

SHOLEM ASCH

lyrical movement, not centered on character

The Little Town

trans. Meyer Levin

season

personification

ostensibly seen  
from his  
perspective

A MUDDY road leads into the village. This is the day before Purim, and the snow melts and dissolves over the fields. One can already see patches of the dark earth through the threadbare blanket of snow. The seeds that lay under cover all winter long have softened; they've split open, and their sprouting little roots have begun to suck the juice of life from Mother Earth. In these dark patches, through the snow, one may well perceive that Mother Earth is pregnant.

Far along between the linden trees that line both sides of the road, a lone wayfarer goes, with his pack on his back and his stick in his hand. Above, black crows fly from tree to tree, and their little gray feet break the threads of snow upon the branches.

The wayfarer's path leads him into the village. Let us go along with him, and whatever we see and whatever we hear shall be written in this book.

Night scene; late winter

2/62 '3

1. *Reb Yechezkiel's Place*

The door of the house is open day and night. People are forever coming in and out, just as if it were an inn. Actually, this is Reb Yechezkiel Gumbiner's house, but at the same time it is a gathering place open to one and all. If a complete stranger were to come in and sit down, the villagers might not even ask him what he had to say for himself. For here everyone is at home.

If a man leaves his house in the morning without having swallowed something to warm his insides, he simply walks into Reb Yechezkiel's, still wrapped in his praying shawl and phylacteries, and just as if he were one of the family, he calls to the servant to fetch him a glass of tea. Or, more frequently, it's a cup of borsch for which people are indebted to the house. For not long after breakfast, on a wintry morning in a cracking frost, one feels the need for something warm again, and word soon gets around that Reb Yechezkiel's wife Malka is brewing a garlic borsch in her kitchen. There's nothing evil about taking a sip of something there—actually it's the custom—a cup of borsch, a glass of water. . . .

If a village housewife is too lazy to build a fire in her oven, she takes up her pot and carries it over to Malka's kitchen. And in that kitchen, the cooking pots of the entire town may be found. Sometimes the good housewives become confused as to whose pot is whose. Then things are lively.

And if a lad has trouble at home, he betakes himself to Reb Yechezkiel's stable. He has nothing to worry about. Bread and rolls are never locked up in Reb Yechezkiel's house. In the kitchen everything is as free as water, and butter and radishes are always

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to be found in the cellar. The key to the cellar hangs by the stove in the care of Yente, the servant girl. But she's a good enough girl, and if she doesn't do as she's told—a little beating helps. Reb Yechezkiel says so himself.

Arrival of guests

Night takes the village under her wing, and within the night all the surrounding world is hidden. In the midst of the night the noisy beat of horses' hoofs and the rattle of wagon wheels on stone is heard. The noise ceases as a light shines forth from a window; then people are heard getting down from a wagon.

Heavy manly steps make themselves heard down the corridor. These must be habitual guests for they find the lock immediately, open it, and come into the big room.

There is no one in the long wide chamber; it is filled with shadows. Only one light burns among the shadows—the great winter lamp, with its wide shining arc like a grandmother's broad apron.

The Jews coming into the room wear long full sheepskin coats with broad collars that hang halfway down their backs and have red shawls wrapped around their throats. In the dark folds of their coats there still seem to linger the dark secrets of the night, which they have carried in with them from outdoors. On their heads they wear sheepskin caps with earlaps, and there are icicles on their hats and collars. The icicles melt in the warmth of the room, and drops of water fall from their sheepskin caps and coats so that they leave little trails of water behind them as they move about the room.

They approach the great stove that stands in a corner of the room. A blast of heat from the stove keeps them from coming too close. The warmth embraces them. They remove their sheepskins and remain standing in their thick red-belted jackets, and only now their beards appear. Some white, some black, some short, some long.

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The younger men leave the places near the stove to the elders and seek out havens for themselves. One stretches out on a bench, another on a table. They are soon asleep. The old ones sit quietly around the stove, and occasionally one asks a question of another, about business, and after a long while the other gives him an excuse for an answer.

Now the night comes through the window as though peering through gray glasses. One may imagine that a few barrels of light have been emptied into the black ocean of night, making it just a shade grayer. From somewhere the long-drawn-out crowing of a waking rooster is heard. Wheels rattle over stones, making a forlorn sound in the quiet night.

With ever grayer spectacles the night peers through the window. More and more barrels of light are stirred into the sea of darkness. From another house a rattling is heard and the sound of water pouring. Then there are steps moving about and away. And soon from the other house one hears an old man's voice repeating the morning prayer in a tearful singsong. The voice carries a long way. Then a bold young voice mingles with it. The young voice is hurried, joining almost pretentiously in the ancient, tearful chant. "*Thus saith the Lord . . .*" It rattles against the elder voice, but the aged one continues solemnly, as though for itself alone, avoiding and disdaining the bright young intrusion and pouring forth its lamentation into the world.

The Jews huddled around Reb Yechezkiel's oven hear the voice of prayer as they awake, rubbing their eyes. One washes his hands by rubbing them against the window. Each soon draws a prayer from his pocket, and they repeat the responses with a sharp, half-Litvak accent. "*Why hast Thou forsaken us? . . .*"

One might imagine that the voices are merely exchanging greetings with each other in the dim light, before the men can see each other.

And through the window the night peers, a paler gray, until one cannot tell whether this is the hour of daybreak or of nightfall.

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Wood chopping is heard from the kitchen, and the crackling of fire. Someone pours something from one pail into another. The door opens; people move about; people come in; somebody puts something down and goes on his way. A child's cry is heard from a house nearby. Now all of the sounds seem to merge—the mournful praying of the old man, the high-pitched singsong of the young boy at his devotions, the servant's wood chopping, the crackling of the fire, and the scattered voices greeting each other and saluting the newborn day that peers in through the windows.

It is already half light in the room. On the great table, there lies a heap of fur coats, greatcoats, and shawls. A tall young man is stretched on the sofa with his long legs extending into space. Doors and gates are open. People are coming in and going out; Jews of all sorts and all ages are arriving. They are tall and they are short; they have long beards and short beards. They say good morning to one another, and without wasting a word they are in the midst of bargaining. They talk and argue. To some questions there is no answer, and to other questions there are too many answers. Already one sees a good Jew taking another by the arm, steering him into a corner where he buzzes something into his ear. A third person stands by a table with his little prayer book open while his eye wanders to that corner, and suddenly he too seizes someone by the arm and walks him to another corner, showing that he too has a secret business—and let his competitor's eyes pop out of his head!

Meanwhile there is yet another who wakes, and winding himself in his prayer shawl and his phylacteries, he stands and prays, and there is even another who is already off on his way. At the table two businessmen are adding up their account with a bit of chalk. One of them wets his finger and rubs out what the other writes, and the other writes again what the first has rubbed out. In another corner stand two good Jews occupied in a further stage of business. One of them, with a little yellow beard and a round little belly, counts out money on the table. He counts sol-

emly, like someone piously praying—seventy-four, seventy-five, seventy-six—and as though he wishes to emphasize to the other, “You see what money means?”

Now the door opens, and in bursts a huge fellow, blind in one eye and with a long reddish beard. Without a why or wherefore he begins to curse the yellow beard who is counting out money. “You yellow dog! Paying two hundred and fifty rubles! Have you gone crazy?” The yellow beard keeps on counting out the money, one hundred and one, one hundred and two. . . . “What are you doing with my money?” the one eye shouts. Yet scarcely has the recipient picked up the money before the red beard and the yellow beard are off whispering together, and all is peaceful between them.

On the table there are samples of grain heaped in red handkerchiefs, and every Jew who comes into the room picks up a few kernels and examines them; he pops one into his mouth and asks of no one in particular, “What’s the market today?” He gets no answer, so he cracks the kernel in his teeth and creases his brow as though he would discover by himself the answer that no one has offered.

This room is the village market place. Little merchants go around buying grain from the peasants, and they sell it here in “Reb Yechezkiel’s granary.” In this room all sorts of affairs are arranged, not only matters of business with Reb Yechezkiel but all sorts of side affairs between one customer and another. For if a Jew has a little private business to negotiate, or if a young man wants to take his first step away from the study table and get into business, he will come and pass his time in this room.

In the house there is a special little room known as the office—for Reb Yechezkiel himself. In front of a square desk sits Reb Yechezkiel—a short, thickset patriarch, with a round white beard, holding his glasses on his nose with one hand. A lens is always falling out, and Reb Yechezkiel picks it up, cleans it with his kerchief, and sets it back in place on his nose while he’s asking

something or answering something in his endless discussions with his man, Reb Toby. Reb Toby, a tall fellow with a thin face, replies to Reb Yechezkiel with alacrity, and with a little cackle as if to say, “Everything is fine; everything is going fine.”

Wrapped in his long, ample sleeping coat, with his four-pointed hat on his head, Reb Yechezkiel sits there rolling a bit of bread dough between his fingers, giving ear to his man. For a moment he frowns, then he smiles again, as one who is ready to advise his helper. He pulls open a drawer, takes out a document, and instructs Reb Toby, “Wolf had better write to Danzig that the first transport has gone off.”

A door opens, and at first a head appears, saying, “Good morning,” then it disappears, and then a tall peasant comes into the room, his high muddy boots leaving a distinct track behind him. His face is red with heat, drops of sweat run from his damp hair, and without a word he flings open his coat, and then his vest, pulling out a letter, which he hands to Reb Yechezkiel. While Reb Yechezkiel is reading, Reb Toby goes over to the messenger, plying him with questions. But the peasant stands dumbly. He keeps his eyes on Reb Yechezkiel as though waiting for a signal.

“Hitch up the wagon! I’ll go myself to Trisk!”

“I said from the first—you can’t trust the water! Even then. Two weeks before the holiday—who knows what can happen! If the first frosts are strong. . . .” Reb Toby drums to Reb Yechezkiel with a sort of soft insistence, for he already understands what has happened.

“It’s lost! I had to have the lumber in readiness there. The rafts were strongly tied. The rope was thick. And the weather was good. How can you know what will happen? What is there to do? It’s an act of God. How could anyone predict that before Hanukkah the river Vistula would break and—”

“We have to take along Antek and Sokolofsky—and axes and plenty of rope,” Reb Toby advises.

“That goes without saying. They write to me that God should

only grant that the storm may not be too violent. And Trisk, it seems to me, is a sheltered spot. It's not windy. And with God's help, if only there shouldn't be a sudden storm, we may yet be able to save the logs," Reb Yechezkiel concludes. "With God's help."

"We have to send two hundred rubles to the squire. And Reb Abraham Plotsker had better buy what he needs in Shaminitz. I am afraid the Shaminitzers will buy up all the sheep before we know it. We can't let them do that to us." And still talking, they go into the other room.

About half of the dealers were already in the yard, clustered around the scales where the grain was being weighed. In the house there remained only a few of the last arrivals who had brought their wagons of grain during the night. There were also two traders from the city—one fine Jew in a goyish hat, wearing a collar and a short coat and carrying a stick in his hand. This was Kazak, the trader for the big landlord, the Paaritz. He had been sent from the big landlord's sugar refinery to Reb Yechezkiel. With every second word, he brought in the landlord and his sugar refinery. The other was Reb Zekiel Epstein, a Chassid, who had himself once been a grain dealer, buying produce directly from the farms. Now he was above all that. He had become a broker in his own name. He wore a long imitation-silk coat always torn and spotted; however, it had not yet lost the silken shimmer of its earlier days.

Reb Yechezkiel greeted all the good Jews with a hearty "*sholem aleichem*" and herded them over to the washbasin before they could utter a word, so they could wash before eating. Then a tall heavy woman in a broad apron came into the room. Her heavy rattling bunch of keys heralded her arrival; her diamond earrings flashed. She placed a clean white tablecloth upon the chalked-up table, and in a solid housewifely voice, she commanded the men, "Reb Toby, wash your hands. Reb Nota, go wash." Then she set the table.

מנחם נח אהרן: געטענען מנחם יוסף און מנחם ל  
 .געטענען און געטענען

The guests permitted themselves to be hustled to the washroom. Epstein, the broker, was the last. Malka set bread on the table, and everyone sat down. From the kitchen came the odor of frying onions and the steaming aroma of red borsch, which brought memories of Passover and awakened everyone's appetite. Epstein sat at the table in full equality with the other guests; he traded witticisms from the Torah as he ate. The other broker, Kazak, sat in a corner on the edge of the bench and twirled his whiskers. He sat in such a way that if one wished one could believe that he was sitting at the table, and if one wished one could believe that he was not sitting at the table. He looked down upon Epstein from his height. But the serving girl, it seemed, made a little error and counted him as a guest at the table, for she put a plate before him. He too, it seemed, made an error and turned toward the table, partaking of the food in such a way that if one wished one could consider that he was eating, and if one wished one might consider that he was merely tasting.

In the yard, there was altogether a new life. Just before Purim, winter still lies on the earth, but spring already smiles down from heaven and approaches from all four corners of the world. The long-frozen snow, which formed a second surface over the earth during the winter, now melts and dissolves. The sun's bright daughters, the warm rays, flicker in the mud. Pigeons fly back and forth over the yard. They descend and light on the ground, snatch up a kernel of oats, proudly spread their white wings, and are off. Grains of oats are scattered over the yard. Hens wander about, pick up the grains, and get underfoot. Chained in the stable to his kennel lies Borak, a large shepherd dog. He sticks out his thick head and waits his chance. As if in fulfillment of the prophecies, a white goat with twisted horns wanders around the yard with a little sheep. They have formed a partnership and sport together in the bundles of hay lying on a wagon in the middle of the

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## TALES OF MY PEOPLE

yard. On the other side of the yard frozen boards and planks lie half buried in the snow. Children swarm along the boards, heading for the granary. The doors of the granary are open; in front of them stands a huge scale. One man piles sacks on the scales, and the record keeper, a young man in a fur-collared coat, holds a notebook in his hand and writes down the weight. Through the open gates one team after another drives into the yard. The drivers unload their sacks, weigh them off, and carry them into the granary. Nutta, the young stableman, a tall broad-boned fellow from Reb Yechezkiel's establishment, with a dark sunburned face and large bright eyes that look from the distance like two storm lanterns, leads a pair of tall horses out of their stalls. One of the horses has a round black mark on his forehead that shines like a dark eye out of his chocolate-colored coat. The manes of both horses are combed and braided. This pair is the favorite treasure of Reb Yechezkiel. They understand him and they know when his journey is urgent. The whip is carried only for show. There has never yet been a time when these horses have left him stranded on the road over Sabbath. They seemed to sense the coming of evening on Fridays so as to race home before Sabbath fell. He could rely on them. And when they showed their mettle, he stroked them with his own hands.

It was said that Reb Yechezkiel's horses were the souls of one-time debtors whose signatures still lay in his keeping and who could not rest in their graves until they had worked out their debts to him.

Nutta was dressed in his short winter jacket with high leather boots. On his head he wore a round military fur hat, only the insignia was missing. And with a friendly air he led his companions in labor to the wagon, placed the salters around their necks, and hooked them up in their harness. Then he tied the blue reins to the whip and took his place on the driver's seat. Antek picked up the weight and the rope from the ground and shoved them under the seat.

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While going into the stables, Nutta threw a glance into the window of the kitchen. It was successful, for he was almost immediately followed by Yente, the serving girl. The glow of her healthy red blood in her thick fleshy arms was visible through her torn smock. Black locks framed her sooty young face, and her black eyes under the sharp black brows spoke fire and flame. She slipped into the stable after Nutta, and without saying a word, she brought a half a roast chicken from under her smock and handed it to him. Nutta accepted it as a matter of course. She waited. He knew what she was waiting for. And contrariwise, since she wanted, he didn't. He picked up a bit of straw and seemed to be on his way out. And now he wanted. He seized her and imprisoned her in both his arms, still holding the whip in his hand. He paid her with a fat kiss on the cheek.

"You think I believe you'll marry me? You should be so!" she said, pulling away.

"Quick, the mistress is coming. Run!" Nutta gave her a little push. She became frightened and started away, but in a moment she realized he was teasing her. The girl paused at the stable door. "I hope you break your arms and legs on the way!" she flung at him with a laugh as she ran off.

"You wait!" he called after her. The weighman, seeing her running out of the stables, winked to Antek, the yardmaster. "Goddam!" Antek called after her. She stuck out her tongue to him and disappeared in the cooking shed.

The snap of Nutta's whip and the growl of whirling wheels announced to the world that the wagon was waiting in front of the gate. Immediately a procession of people, carrying all sorts of packages, moved from the house to the wagon. For Reb Yechezkiel never started on the way without a few items to sustain him on his journey.

Then Reb Yechezkiel appeared, carrying his ample sheepskin. The wide-sleeved winter coat was spread over the seat since it was

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a nice day and the frost was melting and the sun was laughing in heaven. After him came his wife, Malka, with a blessing on her lips, and a flock of children, small and large. Some of the children had their study books in their hands as they had already been in the schoolroom—and there were toddlers clutching buttered bagels, whom a servant was still urging toward the schoolroom. But the children—most of them in their fur jackets—clustered around the wagon.

"Grandpa!" they called. "Have a good trip. Go in the best of health."

"Good health to you, children. Study well!" their grandfather called, giving his hand to one after another. Then he pulled a huge purse out of his trouser pocket and handed out spending money to the children.

From a window between two open shutters, a young woman's face peered out. One could see part of a tender blooming cheek and a black silken braid tied with a blue ribbon, the whole making a delicate picture in the distance, as she called out, shaking her head to her father, "Good health, Papa!"

Reb Yechezkiel mounted the wagon. Sitting there, he gave last-minute instructions to his man, Reb Toby. He said his farewells and called out to Malka, "The best of health, the best of health!" And then called to his sweet-faced daughter, "The best of health, Leabeh!" and to his grandchildren he called out from the wagon, "Don't forget, study well!"

Yente was standing to one side. She held her hand over her heart and peered out after Nutta as he sat proud and powerful on the driver's seat. There he was in his short coat, with his rascally cap, winking down at her. He held the reins in his hands, ready to go forth into the world with the same impatience as his team of horses, who were rattling their hoofs on the stones. Yente smiled. The snap of Nutta's whip was a greeting for her. "In the best of health, Yente." The team turned out of the little lane into

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the early morning quiet of the village and went forth into the world, and Nutta with his military cap disappeared in the distance.

In Reb Yechezkiel's house all is now peaceful. Business has been finished. The guests who came during the night have sold their wares, hitched up their horses, and left their places to other merchants who will arrive in the coming night. Only now can one see the old-fashioned leather cover of the big sofa, with all of its hills and vales. The long table in the middle of the room is scribbled over with chalk reckonings. The black stove is bescribbled, the high cupboard is bescribbled, and every chair and bench is covered with calculations. And the calculations on tables and benches, on the cupboard and on the walls, look like weapons left by soldiers who have fled from the field of battle. The calculations confront each other, contradict each other, glare across at each other.

Soon there enter two short, pot-bellied, fat young men, Chezkel and Berel. One may see by the family characteristic, the creases beside their nostrils, that they are brothers. They are, indeed, the nephews of Reb Yechezkiel.

Not long ago they were only two young students given their keep by the family, according to custom. And even today they are really still only guests of the family, but they are already in the habit of busying themselves in the big room. Since they are part of the family, they come in after breakfast to stretch out on the big couch. They stretch out on the couch together, as is appropriate for two brothers. First they take off their coats and fold them and place them for pillows under their heads. They do all this in silence as though it would be a pity to waste a word. They shove each other a little, kick each other a little, as they stretch out in opposite directions. Each would have liked the headpiece for himself. But just as they have conducted their struggle in silence, so they now silently make peace. One takes the headpiece, and the other

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arranges himself against his feet. Chezkel, the older brother, scratches his little yellow beard and falls into thought over an account that stares at him from across the wall. "Seven times thirty-eight. How much does that make us, huh, Berel?" Berel answers only with a snore. So Chezkel gives up the question, turns to the wall, and, as though in imitation of Berel, he too begins to snore.

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personage =

## 2, The River

All by itself there stands a little house in the gap between two high hills that rise into the world, tall and far, near the edge of the river Vistula. It is winter. God's world is entirely drowned in snow. Our cottage, like an old family man in his white sacramental undervest, stands at the riverbank, peering down at his frozen old neighbor, the river, and everything is still, awaiting the resurrection of the river. In the meantime the river lies there frozen and dead, wrapped in a white winding sheet. Ravens fly along the length and breadth of the river, alighting and picking little holes in its back. Occasionally a man passes over the river, leaving tracks in the deep white snow.

On both sides of the house the hills look like the broken wings of a fallen eagle, folded one over the other. Scrubby little snow-covered trees creep up along the shoulders of the hills, and one little tree, covered from head to foot with snow, has managed to scramble up to the top of the hill. It stands all by itself on the summit and looks out far and wide over the white world. At the edge of the river, along the foot of the hill, stands a row of trees, one beside the other, snow-covered, looking like a row of white-clad attendants standing watch over a patient who is in danger of death—the river.

In the house, the same family has lived year after year. They live by themselves and with their neighbor, the river. Today the house is called Chaim the Ferryman's. About thirty years ago, it was called Mosheh the Ferryman's, and perhaps, in about twenty years from now, it will be called Daavid the Ferryman's. But this is no sign of change. Only the name may change with the years.



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But the house, the river, and the name Ferryman's remain forever. The eldest ferryman, named Chaim, is a Jew of some fifty years. He is tall and thin, with a drawn-out face and a drawn-out beard and a high, creased, drawn-out forehead. He is a child of the water, brought up along the water's edge, and—who can tell—his grave will probably be in the water. And if not actually in the water, in any case alongside the water. And if a great storm comes, the roaring river will tear him out of his grave and carry him off to Danzig, as it did with his father and his grandfather. And in the end, what difference does it make whether one is mingled with the earth or dissolved in the sea? The earth is dead. She is forever silent and forever motionless. But the water at least is in continual movement, rushing, hurrying into the world, bubbling with life. For a long time he has been kin with the sea. Every year the river demands a human sacrifice, and it is already a long time since his little son Mosheleh became one with the river. And if the ferryman drowns by the shore sometime of a Sabbath afternoon, and a wave comes along with a roar, he might well imagine that the waves are Mosheleh and his playmates, who have come to wake him.

In the summer, he earns his living from the river. All week long he is in his little boat with the sail that cuts the sky in two. On the Sabbath, the river behaves like a good Jew. The river observes the Sabbath and the holy days. She is quiet. One wave gently kisses the other, and the ferryman and his wife sit by their door. He recites the Sabbath prayer, and his wife reads from the women's portion, and they speak of God's wonders to the waves. And each wave picks up a word and says amen.

In winter the river is frozen under her blanket of snow. The little house is covered with snow, poured over it from head to feet. From the flower-frosted windowpane, the eye of the ferryman peers out at his neighbor the river, all covered over and frozen. The ferryman studies the river, groaning. Both are frozen in, the river under the ice and the ferryman in his cottage. And when the water

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shows again, coming to life from under the winter cover, then the ferryman also crawls out from his wintry grave, taking joy in the resurrection of his neighbor. And he smears his boat with tar.

At night all the surroundings are quiet. The moon gazes lovingly down upon the earth, like a father upon his household. The fields are covered with snow, and the hills are like corpses, peaceful in their shrouds. Then a strand of light shines out from the frosted window of the ferryman's house, blinking to the world. Somewhere, far away, a wayfarer wanders. He catches sight of the strand of light, and it draws him directly to the window of the little house wherein he may pass the night.

It is still winter. And all around everything is still covered with snow. But God already looks down from above with clear eyes. The sun falls upon the gray wintry clouds, and her rays pierce the earth's wintry grave. On the naked hills the snow melts clear and clean. Their pure whiteness has remained unsullied by a human foot, and now entire walls of melting snow slide from the hill and fall into the half-frozen river. The ice over the water is clean and transparent; the water may be seen as through a clean window. Occasionally, a fish leaps up; breaking through the window with his tail, he glances at God's free world and realizes with joy that his mother, the river, will soon uncover the window from herself; the fish dives back deep into the water to tell the good news to his comrades. Clear, clean, and white, the world of snow is marred by only one dark spot, the cabin that stands isolated in the vale.

Chaim's wife goes out to the well behind the house with a pail, and all at once she notices Reb Yechezkiel's wagon in the distance. She recognizes the horses immediately and taps on the window to her husband. "Chaim, the owner of the log rafts is coming."

"There is a wise one! In another few hours there wouldn't be a stick left of his timber!" Chaim answers, coming out to the threshold of the cabin.

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The black line of the road lay over the white fields, and on the road two horses galloped, coming ever closer. Soon Nutta arrived before the cabin, drawing up with a flourish of his whip. The horses were steaming.

Reb Yechezkiel, wearing his heavy sheepskin, jumped from the wagon, asking, "Well, how are my logs back there?"

"We did what we could. We roped them up again. We nailed the rafts together with boards. And then we tied them to the shore with heavy ropes. But who knows; when you are dealing with her—" Chaim waved his hand, as though he would indicate the power of his neighbor, the river Vistula.

Reb Chaim approached Reb Yechezkiel, gave him his hand in welcome, and led him into the cabin. Reb Yechezkiel followed, his head hanging disconsolately.

