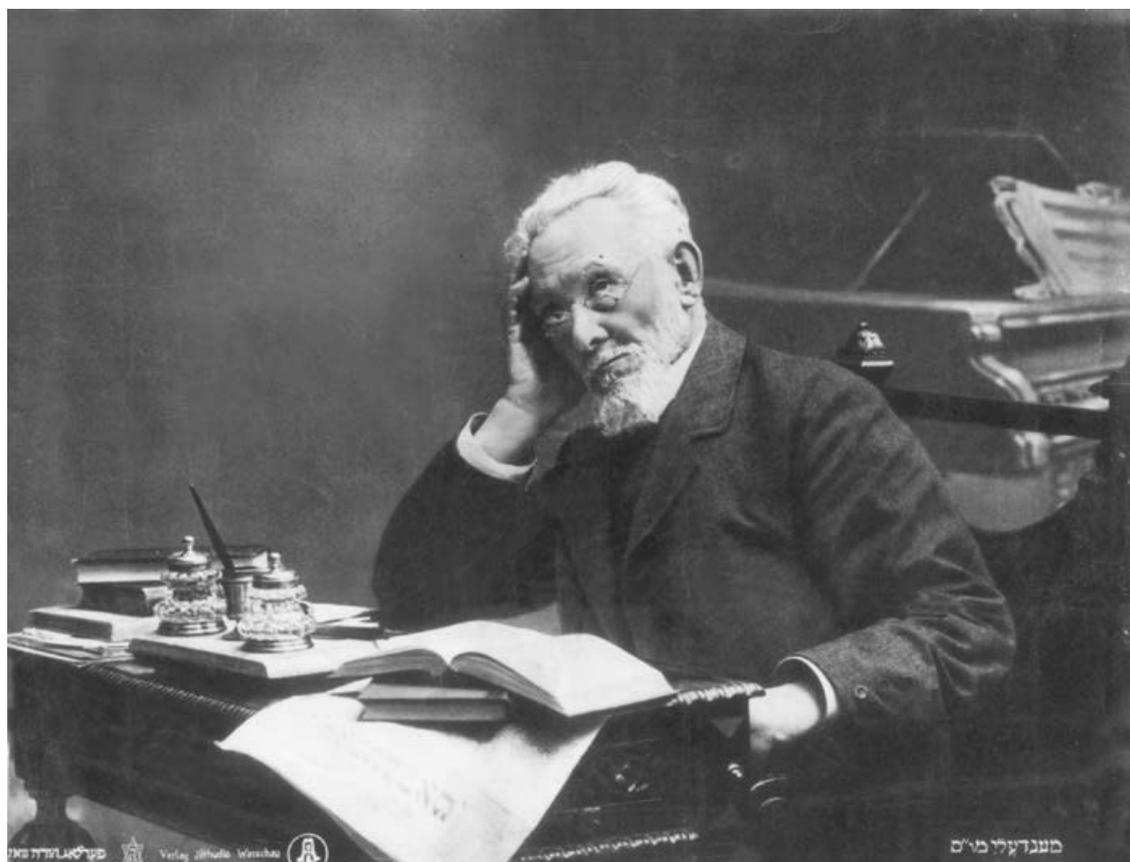


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The Little Man; or, Portrait of a Life

As for me, I was born in Tsviatshits and my name is Mendele the Book Peddler. Most of the year I'm on the road, traveling from one place to another, so people know me everywhere. I ride all over Poland with a full stock of books printed in Zhitomir, and apart from that I carry prayer shawls, fringed undergarments, tassels, shofars, tefillin, amulets, mezuzas, wolf tooth charms, and sometimes you can even get brass and copper goods from me. Truth is, since the Yiddish newspaper *Kol mevasser* started coming out a couple years back, I've also taken to carrying a few issues. But actually that's not what I'm driving at—I'm getting off the point. I want to tell you about something else entirely.

Last year, just before Hanukah in 1863, I rode into Glupsk, where I reckoned on selling some candlesticks and wax candles. Well, actually that's not what I'm driving at either. On Tuesday after morning prayers I came to Glupsk and, as I often do, I went straight to the House of Study. But I'm getting off the point again. When I arrived at the House of Study, I saw groups of people standing around arguing, shmoozing, laughing, and looking worried. The people didn't stand still—three circles would join and then split up again into three. How does the saying go, eh? My heart isn't made of stone, and I'm also flesh and bone.

Well, you can imagine that I was curious to know what was going on. In this world you've got to know everything, hear everything, because you never know when it will come in handy. But I'm getting off the point. I had scarcely unhitched my horse when the groups of people moseyed over toward me. One person greeted me, another took a look into my wagon, and others started poking and groping around at my goods, as we Jews are wont to do. The street urchins and schoolboys even managed to pluck hairs from my horse's tail. But I'm getting off the point. In the meantime, I heard the following conversation:

“Oy, vey! Oy, vey! Blessed be the true Judge. He was just a young man, I think about forty. Oy, vey! How could this happen? And to such a good man!”

“Why are you getting all worked up, Reb Avromtshe? As if you care! What’s it to you? Who was he, after all is said and done?”

“Nothing matters to you, Yosl. Reb Avromtshe is right—how could this happen to such a man? Have mercy! As sure as I’m a Jew, have mercy!”

“Lookit the new minister of mercy, Leybtshe Temes! Now he’s agreeing with Reb Avromtshe. What was it that you said a little while ago, Leybtshe?”

“Who, me? Yosl, what did I say? I mean it, Yosl, what did I say?”

“You and nobody else, Leybtshe. You, with your kosher mouth, said: ‘Big deal! It’s just Isaac Abraham Takif.’ Whether he’ll forgive me for saying so or not, he was a coarse fellow, heartless and a bit of a fool.”

“What? Who? Yosl, you mean me? Good day, I’m in a hurry.”

“Good day, Leybtshe, and a good year at that, too. Come on, Reb Avromtshe, into the House of Study, let’s take a drop of brandy. Today the shammes has very good brandy.”

“You know, Yosl, a little brandy never hurt anyone, eh? You sure outsmarted that liar Leybtshe. Gave it to him good, Yosl. What nonsense he was talking! The man, may he rest in peace, was an ignoramus, a meddler, and a bloodsucker. And he left behind a pile of money.”

“That’s why, Reb Avromtshe, I like you so much. Because you always insist on telling the truth.”

I heard all this and more, but now I’m getting off the point again. It was time to unpack my wares. I shifted my horse around in the harness so she faced the wagon, to cheer her up with a bit of straw; as for me, I went to work. As soon as I had pulled out a candlestick, a prayer shawl, and a package of tassels, the assistant to the rabbinical court ran up panting like a goose and said:

“Oy, *gevalt*, Reb Mendele! Sholem aleykhem, Reb Mendele! The Rebbe kindly requests that you come to him as fast as you can.”

I told the rabbi’s assistant that I’d come right away. Left by myself, I began to wonder what it could mean that the rabbi had called for me in such a hurry; I knew that he used oil wicks instead of candles for Hanukah, because he’d bought his menorah from me the year before. So why did the assistant come running all out of breath? Whatever it was he wanted, I had to go. I thought it over and brought along a few candlesticks, some amulets, and a women’s prayer book that was hot off the press, which might be of use to the rebbetzin. But I’m getting off the point.

As I entered the rabbi’s house, he ran to meet me and cried out:

“Oy, Reb Mendele! Oy, sholem aleykhem, Reb Mendele! God must have sent you, dear, kind Reb Mendele! This must be a miracle, Reb Mendele, really and truly a miracle from Heaven!” But I’m getting off the point again.

Another bookseller would surely have thought that they were anxious to see my wares, but I’m no babe in the cradle. And I wasn’t hatched yesterday, like a chick that has no idea what’s going on. You should know that, as a rule, the world consists of deception. When a person needs to buy something essential, he pretends that it has no value to him at all. That way he can buy it for a song. When he urgently needs a prayer book, he haggles over a pamphlet of penitential prayers, lamentations, or a package of tassels. Then he picks up the prayer book as if on a whim, glances at it and puts it down, furrows his brow and smiles, saying: “For a small sum I might have bought this, too.” Believe me, all the world is a marketplace. Everyone wants the other guy to lose so he can gain. Everyone is looking for bargains. But I’m getting off the point. I guessed from the rabbi’s face that he didn’t want to buy anything; otherwise, he wouldn’t have let on that he was waiting for me. It’s true that the rabbi is a fine and honest man — I should only have his good name — although still, in this world, one has to deceive people. Even the angels had to follow the way of the world and put one over on Abraham, when the Torah says that they ate, although they only pretended to eat.¹ But that’s really not at all what I’m driving at. The rabbi led me into his house. There sat the rabbinical judges and all the wealthy men in town, looking lost in thought. Rich people always seem a little bit lost and worried, I don’t know why. If you’ve got money, what’s there to worry about? Seems to me that you don’t need any fancy ideas to spend money. But I’m getting off the point.

The rabbi addressed his assistants and the wealthy men with these words:

“Gentlemen! I’ve brought you here regarding a serious matter. And by a miracle, Reb Mendele also arrived in our community today. For this reason I asked that you wait a moment, while I troubled Reb Mendele to join us. Forgive me! Now that everyone is here, gentlemen, I’ll tell you something strange and remarkable.”

For the life of me, I couldn’t understand what it all meant. I even started to ponder what the deeper meaning could be. But then I thought it over and told myself not to be so impatient — soon enough I’d know everything.

1. In Genesis 18:8 Abraham feeds three men who visit him. Rabbinic tradition interprets these visitors as divine messengers, angels who could have only pretended to eat.

The rabbi, he should live and be well, took a thick sheaf of paper out of his pocket and said:

“Gentlemen, Isaac Abraham’s widow sent me this letter earlier today. Before he passed away, he asked that it be given to me. You see, gentlemen, my name is written at the top of the letter. I won’t go on any longer than necessary—I’ll just read it to you. Sit, Reb Mendele,” he said to me. “Sit down and put your candlesticks over there on the floor.”

I sat down. The rabbi unfolded the sheaf of paper, shrugged his shoulders, and started to read these very words:

Rebbe, this letter contains a description of my entire life and my will. I beg, Rebbe, that you follow my request and carry out everything I ask of you. Forgive me that I have burdened you with such a long letter; at the end you will see that it is very useful.

I was born to poor parents in the small shtetl named Bezliude. I don’t remember my father because he died while I was still a suckling child. My memories of what happened go back only to when I was five. From what I remember, in my youth no one thought I had any brains, and whenever I said or did anything, people used to burst out laughing. No one spoiled me—I wasn’t kissed, caressed, or hugged like other children. When I cried, no one comforted me with candies or toys, but instead they silenced me with slaps and blows. I never heard anyone use the word “pity” or “mercy.” No one ever said, “What a pity that he has to go barefoot,” for example, or “What a pity, he’s cold and his face is all swollen,” or “Poor thing, what a pity that he hasn’t had anything to eat.” No one said, “Have mercy on the child, he’s exhausted and shivering to the bone.” I only heard people say: “Look at that pretty face, what a puffed-up mug! His feet are red as beets! Look at the glutton, he’s up to his old tricks again, shivering and making his teeth chatter.” Nobody wants a poor man’s child, who just sticks out like a sore thumb. Even his parents have no pity on him unless he’s sick because hardship and distress harden a person’s heart.

I had a habit of looking into everyone’s eyes and mouth when they spoke. Sometimes I stared into my mother’s eyes, and she always used to hit me for this. But once when I was looking deep into her eyes, and I saw that she didn’t stop me, I couldn’t resist asking:

“Tell me, Mama, what sort of little man is that in your eyes?”

My mother smiled and answered, “That little man is the soul. That little

man isn't in everyone's eyes, and not in the eyes of animals. It's just in Jewish eyes."

My mother's answer awakened in me a lot of new and fresh thoughts. From then on my imagination was preoccupied with the little man. I saw the little man in my sleep and dreamed I was playing with him. I held the little man and imagined that I myself was a little man. In short, I thought of nothing but the little man, and I so wanted to be one. It was no small matter—the little man is the soul! I started to think about how to catch the little man. Once I had a clever idea. When mother leaned over to take a pot out of the oven, I ran up from behind her and struck her head with my fist so that the little man would fall out of her eyes. You can guess how many pinches and slaps I earned for that, and then I went without food all day because my poor mother had broken the pot of corn mush with her forehead.

Another time I got into even deeper trouble. I was curious to know whether animals also have souls, so I walked up to a cow on the street. While I was getting ready to stare it in the eyes, the beast tore into me with its horns and gave me a serious injury. The scar on my left cheek is still there. All these blows didn't drive thoughts of the little man out of my head; on the contrary, they roused my curiosity.

I studied at the Talmud-Torah. It seems to me that I was no coarse lout—I'd learned the Bible with Rashi's commentaries for seven or eight years. Apparently it's possible to have a little learning and to be a great fool anyway. My mother called me a *shlimmazl*, and she was quite right about that. Among the children in the Talmud-Torah, I was the greatest *shlimmazl* of them all, and I received more slaps than anyone else. At the end my teacher had it in for me and beat me so hard that I had to stop going to school. This is what happened. The teacher told me all about the biblical verse near the beginning of Genesis, "And Lemekh said to his wives, Adah and Zillah. . ."² He must have been quoting Rashi or a midrash when he explained that Lemekh was blind and that his son Tubal-cain led him around. When he saw his great-grandfather Cain from afar, he thought it was a wild animal. Actually, just to explain it better, my teacher said that Tubal-cain thought Cain was a fox. So he told his father Lemekh to shoot an arrow at the fox, and he killed him. When Lemekh realized that he had killed his grandfa-

2. Genesis 4:23. The midrash alluded to here is contained in *Tanhuma* and in Rashi's commentary on the passage in Genesis 4:23.

ther Cain, he slapped one hand against the other—and he struck his son Tubal-cain dead. Because of this, his wives became aloof from him. He begged forgiveness from them and said, “Adah and Zillah, hearken to my voice. . .”

