She swore that he was innocent. “He never cares about himself. Everything he does is for the sake of others, for the sake of humanity, especially for those who toil with their hands, the workers.” Now be a sage and try to figure that out!

“So he worries about humanity. Why then,” I said, “doesn’t humanity worry about him if he is such a wonderful person? Please give him my regards, your Alexander of Macedonia. Tell him that I am relying on him as an honorable man not to mistreat my daughter and to make sure she writes an occasional letter to an old father.”

And as I spoke, didn’t she suddenly throw her arms around my neck and start to cry? “Let us say goodbye,” she said. “Be well, Papa. God only knows when we shall see each other again.”

Well, that was too much for me. I could no longer control myself. I remembered this same Hodl when she was still a baby and I held her in my arms . . . in my arms . . .

Forgive me, Pani, for acting like a woman. I must tell you what sort of daughter Hodl is! You should see the letters she writes. She is a gift from God! She is right here . . . right here . . . deep, deep . . . I cannot begin to say it . . .

Do you know what, Pani Sholem Aleichem? Let’s better speak of something happier. What do you hear about the cholera in Odessa?

CHAVA

WRITTEN IN 1906.

Give thanks unto the Lord for He is good. Whatever He ordains is for the best. It has to be for the best, because just try being wiser and making it better! I thought I would be clever, twisting the meaning of the commentaries this way and that, but it made no difference whatsoever. I took my hand away from my heart and said to myself, Tevye, you're a fool! You can't change the world. The One Above gave us *the great sorrows of child-raising*, which means: when children cause you grief, you must count it as love. As an example, take my eldest daughter, Tzeitl, who fell in love with the tailor Motl Komzoil. I have nothing against him. True, he's a simple soul, doesn't understand any of the fine points in a text, can't master the small print. But what can I do? Not everyone can be learned! Still and all, he is an honest person and works hard. They already have a full house of little ones, you should see, *kayn eyn horeh*, while they both struggle to survive in honor and dignity. When you talk to Tzeitl, she says that she is happy as can be, it couldn't be better, but there is not enough food. There you have daughter number one.

Well, about my second daughter, Hodl, I don't need to tell you, you know about her. I lost her—she's gone forever! Only God knows if my eyes will ever look upon her, unless it's in the world to come, may it be in a hundred twenty years. To this day, when I talk about Hodl, I cannot calm myself, it's the end of me! I should forget her, you say? How can you forget a living person, especially a child like Hodl? You should see the letters she writes me; they would make your heart melt. She says things are going very well for them. He is in prison, and she is earning money. She takes in laundry, reads books, and sees him every week. She hopes things will calm down between us, she says. One day the sun will rise and it will be light, and he, along with many others like himself, will be set free, and then they will get down to the real business of turning the world on

its head. *Nu?* How do you like that? Good? Ha! What does the Master of the Universe decide to do? He is, after all, as you say, a merciful and compassionate God. He says to me: “Wait, Tevye, I will make it so you forget all your past troubles!”

And so it was—just listen. I would not tell this to anyone else because the pain is great and the shame is even greater! But as it is written: *Shall I hide from Abraham?*—do I have any secrets from you? Whatever I live through, I tell you. What then is the problem? I ask but one thing of you: let it remain between us. I tell you again, the pain is great, but the shame, the shame is even greater!

In a word, as it is written in the chapter: *The Holy One, blessed be He, wished to grant merit*—God wanted to do Tevye a favor, and so He blessed him with seven daughters, all pretty, gifted, healthy, and clever, I tell you, like slender young pine trees! Oy, how I wish they were ugly and bad-tempered. It might have been better for them and healthier for me. What is the good, I ask you, of having a good horse if it stays in its stall? What is the good of having pretty daughters if you are stuck with them in the middle of nowhere? We hardly see a living person except Ivan Poperilo, the Gentile mayor of the town; the writer Chvedka Galagan, a tall Gentile boy with thick hair and high boots; and the priest, may his name be eradicated. I cannot bear to hear his name. Not because I am a Jew and he a priest—on the contrary, we’ve been on friendly terms for many years, not that we would invite each other for celebrations or holidays. It’s just that if we meet, we say good morning, have a good year, what’s new.

I avoid long discussions with this priest because right away we get into the whole business of your God and our God. I cut him off with a proverb and tell him we have a fitting commentary. Then he cuts me off and says he knows the commentaries as well as I do and perhaps better, and then he begins to recite from memory from our Bible, pronouncing it just like a Christian: “*Bereshit bara alokim*”—every time, every time the same. So I interrupt him and tell him we have a midrash. “A midrash,” he says, “is the same as Talmud,” and he dislikes Talmud because Talmud is, he says, “nothing but a swindle.” I get very angry and pour out whatever comes out of my mouth. Do you think that bothers him? Not at all. He looks at me and laughs as he smooths his beard. I tell you, there is nothing worse in the world than when you insult someone, make mud out of him, and he doesn’t say a word. Your blood is boiling, and he is sitting and smiling! At that time I didn’t understand that little smile, but now I know what it meant.

One evening before nightfall I came home and encountered the writer Chvedka standing outside with my Chava, my third daughter, the one after Hodl. Seeing me, the young man spun around, tipped his hat, and left. I asked Chava, "What is Chvedka doing here?"

"Nothing," she said.

"What do you mean, nothing?"

"We were just talking."

"What business do you have with Chvedka?"

"We've known each other a long time."

"*Mazel tov* to you for that friendship! A fine friend, Chvedka!"

"Do you know him? Do you know who he is?"

"Who he is, I don't know, I haven't seen his family tree," I said. "But he must have a great line. His father had to be a shepherd, or a janitor, or just a plain drunkard."

"What his father was I don't know and don't want to know, because to me all people are equal. But he is not an ordinary person, of that I am sure," she said.

"Well then, what sort of person is he? Let's hear."

"If I told you," she said, "you wouldn't understand. Chvedka is a second Gorky."

"A second Gorky? Who then was the first Gorky?"

"Gorky," she said, "is almost the most important man in the world."

"Where does he live," I said, "this sage of yours? What is his occupation, and what words of wisdom has he uttered lately?"

"Gorky is a famous author, a person who writes books, and a dear, rare, honest person who comes from simple people. He never studied anywhere but is self-taught. Here is his portrait." She removed a small photograph from her pocket.

"So this is your sage Reb Gorky?" I said. "I could swear I've seen him somewhere, either at the train station carrying sacks or in the woods hauling logs."

"Is it a fault in your eyes," she said, "that a person works with his hands?"

Don't you yourself work? And don't we work?"

"Yes, yes, you're right. We have a special verse in the Bible: *For thou shall eat the labor of thy hands*—if you don't work, you won't eat. But still and all, I don't understand what Chvedka is doing here. I would be happier," I said, "if you knew him from a distance. You mustn't forget *whence you come and whither you go*—who you are and who he is."

"God created all people equal," she said to me.

"Yes, yes, God created Adam in His own image," I said. "But you mustn't forget that everyone must seek his own, as it says, *To every man as he is able.*"

"Amazing!" she said. "You have a quotation for everything! Maybe you can find one about how people separated themselves into Jews and Gentiles, into masters and slaves, into landowners and beggars?"

"Now, now! I think you've gone too far, my daughter!" And I gave her to understand that the world had been that way since the Creation.

"Why should the world be like that?" she asked me.

"Because that's the way God created it."

"Why did He create it like that?"

"Eh! If we begin asking questions, why this and why that, it's a story without an end!" I said.

"That's why God gave us reason, so we could ask questions."

"We have a custom that when a hen begins to crow like a rooster, you should take it immediately to the slaughterer. As we say in the prayers: *He giveth the rooster knowledge to discern the dawn from the night.*"

"Haven't you two prattled enough?" my Golde called from the house. "The borscht is on the table for an hour, and he's chanting prayers!"

"Another voice heard from!" I said. "Not for nothing did our sages say, *The fool has seven traits*—a woman has nine yards of talk. We are talking about serious matters, and along she comes with her dairy borscht!"

"The dairy borscht," she said, "is as important as all your serious talk."

"*Mazel tov!* We have here a new philosopher, fresh from the oven!" I said. "As if I didn't have enough enlightened daughters, now Tevye's wife has also

started to spread her wings and fly!”

“If that’s the case,” she said, “drop dead!” How’s that for a fine dinner invitation to a hungry man?

So let us leave the princess and get to the prince, meaning the priest, may his name be blotted out! One evening I was coming home with the empty milk cans rattling around, and I met him in his iron carriage. He was driving his horses by himself, his combed beard blowing in the wind. And he was the last person I wanted to meet.

“Good evening!” he called to me. “Didn’t you recognize me?”

“It’s a sign you’ll get rich soon.” I doffed my hat and hurried on.

“Stay awhile, Tevel, what’s the hurry? I need to say a few words to you.”

“So long as they are good words, all right, and if not,” I said, “let it wait for another time.”

“What do you mean, ‘for another time’?”

“ ‘Another time’ to me means when the Messiah comes.”

“The Messiah,” he said, “has already come.”

“So I’ve heard from you, more than once,” I said. “Why don’t you tell me, little father, something new?”

“That’s what I wanted to do. I want to have a talk with you about your daughter.”

My heart started pounding. What did he have to do with my daughter?

“My daughters are, God forbid, not the kind who need someone to talk for them. They can speak for themselves.”

“But this is the sort of thing,” he said, “that she herself cannot speak about. Someone else must speak for her because it is a very important matter concerning her future.”

“What concern is my daughter’s future to you?” I said. “As long as we are discussing my child’s future, am I not my child’s father till a hundred and twenty?”

“Indeed, you are your child’s father,” he said, “but you are blind to what she is

doing. She is moving into another world, and you do not understand her, or you don't want to understand her."

"Whether I don't understand her," I said, "or don't want to understand her, that's something else again. We can discuss it a bit. But what does that have to do with you, little father?"

"It has quite a bit to do with me," he said, "because she is now in my custody."

"What do you mean, she's in your custody?"

"It means she is now in my care." He looked me straight in the eyes and stroked his fine old beard.

I sprang back. "My child is under *your* care? By what right?" I was about to lose my temper.

"Now don't get excited, Tevel!" he replied rather coldly, with a little smile. "We can discuss this calmly. You know I'm not your enemy, God forbid, even though you are a Jew. You know that I admire Jews and that my heart aches because of their obstinacy, their stubborn refusal to accept the fact that we mean everything only for their own good."

"Do not speak to me about my own good, little father," I said. "Every word you say now is a drop of poison, a bullet in my heart. If you are as good a friend of mine as you say, I will ask you but one favor—leave my daughter alone."

"You are a foolish man," he said. "Nothing bad will happen to your daughter. Something good now lies ahead of her. She is taking a bridegroom—and what a bridegroom."

"Amen!" I laughed ironically, but in my heart a hellish fire was burning. "And who, may I have the honor of asking, is the bridegroom. Am I permitted to know that?"

"You surely know him," he said. "He is a very gallant young man, very honest and well educated, though self-taught. He is deeply in love with your daughter and wants to marry her, but he cannot because he is not a Jew."

Chvedka! I thought, the blood rushing to my head. I broke into a cold sweat and could barely hold myself together. But to let him see that—no, he would not live to see the day! I grabbed the horse's reins, gave them a snap, and fled

without a goodbye.

When I arrived home—ay ay ay, the house was in turmoil! The children were in bed crying into their pillows, and my Golde looked more dead than alive. I searched for Chava. Where was she? No Chava! I did not want to ask where she was. I did not need to ask, God help me! I felt like a tortured sinner suffering in his grave. A fiery rage was burning in me, toward whom I did not know. I wanted to find something with which to whip myself, but instead I yelled at the children and let out my bitter heart at my wife.

I could not settle down, so I went outside to the horse's stall to feed him—and found him with one leg twisted around a block of wood. I took a stick and beat him with it. “May you fall dead, *shlimazel* of mine!” I shouted. “You won't get as much as one oat from me! Trouble, if that's what you want, I can give you plenty, along with anguish, heartache, grief, and suffering!”

But even as I was yelling at the horse, I realized it was a poor innocent creature—what did I have against him? So I spread some chopped-up straw before him and promised that on Shabbes, God willing, he would have more to eat.

I went back into the house and lay down in a state of misery, my head splitting with contemplating what this all meant. *What is my trespass? What is my sin?*—how had I, Tevye, sinned more than anyone else, that I had been punished more than all other Jews? Oy, God in heaven, God in heaven! *What are we and what is our life?*—who am I that You always have me in mind? You never forget about me when it comes to disaster, catastrophe, or affliction!

Thinking all this, lying as if on hot coals, I heard my pitiful wife groan. It tore at my heart. “Golde, are you asleep?”

“No. What is it?”

“We are as good as dead,” I said. “Do you have any ideas about what we can do?”

“You are asking me,” she said, “what we can do? So it has come to this? A child gets up in the morning, healthy and strong. She gets dressed, hugs and kisses me—and begins weeping without saying why. I thought, God forbid, she had lost her mind! ‘What is it, daughter?’ I asked her. She said only that she would go out for a while to the cows. Then she vanished. I waited an hour, I waited two, I waited three—where was Chava? Chava was gone! I called to the

children to run over to the priest's."

"How did you know she was at the priest's?"

"How did I know?" she said. "Woe is me. Do you think I don't have eyes or that I am not her mother?"

"If you have eyes and you are her mother, why did you keep quiet and not tell me?"

"I should tell you? When are you at home?" she said. "And if I tell you something, do you listen to me? No, right away you answer with a commentary or a quote. You stuff my head with biblical quotes and think you've solved every problem."

While Golde was saying this, she was crying in the dark. She has a point, I thought, but what does a woman understand? My heart ached for her, and I could not bear to hear her groaning and weeping.

I said to her, "Golde, you are angry because I have a commentary on everything. But I must answer you with another one. It is written, *Like as a father pitieth his children*—a father loves his child. Why isn't it written, *Like as a mother pitieth her children*? Because a mother is not a father. A father can talk to a child in a different way. You'll see. Tomorrow morning, God willing, I'll go see her."

"Let's hope," she said, "you can see her, and him too. He's not a bad person, even though he is a priest—he does have compassion for people. You'll beg him, fall at his feet. Maybe he'll take pity on us."

"Who—the priest, cursed be his name? You expect me to bow down to the priest? Are you crazy or just out of your mind? *Do not open your mouth to the devil!* My enemies will not live to see that day!"

"Ach! See what I mean? You're starting in again!"

"What, did you think I'd let myself be pushed around by a woman? I should live by your female reasoning?"

And with such conversations the night passed for us. At last came the first crow of the rooster. I got up, said my prayers, took my whip, and went directly to the priest's house. A woman is truly a woman, but where else could I go? Should I bury myself alive?

To make a long story short, his dogs welcomed me with a fine good morning by preparing to ruin my caftan and taste my Jewish calves to see if they were good enough for their dogs' teeth. Luckily I had brought along my whip and gave them to understand the quote *Not a dog shall bark*—a dog should have something to bark about. Hearing their barking and my shouting, the priest and his wife ran out, shooed off the happy throng, and invited me into the house. They received me as a guest and offered tea. I said the samovar wasn't necessary, I had something to say to him, between the two of us. The priest understood and signaled to his wife to kindly shut the door behind her. I came to the point without any fanfare, asking him, first of all, if he believed in God. Then I asked him whether he knew how it felt to separate a father from a beloved child. Also I asked him what in his opinion was right and what was wrong, and what he would think of a person who stole into someone's house and wrecked it.

Naturally he was confused by all my questions. "Tevel, you are an intelligent person—why do you ask so many questions at a time and expect me to answer them all at once? Be patient, and I will answer them all, the first one first and the last one last."

"No," I said to him, "you will never answer them, little father. Do you know why? Because I already know all your answers. Just tell me this: is there any hope I will get my child back?"

He sat up. "What do you mean, back? Nothing bad, God forbid, will happen to your daughter. On the contrary!"

"I know, I know you want to make her happy! I am not speaking of that," I said. "I want to know where my child is and if I can see her."

"Everything yes," he said, "but not that."

"At least you are being frank," I said, "speaking the truth as it really is! Farewell, and may God repay you in equal measure and twice as much!"

I came home and found my Golde curled up like a black ball of yarn in bed, having no more tears to shed. "Get up, my wife. Take off your shoes and let us sit shiva, as God commanded. *The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away*—we are neither the first nor the last. Let us imagine," I said, "that we never had a Chava, or let us imagine that, like Hodl, she left for the ends of the earth, and who knows if we shall ever see her again. *God is compassionate and good and knows what He is doing!*"

Thus I bared my heart as the tears choked me like a bone stuck in my throat. But Tevye is no woman, Tevye controls himself! As you know, that's easy to say, because, first of all, the shame! But how could I control myself when I was losing a living child, a precious gem of a child who was deeply embedded in my heart and her mother's heart, almost more than the other children, I don't know why. Maybe it's because she was sickly as a child and went through so much. We often sat up with her entire nights, several times snatching her from the jaws of death, reviving her as you would revive a crushed chick, because if God wills it, He brings the dead to life. As we say in the Hallel: *I shall not die, but I will live*—if you are not fated to die, you won't die. Or maybe it was because she was such a good child, so devoted, who always loved us both. So the question was, how could she do this to us?

It was, first of all, our bad luck. I don't know about you, but I believe in Providence. And second of all, it was something evil, foreordained, do you hear? A kind of sorcery! You may laugh at me—and I am not so great a fool as to believe in elves, demons, ghosts, and other such nonsense. But I do believe in magic, you see, because what else would explain it if not magic? Just listen further, and you will say the same.

When the holy books say, *Regardless of thy will, thou livest*, they know what they are talking about. A person does not take his own life. There is no affliction that does not in time heal, and no sorrow that is not forgotten. What can you do about it? *Man is like the beasts that perish*—a man must work, toil, slave, and suffer for a piece of bread.

What else was there to do? We all went back to work, my wife and children to the milk jugs, I to the horse and wagon. *The world goes on its accustomed course*—the world does not stand still. I told everyone in the household that Chava was not to be remembered or mentioned—no more Chava! erased!—and that was it. I gathered up some dairy, fresh merchandise, and went off to my customers in Boiberik.

When I arrived in Boiberik, my customers celebrated and rejoiced to see me. “How is our Reb Tevye? Why don't we see you anymore?”

“How should I be?” I said. “*We renew our days as of old*—the same *shlimazel* as before. One of my calves died.”

“Why is it,” they said, “that all the miracles happen to you?” And the crowd, one after another, grilled me about what kind of calf had died, and how much it

cost me. How many calves did I have left? They laughed and were cheerful as usual. Rich folks enjoy teasing a poor man, a *shlimazel*, after a meal, when they are in good spirits and the weather is fine and it is hot and green and they feel like snoozing. But Tevye can take a joke. I would rather die than let on what is going on in my heart!

I finished up with my customers and started back for home with the empty milk jugs. While riding through the woods, I loosened the horse's reins, to let him go slowly and enjoy nibbling grass. And I sank into my own thoughts, meditating on what you will—life and death, this world and the next, the meaning of life, and other such thoughts—in order to distract myself from her, my Chava. But just for spite, all I could think about was Chava.

I pictured her as she was now, tall and pretty and fresh as a young pine, or even as she was as a small child, sickly and frail as a little chick in my hands, her little head lying on my shoulder. “What do you want, Chava’le? A piece of candy?” I’d ask. Forgetting for a moment what she had done, my heart was drawn to her, my soul yearned for her, longed for her. But then I remembered, and a rage ignited in my heart against her and against him and against the whole world and against myself because I could not forget for a minute. Why couldn’t I erase her, tear her from my heart? Didn’t she deserve it from me?

So did Tevye really have to be a Jew among Jews? to slave all his days, with his nose to the grindstone, to raise children who would in an instant rip themselves from him, fall like an acorn from a tree, and be swept off by wind and smoke? Here grows a tree, an oak in the woods, I thought, and a man comes along with an ax, chops off a branch, and another branch, and another. What is the tree without the branches? I ask him. Why don’t you go and chop down the tree altogether, let there be an end to it? What good is an oak trunk standing naked and bare in the woods?!

As I was pondering this question, I realized my horse had suddenly stopped. What was going on? I lifted my eyes and looked—Chava! She was the same Chava as before, not changed by a hair, even wearing the same clothes! My first impulse was to jump off the wagon, take her in my arms, and kiss her, but a thought held me back: Tevye, what are you, a woman? So I pulled on the reins—“Giddyap, *shlimazel!*”—and turned right. I looked, and Chava was also turning right, waving her hand as if to say: “Stop awhile, I have to tell you something.”

That something tore at my insides and tugged at my heart. I was about to jump off the wagon, but I restrained myself and pulled the horse to the left. My daughter also moved to the left and looked at me wildly, her face ashen. What was I to do? Continue on, or stop? And before I realized it, she was holding the horse by the bridle. “Papa!” she cried. “I will die if you move from this spot! I beg you, hear me out, Papa, Papa!”

So, I thought, you want to force me. No, my darling! If that’s so, it’s a sign you don’t know your father. I whipped the horse for all he was worth, and he obeyed. But as he sprang forward, he turned his head back, his ears flattened. “Giddyap!” I said to him. “*Judge not the vessel but its contents!*—don’t look, my clever boy, where you aren’t supposed to.” And you must know how much I wanted to turn and look back at the spot where she was standing.

But no, Tevye is not a woman. Tevye knows how to conduct himself before Satan the Tempter.

In a word—I won’t go on at length, why waste your time?—I may indeed suffer the punishments of the damned after death, but I have surely atoned for my sins already. If you want to have a taste of *gehennam* and know the rest of the agonies of those roasted and boiled in the holy books, ask me, and I will tell you all about them! All along the way I imagined she was running after the wagon, shouting, “Listen to me, Papa, Papa!” For a moment I wondered what would be so bad if I stopped for a while and listened to what she had to say. Maybe she had something to tell me that I needed to know. Maybe, who knew, she’d changed her mind and wanted to turn back. Maybe he’d rejected her and she was asking me to help her get out of *gehennam*. Maybe and maybe and many more maybes flew through my mind, and I still imagined her as a small child. I was reminded of the verse *As a father pitieth his children*—to a father there is no such thing as a bad child. And I blamed myself and said I was *not deserving of pity*—not worth the ground that bore me!

What are you getting so worked up about, you stubborn madman? I reproached myself. Why are you carrying on? Go, you brute, turn the wagon around and make it up with her! She is your child, not anyone else’s! And all sorts of strange thoughts came to my mind: What did it mean to be a Jew, and what did it mean to be a non-Jew? And why did God create Jews and non-Jews, and why were they so set apart from one another, unable to get along, as if one had been created by God and the other not? To my regret, not being as learned as

others in books and religious texts, I could not find an answer to these questions.

To drive away my thoughts, I began to chant the evening prayer, the *ashrei*: *Blessed are they who dwell in Thy house, and they shall continue to praise Thee*. And I was chanting the *mincha* out loud and singing as God had commanded. But praying and chanting were of no use when my heart was singing another tune: “Cha-va! Cha-va! Cha-va!” And the louder I chanted the *ashrei*, the louder I sang “Chava,” and the more I wanted to forget her, the clearer she stood before my eyes. Over and over I imagined her voice calling to me: “Hear me out, Papa, Papa!” I covered my ears so as not to hear her and shut my eyes so as not to see her as I recited the Eighteen Benedictions. I couldn’t hear my own praying until I beat my breast and I chanted, *For we have sinned, ashamnu*, but I didn’t know how I had sinned. All I knew was that my life was in turmoil, and I was in turmoil.

I told no one of my seeing Chava, and I spoke to no one of her, and I asked no one about her, although I knew quite well where she was and where he was and what they were doing. But they could croak before I’d let anyone know. My enemies would never live to see me complain. That’s the kind of person Tevye is!

Are all men like that, or am I the only crazy one? For instance, it sometimes happens—you won’t laugh at me? I’m afraid you’ll laugh at me—it sometimes happens that I put on my Shabbes caftan and go to the railway station, planning to get on a train to them, where I know they live. I go up to the ticket window and ask for a ticket. He asks, “Where to?” I tell him, “To Yehupetz.” He says, “There’s no such place.” I say, “That’s not my fault,” and I turn around and go home. I take off the Shabbes caftan and get back to work, to the little dairy and the horse and wagon. As it is written, *Man goeth forth unto his work and unto his labor*—the tailor to the shears and the cobbler to the last.

Aha, you are laughing at me? What did I tell you? I even know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking, That Tevye is really a big imbecile!

And as we say on Shabbes, it’s time to call it a day. Be well and strong and write me letters. But for God’s sake, don’t forget what I asked of you. I mean, don’t make a book out of this, and if it should happen that you do, write like it’s someone else, not me. Forget about me. As it says in the Bible: *And he was forgotten*—no more Tevye the dairyman!

SHPRINTZE

WRITTEN IN 1907.

I owe you a big, hearty *sholem aleichem*, Pani Sholem Aleichem, you and your children! It's been a good long time since we've seen each other! My, my, how much water has flowed under the bridge since then, how many troubles both of us and all of Israel have endured in these years—a Kishinev, a *constitutzia*, more pogroms, more sorrows and disasters—ach, Father of the Universe, God in Heaven! I am simply amazed, forgive me for saying so, but you haven't changed so much as a hair, *kayn eyn horeh, kayn eyn horeh!* But look at me: *Behold! I am like unto a man of seventy*—and I am not yet sixty and see how white Tevye has become! There's a saying about the heartaches one has from children, and who has had as many heartaches from children as I have? A new catastrophe befell me with my daughter Shprintze, and it outdoes all the other troubles I've told you about. But look at me! I am still alive as if nothing had happened. As it is written: *Against thy own will, thou livest*—even though you fall apart and this song comes to your lips: what worth is life, what worth the world, without luck, without money?

In short, how does the verse go: *The Holy One, Blessed be He, wishes to bestow favor*—God wanted to do something for His Jews, and so a misfortune befell us, a disaster, a *constitutzia!* Ay, a *constitutzia!* Suddenly our rich people panicked and stampeded out of Yehupetz, heading abroad, supposedly to the spas to take the waters, to the mineral baths to calm their nerves—pure nonsense. As soon as they fled Yehupetz, Boiberik, with its fresh air, its pine woods, and its dachas, was in deep trouble. As we say in the morning prayers: *Blessed be He who hath mercy upon the earth.* What happened to Boiberik? Our mighty God sees to it that His poor people have to struggle on this earth, and so we had quite a summer—ay ay ay! People poured into Boiberik in droves from Odessa, from Rostov, Katerineslav, Mohliv, and Kishenev—thousands of rich

folks! Apparently the *constitutzia* came down harder on them than on us in Yehupetz. That's why they kept running here. Why were those rich folks running *here*? Why were our rich folks running *there*? It has become a custom among us, blessed be His name, that when there is a rumor of a pogrom, Jews run from one city to another, as it says in the verse: *And they journeyed and they encamped and they encamped and they journeyed*—which means: you come to me, and I'll go to you.

Meanwhile Boiberik became terribly crowded, packed with men, women, and children. And since children like to eat and they need milk, where do you get milk if not from Tevye? I can tell you, Tevye became all the rage. Wherever you went it was Reb Tevye and again Tevye! Reb Tevye, come here! No, Reb Tevye, come to me! If God wills it, who am I to say no?

And it came to pass—here's what happened. It was just before Shevuos, and I was delivering dairy to one of my customers, a wealthy young widow from Katerineslav who had arrived in Boiberik for the summer with her son Ahronchik. Naturally I was the first person she became acquainted with in Boiberik.

“You were recommended,” the widow said, “for having the best dairy.”

“How can it be otherwise?” I said to her. “Not for nothing did King Solomon say that a good name is heard like a *shofar* everywhere, and if you want,” I said, “I will tell you what the commentaries have to say about it.” But she interrupted me and told me she was a widow and was not learned in those matters, didn't know one commentary from another. The most important thing was for the butter to be fresh and the cheese tasty. *Nu*, can you talk to a woman?

From then on I came around to the Katerineslaver widow twice a week, every Monday and Thursday, like clockwork, and delivered her small order of dairy without ever asking whether or not she needed it. I became quite friendly with her and naturally looked around at the way she lived, peeked into the kitchen, and a few times said what I thought. The first time, of course, the maid gave me a scolding and told me to stop poking around in other people's pots. The second time they listened to what I had to say, and the third time the widow asked for my opinion, because she realized who Tevye was. The long and the short of it was that she confided in me her problem, her pain, her sorrow—Ahronchik! This young man of twenty was interested only in horses, bicycles, and fishing, and beyond that he cared for nothing—not for business or for making money. His

father had left him a fine inheritance, almost a million, but he didn't bother to look after it! All he knew, she said, was to spend money with a free hand! "Where is the boy?" I asked. "Just let me at him. I'll have a talk with him about morals, quote a few verses, and read him a midrash."

"You would do better to bring him a horse than a midrash!" she laughed.

Just as we were talking about him, Ahronchik himself arrived, a slender, tall, healthy young man, full of energy, wearing a broad sash around his waist and a pocket watch stuck into his belt, sleeves rolled up to the elbows.

"Where have you been?" his mother asked.

"I went sailing," he said, "and caught fish."

"Fine work," I said, "for a fellow like yourself. Back home your money is dwindling away, and you're here catching fish!"

My widow turned red as a beet. She surely expected her son to grab me by the collar with one strong arm and *smite me as the Lord smote the Egyptians, with signs and symbols*—that is, give me two smacks and toss me out like a broken potsherd. But no! Tevye is not frightened of such things! When I have something to say, I say it!

Here's what happened. When the boy heard my words, he stepped back, clasped his hands behind him, regarded me from the top of my head to the tip of my toes, and let out a strange whistle. Suddenly he began laughing so hard that we were both afraid the poor boy had instantly gone mad. What else is there to say? From that moment on we became the best of friends! I must tell you I grew more and more fond of the fellow, even though he was a rake and a spendthrift, too free with money, and something of a fool. For instance, if he ran across a beggar, he would put his hand in his pocket and give away whatever he found there without counting it. Or he would take off a perfectly good new coat and give it to someone. Who did such things?

It was hard on his mother. "What can I do?" she would lament to me, and beg me to have a talk with him. I agreed—why not? Would it cost me anything? I sat down to talk things over with him, threw in examples and some quotations, mixed in a midrash or two, and a few proverbs as only Tevye can.

He seemed to enjoy listening to me and asked what my life was like at home. "I would love," he said, "to come to you sometimes, Reb Tevye."

“If you want to come to Tevye,” I said to him, “you just come on over to my farm. You have enough horses and bicycles, and in a pinch you could use your own two legs. It isn’t far, and it’s easy to cut through the woods.”

“When are you at home?”

“You can only find me at home,” I said, “Shabbes or on holidays. Listen, do you know what? God willing, a week from Friday is Shevuos. If you like,” I said, “walk over to us at the farm, and my wife will treat you to cheese blintzes the likes of which your *blessed ancestors never partook of in Egypt.*”

“What’s this? You know I’m weak in biblical quotations.”

“I know,” I said. “You are weak. If you had gone to *cheder*, as I did, you too would know what the rabbis know.”

He laughed. “Good, you will have me as a guest! I will come to you, Reb Tevye, on the first day of Shevuos with a few friends for blintzes. But see to it they are hot!”

“Fire and flame inside and out,” I said, “from the frying pan right into your mouth!”

I arrived home. “Golde,” I called out. “We have guests for Shevuos!”

“*Mazel tov* to you,” she said. “Who are they?”

“I’ll tell you later,” I said. “You just prepare eggs. Cheese and butter, we have enough, praise God. You’ll make blintzes for four extra people.” I said, “They really know how to eat but don’t begin to know about Rashi.”

“I knew it. You went and picked up a *shlimazel* from the land of the starving.”

“You’re a silly fool, Golde!” I said. “What would be so terrible if we did feed a poor person some Shevuos blintzes? But you should know, my most esteemed, honored, and beloved wife, that one of our Shevuos guests is the widow’s son, the one they call Ahronchik. I told you about him.”

“Well,” she said, “that’s another story.”

The power of millions! Even my Golde, when she sniffs out money, becomes another person. That’s the kind of world it is—what can you do? As it is written in the Hallel: *Gold and silver, the work of man’s hands—wealth ruins a person.*

The bright spring holiday of Shevuos arrived. I don’t need to tell you how

lovely, green, and warm my farm becomes at Shevuos. The richest man in town would wish for such blue skies, such green woods fragrant with pines, and such delicious pasture grass for the cows, which stand and chew and look right into your eyes as if to say, “Always give us grass like this, and we won’t hold back any milk!” No, say what you will, I wouldn’t trade it for the best livelihood in the city. Where in the city do you have this sky? How do we say in the Hallel: *The heavens are the Lord’s*—it is a God-given sky! In the city if you raise your head, what do you see? A brick wall, a roof, a chimney—but where is there a tree?

When my guests came to my farm for Shevuos, they could not get over it. Four young fellows came on horseback, one behind the other. And Ahronchik, I tell you, sat on an Arabian steed! You couldn’t buy that horse for three hundred rubles!

“Welcome, guests!” I said to them. “I see that in honor of Holy Shevuos you’ve come riding on horseback? That’s all right. Tevye is not one of the pious ones either, and if you are punished for it in the world to come, it won’t hurt me. Ay, Golde! Get the blintzes ready, and let’s carry the table outside. I have nothing to show my guests in the house.”

“Shprintze! Teibl! Beilke! Where are you? Move faster!” I ordered my daughters, who brought out a table with benches, a tablecloth, platters, spoons, forks, and salt. Right after that came Golde with the blintzes, piping hot, steaming, straight from the frying pan, delicious, plump, and sweet as honey! My guests could not praise the blintzes enough.

“Why are you standing there?” I said to Golde, “Go on, say the verse again. Today is Shevuos, and you have to repeat the prayer to welcome the guests.” And my Golde said it, then filled the serving dish again, and Shprintze brought the blintzes to the table. I noticed that this Ahronchik was staring at my Shprintze, not taking his eyes off her! What did he see in her? “Eat,” I said to him. “Why don’t you eat?”

“What do you think I am doing?” he said.

“You’re looking at my Shprintze,” I said. Everyone laughed, and my Shprintze laughed as well. They were all happy, all enjoying themselves. It was a happy Shevuos for all! How could I have guessed that this happiness would turn into great sorrow and torment, that God would wreak punishment on my head, darkening and devastating my life?

A man is a fool! An intelligent man must not allow things to touch his heart and must understand that the way it is, is the way it's supposed to be, because if it had to be otherwise, it wouldn't be the way it is! Don't we say in the Psalms, *Put your trust in God*? Trust in God, and He will make it so that you lie nine cubits deep in the earth baking bagels in the netherworld, and still you must say, this too is for the best! Listen to what can happen in the world, but listen with understanding, because here is where the real story begins.

And it was evening and it was day. One night I came home exhausted from a day of running from dacha to dacha in Boiberik. Outside my house I found hitched to the door a familiar-looking horse that I could have sworn was Ahronchik's Arabian, the one I had admired and valued at three hundred rubles. I went up and slapped the horse's flank with one hand and with the other scratched his neck and ruffled his mane. "Here, my good fellow," I said to him, "my handsome fellow! What are you doing here?" He turned his fine head to me and looked at me with intelligent eyes, as if to say, "Why are you asking me? Ask my master."

I went into the house. "Tell me, dearest Golde, what is Ahronchik doing here?" I asked.

"How should I know? He's one of your friends," she said.

"Where is he?"

"He went with the children for a stroll in the woods."

"A stroll? Out of the clear blue sky? Why?" I asked my wife to bring me food. Having finished eating, I wondered why I was so worked up. If a person came to visit, did I really have to be in such a huff? On the contrary.

Just then I looked up. My girls were walking with the young man, carrying bouquets of flowers. First came the two younger ones, Teibl and Beilke, and behind them, my Shprintze with Ahronchik.

"Good evening!"

Ahronchik was standing in a peculiar way, stroking his horse, chewing a blade of grass. Then he declared, "Reb Tevye! I want to do some business with you. Let's trade horses."

"You haven't found anyone else to make fun of?" I said.

“No, I am very serious,” he said.

“You are really serious? How much did your horse cost?”

“How much,” he said, “do you think he’s worth?”

“I’m afraid he’s worth three hundred rubles and maybe a bit more.”

He burst out laughing and said the horse cost more than three times as much. “So? Are we making a trade?” he said.

I didn’t like the way this conversation was going. What did he mean, he would trade his steed for my *shlimazel*! I told him to put it off for another time. Was that the reason he had come here? I asked him jokingly. If so, it was a wasted trip.

He answered me in all seriousness. “I came here, actually, for another reason. Be so kind as to take a little stroll with me.”

What kind of stroll did he have in mind? I wondered, but went along with him to the woods. The sun had long ago set, the green woods were darkening, the frogs from the pond were croaking, and the grass was deliciously fragrant. Ahronchik walked and I walked; he was silent and I was silent. Then he stopped and cleared his throat. “Reb Tevye! What would you say if I told you that I love your Shprintze and want to take her as my wife?”

“What would I say?” I said. “I’d say you could take the place of a madman without anyone noticing.”

“What do you mean?” He stared at me.

“I mean what I said!”

“I don’t understand you.”

“That’s a sign,” I said, “that you aren’t terribly bright. As it is written: *The wise man hath eyes in his head*—a smart man understands with a wink, but a fool needs a stick.”

“I’m speaking very plainly to you and you answer me with jokes and quotations!” He was angry.

“Every cantor sings the way he can,” I said, “and every preacher preaches his own way. If you want to know what kind of preacher you are, talk it over beforehand with your mother. She will straighten you out.”

“Do you consider me a child who has to ask his mother?”

“Certainly you have to ask your mother, and your mother will surely tell you that you’re an idiot, and she will be right,” I said.

“She’ll be right?”

“Definitely. She will be right because what kind of husband are you for my Shprintze? How is she your equal? And most important,” I said, “what have I to do with your mother?”

“If that’s the case, Reb Tevye, you have made a grave error! I am not a boy of eighteen and am not seeking in-laws for my mother. I know who you are, and I know who your daughter is. I like her, and that’s the way I want it, and that’s the way it will be!”

“Forgive me,” I said. “I see you have taken care of one side of the family. Have you settled with the other side?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean my daughter Shprintze,” I said. “Have you talked this over with her, and what does she have to say about it?”

He looked insulted but gave a little smile. “What kind of question is that? Of course I’ve talked to her about it, and more than once—several times. I come here every day.”

Do you hear that? He comes every day, and I don’t know about it! I’m an ass, not a man! I should be given straw to chew! If that’s the way I let myself be led by the nose, I will be bought and sold! I’m a horse’s ass!

That was what I was thinking as I entered the house with Ahronchik. He said goodbye to my family, jumped on his horse, and rode off to Boiberik.

Now we will, as you say in your books, leave the prince and follow the princess, Shprintze. “Answer me something, my daughter,” I said. “What has this Ahronchik discussed with you of such importance without my knowing about it?”

Does a tree answer? She blushed, lowered her eyes like a bride, swallowed a full mouthful of water, and—silence!

Bah! I thought to myself. If you don’t want to talk now, you’ll talk to me a little later. Tevye is not a woman. He has time! I waited awhile and watched for

the moment when we would be alone. Then I said to her, “Shprintze, do you at least know him, this Ahronchik?”

“Of course I know him,” she said.

“Do you know he is nothing but a pennywhistle?”

“What is a pennywhistle?”

“It’s an empty walnut shell that whistles.”

“You are mistaken,” she said. “Arnold is a good person.”

“So now he’s Arnold,” I said, “not Ahronchik the charlatan?”

“Arnold is not a charlatan. Arnold has a good heart. Arnold,” she said, “comes from a house of corrupt people who care only about money and more money.”

“So, Shprintze,” I said, “you’ve also become an enlightened philosopher who despises money?”

I could see that things had gone quite far and that it was too late to go back because I know my daughters. Tevye’s daughters, as I once told you, when they get attached to someone, it’s with their entire life and heart and soul! And I thought to myself, Fool! Why should I want to be wiser than the whole world? Maybe God wished that through this quiet Shprintze I would come out ahead, be repaid for all the blows and pains I’d endured till now, have a good old age, and perhaps also have a decent life. Maybe it was fated that one of my daughters become a millionairess. And why not? Was I too proud? Where was it written that I always had to be a pauper, always dragging around with the horse and cheese and butter to stuff the mouths of the Yehupetz rich folks? Who knew, maybe it was inscribed Above that in my old age I would be a righter of wrongs, a philanthropist, entertain guests, and perhaps sit down with other Jews to study Torah.

Those and other such satisfying thoughts filled my head. As it is written in the Morning Prayers, *Many are the thoughts in a man’s heart*—or as a Gentile says, “An idea enriches a fool!”

I went into the house, took my old one aside, and had a talk with her. “How would it be,” I said, “if our Shprintze became a millionairess?”

“What’s a millionairess?” she asked.

“A millionairess means a millionaire’s wife.”

“What’s a millionaire?”

“A millionaire is a person who has a million.”

“How much is a million?”

“If you’re such a moron and don’t know how much a million is, what is there to talk about?”

“Who asked you to talk?” She was right.

Another day passed, and I came home and asked, “Has Ahronchik been here?” No, he hadn’t. Another day passed. “Has the young man been here?” No, he hadn’t. To go to the widow for an explanation wasn’t proper. I didn’t want her to think Tevye was pushing for the match. To her this all had to be *as a lily among thorns*—like a fifth wheel on a wagon, though I didn’t understand why. Was it because I didn’t have a million? *I* would have an in-law who was a millionairess, but whom would *she* have as an in-law? An impoverished Jew, a pauper, a Tevye the dairyman! Who, then, had more to be proud of, I or she? To tell the honest truth, I was beginning to want this match, not so much for its own sake as for the triumph of it. To hell with those Yehupetzer rich folks! Let them know who Tevye was! Till now, all you ever heard was Brodsky and again Brodsky, as if no one else existed!

That was what I was thinking as I drove home from Boiberik. Then my wife greeted me with excitement. “A messenger was just here from Boiberik, from the widow, asking you to go right back there, even if it is night! She says you should turn around and hurry back—you are badly needed there!”

“What’s the rush? Don’t they have time?” I took a quick look at my Shprintze, who didn’t say a word, but her eyes spoke—oy, did they speak! No one understood her heart better than I. I had been afraid that nothing would come of his proposal. I spoke my mind to her, told her that he was thus and so, but I was wasting my breath. And my Shprintze was wasting away like a candle.

I rigged up my horse and wagon again and left just before nightfall for Boiberik, wondering what they could want to talk to me about that was so urgent. An engagement? A betrothal? He could have come to me. After all, I was the father of the bride! Then I laughed. Unless the end of the world or the Messiah had come, whoever heard of a rich man going to the poor man? These young folks, the ne’er-do-wells, wanted me to believe that there would soon come a time when the rich man and the poor man would be equals—what was

yours would be mine, and what was mine would be yours—anything goes! It's a clever world we live in, but it has such fools in it!

I arrived in Boiberik, went directly to the widow's dacha, and tied up my horse. Where was she? No widow at home. Where was the young man? No young man either. Who then had sent for me?

"I sent for you!" said a stout, solidly built Jew with a sparse little beard and a heavy gold chain across his belly.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I am the widow's brother and Ahronchik's uncle. I was summoned from Katerineslav by telegram and I just arrived," he said.

"If that is so, here's a big welcome to you," I said and sat down.

"Sit down," he said.

"Thank you, I'm already sitting. How is the *constitutzia* going for you?"

He didn't reply but made himself comfortable in a rocking chair. Shoving his hands in his pockets, he stuck out the gold chain and his belly and said, "I understand you are Tevye?"

"Yes. When I am called to bless the Torah, they say, 'Arise, Reb Tevye, son of Shneur Zalman.' "

"Listen, Reb Tevye, to what I tell you," he said. "Why should we waste words? Let's get right down to business."

"Fine," I said. "King Solomon always used to say, *For everything there is a time*—when it's time to talk business, it's business. I am a businessman."

"It's plain," he said, "that you are a businessman, and that's why I want to talk to you in a businesslike way. Tell me frankly how much it will cost us all told. Be frank about it!"

"Since you ask me to be frank about it," I said, "I can only say that I do not know what you are talking about."

"Reb Tevye!" His hands were still in his pockets. "I am asking you how much the wedding will cost us all told."

"That depends on what kind of wedding you are thinking about," I said. "If you want a fancy wedding, as befits you, I am not capable of paying for it."

He glared at me. “Either you are playing dumb or you are an oaf, although you don’t look like one. If you were an oaf, you wouldn’t have dragged my nephew into this mess, inviting him for Shevuos blintzes and tempting him with a pretty girl. I won’t get into whether she is really your daughter. He fell in love with her, and she with him. It’s possible she is a very special child and means well, I won’t get into that. But you mustn’t forget who *you* are and who *we* are. You are a man of learning, so how can you even consider that Tevye the dairyman, who delivers cheese and butter to us, could be our in-law? Ay, they gave each other their word, you say? They will take it back! No great tragedy will come of it. If it costs something for her to release him from his promise, that’s fine—we have nothing against that. A girl is not a boy, whether a daughter or not,” he said. “I won’t get into that.”

God in heaven! I wondered. What did this man want? He kept on talking, saying that I shouldn’t even think of making a scandal, of spreading it around that his nephew had made a match with Tevye the dairyman’s daughter, and that I should get it out of my head that his sister was a person whom you could take for a lot of money. If I didn’t make trouble, then I could get a few rubles from her, you know, as charity. They were, after all, decent people; sometimes you had to help someone out.

Well, do you want to know what I answered him? Woe unto me, I said nothing! *May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.* I was speechless! I got up, turned to the door, and was gone! I fled as if from a fire, from a prison! My head was buzzing, lights flickered in front of my eyes, and that man’s words echoed in my ears: “*talk business,*” “*whether really your daughter,*” “*take for a lot of money,*” “*charity.*” I walked over to my horse and wagon, laid my face against it, and—you won’t laugh at me?—burst into tears. I cried and cried! When I had cried myself out, I got up on the driver’s seat and laid into my poor horse with as much as he could take. Only then did I ask a question of God, as Job had once asked. *What, dear God, did You see in old Job that You never let up on him for even a moment? Aren’t there any other Jews in the world?*

I arrived home and found my family, *kayn eyn horeh*, cheerful. They were eating supper. Shprintze was missing.

“Where is Shprintze?” I asked.

“What happened?” they asked. “Why did they call you there?”

“Where is Shprintze?”

“What happened there?”

“Nothing,” I said. “What should happen? It’s quiet, thank God. There are no pogroms.”

Then Shprintze came in, looked into my eyes, and sat down at the table as if nothing were going on, as if we weren’t talking about her. Her face betrayed nothing, but her stillness was now too much, not natural. I did not like the way she was sitting deep in thought or the way she complied with everything she was told to do. If you told her to sit, she sat. If you told her to eat, she ate. If you told her to go, she went. And if you called her name, she startled. My heart ached for her, and a rage was burning in me, against whom I did not know. *O Thou Lord of the Universe, God in heaven! Why do you punish me so? For whose sins?*

To make a long story short—do you want to know the end? I would not wish that end on my worst enemy, on anyone, because the curse of children is the worst curse found in the biblical book of curses! How do I know that someone didn’t curse me with children? You don’t believe in these things? How then to explain it? Let’s hear what you have to say. But why should I speculate? Better to hear the ending I have to tell.

One evening I came home from Boiberik with a heavy heart. Imagine the child’s grief, her humiliation. The sheer pity for her! The widow and her son? They went off without so much as a goodbye! It’s an embarrassment to say it, but they left owing me money for cheese and butter! I’m not speaking of that; they probably forgot. I am speaking of their leaving without a goodbye. What that poor child went through no one ever knew except me, because I am a father and a father’s heart understands. Do you think she said so much as a word to me, that she lamented or wept? Eh! Then you don’t know Tevye’s daughters! Quietly, turning inward into herself, she languished and flickered like a dying candle. Once in a while she would utter a sigh, the kind that tears out a piece of your heart.

One day I was riding home, sunk in sorrowful thoughts, asking questions of the Almighty and answering them myself. I wasn’t worried about God—I had more or less made my peace with Him. I was upset about people. Why should people be so bad when they can be good? Why should people embitter the lives of others as well as their own when life could be sweet and happy for all? Is it a given that God created man in order to have him suffer? Of what use was that for Him?

I drove in to my farm and saw, in the distance, a crowd of people, peasants from the village, near the pond. What could it be? There was no fire. Perhaps it was a drowning; someone had been swimming in the pond and met his death. *No one knows where the Angel of Death awaits him*, as we say in the *U'netaneh tokef* on Yom Kippur.

Suddenly my Golde came running, her shawl flying, her arms stretched out in front of her, and ahead of her were Teibl and Beilke, and all three were screaming and wailing and weeping, “Daughter! Sister! Shprintze!” I sprang down from the wagon so quickly, I nearly broke apart. But by the time I got to the pond it was too late.

What did I want to ask you? Yes! Have you ever seen a drowned person? Never? When a person dies, most of the time he dies with his eyes shut. A drowned person’s eyes are open. Do you know why? Forgive me for taking up so much of your time. I too am busy. I have to tend to my horse and deliver my goods. The world remains a world. And you must also think of earning money—and to forget what has been, because what the earth has covered up must, they say, be forgotten, and if you are a living human being, you cannot spit out your soul. You can’t get around it, and we must return to the old saying that as long as *my soul abides within me*—you have to keep on going, Tevye! Be well, and if you do think of me, don’t think ill of me.

TEVYE IS GOING TO ERETZ YISROEL

Told by Tevye the dairyman as he was riding on a train

WRITTEN IN 1909.

Well, what a surprise! I never expected to find you here! That I'd be seeing you! How are you, Reb Sholem Aleichem? I'd been wondering why I haven't seen you in such a long time, not in Boiberik, not in Yehupetz. Who knows what happens to a person? Maybe he cashed it all in and took himself to that other place where they don't eat radishes with *shmaltz*. But then again, I thought to myself, why would you do a foolish thing like that? After all, you're a reasonable person! So praise His holy name, now I see you again and in good health. As it is said, "Two mountains never meet"—but two men can. You are looking at me, Pani Sholem Aleichem, as if you don't remember who I am. It's me, your old friend Tevye. "Look not at the storage jar but at what it stores"—don't be taken in because a Jew is wearing a new coat. It's the same *shlimazel* Tevye as always, not changed a hair. If you put on a Shabbes suit, you look a little better, like a man with money, because if you go out among people, you must look presentable, especially if you are starting out on a long journey as I am, to Eretz Yisroel, that's no small matter.

You are probably wondering how a fellow like me, who always dealt in dairy, can afford to travel in his old age like a Brodsky. Believe me, Pani Sholem Aleichem, it's as they say "altogether questionable," and that quote is right on the mark. Move your suitcase over a bit, if you please, and I'll sit down next to you and I'll tell you a story. And you will be in awe at what God can do.

I must tell you first of all that I am a widower, may it not happen to you. My Golde, may she rest in peace, was a simple woman without pretensions or guile,

but a true saint, may she intercede on behalf of her children. She suffered plenty for their sakes and perhaps even left this world when she did on account of them. She couldn't take it anymore, because they had all gone off, scattered to the winds. "My heart is broken," she said. "What is my life when there isn't a child about? Even a cow, no comparison intended," she would say, "grieves if you take away her calf." That's what Golde said to me as she wept bitter tears.

The woman was fading like a candle from day to day. I spoke comforting words to her from my heart out of pity and sorrow. "Come now, my darling," I said. "There is a saying, 'Judge us as Thy sons or judge us as Thy servants'—it is the same with children as without children. We have," I said, "a great God and a good God and a strong God, but still may I have as many blessings as the times the One Above did me in, may it befall my enemies."

But she was, forgive me, a woman, and she said to me, "You sin, Tevye, you mustn't sin."

"What did I say wrong?" I said. "Am I saying something against God and His ways? Since He did such a wonderful job of creating this little world of ours, a world in which children don't behave like children and parents are worth little in their eyes, He most likely knew what He was doing."

She didn't understand a word I was saying, and spoke in a whisper. "I am dying, Tevye. Who will cook supper for you?" Her eyes would have moved a stone to tears.

But Tevye is not a woman, and so I answered her with a saying and a commentary and a chapter and another midrash. "Golde," I said, "you've been devoted to me for so many years. Don't make fun of me in my old age." I looked at her. She did look dreadful. "What's the matter with you, Golde?"

"Nothing," she said, barely able to speak.

Ach! Seeing that the devil was doing his work, I hitched up my horse and sped to town for a doctor, the best doctor I could find. I arrived home—dear God! My Golde was already laid out on the ground with a candle at her head, looking like a small mound of earth that had been swept up and covered with a black cloth. For this is the whole of man, I thought. Is this the way a person ends up? Oh you Lord of the Universe, what have you done to Tevye? What will I do now in my old age, in my miserable old age?

I dropped to the ground beside her, but what good would that do? Do you hear

what I'm saying? Once you see death before your eyes, you must become a heretic and begin to reason, *for that is the whole of man*. What does it all amount to, this world of devils speeding around in trains, running crazily in circles, when even Brodsky with his millions comes to nothing in the end?

To make a long story short, I hired a Jew to say kaddish for her, may she rest in peace, paying him for a whole year in advance. I had no choice since God had punished me by giving me only daughters and more daughters. Not one son, may no Jew know that fate. Do other Jews suffer as much with their daughters as I have? Or am I a miserable *shlimazel* who simply has no luck? I don't have anything against my daughters, and luck is in God's hands. May I have half as much as what my daughters wish for me. If anything, they are too devoted, much too devoted.

Take, for example, my youngest one, Beilke. You have no idea what kind of child she is. You've known me forever, it seems, and you know I am not the kind of father who will praise his children. But when I speak of my Beilke, I cannot say more than two words. Ever since God has created Beilkes, He hasn't created another like my Beilke. Well, of beauty we don't have to talk. Tevye's daughters, as you have seen, are known far and wide as the greatest beauties, but she, Beilke, puts them all to shame. There is no comparison! To describe her properly, you would have to use the words of *eyshes chayil*: *Charm is a deception*—a woman of valor. I am not speaking so much of beauty as I am of character. Gold, I tell you, pure gold! From the very beginning I was her favorite, but since my Golde passed away, may she have had more years, Beilke's father became the most important person in her life. Not a speck of dust did she allow to fall on me. I said to myself, as we say in the Rosh Hashanah prayer, *The Lord precedes anger with mercy*—the One Above sends us the remedy for the affliction He has caused. And do you know, I am not sure which is worse, the remedy or the affliction. Who could be a prophet and guess that Beilke would sell herself to send her father to Eretz Yisroel in his old age? Of course, that's only a manner of speaking—she is as guilty of selling herself as you are. The one who was entirely guilty is her intended. I don't wish to curse him, but may a powder keg blow him up. And if I really think about it, ponder it more deeply, I myself may be more to blame than anyone. There is a special saying in the Gemorah: *Man is guilt-ridden*—but surely I don't need to tell you what the Gemorah says!

Anyhow, I won't keep you long. The years went by. My Beilke grew up,

became a proper lady, *kayn eyn horeh*, and Tevye carried on his own business, as always, with his horse and wagon, delivering his wares, summers to Boiberik, winters to Yehupetz, may fire and brimstone befall it like Sodom! I cannot abide that city, and not so much the town as the people, and not so much the people as one person—Ephraim the matchmaker, may a curse befall his father's father. Listen to what a matchmaker can stir up.

One day in the middle of Elul I arrived in Yehupetz with my meager merchandise. I looked up, and Haman himself—Ephraim the matchmaker—was walking toward me! I once told you about him. Ephraim is a stubborn man, but once you see him, you have to stop. That's the kind of effect that that Jew has on you.

“Hold up a minute, my sage,” I said to my horse, “and I'll give you something to chew.” Then I greeted Ephraim the matchmaker. “How's business?”

He gave a deep sigh. “It's bitter!”

“In what way?” I asked.

“There's nothing doing.”

“Really? What's the problem?”

“The problem,” he said, “is that matches aren't arranged at home these days.”

“Where then are they arranged?”

“Somewhere abroad.”

“So what would I do when my grandfather's grandmother never went there?”

“For you, Reb Tevye”—he handed me a pinch of snuff—“I have a special piece of merchandise, right here on the spot.”

“Is that so?”

“A widow lady without children, worth five hundred rubles. She was a cook in all the finest homes.”

I looked at him. “Reb Ephraim, for whom are you making this match?”

“Who else would I be making it for? For you,” he said.

“May all my nightmares fall on my enemies' heads!” I gave my horse a lash of the whip, wanting to drive on.

Ephraim said, “Don’t get so offended, Reb Tevye. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. Who were *you* thinking of?”

“Who else would I mean if not my youngest daughter?”

He sprang back and slapped his forehead. “Of course! It’s a good thing you reminded me, long life to you, Reb Tevye.”

“Amen, the same to you. May you live until the Messiah comes. But tell me why you are so excited.”

“This is wonderful, Reb Tevye, really good, couldn’t be better!” he said.

“In what way? What’s so good about it?”

“I have for your youngest,” he said, “a match, a perfect choice, a rare find, a stroke of luck, a rich man, a prince, a millionaire, a second Brodsky—a contractor named Podhotsur!”

“Podhotsur? A familiar name from the Bible.”

“What Bible!” he said. “He’s a contractor, this Podhotsur. He builds houses, walls, and factories. He was in Japan during the war and brought back a fortune. He drives around in carriages with fiery steeds, has servants at the door, a private bathtub inside the house, and furniture from Paris. He wears a diamond ring. And he’s not even old—a bachelor, prime goods! He’s looking for a nice girl and will take her as she is, no questions asked, so long as she’s a beauty!”

“Stop!” I said. “If you don’t slow down, Reb Ephraim, we’ll wind up in Hotzenklotz! If I’m not mistaken, you tried to make this same match for my daughter Hodl.”

Ephraim grabbed his sides and laughed so hard, I thought he was having an apoplectic fit. “Aha,” he said, “so you’re remembering a story from ancient times. That one went broke before the war and ran off to America!”

“May his memory be for a blessing,” I said. “Maybe this one will also run off there.”

The matchmaker blew up. “What are you talking about, Reb Tevye? That one was a nothing, a charlatan, a spendthrift! This one is a contractor, with army contracts, with businesses, with shops, with people working for him, with—with —”

What can I say? The matchmaker got so worked up, he pulled me out of the

wagon. He grabbed me by the lapels and shook me so hard, a policeman came along and wanted to throw us both in jail. Luckily, I remembered the commentary: *Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury*—you have to know how to deal with the police.

To make a long story short—why should I keep you?—this Podhotsur became engaged to my youngest daughter Beilke. But it took some time before the wedding canopy was raised. Why? Because Beilke would rather die than go through with the marriage. The more Podhotsur showered her with gifts and gold watches and diamond rings, the more he revolted her. She didn't have to spell it out for me. I saw it in her face and in her eyes and in her silent weeping.

I decided to have a talk with her. “Listen, Beilke, I'm afraid you love Podhotsur about as much as I do.”

Her face turned fiery red. “Who told you that?”

“There's a lot of crying at night.”

“Am I crying?”

“No, you're not crying,” I said, “you're sobbing. Do you think that by hiding your head in the pillow, you hide your tears from me? Do you think your father is a youngster or that his mind has dried up and he doesn't understand that you're doing this for his sake? You want to ensure him a comfortable old age so he'll have somewhere to lay his head and won't have to go begging in the streets, God forbid. If that's your intention,” I said, “you are foolish. We have a great God,” I said, “and Tevye would not be the first person to beg for his bread. And money *is as dirt*, as it says in the Bible. Here is the proof—your sister Hodl is as poor as can be, and yet see how she writes from who knows where, from the ends of the earth, that she considers herself lucky with her *shlimazel* Fefferl!”