In the quiet little room there were two high beds covered half-way to the ceiling with comforters that were stuffed with the feathers of all the geese and ducks that Chaim's wife had roasted on the eve of every Sabbath since her marriage day. These comforters were to be part of the dowry for her niece's wedding. From the little cupboard that stood in the corner of the house, red apples peered out, spreading their fresh scent through the little farmhouse.

Reb Yechezkiel seated himself at the table. In sheer agony of soul he neglected to remove his sheepskin and just sat gazing out of the window. All around was quiet. Only from far away one heard a sound of flowing water. This was a bad sign. And out of habit, a gusty "God in Heaven!" burst out from Reb Yechezkiel's chest.

Nutta came into the house, looking for something by the door. Chaim's wife began to argue with him about chopping wood. Soon a fire was snapping in the stove and a pot of soup was cooking for the merchant. Seeing that the merchant sat lost in thought by the table, Chaim's wife began to cheer him up. "Don't worry, sir,

about the rafts. With God's help, you will rescue them from the water."

Reb Yechezkiel looked around and beheld Chaim's wife. That he should have to receive courage from her—from a woman—made him ashamed of himself. He arose and went out into the yard. "Reb Chaim, take me to the woods," he said as he came upon Chaim carrying two pails of water. "Nutta, come along."

Chaim carried the pails to the door. All three went down to the woods behind the house.

If one had not known that there were logs lying there, one would never have noticed them. The rafts were frozen in the ice and covered over with snow. Only the longest logs showed at all. The rafts were attached by long heavy ropes to the thick trees that stood along the riverbank.

"A terrible, terrible business," Reb Yechezkiel murmured to himself as he held up his walking stick, glancing at its length in order to guess the number of yards that remained between his logs and the edge of the river. "We must get some men from Yamoshok. All the peasants we can get—and as soon as the ice breaks, we must drag the logs out of the water, no matter how much it costs. What's lost is lost."

"It's the only thing to do. As soon as the ice begins to break, it will drag the logs along like a bunch of feathers," Reb Chaim agreed, glancing with a sort of secret pride toward his river.

"It's not far from the edge. Five or six yards, maybe eight."

"We had better hurry; when the ice comes down from above, it's a matter of minutes," Reb Chaim said, already on his way.

Reb Yechezkiel handed him a five-ruble note for brandy to be bought in the village and himself went back into Reb Chaim's house.

The cottage was already filled with an aroma of beans and potatoes, for Chaim's wife was well aware that passing merchants licked their fingers over her beans. The woman was fully occupied in the kitchen. Nutta sat there in a corner, with his boots off,

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drying his leggings and palavering with Chaim's wife about a bride. Chaim's wife had the ideal match for him—her niece, the daughter of Arya of Yanosham, a very pretty, healthy girl, with a dowry of a few hundred gulden—and if it should so happen that his master remained over Sabbath, she would bring her little niece here for him to see. Nutta sat listening solemnly to her talk, nodding his head in agreement. What he really hoped to get out of the old woman was a good dinner. And he knew how to go about his affair. The old woman began to treat him like one of the family.

When Reb Yechezkiel came in, the discussion was cut off. Reb Yechezkiel found the table already covered—with an odd sort of cloth that might have been a blanket taken off the bed. And there was an old pewter spoon, a knife blade without a handle, and a fork. On the table were homebaked bread and a salt shaker. Reb Yechezkiel washed himself, recited the blessing, and Chaim's wife served him with a plate whose aroma filled the entire room.

Reb Yechezkiel scarcely tasted the food; he pushed away the plate. What was left was for Nutta. Reb Yechezkiel hastily recited the blessing after food and went out to the woods. He stood by the riverbank, waiting, casting his eye over the length and breadth of the white world. The water flowed down from the hills, pouring over the ice. Then a distant cracking was heard. A sheet of ice, large as half a lake, rushed toward them and tore onward. Water gushed up from between two chunks of ice, then broke with a roar out of a crack in the ice. Instantly, there was a huge hole. The surface was flooded. A wave of water came rushing, pouring over the ice. And immediately afterward, a crack was heard, like an explosion! The ice split, and a huge block rose on end, to be smashed to bits in the same instant. With even greater force, the water burst out of its prison of ice, sweeping along jagged, broken portions of its winter jail, toying with the ice, whirling great chunks, tossing them from one wave to another. Now the river

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was free. The waves raced on as though chasing one another. Already, there was a break in the ice along the river's edge where the logs lay. Reb Yechezkiel heard the crack. A sheet of ice had broken but still did not move. The mass was too large and too heavy to be jarred loose all at once. The water battled the ice, sending wave after wave against the shore. The mass remained unmoved. Bits of ice broke from it, to be ground up and swallowed. For another moment the block remained in place, but a rumbling began underneath the ice, and slowly the block began to disintegrate.

Now the rafts became clearly visible. The logs had been tied together, but under the terrible upheaval they were torn apart.

Reb Yechezkiel stared at his property. He was in danger of losing all the lumber. The blocks of ice bumped and tore at the rafts. The ropes tugged and rubbed against the trees, pulling to get free. The last moment seemed to have arrived.

Reb Yechezkiel stepped closer to the water. He stretched out his hand as though to hold it back, and he looked desperately around, hoping to see the peasants arriving. No one was in sight. The water rushed on. All around, the ice groaned, cracked, burst. How could he save his fortune? O Lord in Heaven! If there were only a way to save his fortune!

Just then, Reb Chaim came running with a whole army of peasants. Reb Yechezkiel saw them in the distance and waved to them to hurry. The men approached, some carrying axes, iron bars, chains, and rope. Reb Yechezkiel's hope revived. He ran forward, paying no attention to the ice. He was ankle-deep in water. Reb Yechezkiel scarcely noticed. With God's help and the peasants behind him, he had no thought for danger. All that mattered was to save the lumber.

They leaped on the logs with their axes. They cut through the ropes. They separated one log from another. They chopped away the ties, they hauled on the ropes. There was no time to worry

the  
river  
breaks up

about small matters. They jumped from one log to another, slashing, dragging. What logs they could save were hauled up from the river's edge to higher ground. The loose logs were securely tied and fastened to trees near the edge of the river.

And still the water raged and churned, battling the ice until the eye could scarcely tell whether the surface was composed more of ice or of water. The current hurled one block against another; they smashed head on and were instantly shattered to pieces. Suddenly a block of ice rose up, blocking the path of the others that swarmed around it, climbing one on top of another until a mountain of ice formed in the middle of the river. At first, the river was respectful of this mountain, flowing carefully around it. But soon the waves linked arms, made a united assault against the mountain of ice, and smashed it, destroying it completely. Then the river flowed on victoriously into the world.

The raging torrent smashed everything before it, and the peasants flew, leaping from one block of ice to another. Meanwhile night was coming on. The heavens above became frozen over in a mass of clouds. But the river kept on its own way, and the peasants kept on with their struggle. They dipped chunks of wood in pitch and set torches ablaze to light up the night. Under the leadership of old, experienced hands they labored, dragging one log after another to the banks. And the water stormed and roared, trying to drag the logs to itself.

After some hours when more than half of the lumber was already safe on the shore, Reb Yechezkiel sent his wagon to town for brandy, while he himself went into Reb Chaim's cabin. By the table sat an old Jew in a long fur coat, with a long black beard. He was half reclining on a bench and conversing with a boy of about fifteen. In the clever face of the boy, his father's worldliness could be seen more clearly than in the face of the old man himself. The boy wore a velvet skullcap over his little ear curls, and a silk kerchief. He was a little man of the world, self-possessed, neat, well

mannered. Reb Yechezkiel was immediately taken by the boy, who came forward and stretched out his hand. Reb Yechezkiel greeted the boy and his father. "*Sholem aleichem*. Peace unto you," and they responded, "*Aleichem sholem*. And unto you, peace."

Then both parties asked at the same time, "From here?"

"I am from Konskavola, the village on the other side of the river," responded the good Jew with the black beard.

"I am from Kasner. My logs are in the river," Reb Yechezkiel said in turn.

"Who? Are you then Reb Yechezkiel Gumbiner of Kasner?"

"Yes. And you, how might you call yourself, in Konskavola?"

"Indeed! Reb Yechezkiel Gumbiner!" the other repeated happily as he rose from the bench, "I am Mordecai Konskar."

"Reb Mordecai Konskar of Konskavola!" Reb Yechezkiel repeated in awe. "Well!" He approached, stretched forth his hand. "Well, well!"

"The logs are still frozen in the water?"

"Yes, the logs were frozen during the winter. Nothing could be done. They were covered with snow. Now, praise be God, as much as we can—"

"A pretty business. May God watch over us and protect us. Father in Heaven!"

"Half are already taken out, with God's help. The peasants are working well."

For a moment they both remained quiet, leaning against the table. They looked thoughtful. The room was quiet. From outside one could hear the roar of the water, pouring down upon the ice with relentless anger. From a distance, there came a long-drawn-out sound, as from an empty barrel. The workers were sending some sort of signal to each other; the cry mingled with the roar of the water tearing itself away from all that was real in the world.

Reb Yechezkiel quietly took his place in a corner and began the evening prayers. Soon Reb Mordecai and his young son did like-

wise. All three began to walk up and down in the room. From time to time Reb Yechezkiel groaned out, "Lord in Heaven," and after a moment, they placed themselves in front of the wall, swaying and praying in silence. All became quiet in the room. Only Nutta's snoring rose from an obscure corner, echoing up and down the room.

Chaim's wife sat by the stove putting bits of wood into the fire. The kindling crackled in the stove. The woman permitted herself a respectful glance at the merchants. To behold such important men praying in her little cabin! Truly God must be present in her house! And she, an accursed fool, all she knew how to do was to put bits of wood into the fire. She pushed a few stray wisps of hair back under the marriage wig.

Suddenly, all was quiet as the men stood, each reciting to himself the silent prayer of the eighteen passages. Everything around them was as silent as the silent prayer of the eighteen. Into the midst of this, there came a terrible sinking sound from outdoors, as though an ocean were sinking within an ocean. And then there was silence again.

"Hold on, hold on!" someone shouted. The voice broke off abruptly, like a window smashed in by a fist. Chaim's wife was already outside. Nutta leaped up from his sleep. He looked around for an instant, making sure that the house was not on fire. Then he remembered something and ran out.

The three remained standing and praying. The boy, however, could not restrain himself; he broke off before reaching the eighteenth passage. He started to go out of the house, but as he saw that the two old men stood without budging from the spot, he became ashamed of what he had done. He wanted to begin the prayer all over again, but now he was abashed before God and did not know what to do.

The door opened, and Chaim burst in, breathless. "Master, the third raft has floated away."

The old Jews remained at their prayer. The boy and Reb Chaim exchanged glances without speaking. The old men completed their eighteenth passage.

Only then, Reb Yechezkiel asked, "What is it?"

"*Shagetz!* Infidel!" A resounding slap was heard as Reb Mordecai paid off his son. "To break out in the midst of the eighteen!"

"It was carried away, floating."

"Carried away?"

"We had just begun to get into the third float when a huge block of ice came along like a beast and upf! It was on the way to Danzig."

"Did you save much out of it?"

"Forty or fifty small ones."

"Praised be God for that." He thought of something suddenly and walked up and down the room, repeating a prayer of thanks. As he finished, his hand was already searching in his vest pocket for his notebook. In the same moment, he put on his coat and went out.

The night was so dark that it was hard to believe that there was a heaven above and a God in heaven. The water roared. Nothing could be seen. One could hear only the force of wrath, as though some utterly unknown violence had come to swallow the world.

Reb Yechezkiel was frightened. He ordered the work to be halted. Let no more rafts be taken apart. No, let everything depend on God's mercy for the rest of the night. The rafts would remain where they were, roped together at the river's edge. He was certain that God would not forsake him.

And with a tranquil heart, with faith in the mercy of God, he went back to Chaim's place to make an offering with his blessing and to eat his supper.

The merchants were sitting at their meal, each completely occupied with his calculations. From outside one could hear the crying

act of  
fornication =  
high point

of the wind and the roar of the water. Reb Yechezkiel was unconcerned. "How is the grain in your village?" he asked Reb Mordecai in order to distract his thoughts.

"Our grain? Not a bit to be seen. Who has grain?" And after a moment of silence, "I've got a little for myself."

"How much does it cost?"

"Thirty-two guilder, two hundred and forty Polish."

"Two hundred and forty! Expensive. Around us it's much cheaper." And as though they had already come to an agreement, Reb Mordecai took out a little bag and opened it. Reb Yechezkiel, still talking, reached his hand into the bag, took out a few kernels, snapped one into his mouth, split it open, took it out between his two fingers and rolled it, then licked it.

"The quality isn't bad. The flour?" He wrinkled his nose. "Far from water?"

"A mile. A few hundred sacks alongside the water."

"Too much, take off five per cent."

Reb Mordecai wrinkled his forehead to indicate that this was impossible.

Reb Yechezkiel cut himself a slice of bread, not that he was hungry but simply to be doing something.

From where he sat by the stove, Nutta coughed, as though to suggest that they had altogether forgotten him and that he wished to remind them of his existence.

Chaim's wife served them with water for washing after the meal.

For a moment they were quiet. Then they began to nod one to the other.

"Well, Reb Yechezkiel? You will say the blessing?"

"No, Reb Mordecai, the honor should be yours."

Finally one took it upon himself, saying, "Enough. It's time for the blessing." They repeated the thanksgiving after food.

Reb Yechezkiel was the first to rise from the table. With a

chuckle he asked of the boy, "Well, young man, can you recite anything?"

"Why not?" the boy answered.

His father smiled proudly. "He's just coming from the Yeshiva."

"How far are you in the Talmud?" The boy named it. "Oh, that, that's a fine passage. Are there any commentaries?" And without waiting for the boy to answer, he whispered to the father, "The boy pleases me."

"He's got a fine head," Reb Mordecai answered, winking solemnly.

"Well, I would like to buy the corn. Not that I really need it, but simply since I am already here. You think I can make anything out of lumber? Eh, what? If there is a chance to buy something, a man has to buy it."

"Well, naturally."

"The five per cent—let it go as commission."

"But if I can't . . ." Reb Yechezkiel took a large wallet out of his rear pocket, opened it, took out a few notes, and offered them to Reb Mordecai.

"What can a man do when he can't?" Reb Mordecai groaned as he accepted the money.

And the deal was made.

Who knows whose grain from whose fields had changed hands! And God was kind to Reb Yechezkiel. As though on order from Heaven, the ice avoided the rafts. Like matches, like slivers of wood, the logs floated in the turbulent water, tossing and trembling, but without moving from their anchorage.

Reb Yechezkiel stood by the shore and beheld the wonder that God had performed for him and saw that God had not ignored his prayer. For two days the peasants labored, dragging the logs to the shore. And Reb Yechezkiel, with his own eyes, beheld the effect of the Lord's intervention.

On Thursday Reb Yechezkiel said farewell to Reb Mordecai.

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The unfortunate Reb Mordecai had to remain over Sabbath at Chaim's place since it was impossible to cross the river.

When Nutta was back on the driver's seat, waiting for his master, Chaim's wife came out on the steps. She gazed at Nutta and shook her large head. One idea was clear in her mind—what a fellow was this Nutta! He had had a feast for himself in her house. She had stuffed him with the best of everything, hoping that he might one day become a kinsman—through her niece. And there he sat on his wagon, with the horses waiting to carry him off. What a fellow! He had really taken her in, yet she could have no real complaint against him! For after all, what was he doing? He was driving off with his master. What else should he do? Stay in her place, forever? But she had reason to shake her head. And she stood on the steps, studying Nutta and shaking her head.

"What a fellow he is! What a fellow like that can do!"

Nutta turned his head away and stared out into the world, pretending not to see her; he whistled to his horses.

"Look how he sits, proud and fine on his wagon!" she spoke more through her head shaking than with her lips.

"What? Who?" Nutta asked, looking at her innocently.

"What? Who? And didn't you stuff yourself, and didn't you drink your fill, eh?" The old woman kept on shaking her head.

"Not a bad fellow, Nutta, a nice young fellow, one might say. Stuffed himself and made a fool of the old lady! I should live so! Does he want to get married! Is he looking for a suitable match?" said Reb Chaim, coming along and slapping Nutta on the back.

"Well, what else, Reb Chaim?" Nutta wrinkled his eyes and shrugged his shoulders. "If someone gives you something, you take it!"

"And didn't you promise to become a bridegroom while you were gobbling and swilling!" Chaim demanded.

"You should live so, you old fool!" Chaim's wife snapped at him as she turned and ran into the house.

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Soon Reb Yechezkiel came out in his sheepskin and climbed up on the wagon. "The best of health to you!" Nutta cried into the window as the horses began to move.

"A healthy journey to you, and may you break your hands and feet!" cried the old lady. She sent her curses after him, feeling in her heart that he had somehow done her wrong.

Nutta answered her with a crack of the whip.

Intro. there of rivling thru 2 sisters - in-law

2/1/58

### 3. Keeping Accounts

There were four partners in Reb Yechezkiel's lumber business, but actually only three "heads" could be counted. Reb Yechezkiel, of course, was one of the heads. The second partner was Reb Chaim Rosenkranz, whose daughter was married to Reb Yechezkiel's son Motaleh. Motaleh, of course, was a third partner. And the fourth was Ozarel, the son of Reb Chaim Rosenkranz, who was married to the daughter of Reb Yechezkiel. The two older men counted as heads of the business, and the two younger men taken together were counted as the third head in the business.

Accounts were kept by the younger generation, Motaleh and Ozarel. They did their bookkeeping in the modern manner with paper and ink. They kept their accounts separately, but every few minutes one ran to the other for a consultation. One's accounts never balanced with the other's, and the only way to straighten them out was for the elders to take a piece of chalk and do the accounts over in the old style, by straight and crooked marks, until the business was finished.

But this was only the ordinary weekly reckoning that took place every Saturday evening. When the semiannual accounts had to be made at the end of each winter and summer, they sent for Reb Wolf the scribe, the well-known wonder-worker, and if there really was a difficult computation to be made there was nothing for it but to send for the lawyer, who was "a specialist" and wrote contracts for the big landowners.

To tell the truth, the elders could never understand what use

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there was in all this bookkeeping. No profit was ever made out of it, nor did they ever have to pay out money as a result of it. What use was it to know the sum total? Whether you knew or did not know the total, your blessings were neither greater nor smaller. And actually they were perfectly able to keep all the accounts in their heads; they knew in what transactions they had lost and in which they had earned money. They had lived their lives until now and done quite well without knowing anything about bookkeeping, but now came the younger generation with its innovations, and one had to keep written accounts! So they kept their accounts although they knew beforehand what the result of every accounting session would be—a dispute. "And in the end," the elders complained, "what difference can it make? Is not Motaleh my son, the same as Ozarel? If there is a circumcision or a confirmation in one family or the other, don't we take equal pleasure out of it?"

The younger generation insisted that books had to be kept because this was a "necessity" in modern business. Well, so they went on adding and subtracting, and if disputes arose, with God's help, the arguments led to nothing serious.

In the younger generation there were nothing but disputes; the sons argued with each other, and the daughters quarreled with their mothers-in-law. There was a standing quarrel between Iteh, Motaleh's wife, and Golde, Ozarel's wife.

Golde, Ozarel's wife and Reb Yechezkiel's daughter, contended that much of her father's fortune had been sunk into the purchase of a house for his partner, Reb Chaim Rosenkranz and family. And contrariwise Iteh insisted that a great part of her own father's fortune had been utilized for the purchase of Reb Yechezkiel's properties. Again, the elders pointed out that it all would amount to the same thing in the end. "What does it matter," they said, "whether you inherit from your father's side or your mother's side since, after we are all dead, everyone will get an equal share?"



But how could one expect the younger generation to understand anything so simple?

Reb Yechezkiel's daughter Golde was a tall young woman who wore an elaborate marriage wig with three curls falling over her shining forehead. She had a snake's tongue and the whole town trembled before it. She was often to be seen in the streets with her little boys running before and behind her, tugging at her broad skirt, and crying, "Mama, a copper, a copper!"

She was the deadly enemy of her sister-in-law Iteh, and she complained constantly to her brother Motaleh, Iteh's husband, "Oh, Motaleh, you certainly fell into it, what a pity! How terrible you look—and when I remember you before you were married!" Her brother had only to step into her house for a word with Ozarel, and fail to find him at home, to hear this wail from Golde.

Motaleh was quite used to his sister's pity, though he had no idea why he was to be pitied. So he would only murmur, "All right, all right; be still, please," and leave the house. Sometimes, however, he was pained when she criticized his wife for, after all, Iteh was his wife; so he would turn on his sister. "What business is it of yours? She's married to me not you!"

"His wife! Just look how he defends her with his last breath! A fine daughter-in-law for Reb Yechezkiel Gumbiner! You know what she is? She is the daughter of Chaim, your father's stableman."

"Then my father's stableman's son is your husband. How do you like that?" her brother teased her.

"My husband—Chaim the stableman's son!" Her face grew red with anger. "So that is what Iteh has made of you! She'll bring you to an early grave! You'll run alive into your tomb just to get away from her." And she would begin to weep.

The house was filled with children, and as they saw their mother crying, they all began to bawl. After that Golde went to bed for the rest of the day, and when her husband came home, she

fell upon him. "I suppose you stand by your wife, the way Motaleh does by his! If you heard your wife insulted, you wouldn't even say a word against it. You men!"

Afterward, when Ozarel and Motaleh were in the granary looking at the wheat and talking over affairs, Ozarel casually dropped a word about their wives into the conversation. "What was the trouble between you and Golde today?"

"Nothing, it was just nonsense."

"She went to bed for the whole day."

"How much did you put down for the Krosnitz?" the other asked, to change the subject. And more than once this sort of thing occurred the other way around, between Iteh and Ozarel.

It was the custom for each mother-in-law to raise a few turkeys for Passover, as a gift for her daughter-in-law. This had been a family tradition for years. One could see the young turkey cocks strutting around in Reb Yechezkiel's yard. They were destined for Iteh. And in Reb Chaim Rosenkranz's yard a few birds were being grown for Golde.

One day Golde came along, took the young turkeys out of her mother's yard, and carried them home. "They belong to me just as much as to her; they're my mother's turkeys," Golde defended herself.

Then Iteh ran off to her own mother, wailing, "Golde has carried away my turkeys!" Whereupon Iteh's mother seized the turkeys destined for Golde and gave them to Iteh. Soon enough the daughter-in-law came running demanding her customary gift, and naturally there was a healthy quarrel.

There was only one way out of it. The mothers-in-law quietly went off and bought another flock of turkeys, which they shared out between their daughters-in-law, and so the young women had twice their usual share.

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The old folk were tired of the constant quarreling between the youngsters, for the endless quarrel embittered their households and their souls.

On the surface the daughters-in-law kept a sort of truce during the length of the year; they were neither angry with each other nor on good terms. If they passed in the street, they nodded distantly with their noses in the air. If, however, they met in the mother's house (it made no difference which mother) during fruit-canning days, they offered each other a polite "good morning" without actually looking at each other. The preserves were then shared out without exchanging a word. One would push the larger share toward the other, saying, "Let her take whatever she likes," and stare off at the wall.

"What difference does it make? Your children will eat the preserves in her house, and her children will eat them in your house—and the best of health to them all!" the mother or mother-in-law (as the case might be) would remark, while handing each her portion.

But when the time for the semiannual accounting came 'round, the two women, for no visible reason, would stop greeting each other in the street, and if they met in a parental house, they would sit facing each other in silence.

It was the night of the Sabbath before the annual accounting. There was a new atmosphere about the house. It bore a holiday air as though the house were decked in silken garments. The lamplight poured down on the long broad table, and the lamp seemed to be burning with special respect and altogether unusual intensity in honor of this day. Piles of documents and notepaper were spread on the table. At its head sat Reb Yechezkiel in his patriarchal chair. He held his glasses in one hand and a bit of chalk in the other while he carried out a bit of side addition for himself.

At the other end of the table, opposite Reb Yechezkiel, sat Reb Chaim Rosenkranz, a tall man with a long yellow double-pointed

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beard and a long hairy nose. Large beads of sweat dropped from the creases in his shiny broad forehead and hung on the hairs at the end of his nose. Reb Rosenkranz spoke little, and when he uttered a word, it was as though he were doing someone a favor. He watched everything. If anyone spoke he stared at him—and that was enough.

Ozarel and Motaleh sat on either side of the table. They were carrying on their computations out loud.

Motaleh muttered to himself, "Eighty-two on hand in Schenitz."

Ozarel, who seemed deep in his own accounts, suddenly started up as though boiling water had been poured over him. He shut one eye and regarded Motaleh. "What? When? What do you mean, eighty-two?"

"In Schenitz, didn't we give it to Lazar Rubin, eh?"

"Ah, Lazar Rubin . . . One hundred and twenty in Gumbin." The other went on with his own calculations as though nothing had been said.

"Dirty dog!" Motaleh cursed. "Snooper! Thought he would catch me. . . ."

They began to throw insults across the table at each other. The elders called, "Quiet! Quiet!" pounding on the table.

