Sholem Aleichem

THE GREAT PANIC OF THE LITTLE PEOPLE

(A Poema)

1

[Wherein the Author Confides in His Readers]

Heaven has apparently decreed that Kasrilevke's Jews are destined to have more woes than anyone else in the world. Wheresoever there was calamity, misfortune, troubles and misery, trials and tribulations, they sought to sympathize, taking each affliction to heart more than anyone the world over. Of course, Kasrilevke's anguish over the Dreyfus affair should surprise no one. After all, Dreyfus was one of their own, a member of the family, so to speak. Like they say: Blood is thicker than water.

But by what stretch of the imagination could you reasonably account for the Kasrilevkites' involvement with the Boers, whom the English conquered and wiped out? In Kasrilevke that war, too, caused a hullabaloo. Oh my, plenty of blood was spilled over that Boer War in the Kasrilevke synagogue. But wait a minute! Don't be alarmed! Do you really think *blood* was actually shed? God forbid! Far be it from a Kasrilevkite to shed blood. Just point out a nicked finger in the distance and he falls into a dead faint. So when I say "blood" I mean something entirely different. I mean pain, heartache, and humiliation. Then why all the fuss? Simply because people have different opinions. If Srulik says one thing, Shmulik says just the reverse.

For instance, if Srulik sides with the Boers and takes up their grievances by saying: "It isn't fair! What have the

English got against those poor devils? They mind their own business and just want to be left in peace to work the earth"—Shmulik immediately ups and defends England and proves that the English are the most cultured people on earth.

"Pipe down, you bastard," someone yells. "I don't give a hoot about culture if they chop people up like cabbages."

"And I don't give a hoot about you, you big fat dope."

"And you're an imbecile, but you're built like a jackass."

To make a long story short—a few punches, witnesses, documents, depositions, a justice of the peace, and the concomitant plagues. At first glance you might wonder why these poor beggars, these poverty-stricken creatures, these penniless, down-at-the-heel paupers, should care about a land stuck away the deuce-knows-where in Africa?

Moreover, please tell me, my dear Kasrilevkites, why you have to break your heads over Serbia, where in the middle of one fine night some officers killed the Czar and his wife and chucked them out the window? I know you'll counter by asking if it's fair to attack a man while he's asleep and do him in. That's what you'd expect of wild savages. In turn, I'll ask you another question. Why should all these things worry you more than anyone else? Don't you have anything else to worry about? Have you already married off and provided for all your children? What sort of habit is it, I ask you, to stick your nose into every pot? Believe me, the world will get along very nicely without you, and everyone will undoubtedly manage to take care of himself.

The author begs his reader's pardon for addressing such cutting remarks to his fellow Kasrilevkites. But please understand, dear friends, that I myself am a Kasrilevkite. Born and bred in Kasrilevke, I was educated in its Talmud Torahs and schools and was even married there. But then I set my little ship adrift in the great and tempestuous sea of life whose waves are high as houses. And despite the fact that one is perpetually in a tumult and on the go, I have never ever forgotten either my beloved home town Kasrilevke, may it thrive and prosper to ripe old age, or my dear brethren, the Kasrilevke Jews, may they be fruitful and multiply. Whenever we experience violence, disaster or calamity *here*, far

away from Kasrilevke, I immediately ask myself: What's happening *there*, in my home town?

For your information, no matter how small, forlorn, and castaway Kasrilevke may be, it is connected to the rest of the world by a sort of wire which if tapped at one end delivers a message at the other. Let me put it another way. Kasrilevke can be compared to an unborn child, tied to its mother's umbilical cord, that feels everything the mother feels. The mother's pain is the child's pain and vice versa. The only thing that puzzles me is why Kasrilevke feels the troubles and woes of the entire world, while absolutely no one cares about Kasrilevke, or sympathizes with its afflictions. Kasrilevke is a kind of stepchild of the world. The first to react to a misfortune, Kasrilevke scurries about more than anyone else and goes without sleep till it practically knocks at death's door.

Yet—oh blast those anti-Semites!—should this stepchild itself fall ill and collapse in a corner, burning feverishly like an oven, wasting away for lack of food, and thirsting for lack of water, you may be sure that not a soul would even cast a glance in its direction.

2

[A Short Letter and a Big Hullabaloo]

After such an introduction, everyone will readily be able to appreciate the tumult in Kasrilevke at the conclusion of that sweet Passover episode—God spare us a like repetition. Even before the Yiddish newspaper reached Zaydl (the only subscriber in town) and before anyone had heard the news, a certain *shokhet* received a letter from his son-in-law. This letter is herewith transcribed word for word in the writer's own style, and translated from Hebrew into the vernacular for everyone to understand:

"Peace to my beloved and scholarly father-in-law, whose name resounds to the four corners of the earth, and to my dear and beloved mother-in-law, wise, honest, and pious, may your names shine forth the world over, and peace to your household and to all Israel, Amen.

"With trembling hands and quaking knees do I write these

words to you. Know that the *weather* here has undergone a severe change. No pen can possibly describe it. All I can say is that, God be praised, all of us are alive and well. The hail and the tempest that struck this place just scared us a bit, but, thank God, the storm has passed and we're no longer afraid of anyone. My wife, children and I beg you not to worry for, glory to God, we are all well. Be sure to write us immediately a lengthy detailed letter, telling us what's new with you, how the *weather* is, and if you're all in good health."

Sages and savants have of long noted that the Jews are incomparable at the art of reading between the lines. Show them a finger—and they'll know what you're driving at. Mention a word—and they'll reply with two more. They recognize neither conundrums, riddles, nor enigmatic questions.

The afore-mentioned letter went from hand to hand. The Kasrilevkites talked only of the *shokhet's* son-in-law. And the weather report spread like wildfire through town. They told one another dreadful stories, embellished with all the horrible details, as though they themselves had witnessed the pogrom. Their faces reflected the gloom and bitter melancholy within them. At once they were bereft of joy, seemingly forever. Their one bit of hope and consolation was that perhaps it was either all imagined or an out-and-out lie. Who could tell! The *shokhet's* son-in-law was a young writer-intellectual, a fine Hebrew prose stylist. Perhaps his infatuation with rhetoric had led him to the devil-knows-where? It was sheer hyperbole and nothing else. And in order to cheer their spirits and drive gloom away the villagers told each other merry tales about the modern young intellectuals and their flowery style—tales which, at another time, would have prompted fits of hysterical laughter. The only hitch was that no one laughed now. No one was in the mood for humor. An uncommon dejection settled over them all. Everyone privately pondered the awful thing that must have happened over *there*. And then the people converged upon Zeidel.

Our old friend Zeidel had just come from the post office with his newspaper. His face was dark as night. Excited and apprehensive, he was furious at the whole wide world. Only

then did the Kasrilevkites realize that the reports were really true.

"Fortunately, a nasty business like that can't come to pass in Kasrilevke," they all consoled themselves. "Such a calamity can't possibly happen here."

Nevertheless, in their hearts they brooded—who knows? Great winds can turn a tiny spark into a hellish conflagration. And the Kasrilevke Jews cautiously took stock of their relations with their neighbors—the "other people."

3

[*Describes Fyodor, the Gentile-for-the-Sabbath, in Particular, and Other Gentiles, in General*]

If Fyodor, the gentile who extinguished the lights in Kasrilevke on Friday nights; Pockmarked Hapke, the woman who whitewashed the houses and milked everyone's goats; and other such non-Jews could be labeled the "other people," we must conclude that Kasrilevke had absolutely no cause for alarm. The Jews could easily have remained in their village until the advent of the Messiah, for since time immemorial they had fared well with these "other people"; so well, in fact, that one might even have thought it couldn't be any better.

Fyodor knew beyond doubt that though he was the sole native aristocrat of Kasrilevke, he nevertheless had to heat up the ovens for the Jews on the Sabbath, extinguish the lights, empty the slops, and perform other such menial tasks which had become second nature to him over the years. And if you think he had hard feelings toward the Jews because of this, you're mistaken. He knew, to be sure, who he was and who the Jews were: the entire world couldn't be made up of generals only; there had to be some plain foot soldiers as well. As a matter of fact, perhaps a few of the generals—that is, some Kasrilevke Jews—would gladly have changed places with Fyodor, the plain foot soldier. But on the other hand, generals were necessary, too. With foot soldiers alone the world could not exist. And so both sides were content: the generals of Kasrilevke were happy that someone catered to

them on the Sabbath; and the plain foot soldier was pleased that he had someone to cater to—for this work enabled him to snatch a piece of Sabbath-loaf here and get a glass of whiskey there. On Sabbath after the Kiddush folks said to him, "Come on over here, Fyodor dear. Have a drink," adding in Yiddish, "and break a leg!" Fyodor removed his cap, held his glass with two fingers, bowed, and wished everybody a hearty and prosperous year.

