

ISAAC LOEB PERETZ

THE COLLECTION OF JEWISH STORIES



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The Collection of Jewish Stories

If Not Higher, Domestic Happiness, In the Post-chaise, The New Tune, Married, The Seventh Candle of Blessing

Translator: Helena Frank

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Table of Contents

If Not Higher
Domestic Happiness
In the Post-chaise
The New Tune
Married
The Seventh Candle of Blessing
The Widow
The Messenger
What is the Soul?
In Time of Pestilence
Bontzye Shweig
The Dead Town
The Days of the Messiah
Kabbalists
Travel-pictures
Trust
Only Go!
What Should a Jewess Need?
No. 42
The Maskil
The Rabbi of Tishewitz
Tales That Are Told
A Little Boy
The Yartseff Rabbi

Lyashtzof
The First Attempt
The Second Attempt
At the Shochet's
The Rebbitzin of Skul
Insured
The Fire
The Emigrant
The Madman
Misery
The Làmed Wòfnik
The Informer
The Outcast
A Chat
The Pike
The Fast
The Woman Mistress Hannah
In the Pond
The Chanukah Light
The Poor Little Boy
Underground
Between Two Mountains
The Image
Glossary

I. If Not Higher

[Table of Contents](#)

And the Rebbe of Nemirov, every Friday morning early at Sliches-time, disappeared, melted into thin air! He was not to be found anywhere, either in the synagogue or in the two houses-of-study, or worshipping in some Minyan, and most certainly not at home. His door stood open, people went in and out as they pleased—no one ever stole anything from the Rebbe—but there was not a soul in the house.

Where can the Rebbe be?

Where should he be, if not in heaven?

Is it likely a Rebbe should have no affairs on hand with the Solemn Days so near?

Jews (no evil eye!) need a livelihood, peace, health, successful match-makings, they wish to be good and pious and their sins are great, and Satan with his thousand eyes spies out the world from one end to the other, and he sees, and accuses, and tells tales—and who shall help if not the Rebbe? So thought the people.

Once, however, there came a Lithuanian—and he laughed! You know the Lithuanian Jews—they rather despise books of devotion, but stuff themselves with the Talmud and the codes. Well, the Lithuanian points out a special bit of the Gemoreh—and hopes it is plain enough: even Moses our Teacher could not ascend into heaven, but remained suspended thirty inches below it—and who, I ask you, is going to argue with a Lithuanian?

What becomes of the Rebbe?

"I don't know, and I don't care," says he, shrugging his shoulders, and all the while (what it is to be a Lithuanian!)

determined to find out.

* * * * *

The very same evening, soon after prayers, the Lithuanian steals into the Rebbe's room, lays himself down under the Rebbe's bed, and lies low.

He intends to stay there all night to find out where the Rebbe goes, and what he does at Sliches-time.

Another in his place would have dozed and slept the time away. Not so a Lithuanian—he learned a whole treatise of the Talmud by heart!

Day has not broken when he hears the call to prayer.

The Rebbe has been awake some time. The Lithuanian has heard him sighing and groaning for a whole hour. Whoever has heard the groaning of the Nemirover Rebbe knows what sorrow for All-Israel, what distress of mind, found voice in every groan. The soul that heard was dissolved in grief. But the heart of a Lithuanian is of cast-iron. The Lithuanian hears and lies still. The Rebbe lies still, too—the Rebbe, long life to him, upon the bed and the Lithuanian under the bed!

* * * * *

After that the Lithuanian hears the beds in the house squeak—the people jump out of them—a Jewish word is spoken now and again—water is poured on the fingers—a door is opened here and there. Then the people leave the house, once more it is quiet and dark, only a very little moonlight comes in through the shutter.

He confessed afterwards, did the Lithuanian, that when he found himself alone with the Rebbe terror took hold of him. He grew cold all over, and the roots of his ear-locks

pricked his temples like needles. An excellent joke, to be left alone with the Rebbe at Sliches-time before dawn!

But a Lithuanian is dogged. He quivers and quakes like a fish—but he does not budge.

At last the Rebbe, long life to him, rises in his turn.

First he does what beseems a Jew. Then he goes to the wardrobe and takes out a packet—which proves to be the dress of a peasant: linen trousers, high boots, a pelisse, a wide felt hat, and a long and broad leather belt studded with brass nails. The Rebbe puts them on.