Ozarel was the "chief accountant." He was a Jew who lived in two worlds at one and the same time. He was a Chassid and a "Dutchman," a Jew filled with pious Hebrew lore and a worldly fellow who spoke German. He was at once an educated fellow and a man of the street. He was at home everywhere, and therefore he was the pearl of the family. A short round little Jew with a little round yellow beard, he sported a stiff white collar and a black tie, and like his father, he counted his words. When he finally spoke, he would shut one eye while he suspiciously studied his adversary with the other. He was suspicious of anyone on first sight, and yet he was on good terms with everyone. For himself, he counted himself a Chassid. He frequented their

little house of prayer and liked to promenade in a long silken coat and a white collar. When he spoke he accented his *r*'s sharply, according to the fashion in Warsaw. He was a great friend of Mitkovsky, the only Litvak in the town, and when the Litvak held forth against the town's ordinary rabbi, he would nod his head and make a little gesture with his hands in such a way that if one liked one could believe he agreed with the Litvak, and if one wished one could believe he regretted the utterances of the Litvak heretic.

Today Ozarel was deeply engrossed in the accounts. He sat with Wolf the scribe over the main account book, which was known as "the correct account" or "the real book." Who, then, was this Wolf, and what sort of account book was this?

Wolf the scribe was a frail, skinny, tiny little nothing of a Jew but the master of master accountants. In this little nothing of a Jew a whole world of wisdom was concentrated, just as all the secrets of the ocean may be found in a drop of water. He was all dried up, with a face dominated by a broad furrowed forehead under which his eyes and his tiny nose were lost. The entire little man could be stuck in your pocket, and then if you needed a mathematician, you just opened your pocket and let him crawl out to walk. Who knew where he lived? He had neither wife nor children, and nobody knew whether he had ever had a family at all. The little man wandered around the town as though he were an afterthought, something that was found necessary when all the rest was already there. If anyone had a mathematical problem (not that he needed to have it solved but simply because it might be interesting to know the answer), he would come to Wolf with it. Wolf would wrinkle his brows until his forehead looked like a leaf out of an old book. The wrinkles in his brow were like faded numbers, and one might have imagined that the wrinkles put themselves together in such a way as to bring forth the answer to the problem.

And so Ozarel had brought in this same Wolf to do the annual accounting. Wolf the scribe never asked for anything easy; all his life he hoped only to find a problem difficult enough for him to prove his mettle.

Whatever the merchants expended and whatever they took in was noted down in a little book according to a system invented by Ozarel; on one page he would inscribe the expenditures and on the other he would inscribe the income.

For Ozarel himself this was well enough; he kept his accounts neatly, he claimed; but when it came to the old folks, the whole system fell into ruins. They were always losing their pencils, and when they had to write something down, they started to search in all their pockets while they cursed the "modern system" that Ozarel had introduced, and in the meantime they made temporary notes on the sideboard with a bit of chalk, or on the table or perhaps simply on a scrap of paper. When the annual accounting came, they had to hunt up the scrap of paper and examine the table and the benches on which they had scribbled their accounts, and then they would transfer these accounts into the big book.

The handwriting of the old people was not very clear, and the numbers scribbled down on scraps of paper and even in the notebooks often became rubbed out so that later there were innumerable arguments about the figures. One would declare that a certain number was an eight, the other that it was a five, but mostly they could make nothing at all out of the notations. They would ask the elders, who would say, "Go bother your own head." So then they would send to Berl the watchmaker for his magnifying glass. They would stare at the number through the magnifying glass, only to emerge with the same division of opinion. At this point Wolf the scribe would intervene. He would perform an algebraic multiplication on one side and an algebraic division on the other side and finally prove that according to mathematical logic the number in question was neither an eight nor a five but a three, and there was no way to stand against him.

The big book was like an instrument, a violin, for Wolf the scribe. Upon it he performed his melodies. The book was the apple of his eye, and he carried it with him wherever he went. Ozarel and Wolf the scribe sat together poring over the big book. There was a perfect stillness upon the household, which seemed to enshrine their task with an added importance. Two large silver candlesticks stood on the table among the scattered papers and notes, lending a solemn illumination to the occasion. The door creaked, the servant slipped in and out, bringing tea and carrying away empty glasses.

On a sofa in the corner sat Chezkel and Berel, of Reb Yechezkiel's family. They were motionless and utterly quiet, so as not to be seen and so as to not miss anything. And they were ready at a moment's bidding to fulfill the slightest task that might be demanded of them by one of the magicians at the table. More than once they started off toward the door, following their own idea of what was needed; they would bump into each other at the door and make a commotion. One of the men at the table would look up and the two lads would shamefacedly tiptoe out of the room; but a few seconds later they could be back again, sitting on the sofa. One of them would solemnly pinch the other's arm or leg, or give him a little bite. The other would reply by sticking a pin in his brother, and they would carry on their battle without uttering a word.

All at once, the sound of arrivals was heard from outdoors; the door opened wide and a group of leading townfolk appeared, still dressed in their Sabbath clothes; some smoking cigars, some with pipes in their mouths, and a thick stream of smoke issuing from their beards. The pipe-smoking did not accord very well with their Sabbath garments, but managed to give them a half-holiday air. The room became filled with smoke and through the thick haze the two candle flames threw a warm homey glow over the group.

They offered a hearty "Good week to you," and then arranged themselves around the table, each according to his station. The door creaked more than ever, and somehow the room now lost its imposing atmosphere, so much so that Berel and Chezkel no longer were constrained by a sense of awe, but felt themselves at home. Now their tongues were freed, so that they left off pinching each other and began to quarrel aloud. The room recovered its old atmosphere. The accounts were soon set aside and Wolf the scribe rescued his big book and vanished.

A tall man with a long broad beard, who talked more with his hands than with his tongue, and who stopped everyone else's mouth with the stream of his own conversation, became the head of the meeting. Since the town needed the income a wonder rabbi would provide, and since a rabbi was urgently needed to provide a place where the Chassidim might gather at a holiday and on the Sabbath, and in general to bring life to the village, it was his opinion, he said, that they should invite the rabbi of Trisk, who had just come to a parting of ways with his brother. The rabbi of Trisk would agree to come, he knew for certain, on the simple conditions that he receive the town rabbi's little house of prayer for his use and that the town rabbi give him a certificate declaring that the supervision of circumcision was the province of the rabbi of Trisk.

"What! We still have our rabbi in town. He'll live to be a hundred and twenty! All that you'll get is a pain from your precious rabbi of Trisk!" cried Aaron Leib the cobbler, who was blind in one eye. He had his stick in his hand, ready for the tall Jew.

The cobbler belonged to the congregation of ordinary folk, the hewers of wood and the carriers of water, as they were called in the village. They were all on the side of the present rabbi; but the more learned Chassidim, who were followers of the wonder rabbi in Trisk, wanted to bring a rabbi of their own into town.

"Handel Leib, since when have you become one of our leaders?"

new rivalry

Can it be that you haven't a crumb left in the world and are trying to get your nose into someone else's cake, eh?" The second attack upon the tall Jew came from a butcher who had gone to school with him as a boy.

"Peasants and fools are to be found everywhere. Nobody asked anything of you! When you are asked, then you can answer!" said the tall Jew, turning his face toward the head of the table.

Reb Yechezkiel, the most important citizen of the village, sat listening to the dispute without uttering a word, glancing occasionally at his partner to see what he would have to say.

"Speaking among ourselves—whoever comes to our rabbi here in town? What sort of a name has he got? Who is he anyway?" the tall Jew quietly pointed out to Reb Yechezkiel.

"A good week to you all!" a new voice rang out all at once in the room. It was a special kind of a greeting that could not be confused with the others. Several of the men turned around to see who this might be. It was Reb Yitzchak Yudels. He was a Jew of quite another sort. Actually he was a little man, but broadly built and with a large stomach. He did not speak in an ordinary voice, like other men, but with a kind of screaming singsong. He did not look at people as did other men but seemed to attack them with his eyes. He could be as gentle as a pigeon or as vicious as a snake. He always had a cigar in his mouth whether it was lighted or not, and one could tell when he was coming a quarter of an hour in advance by the way he scraped his feet. He was everyone's intimate friend. Reb Yitzchak Yudels played a vital role among the Chassidim. He was an expert on all religious rules and regulations, he could tell anybody what they should or should not do, and the whole town feared him. All the ordinary rabbis who were respected by the townsfolk were held in utter disdain by him; he simply dismissed them with a wave of his hand. He had a standing quarrel with the rabbi of the town. If a question of ritual came up, he made his own ruling, declaring that the rabbi

was illiterate. The whole town was intimidated by him; they were amazed at his temerity and afraid to contradict him.

Ozarel, who had remained cool during the entire discussion, listening quietly as though without interest in the argument, became transformed when he saw Reb Yitzchak Yudels. For the important Chassid always patted him jovially on the back when they met in the prayerhouse. Now Ozarel was a new man, a Chassid.

"What are you all arguing for? No one wants your opinion," Ozarel shouted to the plain folk.

Reb Yechezkiel and Reb Chaim Rosenkranz were ordinarily considered among the family men, the unlettered plain folk. They prayed with them and had their friends among them. They were not educated men and could not carry on discussions of the Torah in Hebrew although they were able to read out the prayers by rote. They were of the folk who had great respect for learned men and would give way before them. If a learned man uttered a word, even though he said something that was not altogether right, something that an ordinary man would not permit himself to say, it nevertheless stood to reason that he must know what he was talking about. So even though he was on the side of the ordinary folk, Reb Yechezkiel kept quiet in the face of the learning of Reb Yudels.

It was Reb Yechezkiel's secret desire to have a sage for a son, a being from the other world, who would sit day and night over the scriptures. Therefore he had employed Reb Yitzchak Yudels to teach his offspring, but his eldest son had taken to business even as a boy and had gradually deserted the Torah. One hope, however, had remained to him, a son-in-law who considered himself a Chassid, who frequented the Chassidic house of prayer, and who kept the company of Reb Yitzchak Yudels. Now that he saw that Ozarel and Motaleh together were on the side of Reb Yitzchak Yudels, on the side of the Chassidim, the old man felt a certain

balebatim side w/ learning tho they themselves are not

## TALES OF MY PEOPLE

pride, for after all the Chassidim were something special, something beyond their everyday world with their everyday rabbi. So Reb Yechezkiel did not raise his voice in protest.

Reb Yechezkiel was in hopes of securing a true student of the Torah, someone who would bring honor to the house, as a groom for his youngest daughter Leabeh, the child of his old age. This would be a son-in-law who would eat at his table all of his days and do nothing but study the Torah, so that in the years of his old age, when Reb Yechezkiel had given up his business and sat at ease in his house, he would hear the voice of the Torah rising in the room. And he had put the task of finding such a sage for a son-in-law in the hands of Reb Yitzchak Yudels, so now the hearty greeting of Reb Yitzchak Yudels, resounding loud and firm in the room, brought hope and pleasure to the old man. Chassidim—in his house! And the old man began to daydream about the learned son-in-law he would have.

He rose and winked to his partner, Reb Chaim, to follow him into another room, for it was a custom of the elders that neither one of them should put his hand into a new affair without the other's knowing of it.

After looking ironically around at the plain folk, Reb Yitzchak Yudels threw a remark to them, "Yes, you don't need anything. There is no hurry—and where have we got to in this town?" Scraping his feet, he went into the other room to join the two old men.

"I had a letter from Reb Mordecai Konskar. He mentioned that you met him in Trisk and that you met his son. Well, what more could you wish?"

The women were gathered together in the dining room around Reb Yechezkiel's wife Malkaleh. It was Malkaleh's habit to try out the last of the goose fat for Passover on the Sabbath evening of the annual accounting. From the other room, where the men were busy over their affairs, a low rumbling was heard, which

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indicated the gravity of their discussion. The servant girl went back and forth carrying in full glasses of tea and bringing out empty glasses. Each time the door opened there was a blast of cigar smoke and of noise that temporarily drowned out the women's talk, and the women were dutifully impressed by all that was going on in there. Here in their room the women sat indulging in the foolishness of a card game. It was a game called Sixty-six, played with a worn old pack of cards that the men of the house had given to the children. The youngest children clustered about their mothers, pestering them for the coins on the table. The mothers pushed them away and the children kept up their clamor from a little distance. In the midst of all this a bit of a lad rushed up to the table, seized the stake out of the plate, and vanished to the land where pepper grows. Go follow him!

The older generation of women wore bonnets trimmed with ribbons of all colors, and wide forehead bands edged with pointed lace. From each point, there glowed a different ornament. From one a red ruby, from the other a little diamond glittered, until each wrinkled old forehead was transformed as though by the tiara of the Queen of Sabbath. The younger generation already wore "modern" marriage wigs, with curls falling over their brows, and their clothes were mostly of Parisian textiles in many colors, according to the fashion at that time; their gowns were cut in wide pleats, as was fashionable then, with each pleat inserted into the next. Sometimes the pleats melted together and became one, or again they separated and went in different directions. Over their hearts they all wore little square silver plaques on which each had hung out her bridal gifts.

Iteh, the daughter-in-law, and Golde, the daughter, sat opposite each other in silence, for this being the day of accounting, they were in a state of war. (If one of them got up from her place, the other made a derisive movement with her lips, lifted her eyes to the ceiling, and sighed a little, for this was their custom when they were at war.)

women's world: card playing

ethnography p. 56-106

makes light of their rivalry

(p. 46)



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they were all listening to her tale about the fiery hand and the goose fat.

*story telling*

"Once upon a time long ago," she told them, "a woman was melting goose fat in her oven, and when she took the pot out of the oven, she saw a fiery hand reaching out of the flames, and she heard a voice saying, 'Good woman, good woman, give me a little of the leavings—and then no evil eye will fall on your goose fat!' And so that was what she did, and then she began to pour off the fat, and she filled up one pot, and she filled up a second pot, and a third, and she filled up six and eight and ten until she had no more pots in the house—and only then did the fat stop pouring."

The children listened to her tale and watched with large anxious eyes for her to take the pot out of the fire, to see whether there would be a burning hand in the flames.

But presently old Rachel Leah dozed off, and her old bonnet with the silken ribbons, which had been made over from a discarded bonnet of Malka's, dropped over her wrinkled old brow. Then one of the little boys reached out his hand and tweaked one of the wart hairs on the old grandmother's face. "Up hup-hup" went the old woman's shrunken lips, while her toothless gums snapped at the child's fingers.

"Grandmama, why do the hairs grow on your warts?" the little children asked.

"Because there is no man any more to recite the Sabbath blessing for me, and I do it for myself, and I drink the wine of the blessing," the old woman answered with her eyes half shut, a crooked little cackle on her twisted old lips.

While the old woman was amusing the children, one of the eldest boys, a lad of ten named Chatskaleh, was very busy casting a toy out of lead. He had found a bent spoon in the kitchen, and now he was putting a handful of sand in a little form he had made.

In another corner of the kitchen, away from the stove, sat Yente the servant girl, with a large pail of water before her. She had a

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lapful of potatoes, which she was preparing for the big feast. She peeled the potatoes and tossed them into the pail.

Nutta stood behind her and pinched her full round arm.

"Well, Yente, and what about us?" he asked.

"You think I believe you will marry me?" she replied. "You should live so!"

*End of romance*



- 1) beg. of summer
- 2) tension between rav/rebbe
- 3) downfall of rav/rebetzin
- 4) punishment: the fire

#### 4. The Rabbi and the Wonder Rabbi

At last came Lag b'Omer, the day of rejoicing which commemorates the holy Rabbi Shimon-bar Jechua.

And the good Mother Earth, who bore the entire village, houses, barns, and all, upon her generous breast, now was rejuvenated according to the will of God; she was newly arrayed from head to toe in budding leaves and grass. Little green shoots poked their heads from under logs and stones; with a loving glance at the world, they shook themselves awake and sucked their bit of nourishment from Mother Earth, and Mother Earth uncovered her full breasts and fed and filled every open little mouth so long as it wished to suckle. Lord of the Universe, everything about us obeyed and fulfilled what Thou hast ordained since the first day of creation. The grass grew, striving upward, for this was the fulfillment of its duty: to grow. The little birds built their nests upon the old synagogue wall, just above the window of the women's balcony, and all day long they hopped about in the holy little street of the temple where the voice of the Torah echoed. They danced from roof to roof, they sprang to the window of the ancient house of prayer, and they leapt down, reaching the earth with a screech, which was their way of blessing their food, for they set themselves to picking up the crumbs of bagels, rolls, bread and butter—which had already been blessed by the little student of the Torah. They flew off with their blessed crumbs, and the blessings of the food served partly to redeem the human souls that had been transmuted in these birds.

In the heavens above, thin little clouds extended themselves and melted one into another and floated far and wide, losing their

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way over strange lands while they guarded their little world according to Thy behest from the beginning of time. And the flowing of the stream behind the village was like a tranquil prayer by which it hoped to render thanks to Thee, our only Father, for all that is; it flowed on, wave upon wave, from one strange land to another; and upon its journey it repeated a lengthy, peaceable story; and from the surface of the water invisible clouds of dew arose to refresh the fields that spread far and wide on either side of the stream. The clouds of dew lay over the fields all night long, slaking their thirst and bringing them new life. And from the fields rich scents arose, filling the atmosphere with life and awakening and refreshing every living being within reach.

The first festival of the spring... Before every gate, before every door the housewives sit with their knitting in their hands, knitting stockings and gossiping. A few children have remained at home instead of going along with the others to spend the holiday in the fields; they linger around their mothers, tugging at their aprons, crying, "Mama, a copper!" The pious rabbi's wife, wearing her white holiday shawl, sits before her door, surrounded by the wives of the servants of the synagogue, and of the cantor and the ritual butcher. There are a few trees on the street; no one knows how they grew there since no one ever planted them, and no one knows how they survive when the boys clamber all over them, tearing off their scant leaves. Barefoot lads now come from the fields with heaps of yellow buttercups in their hands, and they cry out, "Flowers for buttons! Flowers for buttons!" The other boys slide down from the trees, and ring them round. They tear the buttons off their trousers and their coats, and buy flowers, running back to their mothers with arms full of blossoms and with their pants falling down.

A large white canvas is suddenly laid in the midst of the market

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place, and the music of a hand organ is heard. Children come running from all sides, then older folk appear. They make a circle around the musician. A barefoot fellow in a crushed visorless old cap, wearing some sort of knitted shirt and buckled up in a broad belt, turns round and round on the canvas; he has a long whip in his hand, and he snaps it over their heads, flicking off their hats, while the hand organ grinds on. Suddenly a tall lad appears; his face is covered with chalk, and he is dressed in tights from head to foot. There is a clock painted on his backside with the motto "Excuse me." He balances a huge pole on his stomach; an entire family climbs to the top of the pole to perform balancing acts and all sorts of tricks. The organ grinds on, and the fellow with the whip snaps it in front of people's faces and over their bare heads. A half-naked girl appears, wearing a little skirt which scarcely reaches her knees; her flowing blond hair is combed and braided, and she has all kinds of little emblems and decorations woven into the braids. She has a red-cheeked attractive little face, and she performs splits and contortions and jumps through a hoop.

There is still another entertainer who swallows one sword after another. When he has swallowed them all, his partner comes forth, but instead of pulling the swords out of his mouth, the partner pulls out a whole chain of kerchiefs and bonnets, the devil only knows why, and the organ grinds on, and the ringmaster snaps his whip around their faces and their heads. . . .

*Biography of Reb David*

Once there was a tailor in the village; no one knew where the little man came from or whither the little Jew was going. He was one of the thousands whose life passes like a shadow under our eyes; no one notices when they are born, and no one pays attention when they die. The bread they eat must grow in invisible fields, and the meat they consume must come from cattle that graze on unknown pastures, for otherwise one would have to ask

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oneself, "Who ate the wheat of these fields? What has become of the cattle in the pastures?"

A little tailor, a Jew who had nothing to do with anyone except with God his Maker . . . Night still covered the sky when the tailor prepared to go to the house of prayer. Hidden behind the big stove, screened by the stand of holy books, he repeated his prayer of gratitude to his Creator for having brought him into being, for the bread with which he nourished himself, and for the mercy that would be his part when God should call him back unto Him. No one paid any attention to the little tailor on his way to and from the synagogue, and no one paid any attention to the little tailor sitting and sewing away on the greatcoats of the peasants, and if one noticed him, he seemed as natural a sight as the pole in the market place; no one ever thought to ask "What is that pole standing there for? What use is it?"

His wife, Chana, had taken upon herself the duty of lighting two candles in the abandoned old women's synagogue every Friday night. This was a duty she had taken over from her mother, may she rest in peace, and that her mother had taken over from her grandmother, and so on from generation to generation. No one bothered to inquire who lighted the two commemorative candles that twinkled from the windows of the ancient women's synagogue every Friday night; no one even thought to wonder whether the ancient housewives had awakened in their graves. There would have been more wondering had there come a fine Friday evening when the two candles were not to be seen; then somebody would have noticed that something was missing in the synagogue, although no one would have been able to say exactly what was missing. But God noticed, and God had sent a reward for the two candles that these simple women had been lighting for so long a time from generation to generation; God sent them a living light, Reb Daavidle, the rabbi of the town.

For many years, Chana, the tailor's wife, was childless; then God listened to her prayers and gave her a son. She named him

*miraculous  
birth*

Daavidle. And this was the present rabbi of the village, Reb Daavidle. From earliest childhood, Daavidle showed himself unlike other children. He would not even sleep in his cradle without a covering on his head. When he was three years old, he babbled the blessing for food before he broke bread. He learned his alphabet from a little prayer book bought for him by his father, and when he was a grown man and a rabbi, he still carried this prayer book in his breast pocket. He studied in school with great industry; he was not a quick student, but what came into his head never left it. He was extremely pious and observant of the last syllable of the law. He never departed by a hair's breadth from the regulations laid down in the Shulhan Aruch. A hundred and one times he repeated the Scriptures, learning them from memory together with the commentaries, until he could find every letter of every word blindfolded by pointing to it with his finger.

When Reb Berl, may he rest in peace, the old rabbi of the town, was taken unto his fathers without leaving behind him anyone to fulfill his place—except a grown daughter of marriageable age—the townsfolk began to suggest that Daavidle should wed the orphan and fill the place of her father. The Chassidim were opposed to this: "What? You want to take the son of Lazar the tailor as our rabbi?" However, the shopkeepers and the little householders, who were hopeful of seeing one of their own sons rise to glory, stubbornly insisted on the combination. A terrible division arose in the town, but one day the ordinary family men assembled in the cemetery, set up the wedding canopy, and married off Daavidle to the rabbi's orphan daughter. Then they knocked on the rabbi's grave and called down to him: "Congratulations! *Mazel tov!* Your son-in-law will fulfill your place on earth!"

The Chassidim had a fearful respect for the anger of the dead; therefore they were silent, waiting for the first offensive step to be taken by the new rabbi. But Reb Daavidle had his Talmud and his books of the Law, and he sat at home studying day and

night. He conducted himself in a model way; a member of an ordinary prayer circle, he arose before dawn each day and recited psalms and prayers with the townsfolk until the rising of the morning star. He prayed with the first ten men who entered the synagogue and completed a congregation, and before each new moon he held the service of atonement in the chilly synagogue.

The Chassidim had never forgiven him for their defeat, however, and they were stubborn as was their wont. They referred to him only as Daavidle the tailor. One of them went so far as to insult him during a circumcision by remarking that a tailor's boy should know how to cut. The plain folk wanted to have it out with the Chassidim, but the rabbi insisted on keeping the peace and actually replied to the insult of the Chassidim by signing himself from then on, Daavidle, the humble tailor's son.

The Chassidim who sat with him in the house of prayer could not bring themselves to call him rabbi; they kept their distance from him. He, too, became estranged from them, preferring the company of the hewers of wood and drawers of water, and it was to them he gave all of his attention. He had no use for learning for himself alone but found it necessary to share with others what he knew.

Every Friday evening the plain folk would gather in the house of prayer with their Bibles in their hands, and Rabbi Daavidle would study the weekly chapter with them. He would explain the legends and the commentaries to them in such a way that the good men licked their fingers over his wisdom. Following the Sabbath afternoon nap, he would seat himself among the tradesmen and workers in the synagogue, take a prayer book in his hand, and repeat the Psalms with them, taking turns reciting the verses. He chanted each word, and his voice was heard beyond the synagogue; it reached down the little street, calling the townsfolk into the house of prayer. Youngsters and Sabbath loafers who were playing in the street put aside their games; teamsters and fishermen who were standing and gossiping with the women left off their

talk and came into the synagogue. The little synagogue became more and more full, and the rabbi, lost in the midst of them all, stood repeating the verses while the congregation recited the responses, a verse from him and a verse from them.

They all knew that they had found a man on whom they could rely. If anyone were in trouble, he would come to the rabbi, and the rabbi had a cure for him—prayer. No matter what sort of Jew came, the rabbi would stand with him in a corner of the house of the Lord and begin to pray with him. The Jew, listening to the voice of the rabbi, which seemed to rise up out of a broken heart, would fall to weeping; he would talk out all his troubles with the rabbi and go away with a free conscience.

