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by Sholem Aleichem

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TEVYE THE
DAIRYMAN
AND THE
RAILROAD
STORIES

Sholem Aleichem

TRANSLATED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY HILLEL HALKIN

SCHOCKEN BOOKS / NEW YORK

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it, there's no sense in blaming you either. After all, it's ridiculous to suppose you did it on purpose, because you were a partner just like me, the business was half yours. I put in the money, you put in the brains, and don't we both wish we hadn't! I'm sure you meant well, *lekhayim veloy lamoves*. If we blew a small fortune, that's only because we weren't meant to make a big one. How does the verse go? *Al tis'haley! beyoyim mokhor*—the more man plans, the harder God laughs. Take my dairy business, for example. You would think it was pretty solid—and yet just last autumn, it shouldn't happen to you, a cow dropped dead on me for whose carcass I was lucky to get fifty kopecks, and right after her, a red heifer that I wouldn't have sold for twenty rubles. Was there anything I could do about it? If it's not in the cards, you can stand on your head and say the alphabet backwards—it doesn't help a damn bit. I'm not even asking what you did with the money that I bled for. I know as much as I want to, that it went to buy birds in a bush, whole flocks of them, and that I'll never get to see a single one. And whose fault is it? It's my own, for having been taken in by a lot of hot air. Take it from me, the only way to make money is to work your bottom off. Which is where you, Tevye, deserve to get a swift kick! But what good does it do to cry about it? It's just like it says in the Bible, *velso'akoh hane'aroh*—you can scream till you burst, who says that anyone is listening? Wisdom and second thoughts are two things that always come too late. Tevye just wasn't meant to be upper crust, that's not how God wanted it. *Hashem nosan vehashem lokakh*, the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away—in which case, says Rashi, cheer up, my friend, and let's go have a little shot of brandy! . . .

And that, Pan Sholem Aleichem, is how I blew all my money. But if you think I've been eating my heart out over it, you have another guess coming. You know the Bible's opinion: *li hakeseif veli hazohov*—money is a lot of baloney. What matters is the man who has it—I mean, what matters is for a man to be a man. Do you know what I still can't get over, though? Losing my dream! If only you knew how badly, oh Lord, how really badly I wanted to be a rich Jew, if only for just a few days! But go be smarter than life. Doesn't it say *be'al korchekho atoh khai*—nobody asks if you want to be born or if you want your last pair of boots to be torn. "Instead of dreaming, Tevye," God was trying to tell me, "you should have

stuck to your cheese and butter." Does that mean I've lost faith and stopped hoping for better times? Don't you believe it! The more troubles, the more faith, the bigger the beggar, the greater his hopes. How can that be, you ask? But I've already gone on enough for one day, and I'd better be off and about my business. How does the verse go? *Koyl ha'odom koyzev*—there isn't a man who hasn't taken a beating sometime. Don't forget to take care and be well!

(1899)

TODAY'S CHILDREN

Say what you will about today's children, Pan Sholem Aleichem, *bonim gidalti veroymamti*: first you have them, then you break your back for them, make every sacrifice, put yourself through the mill . . . and for what? So that maybe, you think, if you've managed to get ahead a bit in life, you can help them get somewhere too. I wouldn't dream of having Brodsky for my in-law, of course, but that doesn't mean I have to settle for just anyone, because I'm not such a nobody myself; and since I don't come, as my wife likes to put it, from a long line of fishmongers, I had hoped for some luck with my daughters. How was that? In the first place, because God gave them good looks, and a pretty face, the saying goes, is half a dowry. And secondly, because even if, with God's help, I'm no longer the Tevye I once was, someone like me still rates a good match even in Yehupetz, don't you think? The trouble is that the same merciful God who's always practicing His miracles on me, first seeing how quick He can raise a man up and then how fast He can dump him back down, has let me know in no uncertain terms, "Tevye, stop being so ridiculous as to think you can run the world! . . . Well, wait till you hear how the world runs itself without me. And who, naturally, does it run right over first? Why, your schlimazel of a Tevye, of course!

