

# NERVES

BY YOSEF CHAIM BRENNER

*translated by Hillel Halkin*

pitch of his voice, ironic and serious at once, softened the suddenness of it.

"Eh?"

"I was saying . . . those trees . . . do you see the tops of them? If I were writing a travel journal, or a 'Letter From Palestine' of the kind that's in fashion nowadays, I'm sure I'd begin: 'Our Jewish colonies: a fleeting yet irrepressible smile quivers through their still too few tree-tops . . .'"

"Quivers?" I repeated the word, a favorite of his when playing the nature lover. Generally he hedged it with sarcasm, but now it was impossible to tell whether this was the case or not.

He swallowed the bait. "Exactly! I'm talking about the tops of those trees. How old would you say they were? Not more than twenty-five years, I shouldn't think. The oldest trees must remember . . . yes, twenty-five years ago there was nothing here at all . . . nothing but sand and dunes . . ."

"But why do you keep coming back to the tops of them?"

"The tops, is it? Because they can see a long way. Perhaps they even see the great cities from here. (Did you know, by the way, that your innkeeper's son has the good fortune to be off to America next week?) You know, the great cities, the ones beyond the sea . . ."

"What about them?"

"What about them? Millions of people made them. For centuries men built them, rebuilt them, accumulated treasures in them . . . so that . . . so that today they stand on solid ground. If you're born in them, you're somewhere. There's even a grandeur about them. Do you remember those monumental railway terminals? Those magnificent parks?"

"So?"

"Whereas here we live in self-imposed poverty. A village barely twenty-five years old . . . and lived in by whom? Ha. Why, just today your innkeeper said to me: 'I should let my son grow old in this hole like myself? I'd see him dead first . . .'"

A bird whose Hebrew name neither of us knew flew brilliantly by, flashing green against the blue sky, and disappeared.

"But the sad thing about it," he went on in his secretive voice, which was tinged not with irony at all now, but with a peculiar sort of earnestness, "is what our treetops see, or should I say foresee, right around them. Let's say they can forget the great cities. Let's say they can't even see them and needn't compare them with our pitiful Jewish village.

They still can't help noticing their surroundings. And I tell you, my heart goes out to them . . . my heart goes out to anything that is forced to put forth branches before it has time to strike root . . ."

"A prophecy?"

"Not even an editorial. Surely we've seen for ourselves."

"Seen what?"

"Villages! The old ones, I mean, not those here. Those that belong, that have their own sun to shine and their own rain to fall on them, that aren't a quarter-of-a-century old . . . and whose inhabitants aren't exiles from their father's table either . . . who . . . still taste the fleshpots of Egypt in their mouths . . . but who . . . well, they may be filthy beggars themselves . . . oh, I'm sure of it: they are! . . . but at least they're not the outcasts of the earth. When I think that those treetops are doomed . . . and always, always, the same wretched Jews on the run . . . what misery!"

The evening gong sounded from the village.

"And do you know what else I wanted to say?" He was in a talkative mood. "Here more than anywhere (do you think that on our way back we might rest for a while on that little hill?) . . . here of all places, where our ruin, the ruin of our people, is most obvious . . . here I've had some of the best days of my life . . . which . . . which at times I've actually thought was taking on direction, some meaning. If only they didn't blather so much back there about the sweet land of our fathers! I'm sure that's why new arrivals in this place are always so depressed . . . it's like waking from a dream. To this day—it's been a year and a half now—I can't get those first moments out of my mind: so this is what our promised land is like! . . ."

After a moment's silence he went on:

"Nerves? You say it's just nerves?" (In fact I had said nothing at all.)

"Well, maybe you're right . . ."

On our way back a while later, after the sun had set, we sat down to rest on the hill, which was covered with sparse grasses and a hedge of more thick, jointed prickly pears. As always our conversation jumped from one thing to the next. When it returned to the subject of nerves and their symptoms, however, my friend stretched out one booted foot in front of him, matched it with a second that was wrapped in rags, and began to speak in an uncharacteristically emotional tone. The story that he for some reason chose to tell me did not follow in any evident way from what had come before. Indeed, it began with a few vague sentences that were hardly coherent at all; yet little by little it showed signs of



making sense—or so, at least, he thought, for he kept encouraging me each time he paused in his tale:

"Don't get up yet . . . Stay a while longer . . . You see, I'm over it now . . . I'll get over this rambling too . . . One gets over it all in the end . . ."

## 2.

"It was on my way over here from New York.

"Funny, how I say 'it was'—as though there were really an 'it' here that 'was' . . .

"But in any case . . . in any case . . . 'it was' is the wrong way to begin. If I'm going to tell it in such a fashion I should probably say 'there were'—because this much is true: a number of things did happen, and perhaps the whole point of it was . . . that in some way they were connected . . . even if for the most part I must say that I didn't understand them . . . but one never does when traveling with people . . . that is, with people who are traveling . . . does one?"

"It happened on my way over here.

"I had decided to come to Palestine. Why? What for? What did I think might happen here? That's all beside the point.

"After all, I've been through all this with you before. Like anyone who has bothered to think a bit about his own life, I had long come to the predictable conclusion that its riddle was insoluble, and that a sequel to it would emerge only in my last moments . . . if at all . . . which is to say, that there was no sequel. And it wasn't just the sequel: my life until then made no sense to me either . . . nor did the rest of the world, or what I was doing in it, or what I might have been doing previously or had I been somewhere else (look at that silvery-gold moon, how it quivers! What day of the Hebrew month is it today?)—to say nothing of who had stuck me in it to live on its earth and breathe beneath its sky, to warm myself in its sun and shiver from its cold (mind you, I'm not cold now, it's just a manner of speaking), to stir each time another of its springs returned and feel sad again with each dreary autumn. (Excuse me for sounding poetic!) But the strange part was this: there was absolutely nothing I could do without thinking about that last destination after which there was nothing . . . that had to come and of which I was constantly aware . . . that destination that was followed by an infinity

of dreamless sleep from which one never awoke and that utterly blotted out all else. (But why are you laughing? Is it at my language or simply at my having taken all this so seriously? Anyway, watch out for that prickly pear, will you, before you get stuck.)

"In a word, that last destination, after which there was neither heaven nor hell, love nor hate, beauty nor ugliness . . . and that still, as hard and stupid as life was, one never wanted to come . . . because it was the last thing that would come . . . So you see, it wasn't as if when I decided to come here I didn't know all these . . . these shamefully trite things (shamefully trite and yet true!) . . . And I also already knew (after all, it wasn't really so long ago, was it?) that even though I knew them, I was like all sentient beings forced against my own will to obey my own will . . . yes, my own will . . . And . . . like everything, sentient or not . . . yes, like you too . . . to somehow fill that terrible, insatiable void that can never be filled until the end . . . if then . . . because who really knows . . .

