

Classic Yiddish Stories of



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SHOLEM ALEICHEM,



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The Little Man; or, Portrait of a Life

As for me, I was born in Tsviatshits and my name is Mendele the Book Peddler. Most of the year I'm on the road, traveling from one place to another, so people know me everywhere. I ride all over Poland with a full stock of books printed in Zhitomir, and apart from that I carry prayer shawls, fringed undergarments, tassels, shofars, tefillin, amulets, mezuzas, wolf tooth charms, and sometimes you can even get brass and copper goods from me. Truth is, since the Yiddish newspaper *Kol mevasser* started coming out a couple years back, I've also taken to carrying a few issues. **But actually that's not what I'm driving at—I'm getting off the point.** I want to tell you about something else entirely.

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Last year, just before Hanukah in 1863, I rode into Glupsk, where I reckoned on selling some candlesticks and wax candles. **Well, actually that's not what I'm driving at either.** On Tuesday after morning prayers I came to Glupsk and, as I often do, I went straight to the House of Study. **But I'm getting off the point again.** When I arrived at the House of Study, I saw groups of people standing around arguing, shmoozing, laughing, and looking worried. The people didn't stand still—three circles would join and then split up again into three. How does the saying go, eh? My heart isn't made of stone, and I'm also flesh and bone.

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Well, you can imagine that I was curious to know what was going on. In this world you've got to know everything, hear everything, because you never know when it will come in handy. **But I'm getting off the point.** I had scarcely unhitched my horse when the groups of people moseyed over toward me. One person greeted me, another took a look into my wagon, and others started poking and groping around at my goods, **as we Jews are wont to do.** The street urchins and schoolboys even managed to pluck hairs from my horse's tail. **But I'm getting off the point.** In the meantime, I heard the following conversation:

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"Oy, vey! Oy, vey! Blessed be the true Judge. He was just a young man, I think about forty. Oy, vey! How could this happen? And to such a good man!"

Ab.
Abram.

Yosl. "Why are you getting all worked up, Reb Avromtshe? As if you care! What's it to you? Who was he, after all is said and done?"

Leyb. "Nothing matters to you, Yosl. Reb Avromtshe is right—how could this happen to such a man? Have mercy! As sure as I'm a Jew, have mercy!"

Yosl. "Lookit the new minister of mercy, Leybtshe Temes! Now he's agreeing with Reb Avromtshe. What was it that you said a little while ago, Leybtshe?"

Leyb. "Who, me? Yosl, what did I say? I mean it, Yosl, what did I say?"

Yosl. "You and nobody else, Leybtshe. You, with your kosher mouth, said: 'Big deal! It's just Isaac Abraham Takif.' Whether he'll forgive me for saying so or not, he was a coarse fellow, heartless and a bit of a fool."

Leyb. "What? Who? Yosl, you mean me? Good day, I'm in a hurry."

Yosl. "Good day, Leybtshe, and a good year at that, too. Come on, Reb Avromtshe, into the House of Study, let's take a drop of brandy. Today the shammes has very good brandy."

Avrom. "You know, Yosl, a little brandy never hurt anyone, eh? You sure outsmarted that liar Leybtshe. Gave it to him good, Yosl. What nonsense he was talking! The man, may he rest in peace, was an ignoramus, a meddler, and a bloodsucker. And he left behind a pile of money."

Yosl. "That's why, Reb Avromtshe, I like you so much. Because you always insist on telling the truth."

5 I heard all this and more, but now I'm getting off the point again. It was time to unpack my wares. I shifted my horse around in the harness so she faced the wagon, to cheer her up with a bit of straw; as for me, I went to work. As soon as I had pulled out a candlestick, a prayer shawl, and a package of tassels, the assistant to the rabbinical court ran up panting like a goose and said:

"Oy, *gevalt*, Reb Mendele! Sholem aleykhem, Reb Mendele! The Rebbe kindly requests that you come to him as fast as you can."

I told the rabbi's assistant that I'd come right away. Left by myself, I began to wonder what it could mean that the rabbi had called for me in such a hurry; I knew that he used oil wicks instead of candles for Hanukah, because he'd bought his menorah from me the year before. So why did the assistant come running all out of breath? Whatever it was he wanted, I had to go. I thought it over and brought along a few candlesticks, some amulets, and a women's prayer book that was hot off the press, which might be of use to the rebbetzin. But I'm getting off the point.

6 As I entered the rabbi's house, he ran to meet me and cried out:

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Rav:

7 "Oy, Reb Mendele! Oy, sholem aleykhem, Reb Mendele! God must have sent you, dear, kind Reb Mendele! This must be a miracle, Reb Mendele, really and truly a miracle from Heaven!" But I'm getting off the point again.

8 Another bookseller would surely have thought that they were anxious to see my wares, but I'm no babe in the cradle. And I wasn't hatched yesterday, like a chick that has no idea what's going on. You should know that, as a rule, the world consists of deception. When a person needs to buy something essential, he pretends that it has no value to him at all. That way he can buy it for a song. When he urgently needs a prayer book, he haggles over a pamphlet of penitential prayers, lamentations, or a package of tassels. Then he picks up the prayer book as if on a whim, glances at it and puts it down, furrows his brow and smiles, saying: "For a small sum I might have bought this, too." Believe me, all the world is a marketplace. Everyone wants the other guy to lose so he can gain. Everyone is looking for bargains. But I'm getting off the point. I guessed from the rabbi's face that he didn't want to buy anything; otherwise, he wouldn't have let on that he was waiting for me. It's true that the rabbi is a fine and honest man—I should only have his good name—although still, in this world, one has to deceive people. Even the angels had to follow the way of the world and put one over on Abraham, when the Torah says that they ate, although they only pretended to eat.¹ But that's really not at all what I'm driving at. The rabbi led me into his house. There sat the rabbinical judges and all the wealthy men in town, looking lost in thought. Rich people always seem a little bit lost and worried, I don't know why. If you've got money, what's there to worry about? Seems to me that you don't need any fancy ideas to spend money. But I'm getting off the point.

10 The rabbi addressed his assistants and the wealthy men with these words:

9 "Gentlemen! I've brought you here regarding a serious matter. And by a miracle, Reb Mendele also arrived in our community today. For this reason I asked that you wait a moment, while I troubled Reb Mendele to join us. Forgive me! Now that everyone is here, gentlemen, I'll tell you something strange and remarkable."

For the life of me, I couldn't understand what it all meant. I even started to ponder what the deeper meaning could be. But then I thought it over and told myself not to be so impatient—soon enough I'd know everything.

1. In Genesis 18:8 Abraham feeds three men who visit him. Rabbinic tradition interprets these visitors as divine messengers, angels who could have only pretended to eat.

The rabbi, he should live and be well, took a thick sheaf of paper out of his pocket and said:

"Gentlemen, Isaac Abraham's widow sent me this letter earlier today. Before he passed away, he asked that it be given to me. You see, gentlemen, my name is written at the top of the letter. I won't go on any longer than necessary—I'll just read it to you. Sit, Reb Mendele," he said to me. "Sit down and put your candlesticks over there on the floor."

I sat down. The rabbi unfolded the sheaf of paper, shrugged his shoulders, and started to read these very words:

Rebbe, this letter contains a description of my entire life and my will. I beg, Rebbe, that you follow my request and carry out everything I ask of you. Forgive me that I have burdened you with such a long letter; at the end you will see that it is very useful.