"Here's to you," he said. He drained the glass at one shot and screwed up his face, positively contorting it, as though he had never before tasted such a bitter brew.

"Dammit a hundred demons and a blasted witch! That's as strong as hell."

"Here! Have some of this," they said in Russian, offering Fyodor a hunk of the soft white Sabbath-loaf, then adding in Yiddish, "and a pack of plagues upon your bones."

But heaven forbid your thinking that the Kasrilevke Jews meant those vehement curses which they rained down upon Fyodor's head. They wouldn't have exchanged an honest peasant like Fyodor for a pot of gold. Even if money were strewn about he wouldn't touch it. He would work for you like a pack of devils: heat the oven, spill the slops, hold the goat until Hapke had finished milking it, bring in the firewood, fill the water barrel, scour the pots like a devoted housewife, and, if need be, rock the cradle, too. No one surpassed Fyodor in putting a baby to sleep. No one could amuse a child as well; he'd clack his tongue, whistle, and snap his fingers; he'd gabble and gurgle, snort like a pig, and go through many other such antics. That's why the children of Kasrilevke, in love with Fyodor's bristly chin and coarse prickly coat, refused to leave his arms.

However, this did not please the Kasrilevke housewives. For they thought that when the kids were hungry and there was nothing to eat, Fyodor was liable to dip into his bag and come up with a piece of bread or something else, heaven forbid, and stuff them with God-knows-what kind of forbidden concoctions. But they were mistaken. Fyodor would never have dreamed of doing any such thing. He knew full well that the foods the Jews ate, he could eat, but the foods that he ate, they could *not* eat.

Why so? Well, that was no concern of his. Why, for instance, was he permitted to blow out the candle—really such an easy task—or touch the candlesticks, or carry the prayerbook to the synagogue, and perform other simple chores on the Sabbath? And why were all these things forbidden to them? Such matters were not open to question; each person had to follow his own path. And if on occasion Fyodor could not restrain himself and laughed at the dry Passover matza by saying: "Very crunchy, dammit a hundred demons and a blasted witch!"—he was given short shrift with: "And is your hog any better, you pig!" Which made Fyodor hold his tongue.

However, Fyodor was silent only when he was sober. But when he became so drunk that he forgot his own name—a rare occurrence for Fyodor—brother, watch out! Danger ahead! On those occasions, he would smite his chest, weep bitterly and bellow:

"What do you want from me? Why do you keep sucking my blood and eating my flesh? I'm going to turn Kasrilevke upside down. Yids, anti-Christ Yids, dammit a hundred demons and a blasted witch." He would continue shouting and raising a fuss until he fell asleep. After a good long snooze he would get up, return to the Jews, and once more be the same old honest and even-tempered "Fyodor-dear," as though nothing at all had happened.

"And where's your boots?" they asked him in Russian, adding in Yiddish, "A pack of blisters on your puss." Then they began preaching to him, raining a bunch of Yiddish curses on him, as usual.

"What do you think you're doing, you great big oaf? Just wait and see, you're going to croak somewhere! You'll drop dead beneath some fence, damn your hide, may you be the atonement for all Israel, dear God!"

Fyodor looked on silently, scratching the back of his head. He knew quite well that they were right and he wrong. He looked down at his bare feet and wondered how in the world he could have sold his boots—"Dammit a hundred demons and a blasted witch." That's the sort of creature Fyodor was.

The rest of the peasants in Kasrilevke were also in constant contact with the Jews. They knew that since time immemorial the Jews were destined to be storekeepers, merchants, and middlemen. For no one could do business or bamboozle you like the Jews, a people created for this very purpose. Or as the peasants put it:

"Business deals—that's what the Jews were made for."

The peasants and the Jews often met at the marketplace. They knew one another's names and respected one another. Hritzko called Hershke a gypper and Hershke called Hritzko a chiseler. But it was all done good-naturedly and they had it out right well. Both went to the rabbi, Reb Yozifl, who, unfamiliar with their slang, always compromised. "Split it in halfl" he would say, content that there be no desecration of God's name.

4

[*Hapke of the Jewish Soul—Makar the Anti-Semite*]

Until now we have described gentiles of the male species. Now let us devote some space to Pockmarked Hapke. Hapke talked Yiddish as though it was her mother tongue; however, she had a special knack for mixing up typically Jewish expressions. For instance, she would say, "A joyous holidanish," "May he rest in pieces," "mazel-tub," "happy Passunder," "Yom-kippered herrings," and the like. In fact, behind Fyodor's back she always called him a good-for-nothing goy-ter.

Hapke had become so attached to the Kasrilevke women that occasionally, forgetting who she was, they ordered her to perform tasks which were properly the role of Jewish women only. She went to the rabbi with a question concerning ritual, helped to salt the meat, koshered the chickens, brought in the Passover dishes, and did other chores in which she was more punctilious than her Jewish mistresses. She feared mixing meat and dairy dishes like the plague, and scrupulously avoided contact with bread and leaven products during Passover. She ate matza, grated horseradish with gusto and, like other Jewish women, considered it a rare delight.

For a long time the Kasrilevke constable refused to believe that Hapke wasn't Jewish. But then, involved in a rather

shameful affair, she was caught and about to be exiled to some far-off place. Fortunately for her someone else was implicated—the municipal clerk, Makar Khalodne, a notorious Jew-hater, a Jew-baiter of the first rank, one of the most educated and virulent anti-Semites in Kasrilevke. If not for their tender feelings for Hapke, the Jews of Kasrilevke could have taken revenge upon their Haman. But since Makar's downfall would have ruined Hapke, the Jewish witnesses retracted and told the examining magistrate that their previous testimony was so much barking at the moon. So the whole business was quashed. One would think that subsequently Makar should have made up with the Jews and become their best pal; however, owing to some caprice of nature, just the opposite happened: he became a more vehement bigot, a fiercer Jew-baiter, a greater anti-Semite than ever before.

It may be said that from childhood on, Makar suffered at the hands of the Jews. At first, his deep-rooted hatred was directed only at the Kasrilevke Jews; and later, at all Jews. When he was still a barefoot boy, driving his father's geese to pasture, he would often meet Jewish children coming from Talmud Torah, and, instead of saying "Good morning" he would mimic their Yiddish and their gestures, intending no insult, God forbid, but merely joking good-naturedly.

But these descendants of the gentle Patriarch Jacob, timid and innocent Jewish children who studied the Torah with Rashi's commentary, were indeed insulted by Makar's antics. They countered with a Yiddish ditty, whose words Makar did not understand. But he could guess from the lilt of the tune and the snickers of the children that he was the butt of their song and it galled him. Makar, indeed, had guessed correctly. This was the song the children sang:

We eat nuts.
Damn your guts.
See our sled?
You drop dead.
Pant and rave.
Dig your grave.

Silly children. First of all, the situation was exactly the reverse. It was Makar who munched on nuts and had a sled, not they. Secondly, how come ten Jewish children plucked up the courage to pick a fight with Makar? After all, Makar had a fair pair of paws which could match wits with the ten brainiest, most sharp-witted Talmud Torah youngsters. In fact, after that ditty Makar taught them a lesson, alluding to the literal meaning of the biblical verse they learned in school: *The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.*

Later, when Makar studied at the parish school he was always running into the Jewish children. During the summer he met them in the field behind the village, and during the winter while they played on the ice. Each time some sort of brawl ensued between the two sides. When he called them "damn Yids"—which was actually a commonplace term like "rascal"—they called him "swine." To their incessant jests he responded with blows; he frequently interpreted another scriptural passage by demonstrating how the Philistines chased the Israelites—he and his friends pursuing the Jewish lads with sticks and stones, and hoots, jeers and catcalls:

"Hike, hike, cursed kike. Skid, skid, confounded Yid."