"For eight years I lived in New York (you're not sleeping? you're still listening?), and before that in the Ukraine where I was born. In New York I worked in a sweatshop, casting buttons into the void, that is, sewing them onto tens of thousands of pairs of pants every month. (I assure you, I can't imagine a more disgusting place or job!) The fact is that I knew perfectly well that all those buttons could hardly make a dent in the void, to say nothing of filling it . . . though at the same time I was aware that this was not the fault of the buttons, and that if instead of them I tried casting oranges picked in the groves of the promised land (assuming that there were oranges to pick when I got there and that I didn't come down with malaria), the Void of Fear, to call it by its proper name, would not fill up any faster . . .

"Yet still I came running here . . . because, you see, I was still in thrall to life . . . ah, what foolishness! I mean to the possibilities of life, do you understand? That is, to the hidden, veiled power of life that rules us against our will and that sometimes manages to make our quest in life seem almost pleasant . . . Which meant that I couldn't, didn't, want to free myself of the seemingly irrational desire for something else, for different possibilities, other places . . . which is of course the trick life plays on us in order to stay attractive . . . So that what I knew, which was substantially no different from what was known by the author of *Ecclesiastes*, was one thing, and the course taken by my life quite another that had nothing to do with what I knew . . . that had to do with certain simple necessities: buttons, paychecks, distributing radical



newspapers, a pair of shoes here, the torments of sex there, every hour of every day something else . . .

"Do you know what I sometimes think? Perhaps what kept quivering inside me and impelling me all that time to come here was simply a yearning for natural beauty (after all, I never got to sit on a hill like this after a workday in New York), and also perhaps for a place to call my own, which as a Jew was something I had never had from the day I was born, not even under the marvelously sweet skies of my Ukraine with its marvelous *shikas* . . . who might sneak up on you while you were swimming in one of its marvelous rivers and throw your Jewish clothing into the marvelous water, ha ha! So that for all I know—but what do you think?—I may have been living all that time with the hope . . . of finding a foothold, any hold, in our picturesque ancestral corner of Asia, in which Bedouin, the great-grandchildren of Abraham the Hebrew, pitch their tents to this day and bring to the well real camels as once did his bondsman Eliezer . . . and in which (which of course is more to the point) third- and fourth-generation children of Polish-Jewish money-lenders are learning to follow the plow . . . So that I thought that there . . . I mean here . . . how does Moses put it? 'Let me cross over and see that goodly land, its fair mountains and the Lebanon' . . ."

"Well, what do you think now? Did you find your foothold?"

At once, however, I felt it was wrong to have interrupted him. My own voice sounded vulgar to me, a crude dissonance.

He absentmindedly plucked a doubled-edged blade of grass and began to roll it between his fingers.

### 3.

"I was telling you about . . . leaving New York.

"I suppose you know that I didn't travel directly. There were a number of detours on the way. I spent a few days in London; I also made a side trip to Berlin, taking the train from Antwerp. I traveled fourth class, which was uncommonly crowded, and my state of mind at the time, if I remember it correctly, was uncommonly depressed too.

"This depression had accompanied me from London. It wasn't caused by the Jewish ghetto there, although that can be depressing enough . . . but then I myself was coming from East Broadway and was hardly pampered in this respect. No, what depressed me was a specific incident

—which had I read about in the newspaper I would have soon forgotten, but which instead I happened to witness with my own eyes . . . and at a time when my nerves were not in the best of shape . . .

"Let me tell you about it. In the flophouse in which I was staying in a crowded, ground-floor common room there was a new arrival, a Jew from Bialystok, who was sleeping in a garret upstairs. His history was known to all of us: he had arrived in England with a large family, which having neither sufficient funds nor sponsors in the country was refused permission to land. When the ship docked in Liverpool he managed, by some Jewish ruse, to smuggle himself ashore, but his family remained aboard ship and was sent back to Germany in the end. This Jew was a bit of an odd fellow: broad-shouldered and thick-bearded, but a total child in his speech and behavior, total. Despite his desperate situation (he was a smith, and a Jew doesn't have a ghost of a chance of finding metalwork in London) he joked and clowned all the time like a boy. He had us in stitches with his antics and his stories of how he had illegally gotten out of Russia and into England. This didn't last long, though. By his second week the wisecracks had come to an end. He grew very quiet, and one night, after hearing that his family had been deported, he went up to his tiny room, shut all the windows, turned on the gas stove, and lay down. He was found in the morning in a state of perfect rest. But perfect.

"Well, you can imagine for yourself . . . I had been traveling night and day, by land and by sea, with so little to eat and drink that sometimes I spent hours at a time in a state of total apathy, without a single feeling or thought, an apathy that could only belong to a life already over (only now and then the thought would pierce my brain before melting there like an icicle: 'From shore to shore . . . he has reached his shore . . . and I?'). Yes, you can imagine the state I was in when, after several days like this, by the end of which I had grown perfectly indifferent to the base physical part of me and its ordeal, I entered the wrong railway car by mistake—it was a few stations before Berlin—and found a Jewish family sitting in one corner by the door with all its possessions scattered over the floor. It consisted of a mother, a woman of about thirty-six or -seven whose dress and appearance I need hardly describe to you; her younger sister, a lady of about twenty with not unattractive but passive, lusterless eyes and a body that seemed gross and awkward although it was actually thin; and five girls, the eldest of whom could not have been more than eleven . . . yes, seven people in all. Their packages and bundles were more than I could count; the largest of them,



it appeared, had been divided up so that everyone could carry his share of the load. A loaf of white bread that had been picked apart by somebody's fingers protruded from one end of an unbuttoned pillowcase.

"Look, Mama, a Jew!" cried the eldest child in Yiddish when she saw me.

"*Ja, eine Jud-d-de,*" echoed the Germans in the car with a peculiar intensity, the tripled consonant sounding like both a groan and a laugh at once.

"The mother, however, did not seem happy to see me. Indeed, she had already reached the stage where even the possibility of such an emotion no longer existed. A Jew? Fine, a Jew. What more could the non-Jews do to her? Soon she would be in Berlin; of what use would another poor Jew be to her there? She didn't even bother answering when I asked her where she came from.

"Brest-Litovsk," her oldest daughter answered for her.

"Not Bialystok?" I asked.

"Who said anything about Bialystok?" exclaimed the girl in an irritable singsong, whose unmistakably pungent Lithuanian accent was like a parody of adult speech.

"But I had already gone too far in my fantasy that this was the same family that had been turned back from English shores (and whose father had arrived at the one true shore) to abandon it now. The fact that the cities weren't the same, that this family was traveling with an aunt whereas the other one wasn't, made no impression on me. An embarrassed, ambiguous pity—is there any pity worse than that?—welled up for them inside me.

