

With that Reb Nakhmanke stopped, turned from his listeners, and walked away. At the same moment a cloud covered the moon, and a mingling of sadness and fright fell on the assembly.

Yet, as we know, the matter ended well after all.

1904 (translated by Maurice Samuel)

THE MAGICIAN

A magician once came to a town in Volhynia.

Although he arrived in the hectic days before Passover, when a Jew has more worries than hairs on his head, the newcomer made a great impression. Indeed, he was a walking mystery: he was dressed in rags but wore a creased yet still serviceable top hat, and while God had given him a clearly Jewish nose, his face was as clean-shaven as a Christian's. He had no travel papers either, and was never observed to touch food, whether kosher or treyf. It was anyone's guess who he was. If you asked him where he was coming from, his answer was "Paris," and if you inquired where he was going, it was "London." What was he doing in Volhynia? "I lost my way." And from the looks of it, he had come on foot! Nor did he ever go to synagogue, not even on the Sabbath before the holiday. If a crowd gathered around him, he would suddenly vanish as if swallowed by the earth and reappear on the far side of the marketplace.

Meanwhile, he rented a hall and began to put on magic shows.

And what magic! Before everyone's eyes he swallowed burning coals as though they were egg noodles and pulled colorful ribbons from his mouth: red ones, green ones, any color you wanted—and as long as the exile of the Jews! Once he even pulled sixteen pairs of turkeys from his boots. Turkeys? Each was as big as a bear! They were still running around the stage when he lifted his shoe and started scraping gold rubles from the sole, and the audience was still shouting "Bravo!" when he let out a whistle and fresh khallahs and rolls flew through the air as if on wings, danced in a circle on the floor, and stamped angrily on the ceiling. Another whistle, and it all

disappeared into thin air. Rolls, khallahs, turkeys, everything—gone! Of course, it was no secret that the devil and his helpers could do such tricks too. Didn't the Bible say that Pharaoh's sorcerers worked even greater wonders in Egypt? The real riddle was: why was such a talent such a pauper? The man scraped rubles off his shoes and couldn't afford to pay for his hotel room! He whistled up more rolls and khallahs than a baker could bake, pulled turkeys out of his boots, and had a face so pinched that a corpse's was better-looking! Hunger burned in his eyes like two bonfires. Instead of the Four Questions, the townspeople said, this year at the seder there would be five.

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But before we get to the Four Questions, let's leave the magician and have a look at Chaim-Yona and his wife, Rivke-Beyle. Chaim-Yona was once a lumber merchant—that is, until he bought "at a good price" the rights to a forest in which the government quickly barred all lumbering, leaving him completely ruined. For a while he worked as a forestry clerk, but eventually he lost this job too, and in the months before the magician's arrival he had been unemployed. The worst enemies of the Jews shouldn't have to live through such a winter! And to make matters worse, after the winter came Passover. Every item in the house had already been pawned, from the chandelier on the ceiling to the last cushions on the couch. "You had better go to the Poor Fund," Rivke-Beyle told her husband, "and ask for some money for the holiday." But Chaim-Yona wouldn't hear of it: he had faith in God and was not about to stoop so low.

Rivke-Beyle searched the house again, ransacking every corner, and managed to find an old silver spoon that had disappeared years ago. It was nothing short of a miracle. She gave the spoon to Chaim-Yona, who went, found a buyer for it, and donated the pittance he received to the Poor Fund. The poor, he explained to his wife, needed money for Passover.

Meanwhile, time was not standing still. The holiday was just around the corner. Chaim-Yona had faith: God, he said, would provide. What could Rivke-Beyle do but bite her lips? A woman lets her husband have his way. But the days went by one after another, and at night, unable to sleep, she buried her face in the straw mattress to keep Chaim-Yona from hearing her sobs. There wasn't a sign of Passover in the house yet! And the days were worse than the nights, because at night she could cry and feel better, while by day she had to pinch her cheeks to put some color in them for the neighbors. Not that the neighbors were fooled: each time they

Miriam bent to kiss her father's hand, and when she rose Reb Chiya could hardly recognize her, so transported had her face become with happiness and joy.

"You have no fear, Miriam?"

"No, I wait upon God's word." Her voice rang as clear and pure as crystal.

But after Miriam left, Reb Chiya could not quiet his fears and he dispatched letters to the head of the yeshiva in Jerusalem and to the head of the Jews in Babylon. To them he poured out all his woe and perplexity.

"Tomorrow we shall mark the betrothal of my daughter Miriam, may God grant her long life. There are moments when it seems that I am placing a crown upon her head, and moments when I feel that I am leading my only child, my little white lamb, to the slaughter. Yet I do not wish to oppose the will of God. I shall set the date of the wedding for a month from this day, and during this month I shall wait for word from you, for your counsel and your wisdom. And I beg you to pray for me, to pray for my daughter and for the penitent youth as well."

The next day the betrothal took place. Everyone gasped, and the students of the yeshiva were beside themselves with astonishment: that such good fortune should befall Chananiah! But out of respect for their teacher they said not a word.

So the month passed. No letter for Reb Chiya came from Jerusalem or Babylon, which seemed to him an evil omen. On the day of the wedding he drew Miriam aside and said to her, "Do you know, my child, that your beloved Chananiah is fated to leave this world on the eighth day after the wedding?" And then he repeated what the snake had said and told her that he had not yet heard from Jerusalem and Babylon. If there was a speck of uncertainty in her heart, she could still withdraw.

Miriam replied, "I am certain and my heart is certain. Now that I know the sentence I know how to undo it."

"You! By what virtues and by what powers?" wondered Reb Chiya.

"By the power of my faith, and by the virtue of my mother, may she rest with God, and of you, my father."

The wedding canopy was made ready.

The bridegroom came in his sackcloth, with a hempen rope about his loins and in his hands a staff made from a peeled almond branch. Since he could not speak, Reb Chiya delivered the wedding sermon for him, and Chananiah listened with joy and with sorrow.

And when the bridegroom was led to his bride, she awaited him in workday clothes, with a drab kerchief covering her hair, so that she would not place herself above him.

And when the time came for the bride to be unveiled, her face shone like the sun and her eyes were clear and trusting and quiet, yet happy beyond measure.

And the bride was led around the bridegroom seven times, dressed as she was in her workday clothes, so as not to burden the heart of her beloved. Reb Chiya watched, with pride and with tears.

When Chananiah was asked to repeat the Hebrew words of the marriage ceremony he asked, "What do the words mean?"

