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THE
I . L . PERETZ
READER

BONTSHE SHVAYG

Here on earth the death of Bontshe Shvayg made no impression. Try asking who Bontshe was, how he lived, what he died of (Did his heart give out? Did he drop from exhaustion? Did he break his back beneath too heavy a load?), and no one can give you an answer. For all you know, he might have starved to death.

The death of a tram horse would have caused more excitement. It would have been written up in the papers; hundreds of people would have flocked to see the carcass, or even the place where it lay. But that's only because horses are scarcer than people. Billions of people!

Bontshe lived and died in silence. Like a shadow he passed through this world.

No wine was drunk at Bontshe's circumcision, no glasses clinked in a toast; no speech to show off his knowledge was given at his bar mitzva. He lived like a grain of gray sand at the edge of the sea, beside millions of other grains. No one noticed when the wind whirled him off and carried him to the far shore.

While Bontshe lived, his feet left no tracks in the mud; when he died, the wind blew away the wooden sign marking his grave. The gravedigger's wife found it some distance away and used it to boil potatoes. Do you think that three days after Bontshe was dead anyone knew where he lay? There was not even a gravestone for a future antiquarian to unearth and mouth the name of Bontshe Shvayg one last time.

A shadow! No mind, no heart, preserved his image. Nothing remained of him at all. Not a trace. Alone he lived and alone he died.

Were not humanity so noisy, someone might have heard Bontshe's bones as they cracked beneath their burden. Were the world in less of a hurry, someone might have noticed that Bontshe, a fellow member of the human race, had in his lifetime two lifeless eyes, a pair of sinkholes for cheeks, and, even when no weight bent his back, a head bowed to the ground as if searching for his own grave.

Were men as rare as horses, someone would surely have wondered where he disappeared to.

When Bontshe was brought to the hospital, the corner of the cellar he had called his home did not remain vacant, because ten men bid for it at once; when he was taken from the hospital ward to the morgue, twenty sick paupers were candidates for his bed; when he was carried out of the morgue, forty men killed in the fall of a building were carried in. Think of how many others are waiting to share his plot of earth with him and well may you wonder how long he will rest there in peace.

He was born in silence. He lived in silence. He died in silence. And he was buried in a silence greater yet.

But that's not how it was in the other world. There Bontshe's death was an occasion.

A blast of the Messiah's horn sounded in all seven heavens: "Bontshe Shvayg has passed away! Bontshe has been summoned to his Maker!" the most exalted angels with the brightest wings informed each other in midflight. A joyous din broke out in paradise: "Bontshe Shvayg—it doesn't happen every day!"

Young, silver-booted cherubs with diamond-bright eyes and gold-filigreed wings ran gaily to greet Bontshe when he came. The flapping of their wings, the patter of their boots, and the merry ripple of laughter from their fresh, rosy mouths echoed through the heavens as far as the mercy seat, where God Himself soon knew that Bontshe Shvayg was on his way.

At the gates of heaven stood Father Abraham, his right hand outstretched in cordial welcome and the most radiant of smiles on his old face.

But what was that sound?

It was two angels wheeling a golden chair into paradise for Bontshe to sit on.

And what was that flash?

It was a gold crown set with gleaming jewels. All for Bontshe!

"What, before the Heavenly Tribunal has even handed down its verdict?" marveled the saints, not without envy.

"Ah!" answered the angels. "Everyone knows that's only a formality. The prosecution doesn't have a leg to stand on. The whole business will be over in five minutes. You're not dealing with just anyone, you know!"

When the cherubs raised Bontshe on high and sounded a heavenly fanfare, when Father Abraham reached out to shake his hand like an old friend, when Bontshe heard that a gold crown and chair awaited him in paradise and that the heavenly prosecutor had no case to present, he behaved exactly as he would have in this world—that is, he was too frightened to speak. His heart skipped a beat. He was sure it must be either a dream or a mistake.

He was accustomed to both. More than once in this world of ours he had dreamed of finding gold in the street, whole treasure chests of it, only to awake as great a beggar as before. More than once some passerby had smiled or said hello only to turn aside in disgust upon realizing his error.

That's how my luck is, Bontshe thought.

He was afraid that if he opened his eyes the dream would vanish and he would find himself in a dark cave full of vermin. He was afraid that if he uttered a sound or moved a limb he would be recognized at once and whisked away by the devil.