I was born to poor parents in the small shtetl named Bezliude. I don't remember my father because he died while I was still a suckling child. My memories of what happened go back only to when I was five. From what I remember, in my youth no one thought I had any brains, and whenever I said or did anything, people used to burst out laughing. No one spoiled me—I wasn't kissed, caressed, or hugged like other children. When I cried, no one comforted me with candies or toys, but instead they silenced me with slaps and blows. I never heard anyone use the word "pity" or "mercy." No one ever said, "What a pity that he has to go barefoot," for example, or "What a pity, he's cold and his face is all swollen," or "Poor thing, what a pity that he hasn't had anything to eat." No one said, "Have mercy on the child, he's exhausted and shivering to the bone." I only heard people say: "Look at that pretty face, what a puffed-up mug! His feet are red as beets! Look at the glutton, he's up to his old tricks again, shivering and making his teeth chatter." Nobody wants a poor man's child, who just sticks out like a sore thumb. Even his parents have no pity on him unless he's sick because hardship and distress harden a person's heart.

I had a habit of looking into everyone's eyes and mouth when they spoke. Sometimes I stared into my mother's eyes, and she always used to hit me for this. But once when I was looking deep into her eyes, and I saw that she didn't stop me, I couldn't resist asking:

"Tell me, Mama, what sort of little man is that in your eyes?"

My mother smiled and answered, "That little man is the soul. That little

man isn't in everyone's eyes, and not in the eyes of animals. It's just in Jewish eyes."

My mother's answer awakened in me a lot of new and fresh thoughts. From then on my imagination was preoccupied with the little man. I saw the little man in my sleep and dreamed I was playing with him. I held the little man and imagined that I myself was a little man. In short, I thought of nothing but the little man, and I so wanted to be one. It was no small matter—the little man is the soul! I started to think about how to catch the little man. Once I had a clever idea. When mother leaned over to take a pot out of the oven, I ran up from behind her and struck her head with my fist so that the little man would fall out of her eyes. You can guess how many pinches and slaps I earned for that, and then I went without food all day because my poor mother had broken the pot of corn mush with her forehead.

Another time I got into even deeper trouble. I was curious to know whether animals also have souls, so I walked up to a cow on the street. While I was getting ready to stare it in the eyes, the beast tore into me with its horns and gave me a serious injury. The scar on my left cheek is still there. All these blows didn't drive thoughts of the little man out of my head; on the contrary, they roused my curiosity.

Formal education

I studied at the Talmud-Torah. It seems to me that I was no coarse lout—I'd learned the Bible with Rashi's commentaries for seven or eight years. Apparently it's possible to have a little learning and to be a great fool anyway. My mother called me a shlimmazl, and she was quite right about that. Among the children in the Talmud-Torah, I was the greatest shlimmazl of them all, and I received more slaps than anyone else. At the end my teacher had it in for me and beat me so hard that I had to stop going to school. This is what happened. The teacher told me all about the biblical verse near the beginning of Genesis, "And Lemekh said to his wives, Adah and Zillah. . ."² He must have been quoting Rashi or a midrash when he explained that Lemekh was blind and that his son Tubal-cain led him around. When he saw his great-grandfather Cain from afar, he thought it was a wild animal. Actually, just to explain it better, my teacher said that Tubal-cain thought Cain was a fox. So he told his father Lemekh to shoot an arrow at the fox, and he killed him. When Lemekh realized that he had killed his grandfa-

2. Genesis 4:23. The midrash alluded to here is contained in *Tanhuma* and in Rashi's commentary on the passage in Genesis 4:23.

ther Cain, he slapped one hand against the other—and he struck his son Tubal-cain dead. Because of this, his wives became aloof from him. He begged forgiveness from them and said, “Adah and Zillah, hearken to my voice. . .”

למה לא יצא

And then the fateful day arrived. Suddenly an inspector from Saint Petersburg showed up at the Talmud-Torah. He was beardless and dressed in a short jacket, just like a German. Along with him, to examine the children, came all of the school officials. It was just my rotten luck that he asked me to translate a short passage from the Bible—none other than the good verse, “And Lemekh said to his wives, Adah and Zillah. . .” I had never talked with such an important person before, and certainly not with a clean-shaven German Jew. I was trembling like a fish out of water, my ears were buzzing, my hair stood on end, and I felt as if I had been blinded by the sun. I didn’t think I’d be able to tell a long story about Lemekh, like the one in the midrash. But I had to say something. I got confused and started:

“Vayomer—And he said, a fox. And Lemekh was blind. He said to his wives—Tubal-cain led him around—Adah and Zillah, and he killed him.”

The German Jew almost jumped out of his skin, he was so angry. He called over my teacher and said to him, “Is it possible? Can this indeed be how you instruct your pupils? Is it possible?”

The teacher scratched his head, picked his nose, and stammered, “My lord, sir, the child became frightened. He’s a good lad, you can believe me!”

Then the German Jew said to me, “Have no fear, child, nothing will happen to you. Translate these words for me. Vayomer—tell me, what does *vayomer* mean?”

I opened my eyes wide, like a clay golem, and said, “Vayomer—a fox.” Because when my teacher taught me the verse, we hurried past the phrase *Vayomer Lemekh l’nashav*, “And Lemekh said to his wives.” The main thing was to tell the long story.

My poor teacher looked like he wanted to die. It was a black day for him, and later he poured out his bitter heart on me. He always used to bother me; after this he beat me like there was no tomorrow, until I stopped going to the Talmud-Torah.

My mother apprenticed me to a tailor so that I would learn the trade from him. But I, shlimmazl that I was, didn’t lick honey at his shop either. For an entire year they wouldn’t even give me the honor of letting me hold a needle in my hand. My job was to empty the slop buckets, carry wood,

sweep the house, go to the marketplace for kosher thread, or take a bit of work back to a customer, together with the tailor. I ate nothing but blows and anguish. The lady of the house was a mean, malicious person who wore the pants and led everyone at home by the nose. Just as she needed brandy every day, she needed someone to pinch and flail, tear into and torment, curse and scold. When she ran her little hands over my cheeks, she dug down to the bones. In those days I thought an apprentice had to be treated like this. Otherwise he wouldn’t be able to become a tailor, in exactly the same way that you can’t become a scholar without being beaten by your teacher. Because of this I used to receive all of the blows lovingly, and I didn’t even cry out loud.

Once, during the busy season before Passover, the tailor said to me: “Isaac Abraham, hop over to the store, pick up a penny’s worth of kosher thread, and sew together the front and back parts of this dress. Hurry it up, you little bastard!” I remember how happy I was to have the honor of sitting at the table and holding a needle; it was as if I’d been given the honor of holding up one of the poles under a wedding canopy. I marched over and sat down beside the table, happy and content. The tailor sang a bit of the Kol Nidrei prayer, shifted to “King Above,” hummed a march, and then he told a little joke. Finally he sang a tune for seating the bride before the ceremony, and he made up a few rhymes like a wedding bard. “Hurry it up, Isaac Abraham,” he said, his voice rising, “and trim that wick! Faster, you bastard! Sew faster, you puffed-up mug!”

And stitch by stitch, I stuck the needle into the skirt and into my finger, into the dress and into my finger. But who notices a pinprick when the heart is gay? Suddenly a cloud came over me—the house began to smell of something burning. They looked everywhere until, finally, they noticed that the skirt I was sewing was smoldering. When I trimmed the wick, a piece of it had fallen off. Up went a hue and cry, then curses, which were followed by slaps and blows that rained down on me like broomsticks. I got what was coming to me and then some. The tailor attempted to turn the skirt into a blouse with sleeves, but it didn’t work. Poor man, he even took out the remnants of fabric that were lying around and tortured himself for a long time trying to make something, but it didn’t work. No matter how hard he tried, stretching the cloth this way and that, it didn’t help. The skirt would have to remain a skirt.