Reb Chiya translated from the Hebrew, word for word.

All Safed gasped. And they gasped still more when the groom spoke not a word of Torah at the wedding feast.

The ceremony of the Seven Blessings that followed the wedding was held in the garden. The bride sat among the women like an orphan among the wealthy, and the groom like a dullard among scholars and rabbis discoursing upon Torah. Reb Chiya, no matter whether he spoke himself or listened to others, sat nervous and ill at ease, his eyes searching through the garden. Not that he regretted the wedding! He was, rather, looking for the strange snake, and soon he saw how Achnai glided silently among the guests, seen by none of them, never taking his eyes off its victim, the youth Chananiah.

On the evening of the seventh day of the Seven Blessings, Reb Chiya drew his daughter to his side and in a strained voice said to her, "Tomorrow is the day of judgment. Be strong, my daughter!"

"I am strong," replied the young wife, "for I am blessed by God. And I will redeem my husband from death."

"God be with you," said Reb Chiya, his eyes filling with hot tears.

"But remember," added Miriam, "tomorrow the miracle must occur. The staff must bloom and so must his soul! He must recite to you a portion of the Torah! Come to us early, dear Father."

The next morning, when Reb Chiya came to them, Miriam was already dressed but Chananiah still lay in bed. "Forgive me," he said to his father-in-law, closing his eyes, "I do not feel well."

Reb Chiya, however, was staring at the white staff that stood by Chananiah's bed. For the staff was slowly turning green, veins were beginning to course through it and tiny blossoms to appear. As Reb Chiya drew closer to gaze upon this miracle, he saw that Chananiah's face was also undergoing a transformation. Slowly it took on color,

stepped into her house, their pitying looks pierced her like nails. "When will you bake your matzas?" their stares said. "Where are the beets for your borscht?" Her closest friends told her:

"Look, what's with you, Rivke-Beyle? If you need anything, just ask. It's no problem."

But Chaim-Yona refused to accept "charity" and Rivke-Beyle couldn't disobey him. She had no choice but to invent all kinds of unlikely excuses, her face burning as she did. Seeing how things stood with her, the neighbors went to the rabbi. He had to do something! The rabbi, whose position was not to be envied, listened, sighed, thought a while, and said that Chaim-Yona was certainly a learned and pious Jew and that faith in God was faith in God.

In a word, it was already Passover eve and Rivke-Beyle didn't even have candles to light for the holiday!

That evening Chaim-Yona came home from the holiday prayer in the synagogue. In every house the windows were festively lit except in his own, which was like a mourner at a wedding, or like a blind man among those who can see. Still, his spirits did not flag. "If God wants us to have a Passover seder," he thought, "then a Passover seder we'll have!"

"Happy Passover!" he called out to his wife when he came home. "A happy holiday to you, Rivke-Beyle," he repeated.

"A happy holiday to you too," Rivke-Beyle's tearful voice answered from a dark corner.

Her eyes burned in the darkness like two coals. Chaim-Yona went over to her. "Rivke-Beyle," he said, "tonight is the celebration of the exodus from Egypt, don't you know that? We're not allowed to grieve! And what is there to grieve about? If the good Lord doesn't want us to have a seder here, we'll do His will and have it elsewhere. We'll go to somebody's house. No one will turn us away. All doors are open tonight—doesn't it say in the Passover Haggadah, '*Koyl dikkhfin yeysey veyeykhul*'?" In plain language that means 'Let whoever is hungry come and eat.' Put on your shawl and we'll go knock on the first friendly door we come to."

Never one to argue with her husband, Rivke-Beyle swallowed the lump in her throat, put on her tattered shawl, and made ready to go. Just then, though, the door swung open and in stepped someone who said:

"Happy Passover!"

"A happy Passover to you!" the two answered, unable to make the visitor out in the dark.

"I'd like to be your seder guest," said the man.

"We're not having a seder," replied Chaim-Yona.

"Yes you are," said the visitor, "because I've brought it with me!"

"In the dark?" asked Rivke-Beyle, her voice breaking in spite of herself.

"What a thought!" replied their guest. "Let's have some light. Abracadabra!" At once two silver candlesticks with burning candles appeared in midair and lit the room. Now Chaim-Yona and Rivke-Beyle could see the magician, whom they stared at too wide-eyed with amazement and fright to utter a word. Open-mouthed, each hung onto the other's hand and stood there. Meanwhile, the magician turned to the table that was standing abashed in a corner. "Hey, old man, cover yourself and come here!" he ordered it. No sooner had he spoken than a snow-white tablecloth fell on it from the ceiling and the table began moving toward the middle of the room until it stood beneath the candlesticks, which lowered themselves onto it. "Now," said the magician, "let's have something to sit on!" Three chairs left the other three corners of the room and assembled around three sides of the table. "Make yourselves wider!" said the magician, and they turned themselves into armchairs. "Softer!" he said, and in no time they were upholstered in red velvet with white cushions. Now everyone could sit in comfort!

The magician spoke again and right away a platter of matzas and everything needed for the seder appeared on the table beside three cups and a bottle of red wine, followed by a host of dishes fit for a king, and Passover Haggadahs trimmed in gold.

"How about some water to wash our hands with?" the magician asked. "I may as well conjure that up too!"

It was only then that the couple roused themselves. "Do you think we're allowed to touch all this?" whispered Rivke-Beyle into Chaim-Yona's ear. And when Chaim-Yona didn't know what to answer, she said, "Go, husband, ask the rabbi!"

"It's you who should ask the rabbi," said Chaim-Yona, "because I can't leave you here alone with the magician."

"No, it's you," said Rivke-Beyle. "If the rabbi hears such a story from a foolish old woman like me, he'll think I've gone out of my mind." In the end they both went, leaving the magician in the house with the seder.

The rabbi heard them out and said: "If it's black magic, nothing on the table is real, because magic is only illusion. Go home and see. If the matza can be broken, the wine can be poured, and the cushions are solid, you can consider it all a gift from Heaven that you're allowed to enjoy."

Their hearts in their throats, they went back home. The magician was gone. The table, though, was just as they had left it. They fingered the cushions, poured the wine, and broke the matza—and only then, realizing that their guest had been the Prophet Elijah, did they sit down to have a merry seder.

1904 (translated by Hillel Halkin)

THREE GIFTS

THE SCALES OF HEAVEN

Once, long ago, a Jew died somewhere in this world. Well, when a Jew dies, he dies. No ones lives forever. He was given a proper funeral and buried with all the honors.