Out of the pockets of the pelisse dangles the end of a thick cord, a peasant's cord.

On his way out the Rebbe steps aside into the kitchen, stoops, takes a hatchet from under a bed, puts it into his belt, and leaves the house. The Lithuanian trembles, but he persists.

* * * * *

A fearful, Solemn-Day hush broods over the dark streets, broken not unfrequently by a cry of supplication from some little Minyan, or the moan of some sick person behind a window.

The Rebbe keeps to the street side, and walks in the shadow of the houses.

He glides from one to the other, the Lithuanian after him. And the Lithuanian hears the sound of his own heart-beats mingle with the heavy footfall of the Rebbe; but he follows on, and together they emerge from the town.

* * * * *

Behind the town stands a little wood. The Rebbe, long life to him, enters it. He walks on thirty or forty paces, and then he

stops beside a small tree. And the Lithuanian, with amaze, sees the Rebbe take his hatchet and strike the tree. He sees the Rebbe strike blow after blow, he hears the tree creak and snap. And the little tree falls, and the Rebbe splits it up into logs, and the logs into splinters. Then he makes a bundle, binds it round with the cord, throws it on his shoulder, replaces the hatchet in his belt, leaves the wood, and goes back into the town.

In one of the back streets he stops beside a poor, tumbledown little house, and taps at the window.

"Who is there?" cries a frightened voice within. The Lithuanian knows it to be the voice of a Jewess, a sick Jewess.

"I," answers the Rebbe in the peasant tongue.

"Who is I?" inquires the voice further. And the Rebbe answers again in the Little-Russian speech:

"Vassil."

"Which Vassil? and what do you want, Vassil?"

"I have wood to sell," says the sham peasant, "very cheap, for next to nothing."

And without further ado he goes in. The Lithuanian steals in behind him, and sees, in the gray light of dawn, a poor room with poor, broken furniture.

In the bed lies a sick Jewess huddled up in rags, who says bitterly:

"Wood to sell—and where am I, a poor widow, to get the money from to buy it?"

"I will give you a six-groschen worth on credit."

"And how am I ever to repay you?" groans the poor woman.

"Foolish creature!" the Rebbe upbraids her. "See here: you are a poor sick Jewess, and I am willing to trust you with the little bundle of wood; I believe that in time you will

repay me. And you, you have such a great and mighty God, and you do not trust Him! not even to the amount of a miserable six-groschen for a little bundle of wood!"

"And who is to light the stove?" groans the widow. "Do I look like getting up to do it? and my son away at work!"

"I will also light the stove for you," said the Rebbe.

* * * * *

And the Rebbe, while he laid the wood in the stove, repeated groaning the first part of Sliches.

Then, when the stove was alight, and the wood crackled cheerily, he repeated, more gaily, the second part of Sliches.

He repeated the third part when the fire had burnt itself out, and he shut the stove doors....

* * * * *

The Lithuanian who saw all this remained with the Rebbe, as one of his followers.

And later, when anyone told how the Rebbe early every morning at Sliches-time raised himself and flew up into heaven, the Lithuanian, instead of laughing, added quietly:

"If not higher."

II. Domestic Happiness

[Table of Contents](#)

Chaïm is a street porter.

When he goes through the town stooping beneath his case of wares, one can hardly make him out—it looks as if the box were walking along on two feet of its own. Listen to the heavy breathing! One can hear it quite a long way off.

But now he lays down his load, and is given a few pence. He straightens himself, wipes the sweat off his face, draws a deep breath, goes to the fountain and takes a drink of water, and then runs into the court.

He stands close to the wall, and lifts his huge head till the point of his chin and the tip of his nose and the brim of his hat are all on a level.

"Hannah," he calls.

A little window opens just below the eaves, and a small female head in a white kerchief answers, "Chaïm!"

The two look at each other very contentedly.

The neighbors say they are "loving."

Chaïm tosses up his earnings wrapped in a piece of paper, and Hannah catches them in the air—not for the first time in her life, either!

"You're a wonder!" says Chaïm, and shows no disposition to go away.

"Off with you, Chaïm!" she says, smiling. "I daren't take my eyes off the sick child. I have stood the cradle near the fire-place, and I skim with one hand and rock with the other."

"How is it, poor little thing?"

"Better."

"God be praised! Where is Henne?"

"With the sempstress, learning to sew."

"And Yössele?"

