

The Polish Lad

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is best to saw at the throat with the edge of one hand and to cup the other on the rectum.

"10. But one is permitted, and is even obliged, to respond to the rabbi in ordinary Yiddish, since the meaning of Sabbath is that 'truth is everlasting' and that justice is the foundation of the world."

As I was leaving, my bride's father handed me a large shabby satin bag. "My child," he said, "since you are about to be married, I am presenting you with this phylactery sack which I inherited from the eminent Reb Gad, who in his turn inherited it from his great-grandfather, who in his turn assured him that an uncle of his had personally purchased it from a distinguished holy sage."

I accepted the splendid gift with gratitude, and began the trip home in the same ramshackle cart that had brought me to Krokodilevka. But my bride's grandfather was now replaced by a gentle driver, and when we arrived all hell broke loose, with the driver insisting on being paid for transporting me, since he swore that my father-in-law had not done so. As for my father, for one thing he was poor as Job's turkey, and for another he objected strenuously to the effrontery of the Man of Righteousness. In the end Reb Abish's hat was pawned on condition that the pawnbroker would also attend the wedding and compel the bride's father to redeem the pledge.

So at last the gentle carter was paid off, and preparations for the wedding began.

It is time to marry off the thirteen-year-old boy—then he will be an upright member of the community

So what do you say, my dear readers? Do you consider it high time for me, a lad of thirteen, to be married? Yes or no? You seem to hesitate; are you trying to make up your minds on the question? Well, my friends, I am as smart as you are, and I can guess the reason for your silence. You are probably thinking, "Look at who's being entrusted with a wife!" Isn't that so? Well, first of all that is completely wrong, if you'll pardon my saying so. For you are well aware that I've been wearing my father's shoes for the past few years: it follows that I've shed the juvenile moccasins. And your looking askance at me doesn't worry me a bit—so long as my fiancée, thank God, is enamored of me. Just ask her, and she will tell you that all the so-called genteel folk are not fit to shine my shoes. And here is the proof: she personally told her grandfather that she was in love with my shadow. . . . You may think it a joke, but I can very well believe it. Just try watching a Jewish fanatic as he strolls on a bright windy day. You will be amused to see how he contrives to cast his shadow; how his plaited side curls and goatee flutter

in the wind; how the skirts of his kaftan swoop like the wings of a swan; how the tassels of his underwear flap against his thighs; how at each step the heel of his slipper throws a separate shadow a yard long, with the sun throwing patches of illumination between; and how each time the heel touches the ground again, the ritual fringes along the front of the *tallit katan* get caught in the slippers, while those along the back prance in the wind like the spindle legs of some huge, grotesque crane. This silhouette is cast in every detail by the shadow. Nu, could one not become enamored of so lovely a figure? Now you understand that it was even easier to fall in love with my shadow, since it was small in stature and the shoes and cap I wore were oversized, and thus only the shadow of my figure could be seen. Nu, of what account is your ridicule? You may object, perhaps, that I am unable to support a wife. Ha, ha, ha! You make me laugh. That is the least of my worries. Of course, those who are educated in the secular schools, and who therefore fail to observe the customs and traditions of their parents at home are concerned, being actually convinced that they will have to support their wives and keep their noses to the grindstone to provide luxuries for their families. However, we Hasidic children are brought up at home, and we observe, thank God, how parents in all the Jewish communities of Poland conduct themselves, so we have an inkling as to who is the provider in the family. Take my father, for instance: he devoted his life to the rabbi, and my mother was the breadwinner. What, you ask, was her line of business? Why, what business did she not engage in?—whether it was making dumplings, or conjuring up the evil eye, or administering home remedies, or uttering spells, or baking matzah, or darning stockings, or serving as a waitress or as an attendant in the women's ritual baths—and the rest came from the gro-

cery stand. In addition to which she had household duties, suckling and rearing children, cooking, darning and mending clothes, heating the stove, and emptying the slop pail. And when, on his return from the synagogue, my father failed to be served with food immediately, my mother would be raked over the coals. And still she would receive him with open arms, fawn upon him and pay him homage, serving him the choicest part of the meat and fish, and a white loaf, while she herself would be content to exist on what was left over. I knew how husband and wife managed in Poland. So what was there for me to worry about? I knew that my wife would exert herself to the utmost. And if she should become ill for a while—why, that was no calamity either. Was there not a holy sage in the next town? So one would repair for a time to the rebbe and the *hevera borshet*, letting the wife and the children fend for themselves until things straightened out. We have an Almighty Lord who sustains all creatures, from the maggot to the bison; I don't have to be their provider. What, am I correct? And anyhow, why should I ask your views concerning my wedding? I am well aware that according to you, I could remain a bachelor another five or six years. . . . But what of the holy Gemara, and the other edifying books, which are the advocates and champions of marrying at the age of twelve or thirteen? That seems to carry small weight with you. If you deprecate the one, I can just as easily snap my fingers at the other. I can make fun of your ridicule of me. I will be married at the age of thirteen—and you can call me whatever you choose.

And so the wedding garments are already being tailored for me. Lord of the Universe, may so grand a wardrobe be vouchsafed to all fine young Jewish men: two shirts and trousers made of coarse Turkish linen; a cloth kaftan for ordinary wear and a mohair coat for the Sab-

bath and other holy days; a quilted windbreaker and a robe fashioned from my mother's wedding cloak—for which the sleeves, there being not enough fabric, were pieced together out of my father's satin winter trousers, which the rabbi had given him as a wedding present. Also, a Bershid *tallit katan* and chamois slippers. On the Sabbath morning preceding my Bar Mitzvah I was dressed in this attire and escorted to the synagogue. I remember to this day that when I was invited to honor the Torah, and was about to pronounce the traditional benediction, the reader of the Torah asked me, jokingly, "Do you know how to recite the after-meal benediction?" In my confusion, instead of pronouncing the benediction pertaining to the Torah, I proceeded to recite the one pertaining to the meal . . . and the congregation burst into laughter.