Can you guess what her reply was?

“Don't compare me to Hodl,” Beilke said. “Hodl lived at a time when the whole world was in chaos, about to turn upside down, and people were worrying about that and forgetting about themselves. But now,” she said, “that the world is calm again, everyone is worried about himself, and they've forgotten about the world.”

I couldn't figure out what she meant! *Nu*, you are something of an expert on Tevye's daughters. You should have seen her at her wedding—a princess! I

glowed with pride and marveled. Was this really Beilke, Tevye's daughter? Where had she learned to stand like that, to walk like that, and to hold her head and to dress as if she had been poured into her clothes? But I couldn't bask in my pride too long, because the same day as the wedding, around half past six in the evening, the couple drove off in a carriage, who knows where, maybe to Italy, as was the custom with the rich, and they didn't come back till Chanukah, when they sent for me to come as soon as possible to Yehupetz.

All right, if they wanted me to pay them a visit in Yehupetz, they only had to say so, and that would have been the end of it. But why did they want me to come as soon as possible? There had to be a reason! But what was it? Maybe they were fighting like cats and were on the point of divorcing? But I put that idea away, scolding myself for only thinking the worst. How should I know why they wanted me to come as soon as possible? Maybe they missed me and wanted to see me. Or maybe Beilke wanted her father to be near her. Or maybe Podhotsur wanted to give Tevye a job or make him a supervisor in one of his enterprises. In any case, I had to go, and I set out "as soon as possible" for Yehupetz.

As I was driving along, my imagination took over. I pictured myself leaving the village and selling the cows, the horse and wagon, and everything to become a supervisor for Podhotsur, then a treasurer, then the overseer of all his estates, then an equal partner in all his affairs, half and half, fifty-fifty, riding around with him all over with his steeds, one a chestnut, one a dapple gray. But then I thought it over. *What is this and what is it all for*—what did I, a quiet little fellow like Tevye, have to do with such grand businesses? Who needed all the fuss and bother and noise of the marketplace, all day and all night? As it is said, *So that He may set him with princes*—rub elbows with millionaires? Leave me be. I want to have a peaceful old age, take time to look into the Holy Book, read a few chapters, a few Psalms. You have to think about the world to come, no? How did King Solomon put it? *A person is nothing but a jackass and forgets that however long he lives, he must still die.*

When I reached Yehupetz, I went straight to Podhotsur's place. Well, if I were to brag to you about *the multitude of his riches and wealth*, his home and its furnishings, I could go on and on. I have never had the honor of going to Brodsky's, but nothing could have been finer or more beautiful than this Podhotsur's home. What a mansion it was! When I arrived at the door, the doorman, a huge man with silver buttons, refused to let me in. What was going

on? It was a glass door, and I could see him, curse him, brushing clothes. I winked at him, gestured to him in sign language to let me in, trying to get across that his master's wife was my daughter. But he didn't understand my meaning, the idiot, and signaled me to go away. What a *shlimazel*! To think you needed special documents to visit your own daughter! Woe unto you, Tevye, to have lived to see this!

I looked through the glass door again and saw a servant girl dusting. It must have been one of their chambermaids, I thought, because she had mischievous eyes. All chambermaids have mischievous eyes. I have visited many wealthy homes and know about chambermaids. I winked at her. "Open up, little kitten!"

She obeyed, opened the door, and said, surprisingly in Yiddish, "Whom do you want to see?"

"Does Podhotsur live here?" I said.

"Whom do you want to see?" she said more loudly.

I raised my voice. "If someone asks you a question, you should answer the first time. Does Podhotsur live here?"

"*Da*," she said.

"Now you're talking like one of us. Go tell your Madame Podhotsur that she has a guest. Her father Tevye has come to visit and has been waiting outside like a beggar at the door because that lummoX with the silver buttons who isn't worth your little fingernail didn't consider him worthy of admission!"

With a mischievous laugh, the girl slammed the door in my face. She ran upstairs, then came back down and let me in. It was a palace that my father's fathers never dreamed of in their wildest dreams: silk and satin and gold and crystal. When you walked, you felt like you were stepping on nothing, because your muddy boots trod on expensive carpets as soft as snow. And the clocks, oh the clocks! On the walls, on the tables—no end of clocks! God Almighty! Why did a person need so many clocks? I wondered, walking on, my hands clasped behind me.

In one room I saw several Tevyes coming toward me and going away from me. Tphoo! Mirrors on all four walls! Only a contractor like this Podhotsur could have afforded so many clocks and mirrors!

Podhotsur was a stout man, round, with a bald head and a loud voice and a

squeaky little laugh. I remembered the first time he came to me at home, with his big steeds. He spread himself out in a chair as if he owned it and met my Beilke, then called me over and whispered in my ear, but so loudly you could have heard him on the other side of Yehupetz. What did he whisper? That my daughter was pleasing to him and he wanted to marry her, one two three.

Well, that my daughter was pleasing to him was understandable, but the one two three was like a dull knife in my heart. Where did I come into the picture, and where was Beilke in all of it? Oh, I felt like sticking him with a few good commentaries and interpretations so he would never forget me! But I reconsidered. *Why am I thus?*—why interfere when it's something between children? A lot of good it did me with my older daughters when I gave them advice about their matches! I talked and I talked, I advised and advised, poured out the whole Torah—and who ended up the fool? Tevye!

In short, as you say in your books, let's put aside the hero and get to the heroine. When I visited them in Yehupetz, the fun began.

“*Sholem aleichem! Aleichem sholem!* How is it going?” Podhotsur greeted me. “What's the good news? Sit down!”

“Thank you, I can stand.” And we made all the customary niceties.

To ask *Why is this day different from other days?*—why did you send for me?—could not have been proper. Tevye is not a woman; he has patience. Then a servant wearing large white gloves announced that supper was ready. We rose and went into an oak-paneled room with an oak table, oak chairs, and an oak ceiling, everything trimmed and painted and lacquered and decorated. On the table, fit for a king, were tea and coffee and chocolate, butter pastries, good cognac, the best smoked fish, and platters of fruits and nuts. Embarrassed, I realized that my Beilke had never seen such a spread on her father's table. They poured glass after glass of wine for toasts to me. I drank and looked over at Beilke. I'd lived to see the day when God helped the poor *and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill*. But my Beilke was not to be recognized. She looked something like Beilke, but not really. I compared the Beilke of long ago with the Beilke I was seeing now, and it gave me a terrible feeling of regret, as if I had made a big mistake, made a bad bargain, as if I had traded in my prize colt for a nag of a horse, not knowing what it would become.

Ach, Beilke, Beilke, I thought. What has become of you? Do you remember how you used to sit at night under a smoky lamp and sew and sing a song? In the

wink of an eye you could milk two cows, or roll up your sleeves and cook a plain dairy borscht, or *taiglach* with beans, or cheese dumplings, or poppyseed pockets, and say to me, “Papa, go wash up!” That was the best song I ever heard! Now she was sitting with her Podhotsur like a princess, with two servants waiting on the table, dishes clattering. And Beilke—did she speak so much as a word? He, Podhotsur, did the talking for both of them. His mouth never shut! As long as I’ve lived, I’ve never seen a person who so loved to yammer a blue streak about who knew what, all the time laughing his funny little laugh. We say of a person like that: “he tells the joke, and he does the laughing.”

Along with the three of us, another person sat at the table: a man with red cheeks whom I didn’t know, but he certainly was a good eater. While Podhotsur was talking and laughing, this man packed away food, as it is written in the chapters: *He ate for three*. As we ate, Podhotsur talked about boring things in which I had no interest whatsoever: estates, construction contracts, government ministries, specifications, Japan. Actually Japan interested me, because during the war, as you know, horses became very scarce. They had searched me out and confiscated my horse. They took his measurements, rode him back and forth, and then sent him back. I could have told them they’d be wasting their time. As it is said in Proverbs, *A righteous man knows the soul of his beast*—Tevye’s horse is not made for war. But pardon me, Pani Sholem Aleichem, I’m mixing up two things and might confuse you. As you say, let’s get to the point.

We ate and drank up very nicely as God commanded, and when we got up from the table, Podhotsur took me by the arm and led me into an office fit for a king, with guns and swords on the walls and miniature cannons on the table.

He sat me down on a divan as soft as butter. Removing from a gold humidior two fat aromatic cigars, he lit one for himself and one for me. Then he sat down opposite me, stretched out his legs, and said, “Do you know why I sent for you?”

Aha! I thought. He probably wanted to talk to me about business. But I played dumb. “*Am I my brother’s keeper?* How should I know?”

“I really wanted to talk to you about yourself,” he said.

A job offer, I thought. “So long as it’s something good, whatever it is, let’s hear,” I said.

Podhotsur removed the cigar from his teeth and began a whole lecture. “You are no fool,” he said, “and won’t be insulted by what I will say frankly. You must

know I deal in big businesses, and when you deal in big businesses as I do . . .”

Yes, I thought, he meant me. I interrupted him. “Just as it says in the Gemorah in the Shabbes chapter, *Many possessions, many worries*. Do you know the meaning of that Gemorah?”

“I will tell you the absolute truth,” he said. “I have never studied the Gemorah and don’t even know what it looks like.” He laughed.

Can you imagine? One would think that if God had so punished him and made him an ignoramus, he would at least be ashamed and not boast about it. But I just said, “Let’s hear what you have to say.”

“What I have to say,” he said, “is this. When it comes to my businesses and my reputation and my public position, it doesn’t look good when they call you Tevye the dairyman. You must know,” he said, “that I am a close friend of the governor of the province, and sometimes a Brodsky comes calling at my house, a Polyakov, and maybe even a Rothschild, do you see?”

I looked at his shiny bald head. He might be a close friend of the governor, I thought, and a Rothschild might come to his house, but he talked like an ignoramus.

“What can you do if Rothschild insists on coming?” I said with a little resentment.

Do you think he got that dig? Not a chance!

“I want you to get rid of your dairy business and take up something else,” he said.

“All right, what do you have in mind?”

“Whatever you want,” he said. “There are plenty of businesses in the world. I’ll help you out with money, as much as you need, so long as you quit being Tevye the dairyman. Maybe you could leave one two three for America, huh?” He shoved the cigar between his teeth and looked me right in the eye, his bald head shining.

Nu, what do you say to such a coarse fellow? At first I thought, Why are you sitting here, Tevye, like a block of wood? Get up, kiss the *mezuzah*, slam the door behind you, and leave without a goodbye! That’s how enraged I was by his comments! The nerve of that contractor! Who did he think he was, telling me to

throw away an honest, respectable livelihood and go to America? Because Rothschild might visit him, Tevye the dairyman had to go who knows where?

I had already been upset because of my Beilke, but now my blood was boiling like a kettle. May I have as many blessings, I thought, as Hodl had it better than Beilke! True, Hodl doesn't have a house like this, with such finery, but still and all she has a husband, a Fefferl, who is a mensch, hardworking, relying only on himself, while all of humanity is his concern. And in addition, he has a head on his shoulders, not a noodle-pot of a bald pate. Fefferl can talk, and what he says is pure gold! If you mention a biblical quote to him, he gives you three interpretations. Just wait, my contractor, I thought, and I'll give *you* a quote that will knock you over!

I said to him, "Well, that the Gemorah is for you a secret, I forgive you. For a Jew living in Yehupetz named Podhotsur, a contractor, the Gemorah might just as well lie in the attic. But some quotes can be understood even by an ordinary Gentile. I'm sure you know what the Targum Unkles says about Laban the Aramite?" And I threw him a quotation in mixed Hebrew and Russian.

Looking like a surprised rooster, he said, "What does that mean?" "It means that from a pig's tail you cannot make a rabbi's fur hat."

"What is your point?"

"My point has to do with your telling me to go to America."

He laughed that silly laugh. "If not to America, maybe go to Eretz Yisroel. All old Jews go to Eretz Yisroel."

I felt as if an iron spike had been driven into my brain. *Sha!* Maybe that wasn't such a bad idea. Maybe it was an idea. Considering the kind of pleasure I'd had from children, I thought, Eretz Yisroel might be better. Idiot! Why was I staying around here, and for whom? My Golde, may she rest in peace, was already in the ground, and I was halfway there. How long could I keep struggling?

Besides, Pani Sholem Aleichem, I've always been drawn to Eretz Yisroel. I've longed to be at the Wailing Wall and at the tomb of the Patriarchs, at Mother Rachel's Tomb, and to see the River Jordan, Mount Sinai, the Dead Sea, the cities of Pithom and Ramses, and other such places with my own eyes. My imagination carried me away to the blessed land of Canaan, *the land flowing with milk and honey.*

Podhotsur cut me off in the middle of my reverie. “Well? Why do you need to think so long? Make it one two three!”

“To you,” I said, “everything is one two three. But for me it’s a big decision, because to pick up and go to Eretz Yisroel I’d need to have the means.”

He snickered, stood up, and went over to a table. Withdrawing a metal box, he counted out one bill after another—just imagine, a fine sum. I wasted no time, gathered up the bills—oh, the power of money—and stuck them deep in my pocket.

I wanted to share at least a couple of commentaries and quotes with him, but he wasn’t about to hear them. “This will be more than enough to get there, and when you arrive and need more money, write a letter, and one two three we will send you money. And about your leaving, I won’t need to remind you again because you are an honorable and honest man.” Then Podhotsur laughed that laugh that made me sick to my stomach.

Maybe I should throw the money back in his face, I thought. You didn’t buy Tevye with money, and with Tevye you didn’t talk of honesty and being honorable. But before I could open my mouth, he rang for Beilke.

“My dear, do you know what?” he said to her. “Your father is abandoning us. He is selling everything he owns and is leaving one two three for Eretz Yisroel.”

As Pharaoh said to Joseph, *I dreamed a dream but I did not understand it.* This was a nightmare, I thought. I looked at my Beilke. Do you think her face showed any feeling? She stood like a post, not a drop of blood in her face, looked from him to me and back, and said not a word! I was also silent. Both of us were silent, as it is written in the Psalms: *May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth*—speech had failed us.

My head was spinning, my temples were pounding, and I felt I was suffocating. Was it the smoke from that fine cigar Podhotsur had given me? But he was smoking one too, and talking, his mouth never shutting, though his eyelids kept lowering as if he could not wait to take a nap.

“You must go,” he said to me, “from here to Odessa by the express, and then by sea to Jaffa. Now is the best time to go by sea, because later on the winds and hurricanes and the snows begin, and then . . .” His tongue stumbled, as if he were overcome by the desire to sleep, but then he forged ahead. “And when you are ready for the journey, you must let us know, and we will both ride out to the

station with you and see you off, because who knows when we will see each other again?” He gave a big yawn, stood, and said to Beilke, “My dearest, sit here a bit while I go lie down for a nap.”

That was the best thing he could have said, as I am a Jew! Now at least I could let out my bitter heart! I thought. I longed to talk to my Beilke, to tell her everything that had happened that morning. Suddenly she fell into my arms and began to weep. But what weeping you can only imagine! My daughters, poor things, are all like that. First they act mature and in control, and then when something bad happens, they weep like willow trees. Take my daughter Hodl. Just before she left for Siberia to join her Fefferl, she wept bitter tears. But how can I compare them?

I will tell you the honest truth. As you know, I am not a person of tears. I really cried only once, when my Golde, may she rest in peace, was lying on the earth, and I also had a good cry when Hodl went off to her Fefferl and I remained on the station platform like a great fool, all alone with my horse. And a few other times I welled up with tears, but I don't remember if I ever cried. But Beilke and her tears moved me so deeply that I couldn't hold back. I didn't have the heart to criticize her. With me it isn't necessary to say a lot. My name is Tevye. I understood her tears right away. They were not ordinary tears. You understand, they were tears brought on by *the sin I have sinned before you*—the sin of not listening to your father. And instead of blaming her, as I could easily have done, and baring my soul about her Podhotsur, I comforted her by telling her one biblical story after another, as only Tevye can do.

Beilke heard me out. “No, Papa, you can't stop my tears with stories. That's not why I'm crying—I have no complaints about anyone. It's because you are going away on account of me and I cannot help you. That's why I am so despondent.”

“You're talking like a child,” I said. “You forget that we still have a great God and that your father is still in his right mind. Your father,” I said, “has a plan to go to Eretz Yisroel and come back, like in the commentaries: *They journeyed and they camped*—they didn't know if they were coming or going.” That was the way I talked, but I was thinking, Tevye, you're lying! You're going to Eretz Yisroel, and that will be the last of you—no more Tevye!

As if she had read my thoughts, she said to me, “No, Papa, that's how you comfort a small child. You give it a toy, you put a plaything in its hand, and you

tell it a pretty story about a little white goat. If you do want a story,” she said, “I will tell you one, not you me. But the story I will tell is more sorrowful than pretty.”

Tevye’s daughters don’t mince words. She laid out for me a tale, a story worthy of *A Thousand and One Nights*, about how her Podhotsur became rich after being a nobody. He grew from the lowest of the low and with his own ability reached the highest levels and now wanted to invite to his house people like Brodsky. He was handing out charity, throwing thousands around. But money wasn’t enough—you still needed a pedigree, power, influence, and status. Podhotsur was doing everything possible to show he was somebody. He bragged that he came from the famous Podhotsurs, his father was also a famous contractor. But “he knew very well that he was a street musician,” Beilke said. “Now he tells everyone his wife’s father is a millionaire.”

“Who does he mean?” I said. “Me?” Maybe I was once fated to have millions, I thought, but that was as close as I’d ever get to having them.

“Do you know, Papa,” she said to me, “my face burns whenever he introduces me to his friends and tells them about my father and my uncles and the whole family—things that never were and could never be. I must listen to it all and be silent because he is, about those things, very capricious.”

“To you,” I said, “it’s being capricious, but to us it’s simply lying or bragging.”

“No, Papa,” she said, “you don’t know him. He isn’t as bad as you think. He is just a person who is one way one minute and another the next. He has a good heart and an open hand. If you make a sad face and catch him in a good mood, he’ll give you his soul. And especially for my benefit, the sky can be the limit! Do you think,” she said, “I have no influence on him? Just recently, to rescue Hodl and her husband, he promised me he would spend many thousands, on the condition they went straight to Japan.”

“Why Japan?” I said. “Why not India or Mesopotamia, or to the Queen of Sheba?”

“Because he has businesses in Japan,” she said. “He has businesses all over the world. What it costs him in telegrams alone, we could live on for half a year. But what good does it do me when I cannot be myself?”

“As it is written in the chapters, *If I am not for myself, who will be for me?*—I

am not me and you are not you.” My heart was breaking to see my poor child miserable, although as they say, ‘in riches and in honor.’ “Your sister Hodl wouldn’t have done that.”

“I told you not to compare me to Hodl, Papa. Hodl lived in Hodl’s times and Beilke lives in Beilke’s times. From Hodl’s times to Beilke’s times is as far as from here to Japan.” Do you understand what she was talking about?

Anyway, I realize you are in a hurry, Pani. Two minutes more and it will be an end to all the stories. I was full up to here. I’d heard enough of sorrows and troubles from my youngest daughter and left her house wretched and brokenhearted. I flung the cigar that had clouded up my head onto the ground and said to it, “Go to hell!”

“Who are you cursing, Reb Tevye?” I heard a voice behind me. I turned, looked, and saw—it was he, Ephraim the matchmaker, may he have a stroke!

“Welcome,” I said. “What are you doing here?”

“What are *you* doing here?”

“I was visiting my children.”

“How are they?”

“How should they be? May we be as well.”

“I see,” he said. “You are satisfied with my merchandise?”

“Satisfied?” I said. “May God repay you for what you have done.”

“Thank you for the blessing,” he said. “Maybe you can add a little extra on to the blessing?”

“Weren’t you paid for the match?”

“May your Podhotsur only be worth as much as he paid me.”

“What is it?” I said. “Was the fee too small?”

“Not at all, but it was the way it was given.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean there’s not a groschen left.”

“What happened to it?”

“I married off a daughter.”

“*Mazel tov*,” I said. “May God grant much luck, and may you live to have much pleasure.”

“I’ve already lived to have much pleasure. I got myself a son-in-law—a charlatan who beat my daughter, took her last gulden, and ran off to America.”

“Why did you let him get so far?” I said.

“What could I have done?”

“You should have put salt on his tail.”

“Are you feeling all right, Reb Tevye?”

“May you feel half as well, may God help you!”

“Is that so?” he said. “And I thought of you as a rich man.”

“If that’s the case,” I said, “here’s a pinch of snuff for you.”

Having gotten rid of the matchmaker with a pinch of snuff, I went home. There I began to sell off my business of so many years. You can imagine that it was not done as easily as it was said. Every pot and pan took a lot out of me. Some things reminded me of Golde, God rest her soul. Others reminded me of the children, may they have many years. But nothing cut so deeply as selling my old horse. I felt particularly guilty about him. After toiling so many years together, slaving together, struggling together—and suddenly to sell him off.

I sold him to a water-carrier because from teamsters I got only abuse. They said, “God be with you, Reb Tevye, do you call that a horse?”

“What else?” I said. “Do you think it’s a chandelier?”

“It isn’t a chandelier, but one of thirty-six saints who hold up the world.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“That’s an old man of thirty-six years, without teeth, with a gray lip, shaking like an old lady in the Shabbes frost.”

How do you like that talk? I swear the poor horse understood every word; as it says in the commentaries: *The ox knoweth his owner*—even a dumb beast knows when it’s about to be sold. I knew this because when I finalized the deal with the water-carrier, I said to him, “I wish you lots of luck.” Suddenly my horse turned

his old head to me and looked at me with mute eyes, as if to say, “And this is the way I am repaid for all my labors? This is the way you thank me for all my years of hard and faithful service?”

As the water-carrier took him away to teach him the tough lessons of his new trade, I took one last look at my horse. I stood alone, thinking, God of the Universe! How cleverly you run your little world! Here you created a Tevye and you created, no comparison, a horse, and they both wound up with the same fate. The difference is that a man can at least complain, bare his heart. But a horse, what can it do? Poor thing, a dumb tongue, as we say: “the advantage of man over animal.”

You are looking at me, Pani Sholem Aleichem, because my eyes are filled with tears, and you are surely thinking, “This Tevye misses his horse? Why only a horse?” I am sorry about everything, and I will miss everything. I will miss the horse and the village. I will miss the elders, the constable, the Boiberik *dachniks*, and the Yehupetz rich folks. I will even miss Ephraim the matchmaker, may a plague afflict him, because in the end, if you want to be a bit of a philosopher, he is no more than a poor Jew trying to scrape out a living.

If God will bring me safely to my destination, I don't know what I'll do there. But first I will go to Rachel's Tomb and pray for my children, whom I will probably never see again. And I will also think of Ephraim the matchmaker, and of you and all of Israel.

Here is my hand on it, and please send my best regards to everyone in the most friendly way.

“GET THEE GONE”

WRITTEN IN 1914.

A fine, hearty *sholem aleichem* to you, Pani Sholem Aleichem, to you and to all your children! I have long been looking forward to seeing you. I have quite a lot to tell you. I keep asking myself, why aren't we seeing you lately? I am told you've been traveling to far-off countries, as we say in the Megillah: *the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces of King Ahashueros*.

I see you are looking at me in a strange way. I bet you are wondering, “Is it he or not he?” It is he, Pani Sholem Aleichem, it is your old friend Tevye the dairyman. The same Tevye, no longer a dairyman but just an ordinary Jew, an old Jew as you can see, though not so old in years. As we say in the Haggadah, *Lo, I am not yet seventy years old*—I am still far from seventy! Then why is my hair so white? Believe me, not from pleasure, dear friend—a little my own sorrows, and a little the sorrows of all Israel. May God forgive me—a bad time! A bitter time for Jews! But I know what you're itching to find out. You most likely remembered that when we last parted, I was on my way to Eretz Yisroel. And so you are figuring that this surely is Tevye returning from Eretz Yisroel, and you are probably eager to hear all about it. You want to find out about Mother Rachel's Tomb and the Cave of Machpelah and the other holy places. I can set your mind at rest. If you have some time to spare, listen to remarkable happenings, but listen carefully—as it says in the chapter, *I pray thee, hear me*. And when you have heard me out, you will say that a man is no more than an ass and that we have a powerful God who runs the world as He sees fit.

Tell me, what Bible reading are you up to in your synagogue? *Vayikro*—the first chapter of Leviticus? I am on a different chapter—the chapter *Lech l'cho*, or *Get Thee Gone*. “Leave, Tevye,” I was told. *Get thee gone from thy land and from thy father's house and go to the land which I will show thee*. Get thee gone

from the village where you were born and lived all your life, go wherever your eyes lead you! And when did they remind themselves to give Tevye this chapter to study? At the very time he was already old, weak, and alone. As we say in the Rosh Hashanah prayers, *Cast us not away, O Lord, in our old age.*

But I am getting ahead of myself. I almost forgot to tell you the very beginning, about what happened in Eretz Yisroel. How is it there, dear friend? May we both thrive as much. As it says in the Torah, *it is truly a land of milk and honey!* The problem is that Eretz Yisroel is in Eretz Yisroel, and I am, as you see me, still far from the Promised Land. Of Tevye, hear me out, the chapter of the Megillah applies: *If I perish, I perish*—I was a *shlimazel* and a *shlimazel* I will die. There I was, almost, almost standing with one foot on the other side, in the Holy Land. All I needed was a ticket, board the ship, and I was off. But God had other ideas.

Wait till you hear this, may it not happen to any Jew. My oldest son-in-law, Motl Komzoil, the tailor from Anatevka, goes to sleep a strong, healthy man and just decides to die! Well, he was never that healthy. After all, he was a workingman, sat night and day *absorbed in Torah and in work*—bent over his needle and thread patching trousers. He did this until he got consumption. He began coughing, coughed and coughed till he spat out the last of his lungs. Nothing could be done to help him, no doctor, no quack, no goat's milk, no chocolate with honey. He was a fine young man, simple, not learned, but an honest man without pretensions. He loved my daughter with all his heart and sacrificed himself for his children and thought the world of me!

In short, we finish up the text: *Moses passes away*—Motl died and left me with a weight around my neck. How could I even think of going to Eretz Yisroel at that time? I had my own Eretz Yisroel at home! I ask you, how could I leave a widowed daughter, with little orphaned children, without a crumb of bread? Of course I was of as much use to her as a sack full of holes. I couldn't bring her husband back from the dead, or return their father to his children. There I was, no more than a broken vessel in my old age, hoping to rest my weary bones, to feel like a mensch, not a donkey. I had had enough toiling, enough struggling in this world. I wanted to give some thought to the world to come. It was high time! In addition, I had already sold off my few possessions: the horse you know about, but the cows as well, except for two calves that might grow up to be useful if they were fed well. And there I was in my old age, suddenly a father of orphans, little children! Are you ready for more? Wait! The worst is yet to come,

because with Tevye, if one tragedy happens, another is soon on the way. To give you an example—if ever a little heifer died, another one soon died as well. That’s the way God created His little world, and that’s the way it will always be—a lost cause!

Do you remember that my youngest daughter Beilke struck it rich when she landed Podhotsur, the big-shot contractor who made a fortune from the war? He’d returned to Yehupetz lugging back sacks full of money and fell in love with my daughter because he wanted a beautiful bride. And he sent Ephraim the matchmaker to me, cursed be his name, who made the match. Podhotsur proposed on bended knee and took her poor as she was, showered her from head to toe with gifts, jewels, gold, and diamonds. Sounds good, eh? Well, from all that good luck nothing is left, but nothing, nothing but mud. God protect us, because if God so wills it, the wheel turns, and everything falls upside down. As we say in the Hallel: first it’s *He who raiseth up the poor out of the dust*, and before you know it, it’s gone and He angrily *looketh down low upon heaven and upon the earth*. God loves to toy with human beings, how He loves it! He has toyed with Tevye time and time again—*ascending and descending*—first up, then down!

That is how it was with my contractor, Podhotsur. Do you remember his mansion in Yehupetz with the thirteen servants, the mirrors and the clocks and the fancy ornaments? Piff-poff! I talked to Beilke, begged her to make sure he bought the house and registered it in her name. Well, they heard me as much as Haman heard the Purim noisemakers—what does a father know? A father knows nothing! What do you think happened? You would wish it on your worst enemy. In the end, besides losing everything, Podhotsur went bankrupt, had to sell all he had—the mirrors and clocks and his wife’s jewelry. He had to flee his creditors at great risk to himself and become a fugitive, may it not happen to any Jew, and escape to where the beloved Holy Shabbes goes west—to America. That’s where unhappy souls go, and that’s where Beilke and Podhotsur also went.

At first it was terribly difficult for them. Whatever little money they had was eaten up, and when they had no food left, the poor things had to take work, backbreaking labor, like the Jews in Egypt. Now she writes that it’s not so bad, praise God. They have jobs in a stocking factory and are “making a living.” That’s what they call it in America. In our language it’s called “scraping for a piece of bread.” But they feel lucky; they are just the two of them, with no children to feed. And so it is for the best!

Nu, I ask you, shouldn't an evil spirit possess that Ephraim the matchmaker for making that fine match he finagled me into and for the mire he led me into? Would it have been so awful for her to have married a workingman, as Tzeitl did, or a teacher, as Hodl did? Ay, those two weren't so lucky either. One is a young widow, and the other is in exile God knows where. But that is all God's doing—how can a man be prepared for that? To tell the truth, my wife Golde, God rest her soul, was the wisest one of all, if only because she saw what was going on around her, said goodbye to this foolish world, and left it. Tell me yourself—rather than suffering because of daughters, as Tevye has, is it not a thousand times better to lie in the ground and bake bagels? How did our rabbis say: *Regardless of thy will thou livest—man does not take his fate into his own hands*, and if he does he gets his knuckles rapped.

Let us, as you say in your books, leave the hero and get back to the heroine. Where were we? Yes, at the passage in *Get Thee Gone*. But before we get to that, I beg you to be so kind as to stop for a while at the section about the Amalekites in the Book of Exodus. Since the world began, it has always been the custom to study *Get Thee Gone* first and then Exodus. But with me it is the other way around—first study the Amalekites and then *Get Thee Gone*. I was taught a real lesson from that book. You might want to hear this—it might come in handy someday.

Long ago, right after the Japanese war, during the struggle over the constitution, all kinds of *salvations and consolations* were being visited on the Jews, first in the big cities, afterward in the small towns. But they never reached me, and I thought they never would. Why not? That's easy to answer: after living for so many years among Gentiles, real peasants, I was on friendly terms with everyone in the village. Uncle Tevel was held in the highest esteem! Did you need advice? Go to Uncle Tevel. Did you need a cure for the fever? Go to Tevel'ye. How's about a little loan? Also go to Uncle Tevel. Did I need to worry about such things as pogroms, when the peasants had told me many times that I had nothing to fear? They wouldn't allow it! And so it was—but listen to this.

One day I arrived home from Boiberik. I was still going strong at the time, doing very well, selling dairy, cheese, butter, and vegetables. I unhitched the horse and tossed him some hay and oats. As I was about to wash up before eating, I suddenly noticed a crowd of goyim, the entire village, outside my door, including the elders, from Ivan Poperilo the mayor down to the last goy, Trochim the shepherd. All of them looked very strange to me, all dressed up in their

holiday best. At first my heart thudded: what kind of holiday was this, all of a sudden? They hadn't come to study Torah with me! But I pulled myself together: Nonsense, Tevye! You should be ashamed of yourself. All these years you've lived here as a Jew in peace and tranquillity among so many Gentiles, and no one has ever touched so much as a hair on your head.

So I went out and greeted them with a hearty *sholem aleichem*. "Welcome," I said. "What are you doing here, my dear neighbors? What good news do you bring?"

The mayor, Ivan Poperilo, stepped forward and said without any preliminaries, "We have come here, Tevel, to beat you up."

What do you say to that? What more did they have in mind? But show them my feelings—never! On the contrary! Tevye is not a little boy. So I said to them cheerfully, "*Mazel tov* to you, but why did it take you so long to get around to it? In other places they've almost forgotten about beatings!"

Then Ivan Poperilo the mayor said, rather seriously, "You must understand, Tevel, that we have been arguing over whether we should beat you up or not. Since everywhere else people are getting beaten up, why should we let you get away without it? So the village council has decided we should beat you up. But we don't know what else to do with you, Tevel. Should we knock out your windows and rip up your feather beds and pillows, or should we burn down your house and barn?"

Now that really began to upset me. My guests leaned on their tall staffs and whispered to one another, looking as if they meant business. If they did, I thought, then as we say in the Psalms, *The flood waters are rising up to my very soul*. Tevye, you are in deep trouble! Eh, with the Angel of Death you don't play games—I had to say something to them.

Why drag the story out, dear friend? It was fated that a miracle take place. The One Above put in my head the idea that I not humble myself. I took heart and in good spirits said to the villagers, "Listen, gentlemen, to what I have to say. If the council has decided, they must know best. Tevye deserves to have you destroy his home and everything he has. But you know, there is something higher than your council. There is a God Above. I am not saying *my* God or *your* God, but I am speaking of the God of all of us, who sits above and sees all the wickedness that goes on down below. It could be," I said, "that He pointed me out to be punished by you, my best friends, for no reason at all, or possibly the opposite,

He wants under no circumstances for Tevye to be harmed. Who,” I said, “can know God’s will? Maybe there is one among you who will take it upon himself to understand it?”

Apparently they realized that they would not get the best of Tevye, and so Ivan Poperilo the mayor said to me, “This is the way it is. We have nothing against you, Tevel. It’s true you are,” he said, “a Jew, and you are not a bad person. But one thing has nothing to do with the other. We must beat you up. The council decided it, and that’s the way it has to be! We will break out your windows. That we *must* do, because if some official passes through, they must see that you’ve been punished. Otherwise we might be the ones who get punished.” Those were his very words, so help me God! *Nu*, I ask you now, Pani Sholem Aleichem, you are a man of the world who has traveled all over. Is Tevye right when he says we have a powerful God?

Now let us return to the *Lech l’cho—Get Thee Gone*. I studied it not too long ago, and it has the most meaning. This time, you understand, no fancy interpretations or speeches helped me. Here is the story exactly, with every jot and tittle, as you like to hear it.

Right at that time the world was turning topsy-turvy over Mendel Beiliss and the blood-libel trial. Beiliss was suffering the punishments of the damned, atoning for the sins of others. Sitting on the stoop of my house, I was deep in thought. It was summertime. The sun was baking, and my head was spinning. How could this be happening? I wondered. How could it be possible, in these times, in such a clever world full of such smart people! And where was God, the old Jewish God? Why was He silent? How could He allow such a thing? How could it be, and again, how could it be? And I began to ponder the universe and wondered, What is *this* world? And what is the *next* world? And why does not the Messiah come? Ay, I thought, wouldn’t it be wonderful if the Messiah were to come down right now riding on his white horse! That would be a fine thing! Never has he been so badly needed by our Jewish brethren as now! I don’t know about the rich people, the Brodskys in Yehupetz or the Rothschilds in Paris. Maybe they never think of Him at all. But we poor Jewish folk from Kasrilevka and Mazepevka and Zlodeyevka, and even Yehupetz and Odessa, crave his coming. We strain our eyes looking for him! Our entire hope now is that God will perform a miracle and the Messiah will come!

Just then, I looked up and saw a white horse and rider coming straight to my

door! He stopped, got off, tied the horse to the post, and came right over to me. “Zdrastoy, Tevel! Greetings!”

“Greetings to you, your honor!” I answered in a friendly manner, and in my heart I was thinking, *Haman approacheth*. As Rashi says, *When you await the Messiah, the village constable comes instead*. I rose and said to the constable, “Welcome to you. What’s happening in the world, and what good news do you bring, your honor?” My heart was pounding—I wanted to know what and when.

But he, the constable, took his time. He smoked a leisurely cigarette, blew out the smoke, spat, and said to me, “How much time do you think you need, Tevel, to sell your house and all your things?”

I stared at him. “Why should I sell my house? Is it in anyone’s way?”

“It isn’t in anyone’s way,” he said. “I’ve come to tell you that you must leave the village.”

“That’s it, no more? For what good deeds do I deserve this? How have I earned this honor?”

“It isn’t me sending you away,” he said. “It’s the provincial government.”

“The government?” I said. “What does the government have against me?”

“Not just you,” he said, “and not just from here, but from all the villages all around, from Zlodeyevka and from Rabilevka and from Kostolomevka, and even Anatevka, which was a town and now has officially become a village, so we can drive all, all of you Jews from here.”

“Even Lazer-Wolf the butcher? And Naftali-Gershon the cripple? And the ritual slaughterer of Anatevka? And the rabbi?”

“All! All!” he said, making a gesture with his hand like cutting with a knife.

That made me feel somewhat easier, as it is said: *The troubles of others are half a comfort to one’s self*. But I was nevertheless infuriated, and a fire burned within me. I decided to confront the constable. “Tell me, does your honor realize that I’ve lived in this village much longer than you? Do you realize that in this little corner of the world my father lived and my grandfather and my grandmother, may they all rest in peace?” And I listed my whole family by name, whoever lived there and where and when they died.

He heard me out, and when I finished, he said to me, “You are a clever Jew,

Tevel, and you can talk a blue streak. What good are your stories about your grandmother and grandfather to me? Let them have a bright paradise! But you, Tevel, had better gather up your stuff and get going to Berdichev!”

That made me even angrier. Enough, you Esau that brought me such good tidings, now he ridicules me by telling me to get going to Berdichev! Let me at least teach him a lesson. “Your honor, as long as you’ve been constable here, have you ever heard any of the neighbors complain that I’ve ever robbed them or cheated them or tricked them or taken anything from them? Go ahead, ask anyone,” I said, “whether I didn’t live much better alongside all of you than anyone else. How many times did I come to you to plead the case for my Gentile neighbors, asking you not to mistreat them?”

That did not sit well with him! He stood up, crushed his cigarette with his fingers, tossed it away. “I don’t have time to waste with your idle chatter,” he said. “I received an order, and that’s all I need to know. Come, you’ll sign the order right here. They give you three days to pack up, sell everything, and get on your way.”

I saw it was bad. “You are giving me three days?” I said. “For this may you live three years in honor and in riches! May God repay you many times over for the good news you brought me!” I gave it to him good, as only Tevye can! After all, what did it matter, what did I have to lose? If I had been twenty years younger and Golde were still alive, and if I had been the same Tevye the dairyman as before, in my prime—oh ho! I wouldn’t have given in so easily! I would have fought back to the last drop of my blood! But the way things were now—what could I do? *What are we and what is our life?*—what am I today and who am I? Only half a body, a wreck, a broken vessel! *O ye ruler of the earth, our Father!* I thought, why are you picking on poor Tevye? Why don’t you once in a while play around with Brodsky or Rothschild? Why don’t they have to learn the portion of *Lech l’cho—Get Thee Gone?* They would probably benefit from it more, wouldn’t you think? They would experience what it was really like to be a Jew, and they would see that we have a powerful God.

Well, these were all empty words. You don’t argue with God or give Him advice on how to run the world. As He says, *The heavens are mine and the earth is mine*—which means He is the boss and we must obey Him. What He says is said!

I went into the house and told my daughter the widow, “Tzeitl, we must

prepare to leave here and go to a city somewhere. We've lived in the country long enough. *Change your place, change your luck.* Start packing the bedding and the samovar and the rest, and I will see to selling the house. A decree came saying we had to clear out of this home of ours in three days."

She tried to hold back her tears, but her children saw her distress and burst into tears. It was like, what can I say, Tisha B'Av in the house! Angrily, I let out my bitter heart at my poor daughter. "What do you want from me?" I cried. "Why are you sobbing like an old cantor on Yom Kippur? Who do you think I am, God's favorite child? Aren't enough Jews," I said, "being driven out of their villages? Listen to what the constable has to say. Anatevka, which used to be a town, with God's help, is now a village, so that they can feel free to drive out all the Jews! If that's the way it is, how are we any worse off than all the other Jews?"

So I poured my heart out to my daughter. But she is, after all, female, and she asked, "Where can we go on such short notice? Where can we find a city to live in?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" I said. "When God came to our great-great-grandfather Abraham and told him, *Get thee gone from thence, you must leave your native land*—did Abraham ask him, 'Where to?' God said, *to the land of Arad.* We will go wherever our eyes take us, wherever all Jews go! What will be for all the children of Israel will be for us.

"And what makes you think you are better than your sister Beilke? It isn't beneath her dignity to be with her Podhotsur in America, scraping out a living, so it shouldn't be beneath yours either. Let us thank God, blessed be He," I said, "that we have the means with which to set out. We still have some money from before, and a little from selling the cows, and some will come from the house. It all adds up, and may it be for the best! And even if we had, God forbid, nothing," I said, "we are still better off than Mendel Beiliss!"

In short, I convinced her not to be obstinate. When the constable brings a decree telling you to leave, I explained, you can't be piggish; you must go. Then I went into the village to sell my house.

I went straight to Ivan Poperilo the mayor, a fat goy who I knew was dying to buy my house. I didn't give him any explanations—a Jew is smarter than a goy. "You should know, Ivan, my friend, I am leaving," I told him.

He asked me why.

I said, "I am moving to the city. I want to be among Jews. I am no longer a young man, and I might die at any time."

Ivan said, "So why can't you die here? Who is stopping you?"

I thanked him warmly. "Better you should die here," I said. "You're more deserving, and I will go die among my own. Buy my house and my garden from me. I wouldn't sell it to anyone but you."

"How much are you asking for your house?"

"How much are you offering?"

Back and forth, up a coin, down a coin, we haggled until we reached a price and shook hands on it. I took a nice down payment so he wouldn't change his mind. A Jew is smarter than a goy. And that was how I sold my house and all my belongings in one day, dirt cheap, but still making a bit of a profit. I went off to hire a wagon to cart off the remainder of my poor household goods. But just listen to something that can only happen to Tevye. I won't keep you long, but listen carefully and I'll tell it to you, as you say, in three words.

I came home to find, not a house, but a wreck, the poor walls bare, as if they were shedding tears for all that was happening to them! On the floor were piles, bundles everywhere! On the hearth the cat perched, sorrowful as a poor orphan. My heart almost broke, and tears sprang to my eyes. Had I not been embarrassed before my daughter, I would have had a good cry! Here was where I had grown up, here I had struggled all my life, and suddenly—*Lech l'cho*—get thee gone! Say what you will, it's a terrible loss!

But Tevye is not a woman. I straightened up, put on a cheerful face, and called out, "Come here, Tzeitl. Where are you?" She stepped out of the other room, her eyes red and her nose puffy. Aha, I thought, she'd been bawling again, like a woman on Yom Kippur! These women, do you hear, as soon as something happens, they weep! Tears are cheap to them! "You silly," I said to her, "why are you crying again? Aren't you being foolish? Just think of the difference between you and Mendel Beiliss."

She didn't want to hear that. "Papa, you don't know why I'm crying," she said.

"I know very well," I said. "Why shouldn't I know? You're crying because

you're sad to leave your home. You were born here and grew up here, and so you are sad. Believe me," I said, "if I weren't Tevye, if I were somebody else, I would kiss these bare walls and these empty shelves. I would get down on my knees on the earth. I will miss every little thing the same as you. Even the cat," I said, "is sitting on the hearth like an orphan. It's a dumb animal, and yet I have pity on her. She will remain alone without someone to care for her, a forsaken creature."

"There is, I must tell you," she said, "a greater sorrow."

"What do you mean?"

"We are leaving someone behind who will be as alone as a bare stone."

What did she mean? "What are you babbling about? Which person? What stone?"

"Papa, I am not talking about our leaving. I am talking about our Chava."

When she uttered that name, I swear to you, it was as if hot boiling water had been poured over me or a block of wood had hit me on the head! I fell upon Tzeitl in a rage. "Why do you suddenly bring up Chava? I told you how many times that Chava for me is no longer alive!"

Do you think that frightened her? Not one bit! Tevye's daughters have great strength in them!

"Papa," she said, "stop being so angry, and remember what you yourself said so many times. It is written that a human being must have pity for another like a father for a child."

Do you hear those words? I became even more enraged and lit into her, as she deserved. "You are speaking to me of pity? Where was her pity when I was stretched out like a dog before the priest, cursed be his name, kissed his feet, while she was in the next room and heard every word? And where was her pity when her mother, may she rest in peace, was lying right here on the ground covered in black? Where was she then? And the nights I couldn't sleep," I said. "And the heartache that gnaws at me to this very day when I remember what she did to me and for whom she forsook us? Where is her pity for me?" My heart was breaking, and I could no longer speak.

But Tevye's daughter found an answer. "You yourself, Papa," she said, "have said that a person who is sorry for what he has done, even God must forgive."

“Sorry?” I said. “It’s too late! The branch once torn from the tree must wither! The leaf that has fallen to the ground must shrivel. Do not say any more to me about it—*thus far and no more!*”

When she realized that words were of no use, that she could not win Tevye over with words, she threw her arms around me and began kissing my hands. “Papa, may I suffer, may I die right here on the spot if you cast her off again as you did there in the woods when she ran back to you and you turned your horse away and sped off!”

“Why are you tormenting me? Why are you torturing me like this? What do you want of me?”

But she would not let go—she gripped me by the hands and pleaded her case. “May evil come to me, may I perish if you do not forgive her,” she said. “Because she is your daughter, just as I am!”

“What do you want of me?” I said. “She is no longer my daughter! She died long ago!”

“No, she didn’t die, and she is your daughter again as always. Because from the first minute she found out we were being sent away, she decided they would send all of us, she too along with us. Wherever we go—so Chava herself said—she will go. Our exile is her exile. Here is the proof,” she said. “Here is her bundle on the floor.” My daughter Tzeitl said this to me in one breath, the way we recite the ten sons of Haman in the Megillah, not letting me get in a word, and pointed to a bundle wrapped in a red shawl. Then she flung open the door to the other room and called out, “Chava!”

And what can I tell you, dear friend? Just as you describe in your books, Chava appeared from the other room—healthy, tall, and lovely as she always was, unchanged except for her face, which wore a worried look, her eyes sad. Holding her head high with pride, she remained standing, and she looked at me as I did at her. Then she stretched out her arms to me and could only utter one word, one word only, softly:

“Pa-pa . . .”

Please don’t think badly of me that tears come to my eyes when I remember this. But do not even think that Tevye shed so much as a tear or showed, as they say, a sign of sentimentality—never! What I felt in my heart at the time is another story. You yourself are a father, and you know, just as I do, the meaning

of the verse *like as a father pitieth his children*, and you know how a father feels when a child, no matter how it has sinned, looks right into your soul and says to you, “Papa!” Well, try to be strong and drive those feelings away! Then again the hurt persisted, and that fine bit of spite she played on me came to mind. I remembered Chvedka Galagan, may he sink into the earth, and the priest, may his name be erased, and my tears, and Golde’s death, God rest her soul. . . . No! Tell me yourself, how can I forget it, how can I forget it?

But then again, after all, she was still my child, and again the verse came to me, *like as a father pitieth his children*. How can a person be so harsh when God says of Himself that He is *an all-forgiving God!* And especially since she had repented and wanted to return to her father and to her God! What do you say, Pani Sholem Aleichem? You’re a Jew yourself who writes books and gives advice to everybody. Tell me, what should Tevye have done? Should he have embraced her as one of his own, hugged and kissed her, as we say on Yom Kippur at Kol Nidrei, *I have pardoned according to Thy word*—come to me, you are my child? Or should I have turned my back on her, as I did before, and told her, *Lech l’cho*—get thee gone, go back to where you came from? No, imagine that you are in Tevye’s place, and tell me honestly, as a true and good friend, what *you* would have done. And if you cannot tell me right away, I will give you time to think it over.

Meanwhile I must go. The grandchildren are waiting for me, looking for their grandfather. You must surely know that grandchildren are a thousand times more precious and more lovable than children. *Sons and sons of sons*—that’s no small thing!

Goodbye, be well, and forgive me for filling your head with so many words. It will give you something to write about. If God wills it, we will meet again someday.

VACHALAKLOKOS

A belated story from Tevye the dairyman, recounted before the war but, because of the wartime turmoil, not seeing the light of day till now

WRITTEN IN 1914-16.

You probably remember, Pani Sholem Aleichem, that I once told you about the portion of *Lech l'cho—Get Thee Gone*, with all the details. I told you how Esau settled accounts with his brother Jacob, repaid him well for the blessings of the firstborn son he stole from him. Like Jacob of old, I was exiled from my village with all my worldly goods, with my children and grandchildren, as their edict required. They made an utter ruin of my property and poor belongings; even my horse had to be sold, which to this day I cannot speak of without tears coming to my eyes. As we say on Tisha B'Av, *This too is worthy of tears*. That poor horse earned the right to have a few tears shed over him.

But never mind. After all, it's the same story. Why am I more special to God than the rest of our Jewish brethren, whom Ivan is driving from the blessed villages as quickly as he can manage it? He is sweeping and cleaning out and uprooting every trace of a Jew! As we say in *yaaleh veyavo, so as there shall be no sign*—nothing will remain of their presence. I have nothing more to complain to God about than all the rest of the village Jews who are being driven out and are now wandering in every direction, having no place to lay their heads, quaking with fear every minute lest a police officer appear for whatever reason. Tevye is not ignorant like other village Jews. He understands a few Psalms and is no stranger to the midrash and can, with God's help, interpret a portion of Chumesh and Rashi as well. So what? Do you expect Esau to appreciate this and have respect for such a Jew? Or maybe I deserve thanks for it? The fact is, I have

nothing to be ashamed of, and a fault it certainly isn't. Thank God I am a Jew, the equal of others, and am not so blind that I cannot see or understand the small print in the holy writings. I am acquainted with the ins and outs of scripture, as it is said: *Worthy is he who understands*.

You must think, Pani Sholem Aleichem, that I am just saying this off the top of my head. Or that I want to show off for you, to boast of my great knowledge and learning. Don't be offended, but only someone who doesn't know Tevye would say that. Tevye does not speak without thinking about it first, and he was never a vain braggart. Tevye likes to talk about something he has seen with his own eyes or has experienced himself. Sit down right here for a little while, and you'll hear a good story, about how sometimes it can come in handy if someone isn't an ignoramus and has some notion of the higher things and knows when and where and how to apply a portion from our old Book of Psalms.

To make a long story short, if I'm not mistaken, it was a long time ago, right in the heat of Ivanchik's revolutions and constitutions. The hooligans were set loose on Jewish cities and villages and given a free hand. They destroyed Jewish property and goods, as it says in the Siddur: *they shattered windows and tore bedding*. I remember once telling you that I was not surprised by such things. I do not scare easily. If it happens, it happens. If it is fated, an edict from heaven, then how can I be an exception among Jews? As we say in the chapter, *Each Jew hath his share*. But then again, if it's simply an epidemic, a kind of blight, God pity us all, a passing windstorm, you can't take it personally! The windstorm will subside, the sky will clear, and it will be *a new day for us*.

And that's how it was, as I once told you, when the village council informed me of the good news that they had come to do to me what they were doing to all of Israel—to administer the good deed of “driving out the Jews.” At first I reviled them soundly, complained, and demanded answers, as only Tevye can: “I ask you, how and why and when? Give me an explanation for suddenly swooping down and attacking a person in the middle of the day and tearing the feathers out of his pillows?”

Well, you can complain all you like, but all my words were useless. The hooligans were stubborn and insisted they had, for appearances' sake, to follow orders from the police in case an officer blew in, a plague on him. And if he saw they had let a Jew pass as an equal with no sign of a pogrom, how would it look to the police? That's why, they said, the council decreed that something had to be

done to me! They must!

I thought it over and finally said, “Listen to what I have to say. Let the council so decree, but that’s beside the point. Is there not something higher than the council? But you know there is something higher than the council.”

“Tell us, what can be higher?”

I said, “God. I don’t mean our God or your God. I mean our God and God of our Fathers, the God of us all, who has created me and you and your whole council. That’s who I mean. And you must ask Him if He has commanded you to do me injury. It could be,” I said, “that He does command it, but then again, it could also be that He doesn’t want it at all. Ay, how can we know? Let us throw lots,” I said. “Here is a Book of God’s Psalms. Do you know what the Psalms are? We call it Psalms and you call it Psalter. The holy Psalter,” I said, “will be the judge between us. It will decide whether or not you must punish me.”

They exchanged disbelieving smiles. Ivan Poperilo the mayor stepped out from among them and said me, “Exactly how will the holy Psalter make a judgment?”

“If you give me, Ivan’u, your hand on it that the council will obey what the Book of Psalms says, I will show you how.”

Ivan put out his hand to me. “Agreed.”

“If that is so,” I said, “it’s done. Now I will flip through the pages of the Book of Psalms, and as soon as my eyes catch the first word, I will say to you, ‘Be so kind and pious as to repeat it.’ And if any one of you can repeat it after me, it will be a sign that God commands that you do with Tevye what you will. And if not, that will be a sign that God says no. Are you agreed?”

Ivan the mayor and the council exchanged looks and said to me, “All right.”

I opened the Book of Psalms for them, and my eyes somehow caught the word *vachalaklokos*. “There you have it,” I said. “Can you repeat the word *vachalaklokos*?”

They looked at one another and at me and asked me to say the word again.

“That’s fine. I’ll even say it three times, if you wish: *Vachalaklokos! Vachalaklokos! Vachalaklokos!*”

“No, Tevel, don’t say *hal hal hal!* Say it clearly with a beat, and slowly!”

“I’ll do it!” I said. “I will say it clearly with a beat and slowly. *Va-cha-lak-lokos!* Satisfied?”

The group thought it over and got down to work, each in his own way. One said, “*Haidamaki*,” another said, “*Lomaki*,” and a third actually came out with “*Chaykolia*.” What did he like about “*Chaykolia*”?

I realized it was a story without an end. “You know what, children?” I said. “I see that the work is getting too hard for you. Obviously, *vachalaklokos* is not for you, so I will give you another word, also from our Book of Psalms: *m’maamkim keraticha*.”

And the same business started all over again: one pronounced it “*Lochanka kerosina*,” a second pronounced it “*Krivliaka buzina*,” and a third simply spat out, “Forget it!”

Apparently they realized that with Tevye they would not win. Ivan Poperilo called out to me, “This is the way it is. We have nothing personal against you, Tevel, nothing at all. True, you are a Jew and not a bad person, but one thing has nothing to do with the other. We must make a wreck of things here. The council has decided, and it’s over. We will,” he said, “at least break a few windows, and if you wish, you can knock out a few panes yourself. That will silence their mouths, to hell with them! If the police ride by, let them see you didn’t get off. Otherwise they will punish us on account of you. And now, Tevel,” he said, “put up the samovar and be so kind as to serve us some tea and naturally some brandy to go with it, and we’ll drink to your health because you are, after all, a smart Jew, one of God’s people.”

That is what he said, those very words as I am telling you, may God help both of us!

So now I ask you, Pani Sholem Aleichem, you are a Jew who writes books. Don’t you agree with Tevye that we have a powerful God and that a person, so long as he lives, should never lose heart, and especially a Jew, and especially one who knows a Hebrew letter when he sees one? Above all, hear me, in the end it comes out, as we say in the daily prayer, *worthy and good is he who can*, that no matter how we keep from boasting about it, we must admit that we Jews are, after all, the best and the smartest people. As the Prophet says: *Who can be compared to Israel?* How can a goy compare himself to a Jew? A goy is a goy, and a Jew is a Jew, as you yourself say in your writings. You have to be born a Jew, *blessed be the Jew*. How lucky I was to be born a Jew and know the taste of

exile and of always wandering, never sleeping where we spent the day. Since I learned the portion of *Get Thee Gone*—do you remember I once told you about that at great length?—I keep on going without a resting place where I can say, “Here, Tevye, you will remain.” Tevye doesn’t ask questions. They told him to leave; he left.

Today we met Pani Sholem Aleichem, right here on the train. Tomorrow the train can carry us off to Yehupetz. Next year it can drop us off in Odessa, or America, unless the One Above looks around and says, “Do you know what, children? I think I’m going to send you the Messiah!” I hope He does, even if it’s out of spite, our old God in Heaven!

In the meantime be well, go in good health, and give my regards to all our little Jews. Tell them not to worry: *Our old God lives!*

MOTL THE CANTOR'S SON
Writings of an Orphan Boy

PART ONE

Home in Kasrilevka

Written in 1907.

I

TODAY'S A HOLIDAY—YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO CRY!

A.

I'll bet you whatever you want that no one on earth is as happy with the warm sunny days after Passover as I, Peysi the cantor's son Motl, and the neighbor's calf Meni.

Both of us feel the first rays of the warm sun on the first day after Passover, both of us breathe in the fragrance of the first green blades of grass sprouting up from the newly thawed earth, and both of us crawl out of our dark, cramped corners to welcome the first sweet light of the warm spring morning. I, Peysi the cantor's son Motl, emerge from a cold, damp cellar that reeks of sour-dough and medicines; and Meni, the neighbor's calf, is let out of a worse-smelling spot—a tiny, dark, revolting, mud-covered stall with crooked, peeling walls through which the snow blows in wintertime and the rain whips in summertime.

Escaping into God's bright, open world, Meni and I are filled with joy and gratitude to Nature. I, Peysi the cantor's son, raise both arms, open my mouth wide, and draw in as much fresh warm air as I can. I imagine I am growing bigger and float up, up into the deep, deep blue skullcap of sky toward where the wispy, smoky clouds hover, where the white birds dip and swoop, appear and

disappear, with a shriek and a twitter, and of itself from my full breast a song bursts forth more beautiful than any my father sings at the pulpit during holidays, a song without words, without notes, without any motif, a kind of nature-song of falling waters, racing waves—my own Song of Songs, a godly rapture, a heavenly inspiration: Oh! Oh! Papa! Oh! Oh! Father! Oh! Oh! Forever living G-o-d!

That's how I, Peysi the cantor's son, express my joy on that first spring day. It's quite different from the way Meni the neighbor's calf expresses himself.

Meni the neighbor's calf first pokes his black, moist muzzle into the garbage heap, paws at the ground with his foreleg three times, raises his tail, then leaps up on all fours and lets out a flat *meh*! That *meh* sounds so comical to me that I have to laugh and imitate it with the same tone as Meni. Meni apparently likes this, because he soon repeats it with the same tone and the same leap. Naturally, I imitate the tone and leap again, exactly like Meni. This happens several times: the calf leaps, I leap, the calf gives a *meh*, I give a *meh*. Who knows how long this game would have gone on had my older brother Elyahu not delivered a sharp rap to the back of my neck with the flat of his hand?

“Is that the way to behave, a boy of almost nine years wasting his time dancing with a calf! Into the house with you, you good-for-nothing! Papa's going to give it to you!”

B .

Not a chance! My father isn't going to give me anything! My father is sick. He hasn't chanted the prayers in the pulpit since Simchas Torah. He coughs all night. The doctor comes for a visit, a swarthy, stout man with black sideburns and merry eyes—a cheerful doctor. He calls me Pupik as he flicks my belly button with his fingers. He always tells my mother not to stuff me with potatoes and to feed the patient only bouillon and milk. My mother listens to him, and when he leaves, she hides her face in her apron and her shoulders shake. Then she wipes her eyes and calls my brother Elyahu aside, where they whisper earnestly. What they talk about I don't know, but I imagine they're quarreling. My mother is sending him off somewhere, and he doesn't want to go.

He says to her, “Before I turn to them, I'd rather die! I'd rather die this day!”

“Bite your tongue, idiot! What are you talking about?” my mother chastises him under her breath, clenching her teeth, raising her hands as if to slap him. But she soon softens and says to him, “What shall I do, my son? My heart is breaking for your father.