“Listen up, Isaac Abraham,” the tailor said, “get lost, you bastard. I have no energy left to beat you. Anyway, when the lady of the house returns from

the market, she'll probably get at you with some warm-up punches. But that's nothing to what you'll have coming if I can't pull this off."

The tailor puzzled over the skirt for a bit and said to himself, I'll make that hole into a pocket. . . . Why not? Yes indeed. Then he shouted at me, "Get lost, you bastard!"

I crawled out from under the table like a wounded kitten. That was on a Wednesday. On Friday the tailor ordered me to bring the dress along to the tax collector's wife. She took one look, had a fit, and burst out like thunder:

"A pocket way back there!³ What's that supposed to be, my dear tailor?" She cried out as if the sky had fallen, "How come there's a pocket in back? Never in my life, swine, will I accept such a dress!"

"Ai," the tailor answered her with a sweet little laugh. "Ai, please don't shout, Breindl, I've sewn you the dress according to the latest fashion. These days all of the landowners' wives wear pockets in back, and nowadays only a madman makes pockets in front. So wear it in good health, and give my apprentice here a tip—he worked hard on that pocket."

He was the best tailor in the shtetl, and people said that he even used patterns from fashion magazines. And the tax collector was the richest man in Bezliude. So when people saw that his wife, the tax collector's wife, was going around with a pocket in back, all of the modish women in Bezliude followed her example. That didn't help me any, though, because the tailor beat me until I had to run for my life.

After that I was apprenticed to one worker after another for a week at a time. My luck didn't improve, I remained a shlimmazl. More than one boss gave me the honor of letting me carry the slop buckets. One of them even said, "Carry them, Isaac Abraham, carry them. I should see the day when we carry wine to your wedding ceremony in a sieve. Carry them, Izzy; when I was your age I also carried a ton of slops." I had another boss, a cobbler, who used to send me to pluck boar's hair from the backs of pigs that were rolling in the gutter.

Once a cantor traveled through our shtetl, and on Sabbath he led services accompanied by his boys' choir. He even had a little pipsqueak singer who

3. The tax collector's wife literally complains about "a pocket way down below" (a *keshene same untln*). According to Shalom Luria (1984), however, "below" (*untln*) is a euphemism for "in back" (*hintn*). This idea gains support from the tailor's later claim that "nowadays only a madman makes pockets in front" (*fun fornt*).

was my age. I was so jealous of the way he stood and sang tra-la-la in front of everyone, that I would have given the shirt off my back to become a singer like him. I watched that boy with awe during the prayers, while I was hanging around with all of the other kids in a side room of the synagogue. Nothing in the world, I thought, could be better than a choirboy—except maybe a little man. When the boy opened his mouth, well, I just began staring in as if I wanted to drop everything and jump down his throat. As if only that could cure what ailed me.

After I came home I tried to imitate the singer. During our Sabbath singing I let loose with such a tra-la-la that my mother was delighted. It wasn't the Sabbath songs that had me going, but the idea of imitating the choirboy. When she saw that I didn't want to stop and wouldn't give her any rest after lunch, she gave me a good thrashing and threw me out of the house. And where does a boy run to on Sabbath afternoon? To the House of Study. I thought it was just me, but lo and behold! The entire gang was there, same as me, copying the singers. All of them were standing around, busily practicing. One squeaked, one roared, one hummed like a bass, one mimicked the cantor, one meowed, one piped, one chirped, and even the tax collector's boy was in the midst of the flock, poor kid, torturing himself to sound like the choirboy. It turned out that all of them, like me, had been thrown out of their homes. So we gathered in the balcony, in the women's section of the shul, and we let out such resounding shrieks that the synagogue attendant splashed water on us and drove us out.

But I really had a fine voice, and I started begging my mother to apprentice me to the cantor. I pestered her and made myself into such a nuisance for so long that she took me to the cantor. She was a poor widow and, in the end, she wanted to get rid of such a bargain as me. When the cantor asked me to yammer a few notes and then said he'd take me on as a choirboy, I thought I was on top of the world. I'm incapable of describing just how I felt inside.

I traveled around with the cantor and saw the world for more than six months. For me, the shlimmazl, things turned out worse than they did for any other choirboy. That time I really sold myself short and got myself into trouble. It went like this: while the cantor was leading services, the choirboys were supposed to watch the congregation to see whether they liked his davening or not. After we got home, the cantor would call out someone's name and ask him how the services had gone. As chance would have it, he almost always called on me. Maybe it was more than chance because right after services the

other choirboys used to run away and make themselves scarce. When he turned to me and said, "Avromke!" I answered him: "Cantor, they laughed at you. I swear, they laughed really hard." Then he'd grab me by the ear and twist and pull, twist and pull—until, I tell you, the tailor's blows looked like child's play.

One time he beat me so badly that I could hardly talk and lay sick in bed for a month. This is the story. In some town, he once davened for the special Sabbath with the Torah reading "Shekalim."⁴ He worked hard to prepare for that service, because he hoped to become a steady cantor for that shtetl. Saturday evening people gathered around him, a large crowd. The cantor sent for wine and rum and invited everyone to celebrate the Melave-Malke; his intention was to win over the congregation. He wanted to send me out for something, and he called to me, "Avromke!" Ha, ha! Then I opened my little beak and chirped these words: "Cantor, they laughed at you." The poor man made a face, turned red as a turkey's comb, and everyone, the whole crowd, shot daggers at me with their eyes. I thought the cantor didn't believe me, so I started to swear: "As true as I'm a Jew, Cantor! They laughed at you, these very people. Not to mention that man right there beside you, who's drinking and whispering secrets now, he even laughed while we were saying the *Ke-dusha*." The cantor pretended to laugh and told the crowd that I was an idiot and a fool, but that he had to keep me because of my fine voice. You can guess what I had coming to me after that. In short, I was sick in bed for a month.

I went on traveling around, almost all summer, with the cantor. Just in time for Sabbath "Nahamu," we arrived in Tsviatshits. The cantor was counting on a steady position as cantor of Tsviatshits, and while we were there he pulled out all the stops. They told him that he would lead services during the High Holidays, and afterward they would close the deal. In the meantime, I got to know the tough kids of Tsviatshits and they treated me with some respect. When they managed to steal the shofar from the synagogue attendant's drawer, for instance, they honored me with the first blow. My life even started to improve, but nothing helps if luck isn't on your side.

Listen to how things ended with my cantor. You can imagine how hard he worked on Rosh Hashanah; he really let loose and just about climbed the walls. The bass singer went hoarse because in almost every verse he sang the

4. Exodus 30:11–16, a passage relating to a half-shekel tax, read in traditional synagogues on the last Sabbath before the winter month of Adar.

new argot

accompaniment. The poor tenor also lost his voice because using falsetto he had to outsing the bass, and all we could hear was a warble and a squeak. Each singer was screaming at the top of his lungs, and every few moments I had to give a little cry, *Tatenyu!* Father in Heaven!