But why make a short story long? I'm sure you remember, though I would much prefer to forget, what happened with my

cousin Menachem Mendl—how I wish I had never heard that name!—and with the fine business in gold imperials and popions that we did in Yehupeetz. It shouldn't happen to my worst enemy! For a while I went about moaning and groaning that it was all over with me and my dairy, until the wife said to me, "Tevye, you're a fool to carry on as though the world has come to an end. All you're doing is eating your heart out. Why not just pretend we've been burgled, it could happen to anyone . . . If I were you, I'd go see Layzer Wolf the butcher in Anatevka. He keeps saying he needs to talk to you urgently."

"What can be so urgent?" I asked. "If he's got it into his head that I'm going to sell him our brown cow, he can take a stick and beat it out again."

"What's so precious about our brown cow?" says my wife. "All the rivers of milk and mountains of butter we get from her?"

"No, it isn't that," I say. "It's just a sin to hand over a poor innocent beast to be slaughtered. Why, it says in our holy Bible—"
 "For goodness' sake, Tevye," she says, "that's enough! The whole world knows what a professor of Bible you are. Listen to a simple woman like me and go see Layzer Wolf. Every Thursday when I send our Tsaytl to his butcher shop for meat, it's the same thing again: would she please tell her father to come at once, he has something important to say to him . . ."

Well, sometimes you have to do what you're told, even if it's by your own wife; I let myself be talked into going to see Layzer Wolf in Anatevka, which is a couple of miles away. When I got there, he was out.

"Where's Layzer Wolf?" I asked the pug-nosed woman who was busy doing the housework.

"He's at the slaughterhouse," she says. "He's been there all morning slaughtering an ox, but he should be back soon."

While I waited for him I wandered about the house, taking in the furnishings. I only wish I had half as much! There was a cupboard full of copper that you couldn't have bought for two hundred and fifty rubles; not just one samovar but two; and a brass tray, and another tray from Warsaw, and a set of cups with gilt edges, and a pair of silver candlesticks, and a cast-iron menorah, and all kinds of other things, more bric-a-brac than you could count. God in heaven, I thought, I should only live to see my daughters own such things! Some people have all the breaks. Not

only is Layzer Wolf rich, with a grand total of two children, both married, he even has the luck to be a widower . . .

Well, before long the door opened and in came Layzer Wolf himself, fit to be tied at the slaughterer for having been so unkind as to declare unkosher an ox the size of an oak tree because of a tiny scar on its lung no bigger than a hairpin. A black hole should open up in the earth and swallow him alive! . . . "Am I glad to see you, Reb Tevye!" he says. "It's easier to raise the dead. What's new with a Jew?"

"What should be new?" I say. "The harder I work, the less I have to show for it. It's like it says in the Bible: *loy mi'uktsoikh veloy miduvshokh*. I not only have no money, I also lack health, wealth, and happiness."

"It's a sin to be ungrateful, Reb Tevye," he says. "Compared to what you once were, and let's hope won't be again, you're not doing half bad these days."

"It's the other half that worries me," I say. "But I have nothing to complain about, thank God. *Askakurdo dimashkanto dikarnaso difarsmakhto*, as the Talmud puts it . . ." And I thought: may your nose stick to your backside, you meat hacker, you, if there's such a line of Talmud in the world . . .

"You're always quoting something," Layzer Wolf says. "I envy you, Reb Tevye, for being able to read the small print. But what good does all that book learning do you? Let's talk about something more practical. Have a seat, Reb Tevye." And before I can have one, he bellows, "How about some tea!"

Out of nowhere, as if she had been hiding beneath the floorboards, the pug-nosed woman appears, snatches a samovar like the wind snatching a leaf, and disappears into the kitchen.

"Now that we're alone with only four eyes between the two of us," says Layzer Wolf to me, "you and I can talk business. It's like this: I've been wanting to speak to you for quite a while, Reb Tevye. I even asked your daughter several times to have you come see me. You see, lately I've had my eye on—"

"I know you have," I said. "But it won't do you any good. It's out of the question, Layzer Wolf, simply out of the question."

"But why?" he asks, giving me an astonished look.

"Because there's no hurry," I say. "She's still young. The river won't catch fire if we wait a little longer."

"But why wait," he says, "if you have an offer for her now?"

"In the first place," I say, "I just told you. And in the second place, it's a matter of compassion. I simply don't have the heart."