We must save him!”

“Sell something,” my brother Elyahu says, glancing at the glass cupboard.

My mother looks at the same cupboard, then wipes her eyes. “What shall I sell, my soul? There’s nothing left to sell. Shall I sell the bare cupboard?”

“Why not?” says my brother Elyahu.

“Murderer!” my mother answers, her eyes reddening. “Where did I get such a murderous child?”

My mother grows angry, has a good cry, wipes her eyes, and quickly apologizes. That’s also the way it was with the books, the silver-threaded collar of the prayer shawl, the two gilded little beakers, her silk dress, and all the other things we sold off one at a time, each to a different buyer.

The books were bought by Michl the book peddler, a Jew with a sparse little beard that he keeps on scratching. My poor brother Elyahu had to seek him out three times before he agreed to accompany him home. My mother was thrilled to see him and indicated with her finger that he speak quietly so my father wouldn’t hear.

Michl understood, looked up at the shelf, and scratched under his little beard. “Well, show me what you have there.”

With a nod my mother indicated that I should get up on the table and hand down the books. She didn’t have to repeat it. I leaped up with such zeal that I landed flat out on the table and received an extra warning from my brother Elyahu to stop jumping around like a monkey. He then got onto the table himself and handed Michl the books.

Michl leafed through them with one hand while scratching his beard with the other, calling our attention to defects. Here the binding wasn’t good, there the spine was gnawed. In one case he decided the book wasn’t even a book.

After he finished looking over all the books, examining all the bindings and all the spines, he scratched his beard. “If these were a set of Mishnahs, I’d

probably buy them,” he said.

My mother looked as if she would pass out.

My brother Elyahu, quite otherwise, became red as fire. He turned on the book peddler. “Couldn’t you have said in the first place that you buy only Mishnahs! Why did you come here to waste our time and fool with us?”

“Be quiet!” my mother pleaded with him.

A hoarse voice came from the alcove where my father was lying: “Who’s there?”

“No one is here!” my mother answered and sent my brother to him while she dealt with Michl the book peddler, agreeing to sell him the books for very little. This I figured out because when my brother Elyahu came back from my father’s alcove and asked her, “How much?” she pushed him away and said, “It’s none of your business!” Michl quickly grabbed the books, stuffed them in a sack, and hurried off.

C.

Of all the household things we sold, nothing has given me as much pleasure as the glass cupboard.

True, when the silver-threaded collar on my father’s prayer shawl needed to be ripped apart, it was a bit of holiday for me. First of all, my mother negotiated with Yossi the goldsmith, a pale Jew with a red birthmark spread on his face. Three times he walked out, but he finally had his way. Then he sat down, crossed his legs facing the window with my father’s prayer shawl on his lap, pulled out a small knife with a yellow deer’s horn handle, and bent his middle finger. He ripped the collar apart so skillfully that if I could rip collars apart like that, I’d count myself lucky! But you should have seen my mother—she broke into tears. Even my brother Elyahu, engaged to be married, turned his head to the door, pretended to blow his nose, screwed up his face, and let out a weird sound from his throat. Then he wiped his eyes with the hem of his jacket.

“What’s going on there?” my father asked from his sickroom.

“Nothing!” my mother answered him, and wiped her red eyes. Her lower lip and face trembled so that one had to be stronger than iron not to burst out

laughing.

But what did that have to do with the glass cupboard?

First of all, what can they mean when they say they'll take it away? How will they be able to remove it? I always thought our glass cupboard was part of the wall. Second, where will my mother keep the bread and the challah and the dishes and the tin spoons and forks? (We once had two silver spoons and a fork but my mother sold them long ago.) Where will we keep the Passover matzos? This is what I'm thinking while Nachman the carpenter stands before us measuring the cupboard with the big red thumbnail of his stained hand. He insists that the cupboard won't make it through the door. To prove it, he extends his arms: here's the width of the cupboard, and here's the door. Try and get it to fit through!

"How did it get in?" asks my brother Elyahu.

"Go ask it!" Nachman answers angrily. "Do I know how it got in? They carried it in, and it got in!"

At one moment I'm afraid for the cupboard—that is, I think it's going to stay with us. But Nachman the carpenter soon returns with his two big sons, also carpenters. First comes Nachman, then both sons, and behind them—me. They grab hold of our cupboard. Their father gives the orders: "Kopl, to the side! Mendl, right! Kopl, take it easy! Mendl, stop!" I help them by hopping from one foot to the other. My mother and brother Elyahu don't want to help. They stand there staring at the now-bare wall, covered with spiderwebs, and cry. That's all they do—cry! Suddenly—crash! Just as they get to the door, the glass smashes, and the carpenter and his sons begin arguing, each blaming the other:

"You move like a lead bird!" "Bear feet!" "The devil take him!"

"Break your head, may an evil spirit take you!"

"What's going on there?" a hoarse voice is heard from the sickroom.

"Nothing!" my mother answers and wipes her eyes.

D .

But it's my brother Elyahu's bed and my little cot that give me the greatest

pleasure. My brother Elyahu's bed was once a sofa for sitting on, but when he got engaged to be married, he began sleeping on the sofa next to me on the cot, so the sofa became a bed. In the good years when my father was healthy and chanted the *musaf* prayers in the butchers' small synagogue with four choristers, the sofa had springs, but no more. The springs were now mine. I did all kinds of tricks with them: I bruised my hands, I almost poked out an eye, and once I wrapped them around my neck and came close to strangling myself, until my brother Elyahu tossed the springs into the attic and took away the ladder.

Chana buys the bed-once-a-sofa and the cot. My mother won't allow her to look too closely at them. "What you see is what you buy. There's nothing to look for!"

But once Chana sets a price and makes a deposit, she goes over to the bed and the cot and lifts the bedding. Slowly she looks in all the hidden corners, then spits hard.

My mother is offended by the spitting and wants to give back the deposit, but my brother Elyahu steps in. "Once it's sold, it's final!"

We now lay out our bedding directly on the floor. I and my brother Elyahu stretch out like royalty, covering ourselves with one blanket (they sold his). It's very pleasant for me to hear my older brother say that sleeping on the floor isn't so bad after all.

I wait till he has recited his evening prayers and has fallen asleep, and then I begin rolling all over the floor. Thank God there is plenty of room to roll on the floor, as wide as a field, a real pleasure, a paradise!

E.

"What more can we do?" my mother says one morning to my brother Elyahu as she studies the four bare walls, her forehead wrinkled. I and my brother Elyahu, to help her out, study the walls with her. My brother Elyahu looks at me with concern and pity.

"Go outside!" he says to me sternly. "We have to talk about something."

On one foot I hop outside and, naturally, right over to my neighbor's little calf.

In recent days Meni has grown tall and handsome, his black muzzle attractive,

his round eyes full of human understanding and intelligence. He is always looking to get something in his mouth and enjoys being scratched under his neck.

“Again? You’ve been playing around with the calf? You can’t tear yourself away from your dear friend?” says my brother Elyahu, this time without scolding. He then takes me by the hand and says we’re going to Hersh-Ber the cantor. There, he says, it will be good for me. First of all, he says, I’ll have something to eat. At home, he says, it isn’t good. Our father is sick. We’re doing all we can to save him.

My brother Elyahu unbuttons his coat and shows me his vest. “Here’s where I had a pocket watch, a gift from my future father-in-law. I sold it. If he knew, it’d be a black day! The world would turn upside down!”

I thank and praise God that his future father-in-law doesn’t know about the pocket watch and that the world doesn’t turn upside down. Oh my! May it never happen, because if it did, what would happen to Meni the neighbor’s little calf, a dumb helpless animal?

“Here we are!” says my brother Elyahu, who by the minute is growing ever more caring and friendly.

Hersh-Ber the cantor teaches singing. He himself doesn’t sing; he has no voice at all. That’s what I heard from my father. But he knows everything there is to know about singing. He has about fifteen little choristers and is an awful grump. He listens to me sing “*Mogen Oves*” for him with my own personal touch. He pats me on the head and says to my brother that I’m a soprano. My brother says I’m not just any soprano, but a soprano among sopranos! My brother Elyahu negotiates with him, pockets some money from Hersh-Ber, and tells me I’m going to stay with Reb Hersh-Ber the cantor and that I should obey him, and he adds, “Don’t be homesick!”

That’s easy for him to say! How can I not miss summertime, with the sun baking, the sky clear as crystal, the mud long dried out? Near our house lie wooden logs, not ours, but Yossi the rich man’s logs. He’s planning to build a house and has readied logs but has no place to put them, so he’s stacked them near our house. Long may he live, Yossi the rich man, because out of those logs I can build a fortress. Spiny plants and puffballs grow between the logs. The thorns are good for sticking, and the puffballs you can blow up and burst against your forehead.

I have it good. Meni our neighbor's little calf also has it good. Meni and I are the only real masters here, so how can I not miss him?

F.

It is almost three weeks that I've been at Hersh-Ber the cantor's, and I hardly sing at all. I have another job. I carry around his Dobtzi, who is a hunchback, barely two years old, but still, *kayn eyn horeh*, quite heavy, heavier than I am. I risk my health carrying her around. Dobtzi loves me. She hugs me with her thin little arms and latches on to me with her thin little fingers. She calls me Kiko. Why Kiko, I don't know. Dobtzi loves me. She keeps me awake all night. "Kiko, ki!" means she wants me to rock her. Dobtzi loves me. When I eat, she tears the food from my mouth. "Kiko, pi!" means "Give it to me!" I long for home. The food here isn't too good either. It's a holiday—Succos evening. I want to go outdoors to see the sky opening up, but Dobtzi won't let me. Dobtzi loves me. "Kiko, pi!" She wants me to rock her. I rock her and rock her and fall asleep.

A guest comes to me—Meni the neighbor's little calf is looking at me with knowing eyes and says, *Come!* We run downhill to the pond. Not wasting any time, I roll up my trouser legs, and *plop!* I'm in the pond. I swim, and Meni swims after me. The other side is lovely. There's no cantor here, no Dobtzi, no sick father. I wake up—it's just a dream. *Run away! Run away! Run away!* Where to? Home, naturally.

But Hersh-Ber is already up before me. He has a huge tuning fork that he bangs on his teeth and then places near his ear. He tells me to dress quickly and go with him to *shul*. Today for *musaf* they will sing a special piece. In *shul* I see my brother Elyahu. What's he doing here? He usually prays in the butchers' *shul*, where my father is the cantor! What does this mean?

My brother Elyahu is saying something to Hersh-Ber the cantor, who is not pleased and says, "Remember, for God's sake, bring him back right after we eat!"

"Come!" my brother Elyahu says to me. "You'll see Papa!" We go home together. He walks, and I skip. I run, I fly.

"Take it easy! Why are you in such a hurry?" He holds on to me. It looks like he wants to talk to me.

“Do you know that Papa is sick, very, very sick? Only God knows what will happen to him. We must save him, but we don’t have the medicine. No one wants to help. Mama won’t let him go to the poorhouse under any circumstances! She’d rather die herself. She says that before letting him to go to the poorhouse . . . *Sha*, here comes Mama.”

G.

My mother comes toward us with outstretched arms and embraces me, and I feel her tears on my cheeks. My brother Elyahu goes to my sick father, and my mother and I remain standing outside. We are surrounded by our neighbor’s wife Fat Pessi and her daughter Mindl, her daughter-in-law Perl, and two other women.

“Do you have a guest for Shevuos? God love you and your guest!” they say.

My mother lowers her swollen eyes. “A guest?” she says to the women. “Just a child, come to find out how his sick father is doing. Just a child . . .”

While Pessi is shaking her head, my mother whispers in her ear, “What a town this is! No one cares enough about what’s going on. Twenty-three years of his life he gave singing in the pulpit, sacrificed his health. I want to save him, but I don’t have with what. Everything, praised be God, is sold down to the last little pillow. We’ve placed the child with a cantor, all for his sake.”

So my mother laments to Pessi. I look all around me.

“Who are you looking for?” my mother says to me.

“What does a child look for? Probably the little calf,” Pessi our neighbor says with strained friendliness. “Eh, little boy! No more little calf! I had to sell it to the butcher. Did I have any choice? It’s enough that we have to feed one dumb animal—we can’t manage two!”

Now the calf has become a dumb animal to her? A strange woman, this Pessi. She pokes her nose into everything. She wants to know if we’re having a dairy supper.

“Why do you need to know that?” asks my mother.

“Just like this!” says Pessi. She lifts her shawl and pushes a bowl of sour

cream at my mother.

My mother pushes it back. “God be with you, Pessi! Why are you doing this? What are we, God forbid? You know the way I am.”

“On the contrary,” Pessi protests, “it’s because I do know you. The cow, *kayn eyn horeh*, has been giving lots of milk lately. We have cheese and butter. I’ll lend you some. God willing, you’ll repay me.”

And Pessi the neighbor talks a long time to my mother while my heart aches for the logs, the little calf—oh, the little calf! If I weren’t embarrassed, I’d burst out crying.

“If Papa asks you anything, you should say, ‘Thank God!’ ” says my mother.

My brother Elyahu explains further. “You’re not to complain. Don’t tell any stories. Just say ‘Thank God.’ Do you hear what I’m telling you?”

And my brother Elyahu leads me into the sickroom. The table is covered with bottles, pillboxes, and cupping bottles. It smells of medicines. The window is shut. In honor of Shevuos they’ve decorated the room with green sprigs, and above his bed they’ve hung a Star of David made of flowers, my brother Elyahu’s handiwork. The floor is covered with fragrant grass.

My father sees me and beckons me to him with a long, thin finger. My brother Elyahu gives me a shove from behind. I go to my father. I can barely recognize him. His face is like clay. His gray hair shines, and the hairs stand on end as if they were someone else’s that had just been stuck in. His black eyes are sunk deep into his head as if they belonged to someone else and had been screwed in. His teeth look as if someone else’s had been put in his mouth. His neck is so scrawny, it can barely hold the weight of his head. It’s a good thing he can’t sit. His lips are moving oddly like a person swimming: “*mpfu!*” He lays a hot hand of bony fingers on my face and smiles a twisted, crooked smile like that of a corpse.

At this point my mother comes into the room, followed by the doctor, the cheerful swarthy doctor with the large mustache. He greets me like an old friend, honoring me with a flick to the belly. Then he says cheerfully to my father, “You have a guest for Shevuos? God love you and your guest!”

“Thank you!” says my mother, and nods to the doctor to attend to the patient and write out a prescription for him.

The swarthy doctor throws open the window and scolds my brother Elyahu for keeping it shut. “I’ve told you a thousand times that a window wants to be open!”

My brother Elyahu nods toward my mother, indicating that she’s the guilty one: she won’t allow the window to be opened for fear my father might catch cold, God forbid. My mother nods to the doctor to get on with the examination and to write out a prescription for him.

The swarthy doctor takes out a large gold fob watch. My brother Elyahu looks with wide eyes at the doctor’s fob watch. The doctor notices this. “Do you want to know what time it is? It’s four minutes before ten-thirty. What does your watch say?”

“My watch has stopped,” my brother Elyahu answers, and turns very red from the tip of his nose to the back of his ears.

My mother can’t stand still. She’s anxious to have the patient examined and a prescription written. But the doctor has time. He questions my mother about minor things: When is my brother’s wedding? And what does Hersh-Ber the cantor have to say about my voice? I must have a good voice. A voice, he says, is inherited. My mother is bursting!

Suddenly the doctor turns his chair to my sick father and takes his hot, dry hand in his. “*Nu*, cantor, how are the prayers for this Shevuos?”

“Thank God!” my father answers him with the smile of a corpse.

“For instance, have you coughed less? Have you slept well?” The doctor bends over very close to him.

“No!” my father answers, barely able to catch his breath. “On the contrary . . . I’m coughing . . . and I’m not sleeping . . . but thank God . . . it’s Shevuos . . . such a day . . . we received the Torah . . . today we have a guest . . . a guest for Shevuos.”

Everyone looks at the “guest,” and the “guest” looks down at the ground, and his mind is outdoors somewhere by the logs, by the thorns that stick, by the puffballs that pop open, by the neighbor’s clever little calf who has suddenly become a “dumb animal,” by the pond that rushes downhill, or way up in the higher, wider, deeper blue skullcap that is called the sky.

H.

The little bit of dairy dish that our neighbor Fat Pessi lent us actually comes in very handy. I and my brother Elyahu make a feast of it. We dip fresh challah in the cold sour cream, and it isn't bad at all.

"Only one problem—there's too little of it," comments my brother Elyahu, who on this day is in very high spirits, so much so that he gives me permission not to go back so soon to Hersh-Ber the cantor and to stay and play some more at home.

"You're our Shevuos guest," he tells me, and lets me play outside on the logs, on the condition that I not climb on them too long and, God forbid, rip my only pair of pants.

Ha ha ha! I shouldn't rip my only pair of pants? Too bad there's no one to laugh along, as I'm a Jew! You should see those pants! Better not talk about pants! Better to talk of Rich Yossi's logs. Ay, logs, logs! Rich Yossi believes the logs are his logs. Not at all! They're *my* logs! I built myself a palace out of them and a vineyard. I'm the prince. The prince walks around freely and openly in his own vineyard, tears off a puffball, bangs it on his forehead, tears off another one and bangs it on his forehead, and everyone envies me. Even Rich Yossi's son, Cross-Eyed Henich, begrudges me my good luck. He passes me by in his shiny new clothes and points to my pants. Laughing, he squints his crossed eye and says to me, "Make sure you don't lose something. . . ."

"You'd better go away nicely," I say to him, "or else I'll tell my brother Elyahu!"

All the boys have respect for my brother Elyahu. Cross-Eyed Henich backs off, and I'm again alone, again the prince in my own vineyard. It's just too bad that Meni our neighbor's calf isn't here! He's no longer a calf, but now a dumb animal, as our neighbor Pessi says. What does that mean? And why did they sell him to the butcher? Could it be to slaughter him? Was he born only to be slaughtered? Anyway, why is a calf born, and why is a person born?

Suddenly from the house I hear a strange scream and loud crying. It's my mother's voice. I raise my eyes. People are running in and out of the house, men and women, this one out, that one in. I lie on a log belly down. I'm fine! But hush! Here comes Rich Yossi. Rich Yossi is a trustee of the butchers' *shul*, where

my father has been the cantor for twenty-three years. Yossi himself was once a butcher. Today he deals in oxen and hides and is rich, very rich!

Yossi waves his hands and scolds my mother, complaining, “In God’s name! Why didn’t anyone tell me that Peysi the cantor was so sick?”

“Should I shout it?” my mother defends herself through her tears. “The whole town saw how I was struggling, how I tried to save him, and he himself begged to be saved.”

My mother can no longer speak. She wrings her hands, and her head falls back in a faint.

My brother Elyahu catches her. “Mama! Why do you need to defend yourself? Mama! Don’t forget, Mama, it’s *yontiff*, it’s Shevuos, you aren’t allowed to cry, Mama!”

Rich Yossi keeps firing away at my mother. “What are you telling me—the whole town! Who is the town? You should have told *me*! In the name of God, me! I take care of everything—the burial society, beadles, shrouds, I take care of everything! And if you need something for the orphans, you should come to me! Don’t be ashamed!”

Rich Yossi’s words hardly calm my mother. She keeps on keening and fainting in my brother Elyahu’s arms.

And my brother Elyahu, who himself is crying, doesn’t stop reminding her that today is *yontiff*. “Mama, today is Shevuos, Mama! Mama, you aren’t allowed to cry, Mama!”

And suddenly it’s all clear to me. And I feel a pain in my heart, a tug at my soul, and I feel like crying, but I don’t know for whom. I feel pity for my mother. I can’t bear how she’s crying and fainting and falling into my brother’s arms.

I leave my palace and my vineyard, and I walk up behind her, and I say in the same words as my brother Elyahu as tears pour from my eyes, “Mama! Today is *yontiff*, Mama, today is Shevuos, Mama! Mama, you’re not allowed to cry, Mama!”

II

I HAVE IT GOOD, I'M AN ORPHAN!

A.

Never do I remember being as special as I am now. Why am I so special? My father Peysi the cantor, as you know, died on the first day of Shevuos, and I was left an orphan.

After the first day of Shevuos we began saying kaddish—I and my brother Elyahu. It was he who taught me how to say kaddish.

My brother Elyahu is a devoted brother, but he's not a good teacher. He gets angry, and he gets into squabbles with me. But finally he opens up a prayer book and sits down to teach me.

Yisgadal v'yiskadash sh'may rabo . . . He says the prayer through once and wants me to know it by heart. When I can't say it, he repeats it again and again, from beginning to end, and tells me that now I should be able to say it myself. I try, but it doesn't come out right. I get through part of it, but then I get tangled up. He jabs me with his elbow and says my head is obviously somewhere outside, or somewhere with the little calf. He isn't lazy and repeats it with me again. I barely make it halfway through, *leyla u'v'layla min kol birchoso u'shiraso tush b'choso*, and not another syllable will come! He grabs me by the ear and says my father should rise from the dead and see what kind of son he has!

"Then I wouldn't have to say kaddish," I say to my brother Elyahu, and receive a smart slap from his left hand on my right cheek.

My mother hears it and gives him a good scolding, telling him not to hit me, because I'm an orphan. "God be with you! What are you doing? Whom are you hitting? Have you forgotten the child is an orphan?!"

I sleep with my mother in my father's bed, the only piece of furniture in the house. She lets me have most of the blanket.

"Cover yourself up," she says to me, "and fall asleep, my precious orphan. We have no food to give you."

I cover myself up, but I can't sleep. (I repeat the kaddish by heart.) I'm not going to *cheder*, I'm not studying, I'm not saying my prayers, I'm not singing.

I'm finished with everything.

I have it good—I am an orphan.

B .

Mazel tov! I know the whole kaddish by heart, as well as the special kaddish. In *shul* I stand on a bench and chant the kaddish masterfully like an expert. I have a good voice, a true soprano, inherited from my father. All the boys stand around me and envy me. Women weep. The men give me a kopek.

Rich Yossi's son, Cross-Eyed Henich, sticks his tongue out at me when it comes time for me to recite the special kaddish. He's good at holding a spiteful grudge! He desperately wants me to start giggling. Just to spite him, I won't giggle! Ahron the beadle notices him, takes him by the ear, and leads him out the door. Serves him right! Since I'm saying kaddish morning and night, I no longer go to Hersh-Ber the cantor's and don't have to carry Dobtzi around. I'm free!

I spend all day at the pond, or I catch fish, or I swim. I learned how to catch fish by myself. If you want, I'll teach you too. You take off your shirt and tie a knot in your sleeves and go into the water slowly up to your neck. (You have to go for a long, long time.) If you feel your shirt getting heavy, it's a sign that it's full. Get out as soon as you can, shake out all the grass and mud, and look carefully at what's left. Caught in the grass you sometimes find little frogs. Throw them back into the water—take pity on a living creature. In the thick mud you can often find a leech. Leeches are worth money. For ten leeches you can get three and a half groschens. Don't bother looking for fish. Once there were fish, but now they're gone. I don't bother with fish. I'm satisfied to catch leeches. But this summer there wasn't a single leech!

How my brother Elyahu found out I was fishing I don't know. He almost tore off my ear on account of my wet shirt and pants!

Luckily Fat Pessi, our neighbor, saw it. Your own mother wouldn't protect you as well. "Is that the way to treat an orphan?"

My brother Elyahu is ashamed and lets go of my ear. Everyone sticks up for me. I have it good—I am an orphan.

C .

Our neighbor Fat Pessi has fallen in love with me. She's trying to convince my mother to let me stay with her.

"Why should that bother you?" she argues. "I have twelve to feed at the table, so he'll be a thirteenth."

My mother agrees reluctantly, but my brother Elyahu has his own opinion. "Who'll watch over him, make sure he says kaddish?"

"I'll watch over him and make sure he says kaddish. *Nu*, is there anything else you need to ask me about?"

Pessi is not a rich woman. Her husband is a bookbinder named Moishe. He has a reputation as a master of his trade. But that isn't enough. You have to have luck as well. That's what Pessi says to my mother.

My mother agrees. My mother says to be unlucky also takes some luck. She uses me as an example. Here I am an orphan, and everyone wants to look after me. Some are volunteering to keep me for good, but may her enemies never live to see the day when she gives me away for good! That's what my mother says, and cries.

She discusses it with my brother Elyahu. "What do you think? Should he stay with Pessi for the time being?"

My brother Elyahu is already a grown-up, or she wouldn't be asking his opinion. He strokes his bare, not-yet-bearded face as if he already had a beard and speaks like an adult. "Whatever you say, so long as he doesn't get into trouble."

And so I'll stay with our neighbor for the time being, but on condition I don't get into trouble. To them, whatever you do is called getting into trouble! Tying a piece of paper onto the cat's tail so she'll run in circles, to them is getting into trouble. Running a stick across the priest's grating in the courtyard to attract all the dogs, to them is getting into trouble. Pulling out the stopper of Leibke the water-carrier's barrel so half the water runs out, to them is getting into trouble.

"You're lucky you're an orphan," Leibke the water-carrier says to me, "or else I'd break your bones! You better believe me!"

I really believe him. I know he won't touch me now because I am an orphan.

I have it good—I am an orphan.

D .

Our neighbor Pessi, you should pardon me, told a big lie. She said twelve were eating at her table, but according to my count, I'm the fourteenth. It appears she forgot to include among the eaters Boruch the blind uncle. And maybe she didn't include him because he's so old and has no teeth. I won't argue. He can't chew, but he can swallow like a goose, and he grabs. Everybody grabs. The way they grab is out of the ordinary. I grab too. They hit me. They kick me under the table, and more than all of them, Vashti hits me. Vashti is a terror. His name is Hersh, but since he has a birthmark on his forehead, he is called Vashti. I haven't the faintest idea why. They all have nicknames like Barrel, Tomcat, Buffalo, Stork, Stutterer, Give-Me-More, and Smear-with-Butter.

You can be sure every nickname has a reason. Pinni is called Barrel because he is fat and round like a barrel. Velvl is dark-skinned, so he is called Tomcat. Chaim looks like a buffalo, so he is called Buffalo. Mendl has a pointy nose, so he is called Stork. Feitl is named Stutterer because he can't speak right. Berl is a big nosher. If you give him a piece of bread with chicken fat, he says, "Give me more." Zorach got a bad name, Smear-with-Butter, for something that's not his fault. His mother may be to blame because she neglected to wash his greasy hair during childhood. Then again, maybe she isn't to blame at all. I'm not going to argue, let alone fight over it!

In short, it's a household in which everyone has a nickname. Even the cat, just a dumb animal, surely innocent, is called Feige-Leah the Beadle's Wife. Do you know why? It's because she's fat like Feige-Leah, Nachman the beadle's wife. Can you imagine how many slaps they caught for naming a cat after a person? It did no good. Once you give someone a nickname, it sticks!

E.

They gave me a nickname too. Try and guess: Lips (Motl-with-the-Lips). It seems they don't like my lips. They say I make noise with them when I eat. I would very much like to see anyone eat and not make noise with his lips! I'm

not among those oversensitive people who hate to be criticized, but I really hate this nickname! I don't understand why. But because I hate it, they taunt me with it all the time. You've never seen such nasty creatures! At first I was called Motl-with-the-Lips, then it was shortened to With-the-Lips, and later it became The Lips, and finally Lips.

“Lips! Where have you been?”

“Lips! Wipe your nose!”

It infuriates me, really hurts my feelings and makes me cry. Their father Moishe the bookbinder once saw me crying and asked me, “Why are you crying?”

I told him, “Why shouldn't I cry when my name is Motl and they call me Lips!”

“Who?”

“Vashti.”

He turned to punish Vashti, but Vashti said, “It's not me, it's Barrel.”

He went to punish Barrel, and Barrel said, “It's not me, it's Tomcat.”

So it went from one to the other—a tale without end! Moishe the bookbinder thought it over, laid them down one at a time, and spanked them all with the cover of a prayer book.

“Good-for-nothings!” he said to them. “I'll teach you to tease an orphan!”

That's the way it goes! Everyone stands up for me. Everyone, everyone takes my part.

I have it good—I am an orphan.

III

WHAT'S TO BECOME OF ME?

A.

Guess where paradise is. You can't in a million years. Do you know why? Because it is in a different place for everyone. My mother says that paradise is where my father is. That's where you'll find all the poor worthy souls who suffered on earth. Because they didn't have a good life on earth, they deserve a place in paradise. That is as clear as day. And my father is the best evidence. Where else could he be if not in paradise? Didn't he suffer enough on this earth? So says my mother, wiping her eyes as she usually does when she speaks of my father.

But if you ask my friends, they'll tell you that paradise is found somewhere on a mountain of pure crystal, as high as the sky, where boys do whatever they please. They don't go to school, but all day they bathe in milk and eat honey by the fistful. Are you ready for this one? Along comes this Jew and says that true paradise is in the bathhouse on Fridays. I heard it myself from our neighbor's husband Moishe the bookbinder, so you can believe me. Is there an end to these stories?

If you ask me, I'd say that paradise is Menashe the doctor's garden. As long as you've lived, you've never seen a garden like that. It is the most beautiful garden, not only on our street, not only in our town, but in the whole world. There isn't another garden like it—there never was and never will be! Everyone will tell you that.

What do you want me to describe first—Menashe the doctor and his wife, or shall I first describe paradise, I mean their garden? Let me tell you first about Menashe and his wife. The owners should get the first introduction.

B .

Winter and summer Menashe the doctor wears a high collar, copying the swarthy doctor who visited my father. Menashe has one eye smaller than the other, and his mouth seems to twist to the side, not a little but quite a lot. As he tells it, a draft caused it. I can't understand how a whole mouth can get twisted to the side by a draft. How many drafts, big and little, have I lived through in my life! My whole head would by now be twisted around to my back. I figure it's really out of habit; it's how you get used to holding your mouth. Take my friend Berl, who blinks his eyes. Another friend, Velvl, sounds as if he's slurping noodles and soup when he talks. Everything is a habit. Even though his mouth is twisted to

the side, still and all Menashe does better than any other doctor. First of all, he isn't full of himself like other doctors. When you call him, he comes running immediately all sweated up.

And second of all, it isn't his way to write prescriptions. He makes the medicines himself. Once I had a sticking pain, a chill, and the shivers, and my mother ran right over and brought home Menashe the doctor. He examined me and told her with his twisted mouth, "You don't need to worry. It's nothing at all. The little scamp caught a cold in his lung."

And with these words he took out of his pocket a blue bottle and poured white powder into six pieces of paper. One powder he told me to take right away. I turned and twisted all around—my heart told me it would be bitter as death. And it was. I was right! There's nothing more bitter. Have you ever tasted the fresh bark from a young tree? That's how his powder tasted. Just remember—if it's a powder, it has to be bitter. My thrashing around didn't help me one bit. I swallowed the powder and thought I was going to die. He told my mother to give me the other five powders every two hours. He really thought he had found a willing taker of bitter medicine! When my mother turned around for a minute to tell my brother Elyahu I was sick, I poured all five powders into the trash and later replaced them all with flour.

My mother had quite a job ahead of her. Every two hours she had to run to our neighbor to look at the clock. After each powder I took, she remarked that I was getting better. By the sixth powder I was healthy.

"Now that's what I call a doctor!" she said, but still she didn't let me go to *cheder*—she kept me home all day, and fed me sweet tea and white rolls.

My mother boasted to everybody, as usual wiping her eyes, "Menashe is a better doctor than all the others, may God grant him health and many years! He has medicines that turn the dead into living people."

C .

Menashe the doctor's wife is known by her husband's name: "Menashe'che the doctor's." She's a witch. That's what everybody says. Do you know why? It's because she's mean. She has a face like a man's, the voice of a man, and wears men's boots. When she speaks, you have the feeling she's angry. She has quite a

reputation in town. As long as she's lived here, no needy person has ever received so much as a piece of bread from her. Her house is full of good things—you can find preserves made a year ago, three years ago, and even ten years ago.

Why does she need so many preserves? If you ask her, she doesn't know herself. That's the way she is. Don't even think about it, you won't change her. Once summer comes, she just has to keep cooking up preserves. She doesn't know why. If you think she cooks on coals, you're wrong. She can cook on thorns, cones, and dried leaves. She raises so much smoke on the whole street that you could choke. If you ever come to us in summertime and you smell something like tar, don't be afraid. It isn't a fire, but Menashe'che the doctor's wife's preserves made from her own garden, which I promised to tell you about.

D .

What fruits can you not find in that garden? There are apples and pears and grapes and plums and sour cherries and Spanish cherries and gooseberries and blackberries and peaches and raspberries and morellos and currants and more. Is there anything else you need? From Menashe'che the doctor's you can even buy grapes for the *erev* Rosh Hashanah blessing. True, when you taste the grapes, your mouth puckers—that's how sour they are! But she still gets good money for them. She knows how to turn anything into money, even sunflowers. God save you if you ask her to pull up a sunflower—she won't do it! She'd rather pull a tooth from her mouth than pull a little sunflower from her garden. And never mind an apple, a pear, a sour cherry, or a plum—you're not sure of your life! I am as familiar with this garden as a Jew is with the *ashrei* prayer. I know where every tree is located and what grows on it and if this is a good or not so good year. How do I know? Don't worry, I've never been in the garden. How could I, when it's surrounded by a high fence covered with scary spikes? (Are you ready for this?) There's also a dog in the garden. Not a dog, but a wolf! He's tied up on a long leash, this dog of dogs, and whenever someone passes by, or the dog even imagines someone is passing by, he yanks at the rope, jumping and barking with all his might, as if the devil himself has gotten into him!

You might wonder if I'm making all this up. But listen, and I'll tell you how I found all this out.

E .

Do you know Mendl the slaughterer? If you don't, you certainly don't know his house either. It's right next to Menashe the doctor's house, and it looks right into his garden. If you sit on Mendl the slaughterer's roof, you can see everything that's going on in Menashe's garden. The trick is, how do you climb up onto Mendl's roof? For me, it's no trick. Do you know why? It's because Mendl's house is next to ours, and it's a lot lower than our house. If you climb up to our attic (I do it without a ladder; someday maybe I'll tell you how) and stick your foot out of its small window and then let the rest of you follow, you are on Mendl's roof! There you lie down whichever way you like, faceup or face-down. In any case you must lie down, or else you can be seen. ("What are you doing on Mendl's roof?") I always choose a time before nightfall, between the *mincha* and *maariv* prayers, when I am supposed to go to *shul* to say kaddish. At that time it's neither day nor night—the best time. From there I can look down into the garden, and I swear to you it really is more beautiful than the Garden of Eden!

When summer begins and trees deck themselves out in little white feathery blossoms, little green gooseberries soon appear on short spiky twigs, you hope, if not today, then tomorrow. That is the first fruit you want to taste. Some people wait till the gooseberries turn red. That's dumb! I know for sure that it's when they're green that they're the most tasty and delicious. But aren't they sour? you'll ask. Do they make your mouth pucker? Well, what if they do? Sour things refresh your heart, and for puckering there's a remedy—salt. You put salt on your lips and keep your mouth open for half an hour, and then you can go on eating green gooseberries. After gooseberries come the currants, red with little black mouths and yellow seeds. There are dozens and dozens on every twig. If you draw one twig between your lips, you get a mouthful of currants, winelike and fragrant, a delight! When they turn ripe, my mother buys a quart of currants for a groschen and I eat them with bread.

In Menashe's garden there are two rows of small bushes growing close to the ground, covered with currants, glowing and shimmering in the sun. You long for just one little twig, just to pull off one currant with two fingers and pop it into your mouth! Will you believe me—when I speak of green gooseberries and red currants, my mouth begins to pucker! So let's talk about cherries. Cherries don't stay green for long. They turn ripe very quickly. I swear to you that once, while lying on Mendl's roof in the morning, I noticed several cherries that were green

as grass. By afternoon the sun had reddened their little cheeks and by evening they were red as fire! My mother used to bring me cherries. But how many? Five on a twig. What can you do with five cherries? You play with them until you don't know what became of them.

F.

But Menashe's garden has as many cherries as the sky has stars. You can understand, I'm so eager to count how many cherries grow on one little branch. I tried, but I couldn't count them! Cherries usually cling tight to the branch—they rarely fall to the ground, and then only when they're overripe or black as plums. Peaches, on the other hand, fall off as soon as they get ripe and yellow. Ach, peaches! Peaches! I love them more than any other fruit. In my entire life I've eaten only one peach, and I can still taste it. That was a few years ago, when I wasn't yet five. My father was still alive, and we still owned everything in the house: the glass cupboard, the couch, the books, and all the bedding.

One time my father came home from *shul*, called me and my brother Elyahu to him, and put a hand in his back pocket where he keeps his handkerchief. "Children!" he said. "Do you want some peaches? I've brought you two peaches."

And he removed from his back pocket two pieces of round, aromatic yellow fruit. My brother Elyahu rushed to eat it—he made a quick, loud blessing—"Blessed be the fruit of the vine"—and stuffed the whole thing in his mouth. But I played with it first, savoring its aroma, admiring its beauty, and then ate it bit by bit with bread. Peaches go well with bread. I've never tasted another peach, but the taste of that first one I cannot forget!

Now standing before me is an entire tree bursting with peaches, and I'm spread out on Mendl the slaughterer's roof, looking and looking, and one peach after another falls to the ground. One is yellow, almost red, and has split open, exposing its round pit. What will the doctor's wife do with so many peaches? She'll probably gather them up and make them into preserves, which she'll stick away behind the furnace until wintertime, when she'll move them to the cellar, where they'll remain so long they turn to sugar and get covered with mold.

After the peaches come the plums, but not all at once. There are two sorts of

plums in Menashe the doctor's garden. One tree grows a kind of round, sweet, hard black plum. The other grows ordinary plums they call bucket plums, because they are sold by the bucket. They have a thin skin and are slippery and sticky and watery to the taste. But still they're not as bad as you would think. I just wish they'd give me some. But Menashe'che the doctor's wife isn't one of those giving people. She'd rather make plum compote for winter. When will she ever eat so much plum compote?

G .

When cherries, peaches, and plums are finished, the apple season is here. Apples, you must know, aren't pears. Bergamot pears may be the best fruit in the world, but if they aren't exactly ripe, you can't manage anything with them. You might as well chew wood! Apples can be green, the seeds may be white, but they already taste like apples. You dig your teeth into a green apple, and your mouth turns sour. And you know, I wouldn't give you half of a green apple for two ripe ones. You have to wait a long time for them to ripen, but you can eat green ones right away, right after the tree blossoms.

It just depends on what size you want. The longer an apple grows, the bigger it gets—like with a person, pardon the comparison. But a big apple doesn't have to be good. Sometimes a small apple is better than the biggest apple. Take the Eretz Yisroel apples—they have a winey taste but are delicious. Or take sour or pickled apples. This summer they're so plentiful, they'll have to be moved by the wagonload. I heard that right from Menashe'che the doctor's wife's mouth. She told it to Reuben the apple man when the apples were just beginning to blossom. Reuben the apple man came to look at the garden. He wanted to buy her apples and pears while they were still on the tree. When it comes to apples and pears, Reuben is an expert. All he has to do is take one look at a tree, and he can tell you how much money it'll bring in. He's never wrong, unless it happens that there's a big windstorm and the apples fall before they're ripe, or worms and caterpillars infest them. These are things no one can predict. A wind is God's doing, and so are caterpillars. For the life of me, I can't understand why God needs caterpillars, unless it's to take the bread from Reuben the apple man's mouth. Reuben says he doesn't ask more from a tree than a little bread. He has, he says, a wife and children and needs bread for them. Menashe'che wants not only bread but bread with meat, and she wishes him luck with the trees he's

selected. They're trees? They are gold, not trees.

"You know I'm no enemy of yours, God forbid," Menashe'che says to him. "What I wish for you, may it happen to me."

"Amen!" Reuben says with a little smile on his very sunburned face, peeling from the sun. "Just give me a guarantee against windstorms, worms, and caterpillars, and I'll give you more than you want."

Menashe'che gives him a strange look up and down and then says to him in her mannish voice, "Give me a guarantee that you'll leave here and won't slip and break a leg."

"No one is safe from slipping and breaking a leg!" says Reuben, and looks at her with his kind, smiling eyes. "That can happen to a rich man even quicker than to a poor man because a rich man has the money to pay to look after himself whether he has a broken leg or not."

"You're a clever man!" Menashe'che answers him sarcastically. "But a person who wishes for another to break his leg deserves to have his tongue wither and not know why."

"Why not?" Reuben says with the same little smile. "So long as it isn't in a poor man's mouth when it withers."

H .

It's a shame that Reuben the apple man didn't inherit the garden. He would have made it much more pleasant than that witch did. You don't know how much trouble she's caused. Let one wormy apple fall, even a dried-out one, wrinkled like an old lady's face, and she'll bend down, pick it up, tuck it into her apron, and take it away. Where does she take them? Apparently to the roof, or maybe to the cellar, probably to the cellar, because I heard that last year a whole cellar of apples turned rotten. So isn't it a good deed to pick an apple from her tree?

Yes, but how do you pick them? To sneak into her garden at night when everyone's asleep and stuff your pockets full certainly makes the most sense. But what would the dog say about it? And this summer, as if for spite, the apples are growing one on top of the other. They plead—they're desperate to be picked! What can you do? If only I had some spell, some magic word, to make the

apples come to me! I think and think until I figure it out—not a spell and not a magic word but something else—a stick, a long stick with a bent nail at the end.

With that stick you can find the little stem of an apple and pull it toward you, and the apple is yours. You just have to make sure to hold the stick so the apple doesn't fall to the ground. And if the apple does fall, it's still not a tragedy—she'll think the wind knocked it off. But you mustn't touch the apple itself with the bent nail—that'd bruise it. I swear, I've never bruised an apple. Nor has an apple ever fallen. For me apples don't fall. I know how to angle the stick when I pick apples. Most important, you can't hurry. What's your rush? Once you have an apple, you eat it slowly, then rest awhile and pick another. I promise you, no one will ever know!

Who could foresee that the witch would count the apples while they were still on the tree! Apparently she counts them during the day and when she wakes up the next morning, she realizes some are missing. Then she hides in the attic and watches, to catch the thief. That's what I think happened. Otherwise how could she have found out I was lying on Mendl the slaughterer's roof and picking apples with my stick? If she'd caught me without a witness, I could have squirmed out of it—after all, I'm an orphan, and she might have taken pity on me. But no, she decides to invite my mother, our neighbor Pessi, and Mendl the slaughterer's wife to join her up in her attic. (What won't a witch think of?) From the attic they look out the little window and see me at work with my stick.

“*Nu?* What do you have to say about that rascal of yours? Now do you believe me?”

Those words come from the doctor's wife—I recognize her mannish voice. I turn my head toward the attic and see all four women. I don't throw away the stick and the apple—they fall by themselves. It's a wonder I don't fall as well. I can't look anyone in the eye. If the dog hadn't been lying in the garden, I would've killed myself out of shame.

Worst of all are my mother's tears. She laments and sobs and cries, “*Vey iz mir!* Woe is me! That I would live to see this! I thought my orphan was going to *shul* to say kaddish for his father, but he was lying on a roof, may thunder strike me, picking apples from someone else's garden!”

And the witch stands over her and adds in her mannish voice, “He should be whipped, the little demon! Flogged till the blood runs! A boy must know that this is what happens to a th—”

My mother doesn't allow her to utter the word *thief*. "He's an orphan, a poor orphan," she pleads with the doctor's wife. She kisses her hands and begs her to forgive me, it'll never happen again! She swears with many oaths that this is the last time, otherwise may she herself die, or may she bury me!

"Let him swear that he will never so much as look into my garden," the doctor's wife demands with her mannish voice, without a drop of compassion for an orphan.

"May my hands wither! May my eyes fall out!" I say, and go home with my mother. She lectures me through her tears until finally I break down in tears myself.

"All I ask is, what will become of you?" my mother cries, and tells my brother Elyahu the whole sad story. My brother Elyahu hears out the story and turns pale, it seems out of anger. My mother sees he is mad at me and is afraid he might beat me. She whispers something in his ear, saying he shouldn't beat me because I'm an orphan.

"Who's touching him?" says my brother Elyahu. "I'd just like to know what will become of him? *What's to become of him?!*"

My brother Elyahu gnashes his teeth and rivets his eyes on me to make sure I see him while he's demanding what will become of me. Do I know what will become of me? Maybe you know what will become of me?

IV

MY BROTHER ELYAHU GETS MARRIED

A.

Mazel tov! Do you know why? My brother Elyahu is getting married!

My, oh my, what's going on! The town's in an uproar. The world is quaking! So says our neighbor Fat Pessi. She says it'll be a grand wedding such as hasn't been seen in our town for a long time!

Why all the fuss? Some of it's out of pity, because my mother is a widow and the bridegroom is an orphan. And some of it's out of respect for my father's reputation. My father, may he rest in peace, left behind a good name! While he was alive no one ever spoke highly of Peysi the cantor, but ever since his death he is praised to the skies!

People tell my mother that the bride's father can afford to pay for the expenses plus more. He mustn't forget that he's getting Peysi the cantor's son for a son-in-law! When my brother Elyahu hears this, he becomes embarrassed and strokes his little beard like a grown man. He *is* grown up! Not too long ago his beard began to sprout. Surely that came from smoking. After our father died, he started to smoke. At first he gagged on the smoke and coughed. Now he can inhale and blow the smoke out through his nose. That's quite a trick!

Do you think I can't do that? The only problem is, I don't have tobacco. So I smoke whatever I can get hold of—paper or straw. My brother Elyahu caught me at it and gave me what for! He may smoke, but I may not! But is it my fault that I'm not yet nine years old? I promised him, swore on the Bible, that I wouldn't smoke anymore. How long do you think I kept my word?

I ask you, who doesn't smoke nowadays?

B.

Soon the world will turn upside down. So says our neighbor Pessi. She came back from visiting the bride's father in a rage. It's an ugly story. The father had bought the bridegroom a fob watch as a gift. Then he found out the groom didn't have it anymore. It was a genuine silver fob watch. What happened to it? Did my brother lose it playing cards, God forbid? No, he sold it and used the money for doctors and medicines to try to save my father's life. So argues Pessi. But the bride's father is a crude, unfeeling man. What do people's fathers have to do with his fob watch? he objects. He is not obliged, he says, to support other people's fathers with his fob watches. One measly fob watch suddenly became "fob watches," and one poor father becomes "fathers"! Pessi says, what can you expect? From a pig's tail you can't make a fur hat! She means the bride's father. He remains a crude, unfeeling person.

By trade he is a baker and is called Yoneh the baker. "You might as well lie in

the earth and bake your bagels,” Pessi says to him, probably joking, or maybe she really means it. I don’t understand how you can lie in the earth and bake bagels. Who will buy them?

Our future in-law is a rich man. Pessi claims he’s really wealthy! She says to his face that even if she had half of what he had, she wouldn’t make a match with any of his children. She hates a greedy pig. He’d better be quiet—if someone falls into her trap, watch out! He’s willing to forget the fob watch as long as she shuts up. But Pessi says she isn’t willing to shut up. She wants him to buy the groom a new fob watch. It’s not right for a groom to go under the wedding canopy without a fob watch. Yoneh the baker argues back: what business does Pessi have with the groom? She says it’s her business because the groom is Peysi the cantor’s son, and he, Yoneh the baker, is both a rich man and a greedy pig. This hurts his feelings. He slams the door and shouts, “Go to hell!” She retorts, “You’re in better shape than I to go where it’s hot—you’re a baker!”

My mother is worried that Yoneh might break off the match. Pessi tells her to sleep peacefully—you don’t break off a match with an orphan. Who do you think won out? We did! Yoneh bought the groom a new fob watch, also silver, but even better than the first one. He even brought it over himself. If only I had such a fob watch! What would I do? First I’d remove the insides to figure out how it works. And then? And then—I know what would happen.

My mother congratulates the bride’s father and wishes he live long enough to buy her son a gold watch. The bride’s father congratulates her as well, wishes that she live to see her youngest marry. He means me. I’m willing to get married this very day as long as I get a fob watch.

My mother caresses me and says that a lot of water will flow before then, but in the meantime her eyes become moist. Why does so much water have to flow before I get married? Why does she have to cry about it? Crying is for her a habit, I think, something she has to do every day. For her crying is like your daily praying, or eating. When the tailor delivers the groom’s clothes, ordered by his future father-in-law, she has to cry. When Pessi bakes a honey cake for the wedding, she has to cry. Tomorrow is the time for the wedding ceremony—again crying! I do not understand where people get so many tears from!

C .

It turns out to be a magnificent day—like in paradise! It's the middle of the month of Elul, springtime, and the weather is actually springlike. The sun isn't hot enough to sweat, but it still makes you want to swim. It warms and caresses and kisses like a mother. The sky is decked out for Shabbes.

The whole town is happy that my brother Elyahu is getting married. Early in the morning a fair is being set up in the town square. Fairs are something I can't miss—I'm crazy about fairs. People run around like mice, sweat, shout, and yank the goyim by their shirt-tails, eager to earn money—it's a real show! But the goyim have plenty of time; they stroll around slowly, push their caps back, and look, touch, and scratch themselves, haggling for bargains. Peasant women wear strange shawls and wide-open blouses, exposing their breasts. Into these open blouses they stick bits of merchandise when no one is looking. Jews know this trick and look out for it. If they see it, they make sure to shake out the pilfered goods, which leads to a scene. Sometimes a peasant woman buys a candle in church and hides it in her shawl. Young folks, with nothing else to do, want to have some fun—they sneak up behind her and light the candle. Everyone points at the peasant woman and laughs. She doesn't know why the Jews are laughing and reviles them with deadly curses. This makes them laugh even more. Sometimes this leads to a fight between peasants and Jews. I tell you—you don't need a theater!

Best of all is the *konneh*. Do you know what that is? It's the horse market, where they buy and sell horses. Here you can see all kinds of horses, along with gypsies, Jews, peasants, and gentry. The noise is not to be described—you can go deaf. The gypsies curse, the Jews clap their hands together, the rich folks crack their whips, and the horses run back and forth at top speed. I love to watch the horses running, especially the colts! I would give my life for a colt! I love everything small: puppies, kittens. You know, I even like small cucumbers, young little potatoes, onions, garlic. I like everything small—except piglets. I hate even small-size grown-up pigs.

Let me return to the horses. They run. The colts run after them. I run after the colts. We all run. At running I'm a whiz. I've got very light feet, and I go barefoot. I wear a light shirt, a pair of short trousers, and a cotton *arbe kanfes*, an undergarment with four corner tassels that no Jew can be without. When I run downhill, the tassels loosen in the wind, and I imagine I have wings and am flying.

“Motl! God be with you! Stop a minute!” shouts Pessi’s husband Moishe the bookbinder. He’s heading home from the fair with a pack of paper. I am afraid he’ll tattle on me to my mother, and then my brother Elyahu will yell at me. I stop running and walk slowly to my neighbor’s husband with lowered eyes.

He puts down the pack of paper, wipes the sweat with the hem of his shirt, and gives me a sermon. “How is a young orphan boy not ashamed to be hanging around gypsies and running wild with all the horses? Especially on this day! Your brother’s wedding ceremony is starting very soon, do you know that? Go home!”

D .

“Where have you been? God help you!” My mother claps her hands together and looks over my torn pants, my bloodied feet, and my flaming, flushed face. Long live Moishe the bookbinder—he didn’t breathe a word to her! My mother washes me off and puts a pair of new pants and a little cap on me for the wedding. The pants are made of some I-don’t-know-what fabric. When you take them off, they stand up on their own, and when you walk, they screech—strange pants!

“If you tear these pants, it’ll be the end of the world!” my mother says, and I agree. But these pants can’t be torn unless you break them. The little cap is great, with a shiny black visor. If it stops shining, you spit on it, and it gets shiny again. My mother glows with pride and tears roll down her wrinkled cheeks. She’s eager for me to be a success at the wedding. She says to the groom, “Elyahu! What do you think? He won’t put me to shame, will he? He’s dressed, *kayn eyn horeh*, like a prince.”

My brother Elyahu looks me over, strokes his little beard, and his eyes stop at my feet. He sees that the “prince” is barefoot. My mother sees it too but pretends not to. She’s wearing an odd yellow dress that I’ve never seen on her. It’s too big for her—I swear I once saw it on our neighbor Pessi. But she’s also wearing a brand-new silk head scarf that still has the original folds. The color of the head scarf is difficult to describe. It might be white, or yellow, or rose—it depends on the time of day. During the day it’s light rose, but in the evening it looks yellowish, and at night—white. Early in the morning it seems greenish, and sometimes if you look very hard it appears to be a light-rose-blue-dark-green-

ash-gray. You can't find fault with that head scarf—it's a rarity. But it looks odd on my mother, very odd. Somehow it doesn't fit her face. The head scarf is one thing and her face is another. A woman's head scarf is like a man's hat. The hat and the face must match and look as if they go together.

My brother Elyahu's hat looks like it belongs on his head. His sidelocks are now shaved clean off. He's put on a white shirt with a hard collar and turned-up ends. His expensive new white and red tie has green and blue polka dots! The shiny, squeaky boots he bought have very high heels so he'll look taller. But they'll do him no good—he's still too short. But he is not as short as his bride is large and tall, built more like a man. Her face is ruddy and pockmarked. Her voice sounds like a man's. I'm speaking of Yoneh the baker's daughter. Her name is Bruche.

It's a pleasure to see the couple under the wedding canopy, but I don't have that much time to look at them. I'm busy. I have to look at the musicians, and not so much at the musicians as at their instruments, especially the contrabass and the kettledrum—two beautiful instruments! The problem is, I can't get close enough to try them. Right away the musicians slap my hand or twist my ear. They go out of their minds if you so much as touch their instrument with the tip of a finger! They're afraid you might break it! Ah, if my mother were a good mother, she'd let me become a musician, but that's not what she wants for me. Not because she's bad but because the world won't allow Peysi the cantor's son to be a musician. Neither a musician nor a workingman. They've already discussed what's to become of me more than once—my mother, my brother Elyahu, our neighbor Pessi, and her husband Moishe the bookbinder. Moishe wants to take me on and teach me his trade, but Pessi won't allow it. She says that Peysi the cantor, may he rest in peace, did not deserve to have his son become a workingman.

I get off track and forget about the wedding. Long after the ceremony, people are getting ready to eat. The women and the young girls are dancing a quadrille. I move into the middle with my stiff trousers. The dancers pick me up and toss me from one to the other like a ball.

“Who is this pain in the neck?” one says. “Some *shlimazel!*” says another.

Pessi sees this and shouts in a voice already hoarse, “Are you crazy or out of your minds, or sick in the head? This is the groom's little brother!”

Aha! That hits home. They set me down at the table on the bride's side. And

do you know who they seat me next to? If you had eighteen heads, you could not guess! They seat me with the bride's little sister, Yoneh the baker's younger daughter, whose name is Alteh. She's only a year older than I am, and she wears two braids tied together with ribbons like a braided bagel. Alteh and I eat from one plate not far from the newlyweds. My brother Elyahu signals with a look that I should sit like a mensch, use a fork, chew my food, and blow my nose. I tell you, I'm not enjoying this meal. I hate being looked at. On top of all that, just my luck, here comes our neighbor Pessi.

"May you have a long life!" she shouts to my mother. "Just look over here! Why shouldn't there be another wedding? A match made in heaven!"

At this, Yoneh the baker appears, dressed in his holiday best, and he and Pessi decide that Alteh and I will one day be bride and groom. He laughs with only half a mouth, which means his upper lip is laughing and his lower one is crying. The whole crowd turns its attention to us. Alteh and I look down under the table and choke with laughter. In order not to explode, I hold my nose and blow up like a balloon. In a second the balloon will burst, and there will be the devil to pay. Luckily the musicians strike up a lively tune, a *vollach*. The crowd quiets down. I raise my head and see my mother in her queer yellow dress and silk head scarf. She is doing what she always does—crying! Do you think she will ever stop crying?

V

I HAVE A GOOD-PAYING JOB

A.

My mother gives me the news that I have a job. Not, God forbid, with a tradesman—her enemies, she says, will not live to see Peysi the cantor's son become a tradesman. My job, she says, is an easy, good-paying job. By day I will still go to school, but at night I will sleep at old man Luria's. He is a very rich man, she says, but also very sick. He is well enough to eat and drink, but he can't sleep at night. His eyes never shut. His children are afraid to leave him

alone at night. They want someone to be with him, but leaving him with an elderly person isn't proper. They decide a child would be fine, like having a kitten.

My mother adds, "They're offering five rubles a week and supper every evening after school—a full meal, fit for a rich man. The crumbs from their table would feed all of us. Go, my child, to *cheder*, and at night you'll come home first, and I'll take you there myself. You won't have any work to do, but you'll have a good supper and a good bed to sleep in, plus five rubles a week. I'll be able to make you some clothes and buy you boots."

It sounds good. Why does she have to cry? But she can't do otherwise, my mother. She must cry!

B .

In the meantime I am going to Talmud Torah, but I'm not learning a thing. There isn't even a seat for me. So I help the *rebbetzin* around the house and play with the cat. The *rebbetzin*'s work isn't hard. I sweep the floors, help carry in wood, and do errands—it's nothing, it's not really work. I do everything but learn. Playing with the cat is more fun than learning. A cat, they say, is dirty. But that's a lie—a cat is a clean animal. A cat, they say, is mischievous. It's a lie—a cat is a devoted animal. A dog likes to flatter by wagging its tail. A cat grooms itself, and if you pet its head, it closes its eyes and purrs. I love a cat. But talk to my friends, and they'll tell you a thousand stories about what's wrong with cats. If you hold a cat, you have to wash your hands. If you hold a cat, it ruins your memory. What else will they come up with? Let a cat come near them, and they'll kick it in its side. I can't stand how they kick cats. They laugh at me—they have no compassion for poor living creatures. I'm talking about the children who go to Talmud Torah with me. They're fiends. They laugh at me. They call me "stiff pants" and my mother "the weeper," because she's always crying.

"There goes your weeping mother!" they say to me. She's come to pick me up from *cheder* and take me to my good-paying job.

C .

On the way my mother bemoans her bitter and grief-stricken life. God gave her two children, but she's a lonely widow. My brother Elyahu, *kayn eyn horeh*, has married very well, in fact stumbled onto a gold mine. But his father-in-law is a boor—a baker, after all. What can you expect from a baker?

So my mother laments as we arrive at old man Luria's. My mother says his place is like a royal palace. I'd love to live in a royal palace.

We enter the kitchen, my mother and I. It isn't too shabby. The stove is white and sparkling. The utensils shine, everything shines. They ask us to sit. A woman enters, elegantly dressed. She talks with my mother and points to me. My mother nods in agreement and wipes her lips but won't sit down. I do sit. My mother leaves and tells me to behave like a mensch. As she says it, she gets in a good cry and wipes her eyes. Tomorrow she'll come for me and take me to *cheder*.

They feed me broth and challah (imagine, challah during the week!) and meat—lots of meat! After I finish eating, they tell me to go up, but I don't know where "up" is. A cook named Chanah, a dark-haired woman with a long nose, leads me up a flight of carpeted stairs, which are a treat for my bare feet. It isn't night yet, but the lamps are already burning, endless lamps. The walls are decorated with knickknacks and pictures. The chairs are covered with leather, and the ceiling is painted like in a synagogue, but even more beautifully. They lead me into a large room, so large that if I were by myself, I'd run from one wall to the other, or I'd lie down and roll on the satin carpet. It must be wonderful for rolling around on. Sleeping on it probably isn't too bad either.