5

[*How an Anti-Semite Becomes a Philosopher*]

Makar never got beyond the parish school. He was an orphan, God help us, who had inherited a small house and a bit of a garden. Since he was literate, he plunged into civil service; he sharpened his pen, developed a fine handwriting, and was soon appointed the assistant to the village clerk. Subsequently, he worked his way up the municipal ladder to secretary, finally becoming the Grand Panjandrum himself, a position which enabled him to have frequent contact with the Kasrilevke Jews and to gain thorough familiarity with them.

The initial run-ins that Makar had with the Jews weren't too serious. Both sides were content with hurling insinuations, sharp abuse and satiric digs at each other.

"Oy vey, Abie-Ikey," said Makar to the Jews, "where's your noodle pudding?"

"Your honor!" the Jews replied with mock deference, simultaneously hinting by a vigorous scratch of the head and a fillip at the collar that he still had lice.

Occasionally, a sly innuendo is far worse than a direct slur of one's father; at times a jibe can be a thousand times more painful than a blow. And at the art of the jibe the Kasrilevkites are the most roguish practitioners on earth. It is common knowledge that a Kasrilevkite would walk ten miles, lose a day's work, and practically risk life and limb—all for the sake of one good jibe. If a Kasrilevke pauper, a charity case, a door-to-door beggar was turned away empty-handed, he only asked for the opportunity to tell a story. And when his story was done, he was more often than not given his comeuppance: he opened the door, headfirst—yet he felt that for the the sake of getting off a sharp riposte it was well worth it.

That's the sort of folk my Kasrilevkites are, and if you think they can be made to reform, or that I'm ashamed of them, you're dead wrong.

But let's get back to our friend Makar, whom the Kasrilevkites had unwittingly made a dangerous enemy. They had forgotten the biblical injunction: (Watch out for a little trouble-makar.) They thought that Makar would always be a mere village clerk in the municipality. They forgot that he was relatively wellborn and was hankering after rank and position. It was incredible! Before they had a chance to turn around, Makar had already grown up, tall and strong. He sported a pair of thick black moustaches and wore a red band and a golden button on his official cap. No sooner had he affixed that button than he straightened up, stuck out his paunch, and became taller and heftier than ever. What's more, he even became broad-shouldered. It wasn't at all the same Makar. In fact, now known as Makar Pavlovitch, he henceforth became buddy-buddy with the veterinarian, the medic, the postmaster, and with all the other big shots in town.

Makar's good footing with the postmaster was the most

advantageous of his contacts. For him the post office was an education center. There he imbibed all his information from *The Flag*, the only Russian newspaper that came to the village. Naturally, the first to read the paper was the postmaster himself, who passed it on to Makar Pavlovitch. Only then was it sent to the subscriber, a petty nobleman from Zlodievke, a village not far from Kasrilevke. The postmaster said that reading the paper a few days late wouldn't hurt the nobleman a bit, the devil take him, for he played cards day and night, anyway, and duped all his neighbors out of their last penny.

Since Makar replenished his supply of news weekly, he always had something to talk about. Of course, *The Flag* was a noted Jewish paper; that is, it took Jewish interests to heart. Its editors were constantly concerned about the welfare of the Jews and explored ways to be rid of them—for their own good, naturally. And this gave Makar a wonderful opportunity to become perfectly grounded in all aspects of Jewish behavior. With the good Lord's help, *The Flag* made Makar a top-notch specialist in Jewish affairs, a mastermind of Talmud, the Code of Law, and the entire range of Jewish customs and ceremonies, such as—usury, deception, flimflam, and especially, the use of Christian blood for matzas. All these things caught the fancy of our philosopher Makar to the extent that he sought this information from the horse's mouth, as it were—the Kasrilevke Jews themselves. Although Makar hated them like a Jew hates pork, with a few he was on tolerably good terms. One might even say that some of his best friends were Jews.

6

[*Mordecai-Nossen and His Wife Teme-Beyle*]

One of Makar's oldest friends in Kasrilevke was Mordecai-Nossen, a man so wealthy and prominent he could have put a dozen rich householders into his side pocket.

The opulent Mordecai-Nossen, like all other men of means, held the town under his thumb and did with it as he

wished. For he was the tax agent, the synagogue trustee, the communal leader, the town's big wheel. In a word, he was everything: he was the Rich Man in Town.

But if you really want to descend to particulars, you might well ask: What did his wealth consist of? The answer to this question no one knew. If you would collar a Kasrilevkite, for instance, and ask him: "Listen here, how much money does this Mordecai-Nossen really have?"—the villager would stop, tug at his beard, shake his head, and chant in a mournful singsong:

"Mordecai-Nossen? I wish I had half of what he owes! What am I saying half? I'd be happy with one percent! Don't underestimate Mordecai-Nossen. He's loaded."

"What do you mean loaded? For example, how much is he worth?"

"Worth? It's a nonsensical question. No one's ever counted his money."

"Then how much is Mordecai-Nossen good for?"

"Mordecai-Nossen? First of all, he has a house of his own."

"Plus?"

"Plus his own private courtyard."

"Plus what else?"

"Plus a few goats."

"Plus?"

"What about his shop? Some neat shop!"

"Plus what?"

"Not to mention his tax collecting."

"Plus?"

"My, my, you certainly are an impulsive plusser. Do you begrudge this surplus wealth to a fellow Jew? What do you want him to do, open up a bank? Throw money away and ride around in a gold-plated coach?"

The Kasrilevkite would then depart in a huff, and rightly so! For could a man aspire higher than Mordecai-Nossen? He was *the* rich man, *the* foremost citizen, *the* communal leader. Who was the trustee of the Burial Brotherhood? Mordecai-Nossen. Who was the most influential man in town? Mordecai-Nossen. Who had all the power? Mordecai-Nossen. Who arranged a fine Saturday night dinner for the town's seven leading grandees? Mordecai-Nossen. Who had pull

with the authorities? In brief, Mordecai-Nossen and nobody but.

Mordecai-Nossen, you understand, knew exactly how to deal with the outside world, knew precisely how to conduct himself with the authorities. Every Friday night his house guest for the fish course was the police chief. The Kasrilevke police chief was a great lover of Jewish fish. Each time he ate them he simply could not find enough words of praise. How excellently the Jews prepared fish! How tasty they were! Sweet as sugar! he said, actually licking his fingers.

"There's nothing better than Yid fish with horseradish," he said suddenly with his own peculiar intonation. Apparently the compliment pleased both host and hostess, for they both beamed, grinning from ear to ear, and, due to the heat of excitement and pleasure, actually broke into a sweat. Mordecai-Nossen then tried to convince his guest that the Jews had something even better than fish and horseradish. But his guest was skeptical.

"What, for instance?"

"I'll tell you what—"

And Mordecai-Nossen looked for something that was even better than fish and horseradish, but he was afraid to utter the words "honeyed carrot *tsimess*." For what if the police chief decided to wait for the main course? He needed his guest like a hole in the head. Should he say noodle pudding and risk having to open up the oven and serve the course being saved for the Sabbath afternoon dinner? With a Jewish noodle pudding anything could happen!

So Mordecai-Nossen responded with a little laugh: "Ha-ha," to which the guest retorted: "Ha-ha-ha."

And Mordecai-Nossen, delighted that his guest was in good spirits, replied: "Ha-ha, ha-ha." The guest jabbed his elbow into his host's side and cast a sly smile at the hostess—and both man and wife fell into raptures.

Suddenly the police chief jumped up, wiped his hands and mouth on the snow-white tablecloth, buttoned all his buttons, and said without the slightest trace of humor:

"Well, duty calls!"

Mordecai-Nossen and Teme-Beyle rose in honor of their guest. They accompanied him to the door, their fawning gaze

reminiscent of a sniffing dog looking up at his master. They bowed and scraped and begged him: "Don't forget now, be sure to come next Friday night."

"In a lead coffin," the hostess hissed at her guest once the door had slammed, furious at her husband for spending all his time—day and night, weekdays and Sabbaths—with the authorities. Mordecai-Nossen listened to her outburst, but remained silent, as though he had a mouthful of pebbles. Mordecai-Nossen was a queer sort of fellow, indeed.

And now the author of this story simply must digress for a moment to present portraits of this couple and introduce them to one and all.