But in the congregation there was one rich young man who had modern leanings. He was a kind, fat man, and he liked to clown around with children. Well, he really hated the cantor. When the cantor started to go all out during the "Ata zokher" part in the Eighteen Benedictions and, good man, threw off beautiful ornamented phrases, the rich joker silently came over to me and asked: "Can you pucker up your lips like a cherry?" And then and there he puckered up such a big cherry that I broke out laughing. But at exactly that moment, the cantor reached the end of a blessing and was expecting me to answer with a "*Tatenyu!* Father in Heaven!" When the congregation saw that the cantor had stopped, they started to knock impatiently on their prayer stands. The cantor angrily turned around to look at me, his face reddening and boiling over like a carrot stew. The bass hummed a note, signaling to me that I should answer with a *Tatenyu!* But just as I was getting ready to squeak out my part, the rich man puckered up another cherry and I let out a squeaky laugh. The cantor took fright, broke loose, galloped off, and jumped over some of the Eighteen Benedictions, making a few mistakes along the way. The congregants knocked and rapped on their stands, the women became frightened and cried out, *Fire!* Then the men also got scared and started to run out of the synagogue. In short, the services were spoiled. On the day after Rosh Hashanah the cantor threw me out, and he himself quit the town in disgrace. I was left behind, shlimmazl that I am, stranded in Tsviatshits.

During the holiday I ate meals at the house of a certain man. He was neither poor nor rich, neither a hasid nor from the modern world, and neither gloomy nor happy—just some ordinary Jewish guy. After I'd been left alone there like a lost sheep, I thought things over, went to that man, and told him my troubles. He heard me out in silence, smoothing his whiskers. Then, looking pensive, he waved his hand indicating that I should stay in his home, and called for someone to feed me. That night at about eleven o'clock, when everyone in town was already sleeping—and it was so dark outside that you thought you'd gone blind—he took me to a godforsaken corner of the shtetl, and down a dark alley. There it was still as a graveyard, except for the rustling of trees that shook in the wind and the sound of a mild autumn rain that drizzled on dry, fallen leaves. When the wind let up for a moment, I could hear

1st nature scene in YL

the whirring of a mill in the distance, and when the wind picked up again, it mingled with the crowing of a cock and barking of a dog. Apparently Jews didn't live on that alley—if they had, there would have been no trees lining the path or leaves on the ground.

My new friend walked on and on with me without speaking a word. Finally we entered a small, squat house. In a tiny front chamber a candle flickered, and there he took off his coat. He went into the next room but told me to wait in the front. Because I was standing right beside the closed door, I heard the following conversation in German:

"Good evening, Herr Gutmann!"

"Welcome, Herr Jacobsohn! What a surprise! You haven't visited in three weeks. What's the meaning of this, Herr Jacobsohn?"

"Dear Herr Gutmann, how could I visit? You know that these are the Days of Awe, and the local Jews are more fanatical than ever. You know my position and how dependent I am on them. And if they saw me going to visit you. . ."

"You're absolutely right, Herr Jacobsohn, you're right. You are dependent on them and have a family to support."

"Have you already finished your work, Herr Gutmann?"

"Oh, yes. The book has gone remarkably well. It's too bad that in this entire city only a few people read Hebrew."

"What's worse, Herr Gutmann, is that you receive no payment for your work. You often want for food, and on top of everything you suffer undeserved scorn."

"Believe me, Herr Jacobsohn, a writer really needs no other payment than being understood. Scorn and want merely inspire him to do his work. Undeserved disrespect is just as pleasant as deserved respect. To suffer for the sake of truth is not real suffering. I would call it suffering if I had to flatter, be a hypocrite, deny myself, and sell my conscience, my mind, and my heart. Do you think that being a flatterer is an easy job? It's just as hard as being a thief. The flatterer and hypocrite, like the thief, must always worry and be on guard. Do you think that all of my persecutors, the hasidim, are happy and pious? Oh, no! A certain group of them persecutes me just out of envy, out of jealousy."

"Really, Herr Gutmann, with such fine qualities and thoughts, you truly are enviable. People must indeed be jealous of you. But do you know why I've come to you tonight? Several times you've said that you need an errand boy to send around town, and now I've found one and brought him along. He seems like an honest lad, though a bit of a fool."

"Many thanks, my dear friend. Where is he?"

I understood bits and pieces of their conversation. That is, I didn't catch the meaning, although I understood almost all of the words. They were a mixture of Yiddish and German, and I was able to understand the German words—because when I traveled around with the cantor I heard all sorts of people talk. In conversation, the cantor himself liked to throw in an occasional German word, as it suited him. He often used to boast that he sang from sheet music and could lead services *chorisch*.

Suddenly the door opened and they called me into the room. My new friend was sitting there without his hat, and the German Jew took my hand and said kindly:

"Well, my dear young man, you want to stay with me? Here you won't have any hard work, you'll just have to run an errand now and then."

My eyes bulged and I gave such a foolish look that the German Jew smiled. But I liked him a lot; his face showed such goodness, and he spoke so kindly to me—unlike the tailor, the cantor, and even my mother. I was drawn to him. I put my hand to my lambskin cap, which I always wore, winter or summer, even if I was going barefoot. I lifted it a bit off my head, then I put it back down at an angle. I pulled it down toward my face, then pushed it up, and with the other hand I pulled at my side curls and scratched my neck. I didn't know what to do with myself and with my cap. Finally I took courage and quickly snatched it off my head. I felt as if a cool breeze was blowing over my bare head, as if my head had been shaved. I kept reaching up to touch the hair on my head.

"You're a good fellow," the German Jew said. "What's your name?"

I stood there dazed, just like the time with the German Jew in the Talmud-Torah. I peered at him with a couple of calf's eyes.

"What's your name?" the German Jew asked me again.

"I don't know."

"Can it be that you don't know your own name?"

"My mother," I answered, "used to call me Itzhak Avromtshe. My teacher in the Talmud-Torah called me Itshe Avremele. The tailor called me Itsik Avreml the bastard. And another craftsman, when he wanted to get me to carry the slop buckets, would call me Itshiniu Avrominiu. The cantor called me Avromke. So how should I know my name?"

"Your name is Itsik Avrom," the German Jew said with a smile. "It's a very fine name, taken from the Patriarchs. And that's what I'll call you—that is, Isaac Abraham, or Abraham. Do you want to stay with me, Abraham?"

"So long as you don't beat me. Already there's not a whole bone in my body."

Tears welled up in the German Jew's eyes. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Poor thing! It seems that he has suffered a lot. So young, and already he doesn't have a whole bone in his body! Yes, yes," he said to my new friend, "he really is coarse, even dumb, but still a good, honest fellow." My new friend remained silent and just smoothed his whiskers.

"No," the German Jew said to me. "I give you my word that I won't touch you. You're a human being, no less than I am, apart from which you've had enough misfortunes. So will you stay with me?"

"Yes, but you just shouldn't ask me to sing the high notes. My throat is already sore."

In short, I moved in with the German Jew. He had a wife and two children. He was very poor, but his house was always clean, everything was in its place, and the corners sparkled. His daughter owned only one dress, but it was always pretty and clean, as if it had just been sewn. The missus, his wife, took care of every nook and cranny and was always cheerful. The German Jew sat in his room writing, day and night; books lay all around him, on the table and under the table. I didn't need to polish his boots much because he so seldom went out. On the other hand, his robe and slippers were tattered and torn. My main job was to run errands. Now and again he'd send me to someone with a book. It seemed like easy work. But in fact it was worse than with the tailor and the cantor. I would carry a bill to someone, and I'd see how he turned up his nose, angrily telling me to come back the next day. The next day he put me off again, and the following day I wouldn't find him at home. If I came back to him with a bill, he would shout at me: Whatever does this boy want from me? I can't get rid of him. Another person told his servants not to let me in, and a third would read over the bill, hesitate, and then walk away without saying a word. A fourth person would say: Tell your boss that I'm not home, you understand?