D .

In the room is a handsome man, tall, with a gray beard and a broad forehead, wearing a silk robe, a yellow silk yarmulke, and embroidered sparkling silk slippers. This is old Luria. He sits bent over a big, thick book. He says nothing but chews the tips of his beard, looks into the book, shakes his foot, and mumbles quietly to himself. A strange man, this old Luria. I look at him and wonder, Does he see me or doesn't he? He doesn't seem to, because he isn't looking my way, and no one has told him about me. They simply brought me there, left, and locked the door behind me.

Suddenly old Luria calls out to me, still without looking at me, “Come here, and I’ll show you a bit of Rambam.”

To whom is he speaking? To me? He speaks to me in the polite form of address? I look around. Except for me no one else is there.

Old Luria mumbles again in his deep voice, “Come here, and you’ll see what Rambam says!”

I want very much to go closer to him. “Are you speaking to me?”

“You, you, who else?” old Luria says to me. I approach him. Still looking into the large book, he takes my hand, points with a finger, and tells me in a loud and passionate voice what Rambam says. He gets so worked up, he turns red as a beet. He gestures with his thumb for emphasis, and with his elbow he pokes me in the side repeatedly. “*Nu*, what do you say? It’s good, isn’t it?” he exclaims.

That it is good I cannot say, so I stay silent. The more I stay silent, the more worked up he gets. The more worked up he gets, the more silent I stay.

I hear the sound of a key from the other side of the door. The door opens, and in comes the elegantly dressed woman. She goes over to old Luria and shouts directly into his ear. He is apparently hard of hearing. She tells him to let me go now because I must sleep.

She leads me to another part of the room and lays me down on a sofa with real springs in it. The bedding is white as snow. The quilt is silky and soft—paradise! The elegant woman tucks me in, leaves, and locks the door from the other side.

As I lie on the sofa, old Luria paces the room, his hands clasped behind him. He looks down at his fine slippers while mumbling and grumbling and doing strange things with his eyebrows. I can hardly keep my eyes open. I want to sleep.

Suddenly old Luria comes up to me and says, “I am going to eat you up!”

I don’t understand what he is saying.

“Get up. I am going to eat you up.”

“Who? Me?”

“You! You! I must eat you! It can’t be otherwise!” says old Luria. He paces the room, head down, hands behind him, forehead furrowed. He speaks more quietly to himself.

I try to catch his words but can barely breathe from fright.

He asks questions and answers them himself. This is what old Luria is muttering: “The Rambam says the world is not ancient. But how can that be? For one reason must have another reason! How can I prove it? Just by willing it. But how? Right now I want to eat him, so I will eat him up. Then what? Out of pity? It doesn’t matter. I will do my will. The will doesn’t settle matters. I’ll eat him up. I want to eat him up. I *must* eat him up!”

E .

What great news to receive from old Luria—he must eat me up! What will my mother say? I’m terror-stricken. I’m shivering all over. The sofa I’m lying on is set away from the wall. I manage to slip off the sofa and slide down onto the floor between the sofa and the wall. My teeth are chattering. I listen intently and wait for him to come eat me up. And how will he do it? Silently I call for my mother, and wet drops roll down my cheeks into my mouth. The drops are salty. I’ve never longed so hard for my mother as now. I also long for my brother Elyahu, but not as much. I remind myself of my father, for whom I am still saying kaddish. Who will say kaddish for me if old Luria eats me up?

Somehow I must have fallen asleep for a good while, because when I wake up, I look around and wonder where I am. I touch the wall. I touch the sofa. I stick my head out and see a large, bright room with satin carpeting. The walls are decorated with knickknacks, and the ceiling is painted like a synagogue. Old Luria is still sitting bent over that large book he calls Rambam. I like the name Rambam—to me it sounds like *bimbam*. Suddenly I remember that just yesterday old Luria wanted to eat me up. I’m afraid he might see me and again want to eat me up. I hide between the wall and the sofa and remain silent.

A key jingles outside the door. It opens, and in comes the elegantly dressed woman. Behind her comes the cook named Chanah, carrying a big tray with cups of coffee, hot milk, and fresh butter rolls.

“Where is the boy?” Chanah looks all around the room, then sees me between the wall and the sofa.

“You’re a rascal! What are you doing there? Come with me to the kitchen. Your mother’s waiting for you.”

I jump out from my hiding place and run down the carpeted stairs in my bare feet, singing “Rambam, bimbam, bimbam, Rambam!” till I get to the kitchen.

“Don’t be in such a hurry!” Chanah the cook says to my mother. “Let him at least have a glass of coffee and a butter roll! And you have some coffee too. They have enough. They won’t miss it.”

My mother thanks her and sits down. Chanah serves us wonderful-smelling hot coffee and fresh butter rolls.

Have you ever eaten egg kichel with sugar? That’s what the rich call butter rolls. Maybe they’re even better. The flavor of the coffee I can’t describe—it’s a taste of paradise! My mother holds the glass, sips, and savors it all. She gives me more than half of her butter roll.

When Chanah the cook sees this, she raises a big fuss. “What are you doing? Eat, eat—there’s plenty!” Chanah gives me another butter roll, and now I have two and a half. I listen to their conversation.

It’s a familiar conversation. My mother bewails her bad luck. She is a widow and has two children. One stumbled onto a gold mine—the other one you can see for yourself. I’d like to know how my brother Elyahu stumbled onto a gold mine. A gold mine? Chanah hears out my mother and shakes her head in sympathy.

Then *she* starts to talk, bewailing *her* bad luck in having to work for others. She was her father’s favorite. Her father was once well-to-do but was badly burned in business. After that he fell ill, and then he died. If her father, she says, were to rise from the grave and see his Chanah working at a stranger’s oven! But she can’t complain, thank God for that. She has a good job. The only problem is that the old man is a little—and Chanah points to her forehead. I can’t figure out what that means. My mother listens and shakes her head. Then my mother starts talking again. Chanah listens to my mother and shakes her head. She gives me another butter roll for on the way.

I show it off to the other schoolboys. They gather around me and can’t take their eyes off me as I eat it. It must be something special for them too. I give each of them a small piece, and they lick their fingers.

“Where’d you get such a delicious treat?”

I stuff my cheeks and shove my hands deep into the pockets of my stiff pants.

I chew and swallow slowly.

Then I do a little dance in my bare feet, as if to say, “Eh, you poor, flea-bitten good-for-nothings! These are a rare treat, these butter rolls, ha ha ha! You should try them with coffee, and then you would know what paradise on earth really is!”

VI

A GOLD MINE

A.

The only thought that keeps my mother going is that my brother Elyahu has stumbled onto a gold mine, thank God. That’s what my mother calls it, and as is her way, she wipes her eyes even out of great pride. He is set for life, she says. Her daughter-in-law is no great prize (I agree!), but God sent her son a wealthy father-in-law, Yoneh the baker. He does not do the actual baking himself. He just buys the flour and sells the bread. On Passover he bakes matzo for the whole town. He is a whiz at running the bakery business, but as a person he is always grumpy, even angry. In fact, he’s a terror.

Once when I’m visiting my brother, he catches me helping myself to an egg bagel. The bagel is fresh and warm, straight from the oven. The devil himself must have sent Yoneh the baker to catch me. You should have seen his furious face and his blazing eyes! From then on I never go back there. I will never again set foot in that place, even if I am paid in gold! That a man will grab you by the collar and throw you out the door with three swift kicks to your rear! I tell my mother what happened, and she runs right over there—she wants to give Yoneh what he richly deserves.

But my brother Elyahu doesn’t allow it. He agrees with Yoneh and complains to my mother that I have shamed him. Whenever I visit him, he says, I eat bagels. He’d rather give me a kopek and let me go somewhere else to buy a bagel. My mother tells him he doesn’t have a drop of compassion for me. He doesn’t care at all that I am an orphan. My brother Elyahu tells her that even orphans aren’t allowed to grab a bagel from someone else’s oven.

My mother warns him to speak a little more quietly. My brother Elyahu says he'll shout to make sure everyone knows I'm a thief.

The word *thief* my mother can't bear to hear. She turns all colors and warns my brother not to forget that there is a God in heaven. You don't play with God. God will not be silent. He's the Father of orphans. He'll take an orphan's part. He is a great God and can do anything. If God wishes, Yoneh the baker will not be worth one bagel! Thus she ends her speech to my brother Elyahu, takes me by the hand, and slams the door. We go home.

B.

Listen, it's really true, you can't play with God! Wait till you hear what happened to Yoneh the baker. I did tell you that Yoneh does not do the baking. Two swarthy men and three women from elsewhere do it for him. The women are shabby and scabby and wear sweaty red kerchiefs on their heads no matter how hot the weather is.

Strange things started happening. Customers complained that they were finding long threads, ribbons, cockroaches, and shards of glass in their rolls. One Gentile customer brought the baker a whole handful of black hair that he'd bitten into. This Christian frightened Yoneh the baker, especially when he threatened to call the police. They checked the bakers' hair, trying to discover whose hair matched the hair found. The men blamed the women; the women blamed the men. The women pointed out that they all had blond hair. The men said, "Where did you ever see such long hair on a man?" The women quarreled among themselves, and some interesting things came to light: one had lost a garter in the challah, and another had kneaded a bandage from a cut finger into the dough. Another had used the challah dough as a pillow. The one accused solemnly swore it was a lie, then finally confessed that it had happened only once or twice, since she didn't own a pillow.

The entire town was in turmoil. Poor Yoneh the baker had his hands full. Calling on God didn't help. No one wanted to touch his baked goods! He might as well throw it to the dogs! Served him right!

C.

But Yoneh the baker is a clever man with a spine. He fired all the bakers, men and women alike, and hired other bakers. He asked the *shuls* to announce on Shabbes that he had hired new bakers, and from that time on he would personally ensure that everything was scrubbed and clean. He offered a ten-ruble reward to anyone who found as much as a single hair in his challah. From then on he began making money. The customers looked for hair in his baked goods but never found any. Even if they did find something and brought it to him, he chased them away. He said they had put it on the bread on purpose in order to get the ten-ruble reward. We know these tricks! Some clever fellow, this Yoneh the baker!

But God was intent on getting even with him and sent him a new disaster. One fine morning all the new bakers packed their gear and left. They would no longer bake for him for the same money. He had to raise their pay by a ruble a week, let them go home to sleep at night, and refrain from smacking them in the teeth—otherwise they weren't returning. Yoneh the baker has this quirk: as soon as you do something he doesn't like, he smacks you in the teeth.

Yoneh was furious. He'd been a boss for many years, and never had workers told him to stop smacking them. Raising their pay was out of the question—he could get ten others in their place. Workers weren't so hard to find—there were plenty of people dying of hunger! He went off looking for new bakers. But no one wanted the job. What was going on? All the bakers had joined together, it seemed, and decided they wouldn't work for him unless he took back the former bakers and agreed to their three demands: a ruble raise in pay, going home to sleep at night, and not smacking them in the teeth. Yoneh boiled, banged his fist on the table, and cursed his bad luck. It was really something to see. Oh, did I have my revenge! But that was nothing compared to what happened later.

D.

It's a hot summer day. The watermelons and cantaloupes have just turned ripe. This is the best time of the year. Soon enough the dreary days will start. May God not punish me for these words, but I hate those dreary days. I like the happy days much better. And what can be happier than a market full of watermelons and cantaloupes? Wherever you turn, there they are. The cantaloupes are yellow and smell like citrons. The watermelons are as red as fire inside and have black

seeds, and their sweetness is like honey. My mother doesn't like watermelons. She says cantaloupes are a better buy. When she buys a cantaloupe, she has it for breakfast, lunch, and supper for two days, while a watermelon is a snack that fills your stomach with water. I think she's mistaken. If I were a king, I'd eat watermelon with bread all year. It doesn't matter that they have lots of seeds. If you give a good watermelon a hard shake, the seeds fall out, and then you can eat as much as you want!

But now I've gotten so caught up in watermelons, I've forgotten what I started to tell you. Oh yes, I was talking about my brother's father-in-law Yoneh the bagel baker. He had quite a downfall. No one expected it. One night I'm sitting with my mother at the table eating supper—cantaloupe and bread. The door opens, and in comes my brother Elyahu with a Bible in his hand, my father's Bible. His wife Bruche is dragging after him. In one hand she holds a feather boa with little tails, and in the other hand—a colander. You don't know what a colander is? You strain noodles with it. My brother Elyahu looks as if he's about to drop dead. My sister-in-law Bruche is red as a hellish fire.

“Mother-in-law, we've come to stay with you!” says my sister-in-law Bruche.

“Mama, we've barely escaped with our lives,” says my brother Elyahu.

Both sit down weeping, and my mother joins in. What happened? Was there a fire? Were you driven out?

That's not it at all! My brother Elyahu's father-in-law is cleaned out, bankrupt. The creditors came and took the house and everything in it, down to the last thread. They politely threw him out without a stitch, first making him clean up the house. What humiliation!

“Woe is me!” My mother wrings her hands. “What happened to his money? He used to be a wealthy man!”

My brother Elyahu tells her that, first of all, he wasn't ever really that rich. And second—and here my sister-in-law Bruche breaks in and says her father *was* a rich man. If she had half his wealth right now, she'd be happy. Her wedding cost him a fortune! She loves to talk about her wedding. Whenever she comes visiting us, all you hear about is her wedding. A wedding like hers, she says, has never been seen anywhere. The baked goods at her wedding, the cakes and loaves and strudel and breads! And the preserves and meats at her wedding! And now she stands as you see her, with a feather boa and a kosher colander.

The dowry her father promised—you can forget about it, it's gone. My brother Elyahu lost his Shabbes clothes and prayer shawl, his bedding, and his fob watch too. He has nothing.

My mother falls apart. What a disaster! Who could have known? Everyone envied her this match! Some people must have cast an evil eye on her, or maybe she brought the baker down with her own curses. Whatever it was, she says, she will be punished more than anyone. Wasn't she the one who yearned for a gold mine for her son?

"The gold has disappeared, but the hole in the ground remains. Stay with me for now, my children, until God takes pity." She gives her daughter-in-law her bed, the only piece of furniture in our house.

VII

MY BROTHER ELYAHU'S DRINK

A.

"From One Ruble—A Hundred! You can earn a hundred rubles a month or more. All you have to do is read our book, costing a mere ruble plus postage. Hurry, buy! Stop everything and take advantage of this great opportunity, or you'll miss out!"

That's what my brother Elyahu read somewhere in a newspaper soon after his father-in-law went broke and from a rich man overnight became a pauper. As was the custom, my brother had been promised three years' room and board, but he was hardly there three quarters of a year when misfortune struck.

I'm very busy making money. I'm hawking a drink that my brother Elyahu makes with his own hands. He learned how to make it from the book costing only one ruble, from which you can earn a hundred rubles a month or more. As soon as my brother Elyahu read about that book, he sent off his last ruble by mail and told our mother her worries were over.

"Mama! Thank God, we are in luck! We don't have to worry about money

anymore. We'll have money up to here." He indicates his neck.

"From what?" asks my mother. "Did you get a job?"

"Better than a job." My brother Elyahu's eyes are aglow, in great excitement. She only has to wait a few days until the book arrives, he tells her.

"What book?"

"What a book!" my brother Elyahu exclaims, and asks her if she would be satisfied with a hundred rubles a month. Laughing, my mother tells him she'd be satisfied with a hundred rubles a year, so long as it was a sure thing. He tells her her outlook is too cheap, and off he goes to the post office, where he asks if his book has arrived. He does this every day. It's been over a week since he's sent the ruble, and still no book! In the meantime one has to live. "You can't live on air," says my mother. I don't understand what living on air has to do with it.

B .

Hooray, the book has arrived! No sooner do we unpack it than my brother Elyahu sits down to read it. Oh my, what doesn't he find in that book! So many ways to earn money! A recipe for making the best inks—it could earn you a hundred rubles a month. A recipe for making good black shoe wax—it too could earn you a hundred rubles a month. A recipe for driving out mice, cockroaches, and other vermin—it could earn you a hundred rubles a month. A recipe for making kvass and other cheap drinks—it could earn you a hundred rubles a month or more!

My brother Elyahu stops at the last recipe. By making a drink, you can earn even *more* than a hundred rubles a month—that's what it explicitly says in the book. And you don't have to mess with ink or shoe wax or with mice or cockroaches. The question is only which drink to make. For liqueurs and brandy you need Rothschild's fortune, and for lemonade and soda water you need some kind of gadget that costs who knows how much! So one drink remains: kvass! Kvass is cheap to make and is much in demand, especially in hot summers like this one. Boruch the kvass-maker, you must know, became a rich man. He makes bottled kvass, and it's known everywhere. It shoots out of the bottles like a cannon. What makes it shoot out? No one knows—that's Boruch's secret. He adds something that makes it shoot out. Some say it's raisins. Some say it's hops.

Come summer, he has more business than he can handle. That's how much money he earns!

The kvass my brother Elyahu concocts according to the recipe is not bottled kvass, and it doesn't shoot out. Ours is a different kind of drink. How it's made, I cannot tell you. My brother Elyahu doesn't let anyone near while he's making it. Only when he pours the water in are we allowed to look. But to do the serious part, he locks himself in my mother's room. Not I, not my mother, not my sister-in-law Bruche—no one has the privilege of witnessing it. But if you promise you'll keep it a secret, I'll tell you what's in that drink, because I've seen what he prepares beforehand—lemon peel, honey, and something they call cream of tartar, which is as sour as vinegar. The rest—water. Water is the main ingredient. The more water, the more kvass. The ingredients are all mixed together thoroughly with an ordinary stick—that's what it says in the book—and the drink is ready. Then you pour it into a large jug and throw in a chunk of ice. Ice is the most important thing! Without ice it isn't worth drinking. I once tasted a little kvass without ice, and I thought it was the end of my life!

C.

Once the first batch of kvass is ready, I'm the one to peddle it on the street. Who else *but* me? For my brother Elyahu, it wouldn't be proper. After all, he's a married man. My mother—certainly not. We'd never allow our mother to go with a jug through the marketplace crying, "Kvass! Kvass! People, kvass!" All agree it has to be my job. I think so too. I'm thrilled to hear the news. My brother Elyahu teaches me what to do. I have to hold the jug by a cord in one hand and the glass in the other hand. To get people to stop, I have to sing in a loud voice:

People, come drink!

A kopek a glass!

Cold and sweet—

Come quench your thirst!

I've already told you that I have a nice soprano voice, inherited from my father, of blessed memory. I sing out loud and clear, turning the words inside out:

A kvass of sweet glass!

A person a kopek!

Quenching and cold—

Come sweeten your drink!

I don't know whether they like my singing so much or the drink is so good or the day is so hot, but I sell out the first jug in half an hour and come home with almost three-quarters of a ruble. My brother Elyahu gives the money to our mother and refills my jug. If I can run that circuit five or six times a day, he says, we'll earn exactly one hundred rubles a month. Deduct, if you please, the four Sabbaths in the month, and you'll see how much the drink costs us to make and what kind of a percentage we earn from it. The drink costs us very little—one can say, almost nothing. All the money goes for ice, so we have to sell the first jugful fast so we can use the block of ice for a second jug and a third and so on. I move fast with the drink, really run with it, while crowds of Jewish and Gentile boys tag after me. They mimic my singing, but I pay them no heed. My aim is to empty the jug as quickly as possible so I can run home for another one.

I don't know how much I made that first day. I only know that my brother Elyahu, my sister-in-law Bruche, and my mother really praise me. For supper I'm served a piece each of cantaloupe and watermelon and two prunes and, of course, kvass. We all drink kvass like water. Before I go to sleep on my place on the floor, my mother asks me if my legs ache. My brother Elyahu laughs at her and says I'm the kind of boy whom nothing ever bothers.

"Absolutely!" I say. "If you need proof, I'll go out right now with the jug in the middle of the night."

All three laugh at my cleverness. But in my mother's eyes I see tears welling. Well, that's an old story—a mother has to cry! Do all mothers cry as much as my mother does?

D .

We are, *kayn eyn horeh*, on a lucky streak. Each day is hotter than the one before. They are scorchers! People are passing out from the heat, children are dropping like flies. If not for that glass of kvass, they would burn up. I'm returning with the jug, without exaggeration, ten times a day! My brother Elyahu squints into the jug with one eye and says it's almost empty. Then he hits on an idea and pours in a few more pails of water. I had this idea even before he did. I must confess to you that I did some mischief a few times.

Almost every day I drop into our neighbor Pessi's and let her sample a glass of our very own drink. I give her husband Moishe the bookbinder two glasses. He's a fine fellow. Each child also gets a glass. Let them all know what a good drink we make! The uncle gets a glassful—a pity on him, he's blind! All my friends get some kvass, free of charge, without paying a kopek! But in order to make up for the loss, I add water. For each glass of kvass I give away free, I add two glasses of water. We do the same at home. After my brother Elyahu drinks a glass of kvass, he immediately pours in water. He's right—it's a shame to waste even a kopek. My sister-in-law Bruche drinks a few glasses (she's crazy about my brother Elyahu's kvass!) and replaces them with water. If my mother feels like a glass of kvass (she has to be asked—she won't take any herself!)—fill it up with water!

Anyhow, not a drop is wasted, and we're taking in good money, *kayn eyn horeh*. My mother pays bills and redeems some necessary items from the pawnshop, like bedding. A table and a bench appear in the house. For Shabbes we have fish, meat, and white challah. They promise me that, God willing, for the holidays I'll have a new pair of shoes. I'm sure no one in the world can be as happy as I am!

E .

Be a prophet and know that a tragedy will befall us, and that our drink will become unfit to drink, good only to be poured onto the slop pile. I'm lucky not to have been dragged off to the police station. Listen to this story!

One day I wander over to our neighbor with my jug of kvass. Everyone starts drinking it, I among them. I figure I'm down twelve or thirteen glasses and go to the place for water. But instead of finding the water barrel, I apparently go to the tub where the laundry is washed. I pour fifteen or twenty glasses of soapy water

into my jug and go merrily on my way down the street singing a new song that I myself made up:

People, a drink!

Like nothing you've ever tasted!

Only a kopek,

Your money won't be wasted!

A man stops me and pays a kopek for a glass of kvass. He downs the glassful and screws up his face. "Little boy! What kind of drink is this?"

I pay him no heed. Two more people are waiting to be served. One sips half a glass, the other a third of a glass. They pay, spit out the drink, and walk away. Another brings the glass to his lips and tastes it. He says it smells like soap and tastes salty. Another looks at the glass and returns it to me. "What is this?"

"It's a drink, that's what it is," I say.

"A drink?" he exclaims. "That's a stink, not a drink!"

Someone else tastes the drink and splashes it right in my face. In a minute a whole circle of men, women, and children surround me, all yammering, gesticulating, fuming. A Russian policeman comes by and, seeing the angry crowd, asks what is going on. They tell him. He peers into my jug and asks for a sample. I pour him a glass of kvass. He drinks it down and spits it out, becoming enraged.

"Where did you get this slop?" he demands.

"It's from a book," I say to him, "my brother's business. My brother made it himself."

"Who is your brother?" he asks me.

"My brother Elyahu."

"Who is this Elyahu?"

"Speak not, foolish youth, concerning thy brother!" Several Jews speak in a mixture of Hebrew and English designed to baffle the policeman's understanding. The crowd becomes unruly, noisy, about to riot. New people arrive on the scene. The Russian policeman takes me by the hand and is about to

haul me and my drink right over to the station. The shouting becomes louder —“An orphan! A poor orphan!” I hear from all sides. I’m in a tight spot. I look at the crowd surrounding me. “Jews, have pity!” I exclaim.

They try to bribe the policeman, but he refuses. An old Jew with shifty eyes cries out to me in a mixture of Hebrew and Yiddish, “Motl! Pull thy hand away from the Russian policeman and take to thy heels as fast as thou canst!”

I tear away and run full speed home.

Half-dead, I burst into my house.

“Where’s the jug?” my brother Elyahu asks.

“At the police station!” I answer, and run into my mother’s arms, in tears.

VIII

WE FLOOD THE WORLD WITH INK

A.

Oh, am I a fool! Because I’ve sold soapy, spoiled kvass, I thought surely the police would behead me! But in the end nothing happened. My fears were groundless. “Didn’t Yente sell tallow for goose fat? And didn’t Gedalye the butcher feed the whole town for an entire year with unkosher meat?” That’s how our neighbor Pessi consoles my mother. My mother! She takes everything to heart. That’s why I love my brother Elyahu. He doesn’t think worse of himself because we were burned by the kvass. As long as he has the book, he’s happy, the book he bought for a ruble, called *From One Ruble—A Hundred!* He sits and learns it by heart. By now he knows almost all the recipes, how to make ink, how to make shoe wax, and how to get rid of mice, cockroaches, and other vermin.

Now he decides to make ink. Ink, he says, is a good product. Everyone has to write. He asks Yudl the writing teacher how much he spent on ink. “A fortune!” he says.

Yudl teaches writing to about sixty girls. Boys don't study with him. They're afraid of him. He spanks them or strikes them over their hands with a ruler. You can't hit girls, and you certainly can't spank them. I wish I was born a girl. I wouldn't have to pray every day. I'm sick of it—every day the same thing. And I wouldn't have to go to Hebrew school. Now I go there half a day. What I learn, you can put on the head of a pin, but of slaps there are more than enough. You think the slaps come from the *rebbe*? No, they come from his wife, the *rebbetzin*. What business is it of hers that I feed the cat? You should see her cat—God's pity on it! She's always hungry. She mews quietly to herself, whining like a human being, forgive the comparison. It can tear your heart out! They have not one drop of pity. If she so much as goes over to sniff someone, they scream at her, "Scat!" and she scurries off in a shot. They don't let her get away with anything. Once she was lost for a few days. I thought she was dead for sure. But it turned out she had had kittens. But I must return to my brother Elyahu's ink.

B.

My brother Elyahu says the world isn't what it used to be. Once upon a time, to make ink you had to buy black walnuts, chop them up, cook them on the fire for who knew how long, and then pour in some copper water; and to make the ink shiny, you had to add sugar—a big fuss! Today, he says, it's as easy as pie! You buy special powders and a bottle of glycerin at the apothecary, mix them with water, boil it on the fire—presto! Ink. So says my brother Elyahu.

He goes off to the apothecary and brings back a bag of the special powders and a large bottle of glycerin. Then he locks himself up in my mother's room and does something—what, I don't know. It's a secret. With him everything is a secret. When he needs the pestle from the mortar, he calls my mother over and whispers, "Mama! The pestle from the mortar!" He mixes the powders and the glycerin in a very large pot, a new one he bought. He shoves the pot into the oven and whispers to my mother to lock the door.

We can't imagine what's going on. My mother glances at the oven every minute, scared it will explode. Then we roll in a kvass jug. Carefully we remove the pot from the oven and pour the mixture into the jug. Then we pour water in until the jug is filled a little more than halfway.

My brother Elyahu says, "Enough!" and consults the book *From One Ruble—*

A Hundred! In a whisper he asks for a pen and a sheet of white paper. “These are the ones we write petitions with,” he whispers in my mother’s ear. He dips the pen into the jug and writes something on the white sheet of paper with a swirl and a flourish. He shows the writing first to my mother, then to my sister-in-law Bruche.

Both look at it and say to him, “It writes!”

They get back to work. After pouring in a few more pails of water, my brother Elyahu raises his hand and says, “Enough!” Again he dips the pen into the jug, again he writes something on the paper, and again shows the writing to my mother and my sister-in-law Bruche.

Again they both look at the paper and say, “It writes!”

This they do several times until the jug is full to the brim. There is no room for any more water. Then my brother Elyahu raises his hand and says, “Enough!” and the four of us sit down to supper.

C.

After supper we busy ourselves pouring the ink into bottles. My brother Elyahu has collected bottles from all over, all kinds of bottles and flasks, big and little, beer bottles, wine bottles, kvass bottles, whiskey bottles, and just plain bottles. He has also bought up old corks to save money. He bought a new funnel and an old quart measure with which to pour the ink from the jug into the bottles. Here he again whispers into my mother’s ear to lock the door. Then the four of us get down to work.

The work is divided evenly. My sister-in-law Bruche rinses out the bottles and hands them to my mother. My mother examines each bottle and then gives them over to me. I place the funnel in each one and hold it there with one hand and the bottle with the other. And my brother Elyahu has only one job: to pour the ink from the jug into the quart measure and then into the funnel and the bottles. The work is enjoyable and pleasant. The only problem is the ink. It stains your fingers, your hands, your nose, your whole face. Both of us, I and my brother Elyahu, look as black as devils. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen my mother laugh. And you can imagine my sister-in-law Bruche—she almost splits her sides laughing. My brother Elyahu hates when someone laughs at him. He gets

angry at my sister-in-law Bruche and demands to know why she's laughing. That makes her laugh even harder. He gets even angrier, and she laughs all the more. The laughter keeps coming, in uncontrollable spasms! My mother finally begs her to stop and tells us to go wash up. But my brother Elyahu doesn't have time. The last thing on his mind is washing. All he thinks of is filling the bottles.

Finally all the bottles are filled. No more bottles! Where to get more? He calls my sister-in-law Bruche off to the side, gives her money, and whispers to her to buy more bottles. She hears him out, looks him in the face, and bursts out laughing. He gets angry and calls my mother over and tells her the same thing. My mother goes off to buy bottles.

We continue pouring water into the jug, not all at once, you understand, but a little at a time. After each pailful of water, he raises his hand and says to himself, "Enough!" Then he dips the pen into the jug and writes on the white sheet of paper and says, "It writes!"

He does this several times till my mother comes back with a new supply of bottles. We get back to our original task of pouring ink into the bottles, till we again run out of bottles.

"How long can this go on?" says my sister-in-law Bruche.

"*Kayn eyn horeh*, why stop a good thing?" says my mother.

My brother Elyahu shoots an angry look at Bruche, as if to say, You are my wife, but you are also a dunce, may God have pity on you!

D.

How much ink we make, I cannot tell you. I'm afraid it's a thousand bottles! But what good is it if there's no place to sell the ink? My brother Elyahu looks everywhere. Selling the ink retail, bottle by bottle, one at a time, doesn't make sense. That's what my brother Elyahu says to my neighbor's husband Moishe the bookbinder. Moishe comes into our house and sees all those bottles—and springs back in fright. My brother Elyahu sees it, and a strange conversation follows between the two. I'll relate it to you word for word:

ELYAHU: What scared you so?

BOOKBINDER: What's in those bottles?

ELYAHU: What could it be—wine?

BOOKBINDER: Wine? That's ink!

ELYAHU: Why ask then?

BOOKBINDER: What are you going to do with so much ink?

ELYAHU: Drink it!

BOOKBINDER: No, stop joking. You're going to sell it retail?

ELYAHU: What am I, crazy? If I sell it, I'll sell it ten, twenty, fifty bottles at a time. That's called wholesale. Do you know what *wholesale* means?

BOOKBINDER: I know what *wholesale* means. To whom are you going to sell it?

ELYAHU: To whom? To the rabbi!

And my brother Elyahu goes off to the stores. When he comes to this big wholesaler, the wholesaler examines a bottle. But another wholesaler won't even test the bottle in my brother Elyahu's hand because it doesn't have a label. "On the bottle," he says, "there has to be a nice label with a design."

My brother Elyahu says to him, "I don't make designs. I make ink."

The other one answers, "Suit yourself."

Then my brother Elyahu hurries off to Yudel the writing teacher, who says something very nasty to him. He's already bought a summer's supply of ink.

My brother Elyahu asks him, "How many bottles of ink did you buy?"

Yudel the writing teacher says, "Bottles? I bought one bottle of ink. It will last and last, and when I run out, I'll buy another bottle."

How do you like that! Only a scribbler can think like that. First he says he's spent a fortune on ink, and then he buys a bottle that will last forever. My poor brother Elyahu is beside himself. He doesn't know what to do with so much ink. Originally he said he wouldn't sell any ink retail, only wholesale. Now he thinks better of it. He will begin, he says, to sell it wholesale and retail. I would like to know what *wholesale* means.

This is what *wholesale* means. Just listen.

E .

My brother Elyahu brings back a large sheet of paper. He sits down and prints on it in large block letters:

INK SOLD WHOLESale HERE

RETAIL—GOOD AND CHEAP

The words *wholesale* and *retail* are written so large, they take up almost the whole sheet. When the lettering dries, he attaches the paper on the outside of our door. I see through the window that many passersby stop to look.

My brother Elyahu also looks out the window and cracks his knuckles. That's a sign that he's upset. He says to me, "Just stand by the door and listen to what they're saying."

I stand by the door for half an hour and then come back into the house. My brother Elyahu asks me quietly, "Well?"

"Well what?"

"What did they say?"

"Who?"

"The people who passed by."

"They said it was nicely printed."

"And nothing more?"

"Nothing more."

My brother Elyahu sighs. Why was he sighing?

My mother has the same question. "Why are you sighing, silly? Wait a little. Did you expect in one day to sell out all the merchandise?"

"At least one sale!" says my brother Elyahu, his voice choking.

“You’re a great fool, I tell you. Just wait, my child, and you will, God willing, make a sale.”

My mother sets the table. We wash and sit down to eat. The four of us squeeze together into one tight space. Because of all the bottles, it’s terribly crowded in the house. We make the blessing over the bread—when a strange man arrives. I know him. His name is Kopl. His father is a ladies’ tailor. He’s betrothed to be married.

“Do you sell single bottles of ink here?”

“Yes, what do you want?”

“I want some ink.”

“How much ink do you need?”

“Give me a kopek’s worth.”

My brother Elyahu is really upset. If my mother hadn’t been there, he would have slapped this betrothed Kopl a few times and then thrown him out of the house. But he controls himself and pours out a kopek’s worth of ink. Less than a quarter of an hour later, a young girl comes in. I don’t know her. She picks her nose and says to my mother, “Do you make ink here?”

“Yes, what would you like?”

“My sister wants to know if you can lend her a little ink. She has to write a letter to her future husband in America.”

“Who is your sister?”

“Basya the seamstress.”

“Ah? Look how she’s grown up! *Kayn eyn horeh!* I didn’t recognize you. Do you have an inkwell?”

“Where would we get an inkwell? My sister wants to know if you have a pen, and as soon as she finishes writing the letter to America, she’ll give you back the ink and the pen.”

My brother Elyahu has vanished from the table. He is in my mother’s room, pacing quietly, head down, biting his nails.

“Why did you make so much ink? It looks like you want to supply the whole world with ink in case there’s a shortage.”

That’s what our neighbor’s husband Moishe the bookbinder says. What a strange man that bookbinder is! He has a habit of rubbing salt in your wounds. Usually he’s a tolerable fellow, just a bit of a pest—he likes to get under your skin.

But my brother Elyahu really gets back at him! He tells him to mind his own business and to be careful not to bind together a Haggadah with the High Holiday penitential prayers. Moishe the bookbinder knows very well what that dig is about! He was once engaged by a coachman to do a job. The coachman had given him a Haggadah to bind, but by mistake the bookbinder bound in with it a section of the penitential *slichot* prayers of the High Holidays instead of the welcoming prayers for Elijah at the Passover seder. Everyone at the seder laughed. The following morning the coachman went to our neighbor the bookbinder and wanted to tear him limb from limb.

“Villain, what did you do to me? Why did you stick an unkosher prayer into my Passover Haggadah? I’m going to rip the guts out of your belly!”

Yes, that was quite a jolly Passover.

But don’t be upset that I brought in another story. I’ll get back to our moneymaking ventures now.

IX

AFTER THE FLOOD (*of Ink*)

A.

My brother Elyahu is beside himself with worry. What to do with all that unsold merchandise?

“Still with the ink?” my mother asks him.

“I’m not talking about ink!” my brother Elyahu answers. “To the devil with the ink! I’m talking about the bottles! There’s a fortune in them! We have to make sure to empty the bottles so we can get our money out of them!”

Everything has to be turned into money! My brother Elyahu decides we have to get rid of all that ink, no matter how. But that’s the problem—where to pour it all? It could be embarrassing.

“There’s nothing to it,” says my brother Elyahu. “We have to wait till night. At night it’s dark, no one will see.”

Night falls at last. Out of spite, the moon shines like a lantern. “When you need it, it hides. But look at it now, as if we’d sent for it!” my brother Elyahu says as we carry out bottle after bottle and—splash! pour the ink onto the street. A huge puddle grows in the place where we’re pouring the ink. “We shouldn’t pour it all in one place,” says my brother Elyahu, and I obey him. I find a fresh place to pour the bottles. Splash! Against a neighbor’s wall! Splash! Against another neighbor’s fence! Splash! All over two goats chewing their cud in the moonlight!

“That’s enough for tonight!” my brother Elyahu says, and we go to bed. It’s quiet and dark. I can hear the crickets. The cat is purring under the stove—that sleepyhead! Day and night all she wants is to warm herself and doze. I hear footsteps on the other side of the door. Could it be some bad person? No, it’s my mother—she isn’t sleeping. It seems she never sleeps. During the nights I can always hear her cracking her knuckles, sighing and groaning, and talking to herself. That’s her habit. Every night she talks out her troubles. To whom is she talking? To God. Every other minute she lets out an “Oy, God! God!”

B .

I’m lying on my bedding on the floor and hear a hubbub of familiar voices in my sleep. Slowly I open my eyes—it’s broad daylight. The bright sunlight bursts through the window. It’s calling me outdoors. I try to remember what happened the night before—aha! Ink! I jump up and quickly dress. My mother is teary-eyed—but when isn’t she teary-eyed? My sister-in-law Bruche is furious—but when isn’t she furious? And my brother Elyahu is standing in the middle of the room, hanging his head, trying to look innocent as a lamb.

What's been happening? A great deal! Once our neighbors woke up this morning, all hell broke loose. You'd think they were being slaughtered! One neighbor's wall is splashed with ink. Another neighbor's fence, a new fence, has ink all over it. A third neighbor had two white goats but now they're black, unrecognizable. All this might be tolerable were it not for the slaughterer's wife's stockings. She had hung out her new pair of white stockings to dry on our neighbor's fence. They're ruined. To keep the peace, my mother promises to buy her a new pair of stockings. But what about the wall and the fence? We decide that my mother and sister-in-law Bruche will very kindly take two brushes and whitewash the stains.

"You're lucky you live next door to decent neighbors. If you had splashed ink on Menashe the doctor's garden, you'd know what kind of God we have!" our neighbor Pessi says to my mother.

"What are you talking about? Do you mean you need to have luck to have bad luck?" My mother looks at me meaningfully.

What do you think she means?

C .

"Now I'll be smarter," my brother Elyahu says to me. "Just wait till nightfall, and we'll take the bottles down to the river."

Right, as I am a Jew! What could be smarter than that? People pour filth into the river anyway! They wash laundry and water horses there, and it's where the pigs wallow. I know that river well. I used to catch fish in it. In fact, I'm looking forward to going to the river.

As soon as night falls, we load baskets full of bottles and carry them to the river. We pour out the ink and carry the empty bottles back home, then take another load of full bottles. We work all night. I haven't had such a happy, enjoyable night in a long time.

Just picture it: the town is asleep, the sky is full of stars, and the moon is reflected in the river. It's peaceful and quiet. A river is like a living thing. After Passover, when the ice melts, it performs wonders! It swells, spreads itself out, and pours over its banks. And then it grows smaller, narrower, and shallower. By the end of summer, it quiets down and takes a nap. Occasionally some creature

in the bottom mud goes *bul-bul-bul*. A pair of frogs reply from the other side: *krua-krua!* It's so small, it's an embarrassment, not a river! And I can cross by foot to the other side without even taking off my pants!

Because of our ink, the river becomes a little wider. Imagine, toiling like oxen, we pour in about a thousand bottles! We sleep afterward like the dead.

The next morning my mother awakens us. "Woe unto me and my miserable life! What have you done to the river?"

It appears we have brought catastrophe to the whole town. The washerwomen don't have anywhere to wash their laundry. The coachmen don't have anywhere to water their horses. The water-carriers are ganging up to come after us. That's the good news our mother brings. But we aren't going to wait. We aren't anxious to learn what the water-carriers have in store for us. I and my brother Elyahu decide we'd better take off as fast as our legs can carry us to his friend Pinni.

"Let them look for us there if they want us!" My brother Elyahu takes my hand, and we speed down the hill to his friend Pinni. When we meet again, I'll tell you all about Pinni. It's worth your while to get to know him: he also has lots of good ideas.

X

THE NEIGHBORHOOD SNEEZES

A.

Guess what we're breaking our heads over these days. Mice! All week my brother Elyahu has been studying his little book on how to make money with little investment, *From One Ruble—A Hundred!* Lately he's learned, he says, how to drive out mice, cockroaches, and other vermin. Rats too. Just let him put a powder in a place, and not one mouse will be left! They'll run away, or die—no more mice. How he makes it, I don't know. It's a secret. He keeps the book in his chest pocket, the powder wrapped in a piece of paper. The powder is reddish and ground fine like snuff. It's called *shemeritzi*.

“What is *shemeritzi*?”

“Turkish pepper.”

“What is Turkish pepper?”

“If you don’t stop all this *what-is*, you’ll find your head going through the door!”

My brother Elyahu hates to be asked questions when he’s in the middle of work. I shut my mouth. Along with the red powder, I notice that he has another powder. It also works on mice. But you have to be very careful with it!

“Deadly poison!” my brother Elyahu says maybe a hundred times to my mother, to Bruche, and to me. Especially to me lest, God forbid, I touch it—it’s poison!

We make our first test on our neighbor Pessi’s mice. An endless horde of mice live there. Her husband Moishe is a bookbinder, and the house is full of prayer books. Mice love prayer books. Well, not so much the prayer books as the glue that holds the books together. But as long as the mice are eating the glue, they might as well eat the prayer books too. They do enormous damage. One time they gnawed through one of his holiday prayer books, brand-new, right to where THE KING was printed in large letters. They really loved those words THE KING! They only left the crown of the letter *lamed*.

“Let me at them for one night!” my brother Elyahu pleads with the bookbinder.

The bookbinder won’t have it. “I’m afraid you’ll ruin my prayer books,” he says.

“How will I ruin your prayer books?” my brother Elyahu asks.

“I don’t know how, but I’m still afraid. These prayer books belong to other people.”

You can’t argue with a bookbinder! But finally we got him to let us spend just one night there.

B.

That night didn’t work out too well for us. We didn’t catch one mouse! But my

brother Elyahu says it was a good sign. The mice, he says, sniffed out our powder and ran off. The bookbinder shook his head and smirked. He didn't believe it. Still and all, word got around town that we could drive away mice. It was our neighbor Pessi who spread the word around. She went off one morning to the market and told everyone that "no one drives away mice like they drive away mice." She made our reputation. Earlier she praised our kvass all over town, and then she trumpeted far and wide that we made the best ink in the world. It turned out that no one needed ink, but mice are not the same as ink. Mice are everywhere, in every house. Every homeowner has a cat. But what good is one cat against so many mice? And rats! Rats are about as afraid of cats as Haman is of Purim noisemakers. In fact, cats are afraid of rats. That's what Berreh the shoemaker says. He tells tales of terrifying rats. People say he is a big exaggerator, but even if only half of what he says is true, it's still bad. Rats ate up a new pair of boots, he says. It was at night. He was afraid of coming too close to them—two huge rats, as big as calves. From a distance he whistled at them, stamped his feet, screamed *kish-kish-kish-kish!* Nothing helped. He threw the heel of a boot at them, but they just glanced up and then went about their business. Then he threw the cat at them. They attacked the cat and ate her. Nobody wanted to believe him, but if a person swears, you have to believe him.

"Give me just one night," my brother Elyahu says to him, "and I'll drive out all the rats!"

"Ah, with the greatest pleasure!" says Berreh the shoemaker. "I'll thank you for it!"

C.

We sit through one whole night at Berreh the shoemaker's, who himself sits with us. Ah, what wondrous tales he tells us! He's a veteran of the Turkish War, stationed in a place called Plevneh.

"They were shooting with cannons. Do you know how big a cannon is? One cannonball is bigger than this whole house, and they shoot a thousand cannonballs in one minute. What do you think of that? When that cannonball flies through the air, it screams so loud you can go deaf!"

Once he was standing guard, as Berreh the shoemaker tells it, when suddenly

he heard a *bang*. Something was carrying him up into the air, high up, way above the clouds, and there the cannonball exploded into a thousand pieces. Luckily he fell on a soft place, he says, otherwise he would have broken his head. My brother Elyahu listens to this tale, and his eyebrows smile—that is, he isn't laughing, but his eyebrows are laughing. It's a strange laughter. Berreh the shoemaker doesn't notice. He keeps on telling his fantastic tales. Each story is scarier than the one before. And that's how we spend our time until daybreak. And rats? We see not a one.

“You're a magician!” Berreh the shoemaker says to my brother Elyahu. And he goes out into the town and tells everyone about this miracle, how with a magical incantation we drove away all the rats in one night. He swears that he himself saw it—my brother Elyahu muttered something, and the rats came out of their nests and then ran down to the river, swam across, and kept running, he does not know where to.

D .

“Are you the people who drive away mice?” People are coming to hire us to drive away mice with our magical incantation.

But my brother Elyahu is an honest person. He hates lies. He doesn't drive away mice with a magical incantation, he explains, but with a powder. He has a kind of powder that, once the mice smell it, they run away.

“Let it be a powder, let it be whatever you want,” they say, “so long as you drive away the mice! How much will it cost?”

My brother Elyahu hates to bargain. For the powder it will cost so much, he says, and for the labor, so much and so much. As you might expect, with each new customer he raises the price. Actually, it isn't he who raises the price; it's my sister-in-law.

“Make up your mind,” she says. “If you're going to eat pig, let the fat run down your beard. If you're going to be a mouse-catcher, at least make some money out of it.”

“*Nu*, and where is fairness? Where is God?” my mother interjects.

My sister-in-law snaps at her, “Fairness? *There* is fairness!” She indicates the

stove. “God? *Here* is God!” She slaps her pocket.

“Bruche! What did you say? God be with you!” My mother wrings her hands.

“Don’t waste your time talking to a fool,” my brother Elyahu says to my mother, pacing around the room, twisting his beard. He has quite a full beard now. It grows like crazy. He twists it, and it grows in a weird way. Of all places, it grows thickest on his throat. His face is smooth, but his throat is hairy. You’ve never seen such a beard!

At any other time my sister-in-law Bruche would have ruined his day for calling her a fool, but this time she ignores it because he is earning money. Whenever my brother Elyahu is earning money, he becomes a big shot in her eyes. She also values me more because I help him earn money. Usually she calls me *shlepper* or *shlimazel* or “poor excuse of a kid.” Now she is more endearing—she calls me Mottele.

“Mottele! Hand me my shoes.”

“Mottele! Draw some water for me.”

“Mottele! Take out the garbage.”

If you earn money, they talk differently to you.

E .

The trouble with my brother Elyahu is that he overdoes things. When he made kvass, he made a barrelful. Ink—a thousand bottles. A powder for mice—a full sack. Our neighbor’s husband Moishe the bookbinder told him, “Why do you need so much powder?” I don’t think my brother Elyahu appreciated this problem.

Well, they should have locked the sack up in a closet . . . but no. One day they all go off and leave me alone with it. Is it my fault that I ride the sack as if it were a horse? Be a prophet, and know that the sack would burst and all this yellow stuff would come pouring out! It’s the powder that my brother Elyahu uses to drive the mice away! It has such a sharp smell, you could faint from it! I bend down and try to sweep up what spilled, but I’m seized by a fit of sneezing. If I’d inhaled a whole box of snuff, I wouldn’t sneeze as hard. I sneeze and sneeze till I finally run outside, hoping to stop sneezing.

Guess what happens. Along comes my mother, who sees me sneezing. “What’s the matter?” she asks me. All I can do is sneeze and then sneeze some more! And still more!

“God help me, where did you get such a cold?” She wrings her hands. I can’t stop sneezing and just point toward the house. She goes in but soon runs back out, sneezing even worse than I am. Along comes my brother Elyahu and sees us both sneezing. “What’s the matter?” My mother points toward the house.

He goes in and then comes bounding out, shouting, “Who did th—*katchoo! katchoo!*”

It’s been a long time since I’ve seen my brother Elyahu so angry. He comes at me with both hands. It’s just lucky he’s sneezing or else I’d really get it.

My sister-in-law Bruche comes along and finds all three of us holding our sides sneezing. “What’s going on here? Why all this sneezing?”

What can we tell her? Can we so much as utter a word? We point toward the house. She goes in and runs right out again, red as fire, and assails my brother Elyahu: “What did I tell—*katchoo! katchoo! katchoo!*”

Along comes our neighbor Fat Pessi. She speaks to us, but none of us can answer her with so much as a word. We point toward the house. She too goes in and comes running out again. “What have you—*katchoo! katchoo! katchoo!*” She waves her hands in the air.

Along comes her husband Moishe the bookbinder. He looks at us and laughs. “What’s all this sneezing about?”

“Just go in there—*katchoo! katchoo! katchoo!*” We point toward the house.

The bookbinder goes into our house and runs out, laughing. “I know what it is! I smelled it! It’s *shemer*—*katchoo! katchoo!*” He grabs his sides and sneezes. With each sneeze he lifts himself up on his tiptoes.

Within half an hour all our neighbors and their neighbors and their uncles and aunts and third cousins and friends—the whole neighborhood, from one end to the next, is in a sneezing fit!

Why is my brother Elyahu so frightened? Apparently he’s afraid they’ll be angry at him for the sneezing. He takes me by the hand, and, still sneezing, we run down the hill to his friend Pinni.

It takes a good hour and a half before we can even speak like human beings again. My brother Elyahu tells his friend Pinni the whole story. His friend Pinni listens thoughtfully, like a doctor listening to a patient. When my brother Elyahu finishes, his friend Pinni says to him, “Give me that book.”

My brother Elyahu takes the book out of his chest pocket and hands it to his friend Pinni.

His friend Pinni reads the title, *From One Ruble—A Hundred! Remedies Made from Ordinary Ingredients. With Your Own Hands, Make a Hundred Rubles a Month and More.*

He takes the book and tosses it into the stove, right onto the fire. My brother Elyahu lunges with both hands toward the fire. His friend Pinni holds him back: “Slow down!”

After a few minutes my brother Elyahu’s book about making a hundred rubles a month and more is a pile of ashes. One unburned page remains, on which you can barely make out the word *sh-e-me-r-i-t-z-i*.

XI

OUR FRIEND PINNI

A.

Do you remember, I once told you I’d tell you about my brother Elyahu’s friend Pinni? He’s always full of good ideas. But first I have to tell you about his grandfather, father, and uncle. Then I’ll tell you about Pinni. Don’t worry—I’ll make it short. I’ll start with his grandfather.

Have you ever heard of Reb Hessi the glazier? That’s Pinni’s grandfather. He’s a glazier, a mirror-maker, and a painter who can also make tobacco. He’s quit his windows, mirrors, and painting, but he still makes tobacco and sells it. As long as a man lives, he says, he has to work and not depend on anyone. He’s a tall, thin man with red eyes and a big, scary nose, bent like a ram’s horn. I guess it got that way because he sniffs tobacco. He’s maybe a hundred years old

and still in his right mind. Probably he's smarter than his two sons, Hersh-Leib the mechanic and Shneur the watchmaker. Hersh-Leib the mechanic is as tall and thin as Reb Hessi. He's got a large, straight nose, maybe because he doesn't sniff tobacco. Maybe one day he'll take it up like his father.

Hersh-Leib makes and fixes ovens. Everyone says he's brilliant. If he'd learned a real trade, he says, he would now be one in a million. There's nothing on earth he can't figure out. He says so himself. He can figure anything out with one glance. He learned all about ovens on his own. When he saw Ivan Pitchkur making ovens, he laughed out loud. The goy didn't understand a thing about ovens, he said. Hersh-Leib once dismantled an oven and built a new one from the same tiles. But you could choke from the way it smoked. So he dismantled it and rebuilt it. After doing it several times, he became a master at making ovens. He invented an oven that has to be refueled only once in eight days. If he can only find the right tiles, he's convinced it'll work. Once he finds real Kachlioveh tiles, he'll build you an oven that has to be seen to be believed! An oven is more complicated than a clock—he says so in order to spite his brother Shneur the watchmaker.

His brother Shneur is younger and taller than he and also has a long nose. He was supposed to be a rabbi, or a ritual slaughterer, or a teacher—that's what a head he had for learning! But he preferred to be a clockmaker. Here's how he got interested in clock-making.

When Shneur was still a kid in *cheder*, he asked smart questions. For example, when you turn a lock to the right, it opens, and when you turn it to the left, it locks—why? How does a clock work? Why does it chime when the small hand meets the twelve? A cuckoo clock almost drove him out of his mind. On the hour a little door opened and out came a bird chirping *cuckoo!* The bird looked absolutely alive. Even the cat was fooled. Whenever the bird came out with a *cuckoo*, the cat would arch its back, ready to catch it. Shneur promised himself that he would find that cuckoo bird's secret. Once when no one was at home, he took the clock down from the wall, unscrewed all the screws, and took out its insides. His father beat him severely for it. To this day, he says, his body has the scars. But he succeeded in finding out what made the bird go *cuckoo*, and today he is a clockmaker.

I don't know if he's the best, but he's fast and cheap. My brother Elyahu has Shneur repair his fob watch about every other week. It's a peculiar fob watch—

either it runs crazy fast, or it slows down by an hour, or it stops altogether. It never seems to work right for long. Maybe my brother Elyahu should go to a different watchmaker, but Pinni says it's probably the fob watch's fault, not his uncle Shneur's. Let's face it, if the fob watch were just a regular watch, any watchmaker could fix it. But it isn't a regular fob watch, so of what help can a watchmaker be?

You argue with him and tell him he's wrong!

B .

My brother Elyahu's friend Pinni is a smart person like his father Hersh-Leib the mechanic and like his uncle Shneur the clockmaker. He also has a long nose like them. It runs in the family.

They have an aunt Kryni who has a daughter Malkeh, and she has a nose that's wondrous to see. Not only the nose, but her face as well—it's more like a bird's face than a person's. She's ashamed to go out into the street—a God's pity on her! Pinni resembles her, but on a man it doesn't matter. His face is so comical, you'd laugh just looking at him. It's not enough that he's tall and skinny—he has a pair of long ears, and a long neck like a gander, and he's nearsighted in the bargain.

Wherever he goes, he bumps into someone. Whenever he stands up, he steps on someone's foot. One trouser leg is always turned up, one sock is falling down, his shirt is always unbuttoned, and his necktie is off to the side. And when he speaks, he seems to gargle. He also has a sweet tooth, so that whenever you meet him, he's sucking something.

For all that, he's a very competent person. There's nothing on earth he doesn't know. He's outdone the rabbi in learning. And his writing is better than that of all the scholars.

Besides having a fine handwriting, he's an expert at rhymes. He's always writing in rhyme. He's written rhymes about everyone in town—the rabbi, the slaughterer, the councilors, the butchers, and even his own family. For a while Pinni's rhymes passed from hand to hand, and people had a good laugh. Some even learned them by heart. I remember a few myself:

Our *gabbai*
Reb Shmuel Abba
Has a big belly.
When he sits at table
He grabs what he's able
As he shakes like jelly.
His wife Nechama
Is a pious grandma—
Of her I will not say a thing.
She's as bright
As late last night.
May the devil take them both under his wing.

The whole town was rocking with these rhymes. Someone set this one to music, and the town was going around singing the tune until Shmuel Abba and his wife Nechama got wind of it. They sent for Hersh-Leib the mechanic and wept bitter tears. "What does your son Pinni have against us?" they cried.

Uncle Hersh-Leib the mechanic called Pinni into the house, locked the doors, and gave him a good dressing-down. He made him promise he'd never write any more rhymes as long as he lived.

C .

From that time on Pinni wrote no more rhymes. Rhymes didn't enter his mind. As he tells it, he has many other problems to worry about. His father Hersh-Leib decided Pinni should get married and settle down. He arranged for Pinni to marry a miller's daughter. The miller opened a shop for him that sold flour. My brother Elyahu envies him his business, but Pinni laughs at him, saying it's a business but not for him. What kind of work is it, messing around with flour? It's fit for an uneducated person like a miller. Is it his fault he can't sit in the shop?

He just can't do it. His mind is restless, always working. He belongs to a family of restless minds.

That's what Pinni says, and he refuses to look after the flour shop. He'd much rather sit over a book. His father-in-law is angry about it but keeps silent—he's afraid his son-in-law will write rhymes about him. He also keeps in mind that his daughter Teibl is a delicate creature with a slightly crossed eye. She is a precious only daughter. My mother says she doesn't have a mean bone in her body. But what does that mean? How can a bone be mean? All day she sits in the shop while Pinni sits at home. My brother Elyahu and I visit him every day, and he pours his heart out to us. He sighs and groans and bemoans his bitter luck. He feels hemmed in, he says, constrained. He's being smothered. If he were in another town, it would be very different. If he could get out of here for even a year, he'd turn the world on its head!

D .

There's no one he trusts as much as my brother Elyahu. He shows him his personal letters. Famous people write and tell him he has something special inside him, which Pinni too firmly believes. I look at him and wonder, God in heaven! What can he have inside him?

Once Pinni called my brother Elyahu aside to tell him a secret. If it's a secret, I have to know it. I love to be in on secrets. So I walk right behind them and try to catch a few words. Pinni speaks, and then my brother Elyahu speaks. I'll tell you what they both said:

PINNI: Why are we wasting our time here?

ELYAHU: I don't know.

PINNI: Someone went there with nothing to his name, slept outdoors for half a year, and swept the streets for a piece of bread. I just read about it.

ELYAHU: And now?

PINNI: May it happen to both of us!

ELYAHU: Really?

PINNI: Really! Really! Do you think I'd lie to you? I've already spoken to my Teibl.

ELYAHU: What did she say?

PINNI: What should she say? She's going.

ELYAHU: She's going? *Nu*, and your father-in-law?

PINNI: Who listens to him? If I go alone, will it be better? He sees that I'm determined to go—I can't stay here any longer!

ELYAHU: Neither can I!

PINNI: So let's pack up and go!

ELYAHU: Pack up and go? With what money?

PINNI: Don't be foolish—they're giving out steamship tickets for free.

ELYAHU: What do you mean, for free?

PINNI: We pay in installments. We'll pay it back fully one day. In the meantime we have them for free.

ELYAHU: *Nu*, and before we get to the ship? Expenses? Tickets? Train fare?

PINNI: How many tickets do we need?

ELYAHU: Yes, how many?

PINNI: Figure it out—I and my Teibl are two. You and your Bruche are two. That makes four.

ELYAHU: And my mother makes five.

PINNI: So it's five.

ELYAHU: *Nu*, and Motl?

PINNI: He can get a half-fare ticket and maybe not even that. We can say he isn't yet three years old.

ELYAHU: Are you crazy?

I can't hold it in any longer. Out of great joy I let out a shriek!

Both turn around to me. "Go away, you imp! You have a bad habit of listening in when grown-ups talk!"

I run, skip, and slap my thighs with both hands. It's no small matter—I'm going away! . . . Ship! . . . Train! . . . Ticket! . . . Half-fare ticket! Where are we going? I don't know—what difference does it make? I'm going away—that's enough! I've never gone anywhere in my life. I don't know how "going away" feels. What does it mean? Once I rode around on my neighbor's goat, but it cost me dearly—I fell off and bloodied my nose, and I collected a few slaps. So that trip doesn't count.

All day long I go around in a fog. I've lost my appetite. At night I dream I'm going away—not going but flying. I have wings like a dove, and I'm flying. Long live our friend Pinni! In my eyes he's a thousand times more attractive than before. If I weren't embarrassed, I'd hug and kiss him. A dear man, that Pinni!