The gravestone was laid in place, a son said the Mourner's Prayer, and the dead man's soul flew up to heaven to be tried by a tribunal of angels.

It arrived to find the balance used for weighing good and bad deeds already waiting for it.

The counsel for the defense, who was none other than the dead man's former conscience, stepped up with a snow-white bag in his hand and stood by the right-hand scale.

The counsel for the prosecution, who was none other than the dead man's evil urges, stepped up with a bag smeared with dirt and stood by the left-hand scale.

The white bag contained the man's good deeds, the dirty bag his bad ones. When the defense counsel poured the good deeds onto the right-hand scale, they smelled like the finest fragrance and shone like the stars in the sky. When the prosecutor poured the bad deeds onto the left-hand scale, they were, God help us, as black as coal and smelled like a barrel of pitch.

The poor soul stood gaping. It never had dreamed that there could be such a difference between "good" and "bad." Down below,

in the world it had come from, it often couldn't tell them apart and confused one with the other.

The scales floated slowly up and down. One moment one was higher, the next the other. The needle of the balance shifted back and forth, now a hairsbreadth to the left, now a hairsbreadth to the right.

Never more than a hairsbreadth; the scales swayed imperceptibly. The man was an ordinary Jew—not much of a sinner and certainly no saint. His good deeds were as small as his bad ones: little crumbs, little bits of things, so tiny you hardly could see them.

Still, each time the needle moved a hair to the right, there was rejoicing in the heavens; each time it moved back to the left, there was such a sigh of sorrow that it reached all the way to the mercy seat.

Slowly, single-mindedly, the two angels emptied their bags, bit by bit and crumb by crumb, like Jews on Simkhat Torah bidding penny by penny for the right to carry the first Torah.

But sooner or later every well must run dry. The two bags were finally empty.

"Finished?" asked the bailiff of the court, an angel himself.

The counsel for the defense and the counsel for the prosecution both turned their bags inside out: nothing was left. The bailiff stepped up to look at the balance.

He looked and he looked, and the longer he looked, the clearer it became that he was looking at something that had never happened before since the day the world was created.

"What's taking you so long?" asked the chief judge.

"It's a tie! The needle is right in the middle."

The good and bad deeds weighed exactly the same amount.

"Are you sure?" asked the chief judge of the Heavenly Court.

"Absolutely!"

The court recessed to consult and returned with the following verdict:

"Since its bad deeds do not outweigh its good ones, this soul cannot be condemned to hell.

"On the other hand, since its good deeds do not outweigh its bad ones, it cannot be admitted to heaven either.

"We therefore sentence it to be homeless.

"Let it wander back and forth between the heavens and the earth until God remembers it and calls it to Him in His mercy."

The soul was led out of court by the bailiff, bitterly bewailing its fate.

anti-heroic

domesticated

folk-cliche intimate folk-cliche

"What are you crying for?" asked the bailiff. "You may never know the joys of paradise, but you won't have to suffer the torments of Gehenna either. Fair is fair!"

But the soul was not comforted. "Better the greatest tortures," it replied, "than nothing at all. There's nothing more awful than nothing!"

The bailiff felt sorry for the soul and gave it a piece of advice.

"Go, my little soul," he said, "and return to the world of living men. Don't bother to look back, because what can you see from down there? Nothing but the stars—and the stars are bright but cold creatures that have no pity. You mustn't expect them to intercede with God for anyone."

"Only the saints in paradise will put in a word for a poor, lost soul like you. And they—do you hear me, my little soul?—like to be brought gifts. That's what the saints are like these days," confided the bailiff ruefully. And he went on:

"Fly down to the world of living men, my little soul, and take a good look around you. If you see any deed that is perfectly good, take it and bring it back to heaven; it will make a fine gift for the saints. Just knock on the gate and tell the angel on duty that I asked for it."

"Once you've brought them three gifts, the saints will see to it that the gates of paradise are opened to you. They won't hold your past against you. They don't like aristocrats. There's nothing they like more than a common soul that's managed to work its way up."

THE FIRST GIFT

And so the poor little soul flew back down to the world of living men to seek gifts for the saints in paradise. It flew hither and thither, over cities, towns, and hamlets; through brilliant sunshine, torrid heat, and foul weather with needle-sharp rain; in and out of cloudless summers that ended in showers of gossamers and winters with their endless snows—looking and looking until it felt that its eyes would pop out.

Most of all, it looked for Jews. And as soon as it saw one, it flew down to look even more closely. Could it perhaps be about to witness some act of great devotion to God?

Sometimes, at night, it even peered through the slats of shutters

Inscribing Jews @ center of cosmic history
Do they hold the balance of the universe?

in the hope of finding one of God's fragrant flowers—that rare bloom, a perfect good deed—in the quiet room of some town.

In vain! Often it sprang away from the window with a shudder or in a state of shock.

Thus, the seasons and the years went by and the soul grew melancholy. It had seen whole cities turned into graveyards; graveyards plowed into fields; forests cut down by the ax; stones ground by water into sand; riverbeds moved from their place; stars fall by the thousands from the sky; souls fly by the millions up to heaven—and yet never once did God remember it, nor did it find a good deed that was perfect.

"This world," thought the soul, "is such a poor place; human beings are so mediocre; their souls are so gray and their deeds are so petty: where is one to find anything special? I might as well have been condemned to wander about homeless forever."

It was in the middle of this thought when something flared red in the night. The soul looked down and saw that the light came from the window of a house.

Inside the house masked robbers were holding up a wealthy Jew. One of them held a burning torch while another pressed a gleaming knife to the man's breast and exclaimed: "Don't make a move, Jew, or this blade will come out your back." The rest of the gang was busy ransacking chests and closets and taking everything of value.

The Jew stood regarding the knife with perfect calm. Not an eyebrow flickered, not a hair stirred in the white beard that came nearly down to his waist. It was as though the whole matter failed to concern him. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh, he thought; praised be the Lord's Holy Name! And his pale lips seemed to murmur, "I wasn't born with any of this and I can't take it with me when I die."

He remained untroubled even when the last drawer of the last chest was yanked open and out came bags of silver, gold, precious stones, and other valuables. Indifferent to parting with it all, he simply looked on in silence.

Yet all of a sudden, as the robbers were taking one last little bag from its hiding place, he gave a start. Eyes ablaze, he raised his right arm protectively and opened his mouth to cry out.

"Don't move!"

A hot jet of red blood spurted out in place of a cry, spraying the little bag. The knife had done its work.