And then the fateful day arrived. Suddenly an inspector from Saint Petersburg showed up at the Talmud-Torah. He was beardless and dressed in a short jacket, just like a German. Along with him, to examine the children, came all of the school officials. It was just my rotten luck that he asked me to translate a short passage from the Bible—none other than the good verse, “And Lemekh said to his wives, Adah and Zillah. . .” I had never talked with such an important person before, and certainly not with a clean-shaven German Jew. I was trembling like a fish out of water, my ears were buzzing, my hair stood on end, and I felt as if I had been blinded by the sun. I didn’t think I’d be able to tell a long story about Lemekh, like the one in the midrash. But I had to say something. I got confused and started:

“*Vayomer*—And he said, a fox. And Lemekh was blind. He said to his wives—Tubal-cain led him around—Adah and Zillah, and he killed him.”

The German Jew almost jumped out of his skin, he was so angry. He called over my teacher and said to him, “Is it possible? Can this indeed be how you instruct your pupils? Is it possible?”

The teacher scratched his head, picked his nose, and stammered, “My lord, sir, the child became frightened. He’s a good lad, you can believe me!”

Then the German Jew said to me, “Have no fear, child, nothing will happen to you. Translate these words for me. *Vayomer*—tell me, what does *vayomer* mean?”

I opened my eyes wide, like a clay golem, and said, “*Vayomer*—a fox.” Because when my teacher taught me the verse, we hurried past the phrase *Vayomer Lemekh l’nashav*, “And Lemekh said to his wives.” The main thing was to tell the long story.

My poor teacher looked like he wanted to die. It was a black day for him, and later he poured out his bitter heart on me. He always used to bother me; after this he beat me like there was no tomorrow, until I stopped going to the Talmud-Torah.

My mother apprenticed me to a tailor so that I would learn the trade from him. But I, shlimmazl that I was, didn’t lick honey at his shop either. For an entire year they wouldn’t even give me the honor of letting me hold a needle in my hand. My job was to empty the slop buckets, carry wood,

sweep the house, go to the marketplace for kosher thread, or take a bit of work back to a customer, together with the tailor. I ate nothing but blows and anguish. The lady of the house was a mean, malicious person who wore the pants and led everyone at home by the nose. Just as she needed brandy every day, she needed someone to pinch and flail, tear into and torment, curse and scold. When she ran her little hands over my cheeks, she dug down to the bones. In those days I thought an apprentice had to be treated like this. Otherwise he wouldn't be able to become a tailor, in exactly the same way that you can't become a scholar without being beaten by your teacher. Because of this I used to receive all of the blows lovingly, and I didn't even cry out loud.

Once, during the busy season before Passover, the tailor said to me: "Isaac Abraham, hop over to the store, pick up a penny's worth of kosher thread, and sew together the front and back parts of this dress. Hurry it up, you little bastard!" I remember how happy I was to have the honor of sitting at the table and holding a needle; it was as if I'd been given the honor of holding up one of the poles under a wedding canopy. I marched over and sat down beside the table, happy and content. The tailor sang a bit of the Kol Nidrei prayer, shifted to "King Above," hummed a march, and then he told a little joke. Finally he sang a tune for seating the bride before the ceremony, and he made up a few rhymes like a wedding bard. "Hurry it up, Isaac Abraham," he said, his voice rising, "and trim that wick! Faster, you bastard! Sew faster, you puffed-up mug!"

And stitch by stitch, I stuck the needle into the skirt and into my finger, into the dress and into my finger. But who notices a pinprick when the heart is gay? Suddenly a cloud came over me—the house began to smell of something burning. They looked everywhere until, finally, they noticed that the skirt I was sewing was smoldering. When I trimmed the wick, a piece of it had fallen off. Up went a hue and cry, then curses, which were followed by slaps and blows that rained down on me like broomsticks. I got what was coming to me and then some. The tailor attempted to turn the skirt into a blouse with sleeves, but it didn't work. Poor man, he even took out the remnants of fabric that were lying around and tortured himself for a long time trying to make something, but it didn't work. No matter how hard he tried, stretching the cloth this way and that, it didn't help. The skirt would have to remain a skirt.

"Listen up, Isaac Abraham," the tailor said, "get lost, you bastard. I have no energy left to beat you. Anyway, when the lady of the house returns from

the market, she'll probably get at you with some warm-up punches. But that's nothing to what you'll have coming if I can't pull this off."

The tailor puzzled over the skirt for a bit and said to himself, I'll make that hole into a pocket. . . . Why not? Yes indeed. Then he shouted at me, "Get lost, you bastard!"

I crawled out from under the table like a wounded kitten. That was on a Wednesday. On Friday the tailor ordered me to bring the dress along to the tax collector's wife. She took one look, had a fit, and burst out like thunder:

"A pocket way back there!³ What's that supposed to be, my dear tailor?" She cried out as if the sky had fallen, "How come there's a pocket in back? Never in my life, swine, will I accept such a dress!"

"Ai," the tailor answered her with a sweet little laugh. "Ai, please don't shout, Breindl, I've sewn you the dress according to the latest fashion. These days all of the landowners' wives wear pockets in back, and nowadays only a madman makes pockets in front. So wear it in good health, and give my apprentice here a tip—he worked hard on that pocket."

He was the best tailor in the shtetl, and people said that he even used patterns from fashion magazines. And the tax collector was the richest man in Bezliude. So when people saw that his wife, the tax collector's wife, was going around with a pocket in back, all of the modish women in Bezliude followed her example. That didn't help me any, though, because the tailor beat me until I had to run for my life.

After that I was apprenticed to one worker after another for a week at a time. My luck didn't improve, I remained a shlimmazl. More than one boss gave me the honor of letting me carry the slop buckets. One of them even said, "Carry them, Isaac Abraham, carry them. I should see the day when we carry wine to your wedding ceremony in a sieve. Carry them, Izzy; when I was your age I also carried a ton of slops." I had another boss, a cobbler, who used to send me to pluck boar's hair from the backs of pigs that were rolling in the gutter.

Once a cantor traveled through our shtetl, and on Sabbath he led services accompanied by his boys' choir. He even had a little pipsqueak singer who

3. The tax collector's wife literally complains about "a pocket way down below" (a *keshene same untn*). According to Shalom Luria (1984), however, "below" (*untn*) is a euphemism for "in back" (*hintn*). This idea gains support from the tailor's later claim that "nowadays only a madman makes pockets in front" (*fun fornt*).

was my age. I was so jealous of the way he stood and sang tra-la-la in front of everyone, that I would have given the shirt off my back to become a singer like him. I watched that boy with awe during the prayers, while I was hanging around with all of the other kids in a side room of the synagogue. Nothing in the world, I thought, could be better than a choirboy—except maybe a little man. When the boy opened his mouth, well, I just began staring in as if I wanted to drop everything and jump down his throat. As if only that could cure what ailed me.

After I came home I tried to imitate the singer. During our Sabbath singing I let loose with such a tra-la-la that my mother was delighted. It wasn't the Sabbath songs that had me going, but the idea of imitating the choirboy. When she saw that I didn't want to stop and wouldn't give her any rest after lunch, she gave me a good thrashing and threw me out of the house. And where does a boy run to on Sabbath afternoon? To the House of Study. I thought it was just me, but lo and behold! The entire gang was there, same as me, copying the singers. All of them were standing around, busily practicing. One squeaked, one roared, one hummed like a bass, one mimicked the cantor, one meowed, one piped, one chirped, and even the tax collector's boy was in the midst of the flock, poor kid, torturing himself to sound like the choirboy. It turned out that all of them, like me, had been thrown out of their homes. So we gathered in the balcony, in the women's section of the shul, and we let out such resounding shrieks that the synagogue attendant splashed water on us and drove us out.

But I really had a fine voice, and I started begging my mother to apprentice me to the cantor. I pestered her and made myself into such a nuisance for so long that she took me to the cantor. She was a poor widow and, in the end, she wanted to get rid of such a bargain as me. When the cantor asked me to yammer a few notes and then said he'd take me on as a choirboy, I thought I was on top of the world. I'm incapable of describing just how I felt inside.

I traveled around with the cantor and saw the world for more than six months. For me, the *shlimmazl*, things turned out worse than they did for any other choirboy. That time I really sold myself short and got myself into trouble. It went like this: while the cantor was leading services, the choirboys were supposed to watch the congregation to see whether they liked his davening or not. After we got home, the cantor would call out someone's name and ask him how the services had gone. As chance would have it, he almost always called on me. Maybe it was more than chance because right after services the

other choirboys used to run away and make themselves scarce. When he turned to me and said, “Avromke!” I answered him: “Cantor, they laughed at you. I swear, they laughed really hard.” Then he’d grab me by the ear and twist and pull, twist and pull—until, I tell you, the tailor’s blows looked like child’s play.

One time he beat me so badly that I could hardly talk and lay sick in bed for a month. This is the story. In some town, he once davened for the special Sabbath with the Torah reading “Shekalim.”⁴ He worked hard to prepare for that service, because he hoped to become a steady cantor for that shtetl. Saturday evening people gathered around him, a large crowd. The cantor sent for wine and rum and invited everyone to celebrate the Melave-Malke; his intention was to win over the congregation. He wanted to send me out for something, and he called to me, “Avromke!” Ha, ha! Then I opened my little beak and chirped these words: “Cantor, they laughed at you.” The poor man made a face, turned red as a turkey’s comb, and everyone, the whole crowd, shot daggers at me with their eyes. I thought the cantor didn’t believe me, so I started to swear: “As true as I’m a Jew, Cantor! They laughed at you, these very people. Not to mention that man right there beside you, who’s drinking and whispering secrets now, he even laughed while we were saying the *Kedusha*.” The cantor pretended to laugh and told the crowd that I was an idiot and a fool, but that he had to keep me because of my fine voice. You can guess what I had coming to me after that. In short, I was sick in bed for a month.

I went on traveling around, almost all summer, with the cantor. Just in time for Sabbath “Nahamu,” we arrived in Tsviatshits. The cantor was counting on a steady position as cantor of Tsviatshits, and while we were there he pulled out all the stops. They told him that he would lead services during the High Holidays, and afterward they would close the deal. In the meantime, I got to know the tough kids of Tsviatshits and they treated me with some respect. When they managed to steal the shofar from the synagogue attendant’s drawer, for instance, they honored me with the first blow. My life even started to improve, but nothing helps if luck isn’t on your side.

Listen to how things ended with my cantor. You can imagine how hard he worked on Rosh Hashanah; he really let loose and just about climbed the walls. The bass singer went hoarse because in almost every verse he sang the

4. Exodus 30:11–16, a passage relating to a half-shekel tax, read in traditional synagogues on the last Sabbath before the winter month of Adar.

accompaniment. The poor tenor also lost his voice because using falsetto he had to outsing the bass, and all we could hear was a warble and a squeak. Each singer was screaming at the top of his lungs, and every few moments I had to give a little cry, *Tatenyu!* Father in Heaven!

But in the congregation there was one rich young man who had modern leanings. He was a kind, fat man, and he liked to clown around with children. Well, he really hated the cantor. When the cantor started to go all out during the “Ata zokher” part in the Eighteen Benedictions and, good man, threw off beautiful ornamented phrases, the rich joker silently came over to me and asked: “Can you pucker up your lips like a cherry?” And then and there he puckered up such a big cherry that I broke out laughing. But at exactly that moment, the cantor reached the end of a blessing and was expecting me to answer with a “*Tatenyu!* Father in Heaven!” When the congregation saw that the cantor had stopped, they started to knock impatiently on their prayer stands. The cantor angrily turned around to look at me, his face reddening and boiling over like a carrot stew. The bass hummed a note, signaling to me that I should answer with a *Tatenyu!* But just as I was getting ready to squeak out my part, the rich man puckered up another cherry and I let out a squeaky laugh. The cantor took fright, broke loose, galloped off, and jumped over some of the Eighteen Benedictions, making a few mistakes along the way. The congregants knocked and rapped on their stands, the women became frightened and cried out, *Fire!* Then the men also got scared and started to run out of the synagogue. In short, the services were spoiled. On the day after Rosh Hashanah the cantor threw me out, and he himself quit the town in disgrace. I was left behind, shlimmazl that I am, stranded in Tviatshits.

During the holiday I ate meals at the house of a certain man. He was neither poor nor rich, neither a hasid nor from the modern world, and neither gloomy nor happy—just some ordinary Jewish guy. After I’d been left alone there like a lost sheep, I thought things over, went to that man, and told him my troubles. He heard me out in silence, smoothing his whiskers. Then, looking pensive, he waved his hand indicating that I should stay in his home, and called for someone to feed me. That night at about eleven o’clock, when everyone in town was already sleeping—and it was so dark outside that you thought you’d gone blind—he took me to a godforsaken corner of the shtetl, and down a dark alley. There it was still as a graveyard, except for the rustling of trees that shook in the wind and the sound of a mild autumn rain that drizzled on dry, fallen leaves. When the wind let up for a moment, I could hear

the whirring of a mill in the distance, and when the wind picked up again, it mingled with the crowing of a cock and barking of a dog. Apparently Jews didn't live on that alley—if they had, there would have been no trees lining the path or leaves on the ground.

My new friend walked on and on with me without speaking a word. Finally we entered a small, squat house. In a tiny front chamber a candle flickered, and there he took off his coat. He went into the next room but told me to wait in the front. Because I was standing right beside the closed door, I heard the following conversation in German:

“Good evening, Herr Gutmann!”

“Welcome, Herr Jacobsohn! What a surprise! You haven't visited in three weeks. What's the meaning of this, Herr Jacobsohn?”

“Dear Herr Gutmann, how could I visit? You know that these are the Days of Awe, and the local Jews are more fanatical than ever. You know my position and how dependent I am on them. And if they saw me going to visit you. . .”

“You're absolutely right, Herr Jacobsohn, you're right. You are dependent on them and have a family to support.”