Didn't I tell you he has good ideas?

XII

GUESS WHAT? WE'RE OFF TO AMERICA!

A.

Guess what? We're off to America! Where is America? I don't know. I only know that it's far, terribly far away. You have to travel and travel until finally you get to a place called Castle Garden, where they strip you naked and examine your eyes. If you have healthy eyes, it's good, and if not, you have to go back! I'm sure I have healthy eyes. I only had a problem with my eyes once. Boys from the Russian school grabbed hold of me, then knocked me down, and blew cigarette smoke in my eyes. Ay, did my brother Elyahu beat them up! Now my eyes are clear as crystal.

My mother's situation is not so good. So says my brother Elyahu. It's her own fault, because she's been crying day and night ever since my father died. "In God's name, have pity on us!" he complains to her. "On account of you we'll all have to go back, God forbid!" he complains to her.

"Foolish child that you are! Do I want to cry? The tears come of their own."

She wipes her eyes on her apron and gets to work on the bedding, especially the pillows, which have to be restuffed. America is a country where they have everything except pillows. I don't understand how people sleep there. It must be hard for their heads! My sister-in-law Bruche helps her restuff the pillows. Not to boast about it, but we have three large quilts and quite a few pillows—six big ones and four little ones. From the four little pillows my mother is making one, which is too bad. I like those little pillows better than the big ones. I always play with them in the morning and make triangular hats out of them.

“When we arrive in America, God willing, we'll stuff them into little pillows again,” my mother says to me. She tells my sister-in-law Bruche to do the same as she has. She obeys, even though she's not happy about the journey. It's difficult for her to leave her parents behind. If someone had told her a year ago she'd be going to America, she'd have spit in his eye.

“If someone had told me a year ago I'd now be a widow . . . ,” says my mother, and bursts into tears.

“You're crying again?” my brother Elyahu scolds her. “You want to ruin us all?”

B .

As if we don't have enough on our hands, here comes our neighbor Pessi. Seeing us stuffing pillows for the trip, she pours out her bitter soul to us.

“So, you're really going to America? May the One Above grant that you arrive in good health and find happiness! With God everything is possible. A year ago relatives of mine, Rivele and her husband Hili, left for America. They write that they are struggling but are making a living. We keep begging them to write more details—what and when and how? They answer that America is good for everyone. You struggle but make a living. What is there to say to that? But at least they write. At first they didn't write at all. We thought they had fallen into the ocean, when suddenly news arrived that they were already, thank God, in America. I ask, was it worth all that fuss to break their backs, repack the bedding, and sail across the ocean?”

“I beg you, stop making things worse for us,” my brother Elyahu protests.

Our neighbor Pessi gives as good as she gets. “Making things worse? Look at

him, a smart aleck! He's going to America so he can struggle to make a living! How long ago was it that I held you in my arms, fed you, took care of you? Go ahead, ask your mother about the fishbone you swallowed as a child one Friday night. If I hadn't grabbed you from behind, one two three, you wouldn't be going to America to struggle to make a living!"

Our neighbor Pessi would go on and on talking, but luckily my mother gets involved, gently: "I beg you, Pessi'nyu, dear soul, dear heart, *lyubeh'nyu*, may you be well and strong!"

More than that my mother cannot speak—she begins to cry. My brother Elyahu sees her and becomes enraged. He drops his work and runs out of the house, slamming the door. "May it all go to the devil!"

C .

Our house is now a bare, empty mess. The bundles and bedding in the alcove reach almost to the ceiling. When no one is around, I climb up on all the pillows and slide down like on a sled. I've never had it as good as I do now. No one has cooked anything for days. My brother Elyahu brings a dried-out fish home from the market, and we eat it with an onion. Fish and onions—what could be better than that? Our friend Pinni eats with us. He's always been absent-minded, his head in the clouds. But ever since we decided to go to America, he's really been distracted. That's what my mother says. Still one trouser leg is rolled up, one sock is rolled down, and his tie is way off to the side. Whenever he comes into our house, he still bumps into things.

My mother always scolds him in the same way: "You know you're tall—why don't you bend down a little?"

"He's nearsighted, Mama!" my brother Elyahu defends him, and he and Pinni go off to finish the business of selling our half of the house. They have to write up the bill of sale. We sold our half long ago to Zili the tailor. But a tailor doesn't buy a house so quickly. What a pain, a real *nudnik*, that Zili the tailor! He came over at least three times a day to look over our half. He sniffed the walls, felt the chimney, crawled into the attic, and examined the roof. Then he brought his wife Meni. I have to say, she makes me laugh. Our neighbor's calf was also called Meni. Both Menis have the same face. Meni the calf had a white snout and

round eyes. So does Meni the tailor's wife. Then Zili the tailor brought in experts to look over the house, mostly other tailors. Each one found a different fault with it.

Then they brought in Pinni's father, Hersh-Leib the mechanic, who is a real expert on houses and an honest man. You can rely on him. He examined our half of the house from top to bottom, squared his shoulders, pushed back his cap, and scratched his neck. "Without a doubt this house can stand for a hundred years, if not more," he said.

One of Zili the tailor's experts piped in, "Absolutely! So long as you face it with bricks, put in some new beams, four new walls, and a new tin roof, it will stand, God willing, until the Messiah comes!"

If you had cursed out Hersh-Leib the mechanic or poured a bucket of boiling water on him, he couldn't have gotten angrier. Where did this Jew get off, he demanded, this idiot, this mere tailor, a thief, and a moron into the bargain, talking to him, Hersh-Leib the mechanic, in that language, with that tone of voice?

I was enjoying this, expecting a fistfight to break out any minute. But somehow people showed up from somewhere (people always seem to appear from somewhere when they're least needed!) and separated them. Zili the tailor made peace and began haggling. Finally both sides agreed on a price, and brandy was ordered for a *l'chayim*. The tailor wished us a safe journey, success in business, and a welcome return home, God willing.

"Slow down, not so fast. Are we coming back from America?" says my brother Elyahu, and a discussion followed. Hersh-Leib the mechanic bets we will come back. If not for the conscription, he says, he'd never allow his son Pinni to go. America, he says, is *phooey*!

Zili the tailor asks him, "Pardon me, but how, exactly, is America *phooey*?"

"Because America is a nasty country."

"Pardon me, but how do you know America is a nasty country?"

Hersh-Leib the mechanic responds that it's just common sense. Zili asks him to explain this "common sense." Hersh-Leib stammers, trying to explain his reasoning, but his words become garbled, especially since he's by now a bit tipsy. Everyone is tipsy. Everyone is feeling fine, marvelously fine. Me too. Only

my mother keeps hiding her face in her apron and wiping her eyes.

My brother Elyahu looks at her and says to her quietly, “Troublemaker! Have you no pity on your eyes? You’re killing us!”

D .

Now a new to-do starts up—saying goodbye. We go from house to house to say our goodbyes. We’ve already been to all our relatives, neighbors, and friends. At the home of our in-law Yoneh the baker, we spend a whole day. Our in-laws have prepared a supper for us, invited the family, and put beer on the table. They seat me separately with my sister-in-law’s little sister Alteh. I already told you about her. She’s a year older than me and wears two braids twisted together to look like a bagel. They once talked about us as a future match, and since then, whenever we are seen together, they call us “the bride and groom.” But that doesn’t keep us from speaking to each other. She asks me if I’ll miss her. Certainly I’ll miss her! Then she asks if I’ll write her letters from America. Certainly I’ll write her letters!

“How will you write them? Do you know how to write?”

“It’s easy to learn how to write in America!” I stuff my hands in my pockets. Alteh looks at me and smiles. I know why she’s smiling. She envies me that I am going to America.

They all envy me, even Yossi the baker’s son Cross-Eyed Henich, who would drown me in a spoonful of water if he could! He stops me and blinks his bad eye at me. “Listen here, you. So you’re going to America!”

“Yes, I’m going to America.”

“What will you do there—go begging from house to house?”

Lucky for him my brother Elyahu isn’t nearby. He would have slapped him around for that jibe! I don’t want to start up with him, the stuck-up lummoX. I stick my tongue out at him and run off to our neighbor Pessi to say goodbye to her gang. It’s quite a gang! All eight of them surround me and ask me if I’m happy that I’m going to America. What a question! I feel very confident. They’re all jealous.

More than anyone, Hershl is jealous. He’s the one they call Vashti on account

of the birthmark on his forehead. He can't keep his eyes off me. He sighs and says, "You'll be seeing the whole world!"

Yes, I'll be seeing the whole world! I can't wait!

E .

Now Lazer has arrived with his "eagles," three fiery horses! They can't stand still. Either they're pawing the ground or they're snorting and spraying my face. I don't know what to do first—should I look at the horses, or should I help carry the bundles and the pillows into the wagon? I can manage both things. I stand next to the horses and watch the bundles and pillows beds carried out, creating a full wagon of pillows, a mountain of bedding. It's time to get in and go. We have forty-five versts to the railroad station. Everybody is here. I and my brother Elyahu, my sister-in-law Bruche, our friend Pinni and his wife Teibl, and their whole family—Pinni's father Hersh-Leib the mechanic, Shneur the clockmaker, Pinni's in-laws the miller and his wife, Aunt Kryni's daughter with the birdlike face, and even the old grandfather Reb Hessi—all have come to advise Pinni on how to behave in America. From my family only our in-laws have come, Yoneh the baker and his sons. Too bad I didn't acquaint you with them. Now is not the time. We're going to America. Everyone is crowding around us, warning us to watch out for thieves.

"In America there are no thieves," my brother Elyahu says, and pats his pocket. My mother has sewn in the money there so cleverly that no thief on earth would even think there was a pocket there. That's where all the money from the sale of our half of the house is hidden. Apparently it's quite a stash, because everyone's asking him if he's safely hidden the money.

"Quite safely! Don't worry!" my brother Elyahu says. He's sick and tired of having to give everyone an accounting. We're told it's time to say goodbye. They all get ready for it.

We look around—my mother is gone! Where is she? No one knows. My brother Elyahu is beside himself! Our friend Pinni has lost his tie. Lazer says we might miss the train. Good, here comes my mother. Her face is red, her eyes swollen.

My brother Elyahu jumps all over her. "What's the matter with you? Where

were you?”

“At the cemetery, to say goodbye to Papa.”

My brother Elyahu turns away. We are all speechless. Ever since we decided to go to America, this is the first time that our father has crossed my mind. I feel a twinge in my heart. Everyone is going to America, and my poor father is remaining behind in the cemetery, all alone. They don't let me think about this too long. They shout out to me and tell me to climb up on the wagon. How can I climb up on such a tall wagon with that mountain of bedding? There's a solution—Lazer puts his broad shoulders under me, and up I go!

Suddenly everyone is kissing, weeping, and wailing, worse than Tisha B'Av. More than anyone my mother is crying. She throws her arms around our neighbor Pessi. “You have been a sister to me, dearer than a sister!” she says. Our neighbor Pessi doesn't cry, but her double chin is trembling, and tears as big as peas roll silently down her fat, shiny cheeks. We've all finished kissing—except for Pinni. To see Pinni kissing people, you don't need theater. Because he's nearsighted, he can't find the right place to kiss. He kisses a beard or the tip of a nose, or he bumps foreheads. To make matters worse, when he walks, he hops and gets tangled up in his own feet. I tell you, watching Pinni, you can get a bellyache laughing.

But thank God we're all sitting in the wagon, or *on* the wagon, on top. Sitting on and between pillows are my mother, Bruche, and Teibl. Across from them are my brother Elyahu and his friend Pinni. Lazer and I sit on the coachman's seat. My mother wants me to sit at her feet, but my brother Elyahu says I'm better off on the coachman's seat. I'm definitely better off there! I can see everybody, and everybody can see me. Lazer takes hold of the whip. The crowd shouts goodbye. The women weep.

“Be well!”

“God be with you!”

“Write us about your health!”

“Be successful!”

“Don't forget us!”

“Write every week, for God's sake, a letter every week!”

“Give regards to Moishe and Basya, and Meyer and Zlate and Chaneh-Perl and Sarah-Ruchl and their children.”

“We wish you luck! Be safe! Be well!” we shout back from the wagon, and I swear we are on our way. Lazer lashes the three eagles. He treats them to a blow from a stick. The wheels turn. We’re shaking and swaying. I bounce on the coachman’s seat and almost fall off from happiness. I feel a tickle in my throat and I want to sing.

We’re going, we’re going, we’re going to America!

XIII

WE STEAL ACROSS THE BORDER

A.

Riding on a train is paradise! Riding in a wagon isn’t bad either, but it shakes a lot and afterward your sides hurt. Lazer’s horses really do fly like eagles, but still it takes a long time to get to the station, and when we get there, it’s hard to get down from the wagon. It’s easier for me than for the rest—after all, I’m right beside Lazer on the coachman’s seat. It’s a hard seat and my bones ache, but I can jump off in a minute. The others can’t jump.

It’s worst of all for the women—they’re buried in bundles. First we have to get all the bundles and all the bedding off the wagon, and then we can pull the women out one by one. And Lazer does it all. He’s an angry man, always cursing, but he’s an honest, dependable coachman. Too bad he dumps us all with the bundles and the bedding at the train station and then goes off looking for a return fare. We feel abandoned by him. First of all, we have problems with the Gentile station guard. He’s unhappy with all the bundles, especially the bedding. What concern is it of his that we’re taking a lot of pillows? My mother talks politely to him, tells him we’re going to America. That makes him even angrier, and he tells us to go to a place I’m ashamed to mention.

“We have to shmear the goy’s palm, give him a little something,” my brother

Elyahu tells our friend Pinni in a combination of Yiddish and Hebrew. Our friend Pinni is our leader, our brains. He speaks good Russian, but unfortunately he is very hotheaded. My brother Elyahu also has a bit of a temper, but not as bad as Pinni's. Pinni approaches the goy and talks to him in Russian.

“Listen, you! The devil will not take you if we go to America with a lot of pillows, and we'll give you a drink of brandy if you shut your trap, you pig!”

The goy calls him a few choice names. We're afraid of making a scene that might bring the police down on our heads.

My mother, wringing her hands, cries at Pinni, “Who asked you to show off your Russian?”

“Don't worry, the goy will be happy to take half a ruble, and we'll all make up.”

And that's what happens—they do make up. Pinni spouts Russian, and the goy curses but carries all the bundles and pillows to a large building with high windows called a waiting room. Then the real fun begins. What more do they want? The goy says they won't let us on the train with so many pillows and all those rags. (He is obviously referring to the blankets, which are a bit ragged, with the cotton batting sticking out, but to him they're rags!) We have to see the stationmaster.

Who should go? Of course, Pinni! Pinni goes with the goy to the stationmaster, and I tag along. Pinni negotiates with the stationmaster but in a different tone. He isn't as hotheaded as before, but he speaks and waves his hands. He utters odd words I've never heard: “Columbus . . . civilization . . . Alexander von Humboldt . . . Slonimski . . . mathematics.” I've forgotten the others. The stationmaster listens carefully and is silent. Pinni is giving him a history lesson! But that does no good either. We have to check all the bedding into the baggage department and get a receipt. My mother is frantic. What will we sleep on?

B .

My mother's fears are off the mark. The problem is not what to sleep on but where to find a place to sit and not suffocate. Never mind sleeping, what about sitting? Everybody, Jew and Gentile alike, is fighting for a spot. The delay over

the bedding causes us to lose the best seats. We barely manage to seat the women and put the bundles on the ground, my mother on one side of the car, Bruche and Teibl on the other. If they want to talk to each other, they have to shout across the car. People laugh at them. My brother Elyahu and our friend Pinni are having trouble even finding standing room.

Pinni can't see well and keeps knocking his forehead. And me? Don't worry, I have it good. I have it great! True, I'm squeezed on all sides, but I'm standing near a window. What I see, you have surely never seen. Before my eyes houses are flying by, mileposts, trees, people, fields, forests—not to be described! And how the train flies! And how the wheels clatter, how they screech, how they whistle!

My mother is afraid I might fall out the window, and every minute she shouts out, "Motl! Motl?" A rich-looking man with blue eyeglasses mimics her singsong: "Motl! Motl?" All the Gentiles laugh. The Jews pretend not to hear—certainly my mother pays them no heed. She keeps shouting, "Motl! Motl?" What more does she want? She wants me to eat something. We've brought all kinds of good food with us: radishes, onions and garlic, green cucumbers, and hard-boiled eggs, one egg apiece. I haven't enjoyed eating so in a long time. But Pinni spoils our meal. He always feels he has to defend Jews. He can't stand that the Gentiles are laughing at us for eating onions and garlic. He draws himself up to his full height and says in Russian to the rich-looking man with the blue eyeglasses, "And what about you eating pork?"

That comment cuts the Gentiles to the quick. One of them is really offended. He jumps up and gives our Pinni a resounding slap. Pinni tries to give him two slaps in return, but he's nearsighted, and his slaps land on another Gentile. Luckily the conductor and head conductor arrive, and a big scene follows. Everyone speaks at the same time, the Jews complaining about the Gentiles. One's satchel is dropped on his toe, another's hat is thrown out the window. The Gentiles claim it's all lies, a frame-up! The Jews have two Gentile witnesses, one of them a priest. A priest won't lie. The Gentiles say the Jews have bribed the priest. The priest holds forth as if sermonizing. As the accusations fly back and forth, we stop at several stations.

At each station a few passengers leave the train, opening up more space. Our women are now sitting like ladies with their bundles on seats. My brother Elyahu and our friend Pinni have the best seats and are delighted. Teibl notices that

Pinni's cheek is swollen, and she can see finger marks on it. She falls apart, distressed by the slap that left such marks. Pinni swears he doesn't feel a thing—it only smarts a bit and will soon pass. He hates to waste time talking about what's past. He'd rather talk to the other Jews on the train and find out where they're going. It turns out many of them are going to America. We're thrilled to hear it.

“Why didn't you say something? We're also going to America!” says Pinni, and we quickly become acquainted. We find out which town they came from, which city they're going to, and with whom they'll be staying.

“You're going to New York? We're going to Philadelphia!”

“What's this Philadelphia?”

“It's also a city, like New York.”

“Now slow down, just wait a minute! Philadelphia compared to New York is like Ayshishok compared to Vilna, Drozhne compared to Odessa, Otvotzk compared to Warsaw, Semionevka compared to Petersburg, Kozeletz compared to Harkov—”

“My goodness! You've been all over the world, *kayn eyn horeh!*”

“Let me tell you! If you wish, I can list all the cities where I've been.”

“Why don't you leave it for Shabbes. Better talk about what to do when we get to the border.”

“You'll do what we do, what everyone does.”

By this time all the Jews move in closer together to talk about stealing across the border. I don't understand what “stealing across the border” means. Are we thieves? Who should I ask? My mother is a woman, and what does a woman know? My brother Elyahu doesn't like to be bothered. A kid like me, he says, shouldn't mix in among grown-ups. Pinni is distracted by all the talking he's involved in. Everyone has a different story to tell about borders. One says that the best border to steal across is at Novoselitz. Another says Brod is better than all of them. A third says that Ungeni is also not too bad, but the others immediately object.

“You call Ungeni a border! You call Romania a country! Let them sink into the earth, border and all!”

“Quiet! We’re at the border!”

C.

The border, I thought, must be something with horns, but it turns out to be nothing of the kind: the same houses, the same Jews, the same Gentiles as ours. They even have a market with shops and stalls—everything exactly like ours. My sister-in-law Bruche and our friend Pinni’s wife Teibl go to the market shopping. I want to go too, but my mother won’t let me leave her side for a minute. She’s afraid they’ll kidnap me right at the border. My brother Elyahu and our friend Pinni aren’t around—they’re off talking to the other Jews, strangers to us. My mother says they’re agents who’ll help us steal across the border. One of them really does look like a thief. He wears a green coat, carries a white umbrella, and has thievish eyes.

The other agent looks like a fine person with a cap. She’s a woman, hanging around the circle of men. She looks honest and pious, judging from the wig she wears and the way she’s always bringing God into everything. She asks my mother where she will bless the candles if we’re still here on Shabbes. My mother says we won’t be holding Shabbes here. With God’s help, she says, we’ll be on the other side of the border by Shabbes. The woman makes a pious face and says, “*Amen, reboynu shel oylem!*—praised be our Father above!” But she’s afraid we’re being misled. The agents with whom we’re dealing are just plain thieves. They want to trick us out of our money and will lead us into a quagmire. If we want to steal across the border, we should do so with her help and everything will turn out well.

Could she also be a thief? Would a thief be wearing a wig and be so pious?

My brother Elyahu and our friend Pinni have returned and are upset. It looks like they’ve quarreled. They blame each other for having to spend Shabbes here, although it’s no problem to observe Shabbes in the town. We find out that both agents are threatening to expose us for planning to steal across the border. And, of course, my mother is already crying. My brother Elyahu gets angry at her for ruining her eyes. On account of her eyes, he says, they won’t allow us into America! Then my brother Elyahu and Pinni stop dealing with the agents, saying, “That’s it! We’re not going to America, and we aren’t stealing across the border!”

My heart sinks. I believe him. But it's just a trick, a scheme out of Pinni's head to get rid of the agents!

And instead we deal with the woman, who takes some money and tells us to be ready by midnight. The night is dark—perfect for stealing across the border. I'm impatient to see what a border is and how we will steal across it.

D .

All day we're busy preparing. We have to pack everything up and give it to the pious woman. She'll send it all on to us afterward. The main thing is to get us across. She tells us what we're to do. When it's midnight, we should go to the outskirts of the town, where there's a small hill. Once we're past the hill, we have to go left and then walk and walk till we come to another hill. This time we're to go right and continue walking until we come to a tavern. Only one of us should go into the tavern, where he will find two peasants drinking brandy at a table. He should go over to them and say "*Chaimove*," and that's all. As soon as they hear this word, she says, they will lead you to a little forest, where four more peasants will be waiting for you. If they're asleep, wake them up. When you're in the forest, go quietly, don't make a peep, or they'll hear you and shoot. At every step, she says, a soldier with a gun will be ready to shoot. From the forest the peasants will lead us on the right path, going downhill, until we're on the other side.

The plan with the hill and the tavern and the forest sounds great to me. My mother is more wary, as are Bruche and Teibl. I laugh at them. Women are wary of a cat too!

Finally night arrives. We've said our evening prayers and eaten supper, and now we're waiting till it gets really dark. Exactly at twelve we start out. First we men go and then the women, as usual. As the pious woman predicted, we leave the town and see a small hill. We pass the hill and turn left. We walk and walk till we see another hill. At that hill we turn right and walk on until we see the tavern. One of us has to go into the tavern, but who? Naturally, Pinni.

We wait half an hour, an hour, two hours—no Pinni. The women say we should find out what's happened to him. Who should go in? My brother Elyahu? My mother says no. I say, "Let me go." My mother says she's afraid for me to

go.

Quiet! Here's Pinni.

"Where were you all this time?"

"In the tavern."

"Where are the two peasants?"

"They're asleep."

"Why didn't you wake them up?"

"How do you know I didn't wake them up?"

"Why didn't you say '*Chaimove*' to them?"

"How do you know I didn't say it to them?"

"Well?"

"Well—well!"

"It looks bad."

"Who says it looks good?"

E.

My brother Elyahu is really clever. He says he and Pinni should both go into the tavern to try waking the peasants. And that's just what they do. In less than half an hour they are coming with the two sleepy-eyed peasants, who are tipsy and keep spitting and cursing. The word *devil* is repeated maybe a hundred times. The women are afraid—I can tell by their sighing and groaning and by the God Almighty's that my mother repeats quietly under her breath. She's afraid to say it out loud. We don't make a sound. We walk and walk but don't see any more peasants. Where are the other four?

Suddenly our two peasants stop and demand to know how much money we have. We're so terrified that we can't say a word. My mother steps forward and says we haven't got any money. They say, "That's a lie. All Jews have money." They take out two long knives and stick them right in our faces. "If you don't give us all you have right now," they say, "we'll murder you!"

We stand speechless, trembling like little lambs. My mother tells my brother Elyahu to undo his pocket and hand over the money. (This is the money we made from the sale of our half of the house.) At that moment my sister-in-law Bruche decides to faint. Seeing her fall, my mother screams, “Help!” Teibl, following her example, also screams, “Help!”

Suddenly—*bang bang!!!* Someone is shooting! The shots echo through the woods. The peasants vanish. Bruche comes to.

My mother grabs me by one hand and my brother Elyahu by the other. “Children! Let’s run! The Guardian of Israel be with us!”

I don’t know where she finds the strength to run. We keep getting tangled up in trees and falling. We stand up and run farther. My mother keeps turning her head and asking softly, “Pinni, are you running? Bruche, are you running? Teibl, are you running? Run, run, the Guardian of Israel be with us!”

How far we run I cannot say. We long ago left the woods behind. Day is breaking. A cool breeze is blowing, but we’re very hot. Before us lies a street, and another street, a white church, gardens, and houses. This apparently is the town that the woman told us about. If it is, then we are now on the “other side.”

We meet a Jew with the longest earlocks I’ve ever seen. He wears a long, flea-bitten caftan and a green scarf around his neck and he is leading a goat. We stop him and the goat and greet him. The man regards us from head to toe. Pinni engages him in conversation, but the man speaks in a funny way—he pronounces broad *ah*’s. Are we far from the border? Pinni asks him. The man stares at him. “What border?” It turns out we’re already far beyond the Russian border.

“So why are we running like madmen?” Pinni says to us.

We are overcome with hysterical laughter. The women almost fall to the ground laughing. My mother raises her hands, cries, “I thank you, dearest God!” and bursts into tears.

XIV

WE’RE IN BROD!

A.

Do you know where we are? We're in Brod, which means we're getting closer to America. It's a nice town, this Brod! It's not a town like ours, with streets and people like ours. The Jews aren't like our Jews, even though they are Jews and maybe more Jewish than we are. Their earlocks are much longer than ours, their caftans reach almost to the ground, and they wear odd caps, belts, shoes, and socks. The women all wear wigs. But the way they talk! They call it German. It's nothing like our language. The words are the same as ours, but the pronunciation is different—the broad *ah*'s sound foreign. And when they speak, they sing. They sound like they're always chanting the Psalms.

We're soon able to catch on to their style. The first to do so is our friend Pinni. He speaks German from the day we arrive. It's easier for him, because he learned German at home. My brother Elyahu says that even though he never learned German, he understands just as much as Pinni. I listen to them speaking German and pick it up quickly. In a foreign country you must know the language, says Pinni. His wife Teibl is already speaking half-German, half-Yiddish. My sister-in-law Bruche also wants to speak German, but she can't—she's too thick-headed! And my mother refuses even to hear about speaking German. She'll keep speaking the way she spoke at home—she won't change her tongue to please the Germans. She's actually angry at them. She thought the Germans were honest people, but she found out they weren't such great saints. Once she went to the market, and they cheated her on the weight. She had asked for a pound, and they gave her—she doesn't even remember how much less.

My mother comes to the conclusion that some Germans are apparently thieves as well. My sister-in-law Bruche gets mad and waves her hands. "Thieves, you say, mother-in-law? One thief after another—one bigger than the next! You have to watch out for them more than at home! At least we're sure that every goy is a thief."

"Don't be silly. At home goys know they're thieves," my mother says. She tells a story about Shimke, once our servant girl, while my father, of blessed memory, was still alive. This Shimke was a very fine servant girl but a bit of a thief. She told us! She didn't like to be left alone in the house because she feared she might steal something.

B .

Everything is different with the Germans. Their money isn't even the same as ours. They don't have kopeks and rubles but groschens and shillings. Everything is sold for groschens. For one ruble you get a handful of groschens. My mother thinks it isn't real money—she calls it buttons. My brother Elyahu says the coins melt like snow. Every day he sits down in a little corner, unstitches the secret pocket, takes out a ruble, and resews the pocket. The next day he does the same thing.

The days go by, and our bundles and our bedding still aren't here. The woman who helped us steal across the border has apparently deceived us. The men who almost killed us in the woods were her own guards, and now we might well have lost our belongings. My mother wrings her hands and cries. "The bedding! The pillows! How can we go to America without bedding, without pillows?"

Pinni has a plan—he's going by train to file a protest with the commander of the border post. He'll find the woman with the wig and make hash of her. He'll demand to know what happened.

But these are empty words! The commander of the border post will be of no help, nor will the protest. Teibl wouldn't let him visit that woman even if she covered our house with gold. (That's what she says.) Stealing across the border was enough for her. It was enough for all of us.

We tell everyone how we stole across the border, how we repacked our stuff, how the peasants led us and misled us and tried to murder us, and how luckily my sister-in-law Bruche has a habit of fainting and my mother screamed for help, and how the soldiers heard and began shooting, the peasants took off, and we were rescued.

That's my mother's story. My brother Elyahu tells his own version but with a different twist. Bruche interrupts and tells the very same story but also a bit differently. Teibl says Bruche doesn't remember it accurately because she fainted, and Teibl wants to tell the story from the beginning, but Pinni cuts her off and says she doesn't know anything. Let him retell the story from start to finish. Every day and to everyone, we tell the story of how we stole across the border. All who hear it shake their heads and go *tsk tsk*. They say we're lucky and should say a prayer of thanks.

C .

On this side of the border things are much better for us than at home. We don't so much as put our hands in cold water to wash. Either we stay at the inn, or we stroll around Brod. It's a pretty city. I don't know what my sister-in-law Bruche has against this city. Every day she finds some fault with it. She just doesn't like it. It's muddy; it stinks worse than at home.

One night she woke up screaming that she was being attacked. We all jumped out of bed. "Who attacked you? Bandits?"

"What bandits? Bedbugs!"

In the morning we tell the innkeeper, but he doesn't understand. When Pinni explains in German, the innkeeper insists he never heard of bedbugs. In their German country they don't see them. We probably brought them with us from home, he says. Oh, does Bruche boil over! She hates that man worse than an apostate, she says. I don't know why. He seems like a fine person to me. When he speaks and smiles, his mouth goes a little to one side. And he loves to give us advice about where to go, from whom to buy things, and from whom not. He comes along when we go shopping.

Mostly we buy clothing. Gradually we've started to dress a bit better. Our friend Pinni says it isn't nice to look like tramps. In a new city, he says, you should go out looking respectable, especially here, where things are dirt cheap. We all know this already. First he bought himself a cap, the kind they wear in Germany, and a short coat that just reaches to his knees, and a new necktie. To look at Pinni in his German outfit, you have to be stronger than iron not to break out laughing. He is tall, skinny, and nearsighted, and he hops when he walks. And then there's his big nose. My mother says he has a clown's face. My brother Elyahu says he looks like an organ grinder. Pinni says he doesn't know whether it's better to look like an organ grinder or a tramp. He means us.

My brother Elyahu claims that if he wanted, he could deck himself out like a German too. It takes no great talent to throw your money away. But we have to save it, he says, for America. Pinni says that in America we won't need money—we ourselves will be like money in the bank! Pinni carries on so long that my brother Elyahu finally buys himself a cap and a coat, and a cap and a coat for me too. The three of us go walking down the streets talking German. I'm positive that people think we're Germans. The problem is that walking behind us are the

women—my mother, Bruche, and Teibl—they don't let us out of their sight. My mother is afraid I'll wander among the Germans and get lost and the others will follow me like sheep. So we walk closely together, a clump of six attracting everyone's attention. What are they looking at?

The Germans are the greatest fools in the world, says my brother Elyahu. Whatever you tell them, they believe absolutely—except when it comes to money. Money is more important to them than it is to us. A kreuzer is holy to them. For a crown they'll sell their father, and for a gulden—God Himself!

So says Bruche, and Teibl agrees. All three women, as I've told you, are not terribly pleased with the Germans. I don't know why. I kind of like them. If we weren't going to America, I'd stay here forever and ever. Where else do you have such houses? And such good people—they'll sell you anything! Even the cows aren't the same as ours. The people probably aren't any smarter than we are, but they look more respectable. Everything here looks different.

But if you ask the women, they'll say it's better at home. They don't like a thing, even our inn, least of all the innkeeper. "They're skinning us alive," Bruche says. "They ask to be paid for a glass of warm water. They won't give you a free pinch of salt. If we don't leave here soon, we'll have to go begging from house to house." What my sister-in-law Bruche can say! Why does she call my brother Elyahu an old woman? And why does she call our friend Pinni the worst good-for-nothing? Teibl might have given her what for, but as my mother says, Teibl doesn't have a mean bone in her body. She never talks back to Bruche—none of us do. Me neither. And she really has it in for me. She calls me Leftovers or Fat Cheek Motl. I've gotten pudgy, she says, and have developed fat cheeks. I don't care one bit, but my mother won't tolerate her talking that way about my cheeks. My mother starts to cry. My brother Elyahu hates it when she cries. He says she is ruining her eyes, and with bad eyes they don't let you into America.

D.

Good news! We've heard about our things. The woman who helped us steal across the border has been put in prison. Our friend Pinni gloats—it serves her right, he says.

My mother says, “But what about my things?” Pinni says, “*Nu*, and what about *my* things?” Now that she’s in prison, the woman can’t ever return our lost belongings. What shall we do? We must travel on. Do we have a choice? My brother Elyahu goes around in a daze while my mother tries to comfort him. She tells him, “What would we have done, silly, if they had taken the money we made selling the house and murdered us besides?” Our friend Pinni agrees with her. He says that a Jew must always have faith—“It’s all for the best.” Bruche puts in a little jab—not for nothing, she says, did she name him Old Woman.

We’re getting ready to leave. We ask people how to get to America. People listen to us and make suggestions. Everyone has a different idea. One person says, “By way of Paris”; another, “By way of London.” A third insists it’s closer by way of Antwerp. They get us so confused that we don’t know which way to go. My mother is afraid of Paris—it’s too noisy. Bruche doesn’t like Antwerp—somehow the name sounds funny to her; she’s never heard anything like it. And so it will be London. Pinni says London is the best choice. He’s read many times in his geography book that London is an up-to-date city. Moses Montefiore comes from there, and Rothschild, he says, is also from London.

“Rothschild is from Paris!” says my brother Elyahu.

That’s the way they carry on. Whatever one says, the other one contradicts it. If one says day, the other says night. That’s not to say they actually fight over it—they bicker. They can bicker for an hour straight, and they stop only when they’re separated.

E .

Please excuse me for wandering off talking about the silly Germans and their crazy language. I forgot we’re going to America. Not straight to America, that is, but for now to London—and not straight to London but to Lemberg, where they say there’s a committee for emigrants. Maybe the committee will be able to help us. Are we worse off than other emigrants? Maybe—after all, we lost all our bundles and bedding. My mother is already thinking about what to tell them and how she should cry over it.

My brother Elyahu begs her, “Just don’t cry! You have to think about your eyes! Without eyes they won’t let you into America!”

He goes to pay the innkeeper. In a few minutes he comes back out looking stunned. What's wrong? The innkeeper's bill shocks him! "He charged us for everything! Six candles for the Shabbes blessings—six kreuzers! For *havdalah* blessing—four kreuzers! What *havdalah*? He, the innkeeper, said the *havdalah* while we listened, and now he's charging us four kreuzers! I ask him, 'How come four?' He says, 'If you want it to be five, let it be five.' And now he's charging us something called a commission. What kind of disease is that? And he's charging us for accompanying us when we went shopping for clothing."

Bruche springs up and claps her hands. "Mother-in-law, what did I tell you? Aren't the Germans worse than the night robbers in the forest? Our Russian hooligans are saints compared to them! Are we in Brod? No, we're in Sodom!"

Being compared with Russian hooligans doesn't offend the innkeeper as much as her comparing Brod to Sodom. He gets furious! He says the Russian hooligans were right to make pogroms on us. In fact, what they did wasn't enough. If he were the Russian czar, he'd decree that all of us be slaughtered, every one of us!

I think I already told you that our friend Pinni is a hotheaded person. He can keep quiet for a long time, but if someone says the wrong word, that person's life is in danger! Now Pinni jumps up, stretches himself out to his full height, goes straight over to the innkeeper, and shouts right into his face, "Stupid German! A curse on your ancestors!"

The words "stupid German" cost our friend Pinni dearly—the innkeeper presents him with two strong slaps that make sparks fly. But it has its effect. All of Brod comes running, and things get quite lively. I love it when things get lively.

That day we flee to Lemberg.

XV

CRACOW AND LEMBERG

A.

Lemberg, you must know, is not at all like Brod. First of all, it's clean, spacious, and attractive. It takes your breath away! True, it has some streets like Brod's, where in summer you have to wear high galoshes and hold your nose. Then again, there's a garden in the center of the city where you can stroll if you don't mind the goats. It's free for anyone. On Shabbes Jews wearing tall fur hats walk openly on the streets, and no one says a word.

My mother says the difference between Brod and Lemberg is like day and night. My brother Elyahu says he's sorry that Brod is closer to the border than Lemberg. It should have been the other way around. Our friend Pinni explains that Lemberg is better than Brod because it is located farther from the border and closer to America.

"How do you figure? Where is Lemberg, and where is America?" Pinni remarks that when it comes to cities, my brother Elyahu would do well to learn from him, because he's studied geography.

My brother Elyahu retorts, "If you've studied geography, then tell me, where is the committee?"

"Which committee?"

"The Emigrant Committee!"

"Smart aleck! What does a committee have to do with geography?"

"If you know so much about geography, you should know everything," says my brother Elyahu, and we try to find out about the Emigrant Committee. Whoever we ask doesn't know—a strange city.

"They know but they won't tell us!" states my sister-in-law Bruche. Nothing ever pleases her. She finds fault with Lemberg too: the streets are too broad. That's like complaining the bride is too beautiful. Teibl has another gripe about Lemberg. Back home, whenever we ate something sour, we'd say, "It's so sour you can see as far as Cracow and Lemberg." Or if someone was slapped hard, we'd say, "He saw Cracow and Lemberg."

In short, these women are like that. Nothing ever satisfies them!

B .

Finally we find the committee. It's in a tall building with a red roof. First we have to wait outside for quite a while. Then they open the doors, and we're sent upstairs, where we find a lot of people—mostly our Russians, who are called emigrants. Almost all of them are hungry and are carrying nursing babies. Those who don't have nursing babies are hungry too. They're told to come back tomorrow. Tomorrow they will tell them to come back the next day. My mother gets to know many women. Every one of them has a different tragic story. Comparing her troubles with theirs, she says, it turns out she is lucky! Many of them are fleeing from pogroms. Their stories are horrors! They're all going to America, but none of them have any means. Many of them have been sent back. Some are given work. A few are sent to Cracow, where, they say, the real committee is. What about the committee here? No one seems to know. They tell them to come back tomorrow, and they come. Where is the committee? The committee is right here. Who is the committee? They haven't any idea!

A tall man with a pockmarked face and kind, smiling eyes comes in.

“That's a member of the committee. He's a doctor.”

The doctor sits down on a chair. One emigrant after another approaches him and appeals to him about something, gesticulating anxiously. The doctor hears them out and answers that he is only one person. There is nothing he can do to help. We have, he says, a committee of thirty-odd people, but he is the only one who comes. What can I, only one person, do? he says.

The emigrants don't want to hear that he is only one person. They can't stay here any longer. They've already spent whatever they had. They must be given tickets to America or be sent back home. The doctor claims that all he can do is send them to Cracow if that's what they want. There's another committee there. Maybe that committee will be able to help them. The emigrants say that in the meantime they haven't enough to get them through the day. The doctor takes out his purse and hands them a coin. The emigrants look at the coin and leave.

New emigrants arrive. They say they are dying of hunger.

“What do you want of me?” the poor doctor pleads.

“We want to eat!” say the emigrants.

“They've brought me something to eat. You eat it.” The doctor with the kind, smiling eyes points to the lunch they've brought him: coffee and white rolls. He really means it—he gives them his lunch. What can he do, one person alone?

The emigrants thank him. They say they aren't asking for themselves but for their poor children.

“*Nu*, bring the children here!” The doctor winks to us with his kind, smiling eyes. “What do you want?” he asks us.

C.

My mother tells him our story from the beginning, how she had a husband, a cantor, who was sick all his life. He died and left her a widow with two children, an older one and another barely an infant (she meant me). She married off the older one, who fell into a gold mine. The gold ran out, but the hole remained. His father-in-law went bankrupt, and her son will be conscripted.

“Mama, why are you rattling on like that?” My brother Elyahu starts to tell the same story but in his own way. “Conscription or no conscription—we’re going, you see, to America. These other people are coming with us.” He points to the rest of us. “We had to cross the border. Well, we did get to the border, you see, but without passports, because we’re both eligible for conscription—”

“Allow me!” Our friend Pinni shoves my brother Elyahu aside and tells the same story but in a slightly different way. Though Elyahu is my brother, I must admit that Pinni speaks a lot better. He doesn’t keep saying “you see,” like my brother Elyahu. And he knows Russian very well. Many of the words he uses are beautiful Russian words! Many of them I do not understand, but they are beautiful.

Our friend Pinni begins with many elegant Russian words: “I shall briefly outline the entire situation so that you will be able to formulate an opinion. We are going to America, not so much to avoid conscription as for the sake of independence and civilization, because we are stifled at home, not only by lack of progress but even by lack of air, as Turgenev says. The Jewish problems and pogroms, the constitution and so on, arose, as Buckle says in his *History of Civilization . . .*”

Our friend Pinni is only just warming up, but the doctor interrupts him, takes a sip of coffee, and says with a smile, “Tell me what you want.”

My brother Elyahu steps forward and says to Pinni, “Why don’t you ever get to the point?”

Our friend Pinni's feelings are really hurt—he moves off to the side, gets tangled up in his own feet, and says resentfully, “Do you talk better? Go on, you talk!”

And my brother Elyahu goes up to the table and tells the story.

D.

“We got to the border, you see, and started negotiating with the agents, but as you know, they're big bastards. They fought over us, scrambling, denouncing, playing tricks, you see, until a woman, a proper lady, honest, pious, and kosher, took us in hand. She set a price, you see, and undertook to move us all, first us and then our belongings. She provided us with two peasants as guards, you see.”

“So soon? Look how quick he got to the peasants,” my sister-in-law shoots out. She pushes my brother Elyahu aside and tells the story in a different way: how the woman told us to walk and walk till we saw a hill. There we were to turn left and walk and walk till we came to another hill. After a right turn we would reach a tavern. One of us should go in and find two peasants drinking brandy and say the word *chaimove* to them. They would know what we meant and would take us through the woods. Luckily I have a habit of fainting.

The doctor says, “My dear women, I also have a habit of fainting. Tell me, what do you want?”

My mother steps forward, and she and the doctor have the following conversation:

MAMA: I'll tell you in a few words. They stole our things. DOCTOR: What things?

MAMA: The bedding—two feather quilts, four large pillows, and four more large pillows and three more small pillows.

DOCTOR: That's all?

MAMA: And three blankets, two old ones, one new, some clothing and a silk head scarf and . . .

DOCTOR: I'm not asking about that. Nothing else bad happened to you?

MAMA: What more do you want?

DOCTOR: I mean, what else do you need?

MAMA: Bedding.

DOCTOR: Is that all?

MAMA: Isn't that enough?

DOCTOR: Do you have tickets? Do you have money?

MAMA: I can't complain, but we have steamship and train tickets.

DOCTOR: You should thank God! I envy you. Let's change places. Don't think I'm making a joke. I'm saying this seriously. Take my breakfast, take my emigrants, take my committee, and give me your tickets, and I will go to America this day. What can I accomplish here, one person with so many poor people?

We don't know what to think! But we all agree not to waste any more time. "Too bad, a waste of expenses," my brother Elyahu says. "Let's better go to Cracow. Lots of emigrants are going to Cracow, so let's imagine we're also emigrants."

"Since we've already seen Lemberg, we should also see Cracow," agrees our friend Pinni.

"That way we'll get to see both—Cracow *and* Lemberg," says his wife Teibl.

Goodbye! We're going to Cracow.

XVI

AMONG THE EMIGRANTS

A.

If you ever go to America, be sure you travel only with emigrants. Things will be easier. When you come to a city, you don't need to look for an inn because a

room has been reserved for you. That's what a committee is created for. A committee sees to it that everything is ready for you.

When we arrive that first night in Cracow, we are herded into a large place called a dormitory. There we wait till morning, when someone comes from the committee and writes down all our names. My mother has misgivings about giving our names. She's afraid it might have something to do with conscription. Who can tell? The emigrants make fun of her. What do Polish Jews have to do with Russian conscription? Then they bring us to a large hall in a big inn filled with many cots and many more emigrants. "It looks like our poorhouse," my mother declares. And my sister-in-law Bruche says, "Mother-in-law, we'd better travel on."

I once told you that the women never like anything, and find fault with everything. They take a dislike to Cracow from the first. Even my brother Elyahu is unhappy with Cracow. He says Cracow is not Lemberg. At least in Lemberg there are Jews, but in Cracow there are no Jews. Actually, there are Jews, but they're very strange Jews, he says. "They're half-breeds—half Jews and half Poles. They twist their mustaches and put on airs!" But our friend Pinni contradicts him. He says that there's more "civilization" here. I'd like to know what this "civilization" is that our friend Pinni likes so much.

B.

Things are going well at the inn that the committee has arranged for us. What I mean is, it's not that good, but it's lively. You're always meeting new emigrants. We sit together, we eat together, and we tell one another stories. Oh, what marvelous stories! Miracles and wonders—miracles about the pogroms, miracles about the conscription, and miracles about the border. Everyone tells a different story about agents. "Who was your agent at the border, a redhead or a brunette?" one asks. The other one answers, "Not a redhead or a brunette—just a plain thief!"

Naturally we tell them about our own miracle. They listen, shake their heads, and cluck. One tall emigrant with fierce eyes and cotton in his ears asks, "What did she look like, that woman? Was she pious and kosher, with a wig on her head?"

We tell him our woman was pious and kosher and wore a wig on her head. He leaps up and says to his wife, “Sarah! Do you hear that? It’s the same woman!”

“May she and all agents come down with the cholera, God in heaven!” His wife Sarah says, then tells us how the woman with the wig swindled them, robbed them from head to toe, and tried to sell them steamship tickets to America.

At these words a tailor, a handsome man with dark eyes and a pale face, jumps up. “Steamship tickets? Let me tell you a story about steamship tickets,” he says.

The dark-eyed, pale-faced tailor is about to tell his story when another emigrant, named Topolinski, stands up and says he has a better story about steamship tickets. This ticket company in his town was selling tickets from Libaveh to America. They cheated a young man of some sixty rubles and handed him a fake ticket with a red eagle printed on it. The young man arrived in Libaveh, intending to board the ship. He showed his fake ticket with the red eagle on it. “What’s this? Forget about it! It’s not a steamship ticket, it’s a good-luck card.”

C .

The steamship ticket stories begin to bore me. I like emigrants but I’d rather be with this boy my age, the son of emigrants whom I met when we were riding in the wagon. His name is Kopl, and he has a split lip he got from a fall. He was climbing on a ladder and fell onto a woodpile. He swears it didn’t hurt at all but that it bled a lot. It wasn’t enough that he split his lip—he was beaten by his father. The tall man with the fierce eyes and cotton in his ears is his father, and the woman named Sarah is his mother. They were very rich not too long ago, before the pogrom. I ask him what a pogrom is. The emigrants are always talking about them, but what they are I do not know.

Kopl says to me, “You don’t know what a pogrom is? Then you’re just a little baby! Nowadays pogroms happen everywhere. A pogrom starts from nothing, but once it starts, it lasts three days.”

“What is it?” I say. “A fair?”

“Some fair! They shatter windows! They smash furniture! They rip pillows! Feathers fly like snow!”

“What for?”

“What for?! Because! A pogrom isn’t just on houses. They destroy shops! They throw the merchandise out onto the streets, they break everything up, scatter everything, pour kerosene over it all, and set it on fire.”

“Go on! Really?”

“Do you think I’m making it up? Afterward, when there’s nothing left to wreck, they go from house to house with axes, iron rods, and sticks while the police follow behind. They sing and whistle and shout, ‘Hey, fellows, let’s beat up the Jews!’ And they beat and kill and murder, stab with knives.”

“Who?”

“What do you mean who? Jews!”

“Why?”

“What a question! It’s a pogrom!”

“And if it’s a pogrom—what of it?”

“Go away! You’re a little calf! I don’t want to talk to you!” Kopl pushes me away and thrusts his hands into his pockets, like a grown-up. I’m upset because Kopl is acting so superior, but I keep quiet. Just wait, big shot, someday you’ll have to come to me! I’m thinking, and let a few minutes pass. Then I approach Kopl again and strike up a conversation, not about pogroms but about other things. Does he speak German? I ask him.

“Who can’t speak German?” He laughs. “German is Yiddish, after all.”

“It is? If you know German, then tell me how you say *horseradish* in German.”

Kopl laughs even harder. He can barely get out a word. “What do you mean, how do you say *horseradish*? Horseradish is horseradish!”

“That means you don’t know!”

“Then how do you say *horseradish*?”

Actually I’ve forgotten how you say *horseradish* in German. I used to know, but I forget. I ask my brother Elyahu, “How do you say *horseradish* in German?” He says he’ll give me a lesson that’ll make my teeth rattle. My brother Elyahu is obviously angry. Whenever he has to take money out of his

pocket, he gets angry. Our friend Pinni laughs at him. They bicker. I find a spot on the ground among the bundles where I lie down and sleep.

D .

In Cracow we get nowhere. We didn't even get to the committee. The emigrants told us it was a waste of time to go to the committee—they'd just give us the runaround. First they write down your ages, and then they send a doctor to examine you. Then they tell you to wait. Then they tell you to come back. You come back, and they ask you why you came. You say they told you to come. Then they ask you why you want to go to America. "Where else should we go?" you ask. "Where is it written that you must go at all?" they say. You tell them about the pogroms, and they say, "It's your own fault."

They give you an example: "Just yesterday a young boy, one of you emigrants, stole a roll from the market." You say, "Maybe he was hungry." They say, "Just the other day a man and his wife, emigrants, got into an argument in the middle of the street and they had to call the police." You say, "The wife was right. She recognized her husband, who had thrown her out of the house and wanted to run away to America. By accident she spotted him and caught him.

He wanted to tear himself away and flee, so she made a loud fuss." They say, "Why do you emigrants mostly go around in rags?" You say, "We're poor. Give us clothing, and we won't go around in rags." In short, they give lectures, but not a penny.

So the emigrants complain to us. They say we're lucky that till now we haven't been at the mercy of the committee. My mother says she wouldn't have gone to them if not for the bedding. If we hadn't been robbed at the border, she'd feel like a queen, she says. I remember her yellow silk kerchief, in which she truly looked like a queen. My mother says nothing pains her as much as the loss of the bedding.

"What will we do in America without bedding?" She wrings her hands and cries. My brother Elyahu hears her and shouts, "Again? You're crying again? We're getting close to America—you have to take care of your eyes!"

Are we really close to America? Not at all! We still have a long way to go! I don't exactly know where we're going. The emigrants talk about cities like

Hamburg, Vienna, Paris, London, and Liver-pool. Everybody says they wish Hamburg would burn down this very day. Hamburg, they say, is a Sodom. Jews are driven into bathhouses to be cleaned up and are treated worse than prisoners. Monsters such as they have in Hamburg, you won't find anywhere else. Meanwhile we're getting ready to go to Vienna. There, they say, we'll find a real committee!

Committee or no committee, all I know is we're going to Vienna. Have you ever heard of it? Wait till we get to Vienna, and I'll tell you everything that's going on there.

XVII

VIENNA IS A CITY AND GOD IS A FATHER

A.

"Vienna is a real city!" proclaims my brother Elyahu, and our friend Pinni chimes in, "And what a city! A city among cities!"

Even the women, who never like anything, allow that Vienna is a city. In honor of Vienna my mother dresses up in her holiday silk kerchief. My sister-in-law Bruche decks herself out as if for a wedding. She puts on her Shabbes dress, fancy wig, and long dangling earrings. When you add in her red-freckled face, she looks like a ginger cat in a black shawl.

Have you ever seen a ginger cat in a black shawl? I have. Our neighbor Pessi's children love to play theater and dress the cat up in different costumes. The cat, as I once mentioned, has a funny nickname: Feige-Leah the Beadle's Wife. They once dressed her up in a skullcap that they tied under her chin and then let her run loose. To add a touch of beauty, they attached a feather duster on her tail. The skullcap was too big and fell over her eyes, and she couldn't tolerate the feather duster. Feige-Leah the Beadle's Wife went crazy, scrambling up the walls and doing terrible damage to the neighbors' property. Oh my, did those children get punished!

And worst of all, Vashti—that is, Hershl with the birthmark on his forehead. What a strange boy that Vashti is! No matter how much he's beaten, it's like beating a wall. I miss him more than anyone! Maybe we'll see him in America. We've heard that our neighbor Pessi and her husband Moishe the bookbinder and their whole gang are leaving for America. At first she put us down for going to such a far-off place, and now she herself is going there.

Everyone is going to America. This is what our in-law Yoneh the baker writes us. He's also going to America. He's already at the border—not the border we stole across, but another border. Our border isn't safe. At our border they rob you of your bedding. At other borders they also take your bedding, but they don't attack you with sharp knives in the woods as they did us. Emigrants tell us that at some borders they strip you bare and rob you of everything. But they don't beat you. They didn't beat us either, but they wanted to. We almost died of fright. Luckily someone fired that shot.

I already told you how we stole across the border, but we've long forgotten it. We hate to remember things like that. True, the women still to this day talk about the miracles we experienced then, but the men interrupt and don't let them finish the story. They tell it much better. Our friend Pinni says he's got to write an article for the newspapers. He even wrote a song about it. I think I once told you that Pinni writes songs. The song about the border starts like this:

Radzivil is a town made to order
For stealing across the border.
But first they'll steal you blind,
Whatever you hide they'll find.
They'll promise to get you through
With help from a murderous crew.
You're lucky to cross at all
Without a blow, a bruising fall,
A kick to remember to your butt.

That's just the beginning, says Pinni. It gets even better! He wrote a piece about Brod too, he says, and about Cracow and Lemberg, and everything in rhyme. Pinni is a master of rhyme. He rhymes everything. He also wrote a song about his wife Teibl. I know it by heart:

My wife's a beauty,
Her name is Teibl.
She's quite a cutie,
I'll swear on any Bible.
May what I say not be a bother—
One thing is wrong,
Makes my days last long:
She won't go back to her father.

What do you say to that little song? You should see how Teibl pouts! (She has a habit of pouting.) My sister-in-law Bruche comes to her defense. She calls Pinni a fool. My mother calls him a *shlimazel*. They can't stand it when he writes songs. My brother Elyahu, on the other hand, envies him. He says that in America writing rhymes and songs is a business. He says that in America Pinni will do well in that business. They'll make him rich. In America there are a lot of Yiddish journals and newspapers. Pinni says that he knows he'll do well in America. He feels that he was made for America and that America was made for him. He can't wait till we're on the ship sailing over the ocean. But in the meantime we're still on dry land in Vienna.

B .

What are we doing in Vienna? Nothing. We're strolling through the streets. What streets! What houses! You should see the shopwindow—mirrors, not windows! And the wares on display—toys, clothes, dishes, jewelry! We stop at the windows and try to guess how much things cost. We men do the figuring, and the women wish they owned half of the things in this city. Pinni laughs and says, "You'd do well to wish for a tenth. That'd be more than enough."

“What do you care if they wish for half? Do you begrudge them?” my brother Elyahu says and twists his beard. Since we began our journey to America, my brother Elyahu’s beard has grown quite a bit, but in a strange way, sort of like a broom. I’d love to draw it on paper. I once drew a picture of Pinni on paper and one of my sister-in-law Bruche with chalk on the table. Did I get a lecture for that! Bruche saw it and recognized herself as if in a mirror. She called my brother Elyahu over, and he *really* gave it to me! If not for my mother, he’d have made my life miserable. He always hits me when he sees me drawing. I’ve loved drawing since I was a child. At first I used to draw with a piece of black coal on the white walls, for which they hit me, and afterward with chalk on the door, for which they also hit me. Now I draw with a pencil on paper—and they still hit me.

“Are you drawing figures again?”

They don’t hit me as much for drawing as for sculpting. I have a habit of sculpting little pigs out of soft bread. When my brother Elyahu sees me do this, he slaps my fingers.

Our friend Pinni sticks up for me. “What do you have against him? Let him sculpt, let him draw!” he says. “Maybe he’ll be a painter someday!”

My brother Elyahu gets outraged. “What? A painter? A smearer? He’ll smear churches, whitewash roofs? Go around with paint-spattered hands like a coachman with axle grease? I’d much rather he sang in a chorus for a cantor. When we get to America, God willing, I’m going to place him with a cantor. He has an excellent soprano.”

“Why not place him with a worker? In America everyone is a worker. In America everyone works,” our friend Pinni asks.

My mother jumps all over him. “A worker? May my enemies not live to see Peysi’s son become a worker!” She’s about to start crying.

Pinni defends himself. “What a strange woman you are! We learn in the Gemorah that the sage Rabbi Yochanan was a shoemaker. The sage Rabbi Yitzchak was a smithy. Do you need more examples? My uncle is a clockmaker, and my father is a mechanic!”

Pinni thinks he’s made things better, but in truth he’s made them much worse. My mother doesn’t stop crying. “My husband was a pious man, a cantor. Did he have to leave this world while still young in order for his youngest son to be,

God forbid, a shoemaker or a tailor—and in America to boot?”

“You’re crying again? You’ve forgotten that in America you need healthy eyes!” my brother Elyahu says. My mother stops crying immediately.

C.

I don’t care what I become in America—just let me get there. (I’m so eager to get there!) I promise myself that in America I’ll learn how to do three things—swim, write, and smoke cigars. I can do all those things right now, but not as well as they can in America. I know I could be an expert swimmer, but at home we had nowhere to swim. In our pond it was impossible—if you lay down, you were right in the mud and your feet stuck out of the water.

Some pond! In America, they say, there’s an ocean. There, if you lie down in the water on a tube, the water will carry you as far as the eye can see.

I can write too, though no one has taught me. I copy the letters from the prayer book. The letters I copy are hard to recognize. I don’t really write—I draw. I’d love to write fast, but I don’t know how. In America, they say, they write fast. Everything is done quickly, in a hurry. Americans have no time. That’s what I overheard the emigrants say. I know almost everything about America, even before I’ve been there. They ride under the ground, and they “make a living.” How they do it I don’t know, but I’ll soon find out. I learn very quickly. If I see a person just once, I can imitate him in every detail. I once imitated our friend Pinni, the way he walks with a hop, the way he peers with his nearsighted eyes, and the way he speaks as if slurping hot noodles. My sister-in-law Bruche was holding her sides and my mother was crying tears of laughter.

But my brother Elyahu hates it. He doesn’t let me do anything. He’s a strange one, my brother Elyahu! He loves me—and yet he hits me, he makes my life a living hell. When she sees it, my mother doesn’t let him hit me. She says, “Wait till you have your own children, and then you can hit them.”

Let a stranger lay a finger on me though, and my brother Elyahu will take his eyes out. Once an emigrant’s son “did a governor” on me. Do you know what that is? I’ll teach you. You wet your thumb with spit, and then you poke it hard into someone’s side, right between the ribs and the belly, and then they see stars. The boy who did a governor on me is about eleven with fat cheeks. But did he

have a pair of paws—may they wither! He wanted to be friends with me and asked me my name. I said, “Motl.” He said, “*Motl Kapotl, drubl drutl, Yosef Sutl, eretz kanotl.*” I said, “What does that mean?” He said, “That means you are a sucker even though my name is also Motl. Maybe you’d like a governor?” I said, “Why not?” He said, “Come up a little closer and I’ll show you.” I did, and he showed me. I dropped to the ground. My mother saw it and started to scream. My brother Elyahu came running and gave Motl something to remember him by!