"Just listen to him talk about her!" says Layzer Wolf with a laugh. "A person might think you had no others. I should imagine, Reb Tevye, that you have more than enough of them, touch wood."

"I can use every one I have," I say. "Whoever envies me should know what it costs just to feed them."

"Envy?" says Layzer Wolf. "Who's talking envy? On the contrary, it's just because they're such a fine bunch that I . . . do you get me? Have you ever thought for a minute, Reb Tevye, of all I can do for you?"

"Of course I have," I say. "And I've gotten a headache each time I did. Judging by all you've done for me in the past, you might even give me free ice in the middle of the winter."

"Oh, come," he says, sweet as sugar. "Why harp on the past? We weren't in-laws then."

"In-laws?" I say. "What kind of in-laws?"

"Why, how many kinds are there?" he says.

"Excuse me, Reb Layzer Wolf," I say, "but do you have any idea what we're talking about?"

"I should say I do, Reb Tevye," he says. "But perhaps you'd like to tell me."

"With pleasure," I say. "We're talking about my brown cow that you want me to sell you."

"Hee hee hee," he says, chortling. "Your brown cow, no less, that's a good one . . . ho ho ho!"

"But what do you think we were talking about, Reb Layzer Wolf?" I say. "Why not let me in on the joke?"

"Why, about your daughter!" he says. "We've been talking all along about your Tsaytl! You know I'm a widower, Reb Tevye—it shouldn't happen to you. Well, I've made up my mind; why try my luck again far from home, where I'll have to deal with all sorts of spooks, flukes, and matchmakers? Here we are, the two of us, both from the same place, I know you and you know me—to say nothing of the party in question, who I've taken quite a fancy to. I see her every Thursday in my butcher shop and we've even exchanged a few words; she's on the quiet side, I must say, but not bad, not bad at all! And as for me, touch wood, you can see for yourself: I'm comfortably off, I have a couple of shops, I even

own my own house. I don't mean to boast, but it has some nice furnishings too, and there are hides stored away in the attic, and a bit of cash in a chest. Reb Tevye, why haggle like gypsies about it? Come, let's shake hands and be done with it, do you get me?"

In short, I sat there listening and couldn't say a word, the whole thing bowled me over so. For a minute I thought: Layzer Wolf . . . Tsaytl . . . why, he's old enough to be her father . . . But it didn't take me long to think again. My God, I told myself, what a godsend! She'll be sitting pretty with him, on top of the world! So what if he's a tightwad? These upside-down days, that's actually considered a virtue. *Odom koroyv le'atsmoy*—charity begins at home . . . It's true the man is a trifle common—but since when can everyone be a scholar? There are plenty of rich Jews, fine people, in Anatevka, Mazapevka, and even in Yehupetz, who wouldn't know a Hebrew letter if one fell on them; that still doesn't keep them from being thought highly of—I should only be as respected as they are! How does the verse go? *Im eyn kemakh eyn Toyroh*—it's all very well to know the Bible by heart, but you still can't serve it for dinner . . .

"Nu, Reb Tevye," says Layzer Wolf. "Why don't you say something?"

"What's there to shout about?" I say, playing hard to get. "One doesn't decide such things on the spur of the moment. It's no laughing matter, marrying off your eldest daughter."

"That's just it!" he says. "She's your eldest. Once she's my wife, God willing, marrying off your second and your third and your fourth will be no problem, do you get me?"

"Amen," I say. "It's easy as pie to marry off a daughter. God simply has to find her the right man."

"But that isn't what I meant, Reb Tevye," he says. "I meant that you not only needn't put up a penny's dowry for your Tsaytl, or buy her the things a girl needs for her wedding, because I'll take care of all that myself—you can also trust me to beef up your wallet while I'm at it . . ."

"Hold on there!" I said. "You'll forgive me for saying so, but you're talking just like in a butcher shop. What's this about beef in my wallet? You should be ashamed of yourself! My Tsaytl, God forbid, is not up for sale to the highest bidder."

"Ashamed?" he says. "And here I thought I was only being nice! I'll tell you what, though: for you, I'll even be ashamed. Far be it

from me to object to your saving me money. Let's just be quick about it, the sooner the better! I want a woman in my house, do you get me?"