The robbers fell on the bag and ripped it open, certain that it held the most precious, the most valuable possession of all.

They were wrong. The Jew's blood had been shed for nothing. The bag contained no gold, no silver, no jewels—nothing, indeed, that had the slightest worth in this world. Its only contents were a bit of earth from the Holy Land that the rich Jew had wished to be buried with when he died. It was this he had laid down his life for.

The soul seized a handful of the bloody earth and flew straight to the gates of heaven with it.

The first gift had been brought.

THE SECOND GIFT

"Remember," the angel called after the soul as the gates of heaven swung shut again, "you still have to bring two more gifts."

"With God's help I'll find them," thought the soul cheerfully as it flew back down to earth.

Its good cheer did not last forever, though. Once more the years went by without its sighting a perfect good deed, and once more the soul thought sadly:

"Like a live spring of water, the world sprang forth from God and ran off into Time. Yet the further it runs, the muddier and dirtier it grows. Gifts fit for heaven are far and few between. Men have become diminished, their good deeds plainer, their bad ones drabber; you can look all over and not find a single one that is special.

"If God were to weigh in one weighing all the good and bad deeds of this world," thought the soul, "the needle of the balance would hardly move at all.

"The world is too weak to rise any higher or plunge any lower. Like me it is trapped between the starry heavens and the black depths, while the prosecutors and defense counsels go on endlessly feuding, just as light feuds with darkness, heat with cold, life with death.

"The world teeters this way and that, unable to go up or down. Human beings are born and die, marry and divorce, rejoice and sorrow, love and hate, hate and love, on and on and on. . . ."

A blare of horns and trumpets roused the soul from its thoughts. Looking down, it saw a city in Germany. (All this happened long ago, of course.) Oddly sloped roofs surrounded a town square, which was filled with a colorfully dressed crowd. Other townsmen

pressed their faces to the windows or straddled the railings of the packed balconies that projected beneath the roofs.

In front of the town hall stood a table covered by a green cloth trimmed with fringes and tassels of gold. The town magistrates sat around it in sable robes with gold clasps and white-feathered hats with gleaming badges. Beneath a seal of a taloned eagle, the burgomaster presided over them.

To one side stood a Jewish girl in shackles. Not far from her, ten vassals restrained a wild horse. The burgomaster rose to his feet, faced the square, and read the verdict from a sheet of paper:

"This Jewish damsel has committed a grave sin—a sin so heinous, indeed, that God Himself in all His mercy could not possibly forgive her for it.

"Stealing out of the ghetto on our holy day, she polluted our pure streets. Her shameless eyes stained our sacred procession and the holy icons that we carried through our town with music and hymns. Her accursed ears heard our drums and the songs of our innocent children dressed in white. Who knows if the filthy devil himself, in the guise of this accursed rabbi's daughter, did not touch and defile our holy relics?

"Why did he, the devil, wish to inhabit such a beautiful creature? For I cannot deny that she is beautiful, beautiful as only the devil could make her! Just look at those brazenly bright eyes beneath their silken lashes; look at that alabaster complexion, which only grew paler and purer during her long imprisonment; look at those fingers, so fine and thin it is as though light passes right through them.

"Why did Satan inhabit her? Because he wished to tear your souls away from the rapture of our procession—and he did! 'Just look at that beauty!' he caused a young knight from one of our most distinguished families to cry out.

"Worse yet, it happened during the mass. Yet when the parade officials saw her and caught her, the devil put up no resistance. And why not? Because you, God's flock, were without sin, having just been shriven by confession, so that he had no power over you.

"We therefore sentence the devil, in the guise of this Jewess, to the following:

"Let her hair be bound by its long, devilish braid to the tail of a wild horse, which shall drag her until she is dead through the streets that her feet trod on in violation of our laws!

"Let her unstaunched blood wash the cobblestones that those feet polluted!"

Jewess = demonic-erotic object of desire

A wild cry of joy resounded from every mouth. When it had subsided, the condemned was asked if she had a last wish.

"Yes," she replied calmly. "I would like to be given a few needles."

"She's gone out of her mind with fear," the magistrates remarked to one another.

"Not at all," said the girl in a cold, tranquil voice. "It is my last wish and I ask to have it granted."

She was given her request.

"And now," ordered the burgomaster, "tie her to the horse!"

With trembling hands the vassals tied the rabbi's daughter's long black braid to the tail of the rearing wild horse.

"Stand back!" the burgomaster ordered the crowd in the square.

The crowd parted noisily and pressed itself against the walls of the houses. Each hand gripped something—a whip, a rod, even a plain kerchief—to spur on the horse. All breaths were held, all eyes glittered, all faces were aflame; no one noticed in the excitement how the condemned girl bent over and thrust the needles through the hem of her dress and deep into her flesh to keep her body from being exposed as it was dragged through the streets.

No one but the wandering soul.

"Free the horse!" ordered the burgomaster. The vassals jumped back and the animal broke loose. A cry from the crowd broke loose too, and all the whips, rods, and kerchiefs slashed the air. In a wild frenzy the horse galloped out of the marketplace and through all the streets of the town.

The soul did not wait to see the end of it. Seizing a bloody needle from the leg of the rabbi's daughter, it flew straight up to heaven.

"That's your second gift!" cheered the angel at the gate.

*ethical
moral*

THE THIRD GIFT

Back down to earth flew the soul in search of one last gift.

Once more long years went by, and once more the melancholy soul thought what a petty world it was, pettier than ever, full of little people and little deeds, the bad ones no less than the good.

Once it thought:

"If God, may His name be praised, ever visits His Last Judgment on the world, and if the counsel for the defense stands on one side shaking out the bits and crumbs from the white bag, and the counsel for the prosecution stands on the other side shaking out the grit

and grime from the black bag, it would take forever to empty both—that's how tiny everything is in them!

"But when the bags are finally empty—what will happen then?"

"The needle will stop in the middle once more!"

"When all things are so small, nothing can outweigh anything. What difference can one more feather, one more wisp of straw, one more flake of chaff, one more particle of dust, possibly make?"

"And what will God do then? What will His verdict be?"

"To turn the world back into chaos? No, the sins will not outweigh the good deeds."

"To bring the Redemption? But the good deeds will not outweigh the sins either."

"What then?"

"'Carry on!' he will tell the world. 'Fly on between heaven and hell, between love and hate, between tears of compassion and rivers of blood—fly on forever and ever!'"

The sound of a drum awoke the soul from this oppressive thought.

Where was it coming from?