He was trembling so hard that he did not hear the cherubs sing his praises or see them dance around him. He did not return Father Abraham's hearty greeting or bid the Heavenly Tribunal good day when he was ushered before it.

He was scared out of his wits.

His fright, moreover, grew even greater when his eyes fell involuntarily on the floor of the courtroom. It was solid alabaster inlaid with diamonds! Just look where I'm standing, he thought, too paralyzed to move. Who knows what rich Jew or rabbi they've mixed me up with? In a minute he'll arrive, and that will be the end of me!

He was too frightened to hear the presiding judge call out, "The case of Bontshe Shvayg!" adding as he handed Bontshe's file to the defense counsel, "You have the floor, but be quick!"

The whole courtroom seemed to revolve around him. There was a buzzing in his ears. Gradually, he began to make out the counsel's voice, as sweet as a violin:

"The name of Bontshe Shvayg, Bontshe the Silent," the counsel was saying, "fit him like a tailored suit."

What is he talking about? wondered Bontshe just as the judge remarked impatiently:

"No poetry, please!"

"Not once in his whole life," the counsel for the defense went on, "did he complain to God or to man. Not once did he feel a drop of anger or cast an accusing glance at heaven."

Bontshe still understood nothing. Again the brusque voice interrupted:

"You can skip the rhetoric too!"

"Even Job broke down in the end, whereas this man, who suffered even more—"

"Stick to the facts!" warned the bench.

"At the age of eight days his circumcision was botched by a bungler—"

"That doesn't mean the gory details!"

"—who couldn't even staunch the blood."

"Proceed!"

"He bore it all in silence," continued the counsel for the defense. "Even when, at the age of thirteen, his mother died and her place was taken by a stepmother with the heart of a snake—"

That does sound like me, marveled Bontshe.

"No hearsay evidence!" snapped the judge.

"She scrimped on his food. She fed him moldy bread and gristle while she herself drank coffee with cream in it—"

"Get to the point!"

"She didn't spare him her fingernails, though. His black-and-blue marks showed through the holes in the old rags she dressed him in. She made him chop wood for her on the coldest days of winter, standing barefoot in the yard. He was too young and weak to wield the ax, which was too dull to cut the wood, which was too thick to be cut. He wrenched his arms and froze his feet more times than you can count. But still he kept silent, even before his own father—"

"His father? A drunk!" laughed the prosecutor, sending a chill down Bontshe's spine.

"—he never complained," continued the defense counsel. "He hadn't a soul to turn to. No friends, no schoolmates, no school . . . not one whole item of clothing . . . not a free second of time—"

"The facts!" repeated the bench.

"He even kept silent when his father, in a drunken fit, took him by the neck one snowy winter night and threw him out of the house. He picked himself out of the snow without a peep and followed his feet where they took him. At no time did he ever say a word. Even when half-dead from hunger, he never begged except with his eyes.

"At last, one dizzy, wet spring evening, he arrived in a great city. He vanished in it like a drop of water in the sea, though not before spending his first night in jail for vagrancy. And still he kept silent,

never asking why or how long. He worked at the meanest jobs and said nothing. And don't think it was easy to find them.

"Drenched in his own sweat, doubled over beneath more than a man can carry, his stomach gnawed by hunger, he kept silent!

"Spattered with the mud of city streets, spat on by unknown strangers, driven from the sidewalk to stagger in the gutter with his load beside carriages, wagons, and tram cars, looking death in the eye every minute, he kept silent!

"He never reckoned how many tons he had to carry for each ruble; he kept no track of how often he stumbled and fell; he didn't count the times he had to sweat blood to be paid. Never once did he stop to ask himself why fate was kinder to others. He kept silent!

"He never even raised his voice to demand his meager wage. Like a beggar he stood in doorways, glancing up as humbly as a dog at its master. "Come back later!" he would be told—and like a shadow he was gone, coming back later to beg again for what was his.

"He said nothing when cheated, nothing when paid with bad money.

"He kept silent!"

Why, perhaps they mean me after all, thought Bontshe, taking heart.

"Once," continued the counsel for the defense after a sip of water, "things seemed about to look up. A droshky raced by Bontshe pulled by runaway horses, its coachman thrown senseless on the cobblestones, his skull split wide open. The frightened horses foamed at the mouth, sparks shot from under their hooves, their eyes glittered like torches on a dark night—and in his seat cringed a passenger, more dead than alive.