"In Choder."

Chaïm lowers his chin and goes away. Hannah follows him with her eyes till he disappears. Thursday and Friday it lasts longer.

"How much have you got there in the paper?" inquires Hannah.

"Twenty-two groschen."

"I am afraid it is not enough!"

"Why, what do you want, Hannah?"

"A sechser's worth of ointment for the baby, a few farthing dips—a Sabbath loaf I have—oh! meat—a pound and a half—let me see—and brandy for the Kiddush, and a few splinters."

"Those I can get for you. There are sure to be some in the market."

"And then I want," and she makes a calculation of all she needs for Sabbath, and it comes to this: that one can say the Kiddush quite well over a loaf, and that there are heaps of things one can do without.

The two important ones are: the candles to say the blessing over and the salve for the child.

And if only the children, God helping, are well, and the metal candle-sticks not in pawn, and supposing there is even a pudding, they spend a cheerful Sabbath.

Hannah is wonderful at puddings!

She is always short of something, either meal or eggs or suet, and the end of it all is a sweet, succulent, altogether ravishing pudding—it melts away into the very limbs!

"An angel's handiwork!" says Hannah, smiling delightedly.

"An angel's is it?" Chaïm laughs. "You think you are a little angel, do you, because you put up with me and the children? Well, they worry you enough, goodness knows! And I'm a regular crosspatch, I am, at times—and never a curse do I get—you're not like other women. And what a comfort I must be to you, too! I'm no good at Kiddush or Havdoleh either—I can't even sing the hymns properly!"

"You're a good husband and a good father," persists Hannah. "I ask no better for myself or anyone else. God grant that we may grow old together, you and I!"

And they gaze into each other's eyes so kindly and so affectionately as it were from the very heart. It looks for all the world as if they were newly married, and the party at table grows more and more festive.

But directly after his nap, Chaïm repairs to the little synagogue to hear the Law—a teacher expounds Alshech¹ there to simple folk like himself.

The faces still look sleepy.

One is finishing his doze, another yawns loudly. But all of a sudden, when it comes to the right moment, when there is talk of the other world, of Gehenna, where the wicked are scourged with iron rods, of the lightsome Garden of Eden, where the just sit with golden crowns on their heads and study the Torah, then they come to life again! The mouths open, the cheeks flush, they listen breathlessly to be told what the next world will be like. Chaïm usually stands near the stove.

His eyes are full of tears, he trembles all over, he is all there, in the other world!

He suffers together with the wicked; he is immersed in the molten pitch, he is flung away into hell; he gathers chips and splinters in gloomy woods....

He goes through it all himself, and is covered with a cold sweat. But then, later on, he also shares the bliss of the righteous. The Garden of Eden, the angels, Leviathan, Behemoth, and all good things present themselves so vividly to his imagination that when the reader kisses the book previously to closing it, Chaïm starts as it were out of a dream, like one called back from the other world!

"Ach!" he gasps, for wonder has held him breathless. "O Lord, just a tiny bit, just a scrap, just a morsel of the world to come—for me, for my wife, and for my little children!"

And then he grows sad, wondering: After all, because of what? as a reward for what?

Once, when the reading was over, he went up to the teacher:

"Rabbi," he said, and his voice shook, "advise me! What must I do to gain the world to come?"

"Study the Law, my son!" answered the teacher.

"I can't."

"Study Mishnayes, or some 'Eye of Jacob,' or even Perek."

"I can't."

"Recite the Psalms!"

"I haven't time!"

"Pray with devotion!"

"I don't know what the prayers mean!" The teacher looks at him with compassion:

"What are you?" he asks.

"A street porter."

"Well, then, do some service for the scholars."

"I beg pardon?"

"For instance, carry a few cans of water every day toward evening into the house-of-study, so that the students may have something to drink."

"Rabbi," he inquired further, "and my wife?"

"When a man sits on a chair in Paradise, his wife is his footstool."

* * * * *

When Chaïm went home to say Havdoleh, Hannah was sitting there reciting "God of Abraham." And when he saw her he felt a tug at his heart.

"No, Hannah," he flung his arms around her, "I won't have you be my footstool! I shall bend down to you and raise you and make you sit beside me. We shall sit both on one chair, just as we are doing now. We are so happy like that! Do you hear, Hannah? You and I, we are going to sit in a chair together ... the Almighty will have to allow it!"