“Have you already finished your work, Herr Gutmann?”

“Oh, yes. The book has gone remarkably well. It's too bad that in this entire city only a few people read Hebrew.”

“What's worse, Herr Gutmann, is that you receive no payment for your work. You often want for food, and on top of everything you suffer undeserved scorn.”

“Believe me, Herr Jacobsohn, a writer really needs no other payment than being understood. Scorn and want merely inspire him to do his work. Undeserved disrespect is just as pleasant as deserved respect. To suffer for the sake of truth is not real suffering. I would call it suffering if I had to flatter, be a hypocrite, deny myself, and sell my conscience, my mind, and my heart. Do you think that being a flatterer is an easy job? It's just as hard as being a thief. The flatterer and hypocrite, like the thief, must always worry and be on guard. Do you think that all of my persecutors, the hasidim, are happy and pious? Oh, no! A certain group of them persecutes me just out of envy, out of jealousy.”

“Really, Herr Gutmann, with such fine qualities and thoughts, you truly are enviable. People must indeed be jealous of you. But do you know why I've come to you tonight? Several times you've said that you need an errand boy to send around town, and now I've found one and brought him along. He seems like an honest lad, though a bit of a fool.”

“Many thanks, my dear friend. Where is he?”

I understood bits and pieces of their conversation. That is, I didn’t catch the meaning, although I understood almost all of the words. They were a mixture of Yiddish and German, and I was able to understand the German words—because when I traveled around with the cantor I heard all sorts of people talk. In conversation, the cantor himself liked to throw in an occasional German word, as it suited him. He often used to boast that he sang from sheet music and could lead services *chorisch*.

Suddenly the door opened and they called me into the room. My new friend was sitting there without his hat, and the German Jew took my hand and said kindly:

“Well, my dear young man, you want to stay with me? Here you won’t have any hard work, you’ll just have to run an errand now and then.”

My eyes bulged and I gave such a foolish look that the German Jew smiled. But I liked him a lot; his face showed such goodness, and he spoke so kindly to me—unlike the tailor, the cantor, and even my mother. I was drawn to him. I put my hand to my lambskin cap, which I always wore, winter or summer, even if I was going barefoot. I lifted it a bit off my head, then I put it back down at an angle. I pulled it down toward my face, then pushed it up, and with the other hand I pulled at my side curls and scratched my neck. I didn’t know what to do with myself and with my cap. Finally I took courage and quickly snatched it off my head. I felt as if a cool breeze was blowing over my bare head, as if my head had been shaved. I kept reaching up to touch the hair on my head.

“You’re a good fellow,” the German Jew said. “What’s your name?”

I stood there dazed, just like the time with the German Jew in the Talmud-Torah. I peered at him with a couple of calf’s eyes.

“What’s your name?” the German Jew asked me again.

“I don’t know.”

“Can it be that you don’t know your own name?”

“My mother,” I answered, “used to call me Itzhak Avromtshe. My teacher in the Talmud-Torah called me Itshe Avremele. The tailor called me Itsik Avreml the bastard. And another craftsman, when he wanted to get me to carry the slop buckets, would call me Itshiniu Avrominiu. The cantor called me Avromke. So how should I know my name?”

“Your name is Itsik Avrom,” the German Jew said with a smile. “It’s a very fine name, taken from the Patriarchs. And that’s what I’ll call you—that is, Isaac Abraham, or Abraham. Do you want to stay with me, Abraham?”

“So long as you don’t beat me. Already there’s not a whole bone in my body.”

Tears welled up in the German Jew’s eyes. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, “Poor thing! It seems that he has suffered a lot. So young, and already he doesn’t have a whole bone in his body! Yes, yes,” he said to my new friend, “he really is coarse, even dumb, but still a good, honest fellow.” My new friend remained silent and just smoothed his whiskers.

“No,” the German Jew said to me. “I give you my word that I won’t touch you. You’re a human being, no less than I am, apart from which you’ve had enough misfortunes. So will you stay with me?”

“Yes, but you just shouldn’t ask me to sing the high notes. My throat is already sore.”

In short, I moved in with the German Jew. He had a wife and two children. He was very poor, but his house was always clean, everything was in its place, and the corners sparkled. His daughter owned only one dress, but it was always pretty and clean, as if it had just been sewn. The missus, his wife, took care of every nook and cranny and was always cheerful. The German Jew sat in his room writing, day and night; books lay all around him, on the table and under the table. I didn’t need to polish his boots much because he so seldom went out. On the other hand, his robe and slippers were tattered and torn. My main job was to run errands. Now and again he’d send me to someone with a book. It seemed like easy work. But in fact it was worse than with the tailor and the cantor. I would carry a bill to someone, and I’d see how he turned up his nose, angrily telling me to come back the next day. The next day he put me off again, and the following day I wouldn’t find him at home. If I came back to him with a bill, he would shout at me: Whatever does this boy want from me? I can’t get rid of him. Another person told his servants not to let me in, and a third would read over the bill, hesitate, and then walk away without saying a word. A fourth person would say: Tell your boss that I’m not home, you understand?

In general, they avoided me, and if they saw me coming they simply locked their doors or sicced a dog or a servant on me. When someone had mercy on me and accepted a book, he’d hide it right away under a bed or under a bench. For payment they gave me a torn ruble you couldn’t read. That’s how I spent more than a year with the German Jew. My friend, Herr Jacobsohn, would often visit late at night. And when I wasn’t tired I would eavesdrop on their conversation from the next room. Once I heard Jacobsohn

tell a story about a Doctor Steinharz and was surprised. Herr Gutmann said that all of the other doctors were quite virtuous and honorable men (at the time I didn't understand these two words), but why was he surprised about Doctor Steinharz?

"He is really a little man. That's why he's rich and everyone's favorite—their very soul."

I shook like a leaf when I heard that. Even Guttman says that a little man is the soul, and rich! My imagination got the better of me again, as I thought about trying to become a little man. It was no joking matter, a little man—and rich! Another night I heard Jacobsohn tell about Isser Varger, how rich and fortunate he was, practically running the whole town.

"What else is new?" said Gutmann. "Isser Varger is a little man and serves the landowner as his very soul."

There it was again, the little man! I was back to my old ideas. All night I tossed and turned and thought it over. Isser Varger is a little man, a soul, and a rich, fortunate man. So it appears that if you are a little man, you are rich and fortunate. It seems that people can become little men at will, and when they do, they become rich and fortunate. I thought I must have always been right when I wanted to be a little man. Yes, that's all well and good, but how does one become a little man? How do I get in on the action?

Even if I could roll up into a ball and shrink to a tenth my size, I still wouldn't be a little man. It seemed that there was some great trick to being a little man, otherwise everyone could be little men—souls, fortunate, and rich people. I thought all that over in bed, and when I fell asleep, I dreamed I met a little man on the street, dressed up like a prince in gold and silver, just like a doll. I so envied him that I pulled myself together, wrapped my arms around my knees, and held my breath until I stopped feeling and thinking, seeing and hearing. And suddenly I became a little man! As tiny as a flea. It was exhilarating. As soon as I became a little man, I began to feel better—next I became a soul, drove in a carriage, and I led the whole town by the nose. Everyone showed me respect and pointed at me, saying: There goes the soul in his carriage, take a look at how he talks and laughs! If you've got a dowry set aside, keep it safe with him! If you have some legal matter, go have a talk with the soul! But suddenly I started to stretch, daylight started to shine through my eyelids, and there I was again, Good morning! Just me, the rascal Itsik Avreml.

It really was me, stretched out on my bed, imagining I was lying in the lap

of luxury. I pinched myself and, yes, it really was me. How did I get here all of a sudden? Oh, was I angry with myself for waking up and being myself again! Well, I thought, no matter, I'll figure out how to become a little man. I had to become a little man. Then I mulled it over. Before I dreamed that I was a little man, rich and fortunate, I first stopped feeling, thinking, seeing, and hearing. There must be something to that. One couldn't become a little man except if one first stopped feeling and thinking; one just shouldn't feel and think. But how does one do this? How do you stop feeling and thinking? That was the whole trick! I had the idea that I would ask Herr Gutmann. Then I thought again and realized that if he knew the secret, he himself would have become a little man! He would have been rich and, poor man, he would have spared himself the shame of sending around books and bills. I thought it all over and decided that I should leave Herr Gutmann and offer myself as a servant to Doctor Steinharz. There I would learn the secret of how to become a little man. I promised an agent a big commission if he could pull some strings and make me into a servant for the doctor, and the very next day I left Herr Gutmann and the agent took me to my new job. The doctor himself was not home, his wife gave me work to do, and all day I worked like a donkey. I accepted everything quietly in hopes of seeing the little doctor. At nightfall the door opened and in came a tall, coarse man with a belly as round as the cantor—he was as big and tall as Gog and Magog. When I caught sight of him my eyes bulged and I stared at him foolishly. The boor cried out in Russian:

“What are you looking at, blockhead?”

I started to tremble and shake like a leaf, and I said, “Oy, oy, oy, my name is Itsik Avreml. I'm Abraham. I'm an orphan. I'm a servant here.”

“Well, we can see that you're a great fool,” the coarse man said. “From now on, watch for me, and when I come in you should quickly take off my coat and my boots, you hear?”

I was so scared of him that I got down on the ground and wrapped myself around his legs to take off his boots. The lummoX went into the room, I brought in the samovar, and I served him and the lady of the house all evening. At night, in bed, I thought about who the coarse fellow could be. He could sit for an entire evening alone with the doctor's wife. And where was the doctor himself? For the next two days I served the lummoX, and whenever he went out or came in I stretched out on the ground to put on or take off his boots. As I did this he would hold his sides and look at the ceiling, not even caring if he stepped on my fingers. And I still couldn't figure out who the

lummoX, the lout, could be. Once when the man had already gone to bed, I went down to the kitchen and asked the cook, with a pathetic expression: "I beg of you, who is the man that comes every evening and sleeps in the bedroom?" The cook looked at me, astonished: "What are you saying, what? What do you mean, someone sleeps in the bedroom? What are you talking about?"

"I swear it," I started to say. "I should only see the Messiah as clearly as I've seen him with my very own eyes. We should only live and be well."

"Well, and what about the master of the house?" asked the cook, with a cheerful face, and her eyes blazed like an oven baking challah.

"The master of the house," I answered, "doesn't seem to be sleeping at home. He must have gone away somewhere."

"Well," the cook said, "now I'm curious to go up and see for myself. I'll make some kind of excuse."

A few minutes later the cook came back down all red in the face and opened her big mouth to curse me: "What's the meaning of this? You're so young and already you've learned to make up gossip about something that never happened! Blockhead, hoodlum, I ought to tear you into shreds! How do you dare, you worthless loafer? You brazen rascal, Abraham! A pox on you, and may an evil spirit take you away, so help me! After all that, the master of the house is sitting in bed and talking with his wife!"

"What do you mean?" I said. "What do you mean? God be with you. Not that overgrown lout. . ."

"A curse on your grandpa, you impudent boy!" the cook started to shout and brandished the poker she was holding. "You mean to call the master of the house a lout, you smart aleck? I'll crack your head open!"

I hurried out of the kitchen and went back upstairs. Everything was quiet. When I lay down to sleep in the front room, I mulled it over. What was I seeing and hearing? The doctor was a big, fat fellow, so why did Gutmann say he was a little man? Had Gutmann told a lie? It couldn't be, Herr Gutmann never deceived me, and what Gutmann said always turned out to be true. Something was wrong.

A few days later, when I was standing behind the door to the doctor's office, I happened to hear this conversation between him and his barber-surgeon:

"Doctor, I procured quite a lot for you this week, and you haven't given me anything."

"What are you saying, Getzl? And what about yesterday?"

“What about yesterday, doctor?”

“He has a short memory! What’s the meaning of this? You’ve forgotten, Getzl, that just yesterday, for your sake, I was a little man. I had thirty leeches applied to the sick man—only in order that you would make a profit. Just between us, he needed leeches about as much as you or me. All he had was an upset stomach. Truly, Getzl, just for your sake yesterday I was a little man.”

“Yesterday you were a little man, as you say, and for your sake I was also a little man. Between us, today’s patient didn’t need a doctor. All he had was a cold. But I advised him to call you, and you gave him a prescription so that he’ll be sick for at least two weeks. In the meantime you can visit him twice a day.”

“Well, what do you want, Getzl?”

“Doctor, I still have quite a few leeches left!”

“Calm down, Getzl! Tomorrow I’ll order leeches for all my patients. Just calm down, Getzl!”

So that’s the story?! I thought it over as I lay in bed. Ha, ha! From what I’ve seen and heard, a little man isn’t just a little man. One can, pardon my saying so, be a big and a little man at the same time.

My guess was that being a little man meant drawing other people’s blood and cheating them out of their money. Now I started to understand what it meant to rub elbows with respectable people! I began to know the secret, but what did that help if I wasn’t a doctor and couldn’t apply leeches? I had to look for another means to become a little man—something similar, but in a different way. There was nothing more to be done in that line.

Then it came to me. I had to wheedle my way into service with Isser Varger! I was sure that was all it would take. Isser Varger was a little man—a rich, fortunate person.

That’s what I thought, and I worked it all out in bed. The next day I promised the agent another commission, and in a few days he sneaked me into Isser Varger’s house.