"And it was Bontshe who stopped the horses!

"The rescued passenger was a generous Jew who rewarded Bontshe for his deed. He handed him the dead driver's whip and made him a coachman, found him a wife and made him a wedding too, and was even thoughtful enough to provide him with a baby boy. . . .

"And Bontshe kept silent!"

It certainly sounds like me, thought Bontshe, almost convinced, though he still did not dare look up at the tribunal. He listened as the counsel went on:

"He kept silent when his benefactor went bankrupt without giving him a day's pay. He kept silent when his wife ran off and left him

with the little infant. And fifteen years later, when the boy was strong enough to throw his father into the street, Bontshe kept silent then too!"

It's me, all right! decided Bontshe happily.

"He even kept silent in the hospital, the one place where a man can scream.

"He kept silent when the doctor would not examine him without half a ruble in advance and when the orderly wanted five kopecks to change his dirty sheets. He kept silent as he lay dying. He kept silent when he died. Not one word against God. Not one word against man.

"The defense rests!"

Once again Bontshe trembled all over. He knew that the defense was followed by the prosecution. Who could tell what the prosecutor might say? Bontshe himself hardly remembered his own life. Back on earth each minute had obliterated the one before. The counsel for the defense had reminded him of many forgotten things; what might he learn from the prosecution?

"Gentlemen!" The voice of the prosecutor was sharp and piercing. At once, however, it broke off.

"Gentlemen . . ." it resumed, although more softly, only to break off again.

When it spoke a third time, it was almost tender. "Gentlemen," it said. "He kept silent. I will do the same."

There was a hush. Then, from the bench, another voice spoke tenderly, tremulously, too. "Bontshe, Bontshe, my child," it said in harplike tones. "My own dearest Bontshe!"

Bontshe felt a lump in his throat. He wanted to open his eyes at last, but his tears had sealed them shut. Never had he known that tears could be so sweet. "My child"; "my Bontshe"—not once since the death of his mother had he been spoken to like that.

"My child," continued the judge, "you have suffered all in silence. There is not an unbroken bone in your body, not a corner of your soul that has not bled. And you have kept silent.

"There, in the world below, no one appreciated you. You yourself never knew that had you cried out but once, you could have brought down the walls of Jericho. You never knew what powers lay within you.

"There, in the World of Deceit, your silence went unrewarded. Here, in the World of Truth, it will be given its full due.

"The Heavenly Tribunal can pass no judgment on you. It is not for us to determine your portion of paradise. Take what you want! It is yours, all yours!"

Bontshe looked up for the first time. His eyes were blinded by the rays of light that streamed at him from all over. Everything glittered, glistened, blazed with light: the walls, the benches, the angels, the judges. So many angels!

He cast his dazed eyes down again. "Truly?" he asked, happy but abashed.

"Why, of course!" the judge said. "Of course! I tell you, it's all yours. All heaven belongs to you. Ask for anything you wish; you can choose what you like."

"Truly?" asked Bontshe again, a bit surer of himself.

"Truly! Truly! Truly!" clamored the heavenly host.

"Well, then," smiled Bontshe, "what I'd like most of all is a warm roll with fresh butter every morning."

The judges and angels hung their heads in shame. The prosecutor laughed.

1894 (translated by Hillel Halkin)

KABBALISTS



When times are bad even Torah—that best of merchandise—finds no takers.

The Lashchev yeshiva was reduced to Reb Yekel, its master, and a single student.

Reb Yekel is a thin old man with a long, disheveled beard and eyes dulled with age. His beloved remaining pupil, Lemech, is a tall, thin young man with a pale face, black, curly sidelocks, black, feverish eyes, parched lips, and a tremulous, pointed Adam's apple. Both are dressed in rags, and their chests are exposed for lack of shirts. Only with difficulty does Reb Yekel drag the heavy peasant boots he wears; his pupil's shoes slip off his bare feet.

That is all that remained of the once-famed yeshiva.

The impoverished town gradually sent less food to the students, provided them with fewer "eating days," and the poor boys went

off, each his own way. But Reb Yekel decided that here he would die, and his remaining pupil would place the potsherds on his eyes.

They frequently suffered hunger. Hunger leads to sleeplessness, and night-long insomnia arouses a desire to delve into the mysteries of Kabbalah.