"I didn't mean to ask what part of Russia you came from. I meant where are you coming from now."

"But where are *you* coming from?"

"From London."

"I'm from Yondon too," beamed one of the smaller children from over the top of a bundle, while the sunny eyes of her eleven-year-old sister (because her eyes did have sunshine in them, that I must tell you, although it was sunshine that you didn't see at first, that you only noticed later) appraised me less harshly. You're laughing? But I tell you, she was as pretty as white satin. And what wild, lustrous hair! I'm sure that no one had washed it or combed it for weeks . . .

"From Yondon," said the younger one again.

"As if I hadn't known all along!"

"So that now, neither the fact, which I soon discovered, that the

woman had been a widow for years . . . nor that the reason for her deportation was not insufficient funds but a chronic eye condition . . . nor that her sister was turned back because a single woman could not enter England by herself . . . none of this made the slightest difference. My mind was made up: it was the same family! At once I hurried to bring my bag from the car I had been sitting in. I felt almost enslaved to them, as though it were somehow my duty to serve them. That's nerves for you!"

"A very Jewish case of them," I said sympathetically.

#### 4.

The fourth-day sickle moon hung high above the little colony when we got back. At first, after sunset, while we still sat on the hill, its large, thin, pale half-ring had waxed more and more golden with the gathering dusk until to its right appeared a brilliant first star that was followed by thousands of others all over the sky. The higher it rose, though, the more the golden moon paled.

We reached the main street. My friend's one boot no longer dangled from his foot; he had taken it off in the darkness and was holding it in his hand. The sickle moon had widened and turned to silver, no, to quicksilver, to silvery darts dipped in frozen smoke. Dim lights flickered within the colony's houses, each a world in itself. Through shut windows the inhabitants could be seen spinning the daily cloth of their lives.

My companion grew agitated.

"Yes," he said almost in a whisper. "You were right. Jewish nerves! What a people . . . and yet it can get used to anything. In fact it's happiest in the ghetto. I don't mean that literally . . . although in a certain sense . . . outside of the ghetto it simply isn't at home. Take this peace here, this serenity, this beauty. Of course, no one is going to get rich from it. But if only one knew how to live as a human being, to suffer what human beings must and to live . . . this would be the place for it!"

"Despite what your treetops see?" I couldn't help asking.

"Ah, them . . ." He stifled a sigh. "That's true. But still . . . if only we were capable . . . I mean really capable of making something of this place. Because all places anywhere belong only to those who put their lives into them. Which isn't to say . . ."

There was a long silence, after which he continued irrelevantly:



"You were talking about that family. How many there must be like it in port cities all over the world. So many stray sheep . . . or blind horses . . . all of them. Still, I would like to know where it is now and how it is faring. And the most curious part of it—are you listening?—was that to begin with they didn't trust me one bit. I remember it perfectly: a few minutes after we had introduced ourselves I produced the remainder of a Dutch cheese from my bag and began to eat it in front of them so as to be able to offer it to the children—and their mother wouldn't allow them to touch it! Well, I thought, she's standing on ceremony, so I took from my pocket some small, Belgian copper coins that had holes in the middle of them, strung them like pendants, and began handing them out to the children, in order to rid them, as I saw it, of their apathy. (I suppose I must have imagined that the whole world was drowning in apathy.) 'I really don't need them . . . ' I apologized to the mother. She looked at me as at some kind of profligate and said, 'If you don't need them, what makes you think that we do?' But the final blow was that when we finally reached Berlin—it was already evening—and I tried helping them with some of the bundles, which despite their small size were twice as large as the children who were carrying them, they, the children, began to scream for their mama.

" 'Watch out for him!' the woman shrilled morosely at her sister.

"Luckily for me, though, something soon happened which proved to her that even if I wasn't entirely in possession of my senses (in fact I was anything but) I was at least not a professional crook. At one point we had to pass through a narrow gate where one surrendered one's ticket to an inspector. Since I was unencumbered by luggage I had already passed quickly through ahead of them when I heard her wailing behind me:

" 'God help me! I gave him all our tickets! What will become of us now?'

" 'Weren't you continuing on to Russia?' I asked.

" 'Keep an eye on our things!' she called to her children without answering me.

"She ran to demand her tickets back from the inspector, who had no idea what she wanted and didn't reply. A crowd began to form in a circle around them. A Prussian policeman appeared. The shouting woman became more and more frantic, until even my intervention seemed providential to her.

" 'Where were you bound for? For what destination were your tickets?'

" 'For Vienna! The tickets were for Vienna. I gave them to him . . .

I thought they must realize . . . that they would let us go on . . . my God, what have I done . . . '

"I approached the inspector and tried out every German lesson that I had ever taken on him. I had no idea whether he was being polite or curt with me, but in the end I did manage to establish that the woman's tickets were good only for Berlin.

"What had misled her? It turned out that she had managed while in Belgium to obtain free tickets for Berlin from some Jewish charity (she had had in her possession a letter of recommendation from a relative of hers, a prominent official with another charitable organization in Jerusalem, which had stood her in good stead), as well as a written request to a sister charity in Berlin to pay her fare the rest of the way. In her naiveté, fully confident that she was now a celebrity who would be recognized all along her route, she had surrendered her tickets like the rest of us—until her sister pointed out that without them they could not travel further and she threw herself on the inspector. I tell you, she was the incarnation of the Wandering Jew!"

"And of nerves," I put in.

He laughed and said:

"Don't think that all this didn't have its bizarre psychological effects on me either. After I had accompanied her the next day to the charity in Berlin I spoke to the secretary there, a Teutonic Jew, perfectly correctly—believe me, my German was impeccable!—but a strange nervous tickle kept running through the soles of my feet and I found myself composing little vignettes in my head, from which I felt as though the brain had been surgically removed, such as the following:

"I: (Introducing her) *Mein Herr!* This unfortunate woman set out for London with her husband and five children . . .

"He: (Turning to face me) *Was?* With her husband? But it says here that she is a widow!

"I: (Pleading) Yes, a widow, *mein Herr*, a widow! She really is a widow now, because her husband, her husband . . . (The woman treads on my toes, compelling me to lower my voice) . . . You understand, the poor soul mustn't be caused any more pain . . . but in her situation . . . her husband has reached shore . . . (She pokes me in the ribs, increasing my confusion) . . . I mean the father of these orphans died in the wilderness . . . that is, in London . . .



"He: (Losing patience with me, the devious Russian Jew) *Was schwatzen Sie so?*

"I: (Stubbornly, secretly desiring to punch his nose, as I generally desire to do when addressing important people) *Mein Herr*, these are the five biblical daughters of Zelophhad!