Isser Varger was one of the richest men in Tsviatshits. He worked everyone up into a fever, and everyone trembled before him when he spoke. It was no small matter, Isser Varger! He himself didn’t do business or get his hands dirty; but just the same, things were always cooking at his house. One person came in and another person left—everyone showed up at Reb Isser’s door. You might think that he was a great scholar, from a long line of rabbis, but not at all! He wasn’t even the least bit of a scholar and barely knew how to pray; he

came from a family of tailors. I found out about all of this later. The truth was, as I learned, that the secret of his success was being a little man—and with that he made a sea of money, more than anyone else with his Torah or his trade. He was in tight with the richest man of Tsviatshits—and was his very soul. It was always *this* Isser, *that* Isser, everything was just Isser. Isser was his soul, his legs, his hands. True, I never did get to know the rich man, and maybe he was a great man, a fine person, wise and learned; but Isser was some soul, a real little man. From Reb Isser, my rebbe, I learned a vast number of things. He opened my eyes and showed me the way to become a little man. I was a fool, a numbskull, but it turned out later that I wasn't an idiot by nature. That came more from being beaten and abandoned as a child. I was raised on beatings, and whoever wanted to went to work on me with slaps and blows. From beating your breast you don't get blessed. And from being beaten again and again, you get beaten down. It was no joking matter that, whenever I saw a hand, I expected it to hit me. I was dazed, confused, and stunned. What's more, I was born in a little shtetl, and a small-town Jew stays a small-town Jew. People from the shtetl are different—neither great nor small, neither wise nor foolish, neither good nor bad, neither fish nor fowl, just folk.

I won't waste any more of your time, but you shouldn't be surprised that a simpleton like me occasionally had a levelheaded thought and even came up with some bright ideas. I was a simpleton, for sure, but not by nature—just by being dazed and hazed and beaten. No screw was loose, but I was still unformed. That's how I was. This is why I was still able to learn some things, and I could soak in Reb Isser's teachings. I won't go on at length about Reb Isser, because he passed away and moved on to the true world a long time ago, and why should I reopen the book of his sins? I'd rather not talk about them. It's enough for you to know that I was his student, and from my tricks you'll understand what kind of man he was. I'll just explain to you Isser's system and his worldview, to which I adhered.

Isser had a close friend to whom he would tell everything. Especially when he was a bit tipsy, he would let down his guard and spill out everything that was bothering him. Once they came back cheerful and dead drunk, and they went into his room together. I was already quite good at standing behind doors and listening to conversations.

"Listen, my friend, I worked out a shrewd deal today. That is, I didn't really work, as fools might think. I worked just as little as you. I only pretended to work, you understand."

“But did you take in any money, Isser?”

“Hah! Did I ever!”

“How did it happen?”

“It’s an old story; you know it well. Yankl might as well have walked to Siberia, though it wasn’t really his fault. He’d been asking me to help him out for a long time. You know that I always answer: We’ll see, we’ll see. I say that with a shrug and let him think that I’ve seen what’s going on—although I’ve seen as much as I can see my own ears. Then I take a hefty fee. If his plan fails, I still don’t lose my standing, my influence. He thinks he lost just because I didn’t *want* to look into the matter, and that if I’d *wanted* to get involved, I would have surely carried it off. He can come and make demands, even want to strangle me or just plain call me names. It’s no skin off my back, and I haven’t spoiled my reputation. He’ll get over it and return asking for another favor, and as always I answer: We’ll see, we’ll see. You understand.

“Well, that’s what I said to Yankl: We’ll see, we’ll see. I saw full well that my seeing could help him about as much as last year’s snow. Let’s not be fooled about the limits of my power. But Yankl thought I saw and would ask the rich man to look into it. I didn’t even have to open my mouth or get my hands dirty. After the documents came out, I knew that when it came to a decision Yankl would lose his lawsuit. So early this morning I went running to him out of breath and said: Yankl, I’ve been wearing myself out to win your case. Give me some bottles of wine—I still have to go see the secretary. You should have seen how happily Yankl and his wife embraced. They said to me: We have only you to thank, Reb Isser. If not for you, we could have really suffered, and we’ll tell everyone what you did for us. They sent me home and I took along a small fortune.

“Believe me, my friend, you won’t get anywhere in this world with the truth, and work won’t earn you anything. No matter how hard you sweat, you’ll still go hungry ten times a day. In this world, only a little man gets results. Wisdom is worthless, because the main thing is to be cunning. You must be able to flatter, lie, and be hypocritical whenever it’s called for. What else? You’ve got to have money, for without money you’re nothing. What’s a beggar? Do you want to know why rich people hate a beggar? They talk to him once and pretend to have pity on him, but in truth they can’t stand him. To them he seems superfluous, and they feel a pinching in their chest when they see him. I have no words to describe it to you fully. But everything depends on money, my friend. If you have money, you own this world and the

next. To get money you must be a little man. And to be a little man means flattering, being a hypocrite, and doing whatever it takes to succeed.”

“Well, and Isser, what about the rich man who depends on you as if you were his soul? He has money and yet he’s a fine person.”

“I won’t speak of him, my friend. You understand? So long as he’s under lease to me I won’t speak of him.”

“What do you mean, Isser, he’s under lease to you?”

“Oh, my friend, you’re still just a straitlaced gent, so let me explain it to you. You should know that in this world everyone must seek only his own good. Do you understand? A rich man has great power, and everything falls into his lap. People humble themselves before the rich man, though they get nothing for it, just because a rich man deserves respect. And I, Isser, say that one should judge a rich man by his money, you understand? Just by his money; the man himself comes second. A rich man who doesn’t serve your ends should have no importance to you. Pay as much attention to him as they do to the Purim Megillah in Czernovitz. A clever, shrewd man should, in this world, do everything for his own benefit. Do you understand? I’ll repeat it once more: every person must seek his own good. A rich man has great power, and the clever man must take advantage of everything—so you need to know how to make use of the rich man, and not just for his money. You should stand next to the rich man like a comedian at the entrance to a comedy, or like a circus gypsy beside his bear. If you’ve bought a ticket, enter the comedy and watch the pretty play. If you give me some money, I’ll make the bear dance. You understand? The rich man is under lease to me, so if you want to see him, pay me for a ticket. I’m his manager, his soul, his landlord! That’s enough. Now do you understand, my dear friend?”

At first, of course, Isser’s system was too advanced for me, and many of his expressions were unfamiliar. But right away I understood: “To get money you must be a little man. And to be a little man means flattering, being a hypocrite, and doing whatever it takes to succeed.” I had found the secret. But I didn’t fully understand what it meant to flatter and be a hypocrite. I should note that, at the time, I didn’t know the difference between what one may or may not do. The sins I knew about were things like peeking during the Priestly Benediction, not slaughtering a scape hen at Yom Kippur, not going to Tashlikh during Rosh Hashanah, not believing in a wonder-worker, not believing that Elijah the Prophet goes from house to house on Passover drinking glasses of wine, not believing that the dead pray at night in the Great

Synagogue, or not believing that sinners wander in limbo. That would have meant not believing that there are hordes of people among us who trade, do business, travel, buy and sell, while in fact they are living dead. One fringe of their prayer shawl is defective and they are not called to the Torah. And not believing in the transmigration of souls—that would have meant not believing that the sacred soul of a person is transformed into a black cat, a pig, a calf, a hen, a stallion, or a canary. Or not believing that the dead come for judgment to the Bezliude rabbi, led like soldiers by the Angel of Judgment. Not believing that a shtrayml is sacred, and that even in Egypt the Jews wore fur hats and because of this they were redeemed. In short, these were the kinds of sins I knew—not flattering, being a hypocrite, or being a little man. Why not become a little man, rich and happy? No one dares to beat up a little man, and I knew how much a beating hurts. When a tailor or his wife hits you hard, you see stars; and when a cantor twists your ear, you can forget you were ever born. It's also unpleasant to stretch out on the floor putting on or taking off the master of the house's boots while he puts his hands on his hips and looks at the ceiling. So of course I wanted to be a little man, to suffer less, and to be happy and rich. I'd started to eavesdrop on all Isser's conversations with his good friend, and I began to understand his words. He was easier to understand than my teacher at school.

I served Isser for many years, during which time I polished my skills and learned all the things a little man needs to know. I listened carefully and was a diligent student. Then I started to look at myself and ask: When shall I build my own abode?⁵ That is, when will I start to do something that will raise me up in the world? I was getting on in years and was already a young man. It was true that I knew Isser's Torah well, but the main thing is to learn the craft, not the commentary. I thought about it for a long time before I came to this conclusion. Indeed, I told myself, what a fool I was! Isser himself says that everyone must seek his own good, and one should have a rich man under lease, taking a profit. Well, Isser himself was a rich man, so I decided I would have him under lease and become his soul. It was as if I had roast goose in my mouth and still thought I needed to beg for food. I won't drag it out, but just tell you that I started to play the hypocrite and flatter Isser, finding a thousand ways to ingratiate myself with him until I caught him and became his soul. Isser was also a human being, and he liked to be flattered and pampered, al-

5. A Hebrew phrase based on Genesis 30:30.

though he knew how false flattery was. When he told someone, for example: You're wise, good, pious, generous, and highborn, it meant just the opposite: You're a fool, a villain, a rogue, a miser, and lowborn. But that's just how it is, that everyone in the world likes to be deceived.

Still, it was easier said than done. It took a long time before I was able to become important to Isser. You may wonder: how does a servant become important? Ai, don't hold it against me, but if you need to ask this, you must not know the world. Almost all servants are important, and almost all important people are servants. When people saw my importance, because I had become Isser's soul, they started to treat me with kid gloves. Aha! Someone wanted to see Isser—and who didn't?—so he asked me to intercede for him. There was no need to talk of gifts or bribes. The person thought he'd gotten somewhere with me, that I would put in a good word with Isser, and he was happy. I knew that Isser could help him about as much as bloodletting helps a corpse, but I let him think it helped, and then hand over some money. That's how I gathered a few thousand rubles. I might have gone on that way and collected millions. But I was still a shlimmazl and, in the midst of everything, it happened that the rich man who was under lease to Isser died. Suddenly Isser was nobody's soul and had no influence. And when that happened, obviously, I was also nobody's soul and lost my influence. People stopped going to Isser because he was no longer a lease-holder; he no longer had a dancing bear. And when Isser lost his importance, you understand, I also lost mine. True, I was still important to Isser, but when he could no longer employ me, I needed him like a hole in the head. Then I listened to him about as much as they listen to the Purim Megillah in Czernovitz. I learned that from Isser himself—it was his own philosophy. I had a few thousand rubles, so I could afford to make light of him. My next thought was how to get another position where I could play a leading role, and I had the idea of moving to Glupsk. A certain rich man had a reputation there; I decided to take him under lease.

On the way to Glupsk I went to see the leader of the city. If you want to take a rich man under lease, you have to set things straight with the local rebbe. He's the first stop. That's how Reb Isser acted in his heyday. I gave the rebbe a hefty sum and he gave me his blessing so that I should succeed. With his blessing I rode into Glupsk. At that time I was maybe twenty-three, twenty-five, twenty-seven—I didn't keep track of the years and didn't know when I was born. What good would it have done me to know? In Glupsk I let

on that I was a widower, because a young unmarried man gets no respect. I wore a prayer shawl decorated with a thick silver collar that shimmered and sparkled. In those days, as Reb Isser Varger used to say, a beautiful collar was the best recommendation among Jews. I had money, too, which made it easy to meet all of the fine creatures of Glupsk. I told them I was thinking of opening a business, but really I was thinking of my lease, because I didn't know how to do anything else. God lent a hand and I came to know the rich man. He was very coarse and liked to be involved in all of the foolish goings-on around town, which suited me fine. That's just what I needed. I won't drag it out; my business went on smooth as butter, and it wasn't very difficult for me to become his soul. In short, in the course of two years I was lucky and came to hold him under lease. The whole city, rich and poor, needed his favors and bowed down to him, so you can imagine how it went with me, his soul. I said earlier that it isn't my nature to speak ill of others, and to this day I hold with Isser, who used to say: I won't talk about my rich benefactor. I don't need to confess his sins—he's still alive and will have time to confess for himself. Here I'm talking about myself.

I repent for my sin of deceiving others.⁶ When townspeople saw my importance, they all thought I was immensely rich and powerful. Whoever had a business venture in mind went straight to Isaac Abraham Takif—that's what they called me, as you already know, Rebbe. I would accept piles of gold and say, We'll see, we'll see, just as Isser had answered. A person thought I would help, but in truth I would forget all about him after I took the money. I just made a fool of him.

And for the sin of hardening my heart—I repent. I stole from the poor, from widows, and from orphans. When a poor man cried rivers of tears, I turned a deaf ear. What good are your tears to me? I thought. Render unto me the capital, and desist from weeping and wailing. That is, hand over the dough, Jew dog, and drown yourself in your tears.

And for the sin of hurrying to do evil—I repent. Doing evil is far easier than doing good. Even a cat can spill the milk. Most of the time, to do good requires wisdom, money, and so on, but to do evil is easy as pie. It doesn't demand any great wisdom and doesn't cost a thing. To keep my reputation as a

6. Starting with this phrase, Isaac Abraham's repeated use of the formula "I repent for my sin" (or "for the sin . . . I repent," *al heit she-hetati*) echoes the Yom Kippur ritual of atonement.

takif, I often did evil deliberately, so that people would fear me and not take me lightly.

And for the sin of slander and holding a lease—I repent. I had to speak a lot of slander and secretly carry out a lot of schemes in order to make my benefactor into a leading light, adorn him with a shtrayml, and become his soul, the takif, the lease-holder.

And I repent for my sin of insolence and of being a little man. When I had to entrap an honest man who stood in my way, or to deceive an intelligent, honest man who had guessed my fraud, then I showed my full power and impudence, my insolence, just like a little man.

In short, I was a little man, and because of this things went well for me. I married a rich wife and lived in wealth and honor. I earned a great deal of money from my lease and I have accumulated wealth during the twenty years or so that I've been living in Glupsk.