For it can be considered in this wise: as long as one has to be up all night and suffer hunger all day, let these at least be put to some use; let the hunger be transformed into fasts and self-flagellation; let the gates of the world reveal their mysteries, spirits, and angels.

Teacher and pupil had engaged in Kabbalah for some time. Now they sat alone at the long table. For other people it was already past lunchtime; for them it was still before breakfast. They were accustomed to this. The master of the yeshiva stared into space and spoke; his pupil leaned his head on both hands and listened.

"In this too there are numerous degrees," the master said. "One man knows a part, another knows a half, a third knows the entire melody. The rabbi, of blessed memory, knew the melody in its wholeness, with musical accompaniment, but I," he added mournfully, "I barely merit a little bit, no larger than this"—and he measured the small degree of his knowledge on his bony finger. "There is melody that requires words: this is of low degree. Then there is a higher degree—a melody that sings of itself, without words, a pure melody! But even this melody requires voicing, lips that should shape it, and lips, as you realize, are matter. Even the sound itself is a refined form of matter.

"Let us say that sound is on the borderline between matter and spirit. But in any case, the melody that is heard by means of a voice that depends on lips is still not pure, not entirely pure, not genuine spirit. The true melody sings without voice; it sings within, in the heart and bowels.

"This is the secret meaning of King David's words: 'All my bones shall recite. . . .' The very marrow of the bones should sing. That's where the melody should reside, the highest adoration of God, blessed be He. This is not the melody of man! This is not a composed melody! This is part of the melody with which God created the world; it is part of the soul that He instilled in it.

"This is how the hosts of heaven sing. This is how the rabbi, of blessed memory, sang."

The discourse was interrupted by an unkempt young man girded with a rope about his loins—obviously a porter. He entered the house of study, placed a bowl of grits and a slice of bread beside the master, and said in a coarse voice, "Reb Tevel sends food for

I will help maintain your awe. From my pious soul I will breathe sweet silence and virtue upon you. My breath will pervade your body with faith, your little bones with the fear of God, your tiny heart with repentance and regret for past sins!"

The cat begins to feel how good it is to forgive, and how gratifying to inspire piety and honesty in others. The devout heart of this most pious cat swells with rapture.

But in this atmosphere the canary cannot breathe. It dies of suffocation.

1893 (translated by Golda Werman)

THE GOLEM



Great men were once able to perform great miracles.

When the ghetto of Prague was under attack and marauders wanted to rape the women, roast the children, and murder everyone, when it seemed that all hope was lost, the Maharal Rabbi Judah Loew put aside his Gemara, went out into the street, and, from the first suitable mound of clay that he found in front of the school-teacher's doorstep, molded the shape of a body. He blew into the golem's nostrils—and it began to stir. Then he whispered a name into its ear, and our golem strode out of the ghetto. The Maharal returned to his books in the house of study and the golem attacked our enemies who had surrounded the ghetto, thrashing them as with flails. They fell like flies.

Prague filled with corpses. They say that it went on like this right through Wednesday and Thursday. On Friday, with the clock striking noon, the golem was still intent on its labors.

"Rabbi," pleaded the congregation, "the golem is slaughtering all of Prague! Soon there won't be any Gentiles left to heat the Sabbath ovens or to take down the Sabbath lamps."

Once more the Maharal interrupted his study. He went to the pulpit and began to recite the psalm in honor of the Sabbath.

The golem stopped its work. It returned to the ghetto, entered the house of study, and approached the Maharal. Again the rabbi

whispered something into its ear. The eyes of the golem closed, the soul departed from its body, and it returned to a mere image of clay.

To this very day the golem lies concealed in the uppermost part of the synagogue of Prague, covered with cobwebs that have been spun from wall to wall to encase the whole arcade so that it should be hidden from all human eyes, especially from pregnant wives in the women's section. No one is permitted to touch the cobwebs, for anyone who does so dies. Even the oldest congregants no longer remember the golem. However, Zvi the Sage, the grandson of the Maharal, still deliberates whether it is proper to include such a golem in a minyan or in a company for the saying of grace.

The golem, you see, has not been forgotten. It is here! But the name that could bring the golem to life in times of need, that name has vanished into thin air. And no one is allowed to touch the cobwebs that thicken.

Do something—if you can!