But I got through it all somehow. One thing, however, I shall not forget to my dying day, and whenever it comes to mind, I feel endless distress and mortification; my life becomes gloomy as the grave. The day before my wedding, my father had me put on my new clothes, and then, accompanied by the shammas, make the rounds of the wealthy and the other local notables, ostensibly to make my farewells, but in fact to solicit wedding presents. The clergy and other worthies of Poland had engaged in this practice since time immemorial; and my father followed suit. Cursed by the day when I was born—on the eve of my wedding I went through hell on earth! For one thing, as soon as I entered a wealthy household all the women and girls would roar with laughter, leaving me crushed and humiliated. For, along with the propriety of so splendid a custom as leading the bear about, there was my grotesque image as a bridegroom; and at so comic a sight, nobody could help laughing till his sides split. And if one local nabob or dignitary refrained from

laughing in my face, he would say with a leering grin, "Have a nice journey!" And I had to hold on, biding my time, up to my ears in misery, until he deigned to produce a wedding gift of some sort. Now and then, out of pity, someone would shove an object into my hand, while a dozen others asked impatiently, "Well, what are you waiting for?" . . . And what about my trudging through the marketplace in my finery, accompanied by the shammas, while all the clerks and shopkeepers and ordinary bystanders stood in the doorways, pointing their fingers and jeering at me? Do you have any conception of what that could mean? Believe me, running the gauntlet of a thousand lashes is preferable to the humiliation of that experience. Beware, you Polish bridegrooms; don't let anyone trick you into making the rounds on the eve of your wedding day for ostensible purposes of leavetaking, even though it means forfeiting your life. Do not submit, my brethren, or you will never be able to rid your mind of the inhuman disgrace and ignominy. If I could obliterate it by dying, I would gladly do so. But that is a thing of the past, a moment of idiocy that cannot be repaired by all eternity.

So the wagons are all set to carry the guests to the wedding. Aside from my parents and kinfolk, the party is to include Reb Avremel Hirik, the synagogue sexton, and several ardent followers of the rabbi, as well as the pawnbroker, who is involved in the controversy over the hat. . . . The group had a final drink and climbed into the wagons.

The prowess of the Jews, inherited from the days of Egypt—a confrontation—land and order—true flunkeyism—enduring faith

Jews in general, and Hasidic Jews in particular, don't give a tinker's damn about anything when they are on their way to a wedding; they don't give a damn about anything at all. You take just one Jew with a sense of his own importance, and he will become the biggest frog in his own small puddle, a hard taskmaster and even a despot over those lowlier and weaker than himself. Now imagine a quorum of Jews getting together! They are noisy and blow off steam; when they meet with a muzhik trudging along the highway, it is they who will twist a corner of his kaftan into a pig's ear before he can do it himself to mock the Jews; or on meeting a peasant cart they will knock off a wheel or cause some other mischief. Or when the peasant is hauling his farm produce to market, he will be unceremoniously relieved of it and called a few names into the bargain. In a word, the crowd is feeling playful and indulging in every sort of prank.

Abruptly as a flash of lightning, their ears are smitten by the jingling of harness bells, followed by a shout of "Sтой!"—the Russian for "Halt." At the mere sound of those bells and that cry of "Halt," the would-be men

of importance, heroes and pranksters all turn into jellyfish and sycophantic grovelers. The previous leaders in the demonstration of brute force now shiver in their boots, their teeth rattling like castanets. They now look so harmless you'd think they couldn't hurt a fly, and so innocent, you'd suppose in all the world they owed only their souls to the Lord and a few quarts of milk to the dairy woman.

The vehicle bearing two Russian officials—one with a red collar, the other sporting only a cockade in his cap—came to a stop and Red Collar barked. "*Otkuda ee kudda*—Where you from and where you bound?"

"What did he say?" my father asked, bewildered.

"Never mind what the uncircumcised dog of a Jew is babbling about," Avremel Hirik advised, but not without trepidation.

"Fellow Jews, prepare to do penance!" cried the shammas in a voice full of terror.

"*Nu, da, a passport u vas yes!*—Well, now, have you got passports?" Red Collar brusquely demanded.

"Now we're in for it!" Avremel Hirik murmured under his breath; then, turning to face the interrogator, he implored in a fawning mixture of Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian, "*Panye, nashito nam prashport, yak mi sam tutochke*—Sir, what need have we of a passport when we are here ourselves?"

In a fury, Red Collar howled, "*Stupai k'thoroy, zhidov! skaya khara, ty etakaya! Takoi parkhati zhid stroyet myye uly botchki! Siyu minutu tchto bi bil myye passporty, a to ya vas—kotory mezh vami starshy*—Go to the devil, with that Hebrew snot of yours! A scruffy Jew, making up to me like that! I'll have those passports this minute, or else—who's your elder here?"

"Fellow Jews, pray the Almighty—we're lost!" gasped the pawnbroker, who was trembling all over.

"Ty starshi—Are you the elder?" asked Red Collar, pointing at my father.

"Gevald—help! Avremel, what is he saying?" whispered my father, looking more dead than alive.

"Quick, get out the rabbi's good-luck charm," Avremel, pale as a ghost, replied in a barely audible voice. "Probably he wants to know where you're going."

"Ah-ah-ah" — meekly, and with a servile grin, my father ventured to address Red Collar— "*Panye, nye znaye yak meni yekhali? Meni yekhali na vesselye*—Sir, you didn't know where we were bound? We were bound for a celebration."

"*Akh ty tchutichelo gorokhovoy!*" stormed Red Collar. "*Ty na svadbu yedesh? Ah zhenikh gdye?*—Ah, you founded garden-patch scarecrow! Bound for a wedding, are you? Then where is the bridegroom?"

My father gave him the beady-eyed look of a mouse caught in a trap, with no idea of what the question was.

"*Khossen, khossen*—the bridegroom, the bridegroom!" said the official with the cockade.

"Ah, the *khossen, panye*, the *khossen!* *Vot on*—there he is!"—and he pointed at me.

Though I was frightened out of my wits, Red Collar now only shook with laughter: "*Tak eto tvoi zhenikh? Otlitchno! Ah gdye yevno metricheskoye svidyelstvo?*—So that's your bridegroom? Very good! And where might his birth certificate be?"

Once again my father looked about him with a shrug of bewilderment, until the official with the cockade called out, "*Metrika! Metrika!*"

"Ah, ah—*metrika!*" said Avremel Hirik, venturing in an ingratiating tone to address the official. "*Yai bog, panye, ye tam v'lamik! Ot yak ya mayu boord un paiois*—As truly as there is a God, sir, it's in that bundle! As truly as I have a beard and ritual locks!"

"*Otkroitse vash zhidovskiy khlam—posmotrim*—Open up your Jewish ragbag and we'll take a look!" Red Collar ordered, pointing to the bundle.

"We're in real trouble, fellow Jews!" whispered the shammas.