Earlier I said that I wasn't born a fool, I was no idiot; I was just beaten down. By nature I wasn't an evil person, either, but I was led astray. When I did something low down, afterward my heart pounded faster and a gloomy mood would overtake me. I myself didn't know where to hide my head. I recall that Isser said that a little man shouldn't envy men like Gutmann, who write books. God forbid: one should hate and persecute them, because they are more dangerous than fire. They crawl down your throat with their wise words. He used to say it's a miracle that donkeys don't have horns; well, it's a miracle that men like that don't have money and are usually paupers. Otherwise, we'd never hear the end of them and we'd never get rid of them, like lice. Obviously, Isser's sayings were the Holy Torah to me, and though it disturbed me to make an enemy of Gutmann, who had found a way to enter my soul, I only listened to Isser. If not, I couldn't become a little man, a leaseholder, and I'd have to go on suffering blows and misfortunes by the pound. Of course, I tortured men like Gutmann. But when I was already rich and didn't need to fear suffering and misery, then my heart used to throb; I would imagine the good, calm Gutmann. Oh, what a good man he was! How he liked me and didn't treat me like a servant! Even though he was poor, he was always cheerful and happy.

Once his wife cried long and hard when it was close to Passover and there wasn't a trace of the holiday at home. He sent me out with books for an entire day, and no one wanted to touch them. When I took people invoices, they turned up their noses; and so, in short, the dear lady cried. Oh, Gutmann

said, why are you sinning with tears? We're better off than all of the rich—we're honest people, and we suffer for the truth. It's much better and finer to suffer for the truth than to be happy from deceit. Don't worry. God has helped in the past and He'll go on helping us. What do I need with two jackets and a fur coat, when I can only wear one? And who needs a fur coat, anyway, with summer coming? The moths may chew it up. Abraham, take my fur collar and my coat, pawn or sell them, and we'll have matzoh for Passover.

The scene replayed itself again and again before my eyes. I saw that Gutmann was happy without money, which showed that happiness wasn't made of money, but of something else. He would even say, "We're better off than all of the rich, since we're honest people," which meant that only honest people are happy and rich. I always remembered what he said to my friend Jacobsohn: "Being a flatterer and a hypocrite is worst of all. The flatterer and hypocrite, like a thief, must always worry and be on guard." I began to see how true this was: Gutmann, with his intelligence, understood that things are as bad for a flatterer and a hypocrite as they are for a thief. Both must always be afraid of being caught, and they must always guard against people finding out their tricks. It is unpleasant to live secretly all the time. And I really did feel, in my heart, that a false person is always in a bad way. Life lacks all flavor, it weighs on him like a stone on his heart; his blood boils, his head bothers him and burns like a flame. Yes, I felt that real suffering was having to flatter and be a hypocrite. I was rich, but still not happy!

I would have harsh, bitter dreams. I'd imagine I was holding a knife and slaughtering with it; I'd hear moans, groans, and death rattles, and my coat would be soaked in blood. In one dream I saw Gutmann sitting with his family, happy and cheerful. When I went in, he looked at me and shook his head with regret.

"Oh, Abraham," he said sadly. "You used to be a much better man, although you were a bit of a fool. It's a pity. Feh, you've been led astray and ruined. You've become a little man!"

This year these dark thoughts so tormented me that I took sick. I felt that I wouldn't last long, and I hurried to write my life story—how it happened that I went astray. Perhaps by writing I can atone for my sins, and also set down my last will.

My fortune is worth about a hundred and fifty thousand rubles. I wish to give fifty thousand rubles for my two small children. That's enough for them;

their father didn't even have fifty kopecks at their age, and until they marry they can earn interest. My wife shall receive fifteen thousand rubles.

For God's sake I ask of you, Rebbe, that you send for Herr Gutmann in Tsviatshits as soon as possible. The two of you should make use of my money, as I will direct here. You, Rebbe, are a saint and an honest man, which I can see from the fact that you're very poor. If you had wanted, you could have been rich like any other rabbinical judge. Gutmann is also a saint and a good man, though he wears no head covering and trims his beard; he has your precious character. I ask, Rebbe, that you treat him kindly, as he will treat you, for he likes everyone and is a lover of the Jewish people. Herr Gutmann will be very useful to you in the matters I will request of you.

With the remaining eighty-five thousand rubles, as an endowment in perpetuity, I ask that you first improve the local Talmud-Torah. In what way? You yourself will know, and Herr Gutmann also knows about such things. The main thing is that the teachers shouldn't beat the poor children. And one shouldn't give them all kinds of twisted interpretations of biblical verses. Believe me, that just confuses them.

Second, one should make a vocational school for craftsmen, so that apprentices won't have to suffer abuse from tailors and their wives, and they won't have to carry slop pails. God have mercy! Many orphans who become apprentices, poor things, spoil their health and are left crippled, with bruises all over their bodies. Why doesn't anyone think about such unfortunate children?

Third, when a traveling cantor comes to Glupsk, you should give him expense money to continue on his way. A cantor is no comedian who drags himself all over the world. If you're a cantor, stay home and take care of your synagogue; but if you're a musician, travel around and sing in theaters.

Other than that, you should spend the money as you and Herr Gutmann wish. I know that because both of you are fine people, great humanitarians, you'll know what to do without answering to anyone. I bequeath my entire house with all of its household objects to you and Herr Gutmann; the property earns about five thousand rubles a year. You should live in the house and both of you should provide guidance for my children.

You should read this letter to all of the wealthy local men. It will atone for my sins and teach them a lesson. Afterward you should print it. Let the whole world know that wealth doesn't bring happiness; a person is happy only with a good heart and good deeds. It's better to suffer torments, so long as one is

honest, than to live in luxury and be a little man. Please give this letter to Reb Mendele the Book Peddler, because he knows all about printing books. And apart from that, he travels all around Poland and will be able to distribute it. Pay him well for his troubles—he’s very poor.

When the rabbi finished reading the letter, I took a look at the people gathered around. The rich men were angry and bit their lips with resentment, but they kept quiet. One of the rabbinical judges was enraged and he tore at his whiskers. But the other judges remained calm and said:

“A Jew stays a Jew. Even sinners fulfill as many commandments as there are seeds in a pomegranate. Look at what a Jewish heart he had—he sinned unintentionally, and now he has repented. We’ll study a chapter in the Mishna every day and say Kaddish for him, for a year, free of charge.”

“Now, Reb Mendele,” the rabbi said to me, “I ask you, first, who is this Herr Gutmann of yours in Tsviatshits? Is he really an honest man? Do you know him?”

“Rebbe,” I answered, “Gutmann trims his beard, but still he’s an honest man.”

“Well,” the rabbi said, “so long as he is an honest man, his trimmed beard doesn’t bother me. As we say: better a Jew without a beard than a beard without a Jew. Second, since you’re from Tsviatshits, I ask that you please travel there today—you’ll be well paid for it. You should deliver my letter to Herr Gutmann and ask him to come quickly, for God’s sake, so that we may fulfill the wishes of the deceased. And third, dear Reb Mendele, you should print and sell this letter at a low price all over Poland, so that many people will buy it. Of course, I will pay you well.”

I went over to pick up my candlesticks from the floor, and suddenly we heard a voice outside calling, “Charity saves from death,” as beggars do at funerals. All of us—the rabbi, long may he live, the judges, the rich men, and I—went outside to accompany Isaac Abraham to the cemetery. The rabbi asked the Talmud-Torah boys to walk ahead and say: “Righteousness will go before him and give direction to his steps.”

I hurried to hitch up my horse. While I was sitting at the rabbi’s house, the street urchins had pulled out almost all of the hairs in his tail, so that only about forty remained. But I’m getting off the point. I hurried on my way to Tsviatshits, where I hadn’t been for almost two years.

When I arrived home, they told me that Gutmann had left Tsviatshits

long ago, and no one knew where he was. I hastened to print the letter, and I hereby let it be known that as soon as Herr Gutmann reads it, he should travel to Glusk. The rabbi there is looking for him, so that together they can improve the Talmud-Torah and do many other good things.

Translated by Ken Frieden

Fishke the Lame

A Story of Poor Jewish Folks

I

Last year, in the summer of 1868, after I stocked up some fresh goods and packed my wagon with all sorts of books, I headed out on my travels to those distant places where, thank God, Reb Mendele and his wares are still valued. You've got to know those Jews. They like it when the pages of a book are all colors and sizes, the letters are a little blurred, and every page is printed in different type: Rashi script, pica, elite, bold, pearl, italic, you name it. Don't worry about mistakes because a Jew has a head on his shoulders and can figure things out. One printer from Obmanov, may he rest in peace, discovered the secret of what Jews like, and his books—even the most insignificant—sold like hotcakes. But I'm getting off the point.

It was afternoon on the seventeenth of Tammuz, in the heat of the summer, when I turned off the main road a few miles short of Glupsk. The sky was clear and blue without a trace of clouds; the sun scorched and burned the land. There was no air to breathe and no breeze. From the wheat in the fields to the trees on the hill, nature stood still. You remember the dreadful dry heat last summer, when not a leaf stirred. Jews moved heaven and earth—everywhere they said Psalms, wailed, fasted—but for the longest time God didn't want to grant even a single drop of rain. The grass in the pastures turned brown. The miserable cows lay exhausted with their necks outstretched, ears twitching, chewing the cud. Others rooted around in the ground with their horns, scraped their hooves, and bellowed at the heat. Nearby stood horses leaning their heads across each other, making a bit of shade, and chasing away flies with their tails. It broke my heart to see them, and yet God didn't want to give a drop of rain, even for the sake of the innocent beasts. Everywhere it was calm and you could hear each rustle or peep,

but not a single bird was out—only mosquitoes swarmed, like evil spirits. Now and then they would dance by, take a bite, and buzz and hiss in your ears. As if they'd come to whisper a secret and then march on. But I'm getting off the point.

In the intense heat I sat stretched out on my wagon, stripped down—if you'll excuse my saying so—to my undershirt and fringed garment. A stitched plush cap was pushed back on my head and woolen stockings from Breslau were rolled down to my heels. I wear them even in the summer, to atone for my sins, and I sweated heavily. Actually, if the sun hadn't been full in my face I might have enjoyed this because I like to sweat and can lie for hours on the upper benches of the bathhouse at the hottest time of year. My father, may he rest in peace, was a hot, burning, fiery Jew who got me used to the heat since childhood. He so liked to steam up and sweat that he was famous for it. Sweating is, after all, a Jewish business, and who in this world sweats more than a Jew? But I'm getting off the point. My wretched horse also worked up quite a sweat. I should tell you that he hasn't changed a bit except that now he limps around with a swollen back foot wrapped in rags.¹ One of his eyes oozes pus and there's a nasty cut where the bridle rubs against his neck. What difference does it make if a Jew's horse isn't pretty, so long as it can walk? I took pity on him and tied long strips of paper to his chewed up tail—let me tell you, this is a great trick to drive away flies and mosquitoes. But I'm getting off the point again. Behind me followed a second wagon made of old, torn straw mats. It bounced along on four uneven, squeaky wheels, pulled by an old nag that was tall, thin, with a bruised and scratched back, and big ears. Its knotted mane was tangled with hay and straw that stuck out of the fraying bridle. Leaning his head on his hands, high up on the wagon lay a heavysset Jew with a fat belly, red as a beet, sunburned, dripping sweat from his hairy chest, and it broke my heart to look at him. It was Wine 'n' Candles Alter, my good friend, a book peddler from Tuneyadevke. We had met up along the way a few minutes earlier.

At about one o'clock we came to the woods at the foot of Green Mountain outside Glupsk. Green Mountain is known almost the world over from an old song about it. Everywhere children sing this song; nurses and nannies sing it

1. "My wretched horse . . . hasn't changed a bit": an allusion to descriptions of Mendele's horse in Abramovitsh's previous two Yiddish works, *The Little Man* (*Dos kleyne mentshle*) and *The Wishing-Ring* (*Dos vintshfingerl*).

to suckling babies. My mother, may her soul rest in Paradise, when she wanted to distract me so that I wouldn't cry, used to sing these words:

High up on Green Mountain,
Tall grass brushing their hips,
Stand two stylish Prussians
Brandishing whips. . . .

I always liked the song, and it amused me more than any other lullaby. From a distance, Green Mountain seemed so beautiful that I imagined it was made of something other than earth. Green Mountain brought to mind the hills of Lebanon and the Holy Land. Not to mention those Prussians who seemed, begging their pardon, like oxen, wild beasts, mythical creatures grazing on the tall grass of Green Mountain. But I'm getting off the point.

We unhitched our horses, which were ready to drop, and let them drag themselves off to graze on Green Mountain. Then we propped ourselves up under a tree.

2

Reb Alter could scarcely breathe because of the heat, and he was covered in a cold sweat. He cackled like a hen and so moaned and groaned that hearing him pierced me to the heart.

"Hot enough for you, Reb Alter?" I said, trying to make conversation.

"Bah!" he answered and moved deeper into the shade.

"I reckon the fast has got you feeling really lousy," I said.²

"Bah!" said Reb Alter again.

But I couldn't leave it at that. I was getting bored and wanted to talk a bit, so I tried again.

"From what you've said, Reb Alter, I gather you're coming back from Yarmolinetz. Do any good business at the town fair?"

"Bah!" said Reb Alter once more and twisted his lips.

"Bah, what?" I asked, getting annoyed. "Why can't you just answer my question?"

2. "I reckon the fast has got you feeling really lousy": Referring to the complete fast observed by traditional Jews on the seventeenth of Tammuz, in commemoration of Nebuchadnezzar's capture of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E.

“Don’t ask, don’t ask,” Reb Alter finally said with a sigh. “I got what was coming to me at the fair. It serves me right, and I should give up the business.”

I kept bothering Alter, long and hard, until he told me all about his mishap at the fair.

“When I arrived at the fair,” he began and groaned again, “I tied up my wagon as usual and laid out my wares on the main square. I had great hopes for the Yarmolinetz fair, you should know, because I’m in a bad way. The printer wants me to pay up or he won’t send another book. My eldest daughter is getting on in years and needs to be married off. My wife bore us another son not long back, and so, praise God, I’m raising a brood of kids without a penny in my pocket.”

“Excuse me for interrupting, Reb Alter,” I said, “but why, at your age, did you go and marry a young wife who’d bear you so many children?”

“God help you,” Reb Alter answered. “I needed someone to keep house. Why else does a Jew get married?”