Mordecai-Nossen was a tall, thin, desiccated man with long hands and a perpetually wrinkled brow. Because of his drooping, jowly cheeks, his forever somber face, barely covered with a thin crop of beard, seemed square like a Chinaman's. Since his lips were constantly pressed tight and his mouth set a bit awry, he always appeared to be concealing a secret. A man of few words, Mordecai-Nossen never raised his voice. But when he came in contact with the government authorities, he turned a complete about-face. The wrinkles disappeared from his forehead, his face began to shine, his lips unpursed, his mouth straightened, and he became talkative—Mordecai-Nossen underwent a complete transformation! And do you know why he bustled about so much at the authorities'? Only for the sake of honor and self-aggrandizement. In case a Kasrilevkite ever needed a favor, he would have to approach Mordecai-Nossen with his petition and say: "After all, Reb Mordecai-Nossen, who else but you has so much pull with the authorities?" The word "pull" would compensate Mordecai-Nossen for all the humiliation, trouble, and expense. Mordecai-Nossen was a queer fish, indeed.

Mordecai-Nossen's wife, squat and plump Madame Teme-Beyle was built like a brass pestle or a potbellied samovar on which stood a pointed little teapot. Although roly-poly below, her head was small and angular. This paunchy samovar was always boiling, seething and fuming, angry at her husband, vexed with the servants, infuriated with the Kasrilevke goats, mad at the Kasrilevke women, and all riled up at the world at large. Luckily, though, all of them turned a deaf ear

to her ranting. They took no more heed of her than Haman does the Purim rattle-clacker. Her husband was eternally preoccupied with communal affairs and with the authorities; the maid, out of sheer spite, always burned the groats, charred the potatoes, and scorched the milk; the Kasrilevke goats made her frantic by jumping up on the roof and devouring the thatching, one straw at a time; the Kasrilevke market women exasperated her at the fish stall and the meat stand; the women in the synagogue and even (forgive the proximity) in the bathhouse. . . . Frankly, no one could stand Teme-Beyle. And perhaps with good reason. After all, the entire community was not demented.

Now that we've become acquainted with this couple, I think that we can safely proceed to the other individuals with whom the wealthy Mordecai-Nossen so diligently rubbed elbows.

7

[*Mister Big Shot at the Rich Man's Store and Home*]

Another frequenter at Mordecai-Nossen's was our old friend, Makar Pavlovitch. He wasn't a house guest, but often dropped in to Mordecai-Nossen's textile shop which, for your information, was the first of its kind in Kasrilevke. Besides rep, lustrine and sailcloth, calico and madapollam, one could buy worsted, tricot, cheviot, velvet, satin, and muslin—in short, everything one's heart desired—"modeled after the latest samples, which can't even be gotten in the big city, Yehupetz." So said Mordecai-Nossen, his wife, and all the salesmen. And just you try to contradict them! All the moneyed folk of Kasrilevke and the surrounding region were Mordecai-Nossen's customers. Most were Christians and they trusted Mordedai-Nossen to a T. No sooner did Mordecai-Nossen say "my word of honor" than they stopped bargaining. But all of Teme-Beyle's sacred oaths and solemn pledges were just so much water down the drain. They had implicit faith only in Mordecai-Nossen's "word of honor." And no questions asked, for that's the way it was.

Makar, a customer of long standing, was one of those to whom Mordecai-Nossen now extended credit. Makar had even shopped at Mordecai-Nossen's when he was known merely as Makar, not as Makar Pavlovitch, and when Mordecai-Nossen wouldn't trust him for as much as a spool of thread. In those days Mordecai-Nossen wasn't ashamed of telling Makar quite frankly:

"No money, no goods."

Later, when Makar became a big wheel in the municipality, Mordecai-Nossen opened an account for him—but naturally, in exchange for a note or an IOU. Mordecai-Nossen would cast a little smile toward Makar and say: "Don't you see, dear sir, there can be no ill feelings when your note is in my pocket." Still later, when Makar donned the official golden button and administrative cape, Mordecai-Nossen extended unlimited credit.

When Makar came into the textile shop now, Mordecai-Nossen brought him a chair, and greeted him with the title "Your Honor." Makar Pavlovitch made himself quite at home, crossed his legs, smoked a cigarette and chatted amiably, addressing the shopkeeper with chummy familiarity: "Hey, listen here, Mordecai-Nos." Mordecai-Nossen stood before him with fake deference and sham respect, thinking: Where did you breeze in from, Mister Big Shot? And said big shot delivered a little discourse concerning Jews, Jewish business, finagling and flimflam, ending each remark with a high-pitched laugh and a peculiar cough which thoroughly nauseated Mordecai-Nossen. Mordecai-Nossen's blood boiled, but he restrained himself and smiled. Had he been able to see his cloying, artificial grin in a mirror, that, too, would have sickened him.

Mordecai-Nossen usually didn't give a damn about the topic of Mister Big Shot's soliloquys, for Makar's blather went in one ear and out the other. But now the more Makar talked the more he touched upon points which Mordecai-Nossen could not tolerate hearing. For example, Makar asked such absurdities as: Was it true that every Sabbath in the synagogue the Jews called down curses upon the heads of all other peoples? Do they spit at churches? Were they obliged to pour the slop pail after a Christian departing from a Jew? He also asked other questions which amounted to a heap of rubbish.

In order to escape from Makar's clutches, Mordecai-Nossen tried to throw him off by drawing him into a conversation about the town council, the meat tax, even the Holy Synod. But no luck. Under no circumstances did Makar let himself be hoodwinked. Once and for all he demanded of Mordecai-Nossen:

"Why don't you admit the truth?"

Mordecai-Nossen tried to play along with the gentile and asked: "Where did Your Honor study such laws?"

Makar looked him full in the face. Suddenly he had a brainstorm. He'd catch Mordecai-Nossen unawares, and pin him, as it were, to the wall.

"Well, what about the blood?"

"What blood?"

"Come, come—you know! Passover . . . matza. . . . How about it?"

In turn, Mordecai-Nossen, too, had a bright idea. With a mawkish snicker he lightly slapped His Honor on the back and surreptitiously stroked his cape. "His Honor is a great clown, ha-ha-ha," he said obsequiously. But once His Honor had picked himself up and was gone, Mordecai-Nossen threw a quick compliment after him: "That Big Shot's got a one-track mind. One could hardly say that he was evilhearted, God forbid. He's just a plain son of a bitch."

Once, on a Sabbath, Mordecai-Nossen sat at home studying *The Ethics of the Fathers*. Suddenly the door opened and in traipsed Makar. At first our rich man was somewhat alarmed. He wondered why Mister Big Shot had suddenly come to see him after his nap? Then Mordecai-Nossen put on a friendly face and, smiling, asked Makar to be seated. Mordecai-Nossen took off his Sabbath hat, remaining in his skullcap.

"Listen here, Teme-Beyle," he shouted to his wife. "How about a snack?"

Makar waved his hand. "Don't bother. I've come to you on another matter. It's a secret. Just between you and me."

Hearing the word "secret," Mordecai-Nossen jumped up, intending to bolt the door. But Makar stayed his hand.

"Don't bother. It's not the sort of secret you have to lock

doors for. I just wanted to ask you something. After all, you're a clever man, honest and forthright. If I get the truth from anyone, it'll be from you."

Mordecai-Nossen stroked his earlocks majestically, thrilled with the compliment. His eyes brimmed with delight. He was transported with joy. His only regret was that no one else was there to hear Makar's flattering remark.

"You've probably heard about what happened to the girl," Makar said, looking him straight in the eye like an investigator. Mordecai-Nossen pricked up his ears like a rabbit.

"Which girl?"

"The girl the Jews killed and whose blood they drew off and hid for Passover."

At first Mordecai-Nossen emitted his tiny laugh: "Ha-ha-ha." But then his face blanched and turned green.

"That's a monstrous lie." Mordecai-Nossen's eyes blazed. He shook his head and his earlocks waggled to and fro.

"What's that? It's all over the papers," Makar retorted, still staring relentlessly at Mordecai-Nossen.

"The papers are lying their heads off," screamed Mordecai-Nossen.

"The papers say that the matter has been taken up officially," Makar said icily. "I myself read that there's an official report on it."

"A bunch of damned lies," Mordecai-Nossen interrupted, his skullcap askew on his head and his earlocks a-flutter.