When the bundle was untied, Reb Abish's hat was the first to crawl out, and Red Collar laughed as though he could hardly contain himself. Then he clapped that hat onto my head, pulled it down over my ears and said to me, "*Eto dlya nevesty*—is that for the bride?" Nearly prostrated with fright, I was actually in tears until Cockade said to Red Collar, "*Im kyem toot imyet dyelo! Ostavlye etikh dikarei; pust sebeye yedut k'ichartu na kulitchki! Brrr—gadost etakaya!*"—What is this we're bothering ourselves with! Leave these savages alone; let them go to the devil out here in the middle of nowhere! How disgusting it all is!" At that, Red Collar flung down the hat, spitting as he did so, and climbed back into the carriage.

As soon as the harness bells had faded into the distance, the Hasidic party began intoning a new melody, "May the Rabbi's Merit Shield Us!"

"So why should they not retreat?" the shammas asked in perfect seriousness. "Why should such a goy not shrink from Reb Abish's hat?"

"I only wonder why he was laughing so hard," said the pawnbroker.

"Laughing?" my father broke in. "The laugh was on the wrong side of his face! And the proof of it is that the hat almost crippled that vile hand of his; if he hadn't thrown it down, he would have been minus a hand!"

"No wonder," said the shammas, "that he was clearly about to give up the ghost—may the Lord preserve us! He was already foaming at the mouth so that he could barely spit—"

"That is right," my father joined in. "He was lucky

that the official with the cockade saved him from disaster just in time."

Another bumpkin, who had remained huddled in the cart, frozen with fear, suggested, "It may be that the other one is a gilgul, a transmigrated soul, of the old tzaddik's house slippers, may his memory be blessed!"

"Why must it be from one of the slippers?" exclaimed Avremel Hirik. "He's not worthy of that. From the old man's tobacco pipe, perhaps—"

"Avremel, have you any idea of where the old man's pipe came from?" asked the shammas. "You must understand that after his demise the old man's father of blessed memory—he was the eminent maggid—was led by the Archangel Michael to Gehenna to eat every one of the lost souls down there. But since the great maggid of blessed memory could not carry out his mission without the *lulke-tzibbuk*, the likeness of a pipe was fashioned for him. It had a long stem turned out of Aaron's staff, and its bowl was a conceptualization from the soul of the pious Riveleh, who was in need of a *tikkun neshomah*—a means of spiritual assistance—because a Hasid had once chanced to glimpse her in the nude as she was on her way to the river for immersion prior to the midnight service, thereby inflicting undue torments upon a future Hasidic saint—even though she was unaware of all this herself. But you know that the Holy One, blessed be He, deals very sternly with the tzaddikim. Anyhow, the maggid, of blessed memory, satisfied the tikkun by means of the pipe; and on the following night he returned the same pipe to the old man, of blessed memory—and incidentally, Michael returned the pipestem, now once more a staff, to Aaron as a matter of honor. Now you see how remarkable a pipe it was."

"Although I had not been aware of this story," said Avremel Hirik, deeply moved, "it goes without saying

that the garments of the saintly old man, as well as his carriage and horses and appurtenances of any sort—all things in fact—are the conceptualizations derived from souls—"

"You have discovered America!" my father broke in. "It is common knowledge that once on the holiday of Lag be-Omer when he rode into the country to practice archery, his white horse—may it rest in peace!—reared up on its hind legs to prevent the old man from aiming the arrows toward the east. And the old man, of blessed memory, informed the people then and there that the soul of the steed's sire was in the east and was clamoring for a *tikkun neshomah*, for a means of spiritual betterment. It was only because the old man obliged the steed that it settled down so that the ancient could aim his arrows eastward. . . ."

In this fashion, for the rest of the journey the Hasidic elite continue to wrangle over where the gilgul, the transmigrated soul, of the official with the cockade might have originated. In the end it was unanimously agreed that he was indeed the gilgul of a callus that had been trimmed from Reb Abish's foot and that had an unmistakable resemblance to the official's cockade. And so at last the Hasidim arrived in Krokodilevka.

*All the fair sex, believe it or not, are
favorably impressed with me*

On reaching the city limits we caught sight of a wagon, drawn by two nags, that had come out to welcome the bridegroom. The vehicle was jammed with Jews of all ages, who were singing, cheering, clapping their hands and shouting themselves hoarse. And like a small boat in the wake of an ocean liner, behind it trailed a cart drawn by a blind mare and loaded with women; clustered all over the cart, like flies about a festering sore, were a lot of boys and girls, all shabby and down at the heels.

The younger men took charge of me. Next came the processional circuits of the marketplace before the wedding ceremony, with the bride circling the bridegroom seven times. Well, to be frank, the fair sex were certainly a mixed lot: washerwomen, scrubwomen, serving wenches, chambermaids, scullery maids, gadabouts, tatterdemalions, and even gentle hawkers all came running to witness the charming spectacle of which I was the center.

The procession was preceded by half a dozen musicians: one using a tub for a drum and two rolling pins as drumsticks, another clashing two pot covers as cymbals,

a third sawing on a fiddle that had cost all of twenty kopecks when it was new, a fourth blowing into the neck of a bottle in lieu of a trumpet, a fifth banging his ears to imitate a cello, while a sixth whistled—shrill as a fife—through two fingers stuck in his mouth. It may be that I have failed to identify the instruments properly, but regardless of that such music could hardly have emanated from any others. The married women and girls were all feasting their eyes on me, all longing for a child or a bridegroom such as I. And the proof of it is this: they immediately cast an evil eye so that I began to yawn.

Long life to the Jewish women of Poland, who avert their eyes from long trousers and short jackets! They are not like those supposedly educated grand ladies who take offense at any disrespect, or are put into a fury when one of our young men, and he a paragon of virtue, happens to reach inside his unbuttoned shirt and scratch his chest, or to blow his nose onto the floor, or to yawn in a lady's face or, God forbid, he should happen to spit on the train of her dress. Or if, on some rare occasion, he should happen to say anything crude. Then he is labeled an ignoramus, a vulgarian, a savage. The grand ladies prefer polite, flowery talk and eloquence; they relish compliments, as if they belonged to the nobility and were not daughters of Jerusalem. Indeed, thank God, our Polish women are able to put up with anything; they can take it. You can scratch to your heart's content or spit, or blow your nose, or stand on your head—and not only will they remain unperturbed, the fact is that the more uncouth and vulgar a man's behavior is, the more he will appeal to her. She would not exchange his knobby Adam's apple for the swanlike throat of the most exquisite gentleman.