“Then why,” I said, “did you divorce your first wife? She was a good housekeeper, wasn’t she?”

“Bah!” said Reb Alter with a grimace.

Among us Jews, “bah” is a very useful word. It seems no other people or language has such a word that answers every question. “Bah” comes in handy at any time and will always serve. Even Reb Yosl, who gives advice to all the people of Glupsk, waits until a person has talked himself blue in the face, puts on a serious look, and says, “Bah!” Though Reb Yosl hasn’t been listening to a single word, it comes out like a pearl of wisdom and everyone is satisfied. Or when some hapless man chances upon Reb Nisl, the town arbitrator, and says, “How can it be that I put myself at your mercy, gave you a fortune, and yet you sold me cheap like a sheep for slaughter? Come on, speak up!” Then our Reb Nisl calmly answers with a simple “Bah!” And he stays in the right. People take this as a valid explanation and the very next day another loser entrusts his fate to Reb Nisl. Or when a Jew puts a ruble in front of Reb Abba, our rabbinical judge, for a legal decision, and asks if it is enough, Reb Abba makes a face and says, “Bah!” The Jew catches his drift and, with a heavy heart, adds a few coins. When someone asks Reb Azriel, just to be polite, whether he’d like another glass of wine or piece of fish, he answers with a coy “Bah!” And then you have to give him the last drop. “Bah” has so many meanings that a Jew can always use it to wriggle out of a tough spot. Language experts of our day tell us that the word “bah” is as old as Balam’s ass: when it opened its mouth to speak, it said “Bah, bah!” But I’m getting off the point again.

I, too, had to honor Reb Alter's "Bah!" before asking him to continue his story.

3

"Standing beside my wagon," Reb Alter began, "I watched the town fair. The crowd was thick as molasses, and Jews were busy making a good profit. Among the other merchants I saw Berl Teletse, once a mere teacher's assistant, then a servant, and now the owner of a big shop, favored by fortune and wealth. Over there I saw a man running and working himself into a sweat, wearing a cap on his head and raking in money. Then some other people ran by, out of breath—agents, matchmakers, ragtag tailors, hucksters, henwives, all of them with flaming red faces and apparently all on the verge of success.

"Deep down I envied everyone who was making out so well, mining gold—while I, like a shlimmazl, stood idly beside my broken-down wagon with my arms folded. Some of my wares, charms and four-cornered fringed garments, were hanging over the sides of the cart. Inside were a few packages of books—Passover Haggadas, prayer books for Shavuot—that were out of season and no one wanted to touch. I was also selling a bit of old brassware, some shofars, yarmulkas spun from yarn for children, and some rags. Silently I cursed myself, the wagon, the printer, my broken-down nag—all of us would be better off dead. I saved the best curses for the printer. If not for him, I wouldn't have known from any wagon, nag, or the rest of my troubles.

"Suddenly, driven by envy and desire, it occurred to me to try my luck at a new trade—making a match between the children of two wealthy merchants, who had brought their goods to the fair. You must know them; one is Reb Elyakim Sharograder, and the other is Reb Getzl Gredinger. I neglected my book trade and spent the next day and night going back and forth between the families like an utter madman, running from one father to the other. I worked at it, nose to the ground, determined to make a match then and there. What more suitable place could there be? God helped out by bringing together the in-laws, who luckily agreed to the dowry and other expenses. Overjoyed, I thought I had the world in my pocket, not to mention the matchmaker's fee. I even started to think how much I would give my poor daughter as a dowry, and I haggled over some fabric for a featherbed.

"But listen to what can happen if luck is against you. When they started to write the marriage contract and needed the names of the bride and groom, it

turned out—I can hardly bear to tell you—that it was all a pipe dream. Listen to what can go wrong: both of the families had boys! You can imagine the reward I got from both sides, *vey iz mir*, and how I felt as I left the fair without a penny in my pocket.”

I couldn't help it—I burst out laughing and said:

“How's it possible, Reb Alter, that you got mixed up in such an idiotic scheme? I don't want to insult you any more than I would my own mother, but how could you make a match before you were sure that one family had a girl and the other had a boy?”

“Of course, don't I know it?!” answered Reb Alter with feeling. “I haven't totally lost my marbles. I knew very well that Reb Elyakim had an unmarried daughter, and once I even saw her with my own eyes. But nothing in the world can help if luck is against you. It was just my luck that Reb Elyakim's girl decided to get married in a hurry last year. I hadn't heard anything of it. So when I planned a match between Reb Elyakim and Reb Getzl, I was thinking of Elyakim's girl and Getzl's boy. No need to spell it out—it seemed so simple there was nothing more to say. Two boys don't get hitched up, obviously it would be a boy and a girl, the way of the world. I think I acted as befits the trade, and I swear no one could have done it better. I went straight to the heart of the matter: dowry, wedding gifts, and other expenses. Don't forget that at a fair there's no time to mince words, you keep it brief and to the point. Reb Elyakim himself must have assumed that, if there was going to be a match, it had to be with his son. How could it be any other way? He knew that Reb Getzl would be his in-law, but how could that be? Neither of them had a girl to marry off. Now you see what goes on in the world and how I got into such a mess. Take it from me, nothing you do will succeed unless you have luck. The devil put me up to it, and I got what was coming to me.”

Poor Reb Alter lay there quietly, licking his wounds and beset by cares. His story brought to mind many things about arranged marriages among Jews. I decided to talk with Reb Alter and draw him out of his gloom.

“Yes, Reb Alter, yes,” I said, “anything can happen in this world. I want to tell you a fine tale about what goes on among Jews.”

Reb Alter wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve. Then he stretched himself out under the tree, smoking his small pipe. I coughed a few times, drove away some mosquitoes, and started to tell the following story.

“In the brick bathhouse of Glupsk, there lived for many years a fellow named Fishke the Lamé. One might say that Fishke had perfected every possible flaw. That is to say, there wasn’t a single flaw or failing that Fishke didn’t possess. He had a big, flat head with long, flaxen sidelocks, a wide mug, fat lips, and crooked, yellow teeth. Cross-eyed, one arm twisted back, limping heavily on one leg, Fishke was no delight to behold. He was such a freakish creature that the town didn’t even want him as a cholera groom. When people panicked during epidemics and conscriptions, the Glupsk community hastily matched up cripples, scoundrels, and beggars with unmarried girls, raising the wedding canopy amid the tombstones at the cemetery. They did this in the hope that it would put an end to the disease. Instead of Fishke, the community first selected the famous cripple Yontl, who pushed himself along on his buttocks holding two low wooden platforms in his hands. They paired him off with the illustrious, poor old widow with no lower lip and huge teeth that hung down like shovels. The second time, the community chose the town bum named Lekish. At the graveyard, this Lekish placed the veil on a bride who, if you’ll excuse my saying so, was better off with her face and bald pate covered. In town there was a rumor that she was either sexless or androgynous. They say that the guests were very festive at their wedding and drank a sea of brandy among the tombstones. Jews should be fruitful and multiply, everyone agreed, and poor cripples should also be able to enjoy life. But I’m getting off the point.

“The short and long of it was that they all skipped over Fishke, even the old auntie who’d lost her nose.³ She was the one who—when the klezmer musician used to squeak out a tune on his fiddle and sing along—used to go and hop around like crazy in the middle of the street. She took up a collection so that two corpses could dance; that is, she gave new life to cripples and poor girls so that, God forbid, they wouldn’t become old maids. But even the merciful old auntie kept forgetting Fishke and let him go around for a long time without a wife. It was too bad, let me tell you, for if Fishke had been in good health, Glupsk might already have been blessed with some of his children.

3. “The old auntie who’d lost her nose”: possibly a matchmaker (*shadkhen*); or perhaps a local prostitute or madame in a brothel, because before the discovery of antibiotics, syphilis was known to deface its victims.

“Most of the time Fishke went around barefoot, without a coat, wearing a patched shirt over his long, grease-stained four-cornered garment and coarse, wrinkled underwear. His work consisted of going through the streets calling people to the bathhouse in his stammering voice. In the summer, when vegetables came into season, the streets would ring out with his sweet cries: ‘Jews, over here! Fresh garlic for sale!’ I knew Fishke well, because I went straight to the bathhouse whenever I arrived in Glupsk. First things first, and on such occasions I always stopped in at the brick bathhouse to fumigate my clothes, rinse the lice off my socks, and stretch out my aching bones on the top bench. Whatever anyone else may say, to me that’s the greatest bliss; what could be better than to sweat? As I already said, even now it would be a pleasure to sweat, except for the sun beating down on my face.

“Move over a bit, if you don’t mind, Reb Alter!” I said. “Seems to me you’ve worked up quite a sweat. Move on over, if you don’t mind, just a bit farther.”

Reb Alter cleaned out his pipe, filled it up again with tobacco, and went on smoking. I moved closer to him, into the shade, and returned to my story.

“When I was in Glupsk last year, I saw Fishke from a distance and was so surprised I almost jumped out of my skin. He was limping along as usual but looking like a dandy in a fine new coat, new shoes and socks, a wide-brimmed hat, a newly sewn shirt of starched calico that sparkled on his chest, and large red flowers decorating his four-cornered garment. What did it mean? I wondered. Did the town finally make him into a cholera groom? Or maybe old auntie no-nose took pity on him, combed the streets, and drummed up some beauty for him. But I was off to the bathhouse for a good cupping on my neck and shoulders, as is the custom among Jews, and to scrub my old bones with twigs. I’d fallen on my back and suffered from aches and pains, God help me, so I decided I would pass a few hours at the bath. I figured that I’d learn everything I wanted to know about Fishke there. Aside from which I would pick up other gossip concerning public affairs—such as, what’s gone wrong with the Emperor? Have the Prussians brought him down a notch?⁴ And how might the Pope, poor fellow, be doing? Has Rabbi Avigdor Emanuel been bothering him? What did the old folks, who still remembered the time when Napoleon reached our corner of the world, have to say? In order to save their sons during those first days of the conscription, as the French army approached, peo-

4. Mendele is referring to events associated with the Crimean War (1853–56).

ple married off five-year-old boys and girls. What would people say now? Maybe that we could rediscover the mysterious Red Jews or Ten Lost Tribes. According to the bathhouse gossip, the Pasha was already a lost cause, thrown out of Istanbul with everything he owned. I was most curious to hear what was happening in America, because ever since the Civil War started, in our parts the price of wool has risen so that for a prayer shawl and fringes you have to spend everything you've got.

"I mixed all this together purposely in order that you'd understand what goes on in the brick bathhouse of Glupsk. There everything that's doing and brewing in the world gets mooted about, secrets are revealed, business is transacted, and the tumult is greater than at a town fair. If you come on Friday you'll see a marvelous thing: in a corner sit barber-surgeons surrounded by people. One of them gives shaves and haircuts while another marks shoulders with a razor, places cups, and Jewish blood spurts all over the floor, mixing in with papers and newly cut hair. On the walls, on the ceiling, and beside the oven hang more clothes than in the grandest store: socks, shirts, fringed garments, underwear, caftans, overcoats, and sometimes even plush hats. From the top bench you hear frightful shouting while some folks lie there groaning, ready to pass out. Others, armed with twig brooms, cry, *Gevalt!* Have mercy, Jews, steam it up! The bath grows cold, everyone starts to shout, but no one bothers to pour water on the stone. Finally some hoodlum fires it up until it's so hot you choke. High up over a vat sit the rich and well-connected men talking brass tacks: about the lease from the Polish lord, about the kosher meat tax, about the draft, about the elections, and about the new chief of police. A wealthy man shuffles over to them and makes conversation about the Jewish school, the new government edicts, scandals about town, and starts some rumors. Suddenly one smart aleck—who's been sharpening his teeth on the local councilman—grins and invites the best-connected man in town to sit with him on the top bench, so that he can steam him up a bit. The wealthy man gets the same idea and, swallowing his pride, invites someone else to get in on the action. Everyone crawls up to the top bench and the deal is done. Thanks to them, things really start to heat up in the bath—from young to old and small to grand, people grab the twig brooms amid the hubbub, tumult, and shouting. Then I crawl into a corner as high up as I can get and steam up my bones to the limit, until all at once a glow spreads through my limbs. I'll have to take you with me to the bath some day; you should feel the heat and see it with your own eyes. But back to the matter

at hand. Listen, Reb Alter, to what the bathhouse attendant told me about Fishke, in these very words.

5

“ ‘One Thursday evening,’ he told me, ‘when all of the attendants and I finished firing up the stoves, we stretched out on the benches to catch our breath. Apart from us, stretched out, were a few poor Jews who always hang around and stink up the place. Sorry if I’m being crass. We were all lying there calmly, smoking and chatting cheerfully. You should know that we pass the time much better and more amicably than people do in the town club. There the jealousies and rivalries are so fierce that it’s a wonder no one gets his nose torn off. While we were resting, all at once we heard a coach drive right up to the bathhouse. And sure enough, soon three healthy, broad-shouldered fellows came in, each one bigger than the next. They asked whether Fishke the Lame lived there. At first I was terrified, but when I thought it over I realized I didn’t have to worry about Fishke. Even if the three louts were kidnappers, what did it matter? With all of his charms, thank God, he wasn’t in danger of being drafted into the tsar’s army. Since I was curious to know why they needed Fishke, I answered, yep, Fishke hangs around here. He’s not here now, but if you tell me what you want with him, maybe I can find him for you.