"What's a damned lie?" Makar asked, purple with rage. "What I've said? or what's in the report?"

"Everything's a damned lie. Everything. Everything is an out-and-out lie. There's not a shred of truth in it."

Mordecai-Nossen twitched with fury. His hands, face, eyes, earlocks—every part of him was quivering. Never having seen Mordecai-Nossen so incensed, Makar deduced that there was ample reason for the Jew's agitation. Apparently, then, the matter was true. For if not, why was he in such a dither? Why did he tremble and shake so? The nerve of the Jew, branding black-on-white facts as out-and-out lies. Smoldering, Makar stood up, donned his official cap and said:

"These words'll cost you dear!"

No sooner did he make a move for the door than Mordecai-Nossen jumped up and ran after him, regretting the whole exchange. He wanted to apologize and bring him back.

"Sir . . . Your Honor . . . Makar Pavlovitch . . . Makar Pavlovitch!"

But it was a fruitless attempt. Makar Pavlovitch was already far and away on the other side of the door. Mordecai-Nossen was frantic with heartache and chagrin, for he had said a few words too many, the devil take it. And as though on spite, Teme-Beyle now approached and began nagging him to tell her what the Big Shot had been doing here, why he had departed so quickly, and why he had slammed the door.

"Go ask him yourself!" snapped Mordecai-Nossen.

"Why, just look who's having a bit of a fit! On which side of the bed did you get up this morning? Been having any nightmares?"

Mordecai-Nossen thundered, "Pipe down, you cabbage head," so resoundingly that his wife nearly passed out. He himself was startled at his own voice, as was the maid, a swarthy Lithuanian, who dashed in from the kitchen, more dead than alive.

"Blast you," she said. "You scared the living daylights out of me."

At which Teme-Beyle pounced on the maid with two fists flying. Mordecai-Nossen, in turn, rushed at both of them. The upshot of this was a juicy scandal not even worth describing.

8

[*Kasrilevke Makes Haste for the Road*]

Thereafter, Kasrilevke experienced a period of troubles, suffering, and unwarranted fears. No one knew what prompted Makar to become a more rabid anti-Semite; no one realized why he wasn't seen in the rich man's shop. The rich man himself, apparently ashamed of the incident, tried to hush it up. He didn't breathe a word of it to a soul. On the other hand, Makar went as far as he could go. He constantly provoked the Kasrilevke Jews with new threats. He said they

wouldn't lord it over the town for long. Soon they would be repaid in full measure. Makar appropriated *The Flag*'s complaints and grievances lock, stock and barrel: Why should a people who did not plow, sow or reap amass so many possessions? They never lifted a finger, yet they ate in full measure. They didn't deserve to have it so easy!

Makar's shameful affair with Hapke occurred at the same time; this incident proved to be a momentary stumbling block for Makar, and, as previously mentioned, almost cast him headlong into misfortune. But although Makar, praise the good Lord, had come through that episode unscathed, he nevertheless started to antagonize the Kasrilevke Jews, insinuating that they would soon be taught a lesson.

At that time, too, the letter the *shokhet* had received from his son-in-law was passed from hand to hand. And Zaydl's newspaper, confirming the Jews' fears, added fuel to the fire. Stories made the rounds, one more hair-raising than the next. It was rumored that Kasrilevke would soon witness a fine hullabaloo.

Whence did this all stem? Who first gave wings to the rumor? To this very day no one knows, and no one will ever know. At some future time when the historian of Kasrilevke Jewry comes to this period and examines all its documents and papers, he will most assuredly remain lost in thought and, pen in hand, muse about bygone events.

No one knew how it happened and where it originated, but a report circulated in town that three villages were on the march against Kasrilevke. In the course of one morning the people of Kasrilevke got up as one and began bundling their children, their bedding, and their assorted rags. Packing the entire hoard of Kasrilevke poverty, they attempted to escape the approaching flames and made preparations for the journey. Whereto? Wherever their noses would lead them. Mothers picked up their little ones, pressed them to their breasts, and tearfully kissed, hugged, and fondled them as though, God forbid, someone was about to take them away. As though anyone needed them!

In Kasrilevke one store after another closed. The Jewish villagers looked at, and hid from, one another. People rushed and dashed about, assuming that the sooner they left, the

better. That morning Fyodor was nearly torn to pieces. Everyone dragged him home to help with the packing. Everyone secretly slipped him little bribes—here a chicken wing, there a few kopecks. Never before was Fyodor such a celebrity, never before did he rake in so much cash. So glutted was he with money that he spat in disgust, shouted, "Dammit a hundred demons and a blasted witch," and followed his feet to the usual place to drink a few glasses in honor of the departing Kasrilevke householders. Having had his fill, he began to get worked up. He flailed about with his fists and roared that it was high time that Kasrilevke was rid of the Jews. But as ill luck would have it, guess who was passing by at that very moment? Makar and the postmaster! When they heard Fyodor fulminating against the Jews, the two stopped dead in their tracks. They noticed the Jews busily packing, getting ready for the road. Thoroughly mystified, they both stared openmouthed at the Jews, wondering where were they hurrying to.

The fact that the two officials were ogling them caused the Jews to panic even more. They left off bundling. To hell with the belongings. Life! Life was much dearer! So they began renting any available means of transportation—wagons, teams of oxen, horses. And they took to the road in the nick of time, double-quick and lickety-split, their haste nearly matching that of their ancestors' departure from Egypt.

Heading the column, naturally, were the Kasrilevke draymen, flying swift as eagles with their large and small half-covered wagons. In those vehicles sat the town grandee, Reb Mordecai-Nossen, and his entire family, as well as the households of other rich villagers. Next in line came the hired wagons with gentile drivers, loaded with women, children, and sick people. Following them were the least affluent Kasrilevkites, popularly known as the salt of the earth. They had to traipse along, alas, heel and toe, stepping along right smartly, afraid to look back, lest they see someone giving chase to invite them back, God forbid.

A stillness fell over Kasrilevke. The village had become deserted, forlorn as a graveyard. Not a soul remained. The only living beings left in Kasrilevke were the goats—the sum

total of Jewish wealth in Kasrilevke—Pockmarked Hapke, the bathkeeper and his wife, and of course—a thousand pardons for mentioning him in the same breath—the venerable rabbi, Reb Yozifl.

To each one of these living creatures a separate chapter will be devoted.

9

[*Which Indulges in a Bit of Philosophy*]

Biologists and other keen students of nature have demonstrated that nothing is useless, wasted, or dead. For instance, after a tree grows, blossoms and bears fruit, it may be chopped down and used for fuel. Yet scholars say the tree is not dead at all. It has merely been broken down into its component parts. The fruit provided nourishment, the blossoms sweet aroma, the wood heat. And as the tree lived and died and returned to the earth, so do we. On our graves grows grass, which enables the nibbling goat to give milk to a baby. Sustained by the milk, the baby grows up, lives and dies, and so the cycle continues ad infinitum.

No doubt you're anxious to know where all this is leading to. Well, it's leading right up to the old scattered graves of the ancient Kasrilevke cemetery. The graves, the goats and the Kasrilevke Jews all formed part of an immeasurably ancient chain, a chain to which, no doubt, countless links will be added in future years.

If you want to know how long Kasrilevke has been a Jewish town, don't look for historical archives—none exist. Just take the trouble to go to Kasrilevke's ancient cemetery. Study the old graves with their simple markers of wood and stone, faded gray tombstones which have in reverence been bent over for ages. On all sides appeared barely legible letters worn smooth by time: *Here lies a Jew, the rabbi and saint. . . . Here lies a pious woman, the modest and wise. . . .* Although the year was often indistinct, the graves were undoubtedly very old. Many stones had already crumbled away and many graves were completely grass-covered.

The goats—the perpetually undernourished Kasrilevke

goats—hopped over the broken fence, and, after grazing, brought home udders full of milk, from which the poor Kasrilevke children gained sustenance and strength. There was no knowing what the goats fed on. Perhaps they bore within themselves the soul of someone near and dear. There was no knowing what a close bond existed between the old Kasrilevke cemetery, the grazing goats, and, with all due deference to their honor, the Kasrilevke Jews. Indeed, this entire inquiry was prompted by the sight of the goats on the day the fleeing Kasrilevke Jews abandoned their sole treasure to the mercy of God.