And aren't things really better that way? Indeed, why should one have to be forever on tiptoe, wary of

committing a social error or uttering some impropriety? Gentlemen, indeed! When you think about it, who but these same half-baked clowns and rakes, these debauchees and breakers of the law are responsible for promoting the belief that the female is superior to the male? These scoundrels declare that the female is a gentle being and appreciates the esthetic things of life more than does the male; they likewise propound the notion that it is the female who influences the spirit and guides the emotions of the male in courtship, and that all men are therefore duty bound to pay homage and give honor to women—to be gallant and gracious and accommodating. Nu, what do you think of such moralizing? Our ancestors, mind you, had a bit more wisdom than these modern pillars of society, and they looked on women as cattle. The statements of the holy Gemara concerning those creatures run along much the same lines. And for this very reason, our ancestors' womenfolk worked like slaves, and would not have dared show themselves in any masculine assemblage—let alone, God forbid, intrude upon the discussion.

Anyhow, who pays the slightest heed to those traditional ways of life, and our wives will dance attendance upon us, minister to us, venerate us, and be suitably grateful. As for you half-baked scribblers, do not suppose that your writings will carry any weight with the Jewish women of Poland! They won't in the least, believe me—even if you point out to them a thousand times over that they are doomed to a life of misery with their husbands, that they are looked on as of no account and that even the most insignificant, the laziest and most unattractive husband is lord and master over the loveliest, the finest and also the unluckiest of women, and can hold her in contempt. The life of women passes like a cloud, devoid of either happiness or comfort, and she must swal-

low the cup of her misery. And so, with all the rest of your various fancies and illusions.

You may even write *A Polish Girl*, but you'll merely be riding a balky mare on a wild goose chase and tilting with windmills. For the Jewish women of Poland will only declare, "Once and for all, we'll go on making bricks without straw, we'll do the most menial tasks, we'll endure insults and humiliations, and still go on serving our husbands as breadwinners and worshipping the ground they walk on! For we cherish a *tallit katan* and a protruding Adam's apple more than we care for all the spruced-up coxcombs and because a small share in the world to come earned by our Hasidic husbands through their prayers, their ritual baths, their *melaveh malkheh*, their merry makings at the rebbe's court, are far dearer to us than the worldly pleasures offered by the fine gentlemen!"

At last we arrived at the palatial quarters where the bridegroom and his in-laws-to-be were to be housed. In fact, those quarters were not a bit less luxurious than the elementary schools I had attended, or the home of my bride's family. But the furnishings were different. In the center of the room a noodle board that rested on a kneading trough served as a table; a discarded door laid across two trestles served as a bench; an old shawl belonging to the bride's mother doubled as a table cover, on which cake and schnapps—both worthy of a king, of course—were laid out. Mildew bloomed on the lower surface of the inside walls. I sat on a small tub turned upside down, and the guests sat on the makeshift bench. They had hardly drunk their first toast when there arrived on the scene a man who was stone blind. He carried a shepherd's staff; a black sash encircled his belly, and a cap with a cracked visor sat on his head like a worn-out yarmulka; the high boots he wore were too big for him

and were falling apart. He had the face of a drunken butcher. Leading him by the hand was a fifteen-year-old ragamuffin, whose expression suggested a veteran of fifty. There were cheerful cries from the guests: "Quiet, quiet! The badchan is here!" The badchan, adept at improvising humorous songs, was the traditional entertainer at weddings. For all his blindness, he managed to reach for the bottle, poured himself a tumblerful and swallowed it without blinking, wolfed down a hunk of cake and announced, "*Raboisay*, gentlemen! If you'll quiet down, I'll compose a few rhymes in honor of our bridegroom. Let's hear you, masters—tune up!"

And standing beside the table, in a lugubrious voice he began to chant.

21

Nuptials and a synagogue—a feast of the soul—and let the Polish-Jewish badchanim do the moralizing

The Badchan's Chant

Bridegroom, my dear bridegroom,

Listen to what I say:

Your Yom Kippur is today—

It is your day of doom!

But for your sins, I calculate you've paid,

And have now atoned by the Holy One's aid.

Bridegroom, my dear bridegroom,

To the Holy One lift up your head,

Let your heart be laundered by the tears you shed,

And your wedded bliss will bloom.

To be a bridegroom means, you well know,

That with time your wealth will grow.

Bridegroom, my dear bridegroom,

Though you wed while the world is burning,

Your sons will be men of great learning,

Despite predictions of unending gloom.

*Wisdom arrives, my son, with the passing years,
And so, for now, please lend me your ears.*

Bridegroom, my dear bridegroom,

Give homage to beauty and respect to the soul,

So the Lord will keep you unharmed and whole,

And guide your offspring from cradle to tomb.

If your happiness with others you share

You'll prosper and never fall prey to despair.

Bridegroom, my dear bridegroom,

Today you are king and your bride is queen—

For what do the words beloved bride mean?

They mean, for one thing, a prolific womb.

Many daughters and sons will bear your name;

Their beauty and wisdom the world will acclaim!

Bridegroom, my dear bridegroom,

Now comes the end of my song:

The Lord protect you all your life long,

But before I leave this grand bridal room,

I beg you earnestly, hear my plea,

And if I'm rewarded fittingly,

I will pray for you and your bride-to-be.

As you stand beneath the canopy,

I'll pray for all your progeny,

And also for your family,

I'll even toss in this company,

And personally guarantee

My prayers are first quality!

The truth is that the badchan caused me to weep in despair over my wretched lot. I regarded my wedding day as the eve of Yom Kippur rather than as Yom Kippur itself. But on Yom Kippur eve, while the guests were feasting, for the afternoon Minhah prayers I would be having to recite the *Vidduy*, the confession of my sins, and

put on a shroudlike robe of white linen while my parents pronounced a blessing over me; whereas today, I was to become a kapparah, to be offered up for the sins of my parents, as a matter of course, just like the chicken that is sacrificed on the eve of the Day of Atonement. And likewise my bride was to become my kapparah, my own expiatory chicken—the sole difference being that on the eve of Yom Kippur the chicken is *white*, whereas my wife and I wore *black* . . . But no kapparah whatever would have been likely to redeem the two of us . . . As for my being spared the traditional stripes of the *mal'kot*—well, to begin with, the small boys were sure to contribute their share of pinching and sticking pins in me when I found myself under the bridal canopy, so as to make up for that omission. Moreover I was already feeling so whipped that there was no further necessity of beating me. To be brief, they proceeded to drape me with the white linen robe, buttoning and fastening all its bands and strings. An ox has to be tied up for the slaughter, but among Polish Jews a juvenile bridegroom faces it voluntarily. A single nod from his Polish Jew of a father, and there is no need for chains or irons! As the bride was about to be veiled for the ceremony, my prospective father-in-law noticed that I was wearing an ordinary cap. "What's going on here?" he shouted. "Where is Reb Abish's shtreimel?"