When Daavidle became rabbi, he took upon himself the fulfillment of a commandment that he was pledged to carry out; he was determined to perform this duty from generation to generation, God willing. This was the commandment first carried out by our father Abraham; the Lord's commandment of circumcision. It would be his task to preside at all circumcisions. Daavidle asked and readily won the consent of the householders of the town to perform this act. Circumcision became his special province, his duty, and his good deed before the Lord.

There came a day when Reb Daavidle paced back and forth in his room; his high forehead was wrinkled, and he groaned from time to time. His wife Hindeleh sat in the corner by the stove with her pale face in her hands, crying bitterly.

"Daavidle, I can't bear it! I won't let this pass without raising a hand! You must do something!"

"I tell you, this is an act of God! It is Heaven itself that prevents my doing anything! What can I do against God's will? I suppose it has to be this way. Shall a whole community be at war because of me? Shall the town, God forbid, be doomed? They wept before me—my heart was torn in two!"

"But the shame of it, God in Heaven, the pity! And yet, you

can't permit yourself to be the cause of bloodshed. Heaven forbid!"

The rabbi approached his bookcase, took out a book, and fell into meditation. "Ah, woman, woman, vengeance is a sin. Remember, be careful not to fall into this sin!"

"God in Heaven!" the woman groaned, covering her face with her hands, while the tinkling of her long golden earrings echoed her sighs.

Just then Yudel, the village teacher, appeared in the doorway. Yudel had a second function. He was a *mohl*, one who performed the act of circumcision, and often served when the rabbi officiated.

Yudel motioned to the rabbi's wife, "Excuse me, *rebbetzen*—"  
The rabbi's wife was startled.

The rabbi noticed and signaled to Yudel with his fingers, "Well, are they coming already?"

Yudel nodded.

"As far as I am concerned, they have won. Surely all this is willed from on high. I was not meant to fulfill this sacred duty."

"Rabbi!"

"Shall people be deprived because of me? For my part, I have chosen another sacred duty—I shall fulfill the commandment to welcome the stranger. This, I believe, they cannot take from me. And what about you, Yudel? Have they taken the circumcisions away from you?"

"I don't know. I suppose . . . But what good can it be, without you, rabbi?"

"This is an inflexible law. According to the law, you are not permitted to resign, so long as . . ."

Suddenly a commotion was heard from outside the window. People came running, shouting, "The resignation! The resignation!" The voice of the blind old cobbler was heard, "Rabbi! Oh, rabbi of ours—you bring down the wrath of God on yourself!"

They pounded on the door; some pulled it open; others pushed it shut. Sticks swung in every direction. There was a crash, and

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something came flying through the smashed window. The rabbi's wife screamed and pulled on her husband's coattail. From outside a cry was heard, "The butchers are coming!"

The rabbi flung open the door and appeared in the street. A sea of faces confronted him—men, women, and children, workmen's caps, and silken skullcaps, and velvet Sabbath hats, and kerchiefs of every color. The street was black with people, as at a funeral. All were running and shouting, there were men pulling at each other's beards, swinging their sticks over each other's heads. A tall man stood out above all the others; with his long, lean arms, he swept aside all the heads before him.

"Sinners!" shouted the rabbi.

"The rabbi! The rabbi!" a cry came up from the crowd. Then there was silence. They dropped their heads, waiting. Each hid behind his neighbor, so as not to be recognized by Reb Daavidle.

"Jews, why are you fighting each other like goyim!" the rabbi cried bitterly, while his eyes filled with tears.

A sorrowful, penitent silence choked them all. Only the sound of a single voice came from the mass of heads. "The resignation! The certificates!"

Everyone turned to see who had spoken, but he was already lost in the crowd.

"What do you want? The authority? Here, you can have it, only let there be peace. Surely your rabbi, too, wants only peace."

No one offered a word in reply.

A short, stocky man emerged from the flock, approached the rabbi, and veiling his eyes with piety, as though he were about to repeat the blessing over the holy Torah, he announced, "The rabbi is waiting outside the town. We came for the certificate of authority."

The rabbi went into the house. The stocky man, Reb Yitzchak Yudels, followed the rabbi, and the Chassidim crowded behind the two, elbowing their way past the plain townfolk.

Reb Daavidle paced up and down the room a few times. Then

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he went to the shrine of the Torah that stood in the corner and began to sway before it in earnest prayer, saying, "Unto Him Who called the world into being, it is surely known that I do not resign out of my free will from the sacred duty that I took upon myself, the duty whose fulfillment I pledged with the price of my soul. I do this only for the sake of peace."

He went to the table, took a pen in hand, and began writing.

The Chassidim were silent. From the next room the sobbing of the rabbi's wife could be heard.

Soon enough, the rabbi rose. Reb Yitzchak Yudels reached out his hand for the note.

"No!" said the rabbi. "Have we forgotten our duty to welcome the stranger? Hindel, my coat!" he called into the next room.

Hindel came into the room with eyes red from weeping; she went to the wardrobe.

"Behold, woman, I am thankful and praise the Lord, who has relieved me of one duty and given me another—and you, you sit there mourning and weeping."

The rabbi's wife wiped her tears with her apron.

"Come, let us fulfill the Lord's commandment to welcome the stranger!" called the rabbi to the crowd as he stepped out to the street, dragging the teacher Yudel by his sleeves.

"Let us go and meet the rabbi!" shouted Reb Yitzchak Yudels.

And the whole crowd moved toward the edge of the town.

From every door people flowed; they snatched up their Sabbath coats, their velvet caps; shops were closed in the middle of the day; everywhere doors were shut, and everybody went off into the street. Townsfolk, seeing their own rabbi in the lead, forgot their animosity toward the Chassidim. For they told themselves, a wonder rabbi is coming to live in our town. Then his followers, the Chassidim, will come from far and near to pass the Sabbath with him, and the town will blossom. They put on their Sabbath coats and followed the procession. The parade grew longer and longer; craftsmen put aside their work; the shops were deserted

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by the clerks while the whole town proceeded along Konskar road to greet the rabbi. Even the Gentiles became curious and joined the procession.

From Reb Yechezkiel's yard Nutta came riding forth, with a second cart behind him. The horses wore new harnesses, decorated with brass. In one of the carts sat Reb Yechezkiel with his sons and grandchildren, in the other his partner Reb Chaim Rosenkranz with his sons, sons-in-law, and his grandchildren. When they reached the procession, they saw the entire flock was afoot, so they alighted and walked like everyone else.

The fields around, as though aware that they were all ruled over by one and the same God, seemed to have lost their boundaries and merged into one great field. An ocean of green grass spread as far as one could see. A breeze blew upon the grass, causing wave after wave to flow and vanish in the distant green sea. Little footpaths wandered through the green, leading far into the fields, where they disappeared in the sea of grass. A few isolated trees stood orphanlike and with an air of being abashed that God had permitted them to grow taller than anything in their surroundings. They swayed lonesomely as though praying by themselves in the fields.

Between the fields the deserted roads stretched far away, screened on either side by lanes of linden trees, whose long, freshly budding branches wove an archway over the road.

And the flock proceeded on God's way. In the fields they encountered some of the village teachers, who had led out the children for the first festival of the spring. The boys had made bows and arrows for themselves, and with their bows in their hands they joined the procession, marching to meet the new rabbi.

It wasn't long before the Chassidim found one another; linking themselves arm in arm, or their hands on each other's shoulders, they walked together, forming a little flock of their own within the flock. It made no difference to them whether a man was one of their sect or not; anyone who cared to took hold of a Chassid's

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belt or joined hands with him and went along together with the Chassidim. Children came running and blundered underfoot. They clung to their fathers' girdles, to their fathers' coats, and dragged after the crowd.

The procession grew and grew; from every side it gathered Jews unto itself. They embraced each other and began to raise their voices in song. "*In multitudes, the people glorifies the King!*"

Their voices mingled together and became as one voice, just as their souls seemed to be joined together until one voice arose out of a thousand hearts, resounding over the field and through the woods, while an echo chanted the response. "*In multitudes, the people glorifies the King!*"

In the heavens above, the shining reaches of the sky melted one into another; from all four corners of the world pale little silvery clouds came floating, gliding over each other. There was one corner where darkness glowered, but the black cloud was torn apart and the sun poured her light through the break in the cloud, and the stream of light fell upon a green meadow below on earth, making it shine like a mirror from among the other meadows.

And just as all the earth below became one, so the heavens above suddenly melted together; one shining cloud floated into another, and they mingled and became one and were like a second procession forming in the sky to accompany the villagers as they went to meet their rabbi. And below the heavens, the gentle wind moved the grass over the fields, and the grass swayed after the passing of the flock and bowed, and the lone trees in the fields shook their branches in greeting, and everywhere the voice of the multitude rang out, far and wide. "*In multitudes, the people glorifies the King!*"

The rabbi and the plain folk walked a little to one side. They saw how the Chassidim were linked together, how they had become one with heaven and earth, and they felt that they, the ordinary people, had somehow been left out of things, even discarded. And they could not help feeling a kind of awe before the

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Chassidim who were enfolded in unity, who sang in ecstasy. And here and there from among the plain folk, one or another would slip over to the Chassidim.

Presently a huge cloud of dust rose heavenward from the road. The cloud of dust seemed to be galloping toward them, coming closer and closer, as though to announce, "The rabbi comes! The rabbi comes!"

Then the Jews rushed pell-mell into the cloud of dust, ripping it asunder; the cloud dissolved, revealing a large wagon. In the wagon sat the rabbi in a long white satin coat, buried in his velvet hat and beard and side curls. He was gray and aged, and he sat holding his hands crossed over his heart, his closed eyes fixed upon the sky. A passing frown appeared on his high, delicately aristocratic forehead.

"Peace unto you."

An ocean of hands, thin, long, pale, fat, thick, red-haired, and smooth hands, stretched out toward him. They reached one above the other, drowning each other, reaching upward again, and the rabbi took each one separately in a greeting of peace.

At last Rabbi Daavidle managed to reach the new rabbi. He put forth his hand and said, "Peace unto you."

"And unto you, peace!"

"Who might you be?" the new rabbi asked.

"I am the rabbi of the village."

"So. The rabbi of the village."

"I have brought you the certificate of my resignation," the first rabbi said, handing over the sheet of paper. The rabbi reached out his pale hand for the bit of paper.

"I greet you thrice in the name of the Lord, for it is my duty to welcome the stranger," the rabbi stammered, standing for a moment longer near the wagon. There was a murmur in the crowd.

"And who is your rabbi?" the new rabbi asked with a smile as he put the certificate into his breast pocket.

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"No one."

"No one? Then you shall sit at my table." The new rabbi smiled. The rabbi simply stood there.

But in the meantime the Chassidim pressed forward, and the rabbi found himself pushed to one side. With their hands reaching upward to the new rabbi, the people surrounded the wagon.

"Let us say the evening prayer, Jews," the new rabbi called as he descended from the wagon.

Close to the road there was a thick little wood. The trees were woven together as though into a single garland. The congregation followed the rabbi into the copse. It was already late in the afternoon; the last rays of the sun peered through the branches of the trees. Here and there, between the trees, the sun reached a little circle of grass and turned it to gold. The little wood was utterly quiet as though a secret had been entrusted to it long, long ago. Then the skies let down a sacred red-blue curtain around the woods. Deep in the forest a lonely bird called and called again, as though it knew not for what. Far away in the woods someone was chopping down a tree, and the death song of the tree echoed high in the forest. And around the woods, the whole world lay, expectant.

The green growth had not yet come to fullness but had only begun to blossom. The earth had only uncovered her breast, and the vegetation had only begun to take nourishment and to draw life from its source. Everything about them had only begun to live and was awaiting a blessing, a sign, a release. The congregation was scattered in the woods; beneath each tree there stood a man, and the youngsters stood by the saplings and bushes, and everyone swayed in deep and earnest prayer. The rabbi's blessing resounded through the woods, while he waved his arm before them.

*"Praised art Thou, O Lord our God, for having brought forth all that lives, and for having brought all manner of fruits in Thy Goodness. Make Thy Blessing to shine upon the face of the earth,*

*and bless us with all the goodness of the earth, as Thou hast done in the good years that have gone before. Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, who provides us with all that is good."*

Beneath each tree there was a soul, and within each tree there was a soul, and each soul prayed in unison with the other, and with each prayer that was uttered, one could see a change in all the living green world. The trees swayed together with the congregation as though they too were in prayer, but the trees could not speak, and so the human soul that was beneath each tree spoke the words of prayer, while the trees swayed in unison as if to say amen, amen.

Every living thing prayed and sang to God, and the heavens seemed to come closer to the earth and the earth to approach the heavens; the people and the trees seemed to form one congregation. The branches and twigs were linked together; the grass and the earth moved in prayer; the birds cried from one branch to another, singing the praises of the Lord; and the echo of the prayer came from among the trees deep in the woods. The woodsman's ax responded in the distance, and the sound of all the voices flowed together and melted into one single unity. All joined together and became a single prayer, a single heart, a single soul. And there, deep in the woods, the Shechina herself, the Sacred Spirit, hovered over the trees, joining in the prayer.

The entire universe is God, and through the universe, God was in prayer.

Soon all became quiet; the trees no longer swayed; there was no more movement in the grass; far away in the woods the singing bird became silent, and the echo of the woodsman's ax was no longer heard. The world seemed to have halted for a moment to listen. There, deep in the woods, was God, and He too listened to the ancient familiar melody, to the voice of the rabbi lamenting in the woods.

*"Sound forth the great trumpet call of redemption, O Lord, let the miracle take place, gather us in from our exile!"*

All about them became utterly quiet. A dim melancholy fog spread deep in the woods where the Shechina hovered. The fog spread further, deeper, and from the depths of the forest a lost and melancholy murmur was heard, echoing through woods and fields. Then the echo melted in the distance as though it were carrying away sacred secrets.

This was God's greeting to the congregation of Israel, out of the long, long past.

Soon the rabbi had ended his prayer. Under the trees a number of orphans were repeating the prayer in memory of the dead, and perhaps a few of the saplings also repeated the prayer for their fathers and mothers, or it might have been the children who prayed for them.

The rabbi returned to the wagon and mounted. The horses were unhitched, and numbers and multitudes of the congregation took hold of the wagon instead. They were packed closely together, head against head, and they stumbled against each other and against the wheels. The white satin robe of the rabbi floated over the ocean of heads and hands, and before and behind him there were waves and waves of heads and hands.

And behind the procession a dark, sad, and lovable little cloud of dew floated over the woods and fields, giving them drink and nourishment and filling every little mouth that was open to it. For this was the rabbi's prayer.

Thus they came into the town. A forgotten little cloud of dew that had risen from the river spread itself tenderly and with motherly care over the village, to watch over it and protect it. The little cloud rocked and hugged the village, and the village fell sweetly asleep. In a distant little street the crying of a child was heard.

In Reb Yechezkiel's house there was a chamber with two large windows that gave on the street of the synagogue, and from these windows two bright flames shone into the dark evening fog.



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Out of that chamber, a tender dreamy tune floated into the lane.

For it was there that the rabbi rested.

And there were also lights shining from the windows of the everyday prayer room of the synagogue, opposite Reb Yechezkiel's windows. Six little lights were shining into the night fog from the room where a simple everyday prayer from the heart of an old tailor was repeated, "*May the Lord forgive us our evil deeds, and spare us from destruction.*"

## 5. *Summer Evenings*

As the Festival of Weeks begins to steal upon the town, the summer seems to be cut off in the middle of its life. All the world is like a princess sitting in her holiday garments, mourning the loved ones who have left her. A breeze sways the leaves. Every little blade of grass, every little leaf weeps quietly for the whole world's sake. What lovely summer evenings now! Clouds, in bright and dark masses, emerge from their secret worlds to cover the heavens. They melt together, far on the wide horizon, and then the beautiful open light and the dark clouds are hidden by the blue curtains of haze. Light lies over the broad river, mirroring itself in the glistening waves that flow one upon another, as though they are talking out their hearts to each other. Far away the sky bends down until it enters the water, and the water seems to rise up to heaven. The heavens and the seas join together in the first innocent kiss of love and go to rest together in the dense black woods at the end of the world.

Lovely summer evenings in the little synagogue street! Dark, melancholy fogs gently enwrap the quiet street as though they would mask it from human eyes. In the dense woods at the edge of the world the last reddish glow of sunlight shimmers, sinking like a lost, forgotten island into the blue sea of the sky. From a window of the old house of prayer a little light winks, and a mournful pious voice is heard along the lane, lamenting before Mother Night. And Mother Night carries off the lament into her own mysterious world and transforms it and mingles it with other voices until it becomes part of the choir of night. Frogs in the river croak to the same rhythm, and a lost little murmuring comes

from the trees in the black woods, and the night gathers all the sounds together within herself and lets them fade away along the dark cemetery lane.

From the wonder rabbi's window two streams of light pour out, and he himself may be seen pacing back and forth. As his white gown passes the window, his shadow hurries across the white fence opposite. In front of their doors and their gates, the people sit half dressed, householders and housewives, craftsmen weary after their day of toil, getting a breath of fresh air. Young people stroll by the gates, arms linked, singing out a little melody.

*When the count walked in the wood*

*There a little maiden stood—*

*"Maiden, Maiden, why are you here*

*Alone in the wood? Have you no fear?"*

*"I've come into the wood alone,*

*And cannot find my own way home."*

The boys climb on the fence of Chana Sara's garden and reach for the branches of her pear trees that extend out into the market place. They seize the branches and tear off the green fruit. The gardener rushes out, and the children scatter, except for one little lad held prisoner by a branch. The gardener snatches the boy's cap, and the boy stands there whimpering and rubbing himself, afraid to go home to his mother. Cattle return from their pasture; the shepherd plays on his reed. The householders get up from their benches, take their cattle from the herd, and lead them to their stables. An accordion is heard from somewhere down the street where Stepan, the only Christian in the neighborhood, sits playing a love song for his sweetheart, and the tune of the accordion mingles and becomes one with the melancholy plaint of the shepherd's flute, a sad, heartbreaking little melody that fades away far down the street.

Lovely summer evening in the synagogue street! Far down in the dark little lane by the cemetery, the older lads, the students of

the Talmud, saunter in their light summer coats, and young girls of respectable families stroll by in their cotton summer dresses. The youths walk on one side, the girls on the other. Now a lad glances timidly to the other side of the lane, hoping to catch a glimpse of his intended bride, whose golden engagement watch he carries in his vest. He feels embarrassed, and his heart beats fast. And if the maiden wishes to steal a glance at the lads in order to glimpse the intended groom, for whom she is sewing a prayer-book bag, she is abashed before her comrades, her heart pounds, and her light little jacket rises and falls over her bosom.

Lovely summer evenings in the synagogue lane! But these are the three weeks of mourning for the destruction of the temple, and in these weeks there may be no love play, and so everything has been put off until after the Sabbath of Consolation. The poplars that hold the village in their embrace know all her little secrets and silently guard the mystery of love. And the breezes from the other side of the fields carry the odor of the fields, refreshing the human heart. Then one's breast becomes filled and somehow very light, and there is a sweet and tender and terrible longing to be embraced, to be loved. Oh, Father in Heaven, the lovely summer evenings in the synagogue lane! . . . for those to whom they were known and those to whom they are lost.

And in the dark lane that led toward the cemetery, far down at the end of the synagogue lane, the world pressed her face against the heart of night, and night pressed herself against the heart of the world, and they embraced each other and wandered deep into the woods together and lay themselves down to sleep in the dense forest.

And on the dark path to the cemetery rise a number of old dead poplars, like terrible demons with their hands and feet cut off. They stand like the ghosts of prehistoric monsters, like witnesses from before the six days of creation, like silent witnesses from

the beginning to the end of time. . . . At midnight, the children are told, there appear the ghosts of "Germans tall with whips and all," and they take their places under the trees, and from the branches they draw sweet, heartrending melodies that pull and tug at people's hearts until they follow the music into the evil swamps.

In the fields, in the grass, outside the village, Chassidim lie with their heads to the stars and sing their song of despair.

*You who live in huts of earth,  
Wherefore do you lift your eyes?  
Man and beast have equal worth.*

This they sing to the melody of the cantor who was buried alive in his grave, and their voices resound over the graves there on the hill. The tombs intermingle with God's earth, sunken under their seas of grass. And in their little graves the dead bones lie mute, with only a patch of sky above them. The breeze blows over them. They are mingled with the earth; the living verdure springs upward from them; and thus these ancient bones fulfill their true mission, the ultimate goal of life, that was before and will remain the everlasting. The whole world becomes one, the dead with the living, heaven with the earth, each blade of grass, each tree, all become one life, one world, one Godliness.

Alongside the lane, the night is mirrored in the river, and from a distance it appears to be another world entirely. The little lights of the boats that rest overnight in the water are reflected in its depths, and from a distance they look like dark gray animals whose paws blundered into the water in the dark night and who are unable to extricate themselves. From a distance, the little lights seem to be their eyes, pleading for help.

And on that dark path, deep in the night, God sits, covering his face with both hands. And as He weeps over the destruction of the temple two great tears fall upon the earth and cover everything with dew.

On the dark path to the cemetery, a young man and a maiden walked in the black night, Gabriel, the wonder rabbi's son and heir, and Leabeh, the youngest daughter of Reb Yechezkiel. She had seen him through a crack in the door that night when the rabbi stayed at their house. Before daybreak, while she still lay in bed, she had heard his voice in prayer coming in through her open window. As he repeated the holy words, his voice carried through the window and mingled with the odor of all the young green growing things that wakened from under the dew of night. His voice entered her chamber together with the scent of the blossoms and fluttered over her face and lingered over her, and all of itself her heart began to awaken. And from that moment she longed only for a glimpse of his sensitive face, which shone out like a bright moon from under his broad fur hat. But she did not understand the desire that was in her, nor did she want to know what it was. Yet every evening she went strolling in the synagogue lane. Something drew her there as to a meeting with the "Germans tall with whips and all," who fashioned wondrous melodies from the branches of the trees. And she was drawn still deeper into the dark lane, deeper and deeper . . . and he too must have been drawn by the unheard music, and he too must have allowed it to lead him on. They did not realize how far they were going. Night settled about their heads and took them to herself and wrapped them with darkness and screened them from the eyes of men.

The graves on the hill were witnesses that the young people never spoke a word to each other, nor took each other's hand. But he on one side of the land and she on the other let themselves be led by the heart-burning melodies that were drawn out of the old poplar trees by the long thin fingers of the "Germans tall. . ." The same melodies resounded within them as though played upon the strings of their hearts. And the young people were drawn on and on, walking silently, listening to the inaudible music, to the secret melodies that were being played on their heartstrings. . . .

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Silently, silently. . . Night came down upon them and the dewy clouds floated before and behind them.

And everything around them was filled with love; the heaven, the earth, lay clasped together, lost in the woods; the night was in the world, and the world was in the night, and scented breezes came from the bare fields, slipping across their faces whispering secrets to them, secrets that were to be carried in their hearts and never, never to be revealed. And their bosoms breathed slowly, quietly, and in them there was a strange longing, and a longing lay over all the earth. . . The whole world yearned for it knew not what. . .

In the thick forest God lay wrapt in His black mantle, and He longed for His own sake and for the world, and at the edge of the world where the last red rays sank into the blue dark sea the day kissed the night, and they yearned for each other and for all the world.

Far on the horizon, a bright moon wandered day in and day out, filled with longing, and the little cemetery hid within itself and was filled with longing. . .

And the young man and the maiden let themselves be drawn on, following the mysterious melodies. . .

A little farther on was the river, and the lanterns of the night winked to each other in the depths of the water and told each other tales of other worlds.

The young man and the maiden followed the twinkling lights and let themselves be led astray by them.

They came to the edge of the water and sat down on the shore.

Suddenly a mighty ringing was heard.

The ringing came from the distance, as though a mother might be crying out in the dark night, "Help! Oh, what is happening! Help!"

The sky over the village suddenly became bright as though a

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burning red cloud had come flying out of another world, had lost its way in the dark sea of night, and illuminated half the sky. Or perhaps a mighty hand had brushed a large part of the night aside and thrown it from on high, leaving the open heaven visible to the world. Or perhaps the sun had for once in creation been permitted to err and had returned to this place instead of going on to another land.

Down below on the earth there was a terrible glare as one cloud of fire rolled into another, and they came forth together, leaping into the heavens and setting fire to a part of the sky. Earth, air, and heaven embraced each other with a single flame. The veil of night was torn from the face of the earth, and it was day again. Cries were heard from the distance, and the village bell rang desperately as though it were a mother screaming for help.

The young man and the girl sit by the edge of the water. Bright rays of light fall into the river and seem to set it afire. And the burning waves flow by, whispering to each other, telling the terrible secret of what is happening behind them. Here the night still lies upon the river, and something stirs silently in the water—the dead come up from the cemetery, they creep over the fence, and they cleanse their souls in the river before ascending into heaven to stand and be judged.

The river flows quietly on, cleansing their spirits, cleansing them from sin, and the dead float upon the waves into the dark woods from which they will rise to heaven.

On the other side, the world is in flame; wall after wall of fire climbs skyward. The air is on fire, and the heavens too, and their fiery reflection is on the face of the water. . .