"I certainly do," I say. "For my part, I won't stand in your way. But I'll have to talk it over with the missus, because such things are her department. One doesn't give away one's eldest daughter every day. You know what Rashi says about it: *Rokheyl mevukah al boneho*—that means there's no one like a mother. And we'll have to ask Tsaytl too, of course. You don't want this to be the sort of wedding where everyone turns up but the bride . . ."

"What kind of a man are you!" he says. "Who asks? Go home and tell them, Reb Tevye, tell them it's all been decided and that I'll be waiting beneath the wedding canopy."

"You musn't talk like that, Reb Layzer Wolf," I say. "A young girl isn't a widow, to be married off at the drop of a hat."

"Of course she's not," he says. "A girl is a girl and a hat is a hat. That's why I want it settled quickly, because there's still a whole lot to talk about, pots, pans, and petticoats. But first, Reb Tevye, what say we drink to it, eh?"

"Why not?" I say. "I never turn down a drink. Among friends it's always appropriate. A man is only a man, as they say, but brandy is still brandy. You'll find that in the Talmud too." And with that I began spouting whole passages of Gemara, mixed in with some prayers and a bit of the Haggadah, such as no one ever dreamed of before . . .

In a word, we put a few drops of brandy beneath our belts without keeping count of how many and then, when old Pug Nose brought the samovar, switched to tea-and-brandy punch, jabbering away all the while in the friendliest of fashions about the wedding, and God knows what else, and the wedding again, until I said, "I hope you realize, Reb Layzer Wolf, what a diamond it is that you're getting."

"You hope I realize?" he says. "Do you think I would have asked for her if I didn't?"

"A diamond," I say, raising my voice, "and twenty-four carats too! You better take good care of her and not act like the butcher you are . . ."

"Don't you worry about that, Reb Tevye," he says. "She'll eat better by me every day of the week than by you at your Passover seder!"

"Eat!" I say. "How much can a person eat? A rich man can't eat the gold in his safe, nor a poor man the stones in his shoes. Just how do you think a Jew as crude as yourself is even going to appreciate her cooking? Why, the hallahs she bakes, her gefillte fish . . . good Lord, Reb Layzer Wolf, her gefillte fish . . . lucky is the man who gets to taste it . . ."

"Reb Tevye," he says, "you'll forgive me for saying so, but what does an old prune like you know about it? You don't know the first thing about anything, Reb Tevye, you don't even know the first thing about me!"

"If you were to give me all the rice in China," I say, "I wouldn't take it for my Tsaytl. Listen here, Reb Layzer Wolf, I don't care if you have two hundred thousand to your name, you aren't worth the little toe of her left foot!"

"Believe you me, Reb Tevye," he says, "if you didn't happen to be older than me, I'd tell you to your face what a fool you are."

Well, we must have gone at it hammer and tongs until we were good and sozzled, because when I arrived home it was late at night and my feet felt made out of lead. My wife, may her life be a long one, saw right away how pie-eyed I was and gave me the welcome I deserved.

"Sshhh, don't be angry with me, Golde," I said, feeling so merry that I could have broken right into a jig. "Stop screaming at me, light of my life, and wish me a mazel tov instead!"

"A mazel tov?" she says. "I'll wish you a mazel tov you'll never forget! I'll bet you went and sold our poor brown cow to Layzer Wolf, after all."

"Oh, it's worse than that," I say.

"What?" she says. "You swapped her for a cow of his? Just wait till the poor devil finds out how you cheated him!"

"You're not even warm yet," I say.

"For God's sake," she says, "out with it! Do I have to pay you money for each word?"

"Mazel tov to you, Golde!" I said again. "Mazel tov to us both. Our Tsaytl is engaged."

"My God, are you ever potted!" she says. "It's no joke, the man's hallucinating! How many drinks did you say you had?"

"Layzer Wolf and I had more than one between us," I say, "and a bit of punch to wash it down with, but I swear I'm as sober as can be. It's my pleasure to inform you, my dear brother Golde, that

our Tsaytl has had the good fortune to be betrothed to Layzer Wolf himself!"