"The shtreimel?" rejoined my father. "And did you pay the carter that time?"

"Fool!" retorted the father of the bride.

"Moron!" my father responded. As one word led to another, they both fell to swearing like troopers. Finally the guests prevailed on the pawnbroker to release the shtreimel with a promise that he would be remunerated out of the wedding presents, so that the wedding could proceed.

The women for their part were also in an uproar,

snatching at each other's wigs. My mother was in a rage because she had not been presented with a white blouse, as was the tradition, before the wedding ceremony, and the bride's mother was in a fury because her daughter had not been presented with a fur jacket. To make a long story short, I stepped into the women's section and caught a glimpse of my beauty—the last one before the slaughter. . . . In her bewildered state as she sat there with eighteen women busy primping her and arranging her pigtails, she looked like a fly trapped in a spider's web. If I had not thrown the veil over her face at that moment, I would probably not have survived to take part in my own wedding. The attending women showered me with hops as a sort of leaven for encouraging the dough my parents had concocted to rise. And then we were being escorted to the bridal canopy.

All of a sudden, there we were in front of it. I was somewhat baffled to realize that we were not being taken to the synagogue for the ceremony, but I supposed that the bride's father knew what he was doing. It didn't dawn on me for some minutes that we were in fact standing close to the synagogue. Try, if you will, to visualize a small ramshackle structure, roofed with moldy thatch full of gaping holes, its walls of clay cracked and peeling, propped up by rotten planks. Some of the panes in the three front windows had been pasted over with paper and with strips of a mothridden curtain that had once hung before the Ark where the Torah scrolls were kept, and other panes were missing altogether. The south wall bulged like a pregnant woman who appeared likely to miscarry any day now, and there was a breach in the eastern wall through which you could glimpse a crumbling corner of the Holy Ark—out of which the shammash would scoop the dry rot to be used in the rite of circumcision. Well, and how is that for a synagogue?

Suddenly, as I stood there befuddled, there was a staccato burst of handclaps and the sound of voices from inside the synagogue, a noise that shook the place to its foundation.

When my father inquired the meaning of the commotion, he was told that the Hasidim of nearby Nachmestrivka had bought their rebbe a silver samovar, for which they had paid two hundred rubles, that in the evening the gift would be taken to the sage, and that meanwhile they were having a nip of something in the synagogue as they saw off the delegation to their tzaddik.

And so, my friends, ought not our fellow Jews of Poland live to see the advent of the Messiah? Where else in the world would you find such people, who would sacrifice so much for their tzaddikim? Living in direst poverty, in cold and starvation, down at the heels and out at the elbows, with a house of worship falling into ruins—yet to buy a silver samovar for their holy sage they could and did find two hundred rubles. He was, after all, a divine personage, and deserving of a certain homage. Indeed how could a synagogue compare with a holy sage? The entire prestige of the synagogue rested on the prayers offered within it. But did not the sage himself personify prayer? Did not the great Reb Hillel, when his aging rebbitzin became pregnant, tell her that she was carrying two scrolls of the Torah? (By which he meant two sons.) In fact, she gave birth to a girl, and a deformed one at that. But what of it? It stands to reason that a Jew should be more in awe of delinquency in paying taxes than in awe of the synagogue, since implicit in tax delinquency is the fact of having to face Red Collar—whereas the necessity of paying in the world to come for your fun here is still far off. Moreover, the Jews of Krokodilevka will submit to having their last pillow and featherbed hauled to the police station, as well as to personal arrest,

and still they fail to pay taxes! For how can they raise money when they are destitute? Yet they will move heaven and earth to raise twice eighteen rubles as a *pidyon* for the holy sage, and an emissary will be delegated to deliver it in the name of the community. Whereupon the sage—may his life be prolonged—prophesies that the local tax collector will be dismissed from his post. And the prophecy comes true: the old official is removed from office; the only catch is that the replacement turns out to be a thousand times worse than his predecessor, and the havoc he causes in the community is more calamitous than the destruction of Jerusalem. But the Jews go right on being delinquent in paying taxes, for what can you do when there is not a single crumb in the bread box? And if all your efforts and pains succeed in scraping together a couple of hundred rubles by pawning the last featherbed is blood money like that to be shelled out for taxes, or a donation for the synagogue, or the poorhouse, or a Talmud-Torah for poor children, or to help the ailing and indigent? Now, I ask you: are all these projects of greater importance than presenting your own rabbi with a silver samovar?

You seem to be extraordinarily quiet. Very well: let the Nachmestrivka Hasidim rejoice in their rebbe's samovar; let the synagogue walls continue to bulge; let the invalids, the women in childbirth, the cripples, the widows and orphans go on suffering as before.

And in the meantime, under the bridal canopy, let me contemplate my own tragicomedy.

Mazel tov, fellow Jews! You've had your fun! One more outbreak on the old abscess

Well, and now the groomsmen had completed the traditional circuits around the bride and groom under the marriage canopy—while I went on standing there like a blockhead in paradise. The rabbi had performed the marriage ceremony; the precentor had already recited the traditional document in Aramaic setting forth the obligations of the bridegroom toward his bride; I had already placed the betrothal ring on the bride's finger and had pronounced my own death sentence by uttering the words, "Behold, thou art consecrated unto me with this ring according to the Law of Moses and Israel. . . ." Everything seemed to be moving smoothly ahead. And then the bride stepped on the toes of my right foot—a portent that she would rule the roost after the nuptials. That was all I needed, as though I weren't already miserable enough! Actually, her doing it was superfluous. It is common knowledge that every Jewish girl in Poland who stands under the marriage canopy is fully aware and even wishes wholeheartedly, as she steps on her bridegroom's toes, that as a consequence of this act her husband will

walk over her for the rest of her life. But for some reason or other, the ancient superstition continues to be observed. Then, last but not least, with the same foot the bridegroom shatters a glass—the traditional token of mourning for the destruction of the Temple, and the destruction also of juvenile newlyweds, who by the thousands, alas, spend their lives in wretchedness and perhaps bequeath that same lot to their posterity. For this the Jews have no memento—a fact which, however, I have also overcome. "Mazel tov! Congratulations!" you hear people saying all around you. Thus the Jew forever relies on good fortune, drifting with the current and eating the bread of idleness. He seems oblivious of the statement by the Gemara itself, that Israel is unlucky—but if you make an effort, the Lord will help you.