1893 (translated by Ruth R. Wisse)

THE SHABBES GOY



The rabbi of Chelm, in ragged fur cap and tattered satin robe, a tiny Jew with a prominent Adam's apple and laughing gray eyes in a shriveled face.¹ . . . Between one talmudic problem and the next, the cheerful, gray-headed rabbi gets up, surveys with confidence the open Gemara through glasses on the tip of his nose, his shawl popping out of his chest, and, as his rightful share of worldly pleasures, takes up the wooden snuffbox.

A softhearted person, a being contented with his lot, he smiles at the snuffbox and taps on the cover, drumming lightly with his small fingers as though asking: Is there a little something there?

And when the snuffbox replies softly, "There is a bit left, there is!" he opens it leisurely, takes a crumb of a morsel between his fingertips and brings it to his nostrils, presses gently to the right, gently to the left—and then again. His eyes brighten, his heart

gladdens, he strolls about the House of Judgment almost dancing, and gives praise to the world's Creator in singsong: "Ay, ay, Gottenyu, dear God, what a sweet world you have created!"

"What splendid creatures walk about in your dear world! Jews, and—to be exact—others. Ay, people made of gold, of velvet, of satin. . . ."

Suddenly, someone drops in: "Rebbe, help!"

He is alarmed.

"What happened to you, Yankele? Yankele!"

He recognizes him. The rabbi knows everyone in Chelm, for he has been godfather to almost all. And when he sees Yankele's bloodied mouth: "Oy, Yankele, who wronged you so, Yankele?"

Yankele is already seated on the bench in front of the table of justice holding on to his cheeks with bloodstained hands and rocking away without stopping, from left to right, this way and that.

"Oy, Yankele, who wronged you so, Yankele?"

"Oy, oy, the Shabbes goy, Rebbe."

The rabbi of Chelm stares in amazement. "In the middle of the week, how do you come to the Shabbes goy, Yankele?"

"A destined thing, Rebbe Leyb. I'm walking as usual in the marketplace. Just walking. And do you think, Rebbe Leyb, that I have the Shabbes goy in mind? I have nothing else to think about but the Shabbes goy? A Jew thinks about making a living, that's what he thinks about. Soon I'll be going home with empty hands—and I don't stop worrying. What will my wife have to say? That shrew of mine . . . but you know her well, Rebbe Leyb! So he comes toward me, the Shabbes goy, and I look and see he's eating pumpkin seeds . . . and with such skill! He throws a handful right into his mouth—a single crack and already he's spitting out the shells, to the right and to the left. So I stop and observe this great dexterity.

"He becomes friendly, like an equal, and says, 'Yankele, come on, open your mouth, Yankele!'

"Well, seeing that a goy pleads, I open my mouth supposing, Rebbenyu, dear Rebbe, that he wants to throw some nuts into it. I open wide . . . so he takes his fist, and—bang!—right into my mouth!"

"At this, Yankele starts crying afresh: "Oy, the murderer, the murderer. . . ."

But this does not please the rabbi of Chelm at all. He draws nearer and reproaches him: "That I don't like, Yankele. How can you say such a thing, just so, about one of God's creatures—*murderer*?"

"But take a look, he knocked out three of my teeth," sobs Yankele, and shows him the teeth.

The rabbi looks closely, shakes his head and says incredulously, "Tell me the truth, Yankele, are these *your* teeth?"

"Whose then, Rebbe? Here, Rebbe, look!"

The rabbi looks and marvels.

And Yankele opens his mouth wide to show him the holes.

"Wonder of wonders," says the rabbi after a pause, "that a Jew should have such teeth. . . ."

"What kind of teeth, then, should a Jew have?" asks Yankele, by this time alarmed.

"Here, look!" answers the rabbi and shows him the old "furniture" in his aged mouth. "Some have no teeth at all—in any case, not *such* teeth! After all, I wasn't born yesterday. Never have I seen such teeth in a Jew's mouth!"

And the rabbi proceeds to ponder two questions at once: How does a Jew come to have such large, strong teeth? As to the Shabbes goy, what impels him to knock out strange teeth?

He ponders and ponders, and then jumps up. "Aha! That is to say, solved!"

"It's all very clear, Yankele! The one depends upon the other. Just like that, you say 'murderer.' About one of God's creatures, *murderer*? There's no such thing. If there were murderers in the world, would God permit the world to exist? So what then? But since you are relating an incident that happened, after all, and I believe you, and I see with my own eyes the knocked-out teeth, I must conclude, you understand, thus . . ."