It was after Passover. The snow had already melted and tiny blades of grass (where man let them flourish) were stretching toward the sun, making God's earth green and bright. But Kasrilevke—alas and alack—wasn't the place for fresh grass and aromatic trees. Among Kasrilevke's many desirable and distinctive characteristics were mud, muck, sand, and fetid, oppressive and stifling air. On the day of the Great Panic my imagination carried me to the cemetery, the only place in Kasrilevke blessed with grass. Meditating upon the whole flock of forlorn and orphaned goats, I felt a pang in my heart, both for the goats and for the little Jewish children who had gone without milk that day. The poor goats stood there chewing their cud and wagging their beards, looking ever so foolish as they ruminated wistfully. I imagined them saying: "Uncle, can you perhaps tell us where the deuce our masters and mistresses have taken off to?"

But let us now turn from the dead to the quick—the three souls who had remained behind in the village after the Great Panic. I'm referring, of course, to the bathkeeper and his wife, and their ward, the frail old rabbi, Reb Yozifl.

10

[*Concerning the Rabbi, Reb Yozifl*]

One of my most beloved characters, Reb Yozifl, the rabbi and mentor of Kasrilevke, has often been mentioned in my stories (none, by the way, fabricated or concocted). However, since I have been remiss to my readers and unjust to him in not

depicting him in full as he deserves to be, I shall at least attempt to make amends here and now.

Old Reb Yozifl had been ailing and feeble for many years. Though broken in body, his soul was hale, whole, and pure. And, indeed, into this frail body God had set a permanently youthful soul, which He instructed to have long life until He Himself would recall it to Paradise.

Paradise, beyond a shadow of a doubt! For hell, the torments of the grave, and all the other delights which await us after death, our Reb Yozifl had already experienced, praise God, right here on earth. The Eternal had bestowed upon Reb Yozifl every heartache and plague, distress and misfortune, trial and tribulation. Apparently wanting to test His loyal servant, the Lord generously showered a series of woes upon Reb Yozifl, just as a bride is showered with rice. First God took his children, one after the other, but, naturally, not before tormenting them in full measure. Next He took his wife, the saintly Frume-Teme, who had tended him like a devoted mother. Then He bent Reb Yozifl's body a bit closer to the earth, blessed him with a varied assortment of ailments in his old age, and left him stranded—poor, lonely and feeble. And so that the rabbi might taste the authentic flavor of Gehenna, God inspired the Kasrilevkites with the bright idea of crowning a young man as the new rabbi and of farming out old Reb Yozifl—begging his pardon—to the bathhouse couple with whom he would spend the few remaining years of his life. Surely the latter incident should have given Reb Yozifl sufficient cause to complain against God, to sin like Job who, after patiently bearing his afflictions, finally cursed the day he was born.

But our Reb Yozifl was not that sort of man. Reflection and reasoning had taught him many things. He concluded that there were two possible reasons for all his woes. One was that his life of tribulation was a test imposed by the Holy One: he would suffer in this foolish sinful world so that in the hereafter he would be blessed with a double portion of his just reward. The only other reason was that he deserved everything, if not for his own sins, then perhaps for those of his wayward brethren, the children of Israel, who, responsible for one another, had to suffer for one another—just as an entire Workmen's Association was held responsible if one of its members was caught stealing.

So thought Reb Yozifl, who in his entire lifetime had not let one word of complaint pass his lips. With a philosophic smile, he forsook and completely renounced worldly pleasures. Hence, he won the unmitigated love of the Kasrilevkites. For although Reb Yozifl was no longer their rabbi, and emoluments which had been his were taken by his successor, Reb Yozifl was nevertheless still held in awe, and retained his title and his place of honor at the synagogue, as well. The only trouble was that titles alone could not buy bread and butter. The body made its meager demands, and the rabbi was content if there was a bit of something to keep body and soul together.

The Kasrilevkites then had an inspiration. Since the Kasrilevke bathhouse was a communal undertaking, the villagers decided that the bath should be the rabbi's home and its revenue his income. Of course, the worthy rabbi would not live in the bathhouse itself, but next to it in the bathkeeper's little alcove, which contained a spare room. *There* Reb Yozifl would live and study.

Study? Well, figuratively. For how could Reb Yozifl study if, God save us, his sight was failing and he was barely able to distinguish light from dark? Yet there was no reason to despair! A scholar, no matter how aged, always found something to do. If he had trouble reading, he studied by heart: he prayed, recited Psalms, or simply meditated.

And surely there was much to meditate about. Reb Yozifl contemplated the world and its just Creator, all of whose deeds were just, and also His people Israel, whom God chastised like a beloved child. The rabbi thought of the other nations and of all the earth's creatures, from the huge elephant to the tiniest mite and the smallest worm which the Almighty generously sustained. He realized that from all this a simple lesson could be learned. If the Good Lord provided for mite and worm, He would surely provide for a human being, especially a Jew.

So ran Reb Yozifl's train of thought and he was pleased with God and His world, and with himself and his musings, to which he more than once gave voice. Like other places,

Kasrilevke, too, had its assortment of half-baked scholars, pundits, and brains who, in their attempt to poke fun, loved to ask foolish questions of the old rabbi.

"A mite, you say? I believe you also mentioned a worm. Well, Rabbi, please explain one thing. If God is so great and good and compassionate that He even feeds the smallest worm, well then why doesn't He feed His Kasrilevke Jews? Are we tinier than mites, smaller than worms?"

"Oh, what children you are." The old man smiled. "Let me tell you a parable concerning a king. Imagine that the king has invited you to a feast in his palatial hall. When you come to the vestibule and see that it isn't as roomy or bright as you had expected it to be, you turn around and go back. The same is true here. Just consider this. The little bit of pain, woe, and humiliation we suffer here in this crowded vestibule cannot be compared to the great palace of the World to Come, with its golden walls, silver floors, and diamond bricks. There life is eternal. There righteous souls are given a place of honor. There they dwell in comfort and bask in the splendor of the Divine Presence. There God Himself attends to them. He gives them the finest wine in golden cups and upon golden platters serves them the Messianic repast consisting of the Leviathan and the Wild Ox."

Reb Yozifl's closing words—namely: wine, Leviathan, and Wild Ox—were added as a bonus for the common people who usually turned a deaf ear to the Divine Presence and other spiritual matters. For a simple Jew had to have a plain piece of fish and a hunk of roast meat—a rare dish, indeed, in Kasrilevke; one to be had only on an occasional Sabbath and holiday. Everyone in Kasrilevke loved the old rabbi for his sweet and tender words, especially the common folk. But he was loved most of all by the bathkeeper and his wife, that famous couple who managed Kasrilevke's communal bath. To them, therefore, we dedicate the following chapter.

11

[*Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden*]

Shmaye and Fishel the correspondents (they submitted articles to all the newspapers, but no one ever printed them)

asserted that the Kasrilevke baths were a Paradise right here on earth. If their statement was true, then the names that Kasrilevke wags had given Berke the bathkeeper and his wife, Eve, shouldn't strike one as farfetched. Berke was dubbed Old Man Adam, and his wife, Mother Eve.

These nicknames were of doubtful origin. Since Eve was the real name of the bathkeeper's wife, perhaps the only appropriate name for her husband could have been Adam. This was done either because the noted couple had been isolated for so many years and lived, as it were, in the Garden of Eden; or because the men and women of Kasrilevke had the privilege of seeing the bathkeepers in the same costume which Adam and Eve had worn in the Garden of Eden before eating the forbidden fruit. Whatever the reason, we must admit that once Kasrilevke wags bestowed a monicker it stuck—like a legal name. Like a suit, the nickname was made to order: measured, cut, hand-sewn and pressed—now wear it well!

Everyone realized that neither of the two could have had any other name. What other tag could have been given to a couple who spent every day, year in, year out, removed from the village, far from the famous Kasrilevke muck? They lived at the foot of the mountain, by the riverbank where tall green willows bent into the water and where during the summer the frogs' croaking could drive one to distraction. As the place was truly a Garden of Eden, so the bathhouse couple were truly Adam and Eve in the paradise of Eden, made for each other at the time of Creation.