III. In the Post-chaise

[Table of Contents](#)

He told me everything at once, in one breath. I learned in little over a minute that he was Chaïm, Yoneh Krubishever's son-in-law, Beril Konskivoler's son, and that the rich Meerenstein in Lublin was a relation on his mother's side, peace be upon her! But this relation lived almost like a Gentile; whether or not they ate forbidden food, he could not tell, but that they ate with unwashed hands ... so much he had seen with his own eyes.

They had other queer ways beside: long colored cloths were lying on their stairs; before going in, one rang a bell; figured table-covers were spread about the rooms where people sat as if in jail ... stole across them like thieves ... altogether it was like being in a company of deaf-mutes.

His wife has a family of a kind in Warsaw. But he never goes near them; they are as poor as himself, so what is the good of them to him, ha?

In the house of the Lublin relation things are not as they should be, but, at least, he is rich, and whoso rubs against fat meat gets shiny himself; where they chop wood, there are splinters; where there is a meal, one may chance to lick a bone—but those others—paupers!

He even counts on the Lublin relation's obtaining a place for him. Business, he says, is bad; just now he is dealing in eggs, buys them, in the villages, and sends them to Lublin, whence they are despatched to London. There, it is said, people put them into lime-ovens and hatch chickens out of them. It must be lies. The English just happen to like eggs! However that may be, the business, for the present, is in a

bad way. Still, it is better than dealing in produce—produce is knocked on the head. He became a produce dealer soon after his marriage; he had everything to learn, and his partner was an old dealer who simply turned his pockets inside out.

* * * * *

It was dark in the post-chaise—I could not see Chaïm's face, and I don't know to this day how he recognized a fellow-Jew in me. When he got in, I was sitting in a corner dozing, and was only awakened by his voice. I don't talk in my sleep—perhaps I gave a Jewish groan. Perhaps he felt that my groan and his groan were one groan?

He even told me that his wife was from Warsaw and did not fancy Konskivòlye. That is, she was born in Krubisheff, but she was brought up in Warsaw by that miserable family of hers—lost her parents.

There she learned to know about other things. She could talk Polish and read German addresses fluently. She even says that she can play, not on a fiddle, but on some other instrument.

"And who are you?" and he seized me by the hand.

Sleep was out of the question, and he had begun to interest me. It was like a story. A young man from a small provincial town; a wife brought up in Warsaw—she is impatient of the small town. Something might be made of it, I reflect; one must know exactly how it all is, then add a little to it, and it will make a novel. I will put in a villain, a convict, a bankruptcy or two, and rush in a dragon—I, too, will be interesting!

I lean toward my neighbor, and tell him who I am.

"So it's you," he said, "is it? You yourself! Tell me, I beg of you, how do you find the time and attention required for inventing stories?"

"Well, you see...."

"How can I see? You must have inherited a large fortune, and you are living on the interest?"

"Heaven forbid! My parents are alive."

"Then you won in the lottery?"

"Wrong again!"

"Then, what?"

I really did not know how to answer.

"Do you make a living by that?"

I gave a genuinely Jewish reply—Bê!

"And that is your whole Parnosseh, without anything additional?"

"For the present."

"O wa! how much does it bring in?"

"Very little."

"A bad business, too?"

"Knocked on the head!"

"Bad times!" sighed my neighbor.

A few minutes' silence, but he could not be quiet long.

"Tell me, I beg of you, what is the good of the stories you write? I don't mean to you," he amended himself. "Heaven forbid! A Jew must earn a living, if he has to suck it out of the wall—that is not what I mean—what will a Jew not do for a living? I am riding in the post-chaise, and not in an 'opportunity,'² because I could not hear of one. Heaven knows whether I'm not sitting on Shatnez.³ I mean the people—what is the good of the stories to them? What is the object of them? What do they put into story books?" Then, answering himself: "I guess it's just a question of women's fashions, like crinolines!"

"And you," I ask, "have never dipped into a story-book?"

"I can tell you: I do know a little about them, as much as that."

And he measured off a small piece of his finger, but it was dark in the chaise.

"Did they interest you?"

"Me? Heaven forbid! It was all through my wife! This, you see, is how it happened: It must be five or six years ago—six—a year after the wedding, we were still boarding with my father—when my wife grew poorly. Not that she was ill; she went about as usual, but she was not up to the mark.

"One day I asked her what was wrong.