The young people return to the village through forgotten paths. Half-naked women, naked children snatch whatever they can of their possessions, bits of bedding, pillows, armfuls of kitchenware; they run with unearthly cries, their hair streaming, from one street to another, fleeing the fire. Little children clutch their mothers' skirts; the older ones help their mothers carry their

FIRE

belongings. They flee shrieking into the black woods, and the fire pursues them, reaching out its tongue to seize them. Mothers carry their babies as they pulled them from their cradles, pillows and all. Brothers carry their little sisters; sisters carry their little brothers. They burst into the homes of strangers, lay down their little ones on strange beds, next to strange children. The conflagration drives people from their houses, drives them out of the village, like wild beings. And the wind carries the fire from roof to roof.

The fire had come out of nowhere, a beast springing upon the little village and destroying everything, everything. . . .

Jews and Christians alike hurried with pails of water, but the fire drank up the water with a laughing crackle and went on about its work. Dazed, scarcely knowing what they were doing, people tried to save what they could—some seized doors and windows and carried them off into the road. Wild-eyed mothers leaped into the flames with their hair streaming and their clothes flying, shrieking as they ran, "My child! My child!" and wildly frightened children ran naked in the streets, dragging bundles of household goods and screaming, "Mama! Mama!" And all the voices were drowned together in the crackling of the fire, and tongues of flame shot across the roofs, leaving behind one ruin after another.

Some of the householders, seizing axes and hoes, tear at the walls of their own homes. They hack away furiously as though a mad compulsion has come upon them to make an end of everything, to destroy whatever remains.

One of them smashes windows with his bare fists, then runs in the streets with blood streaming from his hands, but the fire does not diminish. The blazing paws of the raging beast march from roof to roof, and as though to silence the screaming of the children, of the mothers, of all the town, it furiously smashes one house after another. The lamentations rise to the heavens, and the village bells never stop ringing, ringing, as though pleading with the raging beast for pity, begging at its feet for mercy, and at

the same time crying out to the power above, in accusation of the wanton destroyer.

Now comes a cry of horror, "The synagogue is on fire! the synagogue!"

Then people rush from all sides. Fathers throw aside what remains of their household. Mothers put away the babies from their breast, the whole village gathers around the little synagogue. The tall windows are filled with flames, like two bright lanterns. Men groan and tear their hair, women press against the hot walls as though to shield them with their bodies. A few men pour pails of water on the flaming walls. But the fire only sucks up the water, sputters, and burns on.

Christians come running with axes and crowbars. They climb to the roof of the synagogue and hack at the tin covering. The Jews seize them by their ankles, pleading with them to hold back, but the axes tear the roof apart, and every bit of tin hurled from the roof rips its way through the heart of a Jew.

In the midst of this, the rabbi, weeping aloud, rushes to the synagogue doors, bolts them, and closes the shutters, stretching out his thin pale arms as if to hold back the destroyer. But the fire leaps down through the open roof, and now people cry, "The roof! The roof!" They break open the doors and the windows and burst into the synagogue. Already, the gables are afire, and through the roar of the conflagration one can hear the rafters falling one after the other. Now the flames are upside down, the tongues licking downward from above, shooting burning sparks and pieces of flame into the world below. Billows of black smoke burst from an open window; one cloud of smoke storms head on into another, ploughing through a broken pane. For a moment the smoke blackens the flames, forcing a way for itself, rising upward to heaven with the flames snapping after it. In the thick black column streaming from the broken window, mingled with burning sparks of fire and flying chunks of flame, are the shapes of men, leaping through the black smoke and the shooting sparks, some

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of them rescuing half-uncovered scrolls of the law, others with streaming prayer shawls holding pieces of the candelabra, boards from the holy ark. They disappear with them into the darkness.

The synagogue blazes; one wall gives up after another; from within one can hear the flames breaking down pillars, rafters, one after another, to be consumed by the tongues of fire. And from all around rises the bitter weeping of men, women, and children. They shriek, they groan, they wring their hands, and the village bell rings and rings, still pleading with the fire for pity, still crying out against the lust of a destroyer who would consume the entire world.

The day dawned gray and silent. Far on the horizon the morning star flickered bloodily in the pale gray mirror, and its reddish reflection was returned by the watery gray waves of the sky, as though waves of gray water had come from mysterious other-world oceans and made their way one after another into the heavens. The morning washed her newborn son, the new day, that came up out of the gray depths of the waters, washed him in wave after wave, so that he might shine and light up the heavens and the earth.

And the whole world wakened from sweet sleep; the leaves of grass, still drowned in the dew of night, began to stretch themselves toward the sun; the blossoms opened their little eyes and their little mouths and gave forth the flowery scents with which they had drugged themselves all night long. All wakened; the world threw off the garment of night which had enwrapped her while she slept with the dewy clouds; she wore the smile of the bride who wakens on the first day after the wedding. Everything glistened, smiled, and was drunk with love and life.

The fire was dying. Here and there it spent its last violence on a remaining wall, on a doorway or a pillar; it glowered over the wreckage. The village had become a ruin . . . smoking piles of

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ashes and debris, burned roofs crashed over burned walls, glowing embers smoking and snapping.

Here and there one could see half a wall, with a mirror still hanging on a hook. Goose feathers from pillows and comforters fluttered in the streets, broken bits of earthenware rolled underfoot in the streets, and pieces of brass from Sabbath lights were scattered everywhere. And in the midst of all one might see the smoldering remnant of a Sabbath dress or a half-charred marriage wig.

Out of the glowing ashes tall black chimneys rose, sorrowing over the sacrifice that had taken place. Here and there stood Jews with long iron rods in their hands, trying to poke bits of houseware out of the glowing wreckage, pulling out half-burned garments or the legs of smashed tables. Each tried to assemble the pitiful remains of his household. Mothers ran from one house to another wringing their hands and gathering together the infants they had left in strange homes the night before. Little girls hurried to the strangers' houses where they had left their bundles of belongings, gathering together one little packet and another, and putting the packs on the backs of their little brothers and sisters. Schoolboys dragged half-burned books out of the fire, kissed the burned relics, and carried them all into the little prayer house, which had been spared by the fire.

The brilliant day and the brilliant sun, spreading their glory from out of the wide heavens, flooded the village with shining light. But the light fell only upon glowing ruins, stark chimneys, and homeless little children.

Here and there a simple householder stood by his smoking ruin pulling out a few boards or rafters that might not have been completely consumed, throwing water over the embers, and placing plank against plank, board along board, already planning in his mind how to put together his shattered house.

In the fields half-dressed women held their nursing babies in their laps; around them they had gathered up their bundles and

their packs and their children, and the light of the sun poured down upon them all.

Among the plain folk in the village, it was secretly murmured that God in his heaven had taken the side of the town rabbi and had poured out His wrath upon the wood and the stones of the town.

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6. *The Halfway House*

Slowly the town began to return to itself. Well-rooted villagers are not easily defeated, and a town is not easily destroyed. As soon as a man was able, he put together a cabin for his family. And the town became a town again.

At Reb Yechezkiel's, in the meantime, preparations began for the arrangement of the marriage contract. Leabeh, the bride, knew nothing of what was going on. Every morning she sat by her window and listened to the voice of the rabbi's young son, Gabriel, as he repeated his studies in the Scriptures, and his voice mingled with the scent of the blossoms in her garden, wafting into her fresh, clean little room, and slipping across her face, and breathing across her bare, young breast. The preparations for the feast of the marriage contract were to be seen mostly in the kitchen.

Grandmothers and aunts appeared as though risen out of the earth, and the cooking and baking got under way. A track of flour covered the stones from Reb Yechezkiel's house all the way to the bakery.

Reb Yechezkiel's dwelling bordered on a little alley overhung by a row of wooden houses or rather by a single structure with numerous layers of gables, one balanced on top of the other. There was no yard, and the Lord only knew how the top layers were linked with the bottom. The dwellings seemed scarcely to stand on the earth. The houses belonged to everyone and to no one. That is to say, the dwellings mostly stood vacant, with their windows broken, but the minute an "heir" wanted to move into one of the flats, a whole army of heritors appeared, each armed with papers and birth certificates to prove that the houses belonged to him.

## TALES OF MY PEOPLE

The hand of destiny finally fell upon Leibish the milkman, who was selected by the town agent, for no reason in the world, to pay the taxes. A policeman came once a year and dragged four and a half rubles of taxes out of him. Leibish was neither a heritor nor a relative—but who could argue with the police when they brought in their documents and went off with the Sabbath candlesticks? And so the poor Leibish had to come every day and sweep the alley in front of a stranger's door. Now he was being tormented about building a fireproof wall. So he dragged through his days.

The whole town had prayed for nothing better than a fire that would once and for all burn down the shanties so that there would finally be an end to the argument about who owned them. Every day the schoolboys repeated their greatest wish, "May a fire break out in the middle of the day, so we can get out of school!" But just because the whole town wanted it, this time the fire had left these buildings miraculously standing.

Underneath the shanties that seemed to hang in the air was a cellar that seemed to lead into hidden nether worlds. Down there in the cellar was a baker's oven from the time before Terach, the father of Abraham, according to the village legend, and copper pots filled with golden coins were walled into the oven, but no one dared touch it for fear that the entire house would collapse and people might be killed. Day and night, a fire burned in the oven. It was said that the soul of the baker moaned in the fire because it could not rest.

In the cellar dwelt an old woman, Sarah, the baker's widow, with her six orphan daughters. God only knew how the poor woman ever came to live down there in the cellar, but since she was there people let her stay. On the other side of the basement lived a mattress maker, and the whole street was filled with cotton and feather flakes from his shop. The children nicknamed him "Bird Man," and kept shouting "Birds! Birds!" in his doorway. The old fellow would rush out, chasing them with a stick. Every

## THE LITTLE TOWN

Sabbath eve, especially in the summer, the old Jew would collapse as though dead, thereby terrifying the entire town. "The plague!" they would cry and rush off to find Chyiall the apothecary, to come with his smelling salts.

On Wednesdays all the young lads of the town, the tailor's apprentices and the cobbler's apprentices, would gather to court the six orphan girls, who were scarcely a year apart in age. On a summer evening after work, when the night was dark and the shutters were closed, the boys would stroll by with their pagan little canes, walking back and forth past the cellar, and every few minutes one of the orphan girls would slip out, only long enough to show herself, glancing up and down the street; she might catch a kiss, a caress, from some lad and swiftly disappear into the cellar again.

It was hot there, in the evenings of the Festival of Weeks, when the good Jews of the town were in the house of study, which still stood, and the village wives went back and forth to the baker woman, bringing their butter cookies to bake, and the young men hung about the place, and the moon shone down with half an eye open and everything was muted in the half-drowned night.

All that was to be baked for the engagement feast was brought together in the cellar. Aunts and grandmothers clustered about Rachel Leah, the ancient crone, with the little hairs on her warts; she was the chief of all. She brought her huge mortar and pestle and spices from home, and for three consecutive days she stood there rubbing and pounding and grinding. Grandchildren swarmed from all over to try their hands at the mortar, only to be shoved away. A whole collection of baking molds was brought down from someone's attic; there were cookies in the shape of a star of David, in the shape of birds, of geese, and ordinary seven-pointed cookies. Out of her own head, Rachel Leah invented all sorts of shapes with points and corners. For every bride whose feast she prepared, she would devise a special emblem as a good-luck charm.

The cakes were wrapped up carefully, to be transported to the



place where the marriage articles were to be signed. During this time Reb Yitzchak Yudels had become quite an authority in the house of Reb Yechezkiel; he had won the confidence of every woman and child. And the ladies' man, the Daitschel, was even passing his nights in the house. The women ran around in busy confusion, each one as though she had her hands full of things and knew not where to put them down.

The latest to arrive were Iteh and Golde, the daughter-in-law and the daughter. They had a habit of waiting until they were invited over and over again, and when they finally arrived, it was as though they had fallen from heaven. They would pretend they had no idea of what was going on, and in all innocence they would ask, "What could be happening here?" When the mother began to explain, they shrugged their shoulders and sat down each in her corner, wrinkling their noses to show they weren't mixing into the affair.

"What are you angry about?" the mother asked.

"I, angry?" Iteh lifted her nose a little and tossed her head.

"I, angry?" echoed Golde, with an affected little smile, as a curl from her marriage wig fell over her forehead.

And there they sat as though nailed to their chairs, and they looked with a distant eye upon the proceedings, watching everything that the mother and the other women were doing without saying a word.

Mother Malka ran to and fro, and at every moment glanced alternately into the eyes of her daughter and daughter-in-law as though she were not sure what she was doing was all right.

"How shall we dress the bride?" she finally asked.

"How should I know? Ask her," replied Iteh, with a glance toward Golde.

"Tell her to wrack her own brains," Golde advised her mother.

The mother straightened up from packing her daughter's clothes and set her arms akimbo. "Well! Now all is ready for the celebration!"

One fine morning the wagon was harnessed, and they rode off to the village that was halfway between the dwellings of the bride and the groom, for there the marriage contract was to be made.

Nutta brushed down the horses, tied red and blue ribbons in their braided manes, and tied up their tails; as soon as they got outside the town, he chopped off a tree's branches and bedecked the wagons with the leaves.

In the first wagon sat the menfolk: the rabbi and Reb Yechezkiel; Ozarel and Motaleh; Reb Yitzchak Yudels with Reb Schmaya, the old servant of the rabbi, who was dressed in his master's discarded clothes. Close and distant relatives sat in their velvet hats, smoking cigars. In the other wagons rode the women carrying the cakes and other provisions. On either side of the bride sat Golde and Iteh; perched perilously on top of their heads were tiny, circular black straw hats trimmed with black lace and feathers, in the fashion of bygone days. Golde had drawn out the locks of her marriage wig in the Warsaw style, so that they hung in three curls over her broad shining forehead. They wore their golden earrings and the modish chains and necklaces that were gifts of their own bridal days, when they too had made their journey to the halfway house. And now they remembered their own maidenhood, and shook their heads. Malka, the bride's mother, sat among the aunts. These last rode stiffly and silently, in their blue silken Sabbath caps, all beribboned, their thin lips drawn over their toothless gums. They were too excited to utter a single word, especially as the bride's mother kept stopping their mouths with honey cakes from her amply stocked apron.

And the bride, the bride herself, sat between Iteh and Golde. She wore a stylish hat, and her braids were already put up in a knot. She grew alternately pale and red, poor thing, scarcely knowing where to turn her eyes. Golde kept telling her over and over how she must behave and what she must say and what she must think when she was handed the bride money at the moment of signing the marriage contract, and how she should answer her

future mother-in-law in case she should be asked anything. And from her side, Itch kept darting stinging glances at her sister-in-law.

In order to appear in the best light before the bridegroom's family, they had brought along the wife of the old rabbi of Lowitsch. The *rebbetsen* was a far-off aunt, an ancient crone with a clean-shaved head like a sheep; she wore a black kerchief and a wide black gown with a little pillow in the bustle. She was a law unto herself. First she took hold of the ladies' man who had somehow managed to smuggle himself on the women's wagon, where he warmed his heart among the aunts and grandmothers. The *rebbetsen* took hold of him and threw him off the wagon, for to her he was still a man. Then she kept whispering advice and information into the ear of the bride, so that the poor girl became as red as fire with shame.

The ladies' man ran after the wagon for quite a way; when the *rebbetsen* had exercised her shaven upper lip until she talked herself to sleep, he caught hold of the wagon and climbed up in the rear, poking his dented old Sabbath top hat in among the cluster of ladies' hats. Hanging on the braces of the wagon, he too became drowsy, and his top hat nodded an amen to the nodding of the old *rebbetsen* of Lowitsch.

Thus the wagons arrived at the inn.

The Jewish inn stood at the juncture of two roads that led to two large towns in two different counties; each of these towns was the seat of a wonder rabbi. Followers of the rival rabbis, Chasidim with packs on their backs and sticks in their hands, separated here, going off along the different roads across the green fields and tossing stones at each other from one road to the other. Travelers in foreign lands, coming from various cities from either direction, stayed overnight at the inn. There was a special little prayer house for them because various little crawling things in the old prayer hut annoyed them, and they were important travelers, buyers and sellers out of strange lands. There in the inn the voy-

agers from far and wide would relate the tales of their wandering. The wagon drivers had long thick tangled beards that seemed to cover their faces entirely so that one could see only the little pipes that stuck out of their mouths. They were wrapped in thick layers of wool, and over everything they wore great sheepskin coats with large collars. Their high wagons were filled with lime and oil; at night their giant storm lamps showed from great distances. They all halted at the inn to feed their horses and rest their bones. This was the meeting place of Jews everywhere, and here they told each other what went on in their own lands, how it was with the Jews in the world, and how things went with our brethren, the sons of Israel.

It is evening; the sky is broken into a thousand pieces; the little white fleecy clouds and the little blue islands float in the bright shining sea, and the sea turns purple under the sunset blaze and then fades in the hour of the evening prayer. In front of the inn there are a number of wagons, tall wagons so heavily laden with wares that their axles seem to bend between the wheels. Jewish merchants are carrying goods from one country to another. The horses, unhitched, are feeding, digging deep into their nosebags as though purposefully gathering strength to draw the heavy loads on the rest of the journey.

The Jews are one people with one God, and they all await the same Messiah, but every little village has its own look, its own customs, one might say its own soul, with which it stamps its inhabitants. Here a number of Jews lie stretched out, all seemingly alike, sleeping and warming themselves under the sun's last rays, and the dust of the road covers them all. But on their horses and on their wagons there are the marks and signs of their various cities. On the threshold of the inn sits a Lithuanian Jew, an odd sort in a strange shirt with a short jacket that somehow looks like an overcoat and a hat with a high crown. Even in the summer heat he wears a pair of high boots. He must have come from very far, halting here to rest and to spend the night. He tells his fellow

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Jews how things are far, far off in Lithuania with our brothers, the sons of Israel. He tells them how our brethren live there in fear and in need. This Lithuanian is quite a learned man; he speaks the holy tongue as freely as running water, only with a slight Lithuanian accent. The Jews respect him, and they groan, "What do we know? What can we do?" But somehow in their hearts they don't believe him. A Litvak—if they're not careful, he'll pull his tricks on them. Yet it's true that he speaks softly and seems to be pious. He stood for a long while at the evening prayer, over the eighteen silent behests; still he did not sway, and who can tell what a man hides in his heart?

Clouds of dust suddenly appear, rising from both ends of the road and settling thickly over the fields; the clouds come nearer and presently rip into bits as one hears the whistle of whips, and at length a number of wagons draw up in front of the inn. The wagons are full of wedding guests in velvet hats and women in wide skirts. The women are laden down with hampers, with brandy and honey cake. They all alight from their wagons. There on the groom's side are Jews from another district, with short beards and long beards, and they too have a tall, tall Jew, a sort of Reb Yitzchak Yudels, with a long yellow beard and long hands for pushing everyone around. And like Reb Yitzchak, he outyells everyone.

They all greet each other; the mothers-in-law, seeing each other for the first time, kiss and embrace. The old *rebbetzen* of Lowitsch gives orders to everyone, even members of the groom's party.

The drivers unharness the horses and feed them, then look each other over, with their hands on their hips. They call out jokes and make rough remarks to each other, simply by way of passing the time.

The wedding guests went into the house. The main room had a very low ceiling, with small windows high up in the wall. There

the men sat. Reb Mordecai Konskar's young son Avrimel wandered back and forth in the room; during this time he had grown taller, and a little black beard was sprouting on his cheeks; he was wearing a satin coat with silken girdle. He was dark complexioned, and two long curly black ear locks framed the sides of his face. Everyone shook hands with him. Reb Yitzchak Yudels went over to him and talked to him as with a grown man.

In honor of the guests the innkeeper had put on his high shiny boots, which usually lay cast aside in the cellar all summer long. He placed two large candlesticks on the white-covered table and went out. The guests from both sides began to get acquainted. Among the men this went very quickly, they simply shook hands, said "*Sholem aleichem*," and began to converse. And besides they were already related in a way, being Chassidim, followers of the same wonder rabbi. The learned folk among them soon began a sharp discussion of the Torah. Reb Yitzchak Yudels was already deep in an argument with the tall Jew who was the teacher of the groom. They had hold of each other's beards, and each was giving the other a true example of erudition. They got into a heated dispute, corrected and berated each other, and then made peace with an offering of cigars. The rabbi entered the argument but could not keep up with them. The Chassidim simply brushed him aside with a sweeping gesture. Meanwhile Ozarel came up and lent his ear to the dispute, wrinkling his forehead. At every point he nodded his head with his eyes closed, "Yes, yes, that is exactly how it is."

Then they began to give ear to the groom. He recited a minute argument out of the commentaries, leaping from one passage of the Torah to another and enlarging upon an opinion of the great Rambam. Here and there in the course of his argument he tacked on a reference to obscure authorities, and suddenly he tossed over the evidence brought forth on both sides of the dispute and posed a new question related to the kosher laws. He expounded it by mingling rival theories of slaughter with questions of the afterlife.

Reb Yitzchak Yudels tried to catch him up at point after point, but he kept slipping out of his grasp, dodging and dancing from one argument to another and managing always to land on his feet.

Suddenly the rabbi entered into the discussion, asking the groom to recite from memory a direct passage out of the Gemara with the commentaries of Rashi. Instantly, the young groom began to spout the passage, but in the midst of this, up rushed the tall Jew, Reb Osher Yischaras, his teacher, who pulled him aside crying to the non-Chassidic rabbi, "We have nothing to do with outsiders!" Reb Yitzchak Yudels, the Chassid, grinned with satisfaction, and Ozarel showed that he too was on their side. Reb Yechezkiel yearned to get into the argument, but he was intimidated in the face of learning. The rabbi stood stone still. Protests began; there was shouting; the argument grew more and more heated; and all of them were wrapped in the heavy smoke of pipes and cigars that filled the room and poured out of the open window as a fragrant offering to the Lord.

The two old graybeards, <sup>למנו נזי</sup> Reb Yechezkiel and his partner Reb Chaim Rosenkranz, sat in a corner of the room, their gray heads attentive, as the Chassidim carried on their dispute over the word of God. Each Chassid clung to his argument. Each Chassid supported his brother, one for the other, as though they belonged to a single household. Yes, there was a kind of partnership among Jews. And now they saw their own children mixing into the discussion. There was Ozarel, a veritable Chassid! And the groom—how pearls poured from the mouth of the young man, words of the Torah! He entered into argument with graybeards twice his age, and overcame them. Tears began to well up in the eyes of old Reb Yechezkiel, his dry old heart began to fill with new emotions, and he took hold of his old partner.

"Ah, my friend, God has allowed us to see this day. We were ignorant, but our children—our children—" and the two old graybeards embraced each other in the dark corner.

The room was drowned deeper and deeper in smoke that welled

out from the heavy beards and the thick whiskers and filled the house. Hats of velvet and fur bobbed hither and thither in the smoke, the two candle flames threw a sort of halo all around. The voices of Jews rose in argument, and the groom's young voice rang out like a bell as he poured forth his learning, sounding out over them all. Reb Yechezkiel was filled with pride. This would be his son-in-law, and the voice of the Torah would be heard under his roof! He went over to Reb Mordecai Konskar and half embraced him, holding back part way out of respect.

"Reb Mordecai, I want to take the boy from you, no matter how much it will cost!" And the old man wept tears of joy.

So the fathers went into the garden to discuss the dowry.

In the next room, the bedroom of the innkeeper and his wife, the women were gathered. On the walls were pictures of old soldiers and generals. Napoleon, too, was there, alongside a little Jew in an odd sort of hat, a relative in some strange land. The windows were overhung with foliage that still remained from the Festival of Weeks.

In the center sat the bride, freshly washed and combed; they had dressed her in her new gown with the fringes, and then they had seated her. "Sit quietly." All around her the women sat silently in their chairs, not one of them offering a word. Each waited for the other to start the conversation, and if one of them so much as coughed, she blushed. Only the old *rebbezen* of Lowitsch moved around the room. Her arms were crossed, and her little bustle seemed to announce after her, "After all, I am the wife of the rabbi of Lowitsch." But the women remained quiet, their lips tightly shut. One might have thought they were waiting for someone to smash a windowpane. Then, without anyone knowing exactly how it came about, they began to exchange a few words. From time to time one of them would show off by putting in a word of German.

From the other room they heard "his" voice, the voice of the

young groom, interrupted occasionally by the voice of Reb Yitzchak Yudels. The bride's face grew red and her heart began to beat. Golde, with the locks rattling on her forehead, placed herself beside the girl; she took a deep breath, blew out her cheeks, and played with the golden chain round her neck.

And there on the bridegroom's side, believe it or not, there was a pair of sisters-in-law who were the duplicates of Golde and Iteh. Their Golde was tall, with a dark sunburnt face. Her hair was shaved; she wore a bonnet, wound around with a chain of pearls. She was more of a Cossack than a woman, and she was not to be taken in by anyone. She flattered her mother-in-law, and spoke a "city" dialect, saying "*yach*" instead of "*ich*." She talked only of how things were "with us in Warsaw." And their Iteh was a thin, delicate little woman with a narrow little nose, which kept twitching nervously. She wore a long lace bow around her throat and a light thin marriage wig with a part in the middle, a white shawl and a white shirtwaist. She spoke with an elaborate accent and a liberal sprinkling of German words, said "*icha*" instead of "*ich*," and boasted of the "puttercake" served with coffee at her parental home. Whenever she took offense at the Warsaw Golde, she went over to her mother-in-law and said, "I want to go home," acting the part of a poor innocent little calf with her mother's milk not yet dry on her lips.