“ ‘The three fellows thought it over, after which one of them told me:

“ ‘—Have it your way. To tell the truth, there’s nothing to be ashamed of—it’s just a common Jewish story. You probably know the blind old orphan who’s been begging and praying for the dead in front the synagogue next to the graveyard. One of our local scribblers even wrote a song about her, and everyone sings it. This year she became a widow and soon after she had herself matched up with some porter, promising to clothe him, feed him, and even give him a little money. Today was supposed to be the wedding day. They prepared a fine feast with brandy, baked rolls, fish and roast chicken, as Jews are wont to do, and all of that costs money. But listen to what can happen! When everything was ready and the bride had been decked out and veiled, they went to bring the groom to stand under the wedding canopy. But the crown jewel wasn’t at home. They waited an hour and he didn’t show, so they waited another hour. He’d vanished into thin air. It turned out that the brat got cold feet when his granny—a cook who’d served the lord of the

manor for a long time—started to cry, fuss, and scream that the match would shame her. After all, she'd been in service to His Lordship for so many years! She could make a kugel pudding from the best recipe and there was no match for her cooking in town. No small matter, His Lordship's cook! In the meat market, her opinion was the last word. Why should her grandson disgrace her and spoil their good name in her old age? Now, nothing anyone said helped, he'd decided he didn't want the match. —You can call me whatever you want, he said, do what you like, or send me packing to the rabbi's court. So the rest of us were stuck out in the cold like moldy cheese in the larder. No one was as sorry about the groom as we were about the feast. How could this happen? We killed ourselves running around all day long, and we hadn't eaten a bite. What a crime to waste such fish and roast chicken! We thought and thought, pondered the matter some more, and Fishke came to mind. Good Lord, Fishke could get all of us out of this mess—he should be the groom, what does it matter to him? Anyway, we've come now to take him to the wedding canopy in place of the porter, so the bride will remain a bride and the feast won't get spoiled.

“‘As the three hale and hearty fellows were explaining it all to me, in comes Fishke. We snapped him up like a real bargain and kept our story brief: Get going, boy, take your sick legs and limp over to the wedding canopy. Things were arranged in a hurry, before Fishke had a chance to turn around. The town had a good meal—everyone ate and drank like there was no tomorrow, and we congratulated the new couple.’

“That's what the bathhouse attendant said to me. So now,” I told Reb Alter, “Fishke walks around in the overcoat that was meant for the porter, and he's a new man. His job is to take his wife, the blind old orphan, out to her spot beside the graveyard in the morning, and to lead her back home before dark. Fishke no longer has to worry about where his next meal is coming from. His wife is a paragon of virtue with a steady job, the couple is in love, and neither can have any complaints, God forbid, about the other.

“That, Reb Alter, is my story. So you see,” I said, “what can happen in this world. In our parts they hitch up the lame and the blind, just for the sake of a meal, so that all the busybodies can eat and drink their fill! And what happens with poor, simple folk happens just the same with the rich community leaders: more than once they've made completely impossible matches for the sake of a different sort of feast. . . . But I'm getting off the point. Don't worry, Reb Alter, if you didn't succeed in pairing off a boy with a lad, with God's

help you'll have better luck with another match. Just don't let it get you down and don't lose sleep over it! On the contrary, I see you think you've made a fine start in your new business, acting like a top-notch matchmaker, even if you did try to hitch up a couple of boys. As soon as you sniff out a girl, your trade will start to flow like butter. Whether she's crippled, blind, mute, or lame, you'll tell her: Get going, girl, go under the wedding canopy and may luck be with you! Go on! My wife's given birth to another boy, my eldest daughter needs a dowry, the printer wants to get paid, my nag needs to eat, so go ahead, girl! By the way, Reb Alter, won't you move over a piece? You're sweating like a horse. So move on over just a little farther and sweat all you want."

6

We lay there for a few hours until our horses had grazed long enough. By about six o'clock, I was again sitting with my friend Reb Alter, talking business.

A fresh breeze had begun to blow and clouds began to appear in the sky. To us they were as dear as precious guests. The trees rocked slowly; one leaned its head over to another, and after having kept still for so long, they enjoyed a conversation in their tongue. The breeze roused the sleeping wheat and all the stalks woke up in a flurry, like young children, and kissed warmly. One after another, the birds of the field started to chirp and sing. In a small copse not far off, a nightingale rang out on his flute, bursting into sweet scales and playing delightfully. Every creature with a voice joined in with the world-famous cantor—frogs from the river trilled and even flies and bees weren't left out. A beetle sneaked in on the action, humming as he flew past. It was a concert worth buying tickets for. The whole world became livelier and took on a happy mien. It was a joy and a delight to hear and see everything, and to smell the sweet odors coming from all sides. I pulled up my stockings and, if you'll excuse my saying so, hitched up my pants with a strap before I cheerfully began my afternoon prayers. Beside me, Reb Alter soon let loose in his coarse voice, and we gave praise and thanks to God's name. All of the plants in the fields, and all of the creatures in the forest, sang His praise. But I'm getting off the point again.

When I turned back to the main road, behind the wagon I suddenly heard a voice: "Jews, have mercy on a cripple and take me into town with you. I'm all alone in the world, with nothing but what you see on my back." I looked

over and, believe it or not, I saw Fishke the Lame hobbling along—barefoot, scantily clad, worn out, and covered in sweat. His feet were swollen and bloodied up from mosquito bites.

“How did you get here, Fishke?” I called out, astonished to see him. “Where are you coming from? Climb up and tell us what you’re doing here all of a sudden.”

Fishke crawled up onto the wagon with difficulty, and after he caught his breath he sighed and said, “I curse the day she was born!”

“What’s the story?” I asked. “Who’re you cursing out?” Turning, I said, “Look, Reb Alter, this is the very person who married the blind orphan girl.”

“A curse on her and on him, too!” Fishke cried out angrily. “They played a dirty trick on me!”

“What’s the story?” Reb Alter and I asked again. “Tell us, Fishke, tell us. We’ll just say our afternoon prayers while you tell what happened.”

Fishke started to narrate in his lisp, stammering way.

“You seem to know I married the blind orphan girl, and after the wedding we lived well, like a Jewish couple should. I think I kept my part of the bargain right enough. Every morning I took her, as is fitting, out to her spot by the old cemetery. She’d sit there on a bit of straw and beg alms with a melody from Lamentations that touched everyone who passed. Plenty of shopkeepers only dream of earning like her—they can sit whole days in the store, crying their wares and shouting themselves hoarse, haggling with customers and not bringing in a cent. And still there’s rent to pay plus interest on the money they borrowed for stock. Whereas my wife had no expenses and brought in a pretty penny—enough to live on. But people’s never satisfied, and when they have potatoes they want meat.

“‘Yknow what,’ my wife started to say, ‘people like you an’ me, such a couple as the both of us, never run afoul in the world. In this trade, our flaws is pure advantages. So listen to your wife who’s a bit older an’ a little wiser’n you: take me out in the world with folks of the better sort, and you’ll see, we’ll haul in a fortune. In this place there ain’t much more to be done. I sit for hours ‘til someone has pity and gives a groschen. People been talking about Lekish, the cholera groom what went out into the world with his wife Perl—how he struck it rich. After the wedding they lit out an’ their luck’s steady ever since! Motl the pauper met up with ‘em making the rounds of houses in Kishinev—he says their sacks was stuffed with scraps of meat, loaves of bread, smoked lamb, sausage, sheep’s tail, and Perl’s face shone so bright you’d go

blind just lookin' at her. People coming back from Odessa say they seen Yontl, our other cholera groom, draggin' hisself around the shops on his buttocks—God sends him everything he needs. An' God won't forsake us neither. While it's still summer let's get moving, because each day we're here is a waste of time.'

"So we headed out. What should I say? We had it good. Whenever we come to a town or a city, we hit the jackpot. Everybody stared at us and not a single person turned us down. Wherever we went, the poorhouse stood open, and for a few pennies the synagogue attendant got the both of us invited to supper at a decent house. My ol' lady taught me the rules of beggary—I was out of touch with the real world and didn't know the ropes when it come to making the rounds of the houses. She was an expert in such things and taught me all I know: how to peer into a house, how to pretend to cough, moan an' groan, how to beg for mercy with a pathetic look, how to beg for alms, how to hang on like a leech, how to haggle or wish people well, and how to swear at 'em with curses that make the blood run cold. I learned all of this in no time.

"We was foot paupers—that is, draggin' ourselves around on foot. Like soldiers, poor folk is divided into infantry and cavalry—them that walks and them that gets around in wagons. Apart from these is also city poor folk, born somewheres in a city, what don't have nothin' to do with people born in the country. And then there's wagon poor folk, born on the road in caravans, whose ancestors always been on the move. These paupers is all like gypsies: day and night they wander from one end of the world to the other—born, bred, wed, and soon enough dead along the way. They's free men and beholden to no one: never pay no taxes, don't carry no papers, don't say no prayers, and don't mind leaving Judaism behind. Nothin' sticks to 'em. They's another type of creature altogether, neither fish nor fowl. My wife and I was infantry paupers, so you can imagine how, with me an' my bad legs, we used to crawl along real slow, like crabs. Little by little, because of this my wife started to scold, curse me, and make nasty remarks. She done give me nicknames, blamed me for my bum legs, said I'd turned her into a fool from top to bottom. To hear her tell it, she'd made a man of me and taken me out in the world to be with proper folks, but I wasn't true to her, I played dirty tricks on her. I used to keep quiet and swallow all she said, I swear!

"Until we come to the city of Balta we'd already gone and dragged ourselves along for a couple months. There we missed the great fair, which is famous round the world—an' she was sick over it, like as if she'd lost a fortune.

When we left Balta, on the road we met up with a large band of country paupers, cavalry. The entire group was riding in three wagons. Among ‘em was old and young, all kinda women, girls, and boys. For some reason they liked us and welcomed us onto one of the wagons, so after that we traveled around with the troupe. What should I tell you? A new world popped open to me at first, and I was very happy. I’d see an’ hear amazing things I can’t hardly describe. I learned how they’d slander people and mock the whole world, like when everyone told about stunts they pulled—how they filched loaves of bread or swiped a hen from a nitwit. They’d curse out rich folk for all they was worth, just like that, for no reason. I can tell you for a fact, they all hate the rich a heap more than the rich hate them. I used to hear boys chatting with girls, jokin’ around and pairing up; one whole wagon hitched itself up with another. But it ain’t decent to talk about that. I saw how they was able to disguise themselves, when they come to a city. One person pretended to be hunchbacked and another lame, one pretended he was blind, another mute, and another crippled. As soon as they left town the crooked were made straight, the lame man was healed, the blind could see, the mute could talk, and the cripple could walk. Just me and my wife was stuck with our flaws. Later I got the notion that they’d taken to us because of this, we was plain useful to ‘em. More than once they blurted out that defects like ours, for paupers, ain’t nothin’ but gifts from God, ‘cause they bring in good wages. My wife’s blindness was several notches higher’n my limping. On top of that, when she opened her mouth, which flapped open like it was on hinges, people stopped in their tracks and their hair stood on end. One healthy redhead on our wagon kissed up to her like he was in love, made jokes, and talked with her ‘til dawn. Whenever he hustled up a scrap of white bread, a slice of meat, a cake, or cooked peas, he’d hand it over to her. I didn’t give it a second thought. What did I care about him feeding her, clowning around, admiring her, and—for all it mattered to me—turning her into a Turk?⁵ But they finally took to mocking me, taunting me, making my life bitter as the gall from a rotten liver, ‘til I was the butt of all jokes. Every minute someone played a trick on me, every second I had another nickname. I was always to blame and everybody did whatever he wanted with me. If I started to get upset, they just rubbed salt in my wounds. ‘Listen how our fine man moans an’ groans, soon

5. “Turning her into a Turk” (*gib ihr fun maynetvegn afile di shmad*): literally, “so far as I’m concerned, even destroying her Jewishness (converting her to another religion).”

he's gonna bust out crying.' They beat me to death, and when my face was wet with tears, they used to say: 'Fishke, what you so happy 'bout? You grinning like a idiot! Look, everybody, lookit him laugh!' Then someone'd say, 'Give 'm a kick in the shins, or a smack on the back, that's a cure for laughing. If that don't work, we'll slap down the hair on his head or twist his ear and whisper a secret. That should get him started, sure 'nough as bitter herbs at a Passover Seder. After all, we got to take care of our own kind!'

"Sometimes they would throw me off the wagon and—while I limped along struggling to keep up, the best I could—clap their hands, laughing: 'Bravo, Fishke! That's it—dance, Fishke, dance! Hey, everybody, just look at the way Fishke lifts his feet, dancin' along so fine an' dandy. He could dance at any wedding, knock on wood!' Once the redhead who was messin' around with my wife—the devil take him—said: 'Fishke's no cripple! The bastard is putting us on, just pretending to be lame. We ought to straighten him out—jab him hard in the leg and you'll see him kick!' That's how they tortured me. I'd think back on the good years when I sat like a prince in the bathhouse, living like God in Paris. What else did I need? The devil gave me the idea to get married. I wanted to find buried treasure and ended up buried with no treasure."

"Fishke!" I cried out as I finished saying my prayers, "Put off your tears until another day, maybe until Tisha b'Av. You're getting off the point, Fishke. I want to hear more of your story."

"Yep," said Reb Alter, "finish the story—it's a good one."

7

"A plague on 'em!" Fishke cursed before he continued his story. "Whenever we arrived in a city, the gang broke up and went door to door, spreading out every which way. We fell on a town like a swarm of locusts. They called it 'going to work,' and to their way of thinking everyone should come running with alms. They used to say, 'Why do the rich have it so easy, sitting home while everyone works for 'em and spoils 'em? Ain't all they got been earned by the poor man's blood, sweat, and tears? They're so fine and keep so busy saving their souls, but they want to make everyone else work. The fat rich man is respected like nobility, but one of us got to hide his health and be ashamed, like a crook—if not, everyone yells: Why don't such a healthy man go to work? Believe me, we ought to mix things up and let the rich try going to work

for a while! We're just as good as they are.' When they stole something, they called it finding a bargain, or playing a prank on some guy. They had nothin' to do with city paupers and avoided 'em like filth. And all of them'd say that the houses in town were as full of beggars as of bedbugs. They complained that people stuff 'em to the gills at each wedding or bris, while we tore our clothes, toiled, an' worked ourselves into the grave.