And with that I told her the whole story from beginning to end, the who, where, when, and all the rest of it, not leaving out an iota. "So help me God now and forever, Tevye," she said when I was done, "if something didn't tell me all along that's what Layzer Wolf wanted. You know what, though? I was frightened to think that maybe nothing would come of it . . . Oh, thank You, dear God, thank You, thank You, merciful Father! It should only be for the best. Tsaytl should live to grow old and be happy with him, because Frume Soreh, rest her soul, didn't have such a wonderful time of it; but then she was, God forgive me, an impossible woman who couldn't get along with a soul, not at all like our Tsaytl. Oh, thank You, thank You, God! What did I tell you, Tevye, you dummy! What's the use of worrying? If it's written in the stars, it will walk right in without knocking . . ."

"There's no doubt about that," I said. "It even says in the Bible—"

"Spare us your Bible!" she says. "We have to start planning for the wedding. First we should make a list for Layzer Wolf of all the things that Tsaytl will need. Linen goes without saying. And she doesn't have a spare set of underthings, not even an extra pair of socks. And then there's dresses—a silk one for the wedding and two woolen ones, one for summer and one for winter—and house frocks, and lingerie, and a fur coat . . . no, I want two: a plain cat fur for everyday and a good fox fur for Sabbaths and holidays. She'll need high-heeled boots too, and a corset, and gloves, and handkerchiefs, and a parasol, and all kinds of other things that a young lady can't do without . . ."

"Golde, my dearest," I said to her, "since when are you such an expert on high fashion?"

"And why shouldn't I be?" she says. "Don't you suppose I have eyes? Don't you think I've seen what they wear back home when they step out in Kasrilevke? Just you leave it to Layzer Wolf and me. He's no pauper, and you can bet he won't want the whole world calling him cheap. If you have to eat pork, you might as well eat it till it's running down your chin . . ."

In short, we talked all night long until I said, "Round up what cheese and butter there is, my wife, and I'll take it to Boiberik. Not that everything isn't fine and dandy right here, but we can't just

forget about the business. *Haneshomah lokh*, it says—our souls may be God's but someone better look after our bodies."

And so at the crack of dawn, before it was light out, I harnessed my horse and wagon and set out for Boiberik. I arrived at the marketplace—oho! (is there any place in the world where a Jew can keep a secret?)—everyone knows all about it and is congratulating me from all sides.

"Mazel tov, Reb Tevye," they say. "When will the wedding be?"

"Mazel tov to you too," I say. "But I'm afraid it's a case of the son growing up before the father has been born."

"There's no use trying to pull our leg, Reb Tevye," they say. "You'll have to stand us all drinks, you lucky devil. Why, the man is a gold mine!"

"When the gold gives out," I say, "a mine's just a hole in the ground. Which is no reason, of course, to be piggish with one's friends. As soon as I've finished my route, the food and drinks are on me. We'll live it up and to hell with it! *Tsoholoh vesomeykhoh*, my friends—if beggars can't be choosers, they may as well be boozers."

In a word, I finished my rounds in a jiffy as usual and went off to drink a toast with my dear brothers. We wished each other the happiness we all deserved and I started out for home, a bit tipsy and as merry as a lark. I rode through the forest, the summer sun shining down, the trees casting their shadows on either side of the path, a good smell of pine needles all around—this is the life, I thought! I even let go of my horse's reins and stretched out like a count in a carriage. "Run along without me," I told the old boy, "it's time you knew the way yourself"—and with that I threw back my head and broke into a little tune. I had such a holiday feeling in my heart that I even began to sing melodies from the prayer book. There I sat, staring up at the sky and thinking of the words of the *hallel* prayer. *Hashomayim shomayim ladoynai*—the heavens belong to God . . . *veha'orets nosan livney odom*—but the earth He's given to us, the human race, so that we can bury each other six feet deep in it and fight for the honor of crying by the grave . . . *Loy hameysim yehallelu yoh*—the dead don't praise God, and why should they? . . . *Ve'anakhnu nevoreykh yoh*—yet we poor folk who are still barely alive can't thank Him enough if He does us a single favor . . . *Ohavti ki yishma*—of course I love Him; wouldn't you if He had cupped a hand to His