The first Golde looked proudly across toward the other Golde, as though from on high, like one young turkey challenging another. In her glance, she let it be known that she was the daughter of Reb Yechezkiel Gumbiner. She kept staring, waiting for the other to try to meet her eyes—and then there would have been a fine wedding, God forbid! But the second Golde was occupied with her conflict with her own sister-in-law. She settled herself close to her mother-in-law—the groom's mother—and began to praise the groom. The mother was filled with pride and melted like butter, whereupon the second Iteh moved over toward the

bride and began to talk intimately and quietly with her as though they were beloved sisters. Soon they were kissing each other and telling each other what great friends they would be when they were sisters-in-law. The Warsaw Golde suddenly discovered that her archenemy was monopolizing the bride, so she too moved over toward the bride and with a loving little smile began to tell her how fond they would be of each other after the marriage, all the while darting dagger looks at her sister-in-law, in the hopes that her spleen would burst with jealousy.

And our Golde and our Iteh sat quietly on their chairs, twisting their thin mouths, licking their dry lips, showing that they did not want to mix into things.

Then Ozarel entered gaily, with his velvet hat halfway back on his head, and his hands in his pocket. "Why are you all sitting here as though you were strangers?" he demanded of his own family. And turning to the groom's mother, he asked, "Well, have you listened to the bride?"

Then the other Golde, the dark one, went up to the bride with a tangled ball of thread and gave it to her to undo. "Let's see what the bride knows," she said and put a series of questions to the girl. The bride answered them. The Warsaw Golde's bonnet bobbed in the air as she considered the bride's replies. And the poor bride grew redder and redder, while her heart beat loudly.

But this did not please our Golde and our Iteh at all. What sort of examination was this! Who were these nobodies from nowhere, who dared "examine" the bride! Their family pride was aroused, and they made an unwilling peace between themselves in order to attack the common enemy. Our Golde sharpened her tongue and attacked.

"As I live, imagine, people from God knows where trying to examine the bride as though she were being sold in the market place!" And with that she turned up her nose.

"In our circles in Warsaw," the other replied, as though biting the words off her tongue, "this is the way things are done."

But the other Iteh must have suddenly recalled her bridal days, for she began to weep—she had a gift of weeping at the slightest pretext—and she fell on the bride's neck and began to kiss and embrace her.

Then Reb Yechezkiel, the bride's father, came into the room.

"Come, women, don't take offense at each other! Let us bring together the bride and the groom, to see whether they please each other."

The Lowitsch *rebbetzen* objected strongly to this innovation, for it was forbidden that a couple should see each other before the marriage. But Ozarel insisted that the modern world required this, and turning to the Iteh of the other side, he said in a rich mixture of German and Yiddish, "Surely you agree. These old geese . . ." and he pointed to his own parents.

The women left the room, and the bride remained sitting in the corner with her face flaming red. She was unable to raise her eyes from the floor for shame and embarrassment. But the other Iteh, who had stayed with her, kissed her and wept over her as though she were about to be taken to the butcher's block. She alone knew and felt what the bride was feeling this moment in her heart. Perhaps she remembered her own maidenhood and wept for the time of her youth.

Then the groom was brought in by his mother. He was as pale as the wall; his ear locks wavered against his pale cheeks and he clutched his mother's arm tightly.

His mother brought him up to the bride.

"This will be your bride. Look and see whether she pleases you." With this she vanished from the room, as did the other Iteh, leaving the couple alone.

The children stood there as though they had just been beaten and as though they were afraid to move from the spot. The boy was completely confused; he did not know what to do with his hands. The girl stood by the window close to him; she heard the

beating of his heart and somehow felt a great pity for him. She slowly raised her eyes and looked at him, and then she was not able to take her eyes away; she wanted to say something but could not think what.

They both wished only that they might remain standing like this without saying anything, without looking, and that no one should see them.

Then the mothers came in, and they asked the children, "Well, do you please each other?" And they clapped their hands and said, "They are pleased! They are pleased!"

The mothers became great friends and began to embrace each other heartily and to apologize to each other, and our Iteh praised the groom before the bride, and the Warsaw Golde clung to the bride, crying, "We shall be sisters for ever and ever. Amen."

Then the rabbi brought in an imposing document and it was given to the bride to sign. The bride signed her name, and everyone cried "*Mazel tov!* Good luck!" Then her future father-in-law Reb Mordecai Konskar gave her a long golden chain with a brooch as an engagement present, and the bride accepted it with a pretty "Thank you" and she kissed her future father-in-law's hand. After this the *rebbetzen* of Lowitsch picked up a whole stack of plates and smashed them on the ground, crying, "*Mazel tov!* Good luck, good luck!"

Then both the Golde's and the Iteh's went up to each other and offered each other their lips, which usually gave forth only sulphur and pitch, and they embraced each other heartily and cried "*Mazel tov!* Good luck, good luck!"

Reb Yechezkiel wept like a little child, and if he had not been abashed before the Chassidim, he would have kissed his old wife. Instead he seized his partner Reb Chaim by his coat and hugged him.

The mothers could not be found, and from all sides people were shouting "Brandy! Honey cake!" and the old men continued to

## TALES OF MY PEOPLE

embrace each other. Ozarel had slipped in among the women and was becoming extremely friendly with the other Iteh, speaking to her almost entirely in German. The little ladies' man with his dented top hat now came to life. He appeared as though out of the earth, and he made peace with the *rebbetzen* and immediately became friendly with all the women of the other side, telling all sorts of little jokes, except that he had a great fear of the other Golde with the feather in her bonnet. He feared her like burning fire and kept his distance.

And then from the kitchen, old Rachel Leah danced in toward the bride, carrying a platter of cakes and delicacies.

*No one invited her  
She came by herself,  
A poor relation she may be  
But still she is my aunt to me.*

Night still lay over the village and the fields and over the whole world, and the moon came up among the clouds; the wagons still stood in front of the inn, and their storm lamps flickered in the night, casting their glow on the wagons of the wedding party. As the guests came out and mounted the wagons, they still chatted, and from the wagons the men still called out their last arguments, quoting a final passage of Maimonides at each other, and the women called out a greeting to the old grandmothers, to the old aunts, and to entire families. The snapping of whips resounded far and wide in the quiet night, and the echo came from afar. Then the wagons drove off to the right and to the left. In one of the wagons that went to the left there was an unoccupied seat; the bridegroom was missing, for he had driven off with his future in-laws on a Sabbath visit.

On the last wagon sitting among the women was the aged Rachel Leah. She had drunk a little too much, her eyelids drooped

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heavily, and half in sleep her thin old lips still mumbled the song:

*No one invited her  
She came by herself,  
A poor relation she may be  
But still she is my aunt to me.*

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## 7. *Friday in the Little Town*

It is a summery Friday afternoon.

The schoolboys finish off their afternoon recitation from the Book of Moses, skip the commentaries, and go home with their prayer books, their Bibles, and their Talmuds under their arms ready for tomorrow's "examination" by their fathers. Once they are home they get at the blueberries that their mothers are turning into jam; their mothers give them their berrying aprons, but they manage to smear up their faces; then they steal a few carrots out of the cellar. The mothers take their boots and coats and put them away in the chest until prayertime in the evening. Barefooted and half naked, off the boys go into the streets behind the synagogue square where all the rest of the lads are already waiting. With their hands full of stones they run into the market place and chase the baker's pigeons. The panic-stricken birds fly over the square, while the baker rushes out after the boys, who take to their heels and escape.

The burned town is half smoothed over; here and there one can still see a ruin patched together with half-charred boards. Everyone's property is separately fenced around. Here and there one finds piles of lumber and boards. Goyim are at work, while little boys clamber and leap around the lumber piles, and make seesaws out of the planks. A number of Jews, the idle and the unemployed, sit watching the goyim at work, giving them advice as to how to set in the doors and the windows. The Jews argue about their system of construction, and the goyim laugh at them.

In the market place there are green apples to be found and ripe little pears can be had for two coppers. A little boy runs by,

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blowing a whistle made from the throat of a freshly slaughtered duck, and the lads run out after him. A little girl hurries by on her way to the s̄ynagogue with a chicken in her hand, for some question has arisen as to whether the chicken is kosher, and the rabbi must be consulted. Then a woman passes, carrying a duck on a plate. The duck has proven impure, and she is about to dispose of it to the Christian baker. The fathers lead their young sons from the barbers where they have had their heads shaven like sheep, in honor of the Sabbath of Consolation. Jews with packs on their backs come walking from the road, to spend Sabbath in the village. Wagons arrive in the market place. They are loaded with Chassidim, with old Jews and youngsters and boys coming to spend the Sabbath with the wonder rabbi. The town is filled with new faces. Jews stroll freely about as though they were in Jerusalem, open and free, with their fur hats, their low shoes, and their white stockings, with their ear locks and their pipes. The town becomes lively with the Friday feeling; people run about, hurrying, and anyone can easily see that this is the eve of Sabbath, the eve of the great day. Even the sun seems to move over the town in a special Friday manner, letting her light pour down and her golden rays fall wherever they may, making no distinction as to whom they shall touch. Drunken peasants and their drunken wives in red kerchiefs and white coats leave the inns and ride off home; they kiss, weep, and laugh, hug each other, and dance. Their sleek, well-fed horses are decked out with ribbons as though they were on their way to a wedding; they leave the town in a great commotion, their wheels banging over the stones and pigs squealing in their wagons. Boys run after the wagons, shouting and yelling, their shirttails hanging out.

Laible the water carrier comes riding up from the river with his barrel filled; the children fall upon him, pulling hairs out of his horse's tail for use as fiddle strings. Laible curses them and flourishes his whip, but the children pay no attention; they keep on



1904

Kuzmir in mid-19th c

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pulling out the horse's hairs while they feed him blueberries and buttered buns, and the horse patiently bears everything.

The rabbi appears with a group of strangers. He goes from house to house, leaving a Sabbath guest in each house.

Along the street the wagon of the rich Reb Yechezkiel appears, driven by his man Nutta. He is hurrying home for Sabbath. Nutta unhitches the horses and mounts one of them, leading the other to the river, while Reb Yechezkiel sits down in his doorway and quietly slips a coin for the Sabbath to needy men who come to him in secret.

Everything in the street has a Friday air. The little clouds in the sky hurry away as though trying to reach their homes for Sabbath; more and more Jews appear in their long satin coats, in their white stockings and low shoes. Young men in satin and silk, carrying their change of clothing on their arms, go down to the river to bathe. These are young little Chassidim who have come to spend the Sabbath with the wonder rabbi. The town becomes cozy and friendly; the tailors and shoemakers deliver their last pieces of work; the apprentices receive their beer money and hurry into the shops to buy collars and ties, then run down to the river to bathe in honor of the Sabbath.

The river flows behind the house of the old ritual butcher. At night, the dead come from the little cemetery across the way, to take their ritual bath, but on Friday evenings it is the turn of the whole town. All the males of Kasner are gathered here, as naked as God created them. The field is strewn with white packages of clothing, while naked grandfathers, naked fathers, and naked boys sport in the water. The town has long been known as a town of swimmers; the citizens are proud of their prowess in the water. Fathers hold their boys on their bellies, teaching them to swim; the children cry out, and their yells split the sky, but their fathers drag them deeper and deeper in the water and duck their heads. The children open their eyes, screech, and are ducked again. Solemn-faced Jews who worry about business all week

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long now become playful and show off their tricks. One performs a fancy dive, another swims under water, and a third performs a somersault, crouching into a ball, clasping his hands about his feet, and rolling over in the water. A young man from Melawa astonishes the world with his feats of endurance; he lies under water for hours, like the fish, seizing people by their feet, then suddenly leaps up in the air, turns a somersault, and dives below again.

But they remember the saying, "The river devours a human life every year." In the midst of the sport, a scream is heard, "Help! He's drowning!" and there, indeed, someone is being whirled out where the current is strong. The poor fellow struggles to get out of the current, but he has been pulled in, and the waves hold him fast and keep dragging him under. The young man from Melawa dives expertly into the stream, gets hold of the drowning man by the hair, and pulls him out of the water. Meanwhile women and children have come running from the town, screaming, "Who is it?" "Chaim Mosheh, where are you?" They all seize the poor fellow and begin to roll him and to toss him about; they tie a belt around him, and thus they revive the dead.

The river is part of the town, but the field along the edge of the river belongs to the big landlord of the village; so he sends out a policeman with a dog to chase away the bathers. A shout rises, "The guard is coming! The guard!" They pick up their bundles of clothes and run naked to town; a whole army of naked Jews scramble along with their bundles on their heads while the goy and his dog chase them into the midst of the town. But there the Jewish butchers come out with clubs in their hands, and they free the town's Jewry from the arms of the goy. Already the sun is beginning to set far down on the road to Lintz; evening is coming. Things become quiet along the river; people are hurrying home. Only the last of the wagoners who arrived late in town now come down to the river to bathe, together with a few craftsmen who were late in finishing their work. The market women pack

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up their goods and go home. Freshly washed boys hurry down the street with empty bottles to fetch the wine for the Sabbath blessing from the spirit shop. One by one the shops close. And at the end of the street near the inn, on the way to the cemetery, a figure glows red in a cloud of golden dust. The sky over the town grows dark, one hears the custodian of the synagogue passing through the streets, rapping on the doors to warn that the Sabbath is at hand. Candles are already seen in many windows. But the half-destroyed cottages, the remains of the charred ruins, look like poverty-stricken relatives who have come to a wedding, ragged, yet in velvet Sabbath hats. Before several of the houses, the housewives and their little daughters sit, combed and washed and dressed for the Sabbath.

In the streets all is quiet and peaceful; the Sabbath arrives on silent feet, spreading restfulness everywhere. The Christians' church bell rings as though for itself alone, announcing the hour of prayer in the church. From the little study house the Sabbath candles glimmer, and one might imagine there is a rivalry between the church bells and the Sabbath candles. Each is calling its own to itself; pious Christians, both men and women, go through the quiet streets of the village to their church, and freshly washed Jews, their white shirt collars turned over their Sabbath coats, walk to their house of prayer. Chassidim in satin and silk, with white-stockinged feet, go to their rabbi's house, and the little town becomes ever quieter, ever more peaceful, ever more Sabbath-like, as though it had been divided between the little study house and the church, each having taken its own unto itself. Through the freshly polished windows one may see the glimmer of candlelight and the glitter of candlesticks. Maidens begin to appear, strolling in the little street. And the call of the cantor, "Come, O beloved!" sings out to the accompaniment of the church bell. The singing and the ringing mingle and become a single prayer to a single God.

Reb Yechezkiel and his son-in-law, the bridegroom, appear in the street, on their way to the study house. Young girls appear

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in the doorways and on the doorsteps along the street; well-bred respectable daughters peer out through the open windows and whisper to each other, "Leabeh's groom." "Leabeh's groom!"

Maidens and future brides stroll along the synagogue lane, wearing the golden necklaces they have received from their future in-laws. On the other side of the street, the young men walk, the grooms in their satin coats and their silken girdles, with their black side curls, and they too are wearing their golden gifts, the watches they have received as engagement presents.

Suddenly the cry of a mother breaks the quiet of the night-enchanted street. "My child! my Yitzchackel!" Women and girls come rushing from all sides, crying, "What has happened? What is it?"

"Yitzchackel went off in the afternoon, and he hasn't come back. Woe is me! He was seen by the river."

The woman weeps into the quiet street. A group gathers around her, and they whisper the old superstition, "The river takes a life every year. The river takes a life every year."

And the night grows quieter and darker; Sabbath arrives with silent steps and spreads restfulness in the summer world. Far off, there where the heaven lies on the water, the secret of the woman's little boy Yitzchackel, who has disappeared, may be known.

The mother runs down to the river's edge, there where the sky meets the water, where they both lie stretched out together, there to uncover the secret, to find out what has become of her child.

Friday evening had come. In honor of the bridegroom, the table at Reb Zechezkiel's had been set out in the large room. They had added the wings to the large table, as they did only once a year at the Purim feast when all the children and grandchildren gathered together. Malka, the housewife, had not spared any candles. She knew quite well that the greater the number of Friday candles, the greater would be the blessings of the Lord. The large table

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was bedecked with silver candlesticks of the ancient six-branched kind. Everything in the room shone bright under the candlelight. In honor of the groom Malka had brought out the silver table service that was used only for the Purim feast, and she had set out the silver beakers at the head of the table. The Sabbath bread lay ready for Reb Zechezkiel, covered with the Sabbath bread cloth. On the right hand, the groom's Sabbath bread lay ready, covered with ceremonial cloth, embroidered in silver thread by Leabeh for her groom. Malka wore her white silk dress with cloth-of-gold trimming; it was cut in the old-time style with wide folds that fell one into another, and over it she wore the silken shawl with the blue fringes that her husband had brought from the Leipzig Fair. She stood there in her tall Sabbath cap, covering her face with her delicate pale hands, as she said the blessing over the candles. Leabeh, freshly washed for the Sabbath, with her long silken braids falling over her blue velvet jacket, looked like an ideal daughter, who is obedient to all her father and mother's behests and behaves in a manner approved by all who are good and pious—may the blessing of peace and happiness rest upon her head! She seated herself next to her mother and together with her mother she recited the blessing.

*Lord of the world, may this, my fulfillment of the duty of lighting Thy candles, be as pleasant to thee as the candlelighting of the High Priest when he fulfilled his duty in Thy holy temple! And may the eyes of my children shine with the light of Thy beloved holy Torah. . . . And may their fortunes shine in the heavens above.*

The windows were open into the street, the croaking of frogs could be heard from the garden across the way, and far away in the black woods there was the reflection of a little light, hanging there in the deep night like a forgotten little Sabbath light, over which the frogs were saying the blessing. A dark fog hung over the water, covering everything; only one little light winked out from far away on the other side, and one might have imagined

that the old river Vistula, the gray-haired grandmother of rivers, had also lighted her candles in honor of the Sabbath.

Wafted through the open window were the God-given summery scents of a thousand plants and flowers. They poured through the room in all their fragrance, caught up a word of the blessing, a bit of the Sabbath prayer, and drifted out again, carrying the blessing over the fields and over the woods, over heaven and earth, spreading the Sabbath blessing upon God's world.

The Jews were coming home from the house of prayer. The lucky ones brought along a Sabbath guest. The angels of Sabbath flew before them, carrying a Sabbath greeting of peace, and spreading peace over the town. And the Jews beheld the Christians who had come out in their weekday clothes and were sitting on the benches in front of their houses, with their wives and children, singing and making merry. The Jews had pity for them, thinking "Poor Gentiles, they have no Sabbath!"

And thus, Father in Heaven, Thy folk, Israel, were warmed <sup>lyric</sup> under Thy hand. Everything seemed to be released and free; all was clothed in holiness, as though the Sacred Spirit herself had embraced the people of Israel, wiped the tears from Israel's countenance, caressed the people, smoothed Israel's ear curls along his cheeks as a mother caresses and comforts her child, and lovingly had said unto him, "Art thou my faithful son, Ephraim? Or art thou a playful child? As the favorite of my children, I shall always remember thee, and therefore my forgiveness shall always be ready toward thee."

And God's mercy was poured upon the world in the night. Reb Yechezkiel came home after the prayers were said in the study house and a goodly number of guests came with him.

"Good Sabbath."

"Peace unto you, *sholem aleichem*, from the hosts of angels of Sabbath, the angels on high."

And one might almost see the Sabbath angels spreading their two white wings, bringing peace over the room. Malka and the

bride sat by the table, waiting for the blessing over wine and expecting from the husband and bridegroom the pleasant words that men speak to their wives on this occasion—"A good wife, who will find her?"

They sat down to the table. Reb Yechezkiel was at the head of the table, with the bridegroom next to him, and opposite them sat mother and daughter. All around was quiet; only the breeze that came through the open window kept up a continuous whispering. Every few moments, Leabeh shyly lifted her eyes and glanced across the table. He was so attractive in his satin coat with his dark face! And she saw the golden watch peeping from his silken vest, the watch that he had received from her. He was her groom. She would live with him in one house. Only they two, no one else . . . and her young heart beat so lightly, so quietly.

The young man sat silently, with his eyes lowered. What could he be thinking of now? About her, about his Leabeh? She blushed. Her father had brought a bridegroom home to her. . . . Ah, if only nobody were there to see, if her father and mother had gone to bed, then she would go to him quietly, for after all he was her bridegroom, and surely it was permitted to go to one's bridegroom, wasn't it? But Father and the bridegroom were singing the service in unison. His voice, how it rings, how it rises, pouring out through the open window.

*"Peace and joy unto all Israel . . ."*

And now she, the bride, rose and served the dishes at the table, setting a plate before her father, before her mother, and before him.

May he eat in the best of health! And her heart beat fast as she stood by his shoulder, and it seemed to him that something holy brushed past his face. . . .

Later in the meal the partner, Reb Chaim Rosenkranz, arrived with his wife and Ozarel and Motaleh, Iteh and Golde, with their children, and a host of other relatives and friends. They offered their greetings to the groom and asked whether the local cantor

found favor in his eyes. This started a general discussion of cantors; someone sang a bit of a synagogue chant, and the bridegroom answered with a Chassidic melody. People in the street gathered beneath the window. The groom closed his eyes, rested his cheek on his hands, and his voice poured forth, flowing out in a song without words. Beneath the window more and more people assembled, and the daring ones put their heads in at the window. "Leabeh's groom!" the maidens repeated to each other while they pointed with their fingers. The door opened, and strangers began to come in, at first with an apologetic little laugh on their lips, saying, "It so happens . . ." but soon they walked right in, crowding the room.

Then wine was brought to the table, and the cups were filled again and again.

Soon Reb Yitzchak Yudels appeared, saying a hearty "good Sabbath." The people respectfully made room for him. Ozarel placed his hand on the Chassid's shoulder and loudly addressed him as a brother. Reb Yitzchak Yudels could not stay very long because "the rabbi will soon be saying his blessing." Presently the blessing after food was recited, and then the younger folk started off to visit the wonder rabbi, and the partners and in-laws, Reb Yechezkiel and Reb Chaim Rosenkranz, rose to go to the study house where their own rabbi went through the weekly portion, every Friday night, with the ordinary folk.

But Yitzchak Yudels pleaded with them; in honor of the groom, Reb Yechezkiel and Reb Chaim must come along tonight and visit the wonder rabbi!

At first the older men were hesitant about missing the weekly chapter, but their sons and the groom himself pleaded strongly, and Reb Yitzchak Yudels said, "You must get accustomed to the new way."

So at last the fathers gave in. Though still a little embarrassed, they allowed themselves to be led by their children to the wonder rabbi.

It was the first Friday night when they were not to be found at the rabbi's reading of the weekly portion.

In the house of prayer of the wonder rabbi, there is a mighty gathering. In God's congregation all are equal; though they be youths or elders, each has one soul, one body; all have the same love of God; all pray in one prayer house, and their prayer is one. A thousand voices rise out of a single heart; the whole congregation is fused into a single entity, a sea of black fur hats and black beards. All eyes are turned on the man in the white gown, who paces back and forth through the sea of black fur hats, making a path from one end of the prayer house to the other. This is the wonder rabbi. His hands are folded on his girdle, his eyes are turned toward the ceiling, and his spiritual high forehead is knotted into a single deep furrow. He has only a single thought, a single desire toward God.

And God is here, here in the midst of His congregation. He has mingled with His people; He has become part of the community; He is a flame in the lamp of the congregation. The Sacred Spirit and the congregation of Israel, the congregation of Israel and the Sacred Spirit—both have been wandering in exile, and here they meet, and they recall the ancient bridal time when they were first united. For is it not with them as between a bride and groom who have had a little quarrel and have separated; they have gone their various ways in strange lands, and now they meet again in a foreign stopping place.

And the rabbi gave voice to his hymn of love unto the Lord, the Song of Songs.

He did not sing, but chanted deeply and intensely, giving each word its full meaning and beauty.

*Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me: my mother's children were angry with me; they*

*made me keeper of the vineyard; but mine own vineyards have I not kept.*

*Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou makest thy flock to rest at noon: for why should I be as one that turneth aside by the flocks of thy companions?*

*If thou know not, O thou fairest among women, go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock, and feed thy kids beside the shepherds' tents. . . .*

*I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys.*

*As a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.*

*As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. . . .*

*My beloved is like a roe, or a young hart: behold, he standeth behind our wall, he looketh forth at the windows, shewing himself through the lattice.*

*My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.*

*For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone;*

*The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land: . . .*

*Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.*

And the rabbi's voice did not seem to speak the words, so much as to taste them, and to offer them so that all who were present might know the sweetness, the loveliness, the devotion, that the children of Israel felt for the Sacred Spirit and the Sacred Spirit felt for the children of Israel.