"But, really—" he caught himself up. "I don't know why I should bother you with all this."

"Please, go on!"

My neighbor laughed.

"Is straw wanted in Egypt? Do you want my stories, when you can invent your own?"

"Do, please, go on!"

"Apparently, you write fiction for other people and want truth for yourself?"

It does not occur to him that one might wish to write the truth.

"Well," he said, "so be it!"

* * * * *

"Well," repeated my neighbor, "there's nothing to be ashamed of. We had a room to ourselves, I was a young man then, more given to that sort of thing—and I asked her what was the matter. She burst out crying!

"I felt very sorry for her. Besides being my wife, she was an orphan, away from her home, and altogether much to be

pitied."

"Why so much to be pitied?" I wonder.

"You see, my mother, peace be upon her, died about two years before the marriage, and my father, peace be upon him, did not marry again.

"My mother, may her merits protect us, was a good woman, and my father could not forget her. Well, a woman alone in the house! My father, peace be upon him, had no time to spare—he was away nearly the whole week in the villages—he traded in all sorts of things, whatever you please—eggs, butter, rags, hogs' bristles, linen."

"And you?"

"I sat in the house-of-study and learned. Well, I reflected, a woman gets frightened all by herself; but why cry? No, she said, she was dull. Dull? What was that?

"I saw that she went about like one half asleep. Sometimes she did not hear when spoken to, or she seemed absent-minded, and sat staring at the wall—stared and stared—or else, her lips moved and never a sound to be heard. But as to being dull—all a woman's fancy. An unaccountable folk, women! A Jew, a man, is never dull. A Jew has no time to be dull, a Jew is either hungry or full; either he has business on hand, or he is in the house-of-study, or asleep; if one has heaps of time one smokes a pipe; but dull!—"

"Remember," I put in, "a woman has no Torah, no Kohol affairs, no six hundred and thirteen religious obligations."

"That's just where it is! I soon came to the conclusion that being dull meant having nothing to do—a sort of emptiness calculated to drive one mad. Our sages saw that long ago. Do you know the saying, 'Idleness leads the mind to wander?' According to the law, no woman may be idle. I said to her: Do something! She said, she wanted to 'read'!

"'To read,' sounded very queer to me, too. I knew that people who know how to write call 'learning' lehavdîl, reading books and newspapers, but I did not know then that she was so learned.... She spoke less to me than I to her. She was a tall woman; but she kept her head down and her lips closed as though she could not count two. She was quiet altogether—quiet as a lamb; and there was always a look in her face as if a whole ship full of sour milk had foundered at sea. She wanted to read, she said. And what? Polish, German, even Yiddish—anything to read.

"In all Konskivòlye there wasn't a book to be found. I was very sorry—I couldn't refuse her. I told her I would get her some books when I went to see my relative in Lublin.

"'And you have nothing?' she asked.

"'I? Preserve us!'

"'But what do you do all day in the house-of-study?'

"'I learn.'

"'I want to learn, too,' says she.

"I explained to her that the Gemoreh is not a story-book, that it is not meant for women, that it had been said women should not study it, that it is Hebrew....

"I gave her to understand that if the Konskivòlye people heard of such a thing, they would stone me, and quite right, too! I won't keep you in suspense, but tell you at once that she begged so hard of me, cried, fainted, made such a to-do that she had her way. I sat down every evening and translated a page of the Gemoreh for her benefit; but I knew what the end of it would be."

"And what was it?"

"You need not ask. I translated a page about goring oxen, ditches, setting on fire,⁴ commentaries and all. I held forth, and she went to sleep over it night after night. That sort of thing was not intended for women. By good fortune,

however, it happened that, during the great gale that blew that year, a certain book-peddler wandered out of his way into Konskivòlye, and I brought her home forty pounds' weight of story-books. Now it was the other way about—she read to me, and—I went to sleep.

"And to this day," he wound up, "I don't know what is the use of story-books. At any rate, for men. Perhaps you write for women?"

* * * * *

Meanwhile it began to dawn; my neighbor's long, thin, yellow face became visible—with a pair of black-ringed, tired-looking red eyes.

He was apparently anxious to recite his prayers, and began to polish the window-pane, but I interrupted him.

"Tell me, my friend, don't take it amiss. Is your wife content now?"

"How, content?"

"She is no longer dull?"

"She has a stall with salt and herrings; one child at the breast and two to wash and comb. She has a day's work blowing their noses."