ear just to listen to your prayers? . . . *Ofafuni khevley moves*—there I was, a poor wretch surrounded by worries: one day a cow dies on me out of the blue, the next it's my luck to run into a schlimazel of a cousin, a Mr. Menachem Mendl of Yehupetz, who walks off with my last cent . . . *Ani omarti bekhofzi*—why, I thought the sky had fallen in . . . *Koyl ha'odom koyzer*—and that I couldn't trust a living soul anymore . . . So what does God do? *Oydkho ki anisoni*—He taps Layzer Wolf on the shoulder and tells him to marry my Tsaytl, all expenses paid . . . Which is why I thank You, dear Lord, for having looked down on Your Tevve and decided to lend him a hand. At last I'll have some pleasure from my children! When I'll come to visit my Tsaytl in her new home, God willing, I'll find a grand lady with everything a person could ask for, closets full of fine linen, cupboards full of jam and schmaltz, cages full of chickens, ducks, and geese . . .

Well, at that very moment my horse took a notion to practice his downhill gallop. Before I could even look around, I was flat on my back with all my jugs and milk cans, staring up at my wagon on top of me. It was all I could do to crawl out from under it, more dead than alive, and chew the idiot out. "You should sink to the bottom of the sea and be eaten by vultures! Who asked you, you moron, to prove you could be a racehorse? You almost did me in for good, you Satan, you!" I gave it to him for all he was worth—and the old fellow must have realized what a dirty trick he had played, because he stood there with his head bowed as though waiting to be milked. "The Devil take you and keep you!" I said a last time, righting and reloading the wagon. "Giddyap!" I cried—and we were off again. I knew it wasn't a good omen, though. Suppose, I thought, something has gone wrong at home . . .

And so it had. I had traveled another mile or so and wasn't far from our village when I saw the figure of a woman coming toward me. I drove a little nearer—it was Tsaytl! I don't know why, but I felt a twinge when I saw her. I jumped to the ground and called, "Tsaytl, is that you? What are you doing here?"

Her only answer was to throw herself on me and sob.

"For the love of God, Daughter," I said, "what are you crying for?"

"Oh, Papa," she said, the tears running down her cheeks. "Oh, Papa."

I had a black feeling. My heart sank. "Tsaytl," I said, taking her in my arms to hug and kiss her, "what is it?"

"Oh, Papa," she said, "oh, dearest, darling Papa, I don't care if I have to live on bread and water, just have pity on me and my youth . . ."

She was crying so hard that she couldn't say any more. God help us, I thought, for by now I had guessed what it was. The Devil himself had made me go to Boiberik that morning!

"But what is there to cry about, you silly?" I said, stroking her hair. "Why cry? You have no call to: if you say no, it's no; we won't marry you off with a shotgun. We meant well. We thought it was all for the best. But if your heart tells you not to, what more can we do? It simply wasn't meant to be in the first place . . ."

"Oh, Papa," she says, "oh, thank you, thank you so much!"—and she throws herself on me again, crying and kissing me until we're both wet all over.

"Come," I say, "enough is enough. *Hakoyl hevel*—even chicken soup with kreplach gets to be tiresome after a while. Into the wagon with you and home you go! Your mother must be good and worried."

Once the two of us were aboard, I did my best to calm her. "Look, it's like this," I said. "Your mother and I meant no harm. God knows our only thought was of you. If it didn't work out, God musn't have wanted it to. You, Tsaytl, just weren't meant to be a fine lady with a house full of grand things and two old parents who could finally enjoy themselves a bit after keeping their nose to the grindstone all their poor, luckless, miserable, penniless lives . . ."

"Oh, Papa," she said, starting to cry again. "I'll hire myself out, I'll get down on my knees and scrub floors, I'll shovel dirt if I have to . . ."