From that time on we were friends. Motl taught me, besides the governor, lots of things—for instance, ventriloquism. Do you know what that is? It’s impossible to explain—you have to be born to it. You keep your mouth shut, not moving any part of your face, and you throw your voice, bark like a dog, or grunt like a pig, so that everyone will look under the table to find the animal. I scared my family many times. As you know, my sister-in-law Bruche faints. Everybody rushed to look under the table and under the beds. I even bent down looking for the dog while continuing to bark. It was, I tell you, pure comedy! But when my brother Elyahu finally figured out it was coming from me, he really gave it to me! From that time on I quit the art of ventriloquism.

D .

We would have left Vienna long ago if not for the Alliance. What this Alliance is I cannot rightly say. I just hear people talking about it. Alliance! Alliance! All the emigrants are furious at the Alliance. They say it does nothing. It has no pity on people, and it hates Jews. Every day my brother Elyahu and our friend Pinni go to the Alliance and come back as if from a steam bath.

“May it burn up!” says Elyahu.

“May it burn like a candle!” says Pinni.

“I should go and have a talk with the Alliance.” My mother takes me by the hand, and we all go off to the Alliance: my mother and I, Elyahu and Pinni, Bruche and Teibl. I picture the Alliance with a beard, a long caftan, and a red nose. Why a red nose I don’t know.

We walk and walk! My sister-in-law Bruche says she hopes the Alliance has the same sticking pains in his right side as she has in her left. But if he did, he wouldn’t have stuck himself away who knows where at the other end of the city!

With great difficulty we finally arrive. He lives in a house—may all Jews have a house like that. But it doesn't have a courtyard. Vienna doesn't believe in courtyards. Vienna loves enormous windows and huge doors, but they keep the doors locked. "Are they afraid someone will rob them?" my sister-in-law Bruche says. Aha, now she's found fault with Vienna too! It irritates her that when you come to a house, you have to ring a doorbell first. Do I mind if you have to ring? So long as they open the door!

But the Alliance isn't opening the door so quickly. You can ring as long as you please—he has time. We aren't the only ones. There are mobs of emigrants waiting to see the Alliance. The emigrants watch us ringing the bell. "Ring some more—maybe they'll open the door, maybe you'll have better luck." They laugh. They seem in good spirits. More men, women, and children keep arriving, crowding around the door. I love a crowd. If not for the children crying and the mothers scolding them and trying to shut them up, it'd be great.

Thank God, the door opens. The crowd lunges forward in a crush. Luckily someone appears at the door, hatless, red-faced, clean shaven, and pushes us, one by one, back onto the street. He pushes one woman with a child so hard that if not for me and my brother Elyahu, she'd be picking up her teeth. Still and all, she does three flips. After a long time all of us, one at a time, are allowed back into the house. And then the real picnic begins! Everyone wants to speak first and shoves toward the tables.

At the tables sit three hatless people with clean-shaven faces, laughing and smoking cigars. Which of them is the Alliance, I can't tell. My mother doesn't know either. She pleads, "Tell me, which one of you here is the Alliance? A terrible thing happened to me. They stole all my bedding at the border and almost murdered me and my children. Here they are, the poor orphans. My husband died young, he was a cantor all his life—"

That's all she's allowed to say. One of the men grabs her shawl and pushes her toward the door. He speaks a language hard to understand. My mother refuses to step aside until she's satisfied. "Why are you talking to me in German?" she says. "Talk to me in our language, and I'll pour out my bitter heart to you. But just tell me which one of you here is the Alliance?"

"Mother-in-law! Listen to me, let's go," says my sister-in-law Bruche. "God has taken us this far without the Alliance and without Vienna, and He'll probably take us farther. God is a father."

My mother replies, “You’re right, my child! Come, let us go! Vienna may be a city, but God is a father.”

XVIII

WONDERS OF ANTWERP

A.

Have you ever heard of a city name like Antwerp? There is such a city, and that’s where we’re going. Why Antwerp? Because my brother Elyahu’s father-in-law Yoneh the baker is going to America through Antwerp. When my sister-in-law Bruche hears that her father is in Antwerp, she moves heaven and earth to have us go there too. Before, she wouldn’t hear of Antwerp—she didn’t like the name. Now she’s fallen in love with Antwerp!

Our friend Pinni says he'll have to separate from us. He'd rather go from Vienna straight to London. Something is drawing him to London. London, he says, reminds him of America: Englishmen, blond hair, checkered pants. It's a different world altogether! My sister-in-law Bruche replies, "Go with our blessing to your Englishmen with the checkered hair and blond pants, and we will go to America through Antwerp."

Pinni's wife Teibl gets all puffed up like a turkey. I told you that for any reason at all, she puffs up and stops talking. Pinni asks her, "Why are you angry?" She says she hates Englishmen. Pinni says to her, "Do you know any? Where have you ever seen an Englishman?" She says, "So, and you, where have you ever seen an Englishman?"

So we are all going to America through Antwerp after all. I don't care if we go through Hotzenplotz, so long as we get to America. Pinni and I are more eager to get there than the others. We know it'll be wonderful there. Pinni complains to my brother Elyahu, "We are going and going—and not getting anywhere." Elyahu responds, "*Nu*, who's holding you back? Go! Run! Fly!" Pinni says, "How can I fly when your mother wants to meet with every committee in the world?"

When my mother hears this, she says to Pinni, "If you're so smart, tell me how to get to America without bedding?" Pinni is speechless, and he and Elyahu make up.

Our friend Pinni just can't separate from us. The women can't live without one another either. Oh, they squabble a lot, they needle one another and almost come to blows, but they soon make up. If not for my mother, my sister-in-law Bruche and Pinni's wife Teibl wouldn't be friends. They have flare-ups every day, usually my sister-in-law's doing. She admits she's a tinderbox. When a bad mood hits her, she'll throw mud at anyone. But then in a moment she gets so soft, you can use her as a compress.

Bruche has been sparring with me ever since the wedding. She knows I don't like her, but she thinks I laugh at her. She only imagines it. But if I so much as look at her, she imagines I'm laughing at her. I told you I like to draw and that my brother Elyahu hits me for it. Once I drew a foot, an enormous foot. I drew it with chalk on the ground. You should have seen the fuss people made! Bruche claimed it was her foot. Why would I draw her foot? She's touchy about her feet because no one else has such big ones! She wears size thirteen galoshes. You

should see those galoshes!

She tattled to my brother Elyahu, and he erupted as usual. “You’re drawing figures again? You’re up to your old tricks, drawing people again?”

From one foot it becomes a whole person, and from one person—people! My family can drive you crazy! I must admit that I love to draw figures more and more. An emigrant’s son gave me a colored pencil, the same boy who showed me how to do a governor and to do ventriloquism. I already told you about him. His name is also Motl. They call him Big Motl and me Little Motl. We’ve become good friends in a special way. After he gave me the pencil on the train, I gave him a drawing I’d made of him. It looked just like him, down to the fat cheeks. I made him promise not to show it to anyone, because if my brother Elyahu found out, I’d never hear the end of it. Don’t you know he went straight to my brother and stuck the drawing in front of his face?

“This has to be Motl’s work! Where is he, that figure-maker?” My brother went looking for me, but he couldn’t find me. I was hiding behind my mother, choking with laughter. There is no better place in the world to hide than behind my mother!

B .

Thank God we are now in Antwerp. We were bounced and jounced along the way and arrived all worn-out. But we made it! What can I say? This is quite a city! It doesn’t compare with Vienna, which is much bigger and maybe prettier and has more people. But Antwerp is as clean as can be. Why would that surprise anyone? They wash the streets, they polish the pavements, and they scrub the houses. I’ve seen for myself how they scrub them with soap—but not everywhere. For example, at the inns where all the emigrants stay, it’s the way it always was, which means they’re muddy and smoky, wet and slippery, crowded and noisy. In other words, they’re lively and exciting—excellent, just the way I like it. Our in-law Yoneh the baker hasn’t arrived yet, and neither has our neighbor Pessi and her gang. They’re still traveling, working their way through Germany. “Germany is Sodom!” say the emigrants, as they relate frightful stories. Our misfortune, with the bedding stolen at the border, is nothing compared to the misfortunes that the other emigrants tell us about.

At the inn we get to know a woman from Mezhbizh who is traveling alone. She's not a widow—her husband is already in America, and she's on her way to meet him. For a full year she's been dragging around with her two children. She's been everywhere—there's not a city she's overlooked. She's fought pitched battles with every committee, and finally, after much trouble, she wound up in Antwerp. She wants to board a ship, but they won't let her. Do you think it's because she has bad eyes? God forbid—they're strong and healthy. But she is a little touched in the head. When you talk to her, she speaks like a normal person, but every now and then she says something you have to laugh at. For example, you ask her where her husband is, and she'll say, "In America." "What's he doing there?" She says, "He is the czar there." So you say, "How can a Jew be a czar?" And she says in America it's possible. What do you say to that?

Another bug has gotten into her head: she won't eat! She tells us not to eat either, not to touch any dairy, because the dairy is not kosher. My mother asks her, "And how about the meat?" and she says the meat here is neither meat nor dairy. We all break out laughing, except for my mother, who'd rather cry. "It's shameful to laugh at her," she says, and bursts into tears.

"Again! You haven't cried for a while! You want all of us to be sent back home on account of your eyes?" says my brother Elyahu, and in a split second my mother's tears dry up.

My mother pities the woman's two poor children more than she pities the woman. I don't know why. The children seem really happy! When their mother talks nonsense, they giggle. I get to know them pretty well. They tell me the committees want to send them home, but their mother won't go. She wants to go to America, to their father—the czar (hee hee hee!). The committees trick her and tell her they're sending her by train to America (hee hee hee!). They convince her that a train goes from here straight to America (hee hee hee!).

C .

The wonders of Antwerp are not to be described! Every day new people arrive, most of them with bad eyes. They call it trachoma. America doesn't let in people with trachoma. You can have a thousand sicknesses, you can be crippled, mute, and who knows what else, and you can get in, but not if you have trachoma.

How do you get trachoma? You just do. You have no idea where you got it from. That's what a girl here in Antwerp told me.

Her name is Goldele. She's my age, maybe a year older. I'll tell you a nice story about Goldele. We met at the Ezra. You probably don't know what the Ezra is, so I'll explain. The Ezra in Antwerp is like the Alliance in Vienna—it's created for the emigrants' benefit. The difference is that Alliance is a man's name but Ezra sounds like a woman's. You can tell because you call the Alliance a "he" and the Ezra a "she." That makes it easy to figure out who's who.

Anyhow, as soon as we arrived in Antwerp, we went straight to the Ezra, which is really very different from the Alliance. The Ezra throws people out but the Alliance doesn't. A girl named Fräulein Zaichik sits there and writes everything down. You can go to her whenever you want and talk your heart out to her as much as you want. Everything you say, she enters in a book. She's a very nice girl. She asked me my name and gave me a candy. But I'll tell you more about Fräulein Zaichik another time.

Now I want to tell you about Goldele. She comes from Kutneh and arrived here last year with her parents, sisters, and brothers. It was Succos, after the High Holidays, and they were going to have a celebration that all Jews would envy. It wasn't going to be anything extravagant, and they'd been knocked around like all the emigrants—but they had steamship tickets to America for the whole family, and they were going to leave on Succos. They were well dressed. Each of them had been given two shirts and shoes without holes. Now a year later all she has left is one shirt and no shoes at all. If not for Fräulein Zaichik, she says, she would go barefoot. Fräulein Zaichik gave her a pair of her own shoes, still in good shape. She showed them to me. They were fine, but a little too big for her.

Well, Succos came. It was time for them to board the ship. Goldele's parents were told they all had to pay a visit to the doctor. The doctor examined them and found they were all strong and healthy and could go to America. But she, Goldele, couldn't go because she had trachoma. At first they didn't grasp what that meant. Then it sank in. It meant that all of them could go to America but that Goldele would have to stay in Antwerp. They wept and wailed. Her mother fainted three times. Her father insisted on staying here with her, but it wasn't possible—that would have meant they all lost their steamship tickets. So they decided that they would all go to America but that she, Goldele, would stay

behind until her trachoma cleared up.

Now almost a year later it's still not cleared up. Fräulein Zaichik says her eyes aren't healing because she cries constantly. But Goldele says there's another reason—it's on account of bluestone salve! Every time she goes to the doctor, he smears her eyes with the same bluestone salve that he uses on all the other patients. If she could afford to buy a different salve, she would have been cured long ago.

"And what about your parents?" I ask her.

"They're in America. They're making a living. Almost every month I get a letter from them. Come look—can you read? Read them to me!"

She takes a pack of letters from her bosom and gives them to me to read aloud. I would have been glad to, but I can't read handwriting. If they were printed, I could have read them. She laughs at me and says a boy is not a girl. A boy needs to know everything!

I'm afraid she's right. Ah, how I wish I could read handwriting! Ah, how I envy my friend Big Motl because he can read and write. Goldele has Big Motl read her the letters from America, and Big Motl zips right through them. The letters are written in the same style and in almost the same words:

"Dearest Goldele, darling Goldele, long life to you! When we in America remember that our child was torn from our arms and left on your own in a strange land among strangers, we cannot bear our lives. Day and night we weep and wail for our bright star that was taken away right before our eyes. . . ." And so on.

Big Motl reads, and Goldele cries and wipes her eyes. Fräulein Zaichik sees this and scolds us for making her cry. She tells Goldele she's ruining what's left of her eyes! Goldele answers her with a laugh, and more tears pour from her eyes.

"The doctor is ruining my eyes with his bluestone salve worse than I am with my crying."

We say goodbye to Goldele, and I promise I'll see her tomorrow at the same time.

"God willing!" Goldele responds, making a pious face like an old woman. And both of us, Little Motl and Big Motl, go for a walk in Antwerp.

D.

I, Little Motl, and my friend Big Motl are not alone. We have another friend, a boy of thirteen named Mendl. He was also left behind in Antwerp on the way to America, not on account of his eyes but for something else. His parents lost him along the way, somewhere in Germany. As he tells it, his family was surviving on herring, which gave him heartburn. He jumped off the train for a moment at a station for a drink of water, but the train left without him, and he was stuck without a ticket, without a kopek, and without a shirt on his back. Because he didn't know the language, he pretended to be mute. The committee took him everywhere to see if anyone could recognize him. Then he spied a party of Jewish emigrants. He approached them and told them his story. They took pity on him and brought him along with them to Antwerp, where he managed to reach the Ezra. The Ezra wrote a letter to America trying to locate his parents.

Now he's waiting for an answer and a steamship ticket, or rather a half-price ticket, because he's young. He's not really that young, but he acts young. He's probably a bar mitzvah, though he doesn't put on tefillin. He doesn't have any. When the emigrants found out that Mendl was thirteen and didn't have tefillin, they made a fuss: "Why doesn't someone see to it that he has tefillin?" To which Mendl said, "Why doesn't someone see to it that I have boots?" An emigrant with keen eyes reprimanded him, "Oh you ungrateful boy! Not enough we worry about you—you're sassy!" The emigrant with the keen eyes managed to collect enough from the other emigrants to buy Mendl a pair of tefillin.

You can get anything you want in Antwerp. Do you think there are no prayer houses or synagogues in Antwerp? Wrong! And what synagogues! One of the synagogues is Turkish. Do you think Turks pray there? Not at all! Jews pray there, the same Jews as we, but they pray in Turkish. You can't understand one word! Our new friend Mendl took Big Motl and me there. The three of us have become fast friends. All day long we walk around the city. When we were in Brod or Cracow or Lemberg or Vienna, my mother was afraid to let me take a step away from her. Here in Antwerp she isn't afraid. In those cities, she says, there were only Germans, but here in Antwerp we are among our own people. You hear Yiddish spoken. She means the emigrants. Long live the emigrants! Among the emigrants we really feel at home! And soon we'll have guests, God willing. After Shabbes our in-law Yoneh the baker is coming with his family. We're waiting every day for our neighbor Pessi and her gang. Then the fun will

really begin.

I'll tell you all about it.

XIX

THE GANG IS HERE!

A.

You're already familiar with the gang—our neighbor Pessi and her husband Moishe the bookbinder and their eight children, each of whom, as I told you, has a nickname. The youngest is my age, nine and a half, and they call him Vashti. His real name is Hershl, but because he has a birthmark on his forehead, the older children gave him the nickname Vashti. I like him because he doesn't cry. No matter how much you beat him, he takes it silently. Once he tore somebody's prayer book, and his father beat him with the board on which he cuts paper. Vashti suffered for two days straight. He even refused to eat. People were afraid for his life. His mother, our neighbor Pessi, was already mourning for him, and his father was beside himself. Everyone thought it was the end of Vashti, but not so. On the third day Vashti asked for bread and ate as if after a fast.

The children all love to eat and really enjoy their food. Their own mother calls them the Hungry Locusts. Pessi is a very fine woman but a bit too fat. She has three chins. I've drawn her on paper several times. Once Vashti saw me doing it and grabbed the drawing and showed it to his mother. She laughed. My brother Elyahu found out and wanted to punish me for my figure drawings as usual. Luckily Pessi stuck up for me: "A child likes to fool around. It's not worth eating your heart out over." Long live Pessi! I love her. I just hate when she kisses me. When she arrived in Antwerp, she hugged me and kissed me like her own child. She kissed everyone, but more than anyone, naturally, she kissed my mother. When my mother first glimpsed her, it was as if Pessi were my father risen from the dead. My mother cried so hard that my brother Elyahu fell upon Pessi, blaming her for making my mother ruin her eyes so she can't go to America.

Everybody who comes to Antwerp has to go to the doctor. The first thing

you're asked is "Have you been to the doctor yet?" "What did the doctor say?" When you go to the Ezra, she sends you straight to the doctor. When we first came to the Ezra, all my mother wanted to do was tell the story of her life, starting with her husband and ending with the stolen bedding. Fräulein Zaichik wrote it all down in a book. My mother had more to tell but was interrupted by one of the other Ezra.

"So you're going to America?"

We said, "We're certainly not going to Yehupetz."

Another person from the Ezra asked, "Have you been to the doctor yet?"

"What doctor?"

"Here's an address. Go first thing to the doctor, and he'll examine your eyes."

Hearing the word *eyes*, my brother Elyahu looked at my mother and turned pale as a sheet.

What frightened him so?

B.

It's done, thank God. We've all been to the doctor except my mother. She'll go later. My brother Elyahu is afraid—she's cried too much lately. The doctor examines our eyes and writes something down, signs it, and puts it in an envelope. At first we're frightened—we think he's written a prescription for our eyes. We ask him what he wrote. He points to the door, and we assume he is asking us to leave. We go up to the Ezra and show her what the doctor has written.

Fräulein Zaichik opens the envelope and reads the notes. "I can tell you good news," she says to us. "The doctor says you all have healthy eyes."

Of course that's good news! But what are we going to do about our mother? She doesn't stop crying. We plead with her, "What are you doing to us? Aren't you afraid, God forbid, the doctor will reject your eyes?"

"That's why I'm crying!" she replies, and places a compress on her eyes. An emigrant barber gave her the compress. He's a homely man with terrible teeth but is quite vain. He wears a copper watch on a silver chain and a gold ring on

his finger. His nickname isn't very nice—they call him Beaver! He came to Antwerp with Pessi and her gang. They became acquainted on the train and stole across the border together. They didn't have the same troubles we did. No one wanted to murder them, and no one stole their bedding, but they still had a horrendous time. In Hamburg, they had to go through a steam bath. What stories they tell of Hamburg! It makes your hair stand on end! Sodom is a paradise compared to Hamburg! People in Hamburg treat emigrants, they said, a lot worse than we do our prisoners. If not for Beaver, Pessi and her family would have died there.

Beaver helped them in their hour of need. He is a nervy person—he stood up to the Germans. The way he told the story was a treat! He spoke to them only in Russian, he said. He knows Russian well, no doubt better than our Pinni. Pinni says that everything Beaver tells us would be fine if it were true. But from the very first Pinni took a dislike to Beaver. He made up a song about him. When Pinni doesn't like someone, he writes a song about him. If you like, I can repeat it to you:

Beaver our surgeon-barber
Has the chutzpah of a robber.
He steals your time to tell you stories
Packed with a thousand made-up worries.
You need them like a bellyache.
You listen for the poor man's sake.
After all he has a clever brain,
Can keep you healthy, even sane.

C.

The barber-surgeon Beaver takes it upon himself to cure my mother's eyes. Once he's finished, he says no doctor in the world will find anything wrong with them. He learned how to do it back home. A barber-surgeon is half a doctor. Besides, when he was in Germany, he observed how they cured emigrants' eyes. They can

make blind people see.

Pinni quips that it may be the other way around. Beaver gets angry and buries Pinni in words. He says Pinni is far too clever for America! They don't like smart alecks in America! America is a country where there's no time for fooling around. In America you say what you mean, you mean what you say. In America your word is your word. America is built on truth, honesty, righteousness, honor, humanity, compassion, justice, equality, confidence, and faith.

"And on what else?" asks Pinni.

This infuriates Beaver all the more! Too bad they're interrupted just then. Someone is asking for us outside. Who can it be? We go out—guests! Guests! Guests! Our in-laws have arrived, Yoneh the baker and his whole gang! A new gang! Again there is great joy: my sister-in-law Bruche is kissing her parents, and my brother Elyahu is kissing his father-in-law and mother-in-law. Pinni can't hold back and also kisses our in-laws.

Beaver joins in and kisses them too. Puzzled, the guests ask, "Who's this?"

"I'm Beaver," he explains.

Pinni bursts out laughing. And my mother? She does what she always does—she cries! My brother Elyahu is ready to kill himself. He looks at her and tugs at his beard, but this time he says nothing. These are, after all, relatives, in-laws from the same town. Why shouldn't she have a good cry?

"How did you steal across the border, and where did they finally welcome you?" we ask our in-laws, and they have tales enough to tell! But I have no patience for their stories. I go off into a corner with Bruche's little sister Alteh. She's ten years old now, almost eleven, the same age as Goldele, the poor little girl who was left behind in Antwerp on account of her eyes. I tell Alteh about Goldele and her sick eyes, about my friends Big Motl and Mendl, about the Ezra and Fräulein Zaichik, who writes things down in a book, and about the doctor who examines eyes. I tell her all about Vienna and the Alliance that hates Jews, about Cracow and Lemberg, and how we stole across the border and barely escaped with our lives. I don't leave anything out.

Alteh listens wide-eyed to everything I say. Then she tells me what happened to them. Her father had long wanted to go to America, but not her mother and the rest of the family. They said that in America you had to work hard, and her mother wasn't accustomed to that. Her mother had a fur cape that her father had

bought in the good years when they still had money. Now that things were bad and the creditors were pestering them, they decided to sell everything and go to America.

But when it came to selling the fur cape, her mother refused, insisting she'd sell everything except the fur cape. Her father pleaded, "Why do you need a fur cape? In America you don't need a fur cape!" Her mother protested, "What do you mean? How many years did I beg God for a fur cape, and then I finally lived to have one. I have no intention of selling it now." Day and night all they heard at home was "fur cape." The whole family took the mother's side, fighting with the father. It almost led to a divorce between her father and mother, all on account of the fur cape. Who got their way? Of course, her mother! They didn't sell the fur cape. They brought it with them, wrapping it separately in a package. But by the time they got to the border, it had disappeared.

Alteh tells her story, and that's all I want to hear—whether they still have the fur cape. When I hear they don't, I'm pleased. I take Alteh for a walk and show her the city of Antwerp. She is not in the least impressed. She's seen bigger cities, she says. What do you say to that! I take her to see the inns where the emigrants are staying and introduce her to my friends. Nothing seems to impress her. She looks down on everyone and everything, a proud girl. She was always like that. Later on we go to the Ezra together, our gang and their gang. There we meet our neighbor Pessi and her gang. We also see Goldele. Goldele wants to be friends with Alteh, but Alteh keeps her at arm's length. Goldele takes me aside and asks me what's so special about this girl, that she doesn't consider her good enough to speak to? I tell her that a year ago at my brother's wedding, people spoke of Alteh as a future bride for me. She blushes deeply, turns away, and wipes her eyes.

D .

Wait till you hear about the calamity that befell us. We take my mother to the doctor to have her eyes examined. He examines her eyes and says nothing. He just writes a note and puts it in an envelope. We take the envelope to the Ezra, but don't find anyone there except Fräulein Zaichik, the one who writes everything in a book. She greets me with a laugh. She always laughs when she sees me. She sends me regards from Goldele.

She opens the envelope and reads the note, then stops laughing and wrings her hands.

My mother asks, “What is it?”

“What is it? The news, my dear woman, is bad! The doctor says you can’t go to America.”

My sister-in-law Bruche falls into a faint. My brother Elyahu turns pale. My mother turns to stone—she can no longer cry. Fräulein Zaichik runs for a glass of water. She revives Bruche, comforts Elyahu, consoles my mother, and tells us to come back in the morning.

On the way home my brother Elyahu lectures my mother for crying all the time and reminds her how many times he warned her not to cry. She wants to answer him but has no words. She raises her eyes and begs God, “Grant me and my children a favor, O Lord of the Universe, and take me from this world!” Our friend Pinni insists it’s all the fault of that liar, that barber-surgeon Beaver. All that day and night we blame one another. In the morning we go to the Ezra, who advises us to try to go by way of London. Maybe London will let my mother and her weepy eyes go to America. And if not America, at least Canada.

Where Canada is we do not know. They say it’s even farther away than America. My brother Elyahu and his friend Pinni now have something to argue over. Elyahu asks him, “Pinni! Where is this Canada? You’re supposed to know all about geography.” Pinni tells him that Canada is in Canada—that is, not in America. He means to say that Canada is really the same as America but not exactly America. Elyahu asks him, “How can that be?” Pinni answers, “Well, that’s the way it is!”

Meanwhile we have to go to the ship to say goodbye to our good friends Pessi and her husband Moishe the bookbinder and their whole gang of kids.

Oh my, what is going on at the ship! So many men, women, and children, with bundles, satchels, pillows, and mountains of bedding, all running, shouting, crying, sweating, eating, and cursing. Suddenly the cry of a wild beast, a buffalo, is heard: *Hoo-oo-oo!*

That’s the ship’s horn warning passengers to say goodbye and board the ship. More running, kissing, and crying—it’s a living theater! Everyone is saying goodbye. We’re saying goodbye too. Everyone is kissing. We’re kissing too. We’re kissing the whole gang. My mother is kissing her neighbor Pessi, who

consoles my mother and begs her not to worry—they will, God willing, soon see one another in America. My mother waves her hand sadly and swallows her tears. Lately she's crying much less. She's taking some medicine to help her cry less. All the passengers have boarded the ship. We're standing on the dock. Oh, how we envy them! Oh, how I envy Vashti! Once he envied me—today I envy him!

Vashti stands with a tattered cap on the deck of the ship. He holds his hands behind his back and sticks out his tongue at me to let me know that he's going and I'm not. This really hurts my feelings, but I thumb my nose at him: "That's for you!" meaning, Vashti! May your face break out in boils! I will soon be in America too! And I will get rich there!

Oh! Don't you worry. I'll be in America very soon!

XX

THE GANG DISPERSSES

A.

Day by day the gang of emigrants grows smaller and smaller, and Antwerp empties. On Shabbes another large group of emigrants sails away on a ship, all to America. Among them is my friend Big Motl, the one who taught me ventriloquism and other tricks. I don't know what made my brother Elyahu dislike him. I think it began with my sister-in-law Bruche. Bruche has a habit of eavesdropping on people who are talking and laughing. Is it her business why we laugh? Maybe we're laughing at our friend Pinni, at the way he fishes bits of honey cake and candy from his pockets and eats them. Maybe we're laughing at the way Beaver is always bragging.

But I tell you, this time Bruche is right. We make up a skit about her mother Rivele the baker's wife, with her fur cape. Rivele can't stop talking about that fur cape she was robbed of at the border.

Imagine, even my mother can't take it any longer! She says to Rivele, "Oy,

my dear in-law! If I talked about the bedding and pillows that I was robbed of at the border as much as you carry on about your fur cape . . . !”

Rivele the baker’s wife responds in her mannish voice, “At least realize there’s no comparison!”

My mother retorts, “Weren’t my pillows stolen goods too?”

“Were they stolen? I wasn’t there to see it.”

My mother is puzzled. “What are you implying, my dear in-law?” Rivele says, “Let’s leave it at that.”

“My dear in-law, how have I offended you?”

“Who says you have offended me?”

“Why then are you saying there is no comparison between my bedding and your fur cape?” my mother asks.

“It’s obvious! I’m speaking of my fur cape, and you start in with your bedding and your pillows!” Rivele replies.

“Aren’t my pillows stolen goods?”

“Stolen goods or not, I wasn’t there to see it.”

And around and around it goes!

Tell me, do we need theater?

B .

The situation with my mother’s eyes is not good at all. They say they won’t allow her on the ship for any amount of money, not even a million. We must flee Antwerp. In Antwerp the doctors are fiends! They examine your eyes, and if they see trachoma, they turn into devils. They have no respect, no pity! We’ll have to go to America by a different route but which route we don’t yet know. There are plenty of routes if we only had the means. Most probably the money in my brother Elyahu’s pocket is dwindling. We spent the proceeds from the sale of our house on doctors and barber-surgeons, all on account of my mother’s eyes. I overheard my brother Elyahu saying to his friend Pinni, “I just hope we can manage to get to London!” Of course I’d rather go straight to America than by

way of London. Our friend Pessi and her whole gang have long been in America by now. They're already making a living. Vashti must be strolling at his ease with his hands in his pockets cracking nuts.

Our in-laws and their family couldn't wait for my mother's eyes to heal and left for America without us. Oh! What went on that day in Antwerp! We didn't let my mother go to the ship to say goodbye to her in-laws, because we knew she would cry and ruin whatever was left of her eyes. What good did it do? She cried even harder. She lamented that we were taking away her only pleasure—crying her sorrows out, soothing her heart! But who listens to her now?

C .

Do you know who is happy that our in-laws have left? You'll never guess—Goldele! The very same Goldele whose parents are now in America for over a year and she is still in Antwerp on account of her sick eyes. When she heard our in-laws were leaving, she wanted to dance. What's going on? She doesn't like Alteh, my so-called future bride. She doesn't like her because she is haughty. Goldele doesn't like a person who is full of herself.

"I can't stand your bride with the red braids. She's a snob!" Goldele once said to me, and her cheeks were flushed.

"Where did Alteh get red braids when her hair is black?" I said.

Goldele got angrier, cried, and said, "Red! Red! Red!"

When Goldele is angry, you have to leave her be till she is over it. After that she's as good as ever. She's like a sister with me. She tells me everything. She works hard at the inn, sweeps the rooms, takes care of the chickens, and puts the children to sleep. For a long time the innkeeper's wife didn't have any children, but now God has blessed her with twins. Goldele goes to the doctor every day to cure her eyes, and the doctor smears them with the same bluestone salve he uses for all the other patients.

"Oh, if only God would grant me a different salve, maybe someday I'd be able to see my mother and father," she says with tears in her sick eyes.

It makes my heart ache. I can't bear to hear her talk about her mother and father. I can't bear to see her crying. I say to her, "Do you know what, Goldele?"

Soon I'll be going to America. When I start making a living, I'll send you a different salve."

"You aren't joking? Swear a holy oath on that," says Goldele, and I swear a holy oath that I won't forget her. If God will help me, as soon as I start to make a living in America, I'll send her a different salve right away.

D .

I know for sure that on Saturday morning we are leaving for London. We're already preparing for the journey. My mother, Bruche, and Teibl go from one inn to the next saying goodbye to the emigrants—not only saying goodbye but pouring their hearts out to one another.

We realize we are kings compared to other emigrants. Among the emigrant *shlimazels* are some who actually envy us. Their woes are not to be described. At home they were prosperous businesspeople and lived well. Their children married well. They always had room at their table for poor people. Now they would be happy to have what they once gave away. Today they are all paupers! What strange people!

I am fed up with their stories. At one time when they talked about pogroms, I was all ears. Now when I hear the word *pogrom*, I take off. I prefer happier stories, but no one tells anything happy. The barber-surgeon Beaver was happy. He was a liar. But he too is in America now.

"He's probably filling people's ears with plenty of lies!" says our friend Pinni.

"They won't let him fill their ears for long. Don't worry, in America they hate people like that. In America a liar is worse than a bastard!" says my brother Elyahu, and Bruche asks him how he knows that. A quarrel follows. I and Pinni side with Elyahu, Teibl sides with Bruche. Whatever one says, the other one says the opposite.

WE, THE MEN: America is a country of pure truth.

THEY, THE WOMEN: America is a country of liars.

WE, THE MEN: America is built on truth, justice, and compassion. THEY,

THE WOMEN: On theft, murder, and immorality!

Luckily my mother interrupts. “Children, why do you have to fight over America when we’re still in Antwerp?”

She’s right. We’re still in Antwerp. But not for long—soon, soon we will be leaving for London. Everyone is leaving, all the emigrants, the whole gang of them.

What will become of Antwerp?

XXI

GOODBYE, ANTWERP!

A.

When we depart Antwerp, I have feelings of regret that I’ve had for no other city. But more than Antwerp and its people, I’ll miss the emigrants, and even more I’ll miss my friends. Many left earlier—Vashti, Alteh, and Big Motl are now in America making a living. The ones remaining are Mendl the bar mitzvah boy (Bruche gave him the nickname Colt) and Goldele, the girl with the bad eyes. No one else stayed on.

What will the Ezra, who helps the emigrants, do? Whom will they help now? I feel sorry for Antwerp. I’ll miss it, a fine city with fine people. They all deal in diamonds. People in Antwerp carry precious stones in their pockets, ready for business. They all know the trade: cutting, grinding, and polishing stones. Whomever you meet is either a diamond cutter, grinder, or polisher. Some of the boys from our gang remained on here and became diamond cutters.

If we weren’t so eager to get to America, my family would have apprenticed me to a diamond cutter. My brother Elyahu likes the trade, and so does our friend Pinni. They say if they were a little younger, they would become diamond polishers. Bruche laughs and says that precious stones are better to wear than to

polish. Pinni's wife agrees with her. She also likes to wear precious stones. Every day they go looking in the display windows and can't get enough of the stones. Diamonds and other jewels are everywhere to be seen, enough to make your head spin and dazzle your eyes. The women go out of their minds. Pinni laughs and says all these stones are ridiculous, and anyone impressed with them is mad. Don't you think he wrote a song about it? This is how it goes:

Antwerp is a city
Made of precious stones.
The poor get no pity,
The rich have great big homes.
Diamonds are a dime a dozen,
Sold by an uncle or a cousin.
Jewels bulge in every pocket,
Rings, necklaces, a fancy locket.
But one thing strikes me as very funny:
Nobody carries any ordinary money!

And that's all I remember.

B .

To remember all of Pinni's songs, you'd have to have the mind of a government minister. My brother Elyahu is always battling with him over his songs. He says that if the Ezra finds out that Pinni is writing songs about Antwerp, they'll drive us out. And we need the Ezra to help us leave. We go there every day. We're like old friends. Fräulein Zaichik knows who we are by name. She loves me as if I were her own child. My mother is like a sister to her. Even Bruche says Fräulein Zaichik is the reincarnation of a Jewish girl with a Jewish soul. The entire gang of emigrants has fallen in love with her, especially since she speaks to us in Yiddish, not in German.

Everybody else speaks German in Antwerp, there's nothing for it! Pinni says

the country doesn't even belong to the Germans, and the Jews could very well speak Yiddish—it wouldn't do them any harm. All the Jews on this side of the border dislike Yiddish and like German. Even the beggars speak German. They'll die of hunger so long as their last words are in German! This is what Bruche says, and she urges us to go to London. She's sick and tired of Antwerp and its language. Wherever you go, all you hear about is jewels and diamonds!

“If only a little tiny diamond would attach itself to us! If only someone was willing to lose a few diamonds and I would find them!” Bruche's eyes glow with hope. I don't know why she's so excited by diamonds and jewels. I'd give away all the precious stones in the world for one box of paints and a paintbrush. Not long ago I drew a ship with a pencil on paper, a ship with a gang of emigrants, crowded one on top of the other. I gave the drawing to Goldele, who showed it to Fräulein Zaichik, who showed it to everyone at the Ezra.

My brother Elyahu also saw it. I heard from him, “Figures! Will you ever stop drawing figures?” He beat me harder than ever. I told Goldele about it, and she told Fräulein Zaichik, who asked my brother Elyahu why he beat me. She showed him the drawing and argued with him for a long time. He heard her out, and when he came home, I really got it from him. My brother says he has to beat the crazy desire for drawing figures out of me.

C .

Today is our last time to go to the Ezra. I don't know why we go. My brother Elyahu is complaining about something. Pinni is waving his arms around. Bruche is constantly interrupting. My mother is crying. The people of the Ezra are talking to us, as usual, in German. Three of them sit there competing to see who can speak better German. Don't ask me what they say. My mind is now on the ship sailing the sea, or in London, or in America.

Suddenly Goldele comes running over and says in one breath, “Are you really going?”

“I'm going.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Where to?”

“To London.”

“And from there?”

“To America.”

“And I have to stay here with my sick eyes! Who knows when I will see my mother and father?” Goldele cries her heart out.

My heart aches for her. I want to console her but I don’t have the words. I look at her and think, God in heaven, what do you have against this girl? What has she done to you?

I take her by the hand and pat it. “Don’t cry, Goldele. You’ll see, I’ll go to America and will make a living, and the first thing I’ll do is send you a different salve to smear on your eyes. Then I’ll send you a steamship ticket, half price because you’re not ten years old yet. You’ll come to America, and at the Castle Garden your mother and father will be waiting for you. I’ll also be there. When you arrive in America, you should look for me in the Castle Garden. I’ll be holding this pencil in my hand—do you see? When you see a boy holding this pencil, you’ll know it’s me—Motl Peysi’s. Later, when you leave the ship, you’ll hug and kiss your mother and father. You won’t go straight home with them. You’ll just give them your things, and you’ll go with me. I’ll show you all of America because by then I’ll know it all by heart. Then I’ll take you home to your parents, and you’ll eat supper—a hot, fresh soup.”

Goldele does not want to hear any more. She throws her arms around my neck and kisses me. I kiss her too.

D .

Bruche has a habit of showing up when you don’t want her. Exactly at the very minute I’m saying goodbye to Goldele, she has to turn up! She doesn’t say anything to me, but just utters, in her mannish voice, the drawn-out word “So-o-o-o?!”

Then she draws her lips together in a strange way and screws up her nose while letting out a little cough—“Ahem!”—and goes off straight to my brother Elyahu. What she tells him I do not know. I only know that when I leave the

Ezra, Elyahu gives me a smart slap that sets my ears ringing.

“What for?” my mother asks him. “Why?”

“He knows what for,” my brother Elyahu replies, and we all return to the inn, where we find things in turmoil. Everyone is packing. We too must pack. I love to see how people pack. When it comes to packing, my brother Elyahu is a master. He takes off his coat and starts giving orders: “Don’t put the dirty laundry there! . . . Mama, the teakettle . . . the cap, Bruche, the hat, hurry! . . . the galoshes, Pinni, you blind bat, you scarecrow, can’t you see? The galoshes are right under your nose! . . . Motl, why are you standing around like an idiot? Lend a hand! All he knows is drawing figures! Figures!”

He means me. I jump up and help carry things and toss around whatever they put in my hands. My brother Elyahu gets angry because I’m throwing things every which way. He’s about to hit me, but my mother defends me: “What do you want of the child?” My mother calling me a child doesn’t sit right with Bruche, who gets into a spat with my mother, who reminds her I am an orphan and is about to start crying. My brother Elyahu says, “Cry, cry! Cry out the rest of your eyes!”

Soon we will be leaving Antwerp.

Goodbye, Antwerp!

XXII

LONDON, WHY DON’T YOU BURN DOWN?

A.

As long as I’ve lived, I’ve never seen a city that’s more like one big fair than London. Oh, the clattering, the clanging, the whistling, the whooping! And the people are as thick as flies! Where do all these people come from, and why are they always running? They must be hungry or have to get somewhere, elbowing one another aside, knocking people down and stepping on them!

Our friend Pinni, as you remember, is nearsighted. He walks with his head in

the clouds, completely distracted, while his feet get tangled up. One day we just stepped out of the train. Pinni has one trouser leg rolled up, one sock rolled down, and his necktie to the side, as always. I've never seen him so excited—he's burning as if with a fever. He spouts strange words, as is his habit: "London! England! Disraeli! Buckle! *History of Civilization!*" It's impossible to calm him down. Then an accident happens. Within two minutes he's stretched out on the ground, and people are stepping over him as if he's a chunk of wood. His wife Teibl screams, "Pinni, where are you?" My brother Elyahu rushes to him and pulls him up, ruffled and crumpled like an old cap.

That's number one. The second mishap occurs that very same day, on the Jewish street they call by the strange name Whitechapel. Here they sell fish and meat, prayer books, fringed garments, apples, kvass, cookies and cakes, kippered herring, prayer shawls, lemons, eggs, glasses, pots, galoshes, noodles, brooms, whistles, pepper, and string—exactly as people do at home, not a hair's difference. Even the mud is the same as ours, as are the smells and odors, often worse. We're delighted to be in Whitechapel. Pinni overdoes his delight. "Berdichev!" he exclaims. "Good God, Jewish children! We aren't in London, we're in Berdichev!" Oh my, did he pay for that comparison. Berdichev! The Whitechapel Jews don't like it at all. I thought they would have to take him off to the hospital. From that time on Teibl never lets him out of her sight. I look around at Whitechapel. My God! If London is like this, what can America be like?

But if you talk to Bruche, she says London should have burned down before we arrived. From the very first minute she takes an instant dislike to the city. "Do you call this a city?" she says. "It's not a city—it's a hell! A fire should have destroyed it last year!" My brother Elyahu tries to say nice things about it, to no avail. Bruche spouts curses and insults at the city, wishing it would burn down. That's her only punishment for it—having it burn to the ground. Pinni's wife supports her. My mother says, "Maybe God will have pity on us, and London will be our last ordeal?" But the three of us—I, Elyahu, and Pinni—think of London as the Promised Land. We are actually thrilled with the turmoil and noise, the hustle and bustle.

What do we care if it's noisy and crowded? Let them push all they want! The one thing troubling us, however, is that we're without work. We look for a committee but can't find one. Whoever we ask doesn't know or won't answer. They have no time. They're busy, also running! But we must find a committee.

Without a committee we won't have enough money to get to America. My brother Elyahu's secret pocket is now empty. The money we made selling our house has gone up in smoke. Pinni pokes fun at Elyahu: "What'll you do now with that pocket?" This angers Elyahu. He hates being teased. He's a pessimistic sort of person, exactly the opposite of his friend Pinni, who calls him "the worried little boss of the family."

I love Pinni because he's always jolly. Since we came to London, he's become even jollier. In Cracow, Lemberg, Brod, Antwerp, and Vienna, he says, we had to speak German. But here in London it's a pleasure—we can speak Yiddish just like at home, which means half Yiddish, half Russian.

Their language is worse than German. Bruche says that three Englishmen are not worth one German. Who on earth ever heard of a street called Whitechapel? And money is called *ha'penny*, *tuppence*, and *thruppence*! And there's another word that has to do with money called a *fife*. We had an incident with this *fife*, if you want to hear about it.

B .

You already know we're trying to find a committee in London, which is like looking for a needle in a haystack. But we do have a God. We're walking along Whitechapel one night—that is to say, it isn't really night but daytime. In London there isn't daytime or morning. In London it's always night. We run across a man in a short coat and an odd-looking cap who seems to be looking for someone.

"I could swear you're Jews," says the man.

Pinni replies, "Absolutely, and what Jews! Real Jews!"

"Would you like to do a good deed?" the man says.

"For instance?"

"I have to observe the anniversary of a death in the family today and can't leave home. I need a few men to make a *minyan* of ten. Is the lad a bar mitzvah yet?"

He means me. I'm quite pleased that he calls me a "lad" and thinks I'm a bar mitzvah.

We climb some stairs with him and enter a dark room. It's packed with small, dirty children and filled with the thick odor of fried fish. There aren't the necessary ten yet. He needs seven more. The man asks us to sit and runs out into the street to find them. He does this several times until he succeeds. In the meantime I get acquainted with the grimy children and peer into the stove where the fish are frying. Fried fish isn't as bad as my sister-in-law Bruche makes it out to be. If they'd give me a piece of fried fish right now, I'd love it. I don't think even Bruche would refuse it. We've hardly eaten all day. For several days we've been living on herring and radishes. In Whitechapel you can get good black radishes. The man would be doing us a favor if he'd offer us a bite to eat, but obviously he has no idea we're hungry. How do I know? As soon as we finish the *mincha* prayer and polish off the kaddish, he thanks us for our trouble and leads us to the door. But my brother Elyahu stalls long enough to ask about a committee, glancing in the meantime at the fried fish and swallowing hard. The man has one hand on the doorknob and gestures with the other while telling us not such good news.

First of all, he says, the committee doesn't exist. That is, there's a committee, really several committees, but the London committees don't hand out money so quickly. If you need help from a London committee, you have to do a lot of running around first, bringing papers and witnesses proving that you're an emigrant going to America. The reason is that all the emigrants, and there are many here, only say they want to go to America. Once they've brought everything, they demand that the committee give them money for return fare home. The London committee doesn't think highly of America.

And Pinni, a hothead, spouts his customary fiery Yiddish-Russian: "How is this possible? What right do they have to send us back? Aren't they ashamed of themselves, living in such a civilized country—"

The man interrupts him and holds open the door. "You can complain as much as you want," he says. "I'll give you the address of a committee. Go there, and maybe you'll find that it's all right!"

C.

We leave the *yahrtzeit* with the odor of fried fish in our nostrils. We're all really disappointed, but no one says anything except Bruche. She wishes them every ill

in the world. She wishes they would choke to death on their fried fish that smelled a mile away.

My mother can't stand it. "What do you have against them, poor honest folks?" she snaps at Bruche. "They live in a hell but still and all, when it comes to a *yahrtzeit*, they look to find a *minyán*."

Bruche's answer is, "Mother-in-law! Let them burn together with their *yahrtzeit* and their fried fish! They stop strangers and drag them into their house but can't give the child so much as a little piece of fried fish out of charity."

She means me. Not so long ago I was a bar mitzvah lad, and now I'm a child. But it's nice that Bruche is looking out for me.

The six of us make our way to the committee. We thank the man for suggesting that we go by tram. But the London tram doesn't like to stop to pick people up. No matter how hard you wave your arms, it keeps going. Running after it is useless—you won't catch it. Luckily a clean-shaven Englishman takes pity on us. If you see a person with a clean-shaven face, know that he's an Englishman.

He sees us waving our arms at the passing trams and shows us a place to stand in front of a church. And he's right. In no more than a minute, a tram stops. The six of us get on, and off we go. The conductor comes over and asks us to buy tickets. What then happens, we come to understand only later.

Pinni asks him in Yiddish, "How much?" The conductor says, "Fife." Pinni asks him again, "How much?" The conductor, becoming annoyed, again says, "Fife." Pinni turns to us and says, "Do you hear that? He's telling me to go whistle!"

My brother Elyahu goes up to the conductor and asks with the help of sign language, "How much does a fare cost?"

The conductor, now really angry, shouts, "*Fife!*"

Pinni starts to laugh and Elyahu, now also angry, says to the conductor in Yiddish, "Go fife yourself!"

The conductor pulls the cord to stop the tram and throws us all off in such a rage, you'd think we wanted to murder him and run off with his money purse.

It turns out that when we thought the conductor was telling us to go whistle,

he was telling us the price of the ticket in English.

“*Nu*, I ask you, shouldn’t London burn down?” says Bruche as we walk to the committee.

D .

At the London committee it’s just as lively as at all the other committees. The courtyard is filled with emigrants, like so much trash, and inside people are sitting around smoking cigars and saying to one another, “All right.” The difference is that while the German committees wear their whiskers curled up at the ends and speak German, the London committees have clean-shaven faces and say, “All right!” It’s a real show—the men are shaven, and the women wear wigs. Even the girls wear false hair and braided buns, have large teeth, and are so ugly they turn your stomach. Yet it’s they who are laughing at us, pointing their fingers and squealing so loudly, we’re embarrassed for them.

Two girls stop us in the middle of the street and accost my brother Elyahu, telling him to go to a barbershop. At first we don’t understand what that means, but now we know: going to a barbershop means getting shaved and cutting your hair. What strange creatures! They go around gobbling up fried fish in the middle of the street that you can smell a mile away, their mouths dripping grease, and *they* hate hair. Drunks there are plenty of, but they don’t sprawl all over the street as they do at home. The English don’t allow it. “It’s quite a country,” says Bruche, “but it refuses to burn down.”

“What good will it be if it does burn down?” asks my brother Elyahu, and gets an earful from her.

When Bruche wants to, she really knows how to put you down. Sometimes she gives you the silent treatment and doesn’t speak, but other times the words flood out and you have to either stuff your ears with cotton or run away as far as you can. Here’s what she said, word for word: “Why are you defending this accursed country with its black sky and shaven snouts and its dirty Whitechapel, its fried fish, old maids with braided buns, greasy dresses, paupers who drink ginger beer, conductors who tell you to go whistle, and Jews who have *yahrtzeit* and begrudge you a drink of water? A city like that should burn down!”

Bruche takes a breath, crosses her arms, and says, “London, why don’t you

burn down?”

God in heaven! *When will we ever get to America?*

PART TWO

In America

Written in 1916.

I

MAZEL TOV, WE'RE IN AMERICA

A.

Give us a *mazel tov*, we're in America. Or they tell us we're in America. We haven't really set foot in America yet because we're still in Castle Garden. Or that's what it was once called—now it's called Ellie's Island. Why do they call it Ellie's Island? Because it once belonged to someone named Ellie. Pinni is very angry at Ellie's Island because they detain the poor people there but let the rich ones go the minute they get off the ship. He says that's more like what you would expect from those Russian thieves than from this land of the free. Here everyone is equal. There are no poor, no rich. He spouts names like Columbus, Shakespeare, and Buckle and big words I don't understand like *civilization*. He wants to write a song about them but has no ink, pen, or paper. My brother Elyahu tells him that if he doesn't like this country, he can go back. You remember that these two are rarely of one mind? Whatever one says, the other says the opposite. "Summer and winter," Bruche calls them, receiving a stern look from her husband, who calls her a cow and a busybody and other names not fit to repeat. My mother intercedes and tells her daughter-in-law that when cats fight, a person shouldn't get in the middle because he might get scratched.

B .

What are we doing on Ellie's Island? We're waiting for our family and friends to come from the city so they can vouch for us in writing. They questioned us over and over before we boarded the ship, while we were on the ship itself, and when we just disembarked from the ship. And it's always the same questions: Who are we? Where are we going? Whom do we have in America?

We tell them there was a man named Peysi the cantor and he died. He left a widow, our mother. She has a son named Elyahu, who has a wife named Bruche and a friend named Pinni, who has a wife named Teibl. And I am the youngest, named Motl. This is my friend named Mendl, and because he is large, Bruche named him the Colt.

Whom do we have in America? We know everybody in America and all the Jews are our friends. First of all, there is Moishe the bookbinder and his wife Fat Pessi—our neighbor with a whole gang of children. Each one has a name and a nickname. We tick them off on our fingers: Pinni Barrel, Velvl Tomcat, Mendl Stork, Chaim Buffalo, Hershl with the birthmark on his forehead, so we call him Vashti—

They interrupt us, "Enough—enough children. Give us grown-ups." So we give them the grown-ups, tick off their names: Yoneh the baker, an angry man, that's one. His wife Rivele, a woman with a fur cape—that's two. Actually, she once had a fur cape but it was stolen at the border. The word *border* reminds my mother of how our things were stolen at the border. She asks if it's possible to get these things back—and she starts crying, at which point Elyahu reprimands her. She says that now she is in America, she is no longer worried about her eyes and can cry and cry.

C .

That they allowed her through with those eyes is a miracle, as is the fact that we survived the ocean crossing. Was it not a miracle of miracles? How many times did we see the Angel of Death with our own eyes? How many times did we think our lives were over?

At first when we boarded the ship *Prince Albert*, everything was fine. I and

my friend Mendl measured the *Prince Albert* from stem to stern with our strides. No one had it as good as we did. Never had we had accommodations to match what we had on the ship. It was a three-story house on the water. Just picture it—you're sitting in your house, or walking around outside, hands in your pockets, and you're moving! You're eating and—you're moving! You're drinking and—you're moving! And the people you see—a world of people, an entire city—are traveling with you on one ship and going to the same place, America. You can get to know all of them, and they you. You find out in one day so many things that in another place you wouldn't learn in a year.

D .

Oh my, how many friends my mother and my sister-in-law Bruche and Pinni's wife Teibl make among the women! But that's nothing compared with the friends my brother Elyahu and his friend Pinni make among the men. No matter how much any of us talks, they can never talk enough. The women talk about kitchens, cupboards, linens, laundry, bedding, stockings, sheets, and fur capes. The men talk about America, business, Columbus, edicts, and pogroms.

They can't live without talking about edicts and pogroms. As you know, I hate to talk about those things. When they start talking about them, I leave. I take my friend Mendl by the hand, and together we stroll through the streets of *Prince Albert*.

E .

Prince Albert is big enough—and beautiful. It has marble stairs, brass railings, and steel and iron wherever you look. And the crew—some are called stewards and nurses; others are sailors, who run back and forth like the wind. Mendl and I envy them. We promise each other that when we grow up, we will enlist as sailors.

But *Price Albert* has one big fault—we're not allowed to go wherever we wish. As soon as we try to go beyond our assigned quarters, the mean sailors drive us away. The upper-class passengers are just as mean, because if they weren't, they wouldn't let the sailors chase us away. What harm could we do—

take a bite out of them? My friend Mendl is irate. He doesn't understand why you need to have different classes. He says that in America there are no classes. If you don't believe me, he says, you can ask your brother Elyahu. But my brother hates to be asked dumb questions. I prefer to ask our friend Pinni, who loves to talk about such things—he can bury you in words. And if you get him started, he's like a wound-up alarm clock—he won't quit until the wheels stop turning.

F.

I find Pinni sitting on the deck with his nose in a book. Because he is nearsighted, he doesn't read with his eyes but with the tip of his nose.

I come up close to him. “Reb Pinni, I have to ask you something.”

Pinni takes his nose out of the book. “What did you say, Peewee?” Peewee is what he calls me when he's in a good mood, which is almost always, even when he bickers with my brother, and even when his Teibl pouts.

I tell him what I have in mind: is it true there are no classes in America?

You should have seen Pinni flare up with fiery, lofty expressions. America is the only country where true freedom and equality reign, he says. And here's where Pinni pours out his favorite words. In America, he says, you can be sitting here, and right next to you the president, and next to him a beggar, a tramp, a *shlepper*. And a little farther on—a count, an earl, a millionaire! Civilization! Progress! Columbus!

An emigrant, a complete stranger, interrupts him. “If it's such a fortunate land as you say, where everyone is equal, then where do all these *shleppers*, counts, beggars, and earls come from?”

Let's leave Pinni to fight it out with the stranger and a few others. We now know that in America there are no classes. Mendl is right—he says you have to hate the upper classes, which means we have to hate those who sit in the ship's higher classes. I don't understand—what do I have against them? Mendl points out that “they've locked themselves up in first and second class among their fancy mirrors. Why? Aren't we good enough for them? Aren't we human beings just like they are? Isn't our God the same as their God?”

In the end, Mendl has his revenge. One night the snobs from first and second class come down to us in third class, and we all become equals.

It's the eve of Yom Kippur for the Kol Nidrei prayer.

G.

Because the *Prince Albert* sailed after Rosh Hashanah, we had to observe Yom Kippur on the ship. On the eve of Yom Kippur, we prepare for the fast by eating roasted potatoes. There is no kosher kitchen on *Prince Albert*, so we've been living on potatoes plus lots of bread, tea, and sugar every day. It's not so bad—you could live all year like that. But Bruche says that your stomach swells if you eat too many potatoes. Is there anything she likes? She finds fault with everything! For instance, she doesn't like *Prince Albert* because it moves so slowly. Who ever heard that a journey should last ten days? she says. We tell her it isn't the ship's fault, but the ocean's fault. And our Pinni explains that there is three times as much ocean as dry land. My brother Elyahu says it's only two times as much. Whatever you may say, he knows his geography better. The world, he says, consists of two-thirds water and a third dry land, so therefore the ocean is twice as much as dry land.

“Three times!”

“Two times!”

They quarrel but quickly make up.

H.

Who will conduct the service? Who will sing Kol Nidrei? Naturally, it must be my brother Elyahu. Though he was never a cantor, his father was a cantor and a famous one. Elyahu has a good voice for chanting and knows the prayers. What more do you need? Pinni suggests that my brother be invited to sing Kol Nidrei. He spreads a rumor throughout the ship, whispering in people's ears that this young man with the red beard (Elyahu) is a fantastic singer, and his praying extraordinary! And if his little brother (me) could help out with his soprano, we'd have a Yom Kippur for which God and man would envy us.

Elyahu pleads to be left alone, swearing that in his whole life he has never prayed on the pulpit during the High Holidays. But no matter how much he protests, he is forced onto the pulpit, a round table covered with a white cloth. Pinni grabs me by the ear: “Go, Peewee, do your work!” And we produce a Kol Nidrei for the passengers that they will remember for generations.

I.

What makes it a Kol Nidrei to remember? It isn't so much the Kol Nidrei itself as the *yaalehs*, and not so much the *yaalehs* as the weeping. Men and women alike, they moan, sigh, and blow their noses at first. Then, as they wipe their eyes, the tears come quietly, then louder and louder. Wailing and keening begin, ending with much fainting. They are reminding themselves that just a year ago each of them was in his home, in his synagogue, at his proper place in his usual pew, prayer book in hand, listening to his cantor and choirboys. Now they are wanderers, chased and driven like sheep to the slaughter, packed tightly together so that it's hard to catch their breath. Even the dressed-up passengers from first and second class, with shiny top hats on their heads, can't control themselves and pretend to be wiping sweat with their silk handkerchiefs, but I clearly see tears in their eyes. The expression of sorrow is so moving that even the stewards and sailors stand at a respectful distance observing Jews wrapped in white prayer shawls standing on the deck swaying in prayer, weeping and wailing, as they realize how bitter their hearts are.

My brother Elyahu sings out, and I back him up. And there in a corner, among the women, stands my mother wearing her holiday shawl, her prayer book in her hand, bathed in tears.

My mother is in her glory. Today is her day!

J.

The following morning we wake up a little earlier in order to sing “*Adon-Olam*,” with its old familiar tune, but we can't do it. Not only is it impossible to pray, you can't stand on your feet, you can't reach the pulpit. Everything's dark. We can barely make one another out. Even taking a breath is unbearable. It's

bad, worse than bad—yes, we’re truly dying.

What’s happened? I’m too tired to explain, so I’ll leave it for tomorrow.

II

THE PARTING OF THE RED SEA

A.

I started to tell you about the unhappy incident that happened to us on Yom Kippur morning on the ship. It was terrible—we’ll remember it all our lives.