Again he rubs the pane, and again I question:

"Tell me, friend, what is your wife like?"

My neighbor sat up, threw a side-glance at me, looked me down from head to foot, and asked severely:

"Then you know my wife? From Warsaw, eh?"

"Not in the least," I answered; "I only mean, in case I am ever in Konskivòlye, so that I may recognize her."

"So that you may recognize her?" he smiles, reassured. "I'll give you a sign: she has a mole on the left side of her nose."

* * * * *

The Jew got down from the chaise, giving me a cold and distant farewell as he stood on the step. He evidently still suspected me of knowing his wife and of belonging to her miserable family in Warsaw.

I was left alone in the chaise, but it was useless to think of sleep. The cool morning had taken hold of me. My literary overcoat blew out in the wind, and I felt chilly all over. I shrank together in the corner. The sun began to shine outside. It may be that I was riding through beautiful country; the early rays may have kissed hill-tops and green trees, and slid down a glassy river; but I hadn't the courage to open the little window.

A Jewish author fears the cold! I began, as the Jew put it, to "think out" a story. But other thoughts came in between.

Two different worlds, a man's world and a woman's world—a world with Talmudical treatises on goring oxen, and ditches, and incendiary fires, and the damages to be paid for them, and a world with story-books that are sold by weight!

If he reads, she goes to sleep; if she reads, he goes to sleep! As if we were not divided enough, as if we had not already "French noses," "English sticks," "Dutch Georges," "Lithuanian pigs," "Polish beggars," "Palestinian tramps;" as though every part of our body were not lying in a different place and had not a resounding nickname; as though every part, again, had not fallen into smaller ones: Chassidîm, Misnagdîm, "Germans;" as though all this were not, we must needs divide ourselves into men and women—and every single, narrow, damp, and dirty Jewish room must contain these two worlds within itself.

These two at least ought to be united. To strive after their unification is a debt every Yiddish writer owes his public. Only, the writers have too many private debts beside—one requires at least one additional Parnosseh, as he said.

* * * * *

My reflections about an additional Parnosseh were broken in upon by a few sharp notes on the postillion's horn. But I did not leave the chaise. I was just feeling a little warmer, and the sun had begun to pour in his beams.

I got a new neighbor and, thanks to the bright daylight, I saw his face plainly and even recognized him. It was an old acquaintance, we had skated together as children, played at bakers—we were almost comrades—then I went to the dingy, dirty Cheder, and he, to the free, lightsome "gymnasium."⁵

When I did not know the lesson, I was beaten; when I answered right, they pinched my cheek—it hurt either way.

He was sometimes kept in and sometimes he got "fives;"⁶ I broke my head over the Talmud; he broke his over Greek and Latin. But we stuck together. We lived on neighborly terms; he taught me to read in secret, lent me books, and in after years we turned the world upside down as we lay on the green grass beside the river. I wanted to invent a kind of gunpowder that should shoot at great distances, say one hundred miles; he, a balloon in which to mount to the stars and bring the people "up there" to a sense of order and enlightenment. We were dreadfully sorry for the poor world, she was stuck in the mud—and how to get her out? Ungreased wheels, lazy horses, and the driver—asleep!

Then I married, and he went to a university. We never corresponded. I heard later that he had failed, and, instead of a doctor, had become an apothecary somewhere in a small country town....

I all but cried for joy when my new neighbor entered the chaise, and my heart grew warm; my hands stretched themselves out; my whole body leaned toward him, but I held myself back—I held myself back with all my strength.

There you are! I thought. It is Yanek Polnivski, our late sequestrator's son. He was my playfellow, he had a large embrace and wanted to put his arms round the whole world and kiss its every limb, except the ugly growths which should be cut away. Only—there you are again! Present-day times. Perhaps he is an anti-Semite, breathing death and destruction in the newspapers; perhaps now we Jews are the excrescences that need removing from Europe's shapely nose. He will measure me with a cold glance, or he may embrace me, but tell me, at the same time, that I am not as other Jews.

But I was mistaken. Polnivski recognized me, fell upon my neck, nor had I spoken a word before he asked me how I liked "this vile anti-Semitism."

"It is," he said to me, of course in Polish, "a kind of cholera—an epidemic."

"Some say it is political."