And the rabbi's flock understood and yearned for the blessed words as a thirsty field yearns toward the blessed clouds. As the congregation absorbed each word, it sang in their hearts and caressed them, for each word was a greeting from the Sacred Spirit to the children of Israel in exile. *Were I a bird in the fields I would fly unto thee. . . .*

All the congregation joined themselves together, and they became as one heart and one soul.

The rabbi spoke the words with a love so intense that he might have been reading from a letter of love.

*I sleep but my heart waketh.*

*Were I a bird in the woods, I would fly to you.*

And those present felt close to each other, became one soul and one heart, for the rabbi said the words with such love, as if he read a letter, a dear good letter that came from a thousand miles away.

*I sleep, but my heart waketh: it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night.*

*I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I defile them?*

*My beloved put his hand by the hole of the door, and my bowels were moved for him.*

*I rose up to open to my beloved; and my hands dropped with myrrh, and my fingers with sweet smelling myrrh, upon the handles of the lock.*

*I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself, and was gone: my soul failed when he spake; I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer.*

*The watchmen that went about the city found me; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me.*

Suddenly the rabbi was silent. He walked back and forth across the house of prayer without saying another word. His eyes grew larger and larger as he looked heavenward, and the furrow cut deeper and deeper into his brow. His spell of love seemed to have fallen upon the Chassidim, holding them all in a single embrace.

Then the rabbi started out of his enchantment, and with great joy, as though he had received revelation, he cried out, "Peace

unto you! Peace unto you! The angels of Sabbath! The angels on high!"

And to the congregation it was as though a thousand angels had fallen in among them. It was as though the angels from on high came down to them and embraced them fondly and joined them in celebrating the Sabbath, in the house of their rabbi. They rejoiced together, old friends, fellow townsmen; everyone seized hold of the girdle of his neighbor, crying, "Peace unto you! *Shabbath sholem!* The peace of Sabbath! Oh, the eternal angels bless us! The angels on high!" And they went deeper and deeper into ecstasy, each man lived within the soul of his neighbor, and they were united in the joy of Sabbath, in a single love.

"Peace unto you! The blessing of the angels on high!" And the rabbi entered among them, mingled with the flock, clasped them by their hands, and with their arms all intertwined they cried out ecstatically, "Peace! Peace unto all! Peace be unto your coming!"

The rabbi became still again and stood in the center of the room with his eyes turned heavenward as though they were awaiting something there, begging something from heaven. He grasped his girdle more tightly and remained standing thus a long while, utterly motionless, and then he came to himself, and he went off into a little corner between the Torah shrine and the wall. He bent his head and stood there, deep in his own thoughts, and he murmured something quietly to himself. He slowly began to sway, and a silent, wordless prayer poured from him. From time to time he moved his hands as though he would call out or sing out through them. And then he would become still, once more sunk in himself.

All around him, row upon row of dark heads remained bowed in a sweet silence; a tender awe and affection embraced them all, and they groped for each other's hands and waited with trembling expectancy.

The rabbi awoke out of his spell, and with new energy he called to them, "Let us make the blessing."

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His face shone as though it had been kissed by the Sacred Spirit and consecrated. A warmth emanated from him, embracing them all, drawing them all within himself.

The congregation made way for him. In the door there appeared a procession of women, with the rabbi's wife in their midst. Upon her high shining forehead was a band set off with diamonds, pearls, and gold. A Sabbath queenliness shone from her, and spread upon them all as she said, "Good Sabbath." From beneath her Sabbath headdress, the large diamonds in her long earrings blazed like great drops of the Sabbath itself, and the shining pearls that were spread over her heart, upon her silken dress, were like frozen innocent tears adding their glow to the holiness of Sabbath. And as she came to the table, surrounded by her daughters and daughters-in-law, the pride and grace shone upon her queenly Sabbath face. Her silken gown sang after her, her diamonds and pearls dazzled the eye, and all the gathering was filled with respect.

The rabbi filled the silver beaker with wine, lifted it high, and spoke the Sabbath blessing, "*And God blessed the seventh day, and made it holy.*"

The blessing hovered over the heads of the multitude and then floated out through the open window into God's secret world of mysteries, and the weekday mantle was lifted from God's world, and all the world was wrapped in a gown of Sabbath.

The street was dark. The deep-set stars flickered in the blue sky like Sabbath candles flickering in a Jewish household, while the family sits around the table drowsing over the story books. Here and there the Sabbath light still burned brightly in a window, but soon it would go out. From the open window one might still have heard the sleepy end of a Sabbath song.

While the night lay over heaven and earth, the rabbi's blessing spread over the four corners of the world, and at last, all slumbered. Far off in the street one could hear the steps of the Jewish watchman, walking through the town all night long to guard it

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from another fire. From the open windows of the rabbi's house the psalm rose high over the street.

Two white beards, two gray-white heads showed themselves in the dark night.

Reb Yechezkiel and Reb Chaim were coming home from the rabbi's welcome to the Sabbath.

From the window of the little house of study a smoky little light still shone, and the tired voices of the sleepy men could still be heard.

They went into the study house.

At the table, which was faintly lit by a smoky dying lamp, sat the rabbi. Around him was his little flock of ordinary folk, tired after their week's work, and together with them he repeated the weekly chapter, "*And I pleaded with God in those days. . . .*"

A heavy weariness lay upon the sleepy congregation.

The gaunt figure of the blind cobbler could be seen, among those who were sitting there. He was snoring loudly and all the others in the little congregation were embarrassed.

most elaborate of these are left as legacies from mothers to daughters. Every coat is embroidered around the sleeves and the neck with broad designs in silk. On their heads they wear a sort of half cap made of two flowers wound together over upright wires, enveloped in a "Turkish" scarf, sometimes known as a synagogue scarf. Young wives of the modern world wear little two-pointed collars, tied with a silken shawl from Leipzig, and the two ends of the shawl are drawn into a wide bow over their hearts. This is very becoming, and heightens their feminine appeal. On their smooth marriage wigs they wear a cap of black embroidery, with a long black feather, tied with two silken ribbons around their throats. The maidens, dressed for Sabbath in their freshly pressed gowns with their white petticoats, stand in their doorways or in the windows along the entire street watching all who pass. Those who are all dressed up feel as though they are on parade, and walk slowly with a special manner, knowing that a hundred eyes are watching them and that everyone is discussing their every movement, and that all they wear is being weighed and measured by a hundred tongues.

Little boys walk before their mothers or their aunts carrying the women's prayer books wrapped in a handkerchief. And then the family men and householders come out in their long Sabbath coats and clean collars on their spotless shirts. Some already wear their prayer shawls, and some of them have their prayer shawl and their prayer books carried by their little sons who walk behind them. Chassidim appear in their long satin coats and fur hats, and white collars and silken ties, their neat attire attesting to the excellent housekeeping of their wives. Some are going to the ritual bath and some are coming from it. The street becomes ever livelier, more cheerful, filled with Sabbath atmosphere. The sun pours down from the heavens—a fresh new sun especially brilliant for the Sabbath. She pours her light upon the one side of the street, leaving the other in shadow. And on the leaves of the trees that blossom before the doorways the dew of night still glistens.

5 July 13  
8 *The Sabbath*

Sabbath morning—the sun rises in the heavens and the light of day spreads over the village. The day comes of itself; it needs no human help. The shops are closed and locked; no one is as yet awake. Not a soul is to be seen. A peasant comes driving into town with his wagon; he stops to feed his horses. From the deserted aspect of the street, he knows this is the Jewish Sabbath, then somewhere a little Jew appears in his doorway, in his newly washed underwear. He yawns openly and freely before the world. And presently a Chassid walks by, on his way back from his ritual bath, with water still dripping from his wet ear curls, falling on the newly laundered collar of his shirt, which is carefully folded over his coat collar. A tall thin Jew with a long white beard suddenly appears in the midst of the market place. He opens wide his mouth, and calls out like a trumpet, "Into the synagogue!"

And then women begin to appear in pressed white jackets; they run and beat on the windows, crying "Sarah, didn't you hear the call?" Iron latches are unfastened, shutters are opened, and white bed linen may be seen through the open windows. The sleepy ones gaze out toward the clock on the tower of the town hall. "What time is it?"

Now, one by one, the women come forth in their Sabbath finery. From one Sabbath to another, they labor lovingly over their garments, so that they may emerge in their best, to show themselves in the house of God. The fashion now is for wide silken gowns that are narrow at the top and grow wider and wider, until the women look as though they live with half a dozen children in their gowns. They love to strut in their embroidered jackets, and the



But the synagogue stood in waste and ruin, fenced around with boards, a coffin of a synagogue. All that remained standing after the fire was a sort of wailing wall, a pitiful remnant of the synagogue, and they went past it groaning and then went on to pray in the little house of study.

The prayer was already under way in the house of study; the cantor had prepared a few new songs for the faithful congregation of the town rabbi. There stood the cantor surrounded by his choir, by the boys, and by the obscure folk who wander about the streets all the year without anyone paying much attention to them, but who suddenly become important on the Sabbath day when they can make the congregation joyous or sad and when it is in their power to carry the villagers' prayers up to the heavens. At the door stood the "experts," the handkerchief maker with his little split beard and all of his companions. As usual, they were criticising the chorus, twitching their noses from time to time, or tapping with their feet, covering their eyes, or suddenly turning their heads and listening. "There . . . like that!"

Reb Yechezkiel and the groom arrived a little bit late as is fitting for a groom and a Chassid. Avrimel was welcomed with a psalm; the women looked down from their balcony, marveling at the cantor's rendering of the chant.

After the prayer, Reb Yechezkiel invited the congregation to come to his house for the blessing of the wine. Malka delayed the plain folk in another room, where the fish was being warmed, while Reb Yechezkiel waited for the Chassidim to arrive. Then Ozarel appeared with Reb Yitzchak Yudels and all his followers. They began to push and to shove, without sense or reason, pushing the plain folk aside. And in the great commotion that they made, the Chassidim stretched out their arms and seized whatever was on the table. Malka was filled with pride to find Chassidim in her house, learned men! And Reb Yechezkiel had virtually turned into a Chassid himself. The Chassidim pulled him into their circle and slapped him on the back while several of them began to sing.

Everything became quite merry. Malka handed out the fish, and everyone sat down to table; then people from all over town began to bring in delicacies as a gift for the groom. "Mother sends a pudding for the groom," the maidens would say, carrying in a platter that was covered over by another plate, with a napkin wrapped around the whole.

"Thank you, thank you!" Mother Malka would say. "Thank you in God's name. And when your own groom is sitting at your table, we will repay you with flasks of wine!" Her happy voice rang out over the room.

The table was covered with puddings, for each housewife in the village was recognized by the taste of her pudding. A well-made noodle pudding certainly came from an old housewife whose kitchen was managed in the ancient traditional style; a narrow pudding filled with raisins and other dainties was certainly from a modern "lady," scarcely a pudding any more but halfway a cake. A dry pudding well browned with goose fat, containing a sprinkling of raisins but plenty of pepper—that certainly came from a Chassidic table.

The street was still lively and gay. Through a number of windows one could still see people sitting at their tables, taking their day of ease. A number of family heads were drowsing over their prayer books in the midst of the blessing. The younger element and the schoolboys were stealing away from their tables. Before the blessing was finished, they ran out into the street, and up the hill at the edge of the town where the young men and maidens went strolling.

And the Sabbath lay over the hill. The town drowsed sweetly beneath its mother's apron, and this was the enjoyment of Sabbath. Schoolboys were gathered on the hill; they stood on the top, pretending to be generals spying out the town through telescopes, which they made out of their closed fists. Children slid down the hill one after another, tearing their Sabbath coats and their Sabbath boots. Women promenaded along the lane at the bottom of

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the hill and halted to shout up at the hillside, "Nahum, your Sabbath coat!" "Chaim, come down from there! Are you coming?" The lads pretended not to hear and kept on sliding one after another down the hill.

But suddenly a boy called out, "Here comes the rabbi! The rabbi!" and then the whole flock of them took to their heels, vanishing in the distance. Far behind the hill, the road continued, and there was the stream that cut through the town, and beyond was the watermill. The slapping of the water against the wheel could be heard from a distance. And beyond the watermill the older lads, the students of the Torah, went strolling far along the road.

After the meal, as is customary in a good man's house on Sabbath, Reb Yechezkiel crawled under the covers for a nap, and Malka did the same.

Leabeh, wearing a Sabbath dress with a white apron, went into the salon like a modern bride and sat herself by the window, reading a modern romance. Her groom walked back and forth in the salon, a bit more at home. They now felt a little as though they belonged to each other, although they had not yet spoken an intimate word to each other. She kept on reading, no longer disturbed or abashed by his presence, for after all they had been made bride and groom. She said nothing but tasted her joy within herself, feeling her happiness in her heart. For he was hers, a little groom all her own, and she counted his steps within her heart. Now they were no longer ashamed to keep their eyes on each other for after all this was certainly not forbidden. But they had nothing to say to each other, and so they remained silently together in the same room.

"Perhaps Avrimel would like to drink a glass of soda water?" she suddenly asked him, gaining a little boldness.

"Thank you very much," he replied.

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So she brought him a glass of soda water, setting it down close to him. Then he picked up the glass and made a loud blessing, and she felt as though the blessing now included herself, and so she answered with a half-whispered amen. Then she felt deliriously happy, as though she had joined him and they had made a blessing together.

Then they were silent again. He went on walking back and forth in the room. He had an impulse to tell her the story of the lad from Lowitsch in the study house. But then he remembered that she was only a girl. How could she understand such matters? And she had an impulse to talk to him about her circle of girls—but after all he was a man. And so they were silent, yet they felt that it was good to be together, for now they were bride and groom, and after that—but they did not dare to think any further.

From outdoors the Sabbath sun shone through the windows and poured her light on the window sill and came into the room, brightening the silver candlesticks and the glassware. Outside the open window, where the blossoming tree shimmered, one could hear the laughter and the liveliness of the youngsters who were sitting on the benches in front of their houses. Maidens strolled by in the street, glancing into the window as they passed, to catch a glimpse of Leabeh and her groom.

In the afternoon the street was filled with the sound of prayer. From every window voices rose. Reb Yechezkiel, like a good family head, sat down, as was his habit, and first read through the entire weekly portion. After that the grandchildren began to pour into the room, and Reb Yechezkiel listened to each of them reciting his portion, while their grandmother dispensed their Sabbath delicacies, a pear, an apple, a handful of berries, swelling with pride over her flock.

The groom sat at his studies on the other side of the table. He recited in a loud full voice from the endless Gemara, recited to himself, held arguments with himself, disputed over the commentaries with himself, and finally apologized to himself. Presently he

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allowed himself to escape into the path of ecstasy and delved deeper and deeper into the mysteries.

Reb Yechezkiel was silenced in his simple Bible reading by the imposing flights of the holy Gemara that rose about his ears. To think that in his own house, under his own roof, the words of the exalted scholars of all the ages were flying about and contending with each other! Oh, father of all the rabbis! How beautiful this was, how wonderful this was!

On chairs in front of the door sat Malka and the partner's wife, and her daughter-in-law and her daughter. In their silks and their velvets, with their golden necklaces, they watched the strollers in the street.

With slow Sabbath steps, the sun went down below the village. Jews were on their way home to eat the third meal of the day. They walked leisurely, deep in conversation, the women in their Sabbath garments, and after them—let no evil eye befall them—swarmed their children and their children and their children. The little ones tugged at their mothers' aprons, demanding "Sabbath presents! Sabbath presents!" and the women pretended not to hear, walking on in quiet dignity. From the open window the groom's voice resounded, reaching out over the street, enveloping it in the holiness of Sabbath. The passers-by halted for a moment. "Listen to the groom! Listen to the groom!"

Leabeh sat quietly playing with her golden chain, listening to her groom.

Darkness had already come. Here and there little candle flames appeared in the dark of the windows, as they began to dispel the blackness that came into the rooms. From far away a little forgotten melody came wandering into the lane, a melody that was being sung at the evening meal at the wonder rabbi's table, and it passed through the little street and flew on to another world.

A few shops opened, and here and there a woman with a kerchief hastily wrapped around her head hurried through the streets with a worried complaint, "Heavens! My husband has fainted."

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Some ran into the apothecary's for soda water, some ran to the doctor's for the hot-water bag, and the ladies' man dashed from house to house with his smelling salts.

A fright ran through the town, as though the angel of death had brushed it with his wing. They were afraid actually to speak of the matter, but it cut into their hearts.

The plague?

The moon made a path for itself between the dark clouds and appeared so pleasant, so friendly, that it could only be wishing a good week to all.

Here and there little groups of Jews stood and bade the moon welcome.

And far away the frogs croaked in the water . . . but who could tell what the future had in store?

*omits comic episode of Note being  
caught red-handed w/ fentele*

517k 831D 217

## 9. The Holy Month

Now the early days of autumn came to town, and with them they brought the wool dealer who appeared every year just before the high holidays.

No one really knew whence he came or who he was, but he was the first visitor of winter. In the days of early autumn, before the high holidays, when the householders sat before their doors after breakfast, giving the children their coppers as they went off to school; in those days when the sun still reached into the streets but no longer warmed them, then the wool man suddenly appeared. He must have come from somewhere far away where winter had already arrived, for he wore high snow boots; he carried a great bundle of wool under his arm, for knitting woolen stockings. He was a thin little man, and he wore a wool scarf around his throat even on the hottest days, as a sort of reminder of winter. He was a mysterious little Jew who seemed to be sent into town as a harbinger of winter, and when he was seen in the town, everyone felt a shock and a feeling of apprehension.

The first bird of winter.

After him all sorts of newcomers appeared in the village, people who were not seen the entire year round, people with odd hats and strange coats cut in a foreign fashion, peddlers with packs of ritual vests, with strange charms and amulets and toys and horn rings for the children. From their presence one felt that far, far away somewhere there was a world, and in that world lived Jews, and that the poplar-lined road led to and from that world, away from and into our town. . . .

Strangers arrived in their little covered wagons, bringing blind

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orphans, or Jews with wooden legs, or lonely women. There were respectable-looking Jews with flowing beards, and there were families who came with written documents in their hands, stating that their homes had burned down.

Other visitors came, Jews who had the faces of Gentiles and even Gentiles with Jewish prayer books in their hands, relating how their fathers had been important landowners and generals and how they had been overcome by love for the Jewish faith and had given up everything in order to undergo circumcision at their ripe age. Somehow in their hearts the Jews cherished a fear of these newcomers, who were at once Jews and yet not Jews at all.

In the little street of the synagogue there was a pleasant feeling of excitement as the booksellers arrived in their covered carts with all sorts of literature—little prayer books and psalm books that carried the scent of Warsaw, of Berditchev, and also the scent of travel. The schoolboys pulled hairs out of the horses' tails, plagued them, and then led them out in the street where they could mount them. The booksellers lived in the little prayer house, setting up house behind the high cage where torn and discarded volumes of scripture were kept. There they brewed themselves tea while the Jews were at prayer; they spread out their volumes on long tables, and the lads of the town pestered their mothers for money for new little prayer books, for new study books—and what Jewish mother would not take the bread out of her mouth to save a few pennies for her boy to buy a little prayer book or a study book?

And then all sorts of sick people came riding into the town to visit the wonder rabbi. There was a Jew with an evil spirit in him that kept crying out like a rooster, there was a woman with an evil spirit that shrieked out of her belly, there were all sorts of Jews with all sorts of ailments, and each one had another pack of troubles. And suddenly there arrived a man who sought a trial before the court of the Torah against a dead man who gave him

no peace but came every night demanding that he accompany him to the court on high. The whole town gathered at the wonder rabbi's to hear the dead man speak from behind a curtain.

And upon all this there lay a kind of Jewish charm, a spirit of familiarity with the other world of mystery, a veil, like the coat of dust that lies upon ancient holy books. One might have imagined that such a Jewish other world actually existed somewhere—a Jewish world consisting of one immense house of prayer, where the whole Jewish community lived as though in a case of discarded leaves out of the scriptures, enveloped in holy dust, and that upon all this there lay the spirit of Jewish family love and of longing.

It was a fine clear day. The women sat by their doorsteps knitting stockings and scarves. From a yard somewhere the voices of little children came out into the market place as they sat in school repeating the words of the holy Torah. And a woman repeated a phrase out of the women's prayer, "*In the name of the little innocent children who reached out their little necks toward God.*" There was never such a sun in heaven or on earth; her sunbeams lingered over the market place like guests reluctant to depart, and suddenly one heard the blast of a ram's horn. The sound trembled in the air, startling young and old.

So the women sat on the doorsteps of their homes, knitting and embroidering. And wagons came driving up to their doors, and distant cousins and aunts from far away came visiting, wearing their mourning clothes, for this was the season for visiting the graves of their fathers in the old cemetery.

The old cemetery was spread out on the hill, with every tombstone hidden by a tree, and under every tree a sleeping soul, and they all looked down forever into the village. The rabbi of each generation lay surrounded by the good folk of his time in a separate little corner of this holy place, and here one could count the generations of the fathers of the village. Many of the names of the

dead could still be found among the living; some of the names had been graven upon the stone and wood of the village, had become the names of streets or of courtyards. Reb Johanan's, Reb Mosheh's Yard. . . . It was quiet in the cemetery. From somewhere behind a tombstone an angry cat meowed, and elsewhere a mad dog's eyes glittered. The town billy goat with his harem of she-goats clambered over the graves, pasturing among them, and a quiet little breeze swayed the branches of the trees. Here and there living persons knelt among the graves, and a steady quiet sobbing rose from the tall wild grass, as was fitting in a cemetery, and one could scarcely tell whether the sobbing came from the dead or from the living. In one corner Chane Esther, the cemetery woman and the oldest crone in town, guided a young woman to where her father's bones lay resting. And the cantor's little children climbed into the apple trees, and between one requiem for the dead and another, they knocked down the little green apples.

At this time of year the man from the land of Israel appeared to gather up the money that had been dropped into the little collection boxes fastened on the door frames of all the Jewish houses, just below the amulet of holy words, the mezuzah. In every Jewish house this money was gathered for the land of Israel; whenever a housewife blessed the Sabbath candles, she dropped a little blessing money into the box.

He arrived like a shadow, a tall lean man with a pale, ascetic face; in his high furrowed forehead a deep secret seemed to rest, the secret of God's reason for the long, long exile, the secret of the time of the coming of Messiah. . . . He was one of those Jews in whose existence everyone believed; surely they lived somewhere, but no one knew where. The sight of such a Jew recalled something familiar to our hearts, though we could not say what it was. He aroused a forgotten loyalty, deep down in us, and made us feel as though we somehow belonged together. The man from the land of Israel wore a white satin coat, and he had long black ear curls,

and he sat in an obscure corner in the house of prayer. A group of old Jews had gathered around him. There was Reb Mosheh David, who had taken upon himself the holy duty of burying the torn and worn leaves of the holy books in the cemetery, and there was Reb Yoshiahu Wolf, and Reb Nota, all those who spent the days of their old age sitting in the prayer house, long-standing members of the circle of psalm readers. They were the bodyguard of our teacher Moses and the faithful friends of David the King. They had long ago prepared their burial garments and made ready the little sacks of earth that they had procured from the land of Israel. And these old men listened well to what the man of Israel had to tell of the motherland.

They were never tired of gazing upon him, for in the folds of his garment there was the dust of holy land, the dust that blew upon the graves of the holy forefathers, and over the tomb of the holy mother Rachel, and within this dust there was a secret from afar.

Out of his pack he drew bits of stone that he himself had chipped away from the Wailing Wall, for he had stood there, reciting the evening prayer with a congregation of Jews. Each of the old men took the bit of stone in his hands, setting his iron-rimmed glasses upon his nose while he studied the true stone out of the Wailing Wall from the ancient temple in Jerusalem. This was the very stone from the temple, this bit of stone was from the days of old. The high priests had perhaps leaned against it, and this stone had seen the passing of every pilgrim who came with his sacrifices to Jerusalem. Then the man from Eretz Israel drew out a little sack of earth from his pack. This was the earth from the grave of Mother Rachel, there too he had been, on the road to Ephrat, as it is written in the Scriptures, there where our father Jacob buried our mother Rachel, on the road to Bethlehem—from there he had taken this bit of earth.

And the Jews studied the earth from the ancient tomb, from the

grave of our mother Rachel, the grave that had been dug by our father Jacob with his own hands.

A voice seemed to speak within their hearts, *And thus have I not done. And in my coming up on the way from Padan, there your mother Rachel died upon me, and this was in the land of Canaan which is in the land of Israel and on the way to Ephrat. Of this Rashi says in his commentary, And therefore it was that I did not bring her into Ephrat, in order that I might bury her in the land of Israel. And since Thou art perhaps angry with me, I say unto Thee that all this was according to the word in the prophecy, for when the Jews should be driven into exile by Nebuz-radan, then our mother Rachel would appear out of her tomb and plead for mercy, as it is written in the chapter. A voice of pleading shall be heard and then God would be kind unto her as it is written in another chapter: There is an answer unto thy deeds.*

And the old Jews were filled with longing, and here and there a tear dropped upon their spectacles.