It started off innocently enough. Right after Kol Nidrei the night before, a little cloud, a thick black little cloud, had appeared in a corner of the sky. I and my friend Mendl saw it first because while everyone else was down below, crying and reading the Psalms after Kol Nidrei, we were walking around the *Prince Albert*. We found a little corner and sat quietly. It was still and warm, and we felt good but a bit sad. What Mendl was thinking I don’t know, but I was thinking about God, who was sitting up in the sky, and how great He must be to have created all this below. What must He be thinking when He hears so many Jews reading Psalms, praising Him and pouring out their hearts to Him? My mother says He hears and sees everyone, and He knows everything, even what I’m feeling in my heart this very minute. If that’s so, it’s not good, because I was just thinking about a good apple, a sweet pear, and a drink of cold water. The potatoes have given me heartburn, but we’re forbidden to drink. Who would think of drinking water on Yom Kippur after Kol Nidrei? My brother Elyahu would kill me. He says I have to fast till Yom Kippur is over tomorrow night. My mother says, “We’ll see.” In the meantime she’s searching all over the ship for me and can’t find me. A sailor shows her where we’re sitting at the bow of the ship. She shouts, “Motl! Motl?” “What is it, Mama?” “What do you mean, what is it? Go to bed! Tomorrow we have to wake up early, did you forget? It’s a holy day.” I don’t feel like going to bed, but I have to.

B.

When we wake up in the morning, the whole sky is covered. The ocean is working up a rage. The waves are heaving higher than the ship, tossing *Prince Albert* like a wood chip or a toy. The sailors run around like poisoned mice. The stewards are hanging on to the railings. The passengers cling to the walls, barely able to walk. Suddenly the rain comes pouring down. Claps of thunder follow one after the other. God is riding forth on His chariot—and on Yom Kippur! Lightning bolts briefly light up the dark, overcast sky. The *Prince Albert* creaks, sways side to side, up and down, and the rain beats.

What is this—another flood? Didn't God vow to Noah that there'd be no more floods on earth?

"It's the parting of the waters, like the Red Sea," says my brother Elyahu, and his friend Pinni mutters, "Yes, it's the parting of the Red Sea"—the first time these two agree. We're going to pass through between the waves. The words "parting of the Red Sea" catch on. Whenever someone looks at the ocean, he agrees that that's what it is. Then he runs off to the side railing and hangs over, emptying his stomach down to his mother's milk, and we see him no more. Who could think of praying or of Yom Kippur? In a daze, we even forget where in the world we are.

C .

In our family, the first to break down is Bruche. She screams that she's dying! Then she curses my brother Elyahu for talking her into going to America. America is like Siberia, she says, worse than Siberia—Siberia is paradise compared to America! My mother sticks up for her son and chides Bruche, saying we have to withstand everything because it's all God's doing. For instance, it's written in the Bible . . . But she can't go any further because she suddenly feels nauseated. Looking at her, Teibl also feels nauseated.

Pinni has to put in his usual barbs: "These women are a skit, a comedy!" He shoves his hands into his pants pockets and pushes his cap to the side. "Fools! Idiots! Who cares if the ocean storms and the ship rocks? An intelligent person can figure out what to do. When the ship rocks this way, I bend that way. When the ship rocks the other way, I bend this way. It's called balancing."

Bending this way and that, Pinni shows us "balancing." It makes even my

brother Elyahu sick to his stomach, and both of them have to give up whatever's inside them, as do the rest of the passengers. They're barely able to drag themselves back to their bunks, where they fall like sheaves of wheat onto their beds. And that's when the real hell of the parting of the Red Sea begins.

D .

I and my friend Mendl hold out longer than all the rest. Mendl met another emigrant, an "old sea dog," who had traveled back and forth to America three times, so he knew how to cure seasickness. He tells us his remedy: stay up on the deck and look out toward the horizon, not at the ocean. It's like you imagine you're in a sled on the snow, not riding a horse. But the old sea dog ends up lying stretched out on his bunk, while Mendl and I get so soaked from the rain, you could wring us out like a dishrag. We can't even find our bunks on our own. Someone has to lead us there by the hand.

E.

How long does the parting of the Red Sea last? A day or two, maybe three, I'm not sure. I only know one thing—when we wake up, it's a joy to be alive. The sky is as clear as pure gold, and the water is like a mirror. The *Prince Albert* is moving along, fast and trim, slicing through the water, splashing, frothing, and spraying. The passengers come to life. They all come up, young and old, into the warm, lovely, bright world. Someone says we'll soon be able to see land. I and my friend Mendl are the first to tell everyone the good news. From a distance it looks like a speck, a yellowish splotch, but it grows larger and wider. We can make out many tall-masted ships in the distance. All our troubles are quickly forgotten. The passengers dress up in their holiday best. The women pretty themselves up. My brother Elyahu combs his beard. Bruche and Teibl put on their shawls. My mother puts on her Shabbes silk kerchief. I and Mendl don't have anything special to put on, nor is there enough time—we're about to approach the shores of America. Eyes are shining, and people feel elated, just as the Jews must have felt after passing through the real parting of the Red Sea. We want to sing.

F.

“Hello to you, Columbus! We greet you, land of the free! Oh, golden, happy land!”

So our friend Pinni salutes the new land. He actually removes his cap, bends down, and bows his head. Since he’s nearsighted, he doesn’t notice a sweaty, ruddy-faced sailor running toward him, and they collide head on. The tip of Pinni’s nose strikes the sailor between the eyes—but luckily the sailor’s a good-hearted sort. He examines our Pinni’s bruised nose, smiles, and mumbles something under his mustache. It must be some curse in an American language.

G.

Suddenly there’s chaos. Third-class passengers are asked to please go back to their places. First they’re asked politely, then angrily. Whoever doesn’t hurry down gets shoved from behind by a sailor or a steward. They close the doors and hang iron locks on them. Young and old; men, women, and children; Christians, Turks, gypsies—we’re all crammed in together. It’s suffocating. We can only see through the portholes what’s going on outside. We’ve never felt so miserable, like prisoners. “Why? Why are they doing this?” my friend Mendl complains, his eyes burning with fury.

H.

It turns out we’ve arrived in America. Now what? The first- and second-class passengers have left the ship by going down a long ladder with about a hundred steps. And how about us? We’re also in America!

“They shouldn’t treat us this way!” a Jewish tailor from Heissen cries. He’s all dressed up, wearing fancy spectacles. He’s not a bad fellow but he’s a bit of a pest, thinks highly of himself, and contradicts everyone. As soon as he hears what you have to say, he says the opposite. He and our friend Pinni have already gone at it. My brother Elyahu could barely separate them. Pinni had insulted him by calling him names—seamstress, tailor-man, pants-sewer—and asking him how many remnants he’d stolen.

Now that we're all locked up together, the Heissen tailor speaks up in Hebrew: "What are we? Who are we? We are like cattle. But even cattle have to be given consideration."

Pinni attacks him. He says that's not a good comparison. If you're talking about America, he says in his elegant language, as is his way, you have to wash your hands first. He can't bear to hear a bad word about America.

The Heissen tailor says he isn't speaking well or badly of America. He's only saying that everything is good and fine and nice but not for us. They won't be letting us out so soon.

Pinni loses his temper. "What then will they do with us? Pickle us?" he shouts.

"They won't pickle us," the Heissen tailor says with spite and pleasure in his voice. "They'll take us to a place called Ellis Island. There they'll lock us up like calves in stalls until our friends and family remind themselves to come get us."

Pinni leaps up. "Just listen to this man! All this tailor-man knows is bad news. He's not so old, but he's very clever! We all know about Castle Garden, I mean Ellis Island, but I've never heard anyone say that Ellis Island rounds people up like cattle."

Pinni grows more excited. He moves closer to the Heissen tailor as if threatening him.

The tailor backs off, a bit frightened. "Take it easy! Look at him—you'd think I'd stolen his coat! I said a bad thing about his America, but that's not allowed. Well, when we're all a few hours older, we'll be wiser."

III

IMPRISONED

A.

Our friend Pinni really hates Ellis Island. He's ready to write a poem about it or fight with my brother Elyahu, but he keeps his anger to himself. Pinni doesn't

want the Heissen tailor to know that he, Pinni, is dissatisfied with America. He keeps quiet, but inside he's boiling. "How can they take people and lock them up like cattle, like prisoners, like criminals!" he complains quietly to my brother Elyahu after they've brought us here.

The Heissen tailor was right. Oh, he exaggerated a bit—he said they'd lock us up in prison cells. Actually they led us into a large, brightly lit hall and give us free food and drink. They seemed like good, kind people, so what's the problem? Then we finally reach the hall—oh my! We have to walk single file across a long bridge. At every step we're greeted by a new nuisance of an official who considers, scrutinizes, and prods us.

The first thing they do is to turn our eyelids inside out with a white card to examine our eyes. Then they examine our arms and legs. Each examiner leaves a chalk mark on us and directs us where to go next, left or right. Then we enter the great hall I told you about. Only then can we look for one another. Until then we've been confused and separated. We're as frightened as calves led to the slaughter.

B.

What do you think we're so afraid of? Our fear is about my mother's eyes. What will happen when they see her red, weepy eyes? But it turns out her eyes are examined less than anyone else's.

"You can thank your father for this, may he have a blessed paradise!" My mother embraces us all and weeps tears of joy. She doesn't know what to do with so much happiness. My brother Elyahu too becomes another person. Usually when we're upset and rushing around, he takes it all out on me. His slaps fly right and left, and Bruche helps him out with a curse. But now it's as if he's grown a new skin. He pulls from his pocket an orange left over from the ship and hands it to me. On the *Prince Albert* they distributed an orange every day. Whoever wanted one ate it, and whoever didn't hid it in his pocket. I never hid mine. How can you see this fruit and not eat it up?

But Pinni expresses his delight the best. He says to us: "*Nu?* Who's the smart one, I or you? Didn't I say that our enemies told lies about America, that they wouldn't let in people with weepy eyes? They're idlers, liars, gossips, bad-

mouthers! They'll soon be saying that America will force us to convert. Where is that Heissen tailor, a curse on his father's bones?"

Our Pinni has made peace with America.

C.

In all the excitement one of our company goes missing—my friend Mendl. Bruche notices it first. She gasps and claps her hands together: "Oh my God, where's that Colt?"

"I can't believe it!" says my mother, and we all go looking for Mendl. He's gone, as if he's been swallowed up.

It turns out he got himself into a mess. During the examination he got confused. First he pretended to be mute, as he had in Germany. Then he spoke, but in crazy nonsense. He said he was ten years old, and then he said he was already a bar mitzvah and was putting on tefillin. Finally he told the officials the whole story—that at the German border his parents had somehow lost him and we had befriended him. He didn't know his parents' address or the name of the city they lived in. If he did know, he wouldn't need anyone's help finding them, he'd do it himself. So they placed him, along with some others, in a separate room to be sent back later.

D.

When we hear this story, we all come to the defense of the unfortunate Mendl. My mother makes a fuss. She'll have to explain things to his parents if she ever meets them, she knows.

"Wait a second, you aren't even out of the woods yourselves," the Heissen tailor tells her.

"Haman is heard from!" Pinni looks angrily at the tailor, ready to grab him by the throat.

The tailor acts dumb and goes on lecturing as if he had been asked, really piling it on. He lists all the problems and woes that we have yet to endure. First, he says, they'll take the addresses of our friends or relatives. Then they'll take

money to send them a telegram. We'll have to wait until someone comes. And only when someone says he knows us, and can promise that we'll be good and devoted to God and mankind, will they release us from confinement.

As you can well imagine, our friend Pinni flares up like a match. He looks at my brother Elyahu, but he's really speaking to the tailor. How does he know so much about the laws of Ellis Island? he asks him. The tailor tells him he made the acquaintance of another emigrant on the ship, a man who had traveled back and forth three times. He must be speaking of the old sea dog. From him the tailor learned about all the rules and regulations—and many more things about America, so many that he felt he was an American already. He even knew how to speak the American language—for example: *chicken, kitchen, sugar, mister, butcher, bridge*. What those words meant he wouldn't say.

"When we get there," Pinni says, "we'll find out for ourselves what they mean." He dismisses the tailor with a wave of the hand and steps aside, as if to say, You might as well listen to a dog bark.

E .

Don't you think it happens exactly as the Heissen tailor predicted? Not a hair's difference! Once we've passed through the seven stages of hell administered by the doctors, they ask us who we have in America. My mother steps forward. "Better ask who we don't have here," she says, and gets ready to name all our friends and relatives. It's a pleasure to look at her now that they've let her through with her weepy eyes. She's no longer a young woman, but she's still charming. It's been a long time since I've seen my mother glow as she does now.

But my brother Elyahu won't let her speak—the addresses, he says, are written on a piece of paper. Then Pinni interrupts and says they're asking for names, not addresses. Bruche cuts him off, saying that for all intents and purposes Pinni has no one in America. All the friends and relatives are ours. Pinni gets exasperated. "How are Fat Pessi and her husband Moishe the bookbinder more your friends than mine?" he says. Bruche says Pessi can go to hell—when she speaks of relatives, she means her father Yoneh the baker. Maybe my brother Elyahu is right—they aren't asking about friends but about relatives. And a to-do begins about their addresses.

F.

For reading the list of their addresses aloud, understandably, Pinni is the most qualified of us all. He takes the paper from my brother Elyahu, brings it up close to the tip of his nose, and reads the addresses with the same singsong that you use at wedding ceremonies. But no one understands what he's saying. Every word comes out wrong. My brother Elyahu tears the paper with the addresses from his hands and gives it to an official.

The official says two words: "All right."

We don't know what that means. The Heissen tailor says he knows what it means. Those two words, when spoken together, he says, mean that things will go as we wish.

Then the officials collect our coins and send off two telegrams, one to Moishe the bookbinder and his wife Fat Pessi, the other to Yoneh the baker. In the meantime we treat ourselves to a meal. It isn't that good. The little bit of tea they serve, Bruche says, you could cut with a knife. But the meal doesn't cost us anything. On Ellis Island everything is free. Having satisfied our hunger, we settle in to wait for our friends and families.

G.

Waiting is easier said than done. Our eyes almost creep out of our heads before we see a familiar face. The first to arrive are our neighbors Fat Pessi and her husband Moishe the bookbinder. We don't actually see them—we are, as you remember, confined. We're informed that a fat woman and her husband have come to see us. We realize it must be Pessi and her Moishe. They're not allowed to see us but are being held in the examination room, which upsets us very much.

Someone advises us to tip the guards at the door, and maybe they'll allow them to visit, even if from a distance. But our friend Pinni says that America is not Russia—in America you don't bribe.

Our Heissen tailor, who pops up everywhere, pops up now and says it's the same the whole world over: "Gold and silver make bastards legal."

Pinni is speechless.

H .

Naturally the Heissen tailor is right. For a quarter, we can see our neighbor Pessi through the bars. Her red face and triple chins are sweating as she smiles at us from afar. My mother nods at her as both shed tears. From behind her broad back her husband Moishe peeks out, no longer wearing a Russian hat, as at home, but an American cap. Then in a moment Yoneh with his angry eyes appears. He's hardly changed at all, except for his beard—*oy vey!* What's happened to this beard! His wife of the fur cape also comes. We want to greet them, to hug and kiss them, to ask them how they are and what's new in the world. How's life here in America? For my part, I'm dying to know where Vashti is. And how is Bruche's little sister Alteh? And how are the rest of the gang? But what can we do? We can't budge. We're locked up. We can only see through the bars. We're like prisoners or convicts, or beasts.

I .

It's a pity—our poor friend Pinni can't look us straight in the eyes. He's ashamed for America. You could swear it's his own America and that he's responsible for what happens here. He develops a hatred for Ellis Island and makes fun of it by calling it Ellie's Island. This hurts my brother Elyahu's feelings, because *his* name sounds like Ellie. This leads to the usual quarrel. Bruche intrudes, this time taking Pinni's side, citing a proverb: "Don't kick a dog when he's down." What can she mean by that?

IV

A SEA OF TEARS

A .

As if we don't have enough of our own troubles, God has ordained that we share other people's troubles on Ellis Island. As if my mother's tears flowing since my father's death aren't enough, she now has to shed tears over others' misfortunes. Almost every minute God presents her with a new tragedy. My mother takes everything to heart. She wrings her hands, hides her face, and cries quietly.

"You sin, Mama!" my brother Elyahu says to her, and I think he's right. What does she have to cry about? We aren't dragging ourselves around the world anymore. We've survived the voyage across the ocean, thank God. We're almost in America. Another hour, another two hours, and we'll be free. But how can a person not cry when surrounding him is so much misfortune, so many reasons for tears, for a sea of tears?

To convey to you all the misfortunes we've seen on Ellis Island, I'd have to sit down with you for a day and a night and talk and talk and talk.

B .

What will you say to this story? A father and mother and their four children were detained, not able to go back, not able to come here. During the examination a twelve-year-old daughter of theirs could not count backward. The official asked her how old she was, and she said, "Twelve years old." They asked her further, "How old were you a year ago at this time?" She didn't know. They said, "Count from one to twelve." She did. Then they told her to count from twelve backward to one. She couldn't. If they had asked *me* to do that, it would have been easy—no problem! They decide they cannot allow the girl to come to America.

To witness the agony of those parents and the misery of that child, you'd have to be made of stone. When Mother even catches sight of them, she breaks into tears. Bruche and Teibl can't keep from crying either. Now ask yourself, what will happen to the parents and to the other children?

C .

Or how do you like this story? A woman has been traveling with us named Tziviyeh. Her husband left her long ago. She sent out letters all over and received news that her husband was in Cincinnati, a city in America. So now she's going

there to catch him. The “old sea dog” I told you about advised her to find some man in New York who would say he is her husband, and she would be allowed in. The Heissen tailor got mixed up in it too. The old sea dog tried to get a close friend to claim he was her husband. Finally the officials realized it was all a sham. The man was married and had nothing to do with the abandoned wife. Oh my, what went on then! All of Ellis Island went into an uproar.

Our friend Pinni got his revenge on the Heissen tailor. Although in his heart Pinni despised Ellis Island for detaining us, he wouldn’t show it to the Heissen tailor. To hell with him! Instead he even rubbed it in: “So, Mr. Tailor? Didn’t I say that America is not Russia? In America they don’t tolerate shams or tricks or cheating. Long live Columbus!”

But still he caught it from my mother, and even more so from Bruche. His wife Teibl added a little dig. In fact, the women almost scratched his eyes out for laughing at someone who was bleeding. My mother befriended the abandoned wife, becoming like a sister to her. Ellis Island will be sending the abandoned wife back, but the man who pretended to be her husband won’t be let off so easily. In the meantime they’re both detained, and my mother is beside herself.

D.

A young, innocent-looking wife is going to Boston to rejoin her husband. With her is her little girl with curly hair, pretty as a picture, named Ketzele. The girl’s real name is Kayla, after her grandmother, but they call her Ketzele. She isn’t yet three years old, but she runs around and talks and sings and dances. We met them on *Prince Albert*. Everyone there was in love with this child. They hugged and kissed her and passed her around from hand to hand. Ketzele! Ketzele! We’d become very attached to her young mother too. She never left my mother’s side for a moment and poured her heart out to her and read us all her husband’s letters. They hadn’t seen each other for over three years. He’s never seen his child. He dreams of her day and night and can’t let himself believe that he’ll soon set eyes on his daughter, his Ketzele. The young wife weeps, and my mother wipes her own eyes. I laugh at them both—why do they need to cry? I take Ketzele in my arms and feed her pieces of apple and orange, right in her mouth. Ketzele looks into my eyes, laughs, and pets me with her silken little hands as I kiss her small, warm fingers. Too bad I don’t have a paintbox, or I’d

paint Ketzale on paper with her curly silken hair, her pretty blue eyes, and her face like an angel's. My friend Mendl laughs at me for playing with a "doll." To him she is just a doll!

As we were approaching America, Ketzale fell deathly ill. A chill passes over my body when I remember that time. That child took a part of me with her. I can barely speak about it or even think about it. Don't make me tell you what they did with Ketzale. I'll just tell you about the sorrow of the young mother when we reached Ellis Island. She didn't cry. She stared at everyone with glassy eyes. Whenever anyone asked her a question, she didn't answer. Now people are afraid the young woman has gone mad and will be sent back. My mother is frantic. My brother Elyahu is beside himself. He can't bear our mother's tears any longer. And Pinni hides and cannot be found.

E .

Do you think only Jews have problems on Ellis Island? Gentiles also have their troubles. A large group of Italians have been traveling with us, all wearing velvet pants and wooden shoes. When they walk, they clomp like horses. They're fine Gentiles, excellent people. They're crazy about me. They call me a strange name, *piccolo bambino*. They give me nuts and raisins from their velvet pants pockets, and I rather like that. I can't speak with them because they don't understand my language and I don't understand theirs, but I love to hear them talk among themselves. Their *r*'s come out hard: "*Buona serrra!*" "*Mio carro!*" "*Prrrego signorrra!*"

Then a terrible thing happened to them. When they were being examined, one of them innocently let slip that a contractor in London had hired them to work on a bridge in America. That's not legal. So they're going to be sent back. They speak all at once, gesticulate wildly, and roll their *r*'s: "*Sacrrramento!*" But nothing helps. They are greatly to be pitied. Several of them have tears in their eyes.

F.

Mazel tov! We have a wedding on Ellis Island! How did this happen? Listen. An

orphan girl from Chudnov named Leah, dark-haired, charming, and friendly, became very close to our three women during the journey. They became one soul. Our women learned she was alone and had no one in America. For many years she had worked hard, saved some money, and was going to America. She couldn't live in Chudnov anymore. They had killed her father in a pogrom, and her mother had died of grief. She was left on her own. Good people took care of her and taught her a trade—she could sew, knit, iron, and embroider. “Golden hands,” my mother said of her. Everyone is sure that in America she'll be given all the work she needs, and she'll find a good husband. Leah lowers her eyes and blushes. The problem is that she has no one in America to receive her.

But there's a bachelor on the *Prince Albert*, Lazer Bach. He's a carpenter and is going to his uncle in Chicago. Lazer is a rough-looking redhead with very thick lips, but I like him for his songs. He sings Yiddish songs beautifully. So it was decided: since Lazer had someone to receive him and Leah had no one, Lazer Bach would say Leah was his fiancée. Of course this ruse was thought up by none other than our old sea dog. And here's what happened. At the examination they appeared together as bride-to-be and groom-to-be. Sounds good? It turns out that on Ellis Island it doesn't work that way. If you are engaged, you must have a wedding there before they'll let you leave. Leah wept. We consoled her: “What do you care, little silly? You'll get to the city, and he'll give you a divorce, and you'll be the same Leah as before.” “But what if he won't?” the fearful Leah asks. We reply, “Is being sent back better?”

In short, we have a wedding, a sad wedding without *klezmer*, but with an assistant rabbi and many tears, no end of tears, a sea of tears.

G .

Only one person is happy. Can you guess who? It's the Heissen tailor. He's lived to triumph over our friend Pinni. Who can compare with the Heissen tailor? He sees nothing but welcoming parades in front of us, strokes his beard, and peers at Pinni through his shiny eyeglasses. But Pinni is cleverer than he. He sticks the point of his nose into a book, pretending not to see the tailor. He couldn't care less!

H.

Our own troubles, and other people's troubles, put a damper on our joy at finally being in America. We've seen and heard so much sadness here on Ellis Island that we're exhausted. We gather our family close together and stare at the vast, busy city that stands in the distance. Do you know what we look like? We look like a flock of sheep on a hot summer's day, huddled together in a field near the railway tracks, looking bewildered as a train noisily rushes by and vanishes. Too bad I don't have a pencil and a sheet of paper to draw our huddled family and all the other confined emigrants on Ellis Island, each sitting on his bundle. Some sigh and tell one another what is in their bitter hearts. Others remain silent, and still others weep, bathed in tears, in a sea of tears.

V

WITH BOTH FEET ON THE GROUND

A.

If you've never sailed on the ocean, never spent ten days and ten nights on the water, never been confined on Ellis Island; if you've never witnessed or listened to your fill of troubles, sorrows, and pain, never bathed in a sea of tears, nor awaited those who are supposed to deliver you—then you can't feel the joy of finally standing with both feet on the ground. If I weren't afraid of my brother Elyahu, or embarrassed to be seen by others, I'd fall to the ground and then somersault three times. That's how good it feels to be standing with both feet on solid ground. You can understand why even a pessimistic man like my brother Elyahu wears a new expression on his face. He rubs his hands together and says to us all, "Are we really in America?"

"With the help of the One Above, praised be His name!" My mother looks up to the sky. Then she adds with a deep sigh, "The living have made it here, but the one who lies in the earth has not."

By this she means my father. Nowhere and never does she forget my father for as much as a moment.

B .

More enthusiastic than anyone is our friend Pinni. I hesitate to say it, but he's going crazy. He plants himself with his face toward the ocean, raises his right hand in a fist, and proclaims:

“Listen, you asses, brutes, drunks, hooligans, and *pogromchiks*! We have you to thank for our being here in this free, fortunate land! If not for you and your persecution, cruel laws, and pogroms, we wouldn't know about Columbus and Columbus wouldn't know about us! You will wait a long time before we come back to you! Just as you never can see your own ears, you will never see us in your lives! One day you will look around and realize you had the people of Israel with you and didn't know how to appreciate them! You will have a miserable end, just like old Spain. You will whine like dogs. One day you will miss us! There will not remain so much as a single Jew. You'll call us back, but that'll be the day!”

Who knows how long Pinni would carry on if Yoneh the baker didn't lay a hand on his back and say, “Pinni! God be with you! To whom are you speaking? To the stones? Come! We'll be late for the ferry! Or would you rather spend another night on Ellis Island?”

We gather our bundles and make our way to the ferry.

C .

But this is only a matter of speaking. We're not allowed on so quickly. You forget, we're carrying an extra burden on our hands—my friend Mendl. They're not letting him out, but without him we won't move. My mother says she won't be able to rest in America if, God forbid, they send the orphan back, who knows where. Luckily we are to meet with a group of people called the Assembly of Guests that has a representative on Ellis Island, a fine man, very dedicated. It is to this man that we are directed. We tell him the truth about the boy. Of course we all speak at once.

The man cuts us off in the middle and suggests we choose one from among us to be our spokesman. After debating which one, we pick Bruche. Why Bruche? Because neither my brother Elyahu nor Pinni can stand to see the other speak

without interrupting him. My mother speaks well but a bit too much, which is to say, once she starts talking, she's soon telling the whole story about her husband and how he got sick and so on and so forth. No one wants to hear her out to the end. Bruche will make it short and sweet.

After Bruche's brief account of Mendl's situation, the representative gets down to work. He runs off to meet with different people, and after much trouble he brings my friend back to us.

D .

The representative takes hold of Mendl's ear and gives him a stern lecture. "Remember, young man, we're responsible for you, so make sure you behave yourself," he says. "For two years you'll be under our supervision. We'll keep an eye on you. If you don't behave as you're supposed to, we'll send you right back to where you came from!" Then he writes down his name and all of ours, the names of our friends and relatives and their addresses. And then we're free to go wherever we wish and to do whatever we please.

You must think Mendl is affected by this. Not one bit. My friend Mendl is the kind of person whom nothing surprises, and that's why I like him. Later, when I would think about my friend Mendl, about what he was and what later became of him, it really seems like God's miracle. Only in a country like America can the lowly become great, the humble elevated, and even the dead brought to life. I'm getting ahead of myself. We're still at the ferry.

E .

A ferry is a kind of boat on which you can put a horse and wagon and all your belongings and still cross the water. It's long and wide enough for my friend Mendl and me to hold hands and to walk the length and breadth of it. My mother is occupied with our friends and family. They're all chattering away, asking one another what's new. Then she realizes I and Mendl aren't there. She makes a fuss and assumes we've fallen into the water and drowned. The truth is we saw steps and have climbed to the upper deck—where we see an enormously huge iron statue of a woman. She looks like a giant mother. We've barely taken in this

statue when we hear my mother's screams, and my brother Elyahu is before us. He's mad at us for frightening everyone. We don't deny it. He would certainly have made us pay dearly for this, but just then my sister-in-law Bruche lets out an odd shriek, "Oy, mother-in-law, I'm sick!" and she goes into the same condition as on the ocean. Long live the Heissen tailor, who refuses to leave our side! He confronts Bruche and lectures her: "A grown woman like you should know the difference between an ocean and a little harbor. Feh, shame on you!"

Bruche protests. She doesn't know it's a harbor. She thought we were on the ocean again. Is that such a sin? Pinni says he can tell the difference between an ocean and a harbor simply by the smell. An ocean smells of fish, but in a harbor there are no fish. The Heissen tailor asks, "What makes you so sure?" Pinni answers that he wasn't speaking to him and on principle hates arguing with tailors.

Moishe the bookbinder gets into it. He reproaches Pinni, saying he is now in America, not in Russia. America is a land of tailors. Here in America a tailor is as important as a landowner is at home, if not more so. In America tailors have a *yoonyeh*, which is almost like our tailors' guild.

"We bakers have our own *yoonyeh*," Yoneh the baker puts in. "Our bakers' *yoonyeh* is probably as big as the tailors' *yoonyeh*."

"At least say, 'Forgive the comparison!'" Moishe the bookbinder interrupts him. A ruckus follows about which *yoonyeh* is bigger.

"In a few minutes we'll be in Neveyork," says Pinni to my brother Elyahu, in order to change the subject from *yoonyehs*, which is getting on all our nerves.

The city rises in front of our eyes, getting larger as we approach it. Ach! What a city! Ach! What tall buildings! They are cathedrals, not buildings! And windows! A thousand windows! If only I had a pencil and paper!

F.

Trrrach-tarrrerach—tach-tach-tach! Tach! Dzin-dzin-dzin-glin-glon! Hoo-hooooo! Fee-yoo! Ay-ay-ay-ay! And again—*trachtarrrarach!* Then comes the hoarse screech of a captured pig: *Wheee! Wheee! Wheee!* These are the sounds that greet us when we land in New York. As long as we were on water, we were calm, but the moment we are standing with both feet on American soil, we are

overcome by panic.

The first to lose her composure is my mother. She looks exactly like a mother hen fearing for her chicks, spreading her wings and clucking in distress. She opens her arms wide and shouts, “Motl! Mendl! Elyahu! Bruche! Pinni! Teibl! Where are you? Come here!”

“God be with you, mother-in-law! Why are you shouting?” says Bruche, and my brother Elyahu adds, “Your screaming and yelling will get us chased out of America!”

“That’s ridiculous!” Pinni shoves both hands into his pockets and pushes his cap back on his head. “May the czar suffer as long as it will take for them to get rid of us! Do you forget that America was created by God in order to protect and shelter all those who are driven and persecuted, pushed around and humiliated, from every corner of the earth?”

The crush of people is enormous. Our friend Pinni has almost the same mishap he had when arriving in London—he’s stretched out on the street, soon to be trampled and stepped on. But this time he escapes with a mere blow to the side, strong enough to knock his cap off, which is caught up by the wind and deposited a distance off. This wastes several minutes and makes us miss the trolley car. But we don’t have to wait too long. Another one soon comes along, and we climb up with our bundles and grab all the empty seats. We’re off to the city.

“Thank God we’re rid of that pain in the neck, the Heissen tailor!” our Pinni rejoices.

My brother Elyahu says, “Wait, don’t be so sure! If we’re worthy of God, we’ll live long enough to meet up with him more than once in New York.”

VI

ON THE STREETS OF NEW YORK A.

The ride into the city of New York is dreadful. The ride itself isn’t so bad, but transferring from one trolley to another is difficult. As soon as you sit down—

aha! you're flying like eagles through the air over a long, narrow bridge, afraid for your life. They call it the elevated here. Do you think that's it? Just wait a bit. You get yourself out of the elevated, and you have to switch over to another car. You reach it by going down steps, as if into a cellar, where you ride under the ground so fast that your eyes pop out of your head. They call this the subway. Why is one car called elevated and the other subway?

My sister-in-law Bruche says America would be much better if they didn't fly around so much. She swears she'll never ride either the elevated or the subway, no matter what. She'd rather walk than fly like crazy through the clouds, or run under the ground. I, on the contrary, would be happy to ride around on the elevated and the subway all day and night, and so would my friend Mendl.

B .

It seems we've already been everywhere. We've seen enough of the shoving, pressing, and suffocating in this *gehennam* such as we've never experienced anywhere! We're packed in body against body, one passenger out, two in. No place to sit—you must stand. You've got to hold on to what they call a strap, otherwise you'll fall. You get twisted around. If God helps, a seat becomes empty—and many passengers dive for it. With great difficulty you find a spot. You're sitting between two Gentiles, both black, a man and a woman with huge, fat lips, enormous white teeth, and white nails, who are chewing on something like cows chewing their cud. Only later do I find out that it's called chewing gum. It's a kind of candy made of rubber. You keep it in your mouth and chew it. You mustn't swallow it. Young boys, old people, and cripples make a living selling it. Our friend Pinni, as you know, has a sweet tooth. He got hold of a package of chewing gum and slowly swallowed the whole thing. It clogged up his stomach, almost poisoning him. Doctors had to pump his stomach through his throat to save his life. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's go back to our first entry into the city of New York.

C.

For the entire ride on the elevated and in the subway, the men and women keep talking. I say talking, but that's not altogether correct. Who can talk on the

elevated or on the subway when the noise and din and the screeching of the wheels make you deaf? You can't hear your own voice. You have to yell as if you're speaking to someone hard of hearing. We get hoarse screaming. My mother several times begs Pessi, "Pessi'nyu, dear soul, my heart, my love, leave it for later!"

We quiet down for a minute but soon start screaming again at the top of our lungs. We are, after all, lively people, good friends, and former neighbors. How can you hold back and not say what's in your heart? We haven't seen each other for so long, and there is so much to say, so much!

D.

Having talked and screamed our lungs out over small matters, we finally come to the most important matter of all: where to stay. After many arguments and negotiations we decide that my mother and I, our friend Pinni, and his Teibl will stay with our neighbor Fat Pessi. My brother Elyahu and his wife Bruche will stay with their in-laws Yoneh and Rivele. And what about Mendl? Pessi says she'll take Mendl. Rivele says no. At Pessi's, she says, there are a good number of hefty eaters, which hurts Pessi's feelings. She says just as there's no such thing as having too many teeth, so a mother can never have too many children.

"Quiet down! Let's ask the boy himself!" says Moishe the bookbinder. So they ask Mendl, "Where would you rather go—to him or the baker?" Mendl answers that he wants to go wherever his friend Motl goes. That's exactly what I thought Mendl should say.

E .

"In one more station we'll stop!" cries Yoneh, using new American words. We don't know what *station* and *stop* mean. He explains.

"In-law! When did you start speaking the local language?" my mother asks.

Rivele answers for her husband. "I promise you that in a week you'll begin talking the local language. Let's say you go out on the street and ask, 'Where is the *kotzev*?' You can say *kotzev* from today till the day after tomorrow, and no one will answer you."

My mother asks, “How then shall I say it?”

Fat Pessi breaks in, “You must say ‘the butcher.’ ”

“A plague on them!” Bruche interrupts. “Even if they burst, I’ll say *kotzev*, *kotzev*, and still *kotzev*!”

F.

Suddenly we stop. Our in-law Yoneh grabs Rivele, my brother Elyahu, and Bruche and pushes them toward the exit. My mother stands up and wants to say goodbye to her children. Pinni stands up as well to say goodbye to my brother Elyahu and wants to arrange with him where and when to meet again. But before they know it, Yoneh, his wife, my brother Elyahu, and Bruche are on the other side of the door, which the conductor has closed shut. The train begins moving, and Pinni, distracted and bewildered, is thrown off balance. He lands on a Negro woman’s lap. She pushes him off with both hands so hard, he flies over to the seat across from her, and his cap flies off toward the door. As if that isn’t enough, all the people in the train laugh. I and my friend Mendl join in and are scolded by my mother and Teibl for laughing. How can a person *not* laugh?!

G.

Everything must come to an end, and so must our train ride into New York. We’re on the street. If I didn’t know we were in America, I’d surely think we were in Brod or in Lemberg—the same Jews, the same women, the same hustle and bustle, the same dirt as there, except the din and tumult are worse, as are the noise and hurrying. The buildings are taller, much taller. A six-story building is nothing. Some buildings are twelve, twenty, thirty, forty, or more stories high, but more about that later.

In the meantime we’re on the street with our belongings and still have a way to walk. Leading the walk is Moishe with his short legs, followed by Fat Pessi, her legs barely carrying her because she is so fat and heavy. Walking behind are Pinni and his Teibl. To watch Pinni walk, you lose your belly from laughter. When he walks, he prances with a skip and a hop on his long, skinny legs that get tangled. One trouser leg is rolled up, the other is down. His cap is pushed to

the side, his tie is askew—he’s a strange figure, begging to be drawn on paper. I and my friend Mendl walk behind, stopping at almost every shopwindow. We’re pleased to see the signs printed in Yiddish letters and all kinds of Jewish things displayed: prayer books, small prayer shawls, yarmulkes, *mezuzahs*, matzos. Imagine—smack at the beginning of winter, matzos! It’s obviously a Jewish city. But we aren’t permitted to lag behind. My mother calls us, “Come on, hurry up!” And we must go.

H.

Whoever has not seen a New York street has missed a wonderful sight. What can you not find on the street? Men are doing all kinds of business. Women sit and chat. Children in look-alike carriages are napping. The babies suck milk from little bottles right on the street. Older children play games with buttons, small wheels, balls, wagons, sleds, and skates. Skates are contraptions with four wheels tied to the feet, and you roll on them. You can go deaf from the racket the children raise on the street. The street belongs to the children. No one would dare chase them off. In general, America is a country created for children’s sake. And that’s why I love it. Just let someone lay a finger on a child!

My brother Elyahu learned a lesson he’ll never forget. Here’s what happened. One time Mendl and I were on the street playing checkers, a game with round wooden buttons that you shoot at each other. My brother Elyahu came over while we were playing and, as was his old habit, grabbed me by the ear. He was about to give me a few good slaps when a sturdy fellow appeared out of nowhere, ran up to my brother, and tore me out of his hands. Then he rolled up his sleeves and said something in English to my brother Elyahu. But as my brother Elyahu didn’t understand English, the sturdy fellow stuck his fist right under his nose. Soon a small crowd of people gathered around. My brother tried to explain in Yiddish that he was my brother and he had the right to teach me respect. But the onlookers said this was not the way things go in America, whether you are a brother or not. You may not hit someone smaller than you.

Nu, how can you not love this country!

I.

Look how I got busy talking—I forgot that we’ve arrived where we’re supposed to stay, at Fat Pessi and her husband Moishe’s. When we go into her house, we don’t find any of the gang. I look all around for my old friend Vashti. No Vashti, nobody. Where are they all? Wait till you hear.

VII

THE GANG AT WORK

A.

The gang is at work. But before I tell you what kind of work they’re doing, I have to describe to you how a bookbinder manages to live in America.

First of all, the apartment. Back home Fat Pessi would have been afraid to climb up so high. You have to go up and up, maybe a hundred stairs, until you reach a magnificent apartment with countless big and small rooms. In each room there are beds and blankets, with curtains on the windows. One room is called a kitchen. It doesn’t have a brick oven, only an iron range with holes on which to cook. The water comes out of the wall, hot and cold water—as much as you want! You just turn the faucet, and out it pours.

B.

Later on, when my brother Elyahu and his wife Bruche come by to see how we are faring, our friend Pinni takes him by the hand and leads him into the kitchen. He shows him the two faucets for the water and begins his usual speech. “What do you have to say, Elyahu, about Columbus? What Russian is worth his little fingernail! Except for guzzling vodka and making pogroms, he doesn’t know his left hand from his right.”

My brother Elyahu is not going to let him get away with it. “So now you’re all for Columbus. What were you saying a while back on Ellis Island?”

Pinni says that Ellis Island doesn’t belong to America. Ellis Island lies on the

border between America and the rest of the world.

My brother says Pinni doesn't know what he's talking about, and they start quarreling. Bruche makes peace between them. She says they're both ignoramuses and their quarreling isn't worth a worn-out groschen.

But I started to tell you about Moishe the bookbinder's apartment and went off in another direction. Don't worry. I'll get back to our Fat Pessi and her gang of children.

C.

Surely never in their lives did our Moishe and our Fat Pessi dream of living in such luxury, in such an apartment with so many rooms. They have a room for everything. For sleeping there is a bedroom. For eating there is a separate room called a dining room. Why a dining room? My brother Elyahu and Pinni cannot figure it out. All right, a bedroom, because beds are there. But a dining room? What does *dining* mean? Why not eating room?

Moishe interrupts: "Why do you need to rack your brains for nothing? So long as I'm head of this family in New York, thanks be to God, and my children are all working, with God's help, and we are making a living here in America—"

I look at this Moishe the bookbinder and think, God Almighty! How a person can change! At home we never heard him say a word. Everywhere and always it was Pessi. He only knew how to make pulp and to bind books. And here he's grown a foot taller. It's no wonder. The man has no worries! All the children are working and bringing home money. I'll tell you all their names, what their work is, and how much each one is earning. My mother is jealous of our neighbor Pessi because God blessed her with so many children.

D.

The oldest boy, the one we called Barrel at home, is called Sam here. Why Sam? I don't know. I only know he's already making money. He is working at a paper box factory. Don't think it's such a hard job. He doesn't make the boxes himself. He delivers them. He takes a bundle of ten dozen boxes in each hand and runs through the narrow streets between the cars and the trolleys. He has to be careful

the boxes don't get crushed. For this he makes two and a half dollars a week and hopes to get a raise. Maybe in time he'll make three dollars a week. That's for now. Later on, his boss tells him, he'll teach him the business of making boxes. He says to him, "Just be a good boy, and you'll be all right."

E.

The second boy, who was once called Velvl the Tomcat, is now called Willy. He is also a *delivery boy* and works for a *grocery store*, which is a much harder job. He has to get up very early, when God Himself is still asleep. First he has to sort out and fill all the orders, and then he delivers the bundles to the *customers*. The bundles consist of rolls, butter, cheese, eggs, sugar, milk, and sour cream. He has to climb with them up more than two hundred stairs to the *top floor*, and quickly, so he can get back to the store in time to sweep the floor, clean up, and do other work until noon. Then he's free. He doesn't make much money, only fifteen cents a day, except Friday, when he makes a whole quarter plus a challah for Shabbes.

F.

What I just told you about applies only to the older boys. They don't let the younger ones work here mornings, because in America the young children must go to school, or they're in trouble. And school is free, even the books. When our friend Pinni hears this, he's astounded. At home they didn't even allow Jewish children into the schools, but here in America they drag you in by force, or else you'll be punished and fined. "For that reason alone," says Pinni, "the czar should bury himself alive out of shame!"

But since they go to school only half a day, children can do something else in the afternoon to earn a few dollars. And that's what Pessi's younger children do. The one we used to call Stork works at a pharmacy, which they call a drugstore. He washes bottles and goes to the post office for stamps that are sold at the pharmacy. For half a day he makes a dollar and a quarter a week. "That comes in handy too," says Moishe, and takes the money.

G .

Feitl Stutterer, now called Philip, also goes to school half a day. The other half he peddles gazettes, here called papers. He runs up and down East Broadway, crying, “Papers! Papers!” then the name of each paper. From that he makes forty or fifty cents a day and sometimes more. Of course that also goes into his father’s pot. They all earn money, and the father takes care of them all.

H .

Even my friend Hershl earns money, the one with the birthmark on his forehead who we called Vashti. Here he isn’t called Hershl or Vashti but Harry, and he’s going to school. The other half of each day after school he spends at a pushcart on Rivington Street. It belongs to a woman from our hometown who sells rice, barley, beans, chickpeas, nuts, raisins, lentils, almonds, figs, olives, carob, and sour pickles. There isn’t much work for Vashti, or Harry, to do. He just has to keep an eye on people to see they don’t filch anything, because a woman who comes up to ask the price of something might pop a raisin or an almond or an olive into her mouth. But he himself will often sample the sweets. Vashti has no secrets from me. He admitted that he once snacked on so many raisins, he had a bellyache for three days afterward. He doesn’t get paid for his work aside from *tips*, a cent or two, sometimes a nickel, for helping customers carry their packages. That can add up to a dollar a week. At home Vashti never laid eyes on a kopek even in his dreams, except for distributing *shalach-mones*, Purim sweets. But Purim comes only once a year. Here Purim comes every day, and every day he earns money.

“Columbus! You are worth your weight in gold!” exclaims our friend Pinni when he walks down Rivington Street and sees Vashti at his pushcart. He buys three cents’ worth of carobs and gives one cent to Vashti as a tip.

I .

As for Moishe, he is not sitting idle. He isn’t binding books as he did at home because here in America, he says, you need to have connections and a lot of money to rent a store and buy machinery. And in his older years, he can’t work

again as an assistant to someone else. Somebody gave him advice—among Jews you'll find plenty: put up a book stand on Essex Street and make a living that way. This has such appeal to our friend Pinni that he says he would love a business like that. He says it appeals to him because you're influenced by what you work with. Pinni loves books as a fish loves water. When he gets hold of a book and sticks the tip of his nose into it, you can't tear him away.

J .

Even our in-law Yoneh the baker doesn't take up his old trade of baking. Why not? It's the same story. In order to open a bakery here, you need to have Rothschild's fortune. And besides that, you need to belong to the *yoonyeh*, and he's too old for that. He's afraid of working for someone who doesn't belong to a *yoonyeh* in case there's a strike, which happens in America every day, and for which he might get his head split open. It looks bad. What can he do? He also receives advice that instead of baking bread and challah he should make knishes, homemade knishes, dairy knishes with cheese, or *parve* knishes with cabbage. What can I say? Our in-law isn't doing badly at all, not at all! His knishes have a reputation all over the East Side. If you go down Essex Street, you'll see a sign in a window written in large Yiddish letters—HOMEMADE KNISHES SOLD HERE—and you'll know that's our in-law, my brother Elyahu's father-in-law, Yoneh the baker. And if you see on the same street, right across the way, another Yiddish sign with the same large letters—HOMEMADE KNISHES SOLD HERE—you'll know it isn't our in-law Yoneh the baker. He now has a competitor, so don't go there. Better go to our in-law, to my brother Elyahu's father-in-law. You'll know who he is as soon as you come in. Our in-law has an angry face. If you don't recognize him, you'll recognize his wife Rivele. She has a double chin and wears coral beads. You'll certainly know my sister-in-law Bruche. She has big feet. Her little sister, a pimply faced girl with a pigtail, is there too. Her name is Alteh, and they once talked about her being a match for me. But we'll talk about her another time.

VIII

WE LOOK FOR JOBS

A.

We can't complain. We are very welcome guests at our neighbors Fat Pessi and Moishe's home. It isn't bad at all for us, and it's lively enough. And on Sunday, the day the gang isn't working, it's really lively. We gather together, all the young folk and my friend Mendl, and we go to the theater—I mean, the *moving pictures*. It costs a nickel apiece, and you see wonders to make your head spin! If I were the son of a king or Jacob Schiff's grandson, I'd sit all day and all night at the moving pictures. I'd never leave. My friend Mendl feels the same way. So does Vashti, who is now called Harry.

But if you talk to my brother Elyahu, he will tell you it's all a bunch of nonsense. It's a big nothing, he says, made for children. You may ask, if it's for children, then why does our friend Pinni run there all the time, and his wife Teibl, and my sister-in-law Bruche? My brother has an explanation for everything. The women, he says, have as much sense as children, and Pinni runs there all the time just to spite him. He rails against the moving pictures, until one Sunday he decides to come along with us and see for himself. From that time on, he never misses a Sunday at the moving pictures. We all go, young and old, big and small, even Pessi and Moishe and our in-laws—all of us. Only my mother doesn't go. Her husband, she says, is lying in the ground, so how can she go to the movies? Her enemies will never live to see the day!

B .

It isn't bad at all at our neighbors', but it isn't a solution to be a guest. You have to do something with yourself, to "get a job." In America everyone has to make a living. So says my brother Elyahu. He goes around looking more worried than anyone. Every day he comes back from his father-in-law Yoneh the baker's and sits down with my mother to talk about the future. Bruche sits with them, as does our friend Pinni. Pinni has endless plans and projects, but they are worthless. They aren't really that bad, but my brother Elyahu doesn't like them. And if my brother Elyahu likes them, Bruche doesn't. For example, Pinni had the idea that the men and their wives become tailors in a sewing machine shop. Here they're

called *operators*. But Bruche feels it wasn't worth leaving their home and risking their lives crossing the ocean to become tailors in their later years. My brother Elyahu says he doesn't know which is better, selling knishes on Essex Street or working at a sewing machine. Bruche is insulted that my brother Elyahu looks down on selling knishes. She lets him know that if not for her father's knishes on Essex Street, they'd all be starving.

C.

I love our friend Pinni for the way he talks. When he gets excited, it's a pleasure to hear him. Having heard out everyone's arguments, he jumps up, waves his hands, and delivers a passionate speech. I remember every word he says:

Oh, miserable, ignorant people that you are! You still have deeply rooted inside yourselves the Jewish exile from that darkest land of the czar, may his name be obliterated and forgotten! But America is not a land of swines! All the millionaires and the millionairesses in America worked long and hard when they were young, some in shops and some on the street. Just ask Rockefeller, Carnegie, Rothschild, Morgan, or Vanderbilt what they once were. Didn't they sweep the streets? Didn't they hawk papers? Didn't they shine people's shoes for a nickel? Take, for example, the king of the automobiles, Mr. Ford, and ask him if he wasn't once a chauffeur or a taxi driver. Or take the really great people—

Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt—were they born great people, presidents? Even our President Wilson, may he forgive me, wasn't he just a teacher?"

D.

This my brother Elyahu can no longer take. He cuts Pinni short. "Eh, Pinni, now you're really blaspheming! You forget that Wilson is now our king."

But Pinni is a terror when he gets excited. He bursts out laughing. "Ha ha! King? What kind of king? There is no king in America! It's a free country, a democracy!"

"So he's not king, he's president, what's the difference?" my brother Elyahu protests.

But Pinni cuts *him* off. “There’s a big difference! There’s as much difference between a king and a president as there is between Cain and Abel! A king is a king and a president is a president! A king inherits his title from his father, and a president is elected. If we wish Wilson to be president for another four years, we will elect him again. If we don’t, he goes back to being a teacher. And do you know that in a few years I can also be a president?”

“You? A president?”

“I—a president!”

E .

As long as I’ve known my brother, I have never seen him laugh so hard. As you know, my brother Elyahu is, in general, a worried, gloomy man who rarely laughs, and even when he does laugh, it’s not wholeheartedly. This time he is caught up in such a fit of laughter that my mother becomes frightened for him.

But there really is something to laugh about. All you have to do is see our friend Pinni, how he thrusts his hands into the pockets of his too-short pants that barely reach the top of his new American shoes, how Teibl is forever trying unsuccessfully to straighten his too-short necktie, how his small American cap refuses to stay in one place, and especially how his pointy nose seems always to be peering down into his mouth as his nearsighted eyes squint at you.

God help us! This will one day become a president? Try *not* to laugh!

F.

When my brother Elyahu finishes laughing, he says to my mother, “Well, Pinni has taken care of us. We’ll work in the shop and sew dresses on the sewing machine. And Pinni certainly has his future assured. He will, God willing, become a president. But what about our children?”

He means me and my friend Mendl. He can’t bear to see us idle. He’s furious that we spend our days in the street playing *ball* and *checkers*. Do you remember when he grabbed me by the ear and was threatened with a fist under the nose by a burly fellow who told him that in America you can only “fight” with someone

who is your equal?

“You should worry more about yourself than the children!” says Moishe the bookbinder. With that he informs us that although we are indeed very welcome guests, it’s high time we did something to earn our own piece of bread.

G .

Do you think we enjoy being dependent on others’ generosity? My mother helps Pessi in the kitchen. She bakes and cooks and washes and dusts. Teibl makes the beds and sweeps the rooms. Pinni helps Moishe with his book stand. Truth be told, he’s not of much help, because when Pinni sees a book, there’s no tearing him away. When he sticks his nose into a book, well, it’s good day! But that in itself wouldn’t matter. He has a habit of scribbling. God sent him a fountain pen from which the ink keeps coming out forever. Paper is cheap here, cheaper than borscht, so he sits and scribbles.

“Are you learning how to write?” my brother Elyahu asks him, but Pinni doesn’t answer. He gathers up his writings and hides them deep in his jacket side pockets, which makes him look swollen.

H .

My friend Mendl and I aren’t sitting around idle either. Until we get a job, we help the gang out as much as possible. I help the older boy Sam carry the paper boxes, and my friend Mendl hangs around Willy in the grocery store and sometimes around Phillip, who hawks Yiddish papers. For our work we don’t get paid at all, except that on Sundays they pay for our moving pictures. When we leave the moving pictures, they treat us to ice cream, which you eat between two chocolate cookies, or else you drink soda water with it. Afterward we take a walk or a stroll in the park, of which there are many in New York, and everywhere they let you in free. What a country this America is! Wherever I want to go, I go, and whatever I want to do, I do.

I .

If I have time, I drop in at my old friend Vashti, now Harry, but his boss at the stand is not happy. She notices that Vashti sometimes sneaks a piece of carob my way and sometimes a few raisins and almonds. “My stand cannot afford two nosherers,” she says, so I don’t visit Vashti anymore. I wait till he comes home at night, and he always brings something in his pocket for me to nibble. When Bruche sees me chewing, she tattles on me to my brother Elyahu. He asks me what I’m chewing, and I say, “Chung-gum,” what everyone in America chews. Bruche says it turns her stomach to see all this chewing. My brother Elyahu tells her to pretend they’re cows chewing their cud. Pinni can’t abide my brother Elyahu comparing Americans to cows and says, “You’re comparing the best, the greatest, the cleanest and smartest people in the world, with cows?! I want you to tell me just one thing—where would we be if, God forbid, Columbus had not discovered America?”

“Somebody else would have discovered it!” my brother Elyahu replies very simply, without giving it a thought.

J .

Praised be God, I can tell you the news—we have a job. We won’t have to be idle any longer. We won’t have to eat other people’s bread. We are working in a shop. That is to say, not Mendl or I—they can’t hire us, we’re too young. So far my brother Elyahu and our friend Pinni are working. I will now tell you what their jobs are.

IX

WE WORK IN A SHOP

A .

How you work in a shop I can’t say exactly because I myself don’t know. They don’t allow me to work there because I’m not yet bar mitzvahed. I only know what I hear from my brother Elyahu and our friend Pinni. Every evening when

they come home from the shop, exhausted and hungry, they relate wondrous tales. We sit down to eat *supper*. Bruche hates this word as a pious Jew hates pig. My sister-in-law can't abide the word *window* either. She also hates the word *stockings*. And what do you say to the word *dishes*? She prefers the Yiddish words for all of these. The same goes for *spoon*, *steak*, and *fork*.

B.

My brother Elyahu and our friend Pinni work in two different shops: my brother as an operator, really a tailor, and Pinni as a presser. An operator doesn't need to sew by hand. He sews on a machine. But you have to know how to do that too. The machine doesn't sew by itself. How did my brother Elyahu learn to do it when his father's father and all his ancestors were never tailors and never saw a sewing machine in their lives?

My mother says we come from a pure line of cantors, rabbis, and sextons. That's of no help. But this is America, and in America there's nothing a person cannot learn to do. For example, how do you become a rabbi? To be a rabbi you've certainly got to be smart. You have to know how to answer questions. And yet there are rabbis in America (here they're called *reverends*) who back home were butchers. My brother Elyahu made the acquaintance of a *mohel*, a circumciser, a reverend who officiates at *brises*. At home he was a ladies' tailor!

Elyahu asked him, "How did that happen?"

He answered, "Only in America!"

C.

How did my brother Elyahu learn to use a sewing machine? How did the ladies' tailor become a *mohel*? Poor Elyahu worked very hard. They gave him scraps of material to practice with on the machine. He went over the material back and forth, and it was considered "all right." The next morning he was already sewing. You can imagine how awful the sewing was. But it was acceptable.

Why can't Pinni achieve this too? It isn't because he's lazy, God forbid! Pinni will accept anything to make a living in America. The problem is, he's nearsighted and does everything too fast. They sat him down at a machine and

also gave him scraps of material to practice with, sewing back and forth. In his enthusiasm he accidentally caught the left sleeve of his jacket in the machine and sewed it up. He was lucky it wasn't his hand. Oh my, did they laugh at him! His fellow tailors shouted *hoorah!* They called him a *greenhorn*. A greenhorn is someone who just got off the boat and doesn't know which way a door opens. That word is a terrible insult, worse than *thief*. That wouldn't have been, as Bruche put it, half bad. But there is more. Just listen.

D .

In the same shop where my brother Elyahu and our friend Pinni are working is Pinni's old enemy, the Heissen tailor. In this shop the Heissen tailor is a big shot. He's not an operator working on a machine, but a cutter who cuts the material that the operators sew. But that isn't enough for him. He says he won't stay in this business for long. He hopes before long to become a *designer*. Now that's really an important position. A designer is the one who draws the patterns for the clothes. A designer earns fifty dollars a week, maybe seventy-five or even a hundred!

Some people have all the luck! As Bruche says, "God grants this one a lot and another He grants a lot of nothing."

E.

When Pinni comes into the shop, the Heissen tailor goes up to him. He peers at him through his spectacles, puts a hand out to Pinni, and says, "Hallo, *londsmon!* How do you do?"

Our friend Pinni looks at him with his nearsighted eyes. Who is this buffoon? He does not recognize him at all. Not until he mentions the ship *Prince Albert* does Pinni recall who this is. It's as if someone shot three holes in his heart! The Heissen tailor has done nothing to offend him, yet Pinni cannot bear looking at him. Even if he were to earn a thousand dollars an hour, he would not stay in this shop another minute! Add to that the accident with the sewn-up sleeve.

F.

In short, Pinni is no longer an operator. He's beginning as an apprentice presser in another shop. Once he learns the work, he'll move higher and higher. How far can he go?

"You never know," says Pinni. "No one knows what tomorrow will bring. Carnegie and Vanderbilt and Rockefeller didn't know they would become what they are today."

In the meantime Pinni has new problems on account of his habit of doing things too impulsively, in addition to his nearsightedness. He comes home every day burned by the iron.

One day he comes home with his nose burned by the iron. What happened? How did the iron get to his nose? Pinni says his nose didn't wait for the iron to kindly reach up but consented to reach down to the iron. How did the nose get to the iron? Apparently Pinni was groping for a piece of material, and since he is nearsighted, he bent down too close to the ironing board, and the tip of his nose hit the red-hot iron.

"When a *shlimazel* falls down in the snow, he manages to hit a rock," says someone. I won't tell you, but I'm sure you'll guess it's Bruche. My sister-in-law can really hurt a person with her barbs.

G.

Bruche is not happy, nor is my mother, nor Teibl. Have you ever known women to be happy? They lament that we men have to work so hard in America to make a living. No easy thing, working in a shop! At half past seven in the morning you must already be at work. It takes an hour to get there. You have to grab a bite to eat, and you certainly must recite your daily prayers. *You* figure out what time we have to get up. And you may not be so much as a minute late, because if you are, they deduct half a day's pay for every five minutes you're late. How do they know if you're late? In America every shop has a kind of clock. As soon as you arrive you have to "punch the clock," as they call it here, so they know exactly when you started work. That's America for you.

H.

We aren't going to get old working at this shop, I'm afraid. My brother Elyahu says the workers are having problems with the "foreman." Every shop has a foreman, an elder, an overseer. On every floor there's a foreman. On the floor where my brother Elyahu works, the foreman is a Haman. He used to be an operator but he worked himself up and became a foreman. The workers say he is worse than the "boss."