"She: (Beginning to scream at the top of her voice) You mustn't believe him, your Grace, you mustn't believe a word of it! This man who says he wants to help me is mad. I've been a widow for the past five years. A widow! My husband passed away in Brisk. In Brisk! Here, read this letter . . ."

This imaginary dialogue might have gone on and on had I not put an end to it with a gesture of my hand that brought him, the narrator, back to his story.

## 5.

"And so the woman got her ticket to Vienna with another letter of recommendation to another charity there, and that was the last I saw of her in Berlin. (Speaking of Berlin, though, that city put me back on my feet. My second night there, to be sure, was spent at a meeting of the Hebrew language society at which a number of local authors delivered themselves of addresses; various other distinguished Hebraists were present too—not exactly my idea of great fun! But it snowed every day there . . . yes, real snow . . . and I tell you . . . if I weren't afraid of exaggerating I would say that I can still smell that snow to this day. I had eight whole days to myself there!) . . . Where was I? Ah yes, I didn't see her in Berlin anymore. Just imagine how I felt, then, when no sooner had I boarded the ship in Trieste than my eyes fell on all those little packages and bundles! Next to them was my family, which had decided to visit its relative in Jerusalem.

"I could tell you things that happened on that trip, but I won't try your patience. There was only one other Jew aboard ship beside the family and myself, a stout, stooped yeshiva boy in his mid-twenties who was a native of Safed, and who appeared to be, judging by the looks of him—he had those slanting, typically Oriental eyes that glisten like the skin of some wet, dark reptile—an apprentice rabbinical emissary or

fund-raiser of some sort. He was returning to Palestine from Europe and appeared to be out of sorts, no doubt because business had gone poorly . . . and yet that isn't what . . . listen: if you didn't see that woman with her rheumy eyes, which were not her best feature, and her blistered lips, the toothless space between which had turned black from rot, lying on her bundles in her white *jaquette* that was too big for her frail body and her kerchief, under which she forgot to tuck back the wisps of thin hair that occasionally escaped from it, looking like a sick cat with all her starving children crowding around her in their variously colored rags that hadn't been parted from their bodies in weeks . . . well, you missed a heartrending sight. Add to that the freezing nights outdoors on the deck of the ship, the dry bread that was their sole diet, the cuffs of the sailors, the abuse of the other passengers, to say nothing of still further adventures—I don't mind admitting to you that the splendors of the Mediterranean were not exactly foremost in my mind . . .

"The morning we docked in Jaffa I was in an especially eccentric mood. The night before that, which was the last of our voyage, we had been joined by a new passenger, a young man who had embarked the previous day in Port Said. This young man . . . are you listening? Have you ever paid attention to the faces of some of our predatory Jews—who haunt the cities of the Orient . . . I mean those cocky, energetic, wolfish ones with their oily black hair and their sharp little mustaches that curl up at the edges? Have you noticed how they prowl when they walk, as though stalking prey? I tell you, I can spot at a glance which of them are merely pickpockets and sharks, and which also deal in human flesh—and as soon as the person in question boarded the ship (I assure you, an agreeable, pleasant fellow to look at!) and ran his eyes softly over the oldest daughter of the family, I knew in exactly which category to place him . . .

"That whole oppressive night this newcomer kept reminding me of an episode that had taken place the day before. What was so oppressive about it? Well, you see, it was . . . or rather, I should say . . . yes, I remember: in Port Said the deck space was filled by groups of Egyptian pilgrims on their way to Mecca, so that there was not even room to sit anymore, let alone lie down. There was a tension in the air, yet together with it an odd feeling, a kind of carefreeness . . . what? Ah yes, the episode! Wait a bit and I'll tell you all about it.

"It happened in Alexandria. That was as far as our ship went. From there we had to take the train to Port Said, where we would board another steamer for Jaffa that belonged to the same line.



"It was dawn when we arrived in Alexandria. Arabs in long gowns that looked like dresses assailed us on shore and begged, practically threatened us, to let them carry our bags. But why bother telling you all this? You've traveled the same route and seen it all too. To make a long story short, then, we were standing there confusedly, uncertain how to proceed in this strange, primitive, deafening place, when we were approached by a Jew with a limp who warned us not to give our bags to any Arabs, as the price they would demand from us in the end would be more than the worth of the luggage itself.

"You can trust what he says!" said another, assertive voice that belonged to a younger person, who according to the cap he wore on his head was a bellboy at some hotel. 'You have to watch out for swindlers everywhere here, but this man is absolutely dependable.' He pointed at the lame Jew. 'Did you say you were bound for Palestine? You must be Zionists then. Lots of people are headed there these days. I'm a Zionist too, that makes us brothers. Here, I can show you letters . . . but tell me, what's new in Russia?'

"I hardly need tell you that that was all we needed to hear. At once I, by now the family's adopted father, felt a surge of affection for this new brother and permitted the lame Jew to order an Arab to load our luggage into his wagon and bring it to the train station. We ourselves proceeded on foot through the streets of Alexandria, which were as filthy as only the streets of an Arab city can be, staring at the nargilleh smokers in the cafes, at the veiled women with their shawls, nose rings, and breathing tubes, and at all the rest of that Oriental clutter. Near the railway station the lame man caught up with us and asked us for half-a-franc apiece, that is, for four francs all in all—which includes the customs tax that I've already paid for you.' Unlike the woman—my head was spinning from the journey and lack of sleep, which had apparently robbed me of all powers of resistance—I did not think the price unreasonable. True, the Jew had paid the Arab driver only a quarter-of-a-franc for his services—but had we had to carry our own bags we might have missed the train connection, and consequently the ship in Port Said, which sailed toward evening. All that we needed was to have to wait a week in Port Said for it to return! Whereas now, though we were four francs poorer, we had at least arrived in time . . . in fact, there was still half-an-hour until the train was scheduled to leave. We could thank our lucky stars for that.

"Do you know what the tickets to Port Said cost?" asked the man.

"As soon as the ticket office opens, we'll find out."

"I hope you'll be able to fight your way through the crowd. You do have Egyptian money, don't you?"

"No. Only Austrian."

"But it is at least gold?"

"No.' Our faces fell. 'Silver.'

"What do you propose to do then? You'll have to change it for gold. Look, here comes your Zionist, why don't you ask him. Perhaps he can offer some advice."

"Our Zionist,' that is, the bellhop, seemed surprised to see us. As far as our plight was concerned, however, he would be only too glad to help. If we gave him the money, he would even purchase the tickets himself. How many of them did we say we needed: eight?