Adam, an ex-soldier, was a strapping broad-boned man with powerful arms. His beard was elf-locked, his wadded gaberdine shiny, and his boots perpetually bound up with rope. Eve was tall and hefty, in the pink of health. She had a dark, gleaming, pockmarked face and kindly gray eyes. Her head was covered with a checked kerchief, and she always wore a hitched-up skirt and a pair of oversized men's boots which covered her brawny legs.

The only thing this couple knew was the bathhouse, which they were either heating, cleaning, or repairing. They were never idle, except at night when all the fires were extinguished. Then Adam and Eve would sit down over a pot of potatoes, in the wintertime by the oven, in the summer

outside the house. No one in Kasrilevke was more content than they, and no one had such a steady source of income. Moreover, they paid no rent at all and never lacked customers—for no matter how poor the town, a Jew had to have a bathhouse.

Yet, to tell the truth, it wasn't a gold mine. Adam and Eve could neither save money nor buy houses. For, alas, how much could a Kasrilevke Jew pay for his Friday afternoon bath? And think of the piles of wood the bathhouse consumed, especially since the boiler was old, the stones crumbling, the walls cracking, and the ceiling leaking. Every sizzling drop which fell scalded the naked skin of a Kasrilevkite who scampered away, shrieking like the damned being raked over red-hot coals. Furious with the bathkeeper, the people cursed him up and down, but Old Man Adam didn't give a rap. He went on his merry way, pouring water on the hot stones and grumbling into his beard: "Did you ever? They use a bathhouse built in the year one and they expect it not to leak."

Old Man Adam single-handedly kept the old bathhouse in a state of repair. He plugged up the holes in the wall, patched the roof, and supported it with a beam; he even cleaned the women's ritual bath to prevent the Kasrilevke jesters from cracking jokes or spreading false rumors about frogs croaking there.

Old Man Adam rose early, when God Himself was still asleep, and dragged one barrel of water after another from the river, accompanying his work by the chanting of Psalms he knew by heart. His voice echoed from the bath and was carried by the wind to the other side of the river.

The alcove adjoining the bath was still pitch dark. Eve sat over a sputtering wick mending Reb Yozifl's underlinen, which she herself had laundered the night before. She patched holes and sewed buttons wherever necessary so that the rabbi would have something to wear when he awoke.

The rabbi asleep? Well, it could hardly be called sleeping, for it seemed that poor Reb Yozifl had just arisen for his midnight devotions; and now, unseen by anyone, he rose again, washed his hands, and began to praise his Creator. Eve

did not know exactly what he said—but listening to him was sheer delight. Each word touched her heart and bathed all her limbs with joy. She rose without a sound, tiptoed softly to the kneading trough, and began preparing the dough for the Sabbath loaves.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo!" crowed the white red-winged rooster, jumping from the crossbeams to the threshold, proud that he had generously wakened everyone for work.

"To the devil with you," said Eve, chasing him with a barrage of insults. "Scoot. Beat it. A chicken pox upon you. All you know is cock-a-doodle-doo—whether we want to hear it or not. Just you wait. Let me fatten you up a bit and then off to the *shokhet* with you. Then you'll have a merry cock-a-doodle-doo. Then there'll be a real to-do, a real cock-a-doodle-doo."

But Eve's harangue to the pert and cocky rooster was superfluous. For the rabbi was awake. He had already performed his ritual ablutions and begun his morning devotions. Eve did not know exactly what he said—but listening to him was a sheer delight. Each word touched her heart and bathed all her limbs with joy. With great awe she brought him a pitcher of tasty, steaming-hot chicory, as sweet-smelling as Paradise itself.

12

[*Reb Yozifl's Blissful Old Age*]

The suggestion that old Reb Yozifl should be supported by the communal bath was one of those bright ideas which only Kasrilevke was capable of. Actually, according to agreement, Old Man Adam was also required to heat the synagogue with wood provided at his own expense. Nevertheless, he let the worshippers freeze all winter long. His constant excuses were: icy weather, wet wood, thick fogs, and other such flimsy pretexts.

But Adam was told that if he would tend to Reb Yozifl in his declining years, the community would overlook his obligation of heating the synagogue. Were the demands of an old rabbi, alas, so great? Especially an old rabbi like Reb Yozifl,

who even in his prime had been content with everything. The rabbi's wife, Frume-Teme, may she rest in peace, used to say that Reb Yozifl never uttered a word of complaint. For instance, if given hot coals for supper, he would eat them; he would burn his tongue, but eat them he would. That's how pampered a man he used to be. So imagine how easy it would be now, in his old age! The only drawback was that he'd be a bit cramped for space.

However, Old Man Adam had an idea: he and Eve would sleep in the bathhouse, and the rabbi could have the alcove. Both were under one roof, anyway. The bathhouse had another advantage—it was warm during the winter, just like the biblical Garden of Eden. But truth to say, winter's blessing became summer's bane. For the heat, both in the bath and the living quarters, was unbearable. The only other alternative was sleeping at the riverfront, itself a Paradise. During the summer it was more delightful to sleep outdoors than in—yet this convenience also had a drawback: the frogs' croaking made sleep impossible. But, frankly, was sleeping in the house any better? No, for frogs by the dozens invaded the house, too—often leaping smack into Eve's face, either from the bed, the kneading trough, or the oven.

To make a long story short, Reb Yozifl was housed in the alcove, and Adam and Eve moved into the Garden of Eden—the bathhouse, that is. They tended to the rabbi's needs and provided him with food and drink. In time they became very attached to him and loved him as though he were their own flesh and blood.

Reb Yozifl called them his children and they aptly called him their rabbi, for they had not heard so much Torah wisdom in their entire lifetime as they heard from old Reb Yozifl in one day. They considered everything they heard original and new. In their eyes the rabbi was like a traveler from distant lands who told exotic tales which defied the imagination. Openmouthed and hearts knocking, the couple would sit by the stove-couch in the winter and outdoors in the summer, gazing at the rabbi and listening to his discourses on spiritual matters. He talked about God, angels and people, he spoke of earthly and celestial beings, he discussed the sun and moon, the stars and spheres. As they sat outside

the bathhouse on bright warm summer evenings, Adam and Eve would often feel that the old man with the bent back, small white beard, and kindly eyes was himself a spirit. Any moment now he would rise, hover in the air, soar off, and vanish among the spheres. The couple felt that they, too, were being drawn higher and higher toward the threadlike clouds, the tiny stars, and the abode of wandering, restless souls.

Surely Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden were the happiest couple on earth. And living with them in their Garden of Eden, Kasrilevke's rabbi, Reb Yozifl, had the most blissful old age imaginable.

13

[*Reb Yozifl Gets Angry for the First Time in His Life*]

Heaven and earth have sworn that nothing is imperishable. Constant happiness is nonexistent. There is an accusing Angel, better known as Satan, who pokes his nose in everyone's affairs, peeks over our shoulders and watches us like a hawk lest—heaven forbid—we forget the Almighty. Well, this very same Satan meddled into the affairs of the above-mentioned Garden of Eden and nearly succeeded in driving out Adam and Eve, as well as poor lonely old Reb Yozifl. Satan came close to separating the beloved group and permanently destroying their little nest of happiness. It happened one day when Eve came home from the marketplace. She had wanted to buy fish, but there were none. And there were no potatoes or onions, either. In fact, there wasn't a living soul in the marketplace. Assuming that she had arrived too early, Eve waited awhile; but by midmorning she saw that there wasn't so much as a stray dog in the marketplace: wherever she looked Jews scurried about, packing, getting ready to depart.

What was up? They were running away.

Whereto? Anywhere.

By the time Eve had gone home and told the news to Old Man Adam and by the time he passed this on to Reb Yozifl, half the fleeing village had already passed the cemetery.

At first Reb Yozifl didn't want to believe it. Running away? What do you mean, running away? Then he picked up his bamboo cane with its bent brass handle (the cane itself was as old as the rabbi's tenure in Kasrilevke) and took the pains to walk into town. There he still managed to find a few Jews making preparations for the journey. He stopped them and with a smile gently admonished them.

A few of the remaining Jews heard him out and sighed piteously.

"Of course you're absolutely right, Reb Yozifl, but why don't you come with us anyway? Take our advice, Rabbi, and ride with us. And the quicker the better."

"Ride? Whereto? What for? Because of whom?"

But all his words were for naught, for soon these remaining Jews, too, were on their way.

When Reb Yozifl returned to the Garden of Eden he found the bathkeepers, Adam and Eve, deeply distressed, at the point of tears.