He pauses to catch his breath and expounds: "The guilt, Yankele, in reality belongs to your teeth!"

Yankele leaps up to his full height. "How is it possible, Rebbe—my *teeth*? And the goy?"

"Wholly innocent he is not, Yankele, that's not what I'm saying! The basic fault, however, lies in the teeth; that is to say, not *your* teeth. . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen with attention, Yankele! By nature the goy is an amiable creature. He was eating pumpkin seeds, he saw you, he really wanted to be hospitable and give you some, so, 'Open your mouth!' he says, and wants to throw nuts into it—after all, they're fond of doing favors and little tricks. But when you, Yankele, obeyed and he saw such fine teeth, that is to say, *his teeth in your mouth* . . . you understand, a goy, and his teeth in your mouth, so naturally he becomes excited. And since he's a goy, what else can he do when he gets excited? So he hits out with his fist.

"Do as I tell you, Yankele," the rabbi concludes. "Don't make a fuss about it. Go home to your wife and tell her I told you, that I explicitly told you, she should make you a mouthwash out of figs. . . ."

As Yankele submissively departs, the rabbi calls after him: "And the next time a goy tells you to open your mouth, open just a little bit, not more than a bit—a crack! He doesn't have to see anything, that a Jew has teeth. . . ."

The rabbi of Chelm returns to his books, studies with gusto, and derives much joy from the holy Torah—and from time to time helps himself to a pinch of worldly paradise from the wooden snuffbox. His heart expands with joy!

"Oy, a dear world, a sweet world. . . ." And he glances again through the ancient, moldy pane of the House of Judgment's narrow window into the marketplace.

"Such precious people, Gottenyu, silky, satiny. . . ." But he does not finish his praises, for here comes Yankele again. A full month has not yet elapsed.

The rabbi stares in wonder. "What I dreamed last night, just the other night . . . What happened this time, Yankele?"

"The Shabbes goy, Rebbe! The Shabbes goy again!" yells Yankele, and collapses on the bench.

Benignly the rabbi scolds him, "What a pest you are, Yankele! Still bothering with the Shabbes goy? A murderer, God forbid, he's not, but what do you need him for?"

"He stole up on me from behind," explains Yankele, "*from behind*, Rebbe Leyb! I'm walking through the alley, I'm on my way home. I'm carrying a loaf of bread for my family, I bought a loaf of bread for my wife and little ones, his Dear Name destined a loaf for me! Under my arm I'm carrying it when suddenly, from behind, a blow on my head. I fall down, I faint, I've scarcely come to, and I see the Shabbes goy walking away with a full mouth, chewing—and the loaf of bread lies at my feet, bitten off. Here, look, Rebbenyu. Oy, my head, my head!"

He shows the rabbi the loaf and grabs his head.

The rabbi examines the bread and says, "The head is a triviality; from a blow, God forbid, one doesn't perish! But consider, Yankele, who was in the right? Here, take a look—*teeth!* A goy, as you see, has teeth! Do you see? One bite, and half a loaf gone at once! I couldn't do it!"

"Yes, Rebbe," admits Yankele, "but what's to be done with the murderer? All Chelm is in danger!"

"And don't think, Yankele"—the rabbi turns to him—"that I'm not suffering on account of this. I know what half a loaf of bread means to a person like you, with so many mouths in your house to feed, I know what it means. Alas, there won't be enough to go around. If it depended on me, and I tell you this in confidence, I would positively request that the community compensate you for half a loaf. Why not? True, the community is poor, but still, a Jew has suffered a loss from *everybody's* Shabbes goy. And half a loaf is not merely blows—the community wouldn't be impoverished—but you know yourself, Yankele, that I have no say."

Yankele starts screaming, "So that's how it is? It means only one thing—there is no judge and there is no justice in this world—the murderer goes about scot-free!"

"'Murderer,'" replies the rabbi serenely, "is not necessarily the proper word. I explained that to you once before; if it were so, the world would not be permitted to exist. There are no murderers!"

"So what then?"