"But why are you still crying, you little ninny?" I said. "I was talking to God, not to you. I'm feeling so low that I have to have it out with someone—and considering all He's done for me, it might as well be with Him. He's supposed to be our merciful Father; well, He's had such mercy on me that I hope I've seen the last of it—and He better not charge me extra for saying that. A lot of good it does to complain to God about God! I suppose, though, that that's how it's meant to be: He's up in His heaven and I'm down below, with one foot already in the grave—which still leaves

me the other to stand on while I tell the world about His justice . . . Only come to think of it, I really must be a big fool to carry on like this. What am I talking about? Where does a little worm like me crawling about on the earth get off telling God, who can blow me away to kingdom come with one puff of His breath, how to manage His affairs? If this is how He's arranged them, who am I to say otherwise? Forty days before a child is a twinkle in its mother's eyes, forty days beforehand, so it says in our holy books, an angel comes along and proclaims: 'Tsaytl the daughter of Tevye to Berl the son of Shmerl'—and Layzer Wolf the butcher, if he doesn't mind my saying so, can go look for his intended up another tree. I can promise him she won't fly away . . . I only hope, Tsaytl, that God sends you a proper young man, the sooner the better, amen. And now pray for me that your mother doesn't scream bloody murder, because something tells me that I'm in for it . . .'

In short, as soon as we got home I unhitched the horse and sat down outside to have myself a think what fairy tale to tell the wife—anything to keep me out of trouble. It was evening and the sun was going down; from far away came the croaking of the frogs; my fettered horse stood nibbling grass; the cows, back from pasture, were waiting with their feedbags to be milked; all around me the greenery gave off a smell like Paradise. And as I sat there thinking about things, it struck me how cleverly the good Lord had made His world, so that every creature, from man to beast, could earn its keep. Only there were no free lunches! You want to eat, Mrs. Cow? Then let's have some milk, help a poor Jew support his wife and kids! You want some grass, Mr. Horse? Then please be so kind as to trot over to Boiberik with these milk cans! And you too, Mr. Man, you want some bread for your belly? Then off your butt and milk the cows, carry the cans, churn the butter, make the cheese, harness the horse, go early each morning to the dachas in Boiberik, scrape and bow to the rich Jews there, smile at them, fawn on them, make them feel special, be sure they're satisfied—and whatever you do, don't step on anyone's toes . . . Except that here we come to one of the Four Questions: *ma nishtanah*—where does it say in the Bible that Tevye has to work his bottom off and be up at the crack of dawn every day when even God is still snoozing away in bed? Where does it say

that the rich Jews of Yehupetz must have fresh cheese and butter each morning for the rolls they eat with their coffee? Where does it say that I have to be dead on my feet to deserve a plate of grits and some soup that's more water than barley, while they, the same Jews, can stretch and yawn without lifting a finger and be served with roast duck, juicy knishes, varnishkes, and blintzes? Am I less of a Jew than they are? When will justice be done, so that Tevye too can spend a summer vacation in a dacha in Boiberik! . . . Who, though, you ask, would bring him his cheese and butter? Who would milk the cows? Why, the Yehupetz tycoons, of course! . . . But I have to admit that was such a weird thought that it made me laugh out loud. How does the proverb go? If God were to listen to what each fool has to say, He would have to create a new world every day . . .

"Good evening, Reb Tevye!" I heard someone greet me. I turned around and saw a familiar face, Motl Komzoyl, a tailor boy from Anatevka.

"Well, well, well, look who's here!" I said. "If I sat here long enough, I bet even the Messiah would turn up. Have a seat on God's earth, Motl. What brought you here of all places?"

"What brought me here? Why, my feet," he says, sitting down on the grass and glancing at my girls, who were busy with the jugs and cans. "I've been meaning to drop by for a while, Reb Tevye, but I haven't had a free moment. As soon as I finish one piece of work, it's time to start on another. I'm in business for myself now and thank God there's plenty of it—in fact, all we tailors are swamped. There's been nothing but weddings all summer long. First Berl Fonfatsch married off his daughter; then Yosl Sheygetz; then Yankl Piskatsh; then Moyshe Gogel; then Meir Kroppeve; then Chayim Lushik; why, even Trihobikhe the Widow has gone and gotten herself hitched."

"It certainly looks like the whole world is marrying," I said. "I must be the only one not throwing a wedding this summer. I suppose God is too busy for one more."

"Not at all, Reb Tevye," he says, eyeing my girls again. "You're wrong there. You can have a wedding whenever you want. It's entirely up to you."

"Just what are you trying to tell me?" I asked. "You don't happen to have a match for my Tsaytl, do you?"

"One just her size!" he says in tailor talk.

"A serious proposal?" I say, thinking: bless my soul if he isn't about to offer me Layzer Wolf the butcher!