"By now the ticket office had opened and was besieged by a throng of people, some wishing to board the next train, some later ones, who stood on each other's feet and even shoulders. Without counting the money that I gave him—all told, some sixty or seventy Austrian crowns—our benefactor quickly took it and headed for the ticket window. Prompted by the woman, I followed closely behind. While we waited he began to perform some complicated calculation in Egyptian money that turned into such a confusion of pounds, guineas, and piastres that my tired brain could not possibly absorb it, while continuing at the same time to warn me of the danger of swindlers and showing me a letter from Cairo that was, he claimed, an invitation to speak before the Zionist association there . . . only this letter, when I read it, turned out to be another sort of document entirely, sent to somebody else three years before! I could feel my heart sink and my knees begin to shake, but I forbade myself to lose faith in the man—who for his part now developed such confidence that he began to tell me about a trip he had once taken with Herzl to Uganda . . .

"But how can that be?" I asked. "Since when was Herzl ever in Uganda?"

"Believe me," he insisted, "he was there."

"We were already close to the black ticket seller. Everyone was pushing and shoving, but the bellhop somehow managed to elbow them all out of the way (including the apprentice emissary from Safed, who was himself engaged in a fracas with some Egyptian women), and began to talk through the window in French. '*La course . . . la course . . .*' I could hear him say. Yet the ticket seller for some reason handed the money back to him, so that, making an annoyed face, he said:

"I'm afraid we'll have to run and change it."



"Perhaps it was a display of pan-Semitic goodwill on the ticket seller's part that he now pointed at the bellhop and said in English to the emissary, who stood in line behind us, 'No good'—but there was no time for me to digest all this, because I was already running after our Zionist as fast as I could. The Russian woman's sister, seeing me run, began to run on her clumsy legs too. The woman herself began to scream . . . by which point, however, the bellhop was already in the streets of the town with me hot on his heels in pursuit. The strangest part of it was that even now my addled brain refused to admit that our money was actually in danger! As swift as a leopard he bounded up the steps of banks, none of which seemed able to help him, ran back down them again, and cut across streets and alleyways, while I followed him with the last of my strength, for I was on the brink of exhaustion and a good deal weaker than he. In the corridor of one bank—it seemed to surface from nowhere like an underground creature's—I caught sight of the profile of that same young man who was later to join us on the ship from Port Said.

Suddenly the bellhop stopped running.

"Keep going!" I said. "We'll miss our train!"

"Don't worry," he answered. "I promise you that you won't."

And indeed just then he found a moneychanger to perform the necessary transaction. I took what he gave me without question and off we sped. "We've got only a few minutes!" he urged me. I flew back toward the train station through the bizarre streets of Alexandria as fast as my legs could carry me. My shirt stuck to my sweaty skin; I doubt if I would have found my way back at all if the woman's sister, now accompanied by that same young man from the bank, who had already managed to attach himself to her as yet another guardian angel, had not spotted me on a street corner.

"Hurry! Hurry! Only ten minutes to go!"

"The ticket seller now informed me, however, that the money I had received from the moneychanger was twenty-one-and-a-half francs short of the sum needed to buy the eight tickets.

"What?" I protested, waving my arms. "I was told in so many words that I would even get change in return!"

"The ticket seller waved his arms back. 'I told you the man was no good.'

"When I finally held the tickets in my hand, the family and its bundles were still spread all over the waiting room of the station. Good lord, only five minutes left! They were not minutes for weak hearts, believe me. But the crowning touch was that just as the train was about to

depart, our offended Zionist stuck his head into the car. How could we have run out on him like this without even paying him for his pains?

"Haven't you cheated us enough?" I asked. I honestly could not understand him.

"What?!" And he launched into a harangue on Egyptian currency rates, all the time swearing with an injured expression that he hadn't taken a penny for himself. If we were determined to exploit him, however, he was helpless to prevent it.

"Thief! Chiseler! Crook!" screamed the woman.

"Listen to her! That's what comes of doing favors for Jews."

"The train began to move. He leaped from the car and vanished.

"I made up the loss from my own pocket, of course—but it wasn't it that grieved me. I gritted my teeth with a feeling of impotence. There was a dry, bad taste in my mouth. When the children began to munch their stale bread I had to turn my face to the window. The sun beat down outside. It was summer in the month of January. Egypt . . . Egypt and Canaan . . . Sheaves were being gathered in the fields . . . 'And lo, my sheaf arose and stood upright, and your sheaves gathered round it and bowed down to my sheaf' . . . Cairo!"

## 6.

"In Cairo—where you had to change trains by means of various strange and endless under- and overpasses while so many porters clung to you at once and begged to be given your bags that you were forced to shake them off like flies, crying 'No, no, no!' all the time until you were hoarse in the throat—I caught sight of that underground creature again. I, carrying five packages and two small girls, and their mother, who with the rest of the family and the bundles was not far behind me, were trying to find our train. Which of the many around us was the right one? There seemed to be no one whom one could possibly ask . . . when suddenly we heard a voice politely declare—and in Yiddish:

"Not that one! The one on that track over there."

"Like a true gentleman he helped the woman's sister into the car, where she found seats for us all; then he rose and excused himself, saying that he had business elsewhere in another part of the train. Were we aware, by the way, that he had been with us since Alexandria? He had spent several weeks there. Originally he was from Buenos Aires . . .



did we know that in Spanish the words meant . . . *what?* Someone had tried to rob us? You couldn't be too careful of such people. On the other hand, there was no certainty that it was a deliberate swindle. Currencies in Egypt were a nightmare and the difference between silver and gold was indeed great. What did we propose to do, though, in Port Said?

"What do you mean, do? Our tickets are good for Jaffa."

"He knew that. But Port Said was not exactly a port. You had to be rowed out to the ship in lighters, for which the Arabs fleeced you but good. For us and our belongings they would probably ask three francs apiece, perhaps even four. He himself had already suggested to the young lady . . . who hadn't objected . . . if we wished, he would be happy to be of service. He would take only twelve—no, ten francs—for the lot of us. This wasn't his first trip and he had connections . . . was it agreed? He would even include in the price the cost of bringing our things from the train station to the shore."

"No thank you!" I interrupted him in a fury as soon as I heard the word 'shore.'

"No is no . . . but I'm afraid you'll regret it . . ."

"The prospect was not encouraging. Worse yet, the fear crossed my mind that perhaps our ship had already sailed . . . in which case we were lost. Yet in the depths of my despair I made up my mind to trust no one any further, and upon our arrival in Port Said to carry our bags to the ship by ourselves. Of course Port Said had a port—why should anyone need lighters? As for missing the boat, either we did or we didn't . . . if only the children would stop crying . . ."