The soul had lost all sense of time and place.

Down below it saw a prison. Sunshine glanced off the bars of its small windows and glittered on the bayonets of the rifles stacked against one of its walls. The soldiers who had put them there now held knouts in their hands.

They were arranged in two rows, with a narrow passageway between them. Someone was about to run the gauntlet.

But who?

It was a Jew, his meager body dressed in a torn cloak, a skullcap on his half-shaven head. The soul watched as he was led out from the prison.

What had he done to deserve such punishment? God knows. It was long ago. Perhaps he was a thief, perhaps a burglar or a murderer. Perhaps he had even been framed. After all, it was all so long ago.

The soldiers smiled and wondered why there were so many of them. Their victim wouldn't make it halfway down the line!

Yet as the Jew started down the gauntlet, he walked steadily without stumbling or missing a step, taking blow after blow in his stride.

The soldiers were enraged. Who did he think he was, staying on his feet like that!

The knouts whistled through the air and lashed the thin body like snakes. The blood spurted out, more and more of it.

religious

Halfway down the line a soldier aimed too high and knocked the Jew's skullcap off his head. A few steps farther on, the victim noticed it. He halted as though deliberating, and then, unwilling to continue bareheaded, turned around to retrieve the fallen cap. Bending over, he picked it up, turned around again, and started back down the line, soaked in blood but serene, his skullcap on his head. He kept walking until he collapsed.

As soon as he fell, the soul seized the skullcap and flew with it straight to heaven.

The third gift was accepted too. The saints interceded for the wandering soul and it was admitted to paradise.

And when the three gifts were displayed there, a connoisseur's voice was heard to say:

"Ah, what beautiful gifts! Of course, they're totally useless—but to look at, why, they're perfection itself!"

1904 (translated by Hillel Halkin)

Horrified by the judgment of heaven.

DOWNCAST EYES

A very long time ago in a village a few miles from Prague, there lived a Jew, a certain Yekhiel-Mikhl, who kept the local tavern.

The landlord of the village was not an ordinary nobleman, but rather a count of great repute, so that Yekhiel-Mikhl made a plentiful living, as they say, "with something to spare." He became a great personage, a man who dispensed both charity and hospitality. On the High Holy Days, Yekhiel-Mikhl would journey to Prague and there spend money with a free hand. Nor was Yekhiel-Mikhl an ignorant man. While in Prague he became something of a regular at the house of the rabbi, who was also the head of the yeshiva. From him Yekhiel-Mikhl would buy such necessities as the etrog for Sukkot and the ground matza for Passover. He asked as well for the

A PINCH OF SNUFF

777-67
Satan, the Evil One, the Enemy of Mankind, the Tempter and Destroyer, sat one day in his private office, idly examining his account book. He sat at ease, one leg dangling over the other, a kindly, complacent smile on his lips; and his fingers turned at random the leaves, which bore the names of all the living souls on earth.

And then suddenly his complacency vanished and he clapped his palms together: he had come upon the page bearing the name of the rabbi of Chelm, and it was as blank as blank could be.

At the sound of the clapped hands a host of demon flunkies came running and crowded the door, their tongues hanging out while they waited for a word of command.

"Send someone up," said Satan, "and find out whether the rabbi of Chelm has many years to live."

The demon flunkies vanished as swiftly as they had come. A quarter of an hour later the report was handed in from the upper chamber. The days of the rabbi of Chelm were numbered; the thread of his life, worn thin to invisibility, was about to snap. It might happen tomorrow, it might happen the day after.

"Send for the recorder."

Enter the recorder, a bald-headed little goblin, light-footed and merry-eyed. A bow, a scrape, a smirk, and he seated himself cross-legged, Turkish fashion, on the sulfur-smoldering floor; from one side he drew a bottle of blood-red ink reeking of sin and a new crow's feather, from the other a sheet of parchment made from the skin of an atheist. The recorder spat in his palm and threw a submissive look at his master. "Ready!"

Satan uncrossed his legs and leaned forward in his armchair. The Recorder stuck out a fiery tongue, the quill flew over the parchment, a report and claim were indited to the court of heaven:

"Whereas we are told in Holy Script, 'No man liveth who shall do good and no evil,' and whereas there is among the living the rabbi of Chelm, who stands with one foot in the grave, and the debit side of his ledger is blank; therefore, in order that the Torah of Moses

demonic props

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shall be true and shall remain true, let the Rabbi of Chelm be delivered into the power of the Evil One."

Back came the answer: "See the Book of Job, Chapter 1."

That case Satan remembered without difficulty: it meant he could do whatever he wanted with the rabbi of Chelm save that against the man's life he could not put forth his hand. Such as the rabbi's days were, few or many, they had to run their course.

But how was he to do with the rabbi of Chelm what he once had done with Job? For Job had been a mighty man of substance—and the rabbi of Chelm? A widower, alas, his children all married; and it is written in Ezekiel, "The fathers shall not die in place of the sons."² Nothing doing there. As for "flocks and herds of cattle"—the poor man hadn't even a goat for milk. Nor could Satan afflict him with boils—he had them already. What trials and torments could you visit on the rabbi of Chelm?

"Some little lust of his," murmured Satan, licking his chops. "Some tiny desire, some obscure appetite!" He stretched out his hand, lifted the bell, which was made from the skull of a sophist, and rang. The room was filled with demon flunkies.

"Whom shall we send to tempt the rabbi of Chelm from the true path?"

"Me! Me! Me!"

The competition is fierce, and no wonder: promotion awaits the demon who can pull this one off. There is almost a riot. Finally, they draw lots: a couple of minor imps get the lucky numbers, and they are off amid a chorus of "*Mazel tov!* Good luck!"

The sun shone brightly that day on the marketplace of Chelm, crowded with Jews who had nothing to do. They stood about in groups, buying and selling the skins of rabbits and hares that hadn't been caught yet, cases of eggs that hadn't been laid, timber from trees that hadn't been felled. Suddenly, the earth beneath their feet began to tremble, a crack of nearby thunder split the air, and a wagon burst into the marketplace, scattering Jews right and left. A strange and unknown wagon—and stranger still its behavior. High up in front stood the driver, a ragged cap on his head, a red belt about his loins, pulling like mad at the infuriated horses; behind him stood the passenger, in decent black gabardine and fur cap, holding the whip in his right hand and cracking it over the heads of the horses. The driver pulled the horses back, the passenger urged them on! Now and again the passenger drove his left fist into the driver's back; now and again he put his fingers to his lips and

emitted a piercing whistle, which made the horses start as if they had been shot.