"I don't believe it," said Polnivski. "Politicians invent nothing new, they create no facts. They only use those which exist, suppress some, and make the most of others. They can fan the flame of hell-fire, but not a spark can they kindle for themselves. It is human nature, not the politician, that weaves the thread of history. The politicians plait it, twist it, knot it, and entangle it."

"Anti-Semitism is a disease. The politician stands by the patient's bedside like a dishonest doctor who tries to spin out the sickness.

"The politician makes use of anti-Semitism—a stone flies through the air and Bismarck's assistant directs it through the window of the Shool; otherwise other panes would be smashed. Does anyone raise a protesting fist? Immediately a thin, shrinking Jewish shoulder is thrust beneath it, otherwise other bones would crack.

"But the stone, the fist, the hatred, and the detestation, these exist of themselves.

"Who die of a physical epidemic? Children, old people, and invalids. Who fall victims to a moral pestilence? The populace, the decadent aristocrat, and a few lunatics who caper round and lead the dance. Only the healthy brains resist."

"How many healthy brains have we?" I asked.

"How many? Unhappily, very few," replied Polnivski.

There was a short, sad silence. "I do not know what my neighbor's thoughts may have been; it seemed to me that the strongest and best-balanced brains had not escaped infection. There are two different phases in history: one in which the best and cleverest man leads the mass, and one in which the mass carries the best and cleverest along with it. The popular leader is a Columbus in search of new happiness, a new America for mankind; but no sooner is there scarcity of bread and water on board than the men mutiny, and they lead. The first thing is to kill somebody, the next, to taste meat, and still their hatred."

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"And don't suppose," said Polnivski, "that I am fishing for compliments, that I consider myself an esprit fort, who runs no danger of infection, an oak-tree no gale can dislodge.

"No, brother," he went on, "I am no hero. I might have been like the rest; I also might have been torn like a decayed leaf from the tree of knowledge, and whirled about in the air. I might have tried to think, with the rest of the dead leaves, that it was a ball, and we were dancing for our enjoyment; that the wind was our hired musician who played to us on his flute.

"I was saved by an accident; I learned to know a Jewish woman. Listen!"

I leaned toward my neighbor. His face had grown graver, darker; he rested his elbows on his knees and supported his head with his hands.

"But don't suppose," he said again, "that I discovered the heroine of a romance, a strong character that breaks through bolt and bar, and goes proudly on its way. Don't suppose that she was an 'exception,' an educated woman full of the new ideas, or, in fact, any 'ideal' at all. No; I learned to know a simple Jewish woman—one of the best, but one of the best of those who are most to be pitied. I learned to love her, and I'll tell you the truth: Whenever I read anything against Jews in general, she comes hack to my mind with her soft, sad eyes; stands before me and begs: 'Do not believe it. I am not like that.'"

He is lost in thought.

"The story is a simple one," he rouses himself and begins afresh. "We have not written to one another the whole time, and you don't know what has happened to me, so I'll tell you—briefly. I am only going as far as Lukave.

"On leaving the gymnasium I entered the university and studied medicine. I did not finish the course; it was partly

my comrades' fault, partly the teachers', and most of all my own. I had to leave and become an apothecary, had to marry, take my marriage portion, and set up a shop full of cod-liver oil in a little out-of-the-way town. But I was fortunate in many ways. I had a good father-in-law, who was prompt in fulfilling the contract, a pretty wife—it was a little bit of a town.

"My wife's name was Maria—I see her before me now, turning round helplessly from the looking-glass. Her golden curls refuse to submit to the comb, they fly merrily in all directions; they will not be twisted into the wreath which was just then the fashion.

"Slender—and such good, laughing, sky-blue eyes.

"We were not much disturbed by my professional duties. The town was too poor and an apothecary shop where there is no doctor isn't worth much. There was little doing, but we lived in a paradise, and we were always on the veranda—it was summer-time—side by side, hand in hand.

"And what should have claimed our interest? We had enough to live on, and as for going out, where were we to go? The veranda overlooked nearly the whole town—the low, sagging houses, broad, black, wooden booths that leaned, as though in pity, over the roll and apple sellers at their wretched stalls before the house-doors, as though they wanted to protect the old, withered, wrinkled faces from the sun.

"The town had once been rich, the booths full of all kinds of produce and fruits, the market full of carts, peasants, and brokers; sometimes even a great nobleman would be seen among the white peasant coats and the gray kaftans (at least so they assured me in the town), but the chaussée and the railroad had thrown everything out. The streets were

empty, the booths filled with decayed onions and pieces of cheese—all that was left of the good times.