"But why bore you, old man, with my psychology? Port Said had no port after all, and one did need lighters to get to the ship, to say nothing of the distance from the train station to the shore, which was no small trek . . . in the middle of which—are you ready for a *fairy tale*?—we encountered a man whose name I never learned (I imagine he can still be found there), a hotel employee too, who exclaimed that it was beyond him how anyone with God in his heart could pass us by and not offer to help. At first we didn't believe him either, but he simply grabbed our things . . . yes, grabbed them by force . . . and put them and the children into his hotel cart. 'From poor Jews like yourselves I won't take a penny more than three francs for everything, including the lighters . . .'"

"The water was clear and calm, the sun shone down, and it was pleasant to row out in the lighter. The children's spirits revived. Our guide did not leave our side and argued all the way out to the ship with the Arab boatmen, who accused him of taking money from us in order

to hold down their wages, while he in turn complained that they had no God in their hearts . . .

"At last he saw us safely aboard ship—and then, once and for all to silence the Arabs, who still insisted that he was secretly in our pay, he reached into his pocket and paid the three francs himself. An improbable story? I told you it was. But nonetheless true. Perhaps he was doing penance for something that day . . . who knows . . ."

"I only wanted to do"—so he said—"my human duty."

"The woman, for her part, kept repeating over and over:

"The man was an angel from heaven . . . an angel from heaven . . ."

"I myself, once I had regained my composure, fetched a bit of water, washed the sweat from my hands and face, peeled myself an orange, took a piece of bread to go with it, and made a brave attempt to eat. (Not that I was hungry, although I hadn't tasted a single thing all day.) Yet with the first bite I took I was overcome with dread all over again at the contrast between the two men whom we had met by accident that day, the dread of the contrast between 'no good' and 'good' . . . No, I don't mean good and evil in relation to me or the effect it had on me, or on that wreck of a woman with her five children who was the symbol of Jewish homelessness and misfortune . . . What I mean is . . . good and evil, and all that they imply, in themselves . . . Good and evil as two different worlds, two essences . . . with an infinite abyss between them. Good lord, how infinite it was! And how tragic human life was, how hard, how hard it was to live!

"The slice of bread stuck in my throat and the tears began to come nonstop. They were hysterical, those tears, yet at the same time quiet and unobtrusive. Some Christian Arabs, on their way to the Holy Sepulchre, stared at me with the knowledge that I was a sufferer in life, and that Allah had not been kind to me . . ."

"Simultaneously, the new passenger who had joined us in Cairo was busy telling the Russian woman's sister some ridiculous tale about life in Buenos Aires, followed by another concerning the sultan's harem in Constantinople, to which she listened with mixed fear and delight."

## 7.

"Where was I? Yes; in the harbor in Jaffa, and in my eccentric mood."

"The peculiar thing about this mood was that it was in a sense the



opposite of what is said to happen to people who are on the verge of disaster or even death itself. Before death or disaster, so I've been told, one's whole life passes regretfully before one: if only one had it to live over again, how differently one would live it! Whereas my own state was the contrary: suddenly I was filled with an enormous love for everything that had ever happened to me, with an especially great, perfectly satisfied love for the events of the past several weeks—and with an almost ecstatic sense of expectation for what lay ahead. I was about to land in the promised land, after which nothing else mattered . . . after which everything would take care of itself. It was necessary only to set foot there . . . which I would do today, or at the latest, tomorrow. There was Jaffa in plain sight . . . what joy! On the first- and second-class decks the passengers were already staring through their binoculars at the majestic veil of gray haze that hung over the mountains of Judea in the distance.

"Incidentally, I forgot to mention that I myself was not planning to disembark in Jaffa at all. On the advice of a friend from New York, who had been here some three years before, I had decided to spend time first in the Galilee, and only later in Judea, and so had bought a ticket for Beirut . . . none of which prevented me, however, from experiencing all the emotions that would have been appropriate had I been about to land now.

" 'It seems strange that we should have come all this way together and now must leave ship separately,' said the Russian woman's oldest daughter to me with all the intimacy of an eleven-year-old child. How endearing her Lithuanian accent had become to me with its confusion of "sh" and "s"! To this day I am sure that if my desire to take her in my arms, to hold her there and kiss her a thousand times, had not been so powerful, and—so it seemed to me—so obvious at the time, I would have gone ahead and done it. But my blood was on fire . . . and so I slaked my thirst by patting the cheek of her nine-year-old sister instead. Life is sometimes like that, you know. The other three girls, starting with the one who had told me on the train that she was from 'Yondon,' were eight, seven, and six years old respectively. The woman had been a widow for exactly five years!

" 'Wait, it's far from certain that our ship will be allowed to dock in Jaffa,' cautioned the rabbinical emissary, who—in spite of his long ear curls, his even longer black gown, and the round fur hat of extreme Orthodoxy on his head—had gotten to know us well enough to lay aside his monkish exterior and reveal himself as a jolly fellow who spent hours

gossiping with the women and grew so friendly with the traveler from Buenos Aires that he even traded dirty jokes with him.

" 'Nonsense,' said the Argentinian. 'It's true that the port in Jaffa is rocky and can't be safely entered in a storm—but the sea is calm today. If you want to worry, you'd do better to worry about the fact that our Russian passengers don't have an entry visa.'

" 'But why,' inquired the emissary, 'should I worry about that?'

" 'Why? Surely you're not so foolish as they to believe the rumor that no papers are necessary at all anymore, neither a *tazkara* nor—'

" 'But I myself am a Turkish subject!' declared the astonished apprentice fund-raiser. 'What is there for me to fear?'

"And while talking he reached a hand into his pocket and brought out some documents to prove his point.

"The Russian woman rushed agitatedly over to me. Did I hear what they were saying? She would not be allowed to land . . .

"In the meantime we were requested to assemble for a medical inspection. The devil knew what it was for—some sort of quarantine perhaps, or other new rule . . .

" 'Oh my God,' shuddered the woman. 'What will happen when they see my eyes?'

"The inspection, however, turned out to be a lark. The whole business was carried out so comically, with such a disregard for the most elementary appearances, and seemed such a mockery of proper official procedure (the doctor, who had been up all night playing cards, was too lazy even to walk the entire length of the line and contented himself with a cursory glance at three or four of the hundreds of passengers before quickly returning to his cabin) that hopes could not fail to be aroused that Turkish landing regulations were equally uncomplicated.