And meanwhile the driver was wailing at the top of his voice:

"Jews! Have pity on me! Save me, Jews!"

But before anything could be done, the wagon had passed through the marketplace, followed by a stream of sparks. The onlookers stood paralyzed, murmuring, "God have mercy on us!"

The wagon drew near the slaughterhouse, where the huge dogs that hung about the place sprang at the horses' throats; the muscular butcher boys came running out, grabbed the reins, and were on the wagon in a trice. The crowd drew near.

What's the meaning of it all? Nothing much—just a little difference between the men on the wagon. The "passenger" in the decent black gabardine gasps that the driver has gone mad. He wants the horses to dawdle and graze when it's a matter of life and death to get to the next market town without delay and sell the package of diamonds. At the mention of diamonds the crowd falls back respectfully. But the next instant confusion returns. The "driver" begins to yell that he is not the driver at all. The other man is the driver. They've come a long way. In the middle of the night, the real driver put a knife to the real passenger's throat and forced him to give up the package of diamonds—and here they are! The passenger denies every word of it! He is the passenger; the other man is the driver.

Who's to make head or tail of it? The crowd pulls the wagon around and leads it with "passenger" and "driver" to the rabbi's cottage. Let him find out.

And the rabbi of Chelm interrogates each man separately and privately. The plaintiff first, the man dressed like a driver. And he talks like a driver too. And looks like one. Coarse, massive, ignorant. A man of the woods. A voice that no kheyder chant has ever tempered.

But that is not enough for the rabbi of Chelm. He cross-examines.

"What's the value of your package of diamonds?"

"Rabbi, don't ask me. I'm an ignorant man. Can't sign my name, can't add up a column of figures. But God has been good to me, and so I'm a dealer in diamonds."

"How much money is there in the bag the other man took from you?"

"Rabbi, I never count my money. You know—it's bad luck."

The man is sent from the room. He's a wealthy merchant. Unbelievable! But the rabbi of Chelm sighs a heartbroken sigh for the wickedness of the world and asks that the other man, the

"passenger," be sent in. And what a difference! From top to toe the man of learning. The rabbi feels him out with half quotations; the man caps them instantly, Talmud and commentaries. "Rabbi!" cries the man. "What's the good of all this? I'm in a hurry! Here!" And opening the bag, he pours out on the table a heap of diamonds mixed with gold coins—blazing diamonds and flaming gold. "Half yours and half mine, if you say it's all mine."

A faint scream from the rabbi's lips: "Robber!"

The crowd breaks in the door. Where's the "driver," where's the "passenger," where the diamonds and the coins? Gone like wisps of smoke! And all Chelm mutters: "Magic! Or a nightmare!" God have mercy on us all!"

Meanwhile, below, Satan is furious:

"Imbeciles! Clumsy dolts! Maybe he's not beyond being bribed, but not that way. Not in the open, with a chance of being found out! Do you take him for an idiot?"

The two stupid imps are sentenced to a year of their own sulphur and brimstone. A second meeting is called. This time there is less enthusiasm, no yelling of "Me! Me! Me!" An elderly demon with a clear head and a long record accepts the assignment.

Autumn days in Chelm, between the New Year and the Day of Atonement: the penitential days, the time of the soul's reckoning and of decisions in heaven. The mud lies knee-deep in the streets of Chelm, the skies above are disconsolate. And a beggar man, all skin and bones, God help us, comes into the town limping on crutches and drags himself from house to house, from shop to shop. At every tenth door he gets a crust (and he has no teeth), and at every twentieth door a battered and faded kopeck, which almost slips out of his palsied fingers. Not that Chelm is uncharitable, but it is amply stocked with paupers of its own, paupers of standing, respectable paupers, the kind who starve in silence, widows and orphans of rabbis, relicts of teachers and beadles and saints.

The newcomer crawls from house to house the first day, the second, the third. The cold and wet go through him; the soaked and dripping lining sticks out of his tattered coat; his eyes sink deeper and deeper into their sockets. And then suddenly he falls down right in the middle of the marketplace, foaming at the mouth. A crowd gathers about him. One person dashes water in his face, a second brings a cup of raisin wine, a third brings a knife to force between his teeth. Meanwhile, there are some who scream, "Chelm is Sodom and Gomorrah!" The beggar man is obviously dying.

God in heaven! They can't let him die in the street! On the other

hand, who's going to take him in? Householders shrink back—every room in every house is overcrowded. And just then the rabbi comes up. And you have just one guess where the beggar man winds up.

So they carry him into the rabbi's one-room cottage and there he lies, in a trance. The rabbi sits at the table, a sacred book open before him. Every now and then, he casts a glance at the sick man. Outside the cottage a number of Jews linger uneasily—who knows whether help will be needed? Night draws on, and the rabbi is about to begin the evening prayer when he hears a stirring in the bed. He bends over the sick man compassionately, ear to lips.

"Rabbi," the sick man breathes, "I have been a great sinner. I cannot die without confessing."

The rabbi makes a gesture as if to call in witnesses. The sick man stops him. "God forbid. Just we two."

And he tells the rabbi that all his life he has been a mendicant—and a fraudulent one: he begged for bread in the name of wife and children, and never had wife or child; begged for dowries for the marrying off of aging daughters; collected funds for talmudic academies and for institutions in Palestine, but not a kopeck of that money was ever seen by a poor scholar or by a needy resident of the Holy Land. He peddled Palestine soil, which the pious put under their heads in their own coffins, and he had dug it under the nearest hedge.

And he draws from under his ragged kapote a linen bag, saying, "This is what I've collected and saved!" He opens it: wads of banknotes. "Take it, Rabbi. Distribute it among the poor. Do with it as you think fit."

The rabbi of Chelm leaps to the window with a joyous shout. He is suddenly fifty years younger. "Jews! Charity money! Come in and count!"

But when the Jews enter, the beggar has vanished. So has the sack of money. Magic again! Another nightmare!

Down below, Satan mutters: "This time it was not in the open; no chance of being found out."

The black folk are in despair! Then Lilith, the demon-woman, springs to the front. "I'll bring him in—the old ways are the best."