"At first I made the rounds of the houses with my ol' lady, and it was darned easy. I even learned to haggle with people. The trick was—never be satisfied with what people gave, never thank anyone, always scowl and pout, grumble and even curse at people. We fared no worse 'n anyone else, but the redhead—he should rot in hell—started to shame me, put me down in front of my wife, and make me look a fool. 'I don't get it,' he used to say to my wife. 'How you crawl round with that turtle? I'm a different sort, with me you could really walk the walk . . . and things'd really heat up. Together we could rake it in!' Apart from that, he lied about me, saying I was hooking up with a girl from another wagon and flirting with her. It's true that I often talked with a hunchbacked girl. She pitied me, and many a time she cried about our misfortunes. She was all alone on the wagon, and God knows she'd suffered enough in her short life."

"Say, Fishke," Reb Alter and I interrupted, "what sort of girl is she? Tell us more about her."

"It's a very long story," Fishke answered, "but I'll keep it short. The girl was just a young child when her mother brought her to Glupsk. Her mother was a cook in a well-to-do house. She'd never seen her father, and she wouldn't even have known she had a father if her mother hadn't cursed him fifty times a day. At the same time, her mother complained bitterly to her daughter, saying that—since no one can stand a cook with a child—it was her fault she couldn't hold a job. More than once the lady of the house ran into the kitchen when the dinner didn't turn out well, scolding in a loud voice: Why did God punish me with such a cook, who skims the shmaltz off the soup for her pretty little daughter? In fact, the poor daughter ate nothin' but sorrows and blows. Early in the morning her mother used to push her aside into a corner on top of the large enamel oven, just like rotten goods. There she lay hunched up in one tiny spot and no one wanted to hear a sound from her. When she'd sniff the smells of roast goose and fried livers, her mouth would water and she'd suffer from hunger silently, 'til someone remembered to throw her a piece of dry bread with an old bone, or a scrap that had been left

over on someone's plate. Sometimes they completely forgot about her, and if she made a peep, then a poker, a spatula, or a ladle would shoot up over the oven and strike her head, her hands, her feet—wherever the blow might fall. Because she was always sitting bent over and hunched up, in one place, she became a hunchback. She stayed for a few years in the corner beside that oven. But all things in this world come to an end.

“When she got older, she looked down from the oven and saw a young man who come visiting her mother in the kitchen. Her mother would hang on his arm, stuff his pockets with delicacies, and even give him money. He used to come late at night and stay over in the kitchen. As expected, her mother finally married that young man and left the rich woman's house. One lucky evening she took her daughter, half naked, and led her to a dark alley. ‘Sit down and wait, Jews will have pity on you. Farewell!’ she said, and disappeared.

“For a few hours the cast-off child sat on the street and didn't dare move, just like before, on top of the oven. A cold, autumn rain was falling and chilled her bones. She sat huddled up in a shift, trembling and shivering from cold, her teeth chattering. When someone asked who she was, she answered: I'm my mother's! She told me to sit here, and if I move she'll hit me with a poker, a spatula, or a ladle. She stayed there long into the night, 'til some Jewish woman tempted her with promises and took her home—to a small house that stood in the sand on stilts.

“The girl licked no honey at that woman's house. She was a market woman who sat in the square selling potatoes, sweet cakes, and special pears and apples. At dawn the woman went off to the market and left the hunchbacked girl to sit and rock her baby all day long. When she got back in the evening, she'd send out her little nanny to beg for crusts of bread. The poor girl used to go out in nothin' but a coarse shift to beg for crumbs that she would eat—or even share with her auntie, the market woman! That's how she lived and supported herself for about a year.

“One summer after dark while she was going door to door, she wandered far off to the edge of town and couldn't find her way back. The sun had set long before and a black cloud crept into the sky. She strayed like a lost sheep past the city gate, still dressed in only her shift. Three wagons loaded with people was just leaving town, and someone called out from a wagon: Lookit that girl! Right away one of 'em—the very same redhead, the devil take him—jumped down and asked who she was. ‘I'm my momma's,’ she an-

swered in a tearful voice. ‘I want to go home to my auntie.’ The redhead bastard told her, ‘Hush, girl, don’t cry! I’ll take you back to your momma.’ Then he grabbed her, threw her into the wagon, and drove on.

“Ever since, she’s been wandering around with that gang of poor folk, and she’s endured more troubles from them than one could begin to tell. Don’t nobody in hell suffer like her, poor thing. My blood boils over when I think of her—I’d give my life just to free her from them. She’s the best, dearest soul in the world!”

8

“Listen, Reb Alter,” I said with a smile, “it seems to me that Fishke has gone and fallen in love with the hunchbacked girl. Something isn’t kosher here.”

“Why should I deny it?” Fishke answered. “I was drawn to her and began to love her out of pity. If not for her, I’d have lost all interest in life and died of my troubles, but since I’ve gotten to know her, a load has lifted from my heart. My life is better now. More than once we talked and cried together after everyone else had gone to sleep, pouring out our hearts to each other. We don’t fool around none, God forbid, but the redhead bastard—he should rot in hell—noticed everything and brought reports to my wife along with fifty thousand lies. She was furious and, to make me jealous, she flirted even more with that bastard. They became fast friends and would make the rounds of the houses together like a lord and his lady. By then it didn’t bother me, but if I ever tried to say anything, the lout would give me a slap and cry out to my blind wife, ‘Lookit, your Fishke is hitting me! Oy vey, he’s murdering me!’ ‘Butcher him!’ she’d shout back angrily. ‘He ain’t seen nothin’ yet! Give it to the scoundrel and shove him closer to me so I can pay my respects!’ Then both of ‘em jabbed their fingernails into me, pinched, plucked, and tore at me ‘til I was black and blue all over. While he was beating me up, that bastard—he should rot in hell—would stick his tongue out at me and say to my wife, like he was a saint: You hit him yourself, you do the honors. I forgive him—let God punish him. But then he’d punch me in the chest or in the pit of the stomach with his fist, so hard I felt like I was gonna die.

“There was an old fellow, a sly devil, who used to go begging for pennies with me. He’d make such a pitiful face that everyone had to give him something, and then he would point to me, the miserable cripple, with a deep sigh. He’d take the alms and, if I cried out for my share, he hit me and said in

a gruff voice, ‘What, you want to ride for nothin’ in my wagon? I should take you begging for nothin’, you smart aleck? Just try to say another word about it, and I’ll tell your wife. She turned you over to me, so I’ll settle accounts with her. Shut up, you pipsqueak!’ Long before I’d realized that, for them, I was just like a circus animal in a gypsy troupe. But sometimes it irked and pained me so that I lost my head and shouted: Do what you want with me, from now on I’ll go begging by myself. I swore I’d take care of myself and I’ve kept my word.

“One time we arrived at a town in the Kherson district and the gang went out to work. The bastard went with my wife and I went alone. I planned to cover the whole town and collect a fortune, so that I could show my wife I knew how to do business and prove to her that I was no shlimmazl. She shouldn’t think only her redhead was a real *mentsh*.⁶ Luck was on my side that day, and I hit upon a house where they was having a bris. After the circumcision, they gave me a healthy swig of brandy, a whole kiddush cup, a large slice of cake, a little rose-shaped roll, and on top of that a few pennies. I restrained myself and didn’t taste even a crumb, instead hiding everything under my shirt to bring to my wife. Well, you should’ve seen me then. I walked home thinking with a grin how my wife’d look up to me — she’d have to admit that I ain’t no dime-a-dozen sort and she’d send the redhead bastard packing. True enough, I broke off a nice big piece of cake for my hunch-backed girl, who was dear to my heart. I thought to myself: when everyone has gone to sleep I’ll give this to her, poor thing, so she can also enjoy it. She was a ruined, homeless girl with a broken spirit who never had a sweet moment in all her life. I was thinking she should know Fishke’s a faithful friend who takes care of her and watches over her like the apple of his eye — he’d rather not eat so he can give her the last, best piece. I even imagined, as if I was seeing it with my own eyes, how I’d sit with her on a grassy spot outside the Great Synagogue. The sky would be covered with stars, all around it would be still, she’d sit crumpled and hunched up, tears would run down her cheeks, and she’d sing the familiar song in a tearful voice:

My daddy, he slaughtered me,
And my momma ate me alive.

6. Literally, *mentsh* means “person” — in this context, a successful person who can cope with the world; the Yiddish word *mentsh* can also mean “a good, decent person.”

“She always used to sing that song. Tonight I’d comfort her, have a heart-to-heart talk, and give her the piece of cake. She’d cheer up a bit, look me in the eyes and laugh. ‘Fishke, you’re a good man,’ she’d say to me. ‘You’re very dear to me, the only person I have in the world. You’re my father, my mother, my brother. Look, Fishke, be true to me and never forget me. Swear to me by the synagogue, where the wandering souls that pray are witnesses—and among them perhaps the father I never knew. Swear you’ll never forget me. . . .’ In short, along the way I was overjoyed and thought I was happy. But listen to the end of the story and hear what can happen.

“When I come back to the poorhouse that evening, our whole troupe was gone. A couple hours earlier they’d driven away, along with my wife and the bastard who’d been flirting with her all that time. My heart froze, and I almost burst with anger and pain. My head was spinning, my eyes went dim. Why should I deny it? I was mostly sorry for my hunchbacked girl—what would she do, poor unfortunate thing? Who could she talk to and pour out her bitter heart? Oy, Jews, how it hurts!

“To make a long story short,” Fishke started again after taking a deep sigh, “I dragged myself and my troubles out to the Odessa highway. I thought if they was on that road, I’d probably hear about it, but it was no use. They’d slipped away like water, and by then I was sick of life from all that walking. I was dying to rest my bones in one place, like I used to do. In Odessa I met up with Yontl, pulling himself along on his buttocks. We was overjoyed to see one another. He told me how things stood with him, that he was eating like a prince and that in some shops people even treated him like a bigwig when they gave him alms. I spilt out my heart telling ‘bout all the things that happened to me, and I begged him, if he had some standing in Odessa, to find me a place in a bathhouse where I could support myself like I did in Glupsk. He just laughed and answered, ‘For now, Fishke, I won’t say nothin’ about that idea. First, if you don’t mind, go and take a look at the local bathhouses with your own eyes. Then we’ll talk it over.’

“I took his advice and went straight to a bathhouse, which was really strange. Have you ever heard of such a thing? There it was brightly lit, clean as a house and furnished with fine benches, believe it or not! They don’t steam up and they have separate rooms. That ain’t no bath, I assure you, it’s a joke! No, I thought, it’s not for me, I can’t work in such a place. It ain’t no place—with the people, or the pleasures—like our bathhouse in Glupsk. Back home it’s something else entirely, where people while away the time—

naked men lie around on the benches in groups shmoozing, telling stories, talking about every little thing that's going on in town, no matter what it is. What a delight! . . . I went to other baths, but ain't none like ours—they don't even smell like our brick bathhouse in Glupsk. Now, their ritual baths are a joke. In our *mikve* you can darn near cut the water, 'cause it has a special odor, a different color, and it's somehow thicker'n other water. Right away you know it has a Jewish flavor, but there the *mikve* water is clear, plain old water, you could even drink it. . . . 'So, Fishke, what's up?' Yontl asked me later with a smile. 'You seen the local baths?' I said, 'Not a chance, this ain't for me. My place is in Glupsk, and I'm heading home.' How does the saying go? Strap me up by the ankles and send me home bound and tied, so long as I'm among my own kind. So now I'm going back for some peace of mind.

"A curse on my blind wife! I'm only worried about the poor hunchbacked girl."

9

Fishke ended his story and let out a heavy sigh.

"Don't worry, Fishke," I consoled him. "God can bring you and your girl back together. Just tell us, what's her name? On my travels it's very possible that I'll meet up with the gang."

"Beyle is her name," Fishke answered. "She's called Beyle."

Reb Alter suddenly gave a sigh and fell back, his face white as chalk.

"What's wrong, Reb Alter?" I asked him.

"Bah!" he answered as he slowly sat up again on the wagon.

"Tell me, Fishke, do you happen to know her mother's name and where she came from?"

"Yes," Fishke replied. "My poor hunchbacked girl remembered, like in a dream, that people called her mother Elke, and she was divorced from her husband in Tuneyadevke."

"Divorced in Tuneyadevke!" I cried out, astonished. "Who can her husband have been, that brute who sent away his own child? Hey, Reb Alter, maybe you know someone like that in your shtetl. What's his name?"

Reb Alter was frozen in place like a corpse, and his eyes were rolling in his head. My blood ran cold.

"He is called . . ." Fishke tried to remember his name. "Her husband's name is, I think . . . wait a second . . ."

“Alter’s his name,” Reb Alter cried out and collapsed onto the wagon.

“Yes, yes!” Fishke said. “That’s it, Alter—Wine ‘n’ Candles Alter is his name.”

I had already guessed the whole story and stood there like someone who’d just been doused with boiling water.

It was pitch dark outside. The stars twinkled and shone between the clouds, and on the horizon—as if growing from the earth—the moon began to rise, frightfully large and red as fire. My friend Reb Alter moaned and beat his fist on his chest.

“I’ve sinned, it’s true,” he said. “I deserted her and made her life miserable. She’s right, poor thing. She’s right when she says that her daddy slaughtered her, her father blackened her days and years. *Vey is mir!*”

Out of pity I began to console Reb Alter and showed him with kind words how he could still correct his mistake. He soon sat up, raised his eyes to the sky, and said with emotion:

“I swear by the Eternal One that I will not return home to my wife and children, and I won’t marry off my girl, until I find my other unhappy child. . . . You two are witnesses,” he said, pointing at Fishke and me.

Fishke fell upon Reb Alter’s chest, hugging and kissing him. “Oh!” he begged him in a tearful voice, “have pity and save her. *Gevalt!* Rescue her!”

Reb Alter quickly climbed up onto his wagon, bade us farewell, turned his horse around, and went off in the other direction. Late that night Fishke and I rode into Glupsk.

Translated by Ken Frieden