The word goes around in the shop that the foreman is moving the clock so that no matter what time you arrive, it says you're late. What do you say to such a bastard? Our friend Pinni has even better stories to tell about *his* foreman. He doesn't let his workers so much as look at a newspaper. If you do, your life is in danger! As for smoking, forget about it. Talking to another person is out of the question. Pinni says you can hear a pin drop! The only sound is the clattering and whirring of the machines.

There's another nuisance—the irons are heated by gas, which stinks to high heaven.

I.

The reeking smell of the gas gives the workers bad headaches that make them become faint and stop working. It comes off their pay at the end of the week, leaving a big hole in their salaries. If you are five minutes late—off with half a day. If you leave too early—off with half a day. If you feel faint and cannot work—there goes a whole day.

No, we can't take it anymore. We must call a strike.

X

WE STRIKE!

A.

Personally, I think there's nothing better in the world than striking. It's like

studying with a teacher who beats you and punishes you too hard and then they take the students away from him and look for another teacher. In the meantime you don't go to school.

My brother Elyahu and our friend Pinni stop going to work. Our house feels different now that they're home. We used to see them once a week—on Sundays, because, as I told you, when you work in a shop, you have to get up before dawn in order not to be late, and when they come home, I'm already asleep. Why am I asleep? It's because they're working *overtime*, which means all the other workers go home and our men stay on at the shop working, not because they're forced to but in order to earn more. But when it came to paying them, the company deducted days for who knows what. "It's as if we've been attacked by thieves!" my brother Elyahu says. Bruche says that if she were there, all the foremen and all the bosses would bite the dust, and you can believe her. Bruche can do it!

B .

She cools down, however, when all the shops declare a strike. All the tailors and pressers in New York lay down their scissors and irons and—goodbye! Oh my, what goes on then, at home, on the street, and in halls! A *hall* is a large room or a theater. All the tailors gather from all over New York for a meeting, and they talk, talk, and more talk. You hear words you've never heard in your life: *general strike, union, organized, forty-eight hours, higher wages, better conditions, scabs, strikebreakers, pickets*, and many more words I don't understand. My friend Mendl says he does understand them, but he won't explain them. When you get older, Mendl says, you'll understand. It's possible, but for now I'm watching how the crowd gets all stirred up and my fingers are itching to put the striking tailors all down on paper, to draw each one, what he looks like, what he's doing, how he's standing, and how he's speaking.

C .

My brother Elyahu doesn't speak so much as a word. He goes from group to group and sticks his nose in, or cocks an ear, biting his nails nervously. I like it when my brother nods in agreement with every speaker. He agrees with them all,

no matter what they say. A tailor with a boil on the left side of his head comes up to him, grabs him by the lapel, and shakes him, trying to convince him that all this fuss is a waste of time. The tailors won't accomplish anything with their strike, because the "association of manufacturers" is too strong for us! My brother Elyahu nods in agreement. I'm afraid my brother knows what *association of manufacturers* means as much as I do. Another tailor approaches my brother Elyahu, this one with the face of a duck, smacking his lips as he speaks. He grabs my brother Elyahu by a coat button and cries out, "No! We must fight, fight to the end!" My brother Elyahu nods in agreement to him too. It's too bad Bruche isn't here. She would certainly give him the needle.

D.

The story with our friend Pinni is different. Whoever hasn't heard him speak at a meeting has missed something really special. He loves to name-drop famous people and use fancy words. Now imagine him all fired up, speaking to an audience of a thousand people who really don't want to hear him. He begins his speech all the way back with Columbus and how he discovered America, and soon he's talking about the United States, prepared to go on and on and on, but they won't let him continue.

"Who's the speaker?" asks one tailor of another.

"A greenhorn!" the other one answers.

"What does he want here?"

"Why is he bothering us like this?"

"What's he blabbering about?"

"Sharop!" one person calls out and others soon join in: "Sharop!"

E.

Sharop is not a nice word. It means "Stop talking," but our friend Pinni isn't afraid of words. When Pinni starts speechifying it's like a water barrel from which the cork is missing. You can cover the hole with your hand or stuff a rag in it—nothing will work until the water runs out till the last drop, so don't even

bother. Pinni has to have his say to the end, unless you drag him off the stage. This time they actually do have to remove him forcibly. Two young pressers' apprentices take him by the arms and drag him off. But that doesn't prevent him from continuing his speech on our way home, and when we come home, he goes on talking to my mother, Bruche, and Teibl. My friend Mendl and I are also in the audience. I feel Pinni is right in his grievances, but try to tell that to women.

When Pinni is finally finished, Bruche speaks up with her usual kind of remark: "What difference does it make to a turkey whether you slaughter it for the Purim feast or for the Passover seder?"

Do you have any idea what she means?

F.

In the meantime one day follows another. The strike is still on. The workers are steel and iron. Meetings take place every day, always in a new place. The manufacturers, I hear, are also steadfast. They won't give in, but they'll have to give in. That's what everyone is saying. There's nothing the workers won't achieve. This is America! We're down to our last resort, and if that doesn't work, it's the end! That's what our people say. What's the last resort? We'll assemble all the strikers from all over New York and march through the streets. Thousands and thousands of tailors will march with flags through the entire city. I and my friend Mendl really like that plan. We'll march at the head of the parade. But try to talk to a woman like Bruche, who says that to her it looks like children playing at soldiers. She says, "Don't waste your shoe leather." You should have seen our Pinni's face and heard what he said about that!

G.

We are deeply into the strike. My friend Mendl and I are readying ourselves for the Fourth of July the way Americans do. The Fourth of July is a big holiday in America. They shoot firecrackers in the streets, and sometimes, they say, a person is killed. It's a great holiday, that Fourth of July. It's the day the United States freed itself from its enemies.

Mendl and I are already dressed in our holiday clothes when our celebration is

spoiled by a setback. On Canal Street someone is killed. Pinni brings us the news. He was on the spot and saw the murder. He says the man deserved to die. He was a “gangster.” My mother asks, “What’s a gangster? A thief?”

“Worse than a thief!” Pinni says. My mother asks, “A bandit?” Pinni says, “Worse than a bandit.” My mother says, “What can be worse than a bandit?” Pinni explains, “A gangster is worse than a bandit because a bandit is only a bandit, while a gangster is a hired bandit, hired to beat up the strikers. One of them attacked a girl who was striking and was about to hit her. She screamed and people ran to rescue her, and there was a fight.” That was all we could get out of Pinni. He paced up and down with his long legs, sparks flying, in a fit of rage. He tore his hair and spouted words and names:

“Ai-ai, Columbus! Ai-ai, Washington! Ai-ai, Lincoln!”

When he finishes, Pinni gets up and flees!

H .

In the meantime this is what happens to Mendl and me. My mother swears on her health and on her life that she won’t let us out on the street for all the money in the world—not any of us! Because, she says, if it’s gone so far that people are being killed on the street, it’s the end of the world! She throws us all into such a panic that Teibl bursts into tears like a small child. God knows where her Pinni is now. My mother forgets about us and begins comforting poor Teibl. We have a powerful God and nothing will happen to her Pinni. With God’s help he’ll return safely. And he’ll be a husband to his wife and a father to his children who will, with God’s help, one day be born. Until now Teibl has had no child, but she’s seeing a doctor and hoping she’ll someday have children.

“May you have many children!” says my mother.

“Amen, may it be so!” I say, and catch a slap from my brother Elyahu for putting in my two cents where they don’t belong.

I .

Praised be God—Pinni returns, and he returns happily and with good news: the

gangster who they thought was killed is still alive and will live, although he'll remain a cripple for life. They beat him up, gouged out an eye, and broke an arm. "Serves him right—let him not be a gangster!"

But my mother feels sorry for him. "Let him be what he is," she says. "There's a God in Heaven, let him settle things with Him. Why does he deserve to have an arm broken and an eye gouged out? Why are his wife and poor children to blame that they should have a crippled father?"

J .

The strike lingers on, and we're without work. My brother Elyahu is beside himself. My mother tries to console him. She says that God, who brought us to America, will surely not forsake us. Our in-law Yoneh and our good friend Fat Pessi and her husband Moishe and all our friends come every day to comfort us with kind words. They say the sky has not yet fallen. Where is it written that we must make a living only as tailors? You can make a living in America without being a tailor. How? Let me tell you how we made a living in America.

XI

KASRILEVKA IN NEW YORK

A .

Thanks to our Kasrilevka family and friends, we have slowly worked ourselves up and begun to make a living. Kasrilevka has moved to America. After our departure from our old home, a frightful pogrom was followed by a fire. The whole town went up in flames! They tell us there was a rush to leave, an exodus. Who do you think brought us the news? My mother. Wherever there is bad news, my mother is the first to find out. How? From her synagogue, the Kasrilevka *shul*. There is one in New York.

B .

During our first week here, my mother began asking around about a *shul* where she could pray on Shabbes. In New York, thank God, there is a *shul* on almost every street. Our neighbor Pessi took us that first Shabbes to a *shul* where the Jews from our city all pray. It is called the Kasrilevka *shul*. There we find many old acquaintances from our town. Guess who we saw. If you had eighteen heads, you couldn't guess. First of all our cantor, our Hersh-Ber the cantor with the long beard, the one for whom I was once a chorister, if you remember, and carried his crippled little daughter Dobtzi around. The child died back home during the pogrom. Now Hersh-Ber and his wife and older children are here in America and making a living. He is a cantor and a *mohel* and a teacher too. He pinches his students when no one is looking because in America you aren't allowed to hit a child. He's doing very well, but he's changed completely. In truth he's the same as he once was, but he dresses differently. If he were to wear the same hat at home as he wears here, they'd run after him and make fun. His coat is now shortened and his sidelocks cut, but he hasn't touched his beard, even though some people bother him about the beard. Here in America they hate a beard more than a pious Jew hates pork. Once a gang of mischievous boys—here they call them *loafers*—got hold of him in the street and wanted to cut off his beard. Luckily Jews passing by rescued him from their hands. From that time on, whenever he goes out on the street, he hides his beard in his overcoat.

C .

Berreh the shoemaker is also here. This is the Berreh whose mice my brother Elyahu once tried to drive away. If you recall, Berreh likes to exaggerate, to think up things that aren't true and never were true. In other words, he's a liar. Here they call it a *bluffer*. He works as a shoemaker as he did at home. He tells stories about his work that even if a third of it were true, it would still be good. He says he is the greatest shoemaker in America. His shoes, he says, are known all across the country. He swears that the president himself has ordered a pair of boots from him. My brother Elyahu says that story is as true as the one Berreh the shoemaker once told us about the mice eating his cat.

D.

Who else shall I tell you about? Reb Yossi the rich man, who all of us wished we had a third of his wealth, is also in America, but he isn't rich anymore. What happened? It was the pogrom that did him in. He personally didn't suffer that much from the pogrom, but thieves cleaned him out, smashed his furniture, ripped apart the bedding, stole merchandise from his shop. But they did not beat him or his family, because they were all hiding in the cellar for three days and nights. They almost died of hunger. And to make matters worse, all his debtors went bankrupt, and he went bankrupt too. Who would have foreseen that a respectable man like Reb Yossi would have to pack up and escape from Kasrilevka?

He fled in the middle of the night. And where to? To America. Do you remember how his son Cross-Eyed Henich laughed at me for going to America? Now he's wandering the streets. He runs away when he catches sight of me. To this day he can't bring himself to speak to me. My friend Mendl says he's got to blacken Henich's other eye. He hates when somebody acts superior or is conceited.

E.

Best of all, Menashe the doctor and his wife are also here. I'm sure you remember their garden full of berries, pears, grapes, and fruit. That has all gone up in smoke and fire. The *pogromchiks* burned their house down together with the garden, destroyed it all right down to the ground. You wouldn't recognize the two of them. They've both turned gray and old. He pushes a pushcart with apples and oranges, and she peddles Wissotzky's tea. "God help us," my mother says with tears in her eyes, "that it had to come to this."

"Serves them right!" says my brother Elyahu, and I agree with him. Serves them both right! She was a witch, begrudging a poor man a rotten apple that fell from the tree. She thinks I forgot that incident when they caught me picking apples from her garden. I'll remember it as long as I live!

F.

During the time we were making our way through country after country, at home the pogrom was destroying the shops and burning down the homes of our Kasrilevka Jews. Most likely the old house we sold to Zili the tailor was also burned down—Zili is now here too, still working as a tailor. The difference is that there he was his own boss and here in America he works for someone else. Off and on he works as an apprentice pants presser, or he operates a sewing machine. He says he earns his seven or eight dollars a week, which would not be enough for him to manage on. His three girls bring in three times as much as he does making shirts.

G .

Except for our friend Pinni's family, most of Kasrilevka is now in America, and most likely the rest are getting ready to come as well. Pinni's father Hersh-Leib the mechanic and his uncle Shneur the watchmaker write to Pinni that they would have left long ago but didn't have the means. They ask Pinni to send them ship tickets. We're saving every penny, and when we collect a few dollars to put down a deposit, we'll send them the tickets. With God's help, they'll certainly pay us back, because they're not coming with unskilled hands. Hersh-Leib the mechanic writes that he has invented a new kind of stove that requires much less wood, hardly any at all. How can this be? That's his secret. And Shneur the watchmaker has invented a clock whose wonders all of America will come running to see. What kind of clock is it? Just listen to what they write Pinni from home.

H .

The clock itself is an ordinary wall clock with an ordinary face. But if you look closely at the face, you'll see drawn on it the sun, the moon, and twelve stars. During the day you'll see the sun, and at night, the moon and stars. That's not all—just wait. Every time the clock chimes twelve, a little door opens right in front of your eyes, and out comes an officer with a sword followed by twelve soldier-musicians. The officer waves a sword, and the twelve soldiers play a march and then disappear. The door shuts, and it's over! Don't you think someone can make a lot of money with this kind of clock in America? Pinni's uncle has spent many

years working on this clock. It was almost ready, but during the pogrom it was broken to bits. But it doesn't matter. The secret of the clock remains in his head, and when he gets to America, it will be, as they say here, all right.

I.

And how we're making a living, I still haven't said. I'll leave that for tomorrow.

XII

WE'RE MAKING A LIVING

A.

My brother Elyahu is the first one to start making a living. And whom does he have to thank? My mother. Every Shabbes she prays at the Kasrilevka synagogue, where she meets people. She became acquainted with the president's wife, a fine woman who is fond of my mother because my mother always knows on what page in the prayer book the cantor is singing. Bruche says the local women don't know anything about praying. She says the only reason they go to *shul* at all is to show off their diamonds. "Begging your pardon, but they are fat cows," she says, "and don't know a cross from an *aleph*. All they do is stuff their mouths and gossip." My mother interrupts her, "My dear daughter, this too is gossip." Bruche justifies herself by saying she is permitted because she is saying this to her own family, not to strangers. But let's get back to the president's wife and her husband.

B.

Have you ever heard of the Hebrew National Sausage Company? They sell Jewish kosher sausages, dried stuffed derma, roasted tongue, and smoked meats. On every corner of the city they have stores where people come to buy kosher

sausages. If you're hungry and have time, you order hot little sausages right out of the pot, and you eat them with horseradish or mustard, whichever you prefer. If you aren't short of money, you can order another portion. I and my friend Mendl once put away three portions and felt we could eat another two, but we ran out of money. But that's not what I wanted to tell you about.

C .

What I wanted to tell you about is that the president of our synagogue is one of the owners of the Hebrew National Sausage Company. With the help of the president's wife, my mother succeeded in having my brother Elyahu hired as a salesman for the company. And not just as a salesman but as a waiter as well. If a customer comes in and orders hot little sausages, he is to serve them. At first my brother balked at doing it. How could a young man already boasting a beard, the son of Peysi the cantor and the son-in-law of Yoneh the baker, become a servant? Our friend Pinni confronted him. "What do you mean? Do you think you are in the accursed Kasrilevka? You're in America! In America, men as good as you, a Carnegie, a Rockefeller, a Vanderbilt, peddled newspapers, sold matches, and shined shoes on the street! Read the history of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and other greats, and you'll see that Peysi the cantor's son is good enough to serve sausages."

D .

But here our friend Pinni has antagonized my mother. It doesn't bother her that he is spouting the names of Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Vanderbilt, but when he mentions George Washington and Abraham Lincoln in the same breath as my father—this she resents. She says she doesn't know who Washington and Lincoln were. It could be they were very fine gentlemen and good Jews, but she doesn't want her husband's name dragged to America. Let him rest in paradise as a good intercessor for her and for us and for all of Israel.

"Amen!" I say, and receive a slap from my brother Elyahu for being sassy.

E .

In short, my brother Elyahu has a job and is making a living. He sells sausages and serves them at tables and receives five dollars a week and meals twice a day, which is worth something. He meets new people every day, among the finest in New York, who come to shop for meat. We hope that my brother will rise higher and higher, because he is well thought of by the owners and respected by the customers, who enjoy being served by a refined person, not someone who was born only to be a waiter. My brother has but one fault—he has a beard. If he didn't have the beard, he would really be all right, but out of spite his beard in America has grown wider and longer, more in the width than in the length. Pinni says he should, as they say in America, "fix it," as Pinni himself has done.

He dropped into a barbershop, sat himself down on a chair, threw back his head, and never said a word, because at the time he didn't know any English. The barber came over and grabbed his nose, as Pinni tells it, lathered up his whole face, and drew a razor over it no more than twice. He told him to get up. When Pinni caught sight of himself in the mirror, he didn't recognize himself. Not a trace of a beard or a mustache remained on his face. It was smooth as a noodle-board. His reflection was smiling back at him. Oh my, what he received from Teibl! Poor thing, she fainted twice and became sick from aggravation and shame. That was the first time. Now she's gotten used to it. Her Pinni shaves his whole face every week and looks like a real American. He speaks English and chews gum, but he doesn't swallow it anymore. If only he could see to it that his shirt collar was buttoned, his tie in place, and both trouser legs even, he would be a real gentleman, a *sport*.

F.

Pinni could make a living if his mind weren't always preoccupied with the big plans that they call "business" here. He keeps changing jobs. To his credit, he isn't ashamed to do any kind of work at all. He'll do whatever you ask him, so long as he can make a dollar. Sweeping the street is fine with him. Shoveling coal is fine with him. Peddling newspapers is certainly fine with him. America, he says, is a free country, and only stealing is a shame. That's why everyone works here and no one steals. Only the Italians steal. A native-born American, he says, will not steal even if gold is lying in front of him on the ground. An American will never trick you or tell you a lie. That's what Pinni believes. He even made up a song about America. I don't remember all of it. I can say a few

lines of it by heart. Here's how it begins:

America is a land made for the greenhorn.
It makes no difference where you were born.
Just make a living and you'll be all right
In your neighbor's and in God's sight.
The land is huge,
Endless and rough.
Here you don't just talk to talk
And you better not try to bluff.

Then it goes on and finishes up with this rhyme:

America is a land where justice loudly rings,
A land of presidents and never of kings.

G .

Do you think our women aren't making a living too? Bruche and Teibl are both working making neckties. And whom do they have to thank? Again they have my mother to thank, and again it is because she goes to *shul* every Shabbes. She met an *allrightnichkeh*, the wife of a kind of wealthy man in America that they call an *allrightnik* . This wife was once a servant girl, please don't mention it, in Kasrilevka working for our Reb Yossi, the rich man. Her name is Kreindl. Kreindl has quite a story to tell, which I can relate in a few words.

H.

In our Kasrilevka we had a butcher named Meilach, who had a son named Nechemia. This Nechemia fell in love with Kreindl and wanted to marry her, but

he had no money. One day Meilach the butcher gave him money to go to the market to buy a cow. Nechemia took the money and ran off with Kreindl to America. He was lucky and became an *allrightnik* and Kreindl became an *allrightnichkeh* . Now they have a necktie factory. One time Kreindl had a *yahrtzeit* for her mother. She went to *shul* and fell into a conversation with my mother and told her who she was. When my mother told her my father was Peysi the cantor, she drew closer to my mother and promised to help us in any way possible. My mother said we didn't need any help. All she asked for was work for her children. One word led to another. The *allrightnichkeh* managed to get her husband to hire Bruche and Teibl in his factory. For a few weeks they had to go to Broadway to work in the factory, and then my mother worked it out to have them take work home and not have to sit all day in the shop.

I.

But the job didn't last long. They were "busy" as long as the season lasted, but when "slack time" set in, our women had no work. But we didn't take it to heart, because "God is a father—with one hand He punishes, with the other He heals," says my mother. I can't understand this logic. Why does God have to punish and then heal? I believe He shouldn't punish, and then He wouldn't have to heal. My mother replies, "God sends us a cure for the curse."

J.

What's she talking about? You'll soon hear. But let's rest awhile now so I can have the strength to go on with the story.

XIII

THE CURE FOR THE CURSE

A.

I promised to tell you what my mother meant by saying, “God sends us a cure for the curse.” This is the story.

My brother Elyahu became tired of working at the Hebrew National Sausage Company. It wasn't the job for him. Don't forget, my brother Elyahu is Peysi the cantor's son. He's a refined young man and has a fine singing voice. He knows how to chant from the pulpit. How does it look for such a young man to be serving little sausages at tables? The serving itself would perhaps not have mattered, but there are all kinds of people to serve. A polite person comes in and asks for a portion of sausages, sits down, eats the sausages, pays, and goodbye.

B .

But others are not so polite. Sometimes a crude person comes along, a boor who stirs things up. The sausages aren't hot enough. There's no mustard. And if he speaks, he doesn't ask courteously, “If you please, may I have another portion?” No, he whistles or snaps his fingers and bellows, “Say, waiter! Give me another portion!” My brother Elyahu isn't used to being spoken to like this. He resents it and doesn't respond to a boor. The boor gets furious and bellows even louder, “Say, professor! Come here!” Then my brother Elyahu replies, “Since when am I a professor to you?” The customer gets even more furious and begins shouting. The boss hears him and goes over to my brother. “What's the matter with you?” he asks. My brother Elyahu doesn't answer him. “Why don't you answer when someone asks you something?” he asks.

My brother Elyahu says to him, “Ask me like a human being and then I'll answer you.” The boss says, “What do you mean, like a human being?” My brother Elyahu replies, “A human being speaks politely.” The boss again asks, “And if I don't speak politely, am I some kind of a monkey?” My brother Elyahu answers, “It's possible.”

“If that's the case,” the boss responds, “you're getting the sack, which means tomorrow you can stay home.”

C .

“I'd rather live on a piece of bread for three days than sell sausages,” says my

brother Elyahu. Our friend Pinni does not agree with him. Pinni believes America is a free country and in America anything goes. And if you contradict him, he starts right in with his millionaires: Carnegie, Vanderbilt, and Rockefeller.

“How do you know these people?” my brother Elyahu asks him.

“How do I know what goes on in the Russian palace?” Pinni answers.

“Well yes, how *do* you know?”

“If you read as many novels as I do, maybe you would know too,” Pinni replies.

D.

Pinni is referring to the novels he reads at Moishe the bookbinder’s pushcart. They are printed in bad Yiddish and are thick and heavy, heavier than my mother’s Yiddish version of the Torah. Moishe lends them out and makes a living out of it, because maybe a hundred people can read one book. Mostly women read them. Women love romance novels. My sister-in-law Bruche reads them aloud every Shabbes afternoon, one after the other. My mother and Teibl love to hear her read. My mother falls asleep immediately, but Teibl listens and sighs. Sometimes she cries. She has a soft heart. If it weren’t Shabbes and if it were permitted, I’d draw with pencil and paper Bruche reading, my mother sleeping, and Teibl crying.

But I’m getting off the subject. We still don’t know how God sends a cure for a curse.

E .

First—about the curse. It surely is a curse that a young man like my brother Elyahu is unemployed. He can’t do what our friend Pinni does. In wintertime Pinni takes a shovel and cleans the streets of snow. My brother Elyahu says he would shovel the snow, but not out in the street.

“Did you expect them to bring the snow into your home?” Pinni exclaims.

It burns my brother Elyahu up that Pinni is so cheerful. “I suppose it makes you feel good to make jokes?” he says.

“Sure I feel good when I remind myself I’m in America, not in pogrom-land.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” says my brother Elyahu, and with a heavy heart he goes off to the Kasrilevka *shul*. And that’s where the cure comes for the curse. How? Listen to this nice story.

F.

I believe I once told you about the summer when we were living in London Whitechapel. At that time, as I said, a terrible pogrom and fire broke out in our beloved Kasrilevka. What they could steal, they stole. What they could smash, they smashed. The rest they lit a match to and burned down. Never mind the poor. Except for a few pillows, they had nothing to lose. They thanked God that they’d come out of it alive. Some were beaten, and some died of the beatings. Poor infants were torn apart by hooligans, and many more died of hunger. We aren’t talking of them, but of those who just yesterday were wealthy and who now are paupers, beggars, without a shirt on their backs, without a crust of bread. When you think about those once-rich people—so says our family—a shudder runs down your spine! Why doesn’t a shudder run down our spine when we think about the poor people and their poor babies? This I cannot understand, nor can my friend Mendl. He says the Kasrilevka Jews have this inclination that when a poor man dies of hunger, it’s nothing to feel bad about. But when a rich man becomes a pauper—they can’t get over it!

G.

Among our Kasrilevka rich was one Moishe-Noyach, who besides owning his own house with a courtyard and garden was simply rolling in money. Proof of this was that in summertime he used to walk around in his underwear, and over his underwear he wore a bathrobe. A poor man would never dare to be seen in his underwear. But people know immediately that he must be rich because he didn’t care who saw him. Everyone knew he had inherited from his mother three shops in the best spot in the market, and he always had a milk cow. The three

shops brought in more than enough money for him to live on. His wife Nechama-Mirl (she was called Dechama-Birl, because she always had a stuffed nose) was able to draw out of the milk cow enough profit to meet all the household expenses. But so as not to bring down her luck with the milk cow, Dechama-Birl liked to complain that her “cow had lost her milk and wouldn’t let herself be milked.” She wasn’t fooling anyone in Kasrilevka. Everyone knew it was a lie. The cow never stopped giving milk. So just imagine all the *ooh-has* when a Jew like Moishe-Noyach ran off to America, naked and barefoot as the day his mother had him. Of course people pitied him. What could Moishe-Noyach do in America? He wouldn’t work in a shop, nor would his children. So the Kasrilevka synagogue congregation decided to make him the sexton of the Kasrilevka *shul*.

H.

In America a sexton is a job not to be sneezed at. In America a sexton lives better than a Kasrilevka houseowner. From *yahrtzeits* alone you can become very rich. *Yahrtzeits* are a big thing here. All year round no one has time to pray. “Time is money” is what they say. But when someone has a *yahrtzeit*, he drops all his business and runs to *shul*. And from *shul* he runs off to a Yiddish restaurant and orders a kosher meal because he has *yahrtzeit*. And because he has *yahrtzeit*, he tips the sexton generously. And how about a bar mitzvah? That’s when the sexton really cleans up. In our old home, when a boy turned thirteen, you put a tefillin on him and he had to pray every day. Here in America a bar mitzvah is a holiday. They dress the boy in a prayer shawl. They call him up to the *bima* like a bridegroom to read the Torah. He screeches out the *haftorah* like a young rooster. Then he lifts his hands and mumbles some sort of sermon he’s memorized, naturally in English, heaven forbid Yiddish. The rabbi, whose clean-shaven face makes him look like a Polish priest, then lays his wide-sleeved hands on the boy’s head and blesses him.

I.

In short, Moishe-Noyach has a good job. His only problem is that he has to go around to all the people who promised him money for *yahrtzeits* and bar

mitzvahs to collect his money, as well as dues from the members of the congregation and money for his salary. *Nu*, how does it look for a man who was not long ago rich to go collecting? His wife pours out her bitter heart to my mother. She says, “You can believe me, every time by husband has to do collecting bodey, it’s like he’s meeting the Adgel of Death.” I’m afraid none of you will be able to understand what she’s saying because of her stuffed nose, so I’ll translate: “You can believe me, every time my husband goes collecting money, it’s like he’s meeting the Angel of Death.” My mother suggests that her Moishe-Noyach hire my brother Elyahu as a collector. It would help him out, and my brother would earn a living. You can understand that Moishe-Noyach jumped at this plan eagerly.

My brother Elyahu resisted it at first, but our friend Pinni was there to give him a little push in his usual way: “I don’t understand your feeling that this is beneath you. How are you better than Carnegie, Rockefeller, or Vanderbilt? Now go do it!”

That Pinni, when he wants to, he really knows how!

J.

Who would have predicted that a small collecting job for a synagogue sexton would in time develop into a much bigger job, in fact two jobs? In one job my brother Elyahu collects for a furniture business, and in the other job our friend Pinni collects for an insurance company. I can see by your expressions that you don’t begin to understand what *furniture* or *insurance* means. Wait a bit, and I’ll explain everything.

XIV

WE ARE COLLECTING

A.

The great thing about America is that everything is brought right to the house. You can buy anything and pay for it gradually. For one dollar a week you can furnish your home like a count.

B .

Nobody buys anything for cash except someone like the millionaire Jacob Schiff. My brother Elyahu says he's the wealthiest man in America. But our friend Pinni says that's not true. He says Carnegie is much richer, and Vanderbilt—certainly! And Rockefeller—most certainly! Elyahu argues that he's absolutely wrong. Maybe those men are wealthier in land and estates, but as for money, not a chance! Schiff is richer than all of them. Pinni goes off on one of his tears, insisting that my brother Elyahu doesn't know what he's talking about. What Rockefeller gives away to charities alone every year, Schiff doesn't even own. Now my brother Elyahu is riled up and says Pinni is an anti-Semite, because even if it were true that Rockefeller is richer than Schiff, he should say Schiff is richer because Rockefeller is a Gentile and Schiff is a Jew.

Pinni explodes. "And if Schiff were a Jew three times over, is that a reason for me to lie? You forget too often, Elyahu, we are in America, and America hates bluffing!"

My sister-in-law Bruche weighs in with a comment that ends the argument: "May our enemies have as many boils in one spot, and may we have as many good years, as there are lies spoken every day in New York alone, never mind Brooklyn, Brownsville, and the Bronx!"

C .

If you can buy furniture for one dollar a week, you need people to collect the dollars. The collectors, as they're called, go from house to house collecting them. Each collector has his own "route" of houses he visits every week. His work begins by knocking on your door. Then he enters and says, "Good morning!" Then he says, "Very nice day." He takes your dollar, hands you a receipt, and says, "Goodbye." That's all there is to it. It isn't even necessary for him to take off his hat. It isn't customary here. You can go into the richest home

wearing a hat, with galoshes on your shoes, smoking a cigarette, whistling a tune, or chewing gum, and no one will say anything. It's America.

D .

My brother Elyahu is very satisfied with his job. It's much better than standing around and selling sausages, and besides, he's earning much more. Sometimes he makes eight dollars a week, sometimes ten, and sometimes twelve. It all depends on the weather. In good weather you can go on foot. In bad weather you have to go by trolley, which costs a nickel. But my brother Elyahu doesn't spend too many nickels. He is by nature a thrifty person, unlike Pinni, who has a more open hand. Pinni rarely goes on foot—he says he has to ride because he's nearsighted, and it's easier to get run over, not because he is nearsighted but because he's absent-minded. He gets carried away, in addition to which he can't manage without looking into a book or a newspaper. And sometimes he scribbles. As he walks, he thinks and he hears nothing that's being said to him. Sometimes he takes out a pencil or a pen and begins writing. He can easily fill ten pages of paper on both sides. What he writes, and what he does with this writing, no one knows, not even his wife Teibl.

When my brother Elyahu asks him what he's written, he says, "When we get older, we'll know."

We're now quite a bit older, and we still don't know.

E .

Still and all, Pinni makes a living, and quite a good one! He's a collector too, not for furniture but for life insurance. Here everyone has life insurance, young and old, women and children, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, grandmothers and grand-fathers. They pay for it with a nickel to a dollar a week. The higher your insurance, the more you must pay. In some homes all the members of the family, from the oldest to the great-grandchildren, have life insurance. And if some of them aren't insured yet, the collector has to make sure the uninsured buy insurance. How this is done, I do not know. I only know that my brother Elyahu refuses to do that kind of job. He prefers to collect for

furniture. Why? Because to collect for furniture, you only need to say “Good morning” and “Goodbye.” For insurance collecting you have to talk and convince and explain and repeat yourself. At that our friend Pinni is a whiz. He could convince a wall and make the dead talk.

F.

To our friend Pinni it doesn't matter who you are or what you are. Whatever you say, he gets his spiel in. Are you insured? Then he'll talk to you about insurance. Are you not yet insured? Then you must certainly talk about insurance with him. And once he starts talking, you'll never get out of his clutches. He'll insure you, your wife, your child, your grandfather, your father-in-law, your cousin, and even your next-door neighbor. And if your next-door neighbor dies before you, then the company will give you a nice few hundred dollars. The next-door neighbor also insures you, so if you die, God forbid, before him, *he'll* get a few hundred dollars from the company. The next-door neighbor also buys insurance for himself, as you do for yourself. You both pay the company a quarter a week. You don't have to go to the company. The company will find you through its collector. For collecting your quarters, Pinni makes a 15 percent commission.

G .

If Pinni persuades you to write a new policy, as the agent he gets fifteen times as much as the weekly payment. If you pay a quarter for your premium, the agent of the company gets fifteen quarters in one shot! Please figure out how much that is. Imagine, if our friend Pinni is lucky enough to write two or three or more policies in a day and all at a quarter a policy—that adds up to a fortune!

“Oh, my God! You'll be filling the house with gold!” says Bruche, and Teibl blushes, looking on, as her Pinni pulls out quarters and nickels from one pocket after another.

“What do you think?” Pinni makes separate piles of quarters and nickels. “Do you think Carnegie, Vanderbilt, and Rockefeller were born with their millions?”

H .

Now, where can I find a sheet of white paper? If I had a stick of charcoal, I'd draw this picture. A table. My mother is sitting at the head, her hands folded. On one side of her stands Bruche, tall and slim, with big feet. On the other side is Teibl, small as a quarter of a chicken. Both of the younger women work, one sewing, the other knitting. At the other end of the table stands my brother Elyahu, a man with a full beard holding a bunch of receipts in one hand and a pack of paper dollars in the other. This is what he has collected during the day. At one side of the table, standing bent over, is our friend Pinni, clean shaven, a real American. He draws out quarters and nickels from both his pockets, and since he is nearsighted, he brings each quarter and nickel close to his nose. On the table stand two high piles, one of quarters and one of nickels. Pinni isn't finished yet. He has more. This you can see by his pants pockets, which are still bulging.

I.

Nothing lasts forever, and a person is never happy with what he has. We become sick and tired of going around collecting other people's dollars and quarters and nickels. It's better to have your own little rolls than someone else's big loaves of bread. This is what Bruche says. First my brother Elyahu lost his enthusiasm for collecting. The business got to him, and not so much the business as the customers. Some customers stopped paying. They said, "Take back your furniture—we don't need it." Others complained that the bed squeaked, or that the mirror showed a double image, or that the dresser drawers wouldn't open or shut, or that the chairs were too heavy and when you sat down on them it was like sitting on nails! Others decided to move away to another street—and go find them!

Worst of all, some pay weekly until they can no longer pay. Why? The breadwinner is sick, or there is no work, or a strike breaks out. You don't want to lose a customer. What can you do? So my brother Elyahu lays out money from his own pocket during that time. You can see that it's one problem after another!

J.

Do you think our friend Pinni is happy with his job? Not at all. Until you catch a

customer, he says, it's like crossing the Red Sea. You have to talk to them for three days and nights. You try to explain to the moron what insurance means, and you finally get him to sign an "application." But on the second day he changes his mind, or the doctor "rejects" him, which means he's turned down on account of bad health, or the doctor didn't like how he looked naked. But the worst thing by far for insurance agents is a "lapse"—a customer stops paying. Then they deduct from the agent's commission fifteen times as much as the cost of the customer's premium. If not for the lapses, Pinni says he'd have covered the house with gold! It's his bad luck that several customers have stopped paying at the same time, as if they'd decided on it together.

"Let them burn, those customers, with the insurance, with the agents, with the lapses, and with the companies!" says Pinni. He'd rather go into his own business with my brother Elyahu. With God's help, they've saved a few dollars. They can start their own business.

And so we decide to go into our own business.

XV

WE GO INTO BUSINESS

A.

Whatever your heart desires, you can find in the newspapers. Are you looking for work? You'll find it in the papers. Are you looking for workers? You'll find them in the papers. Are you looking for a bride or a bridegroom? You'll find them in the papers. Are you looking for a business? You'll find it in the papers. We're looking for a business, and so we look for one in the papers every day. We are stopped by this advertisement:

CIGARS—STATIONERY—CANDY—SODA STAND FOR SALE Opposite a school, selling because of family trouble. Guaranteed good business. **COME QUICKLY!**

B.

My brother's wife Bruche strongly opposes the business. In the first place, she argues, how do we know what they say in the ad is the truth? In the second place, why should we creep into a sick bed with a healthy head? If there's family trouble, why do we have to get into the middle? Do you think these are the only faults Bruche finds? To a hundred other business possibilities, she is able to find for each its special fault. My brother Elyahu keeps waving her off, but she won't be deterred. He shouldn't be so self-assured, she says. Just because he's shaved off three-quarters of his beard doesn't give him the right to put on airs. To this my brother Elyahu replies, "Why did your father shave his whole beard off?"

Our friend Pinni enters the argument: "Do you know what? I'll bet you two to one that if you find among two million Americans half a dozen people with beards, you can call me a liar!"

"What an example!" says my mother. "That's like saying ducks go barefoot. Better to talk of other things."

My mother hates it when you speak of beards. It's enough for her that she has lived to see Peysi the cantor's son shorten his beard.

C.

The business we go into has many good features. First, my brother Elyahu, as you may remember, is a master of "manufacturing" all kinds of drinks, which comes in handy if you have in mind manufacturing soda water and selling a tall glassful for a cent—with syrup, two cents. The syrup we also make ourselves. Another plus is that we have the cheapest candy—a fistful for a cent, and we can suck the candies ourselves. When I say "we," I mean me and my friends Mendl and Pinni. The three of us help out at the stand and sneak a nosh when no one is looking. When Bruche is nearby, we can't nosh, and out of spite she is at the stand almost all day, helping with the business. We all help out, even Teibl and my mother. When a customer approaches our stand, he might be taken aback to see such a large family of businesspeople. But that's to our benefit. Most customers like to shop where it looks crowded.

D .

The best time for our business is summer, during the hot days. Summer in New York is a true hell. People cool off all day with ice cream, which we sell as sandwiches made up of ice cream between two wafers. Each one costs us a penny. We make a 50 percent profit on it, but that's not where our earnings mainly come from. The main profit lies somewhere else, in a cold drink called cider. This is a sweet and sour kvass with foam, and it tickles your tongue. Those who have tasted champagne say it tastes like real champagne. And though cider is an American drink, who do you suppose manufactures it? My brother Elyahu. What can my brother Elyahu not do? Never mind that Pinni belittles him.

Several times our friend Pinni has held forth and claimed that my brother Elyahu's champagne has only one advantage—it's cold. Otherwise it isn't worth anything. It has no sweetness at all! My brother comes back with, "If the champagne is no good, how come you guzzle it all day?"

Pinni replies, "What do you care if I guzzle? How much can a person guzzle? If I guzzled from early morning till night, I don't know if I would guzzle a nickel's worth." Bruche interrupts and says that a nickel doesn't just walk into your pocket. Teibl defends her husband and says Pinni is an equal partner in the business with my brother Elyahu, and a partner may, you'd think, allow himself to waste a nickel once in a while. Luckily my mother is nearby. She says that were you to shower her with gold, she wouldn't so much as touch this American drink, which looks disgusting and is repulsive to drink! We laugh and for the moment the squabbling ends.

E .

Later, toward the end of summer, when the watermelons are ripe, our business does even better. We cut the melons into many slices and sell them for a penny a slice. If God helps out with a delicious melon, we really make out well. If a few slices remain on the stand, we have a good supper, because you can't keep cut melon for another day or it will turn. I and Mendl and Pinni pray to God to have more watermelon slices left over.

F.

These items have a limited season. After the summer, it's no more champagne, no more watermelon! But cigarettes have no particular season and are sold all year round. We do a very good business with them. There are all kinds of cigarettes. Some cost a penny apiece, some cost two for a cent. Cigarettes are also something you can sneak and smoke in secret. Then something awful happened. I once sneaked a cigarette, and we were smoking it, Mendl and I—he a puff, I a puff. It would have gone smoothly, but Bruche sniffed out that we were smoking. She told my brother Elyahu, who taught me a lesson about cigarettes I'll never forget! It wasn't so much the cigarette that bothered him as the fact that it was Shabbes. That Peysi the cantor's son would smoke on Shabbes—reason enough to kill him! Even my mother went along with him for something like that. The dog deserves the stick. From that time on we don't smoke cigarettes anymore. I can't even stand the smell.

G.

In addition to cigarettes, we also sell Yiddish newspapers and magazines. We don't do a great business with them, but our friend Pinni has something to read. He doesn't leave a single newspaper unread. Once he sticks his nose in, it's hard to tear him away. He's drawn to the papers, he says, like a magnet. He's even tempted to write something for the papers himself. He's already been to East Broadway several times where the papers are printed. What he does there, he doesn't say. I'm afraid he takes some of his songs along, because when they deliver the stacks of papers, our friend Pinni leaps up and grabs one before anyone else. He leafs through and searches through every page. His hands actually tremble. Then he jumps up and runs off to East Broadway. My brother Elyahu asks him what he has to do on East Broadway. Pinni tells him he's looking for a business. Elyahu asks him, "Aren't we doing business?" Pinni answers, "You call this a business? A family of seven people living from one little stand? Some business!" My brother Elyahu is puzzled. "How do you get seven people out of five?" Pinni counts on his fingers. He and his Teibl are two. My brother Elyahu and his Bruche are four. My mother is five. And the two kids make seven. By kids, he means Mendl and me.

H .

My mother is resentful. She sticks up for me and my friend Mendl. She says we earn our keep honestly. Early in the morning, before the stand opens, we deliver the morning papers to our customers. Then we go to school. (Yes, we're going to school.) And after school we help "attend to the business." My mother uses those very words. She is now speaking more than half in English. She knows *chicken* and *kitchen*, but gets them mixed up. She says, "I'm going into the chicken to salt the kitchen." We laugh at her, and she laughs too.

XVI

HELLO, OLD PAL!

A .

One early morning Mendl and I are running around delivering the morning newspapers to our customers when suddenly someone claps me on the back and calls out, "Hello, old pal!"

I turn around and see—Motl, Big Motl! It's the same Motl who dragged around with us in Cracow, Lemberg, Vienna, and Antwerp. If you remember, he taught me how to do a governor in my side and was a ventriloquist. He left with the emigrant gang much earlier than we. While we were still trying to find our way in London Whitechapel, he was doing all right in America. He already had a job in a cleaning store, which he still has. I ask him, "What kind of job is it?" He explains as we walk that it's a kind of cleaning factory where they clean and press clothing. "How do they do it?" I ask.

"They put a pair of washed, creased pants into a sort of machine between two ironing boards. In a separate little oven the boards are heated up. A person pulls down the boards—you have a pair of pressed pants!"

B .

“And what are your jobs?” Big Motl asks of me and Mendl.

“We deliver newspapers,” I say. “We bring papers to customers before we go to school. And when we come home from school, we help with the business. We have a stand on a street corner, and we’re making a living.”

“Oho!” says Big Motl. “Your English is pretty good. How much do you make a week, two businessmen like yourselves?”

“On average,” I say, “we can take in about a dollar a week and sometimes a dollar and a quarter.”

“Is that all?” says Big Motl scornfully. “I make three dollars a week. What’s the name of this gentleman?” He points to my friend. I tell him his name is Mendl. Motl laughs and says Mendl is a stupid name. What kind of a name is Mendl? “What else should his name be?” I ask. He thinks awhile and says he’d do better to be called Mike, not Mendl. Mike is a much nicer name.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Max,” he says.

“If that’s so, I should be called Max too. My name is also Motl.”

He says, “Sure, you’re called Max,” and he leaves. “Goodbye, Max! Goodbye, Mike!”

We decide to meet at the movies the following Sunday. We exchange addresses and go our own ways.

C.

Sunday after dinner I and my friend Mike, who was not so long ago called Mendl, go to the movies to see the great movie star Charlie Chaplin. My brother Elyahu and our friend Pinni also come along. All the way to the movies they talk about Charlie Chaplin, what a great man he is, how much he gets paid, and the fact that he is a Jew. But these two can never agree on anything—what one says, the other one says the opposite. So my brother Elyahu says, “In what way is Charlie Chaplin so great?” Pinni answers that they don’t pay just anyone a thousand dollars a week. My brother Elyahu asks him how he knows that—did he count his money? Pinni says he read it in the papers. And how does he know

Charlie Chaplin is a Jew? Pinni says that's what they say in the papers. My brother Elyahu asks him further, "How do the papers know? Were they at his *bris*?"

Pinni says, "The papers know everything. That's how we know Charlie Chaplin is a mute from birth, and that he can't write or read. And that his father was a drunkard. And that he himself was once a clown in a circus."

My brother Elyahu hears him out and says coldly, "And maybe the whole story is a lie?" Pinni becomes enraged and says my brother is a *nudnik*. I agree with Pinni. Even though my brother Elyahu is my own flesh and blood, he's an awful *nudnik*. What's true is true.

D .

We have just approached the ticket office when we hear a voice: "How do you do, Max? How are you, Mike?"

It's Big Motl, whose name is no longer Motl but Max.

"Don't buy any tickets," says Max. "I'm treating with tickets today," which means he's buying our tickets. He pulls a half dollar from his pocket and tosses it to the girl sitting at the little window and asks for three tickets in the gallery.

"Who is this *shlimazel*?" my brother Elyahu asks us. We tell him who it is. My brother Elyahu looks him up and down and asks him why he doesn't give us a *sholem aleichem*. "Have you become so important in America that it's beneath you to speak a word of Yiddish?"

Motl, or Max, doesn't answer him. But suddenly we hear a shout from near the theater door: "Idiot!"

We all turn our faces toward the door but don't see anyone. We look at each other, surprised. My brother Elyahu moves toward the door, followed by Pinni—no one is there. They look up at the ceiling and search all the corners—not a soul. Who can it be?

Motl, now Max, takes me and Mike by the hands, and we all climb upstairs. There he tells us the secret that it was he, Max, who through ventriloquism yelled out "Idiot!" And he repeats it as we take our seats. We burst out laughing so hard, we can hardly sit still as we enjoy Charlie Chaplin's pranks.

E.

Never in your life have you met such a character as Big Motl, or Max. You'd think there was no greater magician than Charlie Chaplin, but Max imitates him in every detail. Leaving the theater, Max pastes on a black mustache just like Charlie Chaplin's. He pushes his hat back like Charlie Chaplin. He turns his feet out like Charlie Chaplin and imitates his walk exactly, wagging his behind and twirling his cane. My friend Mendl, or Mike, grabs him and hugs him. Everyone standing outside the theater points at him. "There goes the second Charlie Chaplin!" Even a serious person like my brother Elyahu is laughing.

But he doesn't laugh long. In a moment his laughter is spoiled. Why? He suddenly hears a voice as if from under the ground, from the cellar: "I-di-ot!"

F.

Everybody bends down, looking into the cellar we've just passed. We all listen intently, as does Max, as if he has no idea what's happening. Then we suddenly hear a voice, now above us, as if from the roof: "I-di-ot!!"

First my brother Elyahu and then all of us crane our necks toward the roof, as does Max, which is very funny. Mike and I know where the voices are coming from. We can't restrain ourselves and burst out laughing.

G.

That really upsets my brother Elyahu. Had we not been in New York on the street, we'd certainly have received a few good slaps on both cheeks. My ears would have known about it. But since we're on the street in the middle of New York, my brother Elyahu has to be satisfied with soundly cursing us out.

Then he tries to teach us a lesson. He points to Max. "Learn from him," he says, rubbing it in. "Learn from your friend, a boy like you. Why isn't *he* laughing like you are?"

"I-di-ot!" we hear again from behind my brother Elyahu's back. My brother Elyahu spins around, and so does our friend Pinni. We all spin around, including

Max. Mike and I almost fall down laughing.

H.

“In America the stones speak,” says Pinni. He’d love to know who’s calling out “Idiot.”

My brother Elyahu says to him, “Whoever asks is an—”

Isn’t he surprised when suddenly a muffled voice is heard from under the ground: “You are mistaken, Reb Elyahu, because you yourself are the i-di-ot!”

I.

My brother Elyahu no longer goes to the movies and doesn’t even want to hear about Charlie Chaplin.

XVII

WE EXPAND THE BUSINESS

A.

In America people hate to stay in one place. In America they must go forward, grow bigger every day. The business we do at our stand is not enough to support a family of seven people, *kayn eyn horeh*. We began looking for a bigger business, not a stand but a real store. In America you don’t have to look long.

As I told you, all you have to do is look in the newspapers, where you’ll find whatever your heart desires. The problem is that a proper business is expensive. Even the name costs money. Sometimes you have to pay more for the name than for the merchandise. Our own stand barely brings in ten dollars a week, but we’re able to sell it for good money—only because of the name. A greenhorn buys it from us. He doesn’t even asks how much we’re making. It’s enough for

him to see seven people working the stand and making a living. That's probably proof enough for him to think it's a good business.

B .

We sell the stand, together with the wares, the baskets, the equipment, and even the showcase. But the secret of how we manufacture soda water, all kinds of syrup, and especially the drink they call cider—that my brother Elyahu will not give out for any amount of money. (He says that everyone manufactures these things.) How does he manufacture wine for Passover? My brother Elyahu's Passover wine already has a reputation in America. Never mind that it's his first year manufacturing it. All our friends who pray with us on Shabbes in our Kasrilevka *shul* won't buy wine anywhere else but from us. Our friend Pinni spreads the good word all over New York that my brother Elyahu manufactures wine that the president himself could drink. When it comes to promoting things, our Pinni is a demon. Here they call it *advertising*. Pinni says America stands on advertising. Salesmen praise their own wares. Workers advertise their own skills. My drink may taste as sour as vinegar, but I can still advertise that it's sweeter than sugar. My work may not be worth a penny, but I can value it as worth a million. This is America, a free country.

C .

Having spread the good word about my brother Elyahu's Passover wine all over downtown, our friend Pinni calls him aside and says to him, "Listen here, Elyahu. I advertise your Passover wine better than anyone else could. Make sure you don't shame me. You're fully capable of manufacturing a wine that tastes as delicious as your kvass in the Old Country. Remember, this is America, and here they drink wine, not kvass."

My brother Elyahu cannot respond because he feels so insulted. It is Bruche who responds for him. My sister-in-law launches into a tirade at our friend Pinni: "If a stranger would hear those words, he would surely think that in America there are only rich people and aristocrats who drink nothing but wine and bathe in honey and *shmaltz*. I have seen with my own eyes how an *allrightnichkeh* from Grand Street ordered a barrel of apple cider and a hundred sour apples.

May I be blessed if those apples aren't better and tastier than the local oranges and grapefruits, which are impossible to cut and figure out how to eat."

I'm not telling you everything Bruche said. Once Bruche starts talking, she won't stop quickly. Pinni knows this as well as I. He pushes his cap back on his head and takes off. That's the best thing to do. I do the same.

D .

CANDY—CIGAR—STATIONERY STORE WITH FIVE ROOMS. BIG BARGAIN. GOOD BUSINESS. BEST NEIGHBORHOOD. REASON FOR SELLING: I AM SINGLE. FAST SALE NECESSARY.

We find this ad in the newspaper, and we all feel it's a business made to order for us. We men set out first to look it over, and we like it. Then the women go, and they don't like it. Each of them finds a different fault. My mother says it's too far from the *shul*. There is *shul* down the street, but it's not our Kasrilevka *shul*. My brother Elyahu asks her if it's the same God in the new *shul* as in her old *shul*. My mother says it's the same God but different Jews, not Kasrilevka Jews with whom it's easier to pray. Furthermore she can't imagine praying with someone other than her cantor, Hersh-Ber.

E.

My sister-in-law finds a different fault. What will we do with so many rooms? Why do we need five rooms? Our neighbor Fat Pessi suggests that we can rent the spare rooms, take in "boarders." Bruche says, "That's all we need, having to worry about strangers in our house." Teibl echoes her every word like a parrot.

Pinni says to his wife, "Why don't you try to say something on your own for a change, not repeat Bruche's words?"

Bruche steps forward and cools him off: "Some people know everything about others but nothing about themselves." And Teibl repeats this as well, word for word.

Pinni says to his wife, "What would you do if you were alone?" Bruche retorts, "Would you, should you—what a lot of questions!" And Teibl repeats her

every word.

Pinni spits a “Tphoo!” and leaves.

F.

Do you think we're the only ones who go to look at the business? Our in-laws and friends also come along with us. The first is our in-law Yoneh the baker. After a while his wife Rivele comes. They can't leave the knishes alone and have to take turns wherever they go. Then comes Moishe the bookbinder, followed by Fat Pessi. But wait! Here I must interrupt myself and say in the local language, “Excuse me, I made a mistake.” It is Fat Pessi who comes first, followed by Moishe. After them come some good friends who pray with us in *shul*, some Kasrilevka Jews who understand business. The owner doesn't receive them kindly. As a matter of fact, he practically throws them out. He says he never imagined such a large family! This hurts my mother's feelings. She goes with Bruche to see him privately, and Bruche gives him a piece of her mind he will never forget! The businessman swears by God that he's giving up the business only because he's getting married, but now he regrets his decision. If a woman, he says, can open up her mouth like our Bruche, it's not worth getting married. He says he's better off remaining single.

G.

But he's just saying that. He's as eager to sell the business as we are to buy it, especially since we've almost sold our stand. I say “almost” because the greenhorn who came to take over our stand has forced a ten-dollar deposit on us. We're already sorry we've taken his deposit, because now he hangs around us all day and won't move a step away from our stand—a *nudnik* of a Jew, even more of a *nudnik* than my brother Elyahu! My brother is an angel compared to him. He makes such a pest of himself that we throw the deposit back in his face. But he refuses to take it back. He's fallen in love with our stand. He's sure we've become rich from it. “A greenhorn remains a greenhorn!” says our friend Pinni.

H.

What is a greenhorn? Ask me something easier! My friend Mike doesn't really know either. We hear people saying "greenhorn," so we say it too. I draw a picture of the man who's buying the stand from us on the sidewalk. I draw him with a long horn on his forehead, in green chalk. (You should hear them laugh.) Everybody recognizes him and laughs, all except my brother Elyahu. He is not amused. Oh, he doesn't hit me, but he does make me wipe off the green horn with a wet rag or else we could be fined. You can get fined for everything around here. Try spitting on the street, and a policeman will appear, grab you by the ear, and take you straight to the police station, where you'll be fined five dollars. America is very strict!

I.

You must think that no one spits on the street in America and that it's as clean and neat as Antwerp. You're mistaken. They spit and clear their noses plenty here. America is a free country, except maybe on Fifth Avenue, where the millionaires live. Millionaires don't spit. Only people who are badly off spit. The rich man is well off, so what does he have to spit about?

XVIII

WE MOVE

A.

In America it's a custom to move. People pack up and relocate from one dwelling to another and from one business to another. Everyone has to move. If you don't move of your own accord, they force you to move. If you don't pay your rent, for instance, they come and throw you out, which means you are *moved out*. So don't be surprised if they ask you, "When are you moving?" And if they ask you, you have to answer. For refusing to answer, my brother Elyahu receives a talking-to from a customer who gets matches from us. Every week he gets a little box of matches for free. Here you don't have to pay for matches or

even wait to get them. You can just go over and take them yourself.

B .

The customer I'm speaking of is a strange person. Who he is and what he is we don't know. Where he lives and what his business is we also don't know. He's apparently not a rich man—you can tell by his shabby coat, which he never changes, his crumpled hat, and his patched shoes. But he's a very punctual man. He comes by every day at the same time to the minute. He picks up the morning paper, scans the first and last pages, looks quickly at the center page, and puts the paper back. He's never bought a single thing from us. He just takes a free box of matches from us every week and reads the paper every morning. This irritates my brother Elyahu. Once or twice would be all right, but not every day.

One day my brother Elyahu decides to say something. "It costs a penny."

The customer goes on doing what he usually does, reading the first and last pages of the paper.

My brother raises his voice: "It costs a cent!"

The customer glances at the center page, folds the paper back up, and puts it back in the exact place where he found it.

C .

[At this point *Motl the Cantor's Son* is cut short. "We Move" was the last

chapter, the last lines that Sholem Aleichem wrote lying on his deathbed. He wrote the letter *c*, but after the *c* nothing follows except empty white pages. A few days later he left us. The nameless “customer” remains unknown, and all further sketches of the Jewish-American ghetto life that so stirred the imagination of our great writer remain locked away and sealed forever from Yiddish literature.]

Glossary

allrightnik—pompous boaster

ashrei—a psalm attributed to King David

bima—raised platform in a synagogue from which the Torah is read

bris—circumcision rite of eight-day-old baby boys

Bubbe, Bubbe'nyu—grandmother; affectionate term for a little old lady

Castle Garden—immigrant depot of nineteenth-century New York, in present-day Battery Park; predecessor of Ellis Island

cheder—religious elementary school where boys are taught Hebrew prayers and the Bible

dachnik—summer cottage dweller

Eretz Yisroel—Hebrew name for Israel

erev—the night before; eve

gehennam—hell, inferno

Gemorah—the part of the Talmud that comments on the Mishnah

haftorah—lesson from the Prophets read in synagogue

Haggadah—the story of Passover, read at the seder

havdalah—ceremony marking the end of Shabbes

kayn eyn horeh—knock wood, “no evil eye”

Kol Nidrvei—prayer sung to usher in Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year

kvass—frothy sour brew made from fermenting rye flour, malt, and sugar

l'chayim—“To life!”

londsmon—friend from the Old Country

mazel tov—“Congratulations! Good luck!”

Megillah—the story of Purim

Menashe'che—Menashe's wife

mezuzah—a rolled-up piece of parchment inscribed with biblical passages placed in a small container, attached to doorpost of Jewish homes and holy places

midrash—a body of post-Talmudic exegesis, either a book or a passage

Mishnah—here, a particular verse and its interpretation.

nudnik—pain in the neck, nuisance, nagger

Pani—"Mister," in Russian

Purim—joyous celebration of the Book of Esther

Rambam—Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, the thirteenth-century philosopher also known as Maimonides

Reb—"Mister," in Yiddish

Rashi—author of eleventh-century commentaries on the Bible and Talmud

Shabbes—Sabbath

shalach-mones—gifts of pastries and fruit distributed at Purim

shlimazel—clumsy person, misfit, bringer of bad luck

shmaltz—chicken or duck fat

shmone esre—Eighteen Benedictions recited in three daily prayers

shochet—ritual slaughterer

shofar—ram's horn blown at the end of the High Holiday services

sholem aleichem—traditional greeting, "peace to you"

shul—synagogue

slichot—High Holiday prayer

Succos—fall harvest festival

Targum Unkles—Aramaic translation of the Old Testament

tefillin—small boxes filled with scripture that men over bar mitzvah age strap to the forehead and left arm for morning prayers and on holidays; also known as phylacteries

U'netaneh tokef—Yom Kippur prayer asking for another year of life

yaaleh—prayer

yahrtzeit—anniversary of the death of a close relative, commemorated by prayer

yeshiva—institution of higher Talmudic learning, orthodox Jewish all-day school

yontiff—holiday