In general, they avoided me, and if they saw me coming they simply locked their doors or sicced a dog or a servant on me. When someone had mercy on me and accepted a book, he'd hide it right away under a bed or under a bench. For payment they gave me a torn ruble you couldn't read. That's how I spent more than a year with the German Jew. My friend, Herr Jacobsohn, would often visit late at night. And when I wasn't tired I would eavesdrop on their conversation from the next room. Once I heard Jacobsohn

tell a story about a Doctor Steinharz and was surprised. Herr Gutmann said that all of the other doctors were quite virtuous and honorable men (at the time I didn't understand these two words), but why was he surprised about Doctor Steinharz?

"He is really a little man. That's why he's rich and everyone's favorite—their very soul."

I shook like a leaf when I heard that. Even Guttman says that a little man is the soul, and rich! My imagination got the better of me again, as I thought about trying to become a little man. It was no joking matter, a little man—and rich! Another night I heard Jacobsohn tell about Isser Varger, how rich and fortunate he was, practically running the whole town.

"What else is new?" said Gutmann. "Isser Varger is a little man and serves the landowner as his very soul."

There it was again, the little man! I was back to my old ideas. All night I tossed and turned and thought it over. Isser Varger is a little man, a soul, and a rich, fortunate man. So it appears that if you are a little man, you are rich and fortunate. It seems that people can become little men at will, and when they do, they become rich and fortunate. I thought I must have always been right when I wanted to be a little man. Yes, that's all well and good, but how does one become a little man? How do I get in on the action?

Even if I could roll up into a ball and shrink to a tenth my size, I still wouldn't be a little man. It seemed that there was some great trick to being a little man, otherwise everyone could be little men—souls, fortunate, and rich people. I thought all that over in bed, and when I fell asleep, I dreamed I met a little man on the street, dressed up like a prince in gold and silver, just like a doll. I so envied him that I pulled myself together, wrapped my arms around my knees, and held my breath until I stopped feeling and thinking, seeing and hearing. And suddenly I became a little man! As tiny as a flea. It was exhilarating. As soon as I became a little man, I began to feel better—next I became a soul, drove in a carriage, and I led the whole town by the nose. Everyone showed me respect and pointed at me, saying: There goes the soul in his carriage, take a look at how he talks and laughs! If you've got a dowry set aside, keep it safe with him! If you have some legal matter, go have a talk with the soul! But suddenly I started to stretch, daylight started to shine through my eyelids, and there I was again, Good morning! Just me, the rascal Itsik Avreml.

It really was me, stretched out on my bed, imagining I was lying in the lap

of luxury. I pinched myself and, yes, it really was me. How did I get here all of a sudden? Oh, was I angry with myself for waking up and being myself again! Well, I thought, no matter, I'll figure out how to become a little man. I had to become a little man. Then I mulled it over. Before I dreamed that I was a little man, rich and fortunate, I first stopped feeling, thinking, seeing, and hearing. There must be something to that. One couldn't become a little man except if one first stopped feeling and thinking; one just shouldn't feel and think. But how does one do this? How do you stop feeling and thinking? That was the whole trick! I had the idea that I would ask Herr Gutmann. Then I thought again and realized that if he knew the secret, he himself would have become a little man! He would have been rich and, poor man, he would have spared himself the shame of sending around books and bills. I thought it all over and decided that I should leave Herr Gutmann and offer myself as a servant to Doctor Steinharz. There I would learn the secret of how to become a little man. I promised an agent a big commission if he could pull some strings and make me into a servant for the doctor, and the very next day I left Herr Gutmann and the agent took me to my new job. The doctor himself was not home, his wife gave me work to do, and all day I worked like a donkey. I accepted everything quietly in hopes of seeing the little doctor. At nightfall the door opened and in came a tall, coarse man with a belly as round as the cantor—he was as big and tall as Gog and Magog. When I caught sight of him my eyes bulged and I stared at him foolishly. The boor cried out in Russian:

"What are you looking at, blockhead?"

I started to tremble and shake like a leaf, and I said, "Oy, oy, oy, my name is Itsik Avreml. I'm Abraham. I'm an orphan. I'm a servant here."

"Well, we can see that you're a great fool," the coarse man said. "From now on, watch for me, and when I come in you should quickly take off my coat and my boots, you hear?"

I was so scared of him that I got down on the ground and wrapped myself around his legs to take off his boots. The lummoX went into the room, I brought in the samovar, and I served him and the lady of the house all evening. At night, in bed, I thought about who the coarse fellow could be. He could sit for an entire evening alone with the doctor's wife. And where was the doctor himself? For the next two days I served the lummoX, and whenever he went out or came in I stretched out on the ground to put on or take off his boots. As I did this he would hold his sides and look at the ceiling, not even caring if he stepped on my fingers. And I still couldn't figure out who the

lummoX, the lout, could be. Once when the man had already gone to bed, I went down to the kitchen and asked the cook, with a pathetic expression: "I beg of you, who is the man that comes every evening and sleeps in the bedroom?" The cook looked at me, astonished: "What are you saying, what? What do you mean, someone sleeps in the bedroom? What are you talking about?"

"I swear it," I started to say. "I should only see the Messiah as clearly as I've seen him with my very own eyes. We should only live and be well."

"Well, and what about the master of the house?" asked the cook, with a cheerful face, and her eyes blazed like an oven baking challah.

"The master of the house," I answered, "doesn't seem to be sleeping at home. He must have gone away somewhere."

"Well," the cook said, "now I'm curious to go up and see for myself. I'll make some kind of excuse."

A few minutes later the cook came back down all red in the face and opened her big mouth to curse me: "What's the meaning of this? You're so young and already you've learned to make up gossip about something that never happened! Blockhead, hoodlum, I ought to tear you into shreds! How do you dare, you worthless loafer? You brazen rascal, Abraham! A pox on you, and may an evil spirit take you away, so help me! After all that, the master of the house is sitting in bed and talking with his wife!"

"What do you mean?" I said. "What do you mean? God be with you. Not that overgrown lout. . ."

"A curse on your grandpa, you impudent boy!" the cook started to shout and brandished the poker she was holding. "You mean to call the master of the house a lout, you smart aleck? I'll crack your head open!"

I hurried out of the kitchen and went back upstairs. Everything was quiet. When I lay down to sleep in the front room, I mulled it over. What was I seeing and hearing? The doctor was a big, fat fellow, so why did Gutmann say he was a little man? Had Gutmann told a lie? It couldn't be, Herr Gutmann never deceived me, and what Gutmann said always turned out to be true. Something was wrong.

A few days later, when I was standing behind the door to the doctor's office, I happened to hear this conversation between him and his barber-surgeon:

"Doctor, I procured quite a lot for you this week, and you haven't given me anything."

"What are you saying, Getzl? And what about yesterday?"

"What about yesterday, doctor?"

"He has a short memory! What's the meaning of this? You've forgotten, Getzl, that just yesterday, for your sake, I was a little man. I had thirty leeches applied to the sick man—only in order that you would make a profit. Just between us, he needed leeches about as much as you or me. All he had was an upset stomach. Truly, Getzl, just for your sake yesterday I was a little man."

"Yesterday you were a little man, as you say, and for your sake I was also a little man. Between us, today's patient didn't need a doctor. All he had was a cold. But I advised him to call you, and you gave him a prescription so that he'll be sick for at least two weeks. In the meantime you can visit him twice a day."

"Well, what do you want, Getzl?"

"Doctor, I still have quite a few leeches left!"

"Calm down, Getzl! Tomorrow I'll order leeches for all my patients. Just calm down, Getzl!"

So that's the story?! I thought it over as I lay in bed. Ha, ha! From what I've seen and heard, a little man isn't just a little man. One can, pardon my saying so, be a big and a little man at the same time.