So it came to pass one day that the rabbi of Chelm, feeling some disturbance in his health, sent the beadle for the barber-surgeon, thinking that it might be well to do a little bloodletting. Meanwhile, the hour arrived for afternoon prayers, and the rabbi was stationed at the Eighteen Benedictions, which the worshiper must repeat standing motionless and facing east. The door opened and a young

woman came in carrying a fowl. Obviously, a ritual question. Is the fowl kosher or unkosher? The rabbi is absorbed in his prayers; the young woman will wait. And waiting, she begins to hum to herself, absentmindedly as it were. And what a voice! The voice of womanhood itself! Need I tell you that the rabbi of Chelm doesn't even hear it? So the young woman, seemingly bored, sits down and begins to rock herself in the chair. The rocking and the humming fill the room. What of it? If a snake were to enter the room and bite the rabbi of Chelm, do you think that his attention would be deflected from his prayers?

The rabbi finishes the Eighteen Benedictions, takes the three ritual steps backward, spits ritually on idol worshipers, repeats the closing prayer, seats himself at the table, and says in his quiet, good-humored way, "Let's see the fowl."

The young woman leans forward to put the fowl in his hand; in the same good-humored voice the rabbi says: "Put it on the table. A grown-up Jewish girl should know better than that." She begins to tell where and how she got the fowl and makes a long story of it; she can't sit still, and begins to wander about the room as she talks. The voice fills every corner with music; the white teeth flash, the white body shines through the dress, her sleeves are rolled up, a perfume as of precious spices rises from her flesh. She stands behind the rabbi and leans over; she breathes on him. And it's all wasted. The rabbi listens, examines the fowl, puts it back on the table, and says: "Kosher! And you, young woman, had better see about getting yourself a husband."

Maid and fowl disappear through the window. The rabbi smiles. He knows all about it.

Again an assembly of the black folk below. Some say this and some say that. A young and untried demon, without a feather in his hat, without a tooth dangling from his neck, asks:

"But hasn't the rabbi of Chelm a single weakness?"

"Stripped clean of weaknesses" is the answer.

"No enjoyments?"

"Maybe the ritual steambath on Friday afternoon."

The young demon persists. "But hasn't he some special custom of his own, some harmless habit or trick—like rolling bread pills after a meal while he says grace?"

"Nobody's seen him eat. Probably has no such habit."

But then Lilith recalls that when the perfume of her body assailed the nostrils of the rabbi, he took a pinch of snuff.

"That's it!" exclaims the young demon.

Every Friday afternoon, having bathed for the Sabbath, the rabbi of Chelm used to go for a walk in the woods. He always took the same path, between a wheatfield and a cornfield; and as he walked, he repeated by heart—as pious Jews are wont to do on Friday afternoons—the Song of Songs. Now, knowing himself to be an absentminded man, and fearing that some Friday afternoon he would wander out too far and fail to return in time for the Reception of the Sabbath—a grievous transgression—he had created, for his own protection, a special device. He had measured the distance against the time it took to repeat the Song of Songs and had found that halfway through the prayer he reached a certain tree. There he would sit down, treat himself to a hearty pinch of snuff from his goat's-horn snuffbox, rest awhile, then get up and return, saying the second half of the prayer. Thus, he would get back exactly in time for the Reception of the Sabbath.

One fateful Friday, just before the rabbi of Chelm set out for his walk, a spindly-legged little fellow, dressed like a German in a derby hat and green-striped trousers, appeared on the scene, uprooted the tree mentioned above, and carried it out farther into the woods; he replanted it and sat himself down on the farther side.

The rabbi, meanwhile, arrives on the spot where he has always found the tree. He is halfway through the Song of Songs, and the tree, he perceives, is quite a distance off. He is shocked. Obviously, he has been repeating the prayer mechanically, rapidly, without absorption and contemplation—also a grievous transgression. He will do penance at once. He will refuse himself that pinch of snuff until he has reached the tree. His nose itches for the grateful tickle of the snuff, his heart is faint with longing—but no! Not until he has reached the tree. His limbs are feeble, and his steps are tottering. It takes him a long time to get there. And all the time there is this itching and longing, so that he can hardly see. And now at last he reaches the tree; he sits down and snatches the snuffbox from his pocket; but his hands are all atremble, and just at that moment a wind begins to blow from the other side of the tree (it's that miserable little German, of course, blowing) and the snuffbox falls out of the rabbi's hands. He reaches for it. The wind grows stronger and the box rolls away. The rabbi crawls after it on all fours, his body crying out for the strong taste of the snuff. The wretched German grins, and blows harder. Then suddenly he uproots the tree again, and replants it in its proper place. The rabbi looks up, wondering what has happened to the tree. He perceives that it is night; the sky is studded with stars! Sabbath has begun! The sun has set, and he has

not even noticed it, so furiously has his heart been set on the pinch of snuff.

But wait, my friends. The sin of the rabbi in failing to appear for the Reception of the Sabbath was the lesser of the two sins into which his lust for snuff led him that evil day. For the demon kept blowing, the snuffbox kept rolling, and the rabbi, crawling after it in anguish, went out beyond the limits of a permissible Sabbath walk.

The brilliant young demon, returning to the nether regions, was at once entrusted with another highly important mission.

Addressing the mephitic assembly before his departure, he said: "Gentlemen, nobody ever stubs his toe against a mountain. It's the little lusts that bring a man down."

1906 (translated by Maurice Samuel)

YOM KIPPUR IN HELL

Once, on a perfectly ordinary day, without a fair or even an auction, a clatter of wheels and a spatter of mud aroused the merchants in the marketplace. Who, they wondered, could it be? It was a horse-drawn carriage. As soon as they saw it, though, they turned away in fear and revulsion. Both horse and carriage were well known. They belonged to a police informer from the neighboring town who was on his way to the provincial capital. God only knew who would be the victim of his talebearing this time.

All of a sudden, the noise stopped. Involuntarily, the merchants turned to look. The carriage had come to a halt, the horse had lowered its head to drink from a puddle, and the informer was sprawled senseless on his seat.

Say what you will, the man was a human being. People ran to help—but he already looked quite dead. An expert stepped up and confirmed the diagnosis. The members of the Burial Society rolled up their sleeves and went to work.

The horse and carriage were sold to pay the burial expenses, the informer was laid to rest, and the little devils who sprout where they

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are sown spirited the dead man's soul off to hell and delivered it to the gatekeepers.

The informer was brought for interrogation to the gatehouse, where the chief clerk plied him with wearisome questions and yawned as he wrote down the answers.

Taken down a peg by his surroundings, the informer answered everything: place and date of birth, age when married, length of time supported by father-in-law, number of children, year of desertion of wife, nature of profession and how acquired, and whatever other vital information pertained to his life on earth, which ended as he was driving his horse and carriage through the marketplace of Lahadam.^{satiric}

The clerk, who was in the middle of another yawn, sat up.