So at last we are being escorted from under the marriage canopy, arm in arm for the first and only time in our lives. . . . Mazel tov! Congratulations! The young Polish boy has now become a young Polish man. The guests move their feet to something like a flourish of trumpets. Now the in-laws pay homage, doing the cossack dance in front of the house with abandon, as be-hooves two elderly but fervent Hasidim. And all the women looking on cheer and applaud the two God-fearing zealots as though they beheld the Divine Presence hovering about them. At the entrance to the house we were welcomed with a twisted loaf of white bread, apparently to signify that we, like the loaf, would never be parted until, overcome by the force of circumstance, the grave swallowed us up.

We were ushered into the house and given a seat of honor, and then "golden soup," traditional at weddings, was brought in. But when I attempted to dip a spoonful to end the day's fast, there turned out to be neither soup nor gold—the Hasidic guests having lost no time in helping themselves and having left not a drop.

Then they proceeded with the royal wedding banquet, with the appropriate musical accompaniment. When the meal was over, the badchan scrambled onto the table, and placing a huge platter in the middle to contain the wedding presents and donations of money, called out, "Attention, my friends! I will entertain you with a pun or a jest to accompany each present!" My father-in-law pulled out a deed to half his property and tossed it onto the platter. The badchan's invitation, "Trot out your wedding presents, relatives of the bridegroom and the bride!" was met by a stony silence. But the badchan persisted, "Oi, you aunts, uncles, grandfathers, grandmothers, friends of the bridegroom and the bride! Get change for a kopeck and let's have your wedding presents!" Finally, the nabob of Krokodilevka stepped forward and hurled six copper pieces worth five kopecks onto the platter, with such force that it cracked. The damage evoked the ire of my mother-in-law. One word led to another, and my mother was annoyed; then my father turned resentful, and the sour looks and sulking spread to my father-in-law and the guests. In the rumpus that ensued over the poor showing in the matter of wedding presents, the pawnbroker snatched the fur-trimmed hat from my head and took to his heels.

You can imagine the fiasco the wedding had turned into, and above all my chagrin. Had it not been for Hasda, the ritual slaughterer of Krokodilevka, the affair would really, God forbid, have been a calamity! But there, sudden as a bolt of lightning, Hasda was overturning a slop pail on the earthen floor; then he was taking off his gabardine and his trousers, keeping on only his underwear, and urging the rest of the guests to unbend. Next, with a yarmulka that must have weighed two pounds, given its accumulation of dirt, sweat, grease, et cetera, he was whacking the old women and small boys to start them applauding and cheering, while he and the

other guests kicked up their heels and danced with abandon. He raised all our spirits—a blessing on him! That is what I call a real ritual slaughterer—as opposed to Pini, one of that office who wears polished boots and a stylish cap, who sports a tidy beard and earlocks and is, moreover, proficient in reading and writing. Indeed, the Evil One would appear to hold undisputed sway over Pini. As if for spite, he is well versed in the laws of ritual slaughter, is exceedingly hospitable, will stop at nothing to help a fellowman in need, is esteemed by officials because of his fine record, and is most upright and conscientious in his dealings with others. Well, what do you say about such an Evil One? Why, the rabbi persecutes him even in public; but it happens that the ritual slaughterer is more scholarly than the rabbi, so that occasionally he exposes the latter's deficiency in rabbinical wisdom, and then the rabbi has to keep his mouth shut. Alas for such a spiritual leader, so fervent a Hasid, to be surpassed in scholarship—*O tempora! O mores!* Now our Hasda is no great shakes when it comes to ritual slaughter, nor is he anything to boast of as a scholar. But I would not trade him for eighteen ritual slaughterers of the likes of Pini, who is no match for Hasda in certain of his mannerisms or his ingenuity. Why, Hasda's tipping, his hilarity, his whacks with the yarmulka by way of enlivening the occasion, as well as his ready wit and banter—all these delighted and enthralled the gathering. He directed the "Sabbath dances" like a master choreographer. Urging the badchan and the musicians to go on, he pulled out his oversized bandanna, gave the bride one corner of it to hold while she passed the other corner to each guest, male or female, in turn, according to the Orthodox tradition. The guests dropped copper coins onto the platter, and the money was used to replenish the dwindling supply of vodka.

Some of the guests, tired and drunk, fell asleep wherever they happened to sink down; others started to drag themselves home. My in-laws exchanged meaningful glances. Some relative remarked, "Well, enough's enough! The bride and the bridegroom have fasted today; time for them to take a little rest!" When, at a signal, the musicians struck up the music for the "Mitzvah-dance," the groomsmen took me in charge, the bridesmaids gathered about the bride, and we were steered toward a dark small room—the bridal chamber. The nuptial couch consisted of a sleeping bench, and beside it was a roughhewn three-legged stool. Hush, my friends—my attendants are whispering something in my ear. Good, night, my dear guests! As for me—a miserable lifetime dawns. . . .

*If it is ordained by God, it is a thing of
beauty*

And now, my dear readers, since you are already familiar with the story of my life from birth to marriage, and are already aware of what a good sort I am, I may as well tell you the rest. Let the world learn how young Jewish males fare in our blessed Poland—and also acquire a useful lesson or two about life. Bear in mind that when I was still a mere runny-nosed boy, people observed certain performances of mine whose ingenuity and finesse were beyond human comprehension. And the impressiveness of those displays increased as, praise the Lord, I became a full-fledged adult. When you think of it, do you know of many youngsters in Poland with gifts adequate to describe their Jewish milieu so masterfully and in such detail as I have done? And by the way, I haven't told even a tenth of what there was to tell. Can there be many Jewish mothers in Poland who have experienced in the ninth month of pregnancy the miracle of having a girl child transformed into a boy inside their own bellies? How many youngsters have been privileged to see with their own eyes a goblin wearing a skullcap? How many