My guess was that being a little man meant drawing other people's blood and cheating them out of their money. Now I started to understand what it meant to rub elbows with respectable people! I began to know the secret, but what did that help if I wasn't a doctor and couldn't apply leeches? I had to look for another means to become a little man—something similar, but in a different way. There was nothing more to be done in that line.

Then it came to me. I had to wheedle my way into service with Isser Varger! I was sure that was all it would take. Isser Varger was a little man—a rich, fortunate person.

That's what I thought, and I worked it all out in bed. The next day I promised the agent another commission, and in a few days he sneaked me into Isser Varger's house.

Isser Varger was one of the richest men in Tsviatshits. He worked everyone up into a fever, and everyone trembled before him when he spoke. It was no small matter, Isser Varger! He himself didn't do business or get his hands dirty; but just the same, things were always cooking at his house. One person came in and another person left—everyone showed up at Reb Isser's door. You might think that he was a great scholar, from a long line of rabbis, but not at all! He wasn't even the least bit of a scholar and barely knew how to pray; he

came from a family of tailors. I found out about all of this later. The truth was, as I learned, that the secret of his success was being a little man—and with that he made a sea of money, more than anyone else with his Torah or his trade. He was in tight with the richest man of Tsviatshits—and was his very soul. It was always *this* Isser, *that* Isser, everything was just Isser. Isser was his soul, his legs, his hands. True, I never did get to know the rich man, and maybe he was a great man, a fine person, wise and learned; but Isser was some soul, a real little man. From Reb Isser, my rebbe, I learned a vast number of things. He opened my eyes and showed me the way to become a little man. I was a fool, a numbskull, but it turned out later that I wasn't an idiot by nature. That came more from being beaten and abandoned as a child. I was raised on beatings, and whoever wanted to went to work on me with slaps and blows. From beating your breast you don't get blessed. And from being beaten again and again, you get beaten down. It was no joking matter that, whenever I saw a hand, I expected it to hit me. I was dazed, confused, and stunned. What's more, I was born in a little shtetl, and a small-town Jew stays a small-town Jew. People from the shtetl are different—neither great nor small, neither wise nor foolish, neither good nor bad, neither fish nor fowl, just folk.

I won't waste any more of your time, but you shouldn't be surprised that a simpleton like me occasionally had a levelheaded thought and even came up with some bright ideas. I was a simpleton, for sure, but not by nature—just by being dazed and hazed and beaten. No screw was loose, but I was still unformed. That's how I was. This is why I was still able to learn some things, and I could soak in Reb Isser's teachings. I won't go on at length about Reb Isser, because he passed away and moved on to the true world a long time ago, and why should I reopen the book of his sins? I'd rather not talk about them. It's enough for you to know that I was his student, and from my tricks you'll understand what kind of man he was. I'll just explain to you Isser's system and his worldview, to which I adhered.

Isser had a close friend to whom he would tell everything. Especially when he was a bit tipsy, he would let down his guard and spill out everything that was bothering him. Once they came back cheerful and dead drunk, and they went into his room together. I was already quite good at standing behind doors and listening to conversations.

"Listen, my friend, I worked out a shrewd deal today. That is, I didn't really work, as fools might think. I worked just as little as you. I only pretended to work, you understand."

"But did you take in any money, Isser?"

"Hah! Did I ever!"

"How did it happen?"

"It's an old story; you know it well. Yankl might as well have walked to Siberia, though it wasn't really his fault. He'd been asking me to help him out for a long time. You know that I always answer: We'll see, we'll see. I say that with a shrug and let him think that I've seen what's going on — although I've seen as much as I can see my own ears. Then I take a hefty fee. If his plan fails, I still don't lose my standing, my influence. He thinks he lost just because I didn't want to look into the matter, and that if I'd wanted to get involved, I would have surely carried it off. He can come and make demands, even want to strangle me or just plain call me names. It's no skin off my back, and I haven't spoiled my reputation. He'll get over it and return asking for another favor, and as always I answer: We'll see, we'll see. You understand.

"Well, that's what I said to Yankl: We'll see, we'll see. I saw full well that my seeing could help him about as much as last year's snow. Let's not be fooled about the limits of my power. But Yankl thought I saw and would ask the rich man to look into it. I didn't even have to open my mouth or get my hands dirty. After the documents came out, I knew that when it came to a decision Yankl would lose his lawsuit. So early this morning I went running to him out of breath and said: Yankl, I've been wearing myself out to win your case. Give me some bottles of wine — I still have to go see the secretary. You should have seen how happily Yankl and his wife embraced. They said to me: We have only you to thank, Reb Isser. If not for you, we could have really suffered, and we'll tell everyone what you did for us. They sent me home and I took along a small fortune.

"Believe me, my friend, you won't get anywhere in this world with the truth, and work won't earn you anything. No matter how hard you sweat, you'll still go hungry ten times a day. In this world, only a little man gets results. Wisdom is worthless, because the main thing is to be cunning. You must be able to flatter, lie, and be hypocritical whenever it's called for. What else? You've got to have money, for without money you're nothing. What's a beggar? Do you want to know why rich people hate a beggar? They talk to him once and pretend to have pity on him, but in truth they can't stand him. To them he seems superfluous, and they feel a pinching in their chest when they see him. I have no words to describe it to you fully. But everything depends on money, my friend. If you have money, you own this world and the

next. To get money you must be a little man. And to be a little man means flattery, being a hypocrite, and doing whatever it takes to succeed."

"Well, and Isser, what about the rich man who depends on you as if you were his soul? He has money and yet he's a fine person."

"I won't speak of him, my friend. You understand? So long as he's under lease to me I won't speak of him."

"What do you mean, Isser, he's under lease to you?"

"Oh, my friend, you're still just a straitlaced gent, so let me explain it to you. You should know that in this world everyone must seek only his own good. Do you understand? A rich man has great power, and everything falls into his lap. People humble themselves before the rich man, though they get nothing for it, just because a rich man deserves respect. And I, Isser, say that one should judge a rich man by his money, you understand? Just by his money; the man himself comes second. A rich man who doesn't serve your ends should have no importance to you. Pay as much attention to him as they do to the Purim Megillah in Czernovitz. A clever, shrewd man should, in this world, do everything for his own benefit. Do you understand? I'll repeat it once more: every person must seek his own good. A rich man has great power, and the clever man must take advantage of everything — so you need to know how to make use of the rich man, and not just for his money. You should stand next to the rich man like a comedian at the entrance to a comedy, or like a circus gypsy beside his bear. If you've bought a ticket, enter the comedy and watch the pretty play. If you give me some money, I'll make the bear dance. You understand? The rich man is under lease to me, so if you want to see him, pay me for a ticket. I'm his manager, his soul, his landlord! That's enough. Now do you understand, my dear friend?"