"The guilt, I tell you, Yankele, lies in the bread. In the holy books it is written, 'A man sins because of bread.' You know the small print yourself. 'A man sins on account of a crumb of bread.' And all the books say that there are times when a Jew transgresses the commandment 'Thou shalt not covet'—sometimes even 'Thou shalt not steal.' A goy, to make a distinction, may transgress 'Thou shalt not steal'—sometimes even 'Thou shalt not kill.' But this too, however, not by nature. It's all the fault of the bread. You have no idea, Yankele, of the evil impulse that lies hidden in bread. Basically—now tell me your opinion frankly, Yankele—why should it exasperate the Shabbes goy when he sees that Yankele walks about on the street, feeds his little ones, and praises God? Hah? But when he sees *bread*, that Yankele is carrying a loaf of bread! Yes, Yankele—I see you comprehend me now. Chew it well!"

And the rabbi goes over to him, puts his arm about Yankele's shoulder, and says with great compassion, "You know what, Yankele? After all, you know that I am a humble person, by nature a humble person, and I don't like to do such things. However, I will do it for you, for your sake. I will pray to God especially for half a loaf on your account."

"Thanks, Rebbenyu!" Yankele jumps up overjoyed and starts to leave the hut.

But the rabbi detains him. "Listen carefully, Yankele. Don't ever carry bread exposed and uncovered that his Dear Name has destined for you! It is forbidden to tempt the evil impulse. You have a coat—cover it!"

A pacified Yankele takes leave of the rabbi and, after a short while, returns for the third time with a cry for help; again the Shabbes goy.

"It is now beyond comprehension," says the rabbi, "that in the course of a single season a Jew should meet with the Shabbes goy three times—and three times get beaten up! It doesn't stand to reason.

"There's something more to this than meets the eye!" he says, wrinkling his forehead, and proceeding to cross-examine. "Did you show him the teeth?"

"God forbid, Rebbe! Since you told me not to!"

"Did you keep the bread uncovered?"

"What bread, when bread, Rebbe?"

Ah, if he'd only had bread, he would not have come to this pass. He was on his way home without bread . . . his wife had met him with the poker . . . so he ran away, she ran after him . . . he ran beyond the town to the bathhouse . . . a Jewish wife doesn't run outside the town . . . finally he reaches safety on the slope behind the bath, where the Shabbes goy is reclining on the grass. He jumps up and wants to kill Yankele. With his bare fists he'll kill him dead, he says, and punches away. He could barely tear himself away. . . .

"Do you know what, Yankele?" the rabbi says softly after a contemplative pause. "You will forgive me, but I don't believe you."

Yankele pulls off his coat. "Rebbe, I wish you pieces of gold as big as the blue marks I have."

And he wants to disrobe completely, but this the rabbi does not permit.

"Little fool, that's not what I mean," says the rabbi. "It's not the least bit necessary to undress. I'm only acting in harmony with my conviction. I can't possibly believe that the Shabbes goy, one of God's creatures after all, should, just like that, without a reason, be a murderer. The concept lacks reality. Tell me, Yankele, does it make sense—a murderer? Could you be a murderer?"

"No!"

"Nor I," says the rabbi.

He falls into a trance, and after a while comes to. "A-ha! That is

to say, solved!" and he breaks into a smile. "You know what, Yankele? Listen carefully to what I have to say!"

And he stands up, the better to savor each of his words.

"I tell you, Yankele, in the rear of the bath must be the place where Cain, as it says in the holy Torah, killed his brother Abel. The place itself, more or less, is capable of murder, but particularly is it a dangerous spot for 'an offspring of Noah' who cannot by nature control himself."

Yankele opens mouth and ears. "Ah!"

"What do you say?" smiles the rabbi. "It makes sense? Apparently, that's how it is! And I maintain that the goy doesn't even know he is guilty.

"So listen to me, Yankele, and forget about the whole thing! If you wish, call an apothecary; if not, apply cold compresses yourself.

"And on the Sabbath—it's true I don't mix in community matters, but still in times of danger—on the Sabbath, God willing, I will announce in the synagogue and in the study house that everyone should avoid going to the rear of the bath.

"And perhaps the council will decide to move the entire bath into town, into the marketplace. Why not? Wouldn't it be better? But that's already outside my sphere. A good day to you, Yankele."

Hardly a month had gone by when Yankele showed up again.

He had no teeth to exhibit, he hadn't been to the rear of the bath, but he did have broken bones. The Shabbes goy had come upon him behind the synagogue.

This time the rabbi had to admit: "What a bandit! Indeed, quite a bandit!" And "A peril for all of Chelm. . . . For me personally, no. I hardly ever step outside the door of my house. . . . Why should I? But, the rest of Chelm!