youngsters can have been so eagle-eyed in noting which yeshiva students were carrying on behind the oven and in the attic of the synagogue? To say nothing of Reb Abish's self-propelled fur-trimmed hat, a thing so miraculous as almost to be an eighth wonder, following as it does so closely upon the seventh. And who, after all, had inherited it? Who was lucky enough to marry the daughter of a *lamed-vavnik*, one of the Thirty-Six Righteous Men on whom the existence of the world depends? It was I! Who informed all the world of such wonders upon wonders as my father-in-law's epistle and the rabbi's Torah, or gematria, the Kabbalistic numerology of the Baal Shem's grandson, or the minutes of the Association for the Prohibition of Common Speech on the Sabbath? Or the song of the blind wedding jester? Again it was I! And as far as the students are concerned—needless to say, I am to be weighed in one scale against the gold in the other. Those fellows pride themselves on wearing student uniforms with silver buttons. But what of it? What is so great about being tricked out like a goy? To be attired like an authentic Orthodox Jew, and to be at the same time of exceptional charm, is a much greater accomplishment—one that I had mastered in a way uniquely my own! Indeed, at the age of nine I had already been dressed like a Hasid of seventy. So judge for yourself. Who is more to be respected among Jews, and even among goyim: one such as I, who clings to the hallowed garb of my ancestors, dating back to the beginning on Mount Sinai, or one of those who emulate others? Take a look at the illustrations in the oldest of holy books, or at the antique portraits such as those the patriarchs have handed down from one generation to another, and note the appearance of Moses and the other Jews in the exodus from Egypt! Most likely they were clad in long coarse smocks and caps with visors. Indeed,

is not Mordecai, the chief minister, portrayed wearing a high fur-trimmed hat, a long kaftan, white linen underwear and slippers? And what of King David or even King Solomon, the multimillionaire in all his glory? Are they portrayed in fedoras and Prince Alberts? Heaven forbid! No, they are shown in the same traditional costume as all the other Jews. Of course, theirs were tailored from costly fabrics, their shtreimels were made of Russian sable; their long robes of imported silk or camel's hair, and their underclothes of softest linen, their slippers of the finest morocco leather. Well, all this may be taken for granted when it concerns sovereigns and high potentates—yet everything is traditionally Jewish. And by the way, the attire of a Hasidic rabbi—may his life be long!—is in no way inferior to that of the kings of Israel. They were sovereigns on earth, whereas the rabbis are sovereigns in heaven. A ruler derives his wealth from his own subjects, whereas the rabbi derives his from the world at large. And how could it be otherwise? This is not what I was driving at, however; I wish to prove merely that Jews have been wearing the same traditional garb since time immemorial, and that it is worn by Polish Jews to this very day. It follows that the Lord of the Universe must have shown this hallowed garb to Moses on Mount Sinai, and enjoined him to cause Jews to wear it to the end of time, when the world crumbles into dust! And it follows that the garb of Polish Jews must foster even greater saintliness than the Ark of the Covenant; for God showed the model of the Ark only to Moses, and Moses in his turn, out of six hundred thousand Jews was barely able to find one Bezalel, one single, solitary, lonesome Jew intelligent enough to put an ark together—and as a matter of fact, since the time of Moses and Bezalel no synagogue has contrived to follow the authentic design because no Jew knows what it was. Whereas this hal-

lowed garb was manifested by God to all Jews alike, so that in every generation there are, heaven be thanked, quite ordinary Jews—tailors, cobblers, hatters—who can copy this style in meticulous detail. Is it not a crying shame that there should be young Jewish rascals who thrust aside such saintliness and such things of beauty? And they actually glory in their ludicrous attire! Even the blind can perceive that whoever exchanges the hallowed Mount Sinai garb for bobtailed coats and visored caps, at once forfeits the image of God and has his Jewish identity extinguished forever.

I am thus a splendid young fellow indeed. Is this not so? For I am the equal in proficiency in many languages of those uniformed scholars. I may even outwit them. Of what use are many languages when you can achieve your purpose with one that for eloquence surpasses them all? A fig for all their knowledge of languages, as compared to a single utterance of Avremel Hirik! Armed with Avremel's eloquence, I shall outdo their mastery of seventy languages. You recall those golden words of his. And are they not a piece of divine oratory?

But since I am so fine a lad, how does it happen that my mother-in-law looks askance at me and puts on a sour face? Ask her for a reason and she will offer no explanation. She seemed to have borne a grudge against me ever since the wedding feast; she is resentful because on disappearing with my bride that night into that dark little room, I was so dog-tired that I fell fast asleep on the kitchen table and slept there the whole night through. For this she made fun of me in the presence of all the town's busybodies; and although I already carry on in the same fashion as all other young married men, she remains set against me. At first my Kabbalistic friend would likewise frown and whisper to me, "It's a disgrace that a young Hasidic man should be so ignorant of marital

relations." But in time he ceased to mention this ignorance and became friendlier. My mother-in-law, however, was still disgruntled and remained so. She was most impatient to have her daughter produce a grandchild; she was not satisfied to have grandchildren only from her sons. I put up with her and did all I could to please her to avoid unpleasantness. But there was one thing I could not endure: I was driven to distraction by the aphrodisiac prescriptions she brought me, hidden under her apron, before I went to sleep at night. All my pleading was of no help; she would stay until I swallowed the concoction—only to vomit it up a minute later. Every night she brought some new cure-all, and I would swear that she had already sapped my virility. If my readers had been eavesdropping as she lectured me every time I swallowed one of her concoctions, they could have gathered the pearls of wisdom that fell from her mouth. But in fact she was undiluted poison; you would have had to be tough as leather to listen to her.

Let me give you a sample of one of her lectures so that you can understand what a witch she was.

Don't fool yourself—you'll never be free as a bird! There is no escape—you'll be a father yet!

"So, Itzikel, you think your mother-in-law is a wicked woman? Let what I wish you be returned to my own heart! What can I say to you since, alas, you are only a young billy goat! What I wish you and my daughter Tseitl—may she outlive my bones!—may that wish be realized in me, Lord of the Universe! And so what if Traina the Gossip gives in to the carnal appetite of her son-in-law? Yet who is to be envied more—you or he? What do you say, Itzikel? Because Traina, after all—may she forgive me—she came from a very humble family, for all that she is so well-to-do now. Her father—may God not punish me for these words!—her father worked all his life as a butcher in a slaughterhouse—may he intercede in heaven for all those who wear high boots! Whereas my father—may his life be long—in his younger days was a coachman for Reb Getzeleh, or Reb Getzikel, of blessed memory!—I am not worthy to mention that holy name of his. From my wedding day down to the present he has been held in high esteem by the community—may no evil befall him.