At first, of course, Isser's system was too advanced for me, and many of his expressions were unfamiliar. But right away I understood: "To get money you must be a little man. And to be a little man means flattery, being a hypocrite, and doing whatever it takes to succeed." I had found the secret. But I didn't fully understand what it meant to flatter and be a hypocrite. I should note that, at the time, I didn't know the difference between what one may or may not do. The sins I knew about were things like peeking during the Priestly Benediction, not slaughtering a scape hen at Yom Kippur, not going to Tashlikh during Rosh Hashanah, not believing in a wonder-worker, not believing that Elijah the Prophet goes from house to house on Passover drinking glasses of wine, not believing that the dead pray at night in the Great

anti-folklore

Synagogue, or not believing that sinners wander in limbo. That would have meant not believing that there are hordes of people among us who trade, do business, travel, buy and sell, while in fact they are living dead. One fringe of their prayer shawl is defective and they are not called to the Torah. And not believing in the transmigration of souls—that would have meant not believing that the sacred soul of a person is transformed into a black cat, a pig, a calf, a hen, a stallion, or a canary. Or not believing that the dead come for judgment to the Bezliude rabbi, led like soldiers by the Angel of Judgment. Not believing that a shtrayml is sacred, and that even in Egypt the Jews wore fur hats and because of this they were redeemed. In short, these were the kinds of sins I knew—not flattering, being a hypocrite, or being a little man. Why not become a little man, rich and happy? No one dares to beat up a little man, and I knew how much a beating hurts. When a tailor or his wife hits you hard, you see stars; and when a cantor twists your ear, you can forget you were ever born. It's also unpleasant to stretch out on the floor putting on or taking off the master of the house's boots while he puts his hands on his hips and looks at the ceiling. So of course I wanted to be a little man, to suffer less, and to be happy and rich. I'd started to eavesdrop on all Isser's conversations with his good friend, and I began to understand his words. He was easier to understand than my teacher at school.

I served Isser for many years, during which time I polished my skills and learned all the things a little man needs to know. I listened carefully and was a diligent student. Then I started to look at myself and ask: When shall I build my own abode?⁵ That is, when will I start to do something that will raise me up in the world? I was getting on in years and was already a young man. It was true that I knew Isser's Torah well, but the main thing is to learn the craft, not the commentary. I thought about it for a long time before I came to this conclusion. Indeed, I told myself, what a fool I was! Isser himself says that everyone must seek his own good, and one should have a rich man under lease, taking a profit. Well, Isser himself was a rich man, so I decided I would have him under lease and become his soul. It was as if I had roast goose in my mouth and still thought I needed to beg for food. I won't drag it out, but just tell you that I started to play the hypocrite and flatter Isser, finding a thousand ways to ingratiate myself with him until I caught him and became his soul. Isser was also a human being, and he liked to be flattered and pampered, al-

5. A Hebrew phrase based on Genesis 30:30.

though he knew how false flattery was. When he told someone, for example: You're wise, good, pious, generous, and highborn, it meant just the opposite: You're a fool, a villain, a rogue, a miser, and lowborn. But that's just how it is, that everyone in the world likes to be deceived. *= Mendele!*

Still, it was easier said than done. It took a long time before I was able to become important to Isser. You may wonder: how does a servant become important? Ai, don't hold it against me, but if you need to ask this, you must not know the world. Almost all servants are important, and almost all important people are servants. When people saw my importance, because I had become Isser's soul, they started to treat me with kid gloves. Aha! Someone wanted to see Isser—and who didn't?—so he asked me to intercede for him. There was no need to talk of gifts or bribes. The person thought he'd gotten somewhere with me, that I would put in a good word with Isser, and he was happy. I knew that Isser could help him about as much as bloodletting helps a corpse, but I let him think it helped, and then hand over some money. That's how I gathered a few thousand rubles. I might have gone on that way and collected millions. But I was still a shlimmazl and, in the midst of everything, it happened that the rich man who was under lease to Isser died. Suddenly Isser was nobody's soul and had no influence. And when that happened, obviously, I was also nobody's soul and lost my influence. People stopped going to Isser because he was no longer a lease-holder; he no longer had a dancing bear. And when Isser lost his importance, you understand, I also lost mine. True, I was still important to Isser, but when he could no longer employ me, I needed him like a hole in the head. Then I listened to him about as much as they listen to the Purim Megillah in Czernovitz. I learned that from Isser himself—it was his own philosophy. I had a few thousand rubles, so I could afford to make light of him. My next thought was how to get another position where I could play a leading role, and I had the idea of moving to Glupsk. A certain rich man had a reputation there; I decided to take him under lease.

Anti-hassidic

On the way to Glupsk I went to see the leader of the city. If you want to take a rich man under lease, you have to set things straight with the local rebbe. He's the first stop. That's how Reb Isser acted in his heyday. I gave the rebbe a hefty sum and he gave me his blessing so that I should succeed. With his blessing I rode into Glupsk. At that time I was maybe twenty-three, twenty-five, twenty-seven—I didn't keep track of the years and didn't know when I was born. What good would it have done me to know? In Glupsk I let

לוי'ס חסידים
היו רבים
בגלופסק
והוא היה
החשוב
בניהם

on that I was a widower, because a young unmarried man gets no respect. I wore a prayer shawl decorated with a thick silver collar that shimmered and sparkled. In those days, as Reb Isser Varger used to say, a beautiful collar was the best recommendation among Jews. I had money, too, which made it easy to meet all of the fine creatures of Glupsk. I told them I was thinking of opening a business, but really I was thinking of my lease, because I didn't know how to do anything else. God lent a hand and I came to know the rich man. He was very coarse and liked to be involved in all of the foolish goings-on around town, which suited me fine. That's just what I needed. I won't drag it out; my business went on smooth as butter, and it wasn't very difficult for me to become his soul. In short, in the course of two years I was lucky and came to hold him under lease. The whole city, rich and poor, needed his favors and bowed down to him, so you can imagine how it went with me, his soul. I said earlier that it isn't my nature to speak ill of others, and to this day I hold with Isser, who used to say: I won't talk about my rich benefactor. I don't need to confess his sins—he's still alive and will have time to confess for himself. Here I'm talking about myself.

I repent for my sin of deceiving others.⁶ When townspeople saw my importance, they all thought I was immensely rich and powerful. Whoever had a business venture in mind went straight to Isaac Abraham Takif—that's what they called me, as you already know, Rebbe. I would accept piles of gold and say, We'll see, we'll see, just as Isser had answered. A person thought I would help, but in truth I would forget all about him after I took the money. I just made a fool of him.

And for the sin of hardening my heart—I repent. I stole from the poor, from widows, and from orphans. When a poor man cried rivers of tears, I turned a deaf ear. What good are your tears to me? I thought. Render unto me the capital, and desist from weeping and wailing. That is, hand over the dough, Jew dog, and drown yourself in your tears.

And for the sin of hurrying to do evil—I repent. Doing evil is far easier than doing good. Even a cat can spill the milk. Most of the time, to do good requires wisdom, money, and so on, but to do evil is easy as pie. It doesn't demand any great wisdom and doesn't cost a thing. To keep my reputation as a

6. Starting with this phrase, Isaac Abraham's repeated use of the formula "I repent for my sin" (or "for the sin . . . I repent," *al heit she-hetati*) echoes the Yom Kippur ritual of atonement.

takif, I often did evil deliberately, so that people would fear me and not take me lightly.

And for the sin of slander and holding a lease—I repent. I had to speak a lot of slander and secretly carry out a lot of schemes in order to make my benefactor into a leading light, adorn him with a shtrayml, and become his soul, the takif, the lease-holder.

And I repent for my sin of insolence and of being a little man. When I had to entrap an honest man who stood in my way, or to deceive an intelligent, honest man who had guessed my fraud, then I showed my full power and impudence, my insolence, just like a little man.

In short, I was a little man, and because of this things went well for me. I married a rich wife and lived in wealth and honor. I earned a great deal of money from my lease and I have accumulated wealth during the twenty years or so that I've been living in Glupsk.