"So that when the entire family had descended into a lighter that carried them toward shore until their last shouted farewell could no longer be heard and I was left by myself on deck with sunbeams glancing all around me off the eternally breaking waves (I won't deny what's true!) and Jaffa beckoning in the distance (and how pretty it can be from a distance!), its rooftops climbing and falling like the steps of some great parapet, I felt—I swear to you I did!—whisperings of glory in my heart. How could it even have occurred to me that they might not be allowed off the ship, that Jews might possibly be turned away from the land of Judea? I don't mean to say of course that I wasn't perfectly aware even then of all the painful falsehood in this cliché (what on earth do we and the land of Judea really have to do with each other?) . . . but I was



happy, I was wrapped in the gossamer threads of a dream the likes of which have never touched me a second time before or since . . . And I was forced to acknowledge once again that ancient truth that even though one 'knows' that all things are equally unimportant and ultimately even the same, one cannot, as long as one lives and breathes, ignore the differences between one man and another, one place and another, one life and another, and one human condition and another . . . and that despite my intellectual awareness, I could not help feeling different emotions at different times that might be worlds apart from each other, that might sometimes be of the simplest, most humanly universal variety, and at others of the most mysteriously bizarre . . . because I tell you, there *are* mysterious combinations of circumstances in this life, my friend . . ."

A bareheaded adolescent girl stepped out of one of the houses in the colony and crossed the narrow street, humming to a popular Arab melody the words of a Hebrew "folk song" written by a poet in Europe:

*Pretty golden bird, fly far away  
Find me a husband for my wedding day.*

From a courtyard opposite a voice that could have been either a man's or a woman's shouted in a mixture of Arabic and Yiddish through the night air: "*Rukh, rukh min bon! S'tezikh tsugetsbeppet?*" The little colony's large synagogue looked down on us with its broad but dark windows. Beneath them some local citizens stood discussing their affairs. "It's time I fired Ahmed," one of them said. "I've never seen such a thief in my life." This sentiment followed us until we neared a ditch by the side of the street from which suddenly appeared the silhouettes of two young pioneers, one dressed in a costume of dark cloth, the other wearing a blouse, torn linen pants, and no shoes. From somewhere came the words, "Innkeeper, here's seven piastres," from the ditch the refrain of a comic song about two Zionists. The notes quivered until interrupted by a soft Polish-Jewish voice that said: "Tomorrow it will be exactly four months since I arrived in this country." "And how many months will it be since you've been out of work?" laughed a second voice that was Russian by its accent and that, we now saw, belonged to the pioneer of radical mien, who appeared to be enjoying his own joke immensely.

The evening was still not through.

## 8.

Nor was my friend's story.

His happiness lasted for all of two hours.

At any rate, no more than that.

"When the lighters returned, the woman and her five children were in one of them. The boatmen, annoyed at having to row them back again, angrily threw their belongings, which by now were soaking wet, over the deck. All five girls began to cry out loud. The woman lashed out at them savagely and said nothing. It was too awful for words.

"Worse yet: the woman's sister had already entered the country! She too had no papers of course, but the traveler from Buenos Aires had somehow managed to get her safely through—and it had all happened so quickly, and the customs house had been in such an uproar, that they had not remembered until it was too late that their purse with all their money was in her possession. Now she, the mother, was left without a cent. Her sister was ashore and she had been brought back in the lighter. A pretty predicament!

"What now? What could she possibly do? Where was she going to go?

"The sky had fallen on her. The ship gave a lurch and set sail for Haifa. Soon the first mate would come by to check our tickets. As far as Haifa there was no problem, I would pay for their fare myself . . . but what would happen then?

"The first mate passed by without noticing them. Perhaps he felt sorry for them. Was there another piece of bread somewhere? All morning long I had been too excited to eat; now I had to swallow something to keep up my strength, to prepare for new tribulations; only once more the bread stuck in my throat—I could neither get it down nor spit it out.

" 'There were Jews standing there, Jews,' the woman began to lament once her own silence had grown tiresome to her, 'and not one of them had any pity. Not one. All they wanted to know was why did I get off at Jaffa, why didn't I get off at Haifa. I wish I had never heard of either Jaffa or Haifa!'

"And turning to the girls:

" 'If you don't shut up this minute I'll throw you all into the sea!'

"The apprentice emissary tried to calm her. It was a woman's way to scream, but really there was nothing to scream about. He too was getting off in Haifa, from there he would travel to Safed. And in Haifa he



had a brother, a hotel owner, who would no doubt come to meet the ship. This brother was a Turkish subject too and would certainly be glad to come to her aid. In general it was, as far as he knew, far easier to land in Haifa than in Jaffa. In this respect the Jews who asked her why she hadn't disembarked in Haifa were right, their mistake being that they hadn't realized that she was coming via Trieste. They must have thought she had sailed on a ship from Russia, which would have docked at Beirut first, then Haifa, then Jaffa. But now all would be all right. If only she promised not to scream, he, the apprentice emissary, would do his best to help. If by any chance she had a little to money to give him . . . that is, she would give it to him and he would give it to the official at customs, who would understand exactly what it was for. Five francs per person should be enough, perhaps even one napoleon for all of them. Yes, one gold napoleon, or better yet, two halves would do the trick. With it in his palm that Turk wouldn't know up from down . . .

"A napoleon? How much is that? Ten francs?" wailed the woman. 'I haven't got a single sou. Even if they do let me land in Haifa . . . in Jaffa I could find my sister . . . but in Haifa . . . my children and I will starve to death . . .'

"There, there," I said. 'Once we're in Haifa we'll find some way to help you.'

"I had left some twenty-five francs and a few sous, which I immediately handed to the emissary in order to work what magic he could with them.

"A napoleon is enough!" he said.

"So in the end I gave the remaining five francs to the woman 'for a rainy day,' and kept the leftover sous for myself. My eleven-year-old darling took her frozen hands out of the sleeves in which she had been keeping them and threw me a special look. She stuck her hands back into her sleeves, but that look gave me strength, gave me strength . . . so that again, for all the hopelessness of the situation, for all its radical sorrow, it seemed to me that it was definitely worth living and that there were things worth living for . . . Yes, that it was actually pleasant to be alive. This phantasmal notion came and went in a moment, but as long as that moment lasted it made sense. It too of course could not have withstood the scalpel of the intellect, that icicle of the consciousness of reality as it is, not to mention the nothingness that comes after as it is . . . Yet at that moment I wanted to cry out with all my being: Yes! Yes! Yes!"

## 9.

"You're not tired of listening? The fact is that there's not much left for me to tell you. To describe to you the emotions with which we boarded the lighters in Haifa and began our short trip to the shore . . . for that I have neither the inclination nor the skill. We felt like a man jumping straight into the ocean as we descended the ramp of the ship. (Yes, I too disembarked in Haifa in the end, since to Beirut was another night's voyage, which was by now beyond my powers of endurance—and besides, I wanted to see what happened to my family.) Soon our fate would be sealed: either the official in charge would accept our baksheesh and allow us into the town or he wouldn't . . . ah, the promised land! The promised land! How precious it seemed just then.

"Because of the swarm of passengers the woman's five children were separated at the last moment into two different lighters. I sat in the first of them with the two oldest daughters, while she and the younger ones followed at a considerable distance behind us.