"Why are you so upset, children?" he said.

"Good heavens, Rabbi! Don't you know what's going on? Hapke was just here."

"Which Hapke?"

"The gentile woman who puts out the Sabbath lights. What horrible, hair-raising stories she told us!"

Interrupting each other frequently, Adam and Eve began to relate Hapke's version of the goings-on in the world. Leaning on his cane and listening attentively, Reb Yozifl reflected but did not reply. He raised his head and looked about; then, placing his old bamboo cane at his side, he removed his hat, remaining only in his skullcap.

"Now hear *me* out, children," he told Adam and Eve, "and listen to what *I* have to say. Everything you've just told me is absolute nonsense. It's not worth a broken copper. Know that the Guardian of Israel slumbers not. In other words, God doesn't fall asleep on the job. Now listen to this story about a king. Once upon a time there was a king . . ."

"King? What king? Better listen to what Hapke said," Old Man Adam interjected. He immediately regretted his boorish remark, but it was to late to withdraw his words. Reb Yozifl turned away from Adam, donned his prayer shawl and phy-

lacteries, took a sacred book and, with the bamboo cane at his side, seated himself at the head of the table like a king during wartime, armed from head to toe, with a proud and defiant look which seemed to say:

"Now! I just dare anyone to set foot over here."

Reb Yozifl's face radiated such strength and composure that both Adam and Eve changed their mind. The situation was not so terrible, they thought. They, too, would have someone to rely on.

14

[Two Villages in Flight—The End of the Tale]

The refugees made for the road to Mazepevke, a town near Yehupetz. The first place they stopped was a Jewish village named Kozodoievke [Goat-town], known, as its name implied, for its famous goats. Kozodoievke goats were not milked like Kasrilevke goats; moreover, they were distinguished from the latter by horns—that is, by their *lack* of horns. Instead of horns the Kozodoievke goats had on their forehead a queer thingamajig which resembled—forgive the comparison—the head phylactery. Furthermore, they were by nature quite bovine and far more asinine than the Kasrilevke goats. If you met a Kozodoievke goat in the middle of the road, showed it a bit of straw, and said, "Koz, koz, koz," it would straightaway stop and spread its legs, all set to be milked.

In like manner, the Jews of Kozodoievke did not resemble those of Kasrilevke. They were the same Jews, of course; they had the same bellies and souls; they even shared the same shred of poverty. The only difference between them was a prayer in the morning service. The Kasrilevke Jews recited "Blessed be he who spoke" *before* "Give thanks to the Lord," whereas the Kozodoievke Jews, on the contrary, reversed the procedure. What possible difference could it make whether one or the other was recited first? After all, both were prayers to God. But don't you dare suggest such a simple explanation. For in the good old days when both the Kasrilevke and the Kozodoievke Jews were well off, and the only troubles they had were headaches, the incident concerning the priority of "Blessed be he" and "Give thanks" led to a bloody altercation.

Kozodoievke Jews would frequently come to pray in the Kasrilevke synagogue. At the very moment when the cantor, wrapped in his prayer shawl, stood before the pulpit and swayed back and forth singing "Give thanks to the Lord," a Kozodoievke Jew would sound out an octave higher with "Blessed be he who spoke and created the world."

On the other hand, when a Kasrilevke Jew came to the Kozodoievke synagogue and saw the cantor standing rapt in holy devotion with eyes closed and hand upraised, chanting "Blessed be he who spoke," why just then the Kasrilevke Jew would rend the air with a falsetto "Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known among the people his de-ee-ee-ee-eeeeds."

The "Give thanks" alone didn't gall the Kozodoievke Jews as much as the "deeds" the Kasrilevkite stretched out for a good half mile. Look, they said, if you feel like saying your "Give thanks," say it and be done with it. But for goodness sake what point is there in stretching out your "de-ee-ee-eeeds"? Obviously, you're doing it for spite. And since you're such a spiteful wretch, you deserve to be beaten black and blue. And so they laced into him that day for all they were worth.

This beating instigated a bitter feud between the two villages which lingered on for years. It began with a few blows and ended up with all sorts of false denunciations, as well as a continuous display of boorishness, intrigue, and mutual recriminations. The two communities monopolized everyone's attention. Perfect strangers butted into their lawsuits, made fun of their Jewish customs and childish ways, and labeled them fanatics. In a word, it was a nasty, revolting affair.

Indeed, those foolish but happy years were long gone and only God knows if they'll ever return. The villages now had bigger problems than "Give thanks" and "Blessed be he." Nevertheless, although there was no logical reason for it, the hatred between the Jews of Kasrilevke and Kozodoievke remained.

Similarly, there was no logical reason for the following: Upon seeing a Jew, why should a young gentile lad in Kasrilevke forthwith whip off his cap, put it between his teeth, then wave it back and forth, singing: "Yid, Yid, nasty kid . . ."? On the other hand, try to be a smartie and explain why a Jew talking about a peasant in Yiddish should throw in a barrelful of hifalutin Hebrew words to make it hard for the gentile to understand:

"Give the uncircumcised one a beaker of vintage—but don't exceed the brim—and a slice of staff of life, for he hasn't partaken of nourishment today. Remunerate him with two gold pieces and bid him sally forth, but scrutinize him assiduously so that he doesn't appropriate anything."

Since such ways can only be felt but not explained rationally, let's return to the Jews of Kasrilevke and Kozodoievke. There are moments in the lifetime of a man when one must forgive and forget—blot everything out as though it had never been. And a good thing it is, too! For if this were not done, the world would burst at the seams. Our sages rightly decreed that on the eve of the Day of Atonement everyone should forgive his fellow man.

The same thing happened to the feud between the Jews of Kasrilevke and Kozodoievke. During the Great Panic their enmity vanished into thin air. They bumped into each other smack in the middle of the road, where a one-time Jewish inn called The Oak had once been located (it had to close because of the state monopoly, and neither complaints nor protests availed).

When Kasrilevke and Kozodoievke met, they stopped and held the following conversation:

KASRILEVKE: Where are you off to, fellow Jews?

KOZODOIEVKE: Where are *you* off to?

KASRILEVKE: Who, us? We're just traveling . . . . On business.

KOZODOIEVKE: What? An entire community on the move for business?

KASRILEVKE: What about you? Aren't you an entire community?

KOZODOIEVKE: With us it's a different matter. We're not traveling, we're running.

KASRILEVKE: How do you know *we're* not running?
KOZODOIEVKE: Now you're talking. Where are you running to?
KASRILEVKE: Where are *you* running to?
KOZODOIEVKE: Who, us? We're running . . . in your direction.
KASRILEVKE: And we . . . in yours.
KOZODOIEVKE: What will you do at our place?
KASRILEVKE: Same thing you're going to do at ours.
KOZODOIEVKE: Did you ever? Then why do you have to run in our direction and we in yours?
KASRILEVKE: Apparently so that we can change places.
KOZODOIEVKE: Joking aside, better tell us why you're running.
KASRILEVKE: First you tell us why you're. . . .

And then and there, when the two groups of Jews conversed in the field and cast sidelong glances at each other, they first realized what they had done and how foolish they had been.

"Did you ever see such a thing? Running helter-skelter! Beating a retreat! Why are we running? Where are we running to? May their noses run!"

Everyone began wiping his eyes, weeping and moaning.

"Oh my, the things we've lived to see."

Then they began to confer, chat, babble. They talked themselves hoarse. They unburdened their hearts, shook hands, and politely bade each other good-bye. They kissed each other amicably like true pals, like in-laws after signing the marriage contract, or like man and wife remarrying after a divorce. They heaped curses upon all their enemies. They hoped for a happy ending to this miserable affair and with bitter laughs answered "Amen." And then they signaled the gentile drivers—begging their pardon—to kindly turn the horses around.

The two communities returned to their respective villages: the Kasrilevkites to Kasrilevke and the Kozodoievkites to Kozodoievke. Like birds, each to his nest, they silently stole back into their houses and silently resumed their daily tasks.

For many years thereafter they recounted and retold down

to the last detail the story of the Great Panic which had come over them. And in order to apprise our children's children and later generations of this event, we have undertaken to chronicle this grand epic in plain and simple Yiddish. Now that it is published, may it remain a memorial for all time!

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trans. by Curt Leviant