Dusk had fallen upon the town and from a faraway land a wind blew upon the street; now and again an old man showed himself in his winter overcoat. Yes, he had already put on his winter clothes, and with his head bent into the wind, he went into the study house to recite the evening prayer. The young lads, the tailors' and the shoemakers' apprentices, put aside the canes they had carried when strolling in the fields and in the gardens, while they paid court to the pretty girls in the summertime, and now they went into the house of study like old men with their prayer books under their arms, and they recited a few psalms between the prayers of evening and of night, for the beginning of autumn, the month of Elul. Out of the little shops wide beams of light came from smoky lamps, giving the lane a synagogue atmosphere. On one side the sky burned with a hellish red glow; down there the

evil ones were being roasted and burned and their blood streamed into the fire, flaming and flickering. Beneath the trees, the street was empty of life, not a lad was to be seen, nor a maiden. Dutiful little women rubbed their hands against the moist windowpanes of their shops as a substitute for the washing of hands, before they raised their eyes piously toward the heavens and uttered an amen to the blessing that could be heard from the house of prayer down the street. The prayer house was crowded with Jews, young and old. There was warmth in the house of God. With all their souls, the men had turned to their eternal creator. A preacher stood in the pulpit, exhorting them in his sonorous voice, reminding them of their glorious task, reminding them that they were God's children and that the Lord had only wanted to test their faith in Him, and that at every moment the Lord awaited their return. He told the parable of a prince who sinned against his father the king, underlining the parable with a passage from the Prophets: "*If thou wilt return, saith the Lord, return unto Me.*"

And then the congregation felt themselves to be like little children wandering in exile, lost from their Father in Heaven. After the preacher's admonitions they devoted themselves energetically to their prayers. It was the same weekday prayer for mercy that seemed to carry with it memories of the winter lamp burning in the little room, and it was led by the same Reb Osher Aaron with his same hoarse voice, but still it was not the same; something had come to life in the dark congregation, half hidden in the dim house of prayer. A forgotten longing stirred among the people, the longing of the exiled prince for his father the king. A shimmer fell upon them, a darkling, melancholy shimmer, as of a hidden spirit that entered into them and gave them a universal soul, and the simple weekday prayer became something altogether different, became a renewed word of God. A spirit glowed among the simple folk, the spirit of the Jewish congregation, the simple weekday members of the praying circle.

The congregation stood to the prayer of the eighteen verses. The prayer house was half dim; the little candles before the holy Ark were already dying; only somewhere in an obscure corner little drops of light fell into the ocean of darkness. A heavy silence lay over the heads of the worshipers. The single prayer shawl among the multitude of black coats was like a living being among dead shadows. A multitude of black shadows swayed this way and that, as though a wind of mysteries were blowing upon them and bending their heads one way and another. There was not a word uttered in the entire congregation, not even a cough was heard, but now and again, "O Father above!" was torn from an old ailing breast, and the silent multitude of shadows swayed with its secret swaying as though speaking an amen to his groan. A mute soul, wrapped in its black cloak, prayed in the darkness together with the multitude, and the prayer too was mute and dark.

And now it was night. The voices of the poplars that stood on the black cemetery had become muted as though the "Germans tall" had gone early to sleep. Cold winds blew from there, and the lane became dark; everything seemed to be wrapped in black; the shutters were closed over the windows, and from the cracks in the shutters little streams of lamplight escaped. The Jews were already at their labor, a cobbler's hammer could be heard tapping on his last, and the tapping resounded in the street, something familiar, like the chirping of the cricket behind the stove. It reminded people of the long dark winter evenings in the workshops lying ahead.

In and around the town the cottages were drowned in a sea of orchards. The sons of Israel stirred in the groves. Here and there a fire shone through the dark green gardens, and smoke arose. Somewhere a man's wife was cooking his supper, and the little flames among the dark green branches lent a loving pious atmosphere to the village and seemed to draw people to it. Here and there in the dark foliage little glowworms appeared like sparks of fire or like lost souls.

And God's world was like a chaste and loving bride who walked

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all alone at the edge of the road, down the little street, toward the black lane.

The dark silent sky seemed to utter the prayer of night over the village: "Cover mine eyes with sleep and mine eyelids with dreams."

## 10. ~~三~~ After the Holiday

The high holidays had gone by. The villagers had fasted for the Day of Atonement, and afterward, as every year, they had had their joyous recompense in the Festival of the Torah. Early in the morning Aaron Leib, the one-eyed cobbler, had wound a prayer shawl round his head, Turkish fashion, and danced through the village with the scroll of the Lord pressed to his bosom, and he had banged his fist on the table of the house of prayer, singing, "O Moses our teacher, O Moses our teacher!" But now the first night after the holidays crept upon them, the first night of winter.

It is a mute dead night! Not a light shows in the village; cold winds rip and blow without beginning or end. Here and there the shadow of a tree outlines itself, its naked branches swaying like the ghost of a dead tree in the night. The fantastic shadows of its bare branches make fearful shapes in the darkness. All about is silent, dead, and dark. Far down in the little street it seems that the form of dead Aunt Leah walks slowly along. In her white winding sheet she leans against the window of her kitchen to see whether her children are being mistreated by their stepmother. Here and there the wind plays with a torn sheet of tin roofing or with a swinging shop sign, banging it one way and another. Somewhere water is dripping, and the drops rattle down a trough. Far down the street one hears the grinding of a little mill; the kernels fall on the millstone, and it groans protestingly, pretentiously, as though it had knowledge of God and was complaining—the Lord only knows against what.

Lonely steps are heard in the dead of night. They echo upon the stones, and a Jew appears on his way to the study house carry-



ing his little prayer-shawl sack. He is on his way to say the morning prayers. And a frigid "good morning" reverberates in the street. A little light shines out of a high window as if hanging in the air, and the stuttering of a sewing machine rips through the dead night; a tailor is already beginning to work. From a back street there come the sounds of a wagon being hitched . . . and who is running there in the dark street in this dark night?

The deadly weight of the night still lies on the village and yet one already hears the life of the village struggling from beneath the burden of the night.

The night becomes grayer, and the morning begins to peer out as though through misty glasses. Out of the gray mist the forms of tall wooden houses begin to appear; they seem to be in the process of creation, slowly taking flesh and bone upon themselves. Morning lights show in the windows, a cold wind bends the trees in the street, and one might imagine that the wooden houses also bend a little in the wind. Peasants' wagons stand already hitched in the market place. Jews begin to busy themselves with parcels and crates, with boards and rods. They are going off to the market in a neighboring town.

Reb Mosheh the furrier comes riding down the street; he is hauling a wagonload of skins down to the river to be washed. The dew of night still clings about his wagon. The sky becomes grayer, as though it were wrapped in a prayer shawl, repeating the morning service, and had only got as far as "*How goodly are thy tents . . .*" The houses stand out more clearly against the gray background; here and there the lights in the windows are already extinguished, and the houses stand out now as though they had dropped their mystery, as though they had just come out of another world, crying, "Here we are as you see us."

Lads and good children wrapped in their warm fur coats, with their prayer sacks under their arms, enter the house of study for the day's lessons. It is full day now, but a few candles still shine out from the house of prayer. One hears voices in prayer and

in study; it must be warm in there. Over the rooftops the white morning clouds lie cold and fresh; the first breath of winter blows from afar. Smoke rises from a number of chimneys; the women are already cooking breakfast—thick, fall cabbage borsch with potatoes—and a cold day of reckoning rises over the village.

Sometimes the sun suddenly appeared in the heavens, as though she had crept out to pay a debt, and for a moment people would feel optimism in their hearts, but almost immediately a wind would blow across the market place, stirring up the dust and the scraps of straw left over by the peasants, together with other rags and bits of refuse; the Lord only knew from whom or from where all this came to litter up the market place. The refuse danced in the wind, whipping into people's faces like the end of a witch's broom—a broom that swept away all hope. The little huts that had been built for the harvest festival of Succoth were still standing, but now the wind tore off their fir branches and carried the foliage away to the market place, and the bare little houses remained standing naked and ashamed, nothing but four empty walls knocked together from bits of wood, without a roof, without a bit of green; what use were they? What a sight!

And the three trees in the Jewish street stood drowned in their fallen leaves. The trees looked mute and dead, staring off into the market place. Now and again, seeming to come to agreement about something, they shook their bare branches, one of which still held a leaf at the end of a twig; they were mourning the summer. "So it is, so it is, my children."

Only yesterday the townsfolk had celebrated the Festival of the Torah as a veritable marriage feast. All their troubles had been forgotten. For this day, once in a year, people were bound to be happy. And so they had made merry. They had gone to bed half drunk, and when they woke in the morning, the stench was still upon their beds. As soon as they awoke they were restless, for

during the holidays the Jewish grocer had consumed the bit of flour that remained in his sack, and a craftsman remembered that the pincers in his shirt pocket had somehow got lost together with his shirt. And so they came into the market place, stick in hand, ready and eager to earn a few pennies. The wind blew. A master-of-all-trades wandered around the market place, wrapped in his sheepskin coat. One after another appeared, some wearing their silken hats because their weekday hats had got lost somewhere in the merrymaking. The Jews wandered about, waiting for the peasant carts to appear, as for Messiah. They quarreled for no reason at all. On the threshold of Reb Zekiel Epstein's shop a number of grain dealers stood around, freezing in their little coats; there was nothing for them to do. The man-of-all-trades bought a radish for his lunch from a cart in the market place; the others watched him, sighing, and pointing at him with their fingers, for more than one of them was thinking to himself that no one else would eat lunch today.

Now there was a commotion in the street—the sheriff was carrying off two Sabbath candlesticks and a set of impounded Sabbath covers. A woman ran after him begging and screaming for mercy, but the sheriff paid no attention. The Jews stood there in their light coats, and their hearts began to tremble, “Oh, oh, the rent!”

The children were not in school; they had finished with their old classes and not yet gone into the new, and in the meantime they are wandering empty-handed and idle, getting in the way of their mothers. Their mothers scolded them, so they snatched a bit of bread for their pockets and ran about their business. In the Street of the Butcher, hides were spread out to dry in the sun, and fruit lay spread out on large sacks, apples and plums and winter berries. They snatched a handful of plums and ran out into the meadows, where the village herd grazed. A heavy fog lay over everything, but this did not matter to them. They gathered twigs and corn stalks and straw left in the fields and built a fire.

They sat around the fire roasting potatoes and weaving switches out of palm leaves stolen from the Succoth remains. The smoke rose from their fire and hovered darkly over the town. It looked as though the children had captured the town.

The teachers wandered around the market place trying to flatter the poor little storekeepers, the fathers of their pupils. The parents listened to the pleasant words, nodding their heads. Talmud students came riding into town with their little boxes of belongings. Still dressed in their new holiday clothes, they took their boxes on their shoulders and went from house to house, seeking the customary pledges of “table days” in different homes so that they might receive their meals in each of them one day of the week. And the lads of this village started out to studies in other towns. Their mothers accompanied them to the edge of town, helping them to carry their little boxes, sending them off to study among strangers, hoping that all would go well with them. The whole town seemed to be afraid of something. It trembled and worried for the future.

Beyond the town there walked a tailor with a long yellow beard and with swollen eyes, talking to a tall thin apprentice. The lad was dressed in a new sackcoat, which represented his summer's earnings. The tailor walked along with him and promised him all sorts of things. The young man listened silently. And there on the road, someone was already off with pack on his back, going into strange foreign places in the wide world, seeking his bit of bread somewhere, and his mother followed him for a distance, blessing him and weeping.

Toward evening the wagons returned from market, loaded with parcels, wooden cases, and boards. The lights shone out of the little shops and the sky was darkly clouded, the clouds lay thick over the little town and a cold rain fell; for so it had always to be; it always had to rain on market day. Perhaps it was on purpose; perhaps for no reason at all. The drainage ditches filled with water, and the water flowed over half the street. One could no longer pass from one side of the street to the other. People

vignette  
at Shtet  
poverty

## TALES OF MY PEOPLE

stood in their doorways looking across at each other. The ditch water ran into the shops whose thresholds lay even with the street. The Jews cleaned out the unbidden guest with shovels and rags, but the water that was shoved out of one door came back in through another. It took up a board, a plank, and carried it off into the street. The women ran after, crying, "Stop! stop!"

*death personified*  
The sickly Gedalia Yudels walked along the house of prayer, looking as ill as death itself. He suffered from a lung disease inherited from his father and grandfather. Though as tall as a man, he was thin as a boy, so that one constantly feared that his tall body would snap in two. A heavy scarf was wound round his scrawny neck; he coughed and looked about with large wide-open eyes. Everyone in the village knew that he would probably die this month, for this was the worst month for tuberculosis, and they looked upon their fellow being who was still with them today, and who tomorrow would be a part of the great mystery hidden from us all, which we all so greatly fear. All became quiet in the street as Gedalia Yudels passed by; people began to say the prayer of repentance in their hearts, as though the angel of death with his long black wings had flown down the street. Little boys stood whispering together, pointing. And the street was filled with the fear of death.

In the evening the housewives sat with their neighbors around the ovens where apples were baking for the older lads who were studying the Gemara late into the night; the winter lamp stood lighted on the table, and the wives sat around it, mending winter clothes and telling tales. The young children, in the early grades, had been brought home by the teachers' helpers, and they sat by their little table playing their little games, waiting for their elder brothers and sisters to come home and amuse them. Meanwhile the house was still quiet; the dark night looked in through the dark windows; outside all was night, and here they clustered at home around their mothers.

Reb Yechezkiel's wife Malka had also returned from the market

## THE LITTLE TOWN

in Lowitsch; she was laden with packages and boxes. Like a good experienced housewife she had ridden to market to buy a trousseau for Leabeh, her youngest daughter. When she arrived with the boxes and packages the household gathered, the entire family and all their close and distant acquaintances, Iteh and Golde and Rachel Leah, and all the aunts, to examine the purchases, offer their opinions, and wish luck to the bride. Malka unpacked calico and cotton, the sheets and the linen, the tablecloths and all that went with them, and she related the history of each separate piece, how she had found it and how she had bargained for it, exactly where and how she had made the purchase, and told of the miracles that had taken place, which were as numerous as the hairs on her head. The women felt each separate item, weighed and measured it, and tried to guess how much it cost. And they never once hit it right. They were always a little too high or a little too low. As is natural and customary with women, their opinions were completely opposite one from the other; if one were to say "cellar," the other would have to say "garret," and so there began to be angry words and tightened lips. Then the women's tailor from Kalish appeared, a dark young man who had just been married and whose face still wore a youthful cheerfulness. He sported an eight-cornered hat, and was known as a reader of storybooks. Every Sabbath eve his house was filled with young people, and there was dancing. He was well known for his habit of tickling the women under their arms when he took their measurements, and indeed more than once he had received a slap from an outraged husband for this habit. He had brought along a large volume that he called his "journal." It was a book of women's fashions, and he showed them how the women of Paris were wearing dresses with narrow sleeves and layer over layer of frills around the throat. He informed them that in Paris women were wearing mannish coats with hoods hanging down the back. He was an expert in his work, he told them, and he knew all the latest fashions in the great world, but here there was no one for whom he could properly

exercise his craft. Therefore he intended to leave for London right after Passover. He would cross the sea; in fact he already had his passage; he had his tickets at home. He told them all this in a fashionable new dialect filled with German words, right out of the storybooks. There was a modern tailor for you! A fellow like that—how could anyone ever make a good pious Jew out of him!

The children were gathered in the kitchen, boys and girls. The boys had just returned from the house of study, and the lights still burned in their little street lanterns. Among the children stood Rachel Leah, sharing out little honey cakes from her large apron. The cakes, shaped like little birds, she had baked especially for the children, for this was the custom from long ago—to hand out honey cakes to the children on the evening when the bride's wedding dress was given out to be sewn.

## 11. Three Weddings

*Mazel tov! Mazel tov!* For this was Leabeh's wedding day.

A quiet clear winter night. For a few days the snow came ceaselessly down over the little town, covering it from head to foot, and then one evening the moon came up. She found her way through the clouds and made the village so bright that the children on their way home from the house of study used their little lanterns more for amusement than to light their way. After the moon, the stars appeared, each from its secret resting place, and they swam from one cloud to another on their great journey, until they reached all the corners of the earth. The stars shimmered down upon the banks of snow that lay around and within the town like great flocks of white sheep huddled close to one another.

All was cheerful and homelike in the town; the shops were open; lamps shone from the windows; and youngsters jumped on the sleighs that glided through the streets. For there was great festivity in the town. Three weddings. The richest man in town, Reb Yechezkiel, was marrying off his youngest daughter Leabeh. Reb Yechezkiel's driver Nutta was leading Yente the cook under the wedding canopy, and the blind Akiba was presenting a scroll of the Torah to the synagogue.

The wonder rabbi himself would perform the ceremony at Reb Yechezkiel's. A whole army of Chassidim and of other important folk had arrived for the wedding; there was even a string orchestra, and Reb Noah, the clownish master of ceremonies, was also on hand. Oh, what a wedding this would be! Even Nutta's wedding would be quite a ceremony, for Nutta was going to stand before all Israel to put the veil upon his bride. Not for nothing was

there a custom among the old families to marry off a servant on the same day as the youngest daughter of the house. And on the very same day there would be the festival for the presentation of a scroll of the law, the first ever given to the circle of early-morning psalm readers!

The entire village was filled with relatives of the bridal couple. They rushed about in sleighs whose bells jingled through the streets. The children jumped on behind to catch rides, and there was turmoil and commotion everywhere. One saw Chassidim in silken hats, velvet hats, fur hats, and special fur tricorne hats; they all did each other honor in the streets. Jews appeared with their boots polished in oil, in new-style holiday coats, with a split in the back. There were female relatives in towering headdresses, all beribboned, and in wide silken gowns. Aunts stood impatiently before their doors, bedecked with chains and brooches, waiting for the sleighs that had been sent out to fetch the wedding guests, a newfangled idea, since they had only a few steps to go to Reb Yechezkiel's. Young girls who only a few days before the wedding were running about in pigtails, which they had tightly braided so as to make their hair curly for the wedding, now appeared decked out in white gowns, with blue ribbons and white shoes. They carried little velvet bags in their hands, with money for the fiddlers: And for the groom there appeared young men in satin coats and silk hats; some wore fur hats of their family pattern—a sign that they were about to become betrothed. And then little boys appeared in new hats, and girls with their hair freshly washed came walking with their mothers to the wedding.

Music was already heard in the street; the whole town assembled, and there was dancing in the snow. Children made snowballs, in preparation for the moment when the bride and groom would be led through the courtyard of the synagogue toward the wedding canopy. And the moon joined in the sport, pouring her light upon the snow that lay like a warm blanket upon the town. All was bright and cozy; the stars winked down, the snow shimmered

upward, jewel-like flakes whirled into the wind, and the white-capped cottages stood by, and the sleighs skimmed along, with their bells ringing, while little boys leaped up on the backboards.

Violins were heard in the street, playing long-drawn-out Chassidic tunes; Reb Schmucl Lintchester's violin sang into the street, rising in a crescendo. The stars in the sky were listening, and all the white world around gave ear. Chassidim sang sweet melodies; candlelight and lamplight shone through the windows; the streets became bright with light; women appeared in their doorways with lighted torches. The waiting horses beat their hoofs. The bride and groom were about to be led to the wedding canopy in the synagogue courtyard. Chassidim in black fur hats began to pour out into the street, a sea of black velvet hats and satin coats; women stood by in glittering kerchiefs with diamonds strung like stars across their foreheads. Their ample silk dresses rustled in the street; wax candles flickered in their hands; black velvet mingled with the bright silk gowns like black streams of water in white snow. In the midst of the procession was the rabbi in his long white gown, and all around him were his black-garbed followers. The *rebbetzen* of Lowitsch, with her wide kerchief bound around her temples, danced before the bride and groom, scattering raisins and almonds, while little boys and girls caught the raisins as they showered down. The rabbi's helpers drove away the children, clearing the path. And now the bride and groom appeared. They walked together, veiling their eyes with their handkerchiefs; their parents walked on either side. There was Reb Yechezkiel himself, wearing a tall fur hat and white shoes and stockings, just like the Chassidic father of the groom. The mothers were arm in arm with the bride, and the whole made a most aristocratic impression. The rich, and the Chassidim. The fiddles played, and the Chassidim sang, and the candles illuminated the procession.

The second procession followed immediately. Nutta led his bride to the wedding canopy. A little boy ran before them carrying his school lantern, with cut-outs of lions and bears glowing in differ-

ent colors. Then came Yaeckel, the drummer; he had his swollen cheeks in a bandage, bim-bom! The whole street rang and reverberated. A lad had somehow got hold of the town alarm, which hung on a post in front of the town hall, and he began to sound it vigorously. Wagon drivers had taken the storm lamps off their wagons and were lighting the way of the bride and groom. Aunt Rachel Leah had joined hands with a wagoner who was a distant relative, and they danced before the bride and groom, while the drum banged away and the youngsters whistled and scooped up handfuls of snow, packed them tight, and let them fly at people's heads. The groom led the bride. In his Sabbath hat Nutta looked like quite a respectable fellow, but his eyes winked mischievously from under the wedding canopy. Yente the bride, dressed in Esther's Sabbath clothes, cried at the top of her lungs. The town rabbi appeared, amid the relatives and the wagoners, who wore their best coats and their black cloth Sabbath hats and had their boots greased. Here and there a woman in a wide beribboned dress, with a white bow on her head, sprang out of the crowd, seized an unhappy male guest, put her hands on her hips, and danced on one spot with him.

After the second couple, the third procession appeared out of a side street—the procession of the companions in prayer. Trumpets heralded their way through the village. What was this? Had Messiah come to town? Jews in masquerade were mounted on steeds. There rode a Turk with a prayer shawl wound around his head; a witch with rattling chains rode aloft on a broom; wild lads came running along, leading the town goat dressed in a long coat. Tar-dipped torches flamed skyward. Grapeshot rattled against the stones. The commotion reached to heaven. Did they want to bring down the walls of Jericho? Black masses of Jews with children clinging to their hands, seas of black velvet hats and coats, they came dancing with songs on their lips, dancing around the blind Akiba, who clutched the little scroll of the law and hopped about blindly with it. Our Torah! Our own Torah! The poor man had

never swallowed a warm spoonful of food in his life, he had slept on stones, he had begged from house to house, put aside copper after copper, and in his old age he had ordered a Torah to be inscribed for him, a scroll of the law that would be as an offspring, to bless him after he was dead. And the Jews, the companions in prayer, leaped and danced in the street with him, and sang with him, "Our little Torah! Our own little Torah." Aaron Leib the cobbler threw off his coat, put on the barber's cap, and embellished it with chicken feathers. He seized the scroll of the law and danced and whirled with her. The blind Akiba clapped with his hands; his child, his heir, his good deed that would live after him! He kissed the Torah. Jews with their children in their arms danced around the book of the law, kissed it, hugged it. "Our little Torah! Our little Torah!" and the little silver bells that ornamented the scroll rang out with them in their joy, and the torches crackled in unison, and the trumpets sounded, and the Jews sang and cried out and danced and leaped about, and the little boys made snowballs and bombarded the procession as they danced along with it.

The three wedding processions reached the courtyard of the synagogue, which was surrounded by a low fence of half-burnt boards; under a white blanket of snow that reached as far as the fence lay the ruin. It seemed to peer upward to heaven from under its white cap. The moonlight poured down upon the destroyed house of worship. The three processions halted by the ruin, yet the music of the three did not mingle together; each melody from each instrument seemed to go its own way, sounding out separately, and one might have thought that the melodies were holding a contest in which each instrument vied with the others. The delicate Chassidic violins, the plain people's drum, and the common trumpet seemed to be struggling, each to drown out the other.

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into one song. Each instrument contributed its tune, the violins of the Chassidim, the trumpet of the plain people, the drum of the wagoners. And it became the single melody of the village.

And the wanderer, together with the melody, and together with the dark ribbon of the river, became lost somewhere far in the distant white infinity.

Outside the village, the whole world around was garbed in white. All was quiet and peaceful as though in a great cemetery. A strange white fog hung far over the sky, weaving together heaven and earth. The moon wandered all by herself in the silent wide infinity, and the cemetery lay upon the white hillside, with her graves scarcely visible above the white snow blanket. The wandering moon above picked out a tombstone here and there, upon which to pour its light. Beyond the fence of the cemetery, the dark river flowed. The townspeople declared that the river's source was beneath the rock of our teacher Moses and that its waters would heal diseased eyes. The water of the river, alone of all that was visible, was not yet covered by the white blanket of snow. Here and there in the black waters, lumps of snow had settled, and in the moonlight they made strange shapes—like weird animals sitting on their eggs. Far behind the cemetery, the black river lost itself like a black ribbon disappearing into white infinity, and no one could tell where its end might be.

All alone, with a pack on his shoulders and a stick in his hands, a wanderer passed along the road that went by the cemetery; he walked between the tall snow-laden poplars that stood shining in the moonlight like white-clad witnesses. Here all was silent and still; everything led its dead existence. From a distance old Kasher heard the tunes of the violins, snatches of song, and the distant echo of the trumpets and the drums. Only here there was no more struggle between the melodies; they no longer seemed to try to drown each other out; gently, as though they came from a hidden world, the melodies wandered here, and flowed together, mingling

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