"Say that again? Laha-what?"

"Lahadam," repeated the informer.

A gleam of interest flared in the clerk's eyes. "Did you ever hear of such a place?" he asked his assistants.

The assistant clerks shrugged and shook their heads, their mouths slightly open. "Never," they said.

"Would you check to see where it is?"

In hell every town has its registry, arranged in alphabetical order. Each letter has its file cabinet. The devils went through the whole L file: Leipzig, Lemberg, Lublin, every L on the map—Lahadam was not to be found.

"But it exists," insisted the informer. "It's a small town in Poland."

"Since when?"

"Since the local count gave it a charter twenty years ago. It has two fairs a year, a synagogue, a study house, a public bathhouse, two taverns for Gentiles . . ."

"Has anyone from there ever been here?" inquired the clerk.

"Not a soul," answered his assistants.

"Do you mean to tell us no one dies there?" the informer was asked.

"Why should no one die there?" he replied like a Jew, answering a question with a question. "They live packed together in squalor, the public bath can make you gag, the whole place is one big sty." The informer was beginning to feel in his element. "As a matter of fact, they have their own cemetery. And a burial society that charges an arm and a leg. Why, they even had an epidemic of plague there."

The informer received the sentence that was called for and an

obscene

inquiry was called for too. Something was not right. How could a twenty-year-old town, and with an epidemic of plague no less, not have sent a single soul to hell?

Devils were sent out to investigate. Soon they flew back with their report:

"It's true, every word of it!"

There was indeed such a place, the devils explained, a town like any other, with here and there a good deed and a considerable lot of bad ones. The local economy? People managed, if not by hook, then by crook. So what was different about it? The cantor of the synagogue, that's what. Not that he himself was anyone special. But his voice! It was pure music, so tender and feeling that it could melt a heart of stone like wax. As soon as he started to pray, the whole congregation repented of their sins with such fervor that all was forgiven and forgotten in heaven above, whose gates stood open for every one of the townspeople. Just say you were from Lahadam and no more questions were asked!

Needless to say, it was a state of affairs that hell could not put up with. And it was a job for the director himself; no one else could be trusted to handle it.

What did Satan do?

He ordered fetched from the world of men a Calcutta cock with a comb as red as flame and had it placed before him on a table. Bewildered to find itself there, the rooster was too frightened to move. The archfiend crouched before it and crowed, fixing his evil eye on it until his black magic was done in a trice and the red comb was as white as chalk. Hearing a distant rumble of heavenly wrath, he quickly finished his spell with the curse:

"Begone, O voice, until he dies!"

There's no need to tell you whom he had in mind. Before the Calcutta cock's comb could turn red again, the cantor of Lahadam had lost his voice. He could barely utter a word; no sound came forth from his throat.

It was no secret who was to blame. That is, it was no secret to those Jews from whom there are no secrets, although perhaps not to all of them. After all, it wasn't something that you talked about even if you knew. But there it was and nothing could be done. Had the cantor been a man of more spiritual substance, there were measures that might have been taken, but he was a no-account, a lightweight. And so, though he went from one wonder-worker to another, none was able to help him.

In the end, he turned to the saintly rabbi of Apt. Indeed, he all

but went down on his knees and refused to leave the rabbi's room without an answer. You never saw such a pitiful sight.

The rabbi sought to comfort him. "I can tell you," he said, "that your hoarseness will last only until you die. Your deathbed confession will be said in a voice that will reach to the far ends of heaven."

"And until then?"

"It's hopeless."

"But why, Rabbi?" implored the cantor. "Why me?"

He pestered the rabbi of Apt for so long that the rabbi finally gave in and told him the whole story.

"In that case," croaked the cantor as he ran out of the rabbi's room, "I'll make sure that I get my revenge."

"How?" called the rabbi after him. "On whom?"

But the cantor was already gone.

This happened on a Tuesday, or perhaps it was a Wednesday. Thursday evening, when the fishermen of Apt went down to the river to haul in their catch for the Sabbath, their nets seemed heavier than usual. They pulled them out of the water: in them lay the drowned cantor!

He had jumped off the bridge. And just as the rabbi of Apt promised, his voice was restored in time for his last confession, since Satan's curse lasted only until his death. Yet since the confession could not be said under water, his voice remained trapped within him—which is, as you will see, exactly what he had counted on.

The cantor was buried behind the graveyard fence, as is the custom with suicides, and the devils whisked his soul off to hell. When asked by the clerk at the gate for his life story, however, he refused to answer. He was prodded with sharp lances, with burning coals—not a word.

"Then take him away!"

As if they didn't know all about him anyway! In fact, they had been eagerly awaiting him. But as he was led off to a cauldron of boiling water that was being stoked just for him, he tapped his throat with his thumb and burst out:

"Yisgada-al! . . ."²

The Kaddish—and in the special melody of Yom Kippur!

He sang—and his voice sounded far and wide, as good as ever, no, even better, sweeter and so much more tender. The cauldrons, which had reverberated with howls and groans, grew suddenly silent; then, from within them, voices took up the prayer. The cauldron lids lifted, heads peered out for a look, scorched mouths began to sing along.

supernatural = knowable

The devils attending the kettles did not join in, of course, but rather stood there dumbstruck, mouths agape, tongues hanging out, faces contorted, eyes red as coals, some still holding a log to stoke the fire with, others gripping an iron poker or trident. A few even threw themselves epileptically to the ground while the cantor went on singing. Beneath the cauldrons the fires died down. Here and there a dead man began climbing out.

The cantor sang on and hell's inmates sang with him, fervently, with all their hearts, their bodies made whole again, the flesh healed on their bones, their souls cleansed of all sin. When he reached the prayer in the Shimenesre that praises God the Resurrector, the dead came back to life and answered "Amen" in one voice. And when he sang the words "May His great name be blessed," there echoed back such a chorus of voices that the heavens opened on high, and the repentance of the damned reached the seventh heaven; where God's own mercy seat stands, and the moment of grace was so great that the sinners, now converted into saints, sprouted wings and flew out of the jaws of hell and through the open doors of paradise.

No one was left behind but the devils, writhing on the ground, and the cantor, who never budged from his place.

As in his lifetime, all repented through him but he himself could not repent. A suicide!

After a while hell filled up again. New quarters were added, but still the crowding was great.

1915 (translated by Hillel Halkin)

My Memoirs