"Why," he queries, "how are you in greater danger than any other Chelmer? *Your* name is Yankele, another is called Groinem. It has nothing to do with the name. And I don't even know if the Shabbes goy is acquainted with people's names—how that one is called, whose candlesticks he is taking down. . . .

"We must," he sighs, "call a meeting right away, yes. . . . And do you know for what purpose? Can you guess my fear, Yankele?"

"What, Rebbe?"

"On Yom Kippur, when the goy comes into the synagogue to light the candles before the final prayer, he can destroy all of Chelm. He can at that moment, God forbid, wipe out the entire community at once!"

And with the rabbi of Chelm it's this way: when he comes to a decision, he acts without delay.

On the Sabbath, in all the houses of prayer, large signs with glaring letters are already hanging: "A MEETING WILL BE HELD! THE WHOLE TOWN IS IN DANGER!"

Danger? The notables gather, the ordinary citizens come running, they sit packed together, cheek by jowl.

"Now tell us everything; what's it about, Rebbe Leyb?"

"Let Yankele say," says he.

So Yankele tells his story. Then the rabbi tells how the supposition was revealed to him, but that, nevertheless, Yankele is in the right throughout.

"A murderer," yells Yankele, "a murderer!"

"So what's to be done, Rebbenyu?"

The rabbi does not keep them in suspense and speaks as follows. "Were I," he says, "to have a say in the community, if I were to be asked in all sincerity, this is what I would say: In the first place, and before anything else—to satisfy the Divine Name—in fact, right away, tomorrow before dawn, Yankele should go away, someplace else, because on him the Shabbes goy has a claim already—more than a claim—a *fixation*.

"Now, in order to appease his resentment, and with the object of redeeming the entire community from dire peril, let us give the Shabbes goy a raise: a larger portion of the Sabbath loaf and *two* drinks of brandy instead of one. And what else? Perhaps he'll have compassion!"

You're laughing?

Still, there's a little of the rabbi of Chelm in each of us.

1894(?) (translated by Etta Blum)

THE POOR BOY

A Story Told by a "Committee Man"¹

▼
"Give me eight groschen for a hostel."²

"No!" I answer sternly and walk away.

He runs after me with a doglike entreaty in his burning eyes; he kisses my sleeve—it doesn't help! "My income doesn't permit such daily handouts!"

"Poor people," I think, leaving the soup kitchen where I had treated the beggar boy so harshly. "Poor people quickly become a nuisance."

The first time I saw the dirty, skinny little face, with its sunken, blazing, sad, but clever eyes, it went straight to my heart. Before I even heard him speak, my heart began to ache, and a ten-groschen coin flew out of my pocket into his skinny hands.

I remember distinctly that my hand did this *by itself*. It didn't ask my heart whether it felt compassion, nor the auditor, my mind, if a man on a monthly salary of forty-one rubles and sixty-six kopecks could afford five kopecks for charity. His entreaty was an electric spark that shocked every last corner of my body. Only later did my mind factor in the new expense, after the boy, jumping for joy, had already left the soup kitchen.

Caught up in my own and others' business, I quickly forgot about him. But not entirely, it seems. Somewhere inside me there must have been a planning conference. Because the very next evening, when the same boy stopped me once again, and in his shivery ragamuffin voice asked me for a hostel bed, from somewhere within me ready-made thoughts emerged: a seven-or-eight-year-old boy shouldn't be begging, shouldn't be hanging about the kitchen; eating in the kitchen before the dishes are collected only turns him into an idler; he'll never become a proper person that way.

My hand again slipped into my pocket, but this time I discovered it there and restrained it. Had I been pious, I might have thought: Is the good deed worth the eight groschen? Or couldn't I get by just as well with afternoon prayers? Or with an ardent groan while praying? *Not* being pious, I kept the boy's welfare in mind. With my eight groschen I would do him *harm*! Turn him into a lifelong beggar!

And yet I did give him something then. When my hand finally tore out of my pocket, I did not restrain it. Something ached around my heart; my eyes turned moist. Again he left the kitchen rejoicing, and I felt my heart grow easy and a smile spread across my face.

The third time it all took longer, quite a bit longer. I had already calculated that my salary didn't allow me to hand out eight groschen a day. It was certainly a pleasure to see the shy, tearful youngster dance for joy, see his eyes shine, know that because of my eight