Earlier I said that I wasn't born a fool, I was no idiot; I was just beaten down. By nature I wasn't an evil person, either, but I was led astray. When I did something low down, afterward my heart pounded faster and a gloomy mood would overtake me. I myself didn't know where to hide my head. I recall that Isser said that a little man shouldn't envy men like Gutmann, who write books. God forbid: one should hate and persecute them, because they are more dangerous than fire. They crawl down your throat with their wise words. He used to say it's a miracle that donkeys don't have horns; well, it's a miracle that men like that don't have money and are usually paupers. Otherwise, we'd never hear the end of them and we'd never get rid of them, like lice. Obviously, Isser's sayings were the Holy Torah to me, and though it disturbed me to make an enemy of Gutmann, who had found a way to enter my soul, I only listened to Isser. If not, I couldn't become a little man, a lease-holder, and I'd have to go on suffering blows and misfortunes by the pound. Of course, I tortured men like Gutmann. But when I was already rich and didn't need to fear suffering and misery, then my heart used to throb; I would imagine the good, calm Gutmann. Oh, what a good man he was! How he liked me and didn't treat me like a servant! Even though he was poor, he was always cheerful and happy. >

Once his wife cried long and hard when it was close to Passover and there wasn't a trace of the holiday at home. He sent me out with books for an entire day, and no one wanted to touch them. When I took people invoices, they turned up their noses; and so, in short, the dear lady cried. Oh, Gutmann

said, why are you sinning with tears? We're better off than all of the rich—we're honest people, and we suffer for the truth. It's much better and finer to suffer for the truth than to be happy from deceit. Don't worry. God has helped in the past and He'll go on helping us. What do I need with two jackets and a fur coat, when I can only wear one? And who needs a fur coat, anyway, with summer coming? The moths may chew it up. Abraham, take my fur collar and my coat, pawn or sell them, and we'll have matzoh for Passover.

The scene replayed itself again and again before my eyes. I saw that Gutmann was happy without money, which showed that happiness wasn't made of money, but of something else. He would even say, "We're better off than all of the rich, since we're honest people," which meant that only honest people are happy and rich. I always remembered what he said to my friend Jacobsohn: "Being a flatterer and a hypocrite is worst of all. The flatterer and hypocrite, like a thief, must always worry and be on guard." I began to see how true this was: Gutmann, with his intelligence, understood that things are as bad for a flatterer and a hypocrite as they are for a thief. Both must always be afraid of being caught, and they must always guard against people finding out their tricks. It is unpleasant to live secretly all the time. And I really did feel, in my heart, that a false person is always in a bad way. Life lacks all flavor, it weighs on him like a stone on his heart; his blood boils, his head bothers him and burns like a flame. Yes, I felt that real suffering was having to flatter and be a hypocrite. I was rich, but still not happy!

I would have harsh, bitter dreams. I'd imagine I was holding a knife and slaughtering with it; I'd hear moans, groans, and death rattles, and my coat would be soaked in blood. In one dream I saw Gutmann sitting with his family, happy and cheerful. When I went in, he looked at me and shook his head with regret.

"Oh, Abraham," he said sadly. "You used to be a much better man, although you were a bit of a fool. It's a pity. Feh, you've been led astray and ruined. You've become a little man!"

This year these dark thoughts so tormented me that I took sick. I felt that I wouldn't last long, and I hurried to write my life story— how it happened that I went astray. Perhaps by writing I can atone for my sins, and also set down my last will.

My fortune is worth about a hundred and fifty thousand rubles. I wish to give fifty thousand rubles for my two small children. That's enough for them;

their father didn't even have fifty kopecks at their age, and until they marry they can earn interest. My wife shall receive fifteen thousand rubles.

For God's sake I ask of you, Rebbe, that you send for Herr Gutmann in Tsviatshits as soon as possible. The two of you should make use of my money, as I will direct here. You, Rebbe, are a saint and an honest man, which I can see from the fact that you're very poor. If you had wanted, you could have been rich like any other rabbinical judge. Gutmann is also a saint and a good man, though he wears no head covering and trims his beard; he has your precious character. I ask, Rebbe, that you treat him kindly, as he will treat you, for he likes everyone and is a lover of the Jewish people. Herr Gutmann will be very useful to you in the matters I will request of you.

With the remaining eighty-five thousand rubles, as an endowment in perpetuity, I ask that you first improve the local Talmud-Torah. In what way? You yourself will know, and Herr Gutmann also knows about such things. The main thing is that the teachers shouldn't beat the poor children. And one shouldn't give them all kinds of twisted interpretations of biblical verses. Believe me, that just confuses them.

Second, one should make a vocational school for craftsmen, so that apprentices won't have to suffer abuse from tailors and their wives, and they won't have to carry slop pails. God have mercy! Many orphans who become apprentices, poor things, spoil their health and are left crippled, with bruises all over their bodies. Why doesn't anyone think about such unfortunate children?

Third, when a traveling cantor comes to Glupsk, you should give him expense money to continue on his way. A cantor is no comedian who drags himself all over the world. If you're a cantor, stay home and take care of your synagogue; but if you're a musician, travel around and sing in theaters.

Other than that, you should spend the money as you and Herr Gutmann wish. I know that because both of you are fine people, great humanitarians, you'll know what to do without answering to anyone. I bequeath my entire house with all of its household objects to you and Herr Gutmann; the property earns about five thousand rubles a year. You should live in the house and both of you should provide guidance for my children.

You should read this letter to all of the wealthy local men. It will atone for my sins and teach them a lesson. Afterward you should print it. Let the whole world know that wealth doesn't bring happiness; a person is happy only with a good heart and good deeds. It's better to suffer torments, so long as one is

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honest, than to live in luxury and be a little man. Please give this letter to Reb Mendele the Book Peddler, because he knows all about printing books. And apart from that, he travels all around Poland and will be able to distribute it. Pay him well for his troubles—he's very poor.

When the rabbi finished reading the letter, I took a look at the people gathered around. The rich men were angry and bit their lips with resentment, but they kept quiet. One of the rabbinical judges was enraged and he tore at his whiskers. But the other judges remained calm and said:

"A Jew stays a Jew. Even sinners fulfill as many commandments as there are seeds in a pomegranate. Look at what a Jewish heart he had—he sinned unintentionally, and now he has repented. We'll study a chapter in the Mishna every day and say Kaddish for him, for a year, free of charge."

"Now, Reb Mendele," the rabbi said to me, "I ask you, first, who is this Herr Gutmann of yours in Tsviatshits? Is he really an honest man? Do you know him?"

"Rebbe," I answered, "Gutmann trims his beard, but still he's an honest man."

"Well," the rabbi said, "so long as he is an honest man, his trimmed beard doesn't bother me. As we say: better a Jew without a beard than a beard without a Jew. Second, since you're from Tsviatshits, I ask that you please travel there today—you'll be well paid for it. You should deliver my letter to Herr Gutmann and ask him to come quickly, for God's sake, so that we may fulfill the wishes of the deceased. And third, dear Reb Mendele, you should print and sell this letter at a low price all over Poland, so that many people will buy it. Of course, I will pay you well."

I went over to pick up my candlesticks from the floor, and suddenly we heard a voice outside calling, "Charity saves from death," as beggars do at funerals. All of us—the rabbi, long may he live, the judges, the rich men, and I—went outside to accompany Isaac Abraham to the cemetery. The rabbi asked the Talmud-Torah boys to walk ahead and say: "Righteousness will go before him and give direction to his steps."

I hurried to hitch up my horse. While I was sitting at the rabbi's house, the street urchins had pulled out almost all of the hairs in his tail, so that only about forty remained. But I'm getting off the point. I hurried on my way to Tsviatshits, where I hadn't been for almost two years.

When I arrived home, they told me that Gutmann had left Tsviatshits

long ago, and no one knew where he was. I hastened to print the letter, and I hereby let it be known that as soon as Herr Gutmann reads it, he should travel to Glupsk. The rabbi there is looking for him, so that together they can improve the Talmud-Torah and do many other good things.

Translated by Ken Frieden