"And what of Shmaryah—I refer to your father-in-law, may *his* name be blotted out! If only he wished it, the world would beat a path to his door! Is it not common knowledge that he is one of the Thirty-Six Righteous Men? But what is the use! He is such a ne'er-do-well, of no use on earth! And when you think of it, what is man? Alas! Merely a sieve! No sooner is he full of years than his whole life goes leaking out of him. Why, even a dumpling in boiling water has more substance than he. And as for woman—may I live to hear the shofar herald the advent of the Messiah, but this is the truth!—I heard the saintly Reb Getzeleh himself declare that a woman could be compared to a pot of beans: today she is full and shoved into the oven, but on the morrow she's empty again and back on the shelf. . . . So what is it you suspect me of? You may say what you wish about a woman—and not in vain, for she can talk anyone deaf and dumb—yet all the tzaddikim stem from her. So she does, after all, carry some weight with the Lord of the Universe, whose name I am not worthy to mention. But the main issue is, where does a woman hail from? Of what use is good wine if you put in a vinegary cask? Does man live by bread alone? See what Bahya, the great and saintly sage, writes in the *Tzenah Urennah** about attaining paradise, only by begetting good children. And so, Itzikel, listen to your foolish mother-in-law and do her one more favor—drink this decoction! Why, really, there's nothing to it! And what do you think is in it? There's no poison in it, God forbid! That pious old woman Zissel told me today that a few years ago she heard from Dvossi's own lips about a similar incident, in Little Ketarer. At that time the saintly sage of Zilshuv, of blessed memory, urged that a few simple ingredients be mixed together and cooked

*The Yiddish version of the Pentateuch adapted for women

in a small pot—it has to be really small. There you have the whole secret. And yet you suppose that it contains God only knows what. Old Dvossi, of blessed memory—may she intercede with the matriarchs for all of us!—was a miracle-worker. And it's not surprising. A righteous Jewess who made the rounds of all the tzaddikim whose names I am not worthy of mentioning—and mastered a thousand and one cures and incantations! It's a wonder her head didn't burst open. And indeed—may we all soon be redeemed!—her conjuring of an evil eye and her exorcising all manner of sickness induced by evil spirits were little short of miraculous. So, Itzikel, why are you suspicious of me? Do me one more favor and swallow at least a spoonful!"

Whereupon, taking hold of me like a wrestler, she whipped the cup from underneath her apron and poured the filthy mess down my throat before I quite knew what she was up to. It all reminded me of the eager young heretics who on encountering a pious, provincial Jewish lad enlighten him by shoving a hunk of gentile pork down his throat.

Our Hasidim don't engage in such mizvoth! Ask anyone in Poland whether a local Hasid is eager to thrust a piece of noodle pudding into the mouth of a German, or to shove frozen calves' foot jelly into someone's trouser pockets. God forbid! It's true that Polish Hasidim are most eager to perform mizvoth—but of another sort. Their hearts are set on good works that are indispensable, on matters of life and death: such as using false pretenses to deprive someone of the lease to an estate for the least disservice to a Hasidic rabbi; or incriminating someone on a trumped-up charge for the sake of a coquettish gesture from the rebbitzin; or setting fire to someone's roof to amuse a rabbi's child.

And what about such mizvoth as blasting a young

wife's reputation by the slander that she has given birth to a bastard, merely because she refused to wear the sheitel, the hideous wig that married Jewish women put on to conceal their own tresses, or to anathematize someone for trimming his beard; and so on. And what about the mitzvoh that Polish Jews perform *leshem mitzvah*, for the sake of the mitzvah itself—such as perjuring oneself, or resorting to sleight of hand with the double-bottomed measure, or a heavy thumb on the scale, all of these *leshem mitzvah*. . . .

Alas, a Jew must somehow find the means to perform numerous mitzvoh, without which one is not deemed to be an observant Jew. A Jew is duty bound to contribute an offering to the rabbi and rebbitzin, and to stand drinks for the congregation. Then, too, there are the contributions for heating the ritual baths, for a custodian for a white chicken as an expiatory sacrifice on the eve of Yom Kippur, and for a Sadagora shawl; one must invest in various amulets and talismans and charms; and so on. And where is all the money to be obtained? There is no problem for a spoiled and corrupt Hasid who will filch a silver candlestick from the rebbe's table, or steal a string of pearls right from the rebbitzin's neck.

Such exploits are not always successful, of course. But are they not all undertaken for the sake of a mitzvah? This has to do with the preservation of authentic Judaism—so what if a few individuals suffer as a result? Must one not take into consideration that to injure a single individual may benefit scores of others who are more in need? As, for instance, when a Hasid deprives a mismanaged of a business deal through false pretenses, or some Hasid forges the signature of the local squire to be a financial instrument, and so on? As a result of such acts the rebbe and his entourage can enjoy the finest accommodations, and hundreds of pilgrims to the rabbi's court can avail

themselves of a free drink. The rebbe gets his tithes, the rebbitzin and the children receive presents, and the gab-baim have their palms greased. And in the background there is always the Great Beauty, the Reigning Belle—a mere word or a flirtatious coquettish gesture from her, or even a venial little transgression. . . . With the goyim in authority, it may save the rebbe and hundreds of his followers from imprisonment or perhaps even exile to the bleak wastes of Siberia. Now such mitzvoh are worthwhile: no one's Jewishness is undermined thereby, yet numerous Jews are benefited. But you cannot say this of such an act as shoving gentile pork sausage down a Jewish throat: that condemns a Jewish soul forever and renders the Jew an apostate.

But this isn't at all what I was about to tell you. Just listen to what a witch is capable of. True enough, she accomplished her objective. In due time, her daughter began to manifest the familiar symptoms of pregnancy. But now, believe it or not, my mother-in-law proceeded to make life miserable for me. She cursed and railed at me, I was denied food for days at a time, and finally I was turned out of the house. My dear friends, did I deserve such treatment? I found myself at an impasse: the dragon posted herself at the door and barred me from entering. So what does a man do when he is evicted by his in-laws? There is no alternative but to make his way to a rebbe and a *hevre borshit*. So I snatched up and bundled together my few belongings and set out on foot to the court of a rebbe. What I heard and saw there during the first day I shall now delineate for you, with such wisdom as to engrave my story on the memories of generations yet to come.