"Poor as poor can be. Ten traders threw themselves on every cart-load of corn brought in by the peasants, raised the price, then came to an agreement, promised cession money, and bought it in common; but not one of the ten could find in his pockets the wherewith to pay, and they borrowed money on interest. There were one hundred tailors to a pair of trousers; fifty cobblers to put in one patch. In all my born days I never saw such poverty.

"We kept away from the town as much as possible—the happy are selfish.

"But somehow we could not help noticing a young housewife opposite, not more than eighteen or twenty at most, and we could neither of us take our eyes off her, and she, apparently, couldn't take hers off us. It was an unusual sight. Imagine a beauty, a perfect picture, set in a frame as dirty as only a Jewish window in a small town can be, beneath a dreadfully bent roof. Imagine a pair of sad, soft, dreamy eyes in an alabaster white face and under a hair-band.

"She made a terribly sad impression on us.

"For hours together she would stand leaning in the window, her fingers twisted together, staring at us, or else at the stars, and swallowing her tears. We saw that she was always alone (your men never have any time to spare), always unhappy and wistful. Her face spoke for her. She is a stranger here, we decided; she has come from a larger house, less shut in, and she longs to be far away; her heart yearns after a freer life. She also wanted to live, to live and to be loved. No, you may say what you like, but you do sometimes sell your daughters. It is true that after a while they forget. They are pious and good and patient, but who

shall count the tears that fall over their saddened faces till the store is exhausted? Or note what the heart suffers till it resigns itself to its living death? And why should it be so? Just because they are good and pious? You should have seen the husband—yellow, shrunk together. I saw him twice a day—go out in the morning and come home at night.

"A shame!"

You will believe that I had no answer ready.

We were both silent for a time, and then Polnivski went on:

"Once we missed her. She did not appear at the window all day.

"She must be ill, we thought.

"That evening the husband came in—the yellow creature—and asked for a remedy.

"'What sort?'

"'I don't know,' he said; 'a remedy.'

"'For whom?'

"'You want to know that, too? For my wife.'

"'What is wrong with her?'

"'I'm sure I don't know. She says, her heart hurts her.'

"And that," said Polnivski, "was the occasion of our becoming acquainted. I won't be long about it. I am a bit of a doctor, too, and I went back with him."

Polnivski had begun to talk in broken sentences; he looked for cigarettes; at last he broke off altogether, opened his travelling-bag and commenced to hunt for matches.

Meantime I was tormented by suspicions.

I now looked at Polnivski with other eyes; his story had begun to pain me.

Who can read a man? Who knows all that is in him? I began to think that I might have before me a Christian weasel who stole into Jewish hen-houses. He is too indignant

about the fate of Jewish daughters; he is too long looking for matches; he is ashamed of something. Why will he "not be long about it?" Why won't he tell me the whole story in detail? Who knows what part he played in it, if not the old part of the serpent in Paradise? Why won't his conscience let him speak out? There it is again—a Jewess—then, why not? At one time it was a merit to christen her; now the approved thing is to incite her to rebel against her God, her parents, her husband, her whole life!

It is called liberalism, entering a prison and letting in a breath of fresh air, a few rays of sunlight; awaking the prisoner, giving him a few gingerbreads and then going—not seeing the prisoner grind his teeth as the rusty key turns in the lock, or how his face darkens, how convulsively he breathes, how he tears his hair; or else, if he still can weep, how he waters with bitter tears the mouldy bread at which the mice have been gnawing while he slept.

To waken the dark, slumbering, and oppressed heart of a Jewish woman strikes a romantic chord; to fan the flame of unknown or smouldering feelings; to kiss and then—good-bye! bolt the door! she must make the best of it!

We have been slaked for so long with bitterness, gall, and hatred, that now, when we are offered bread and salt, we feel sure it must be poisoned—even though the hand that holds it out to us shakes with pity; even though there are tears in the eyes, and words of comfort on the lips.

It is so hard to believe in it all. For we also are infected; we also have succumbed to the plague.

Meanwhile Polnivski had found his matches, and I unwillingly accepted a cigarette. We smoked. The chaise was filled with blue, smoky rings. I watched them, followed them with my eyes, and thought: Thus vanish both good and evil.