"We neared the shore. I could see Jews standing there, on dry land . . . how lucky they were to be there already, to have that legal right. What more in life could be desired?

"A tumult of shouts reached my ears. My heart was in my throat. What now?

"Relax, Jews, relax!" a heavysset, butcherlike Jew with a flaxen beard and a Turkish fez on his head cried out to us from the shore. 'There's free entry here.'

"I couldn't believe my ears.

"Free? The apprentice emissary, who was the first to leap ashore from the lighter, winked at the bearer of good tidings. 'But that's impossible . . .'

"He and his brother were so busy exchanging winks that they forgot to kiss each other.

"I followed behind him with the two children at my side. In the second lighter, which was still far out in the bay, I could make out their mother's terrified eyes. No doubt the nightmarish thought had occurred to her that the incident with her sister might repeat itself, that I and the two girls would bribe our way past customs and that she would again be left behind . . .



"'Mama, Mama!' shouted the eleven-year-old with all her strength. 'Don't worry! Here no one gets sent back!'"

"The heavyset Jew grabbed our things. 'It's settled then. You'll be staying at my hotel.'"

"And in my ear he whispered:

"'A slight misunderstanding. It's not completely free. You'll need a visa. I'll explain it all later . . .'"

"The apprentice emissary had already disappeared.

"'Did they take money from you?' The Jew who rushed up to me now appeared to be Rumanian and was, I soon learned, a hotelkeeper too. 'Those vampires! Entry is totally free here, it doesn't cost a thing. I wouldn't advise you to go with him, he'll make you pay through the nose . . . but what is the matter with you, young man?'"

"My tears now were no longer the half-hidden, intermittent ones that I had shed in Port Said over the abrupt transition from our unmitigated bad luck to the fairy-tale goodness of that miraculous Jew. I simply felt empty inside, weak in all my limbs; my head was about to split in two and there was a terrible scream in the back of my mouth. I saw the Russian woman with her children drawing nearer to shore with an insane look of excitement on her face, coupled with the refusal to believe that she was actually safe; I saw Jews, who looked much the same as Jews elsewhere, standing on the soil of the Holy Land, the land I had dreamed of since I was a boy; I saw the pure blue waters of the bay as they rose, fell, broke from faraway worlds upon this promised shore . . . this shore that made me think of the Jew in London who had come to that other shore, and of his 'daughter' who had landed in Jaffa with the man with the little, curled mustache . . . It was too much for me, it churned in my guts and flooded my face with hot, gasping tears . . . ah ah ah ah ah!

"'They didn't allow us to land in Jaffa!' panted the happy woman, reciting her adventures to the Jews gathered around her.

"'Here they allow and in Jaffa they don't?' asked one of the bystanders. 'The law should be the same everywhere.'"

"'Terkele shiksa,' said the Jew with the flaxen beard.

"'But look how this young man can't stop crying!' said the second hotelkeeper, half marveling at me, half making fun. 'Ai, ai, ai!' he mimicked. 'Fool, what is there to cry about?'"

"I suppose the way I must have looked just then more than justified his addressing me in such affectionate terms.

"'Oy,' I whimpered like a naughty child in front of them. 'We're in Palestine.'"

"'So much the better then, why cry?' persisted the hotelkeeper.

"The bystanders broke into smiles. 'He's crying for joy . . . for joy that he's here . . .'"

"'He cries easily,' sniffed the woman with a shake of her head. A last drop hung from the tip of her nose; all else appeared already to have evaporated, and she was once again the person she had always been.

"I wiped away my own tears . . . why attempt to deny it? A warm trickle of happiness filtered through me as I looked now at my little friend, who refused to budge from my side, now at the shore. And each time I looked at her—who knew what lay in store for her?—I understood again what I had already realized that morning, that is . . . that as long as we are alive . . . whatever happens to us does make a difference, it does . . . and that the unbridgeable abyss between the two men we had encountered the day before in Alexandria and Port Said was present also in our two comings ashore: that of the woman's unlucky sister in Jaffa, and that of the child who had landed with me there in Haifa. I tell you, looking at that shore, I understood as though in a vision that—for the time being, anyway—it was the closer of the two . . . closer than the one reached by that middle-aged child in cold London. While as for sheer beauty . . ."

"Listen, do you know what I'm going to tell you? Both of us hate all those empty words about beauty that are bandied around us day and night, both of us know that they are meaningless and sometimes even tempt us to deny the existence of beauty altogether. Say what you will, though, I wouldn't know what else to call it . . . it was beautiful then. The great sea was ravishing, and the bay in Haifa doubly so. You see, I really did believe in beauty then . . . in the beauty of nature . . . of the cosmos . . . of something even higher than that. But of course that too was only nerves!"

## 10.

The dark alleyway beyond the synagogue, through which we at last headed home, was deserted; no one besides us was out-of-doors anymore. The moon had dropped down the other side of the sky until its



sickle shape lost its tint of frozen smoke and shone again with a golden brilliance. Soon, however, it disappeared behind a patch of cloud wafted by the light, steady land breeze, and was gone.

Despite my companion's poor health and recurrent difficulties with both his booted and his bootless foot, we had continued to stroll that night through the colony's few, silent streets—but regarding the characters in his story, and the fate of the family once it was safely ashore, I could not get him to say another word. Perhaps he himself had no further knowledge of them; perhaps—though why hide it from me?—he had parted from them that very day. In any case, our conversation passed on to other things, which we discussed with much feeling too.

Yet when we finally returned to our inn, which belonged to a local citrus grower who was by no means poorly off, my friend's malaria began to act up again, and he lay down fully clothed and soon fell asleep.

"He doesn't eat much and he certainly doesn't have much to say," complained the innkeeper to me about him after he had apparently dozed off, "but we're up half the night because of him. He keeps crying out in his sleep . . . I suppose he has bad dreams, eh? It must be the malaria . . . and to think that people like him want to be pioneers . . . and gripe that us farmers don't give them work!"

"Malaria?" knowingly asked the man's oldest son, the one who was about to set out for his uncle in Chicago. "Quinine and castor oil, that's the ticket!"

While the innkeeper's wife set the supper table the talk went from malaria to other current diseases. Some neighbors dropped in to chat and changed the subject to the opening of new shops and the question of bank credit, which they protested went only to those who did not really need it. It was nearly nine o'clock. The innkeeper's daughter, who was finishing the last grade of the local school, sat studying French beyond the oilcloth at the far end of the table. They talked, yawned, drank coffee, and ate pickled herring just as they always had done.

# THE VENGEANCE OF THE FATHERS

BY YITZHAK SHAMI

*translated by Richard Flantz\**

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