"The perfect fit!" he says with another look at my girls. "Where does this match of yours come from?" I ask him. "I'm warning you right now that if he smells of the meat counter, I don't want to hear another word!"

"God forbid!" he says. "There's not an ounce of meat on him. As a matter of fact, Reb Tevye, it's someone you know well."

"And you're sure it's on the up-and-up?" I say.

"Why, it's so far up it's heavenly!" he says. "It's a dream—custom-made and alterations free."

"In that case," I say, "perhaps I can ask you who it is."

"Who is it?" he says, stealing a sideways glance once more. "The match I have in mind for you, Reb Tevye, is none other than myself."

I wouldn't have jumped to my feet any faster if he had poured boiling water over me. He jumped up too, and we stood facing each other like a pair of fighting cocks.

"Are you crazy?" I said. "Since when can you be the matchmaker, the father-in-law, and the groom all rolled into one? I suppose you want to be the rabbi and the bandleader too! I never in all my life heard of a young man making matches for himself."

"All your enemies, Reb Tevye," he says, "should be as crazy as you think I am. You can take my word for it that they don't come any saner than me. In fact, it's a sign of my sanity that I want to marry your Tsaytl—and the proof is that even the richest Jew in Anatevka, Layzer Wolf, wants to take her off your hands free of charge. Do you think that's a secret? Why, the whole town knows about it! And as for what you say about a matchmaker, I'm surprised at you, Reb Tevye. I wouldn't have thought that a Jew like yourself had to be spoon-fed . . . But why beat around the bush? The truth of the matter is that your daughter Tsaytl and I decided to get married a year ago."

I tell you, he might as well have knifed me in the heart! In the first place, how could a tailor boy like Motl even dream of being my son-in-law? And in the second place, what kind of *decided to get married a year ago*?

"Well," I said to him, "and just where does that leave me? Did it ever occur to you that I might also be asked—that I might happen to have an opinion on my daughter's future too?"

"Of course it did," he says. "That's why I'm here, to ask you. As soon as I heard that Layzer Wolf was interested in your daughter, who I've been in love with for over a year, as you know—"

"So far," I say, "all I know is that Tevye has a daughter named Tsaytl and that you're Motl Komzoyl the tailor boy. But what do you have against her that you want to marry her?"

"You don't understand," he says. "I'm not just telling you that I love your daughter. I'm telling you that she loves me too. It's been over a year since we swore to be husband and wife. I had meant to talk to you about it long ago, but I kept putting it off until I had saved up a few rubles to buy a sewing machine and outfit myself properly, because anyone who's anyone these days owns at least two suits and a pair of matching vests . . ."

"Tfu!" I said. "A child like you ought to be spanked. What exactly do you propose to live on after the wedding—the money you'll get from pawning your stomachs, since you won't be needing them anyway? Or do you plan to feed your wife matching vests?"

"Reb Tevye, I'm amazed at you," he says. "I don't believe you had a house to call your own when you were married, either—and yet just look at you now! What's good enough for other Jews is good enough for me. And besides, I have a profession . . ."

Well, to make a long story short, he talked me into it. After all, why pretend: what do most Jewish children have in the bank when they marry? If everyone acted sensibly, there wouldn't be a Jewish wedding in the world.

One thing still bothered me, though: I simply couldn't understand how they had decided such a thing on their own. What has the world come to when a boy meets a girl and says to her, "Let's you and I get married, just the two of us"? You'd think it was as simple as eating an onion! . . . But when I saw my Motl standing there with his head bowed contritely, looking so serious and sincere, I couldn't help thinking that maybe I had the wrong attitude. What was I being so snooty about and who did I think I was, the great-grandson of Rabbi Tsatskeleh of Pripichek? One might suppose I was giving my daughter a huge dowry and buying her a grand trousseau . . . Motl Komzoyl may be only a tailor, I thought, but he's a fine, hardworking boy who'll support his family, and he's as honest as the day is long, why look down on him? Tevye, I said to myself, stop hemming and hawing and sign on the dotted

line! How does the Bible put it? *Solakhiti kidvorekko*—congratulations and good luck to you both!

But what was I going to do about the wife? I was sure to get it in the neck from her unless I could make her see the light. "You know what, Motl?" I said to my future son-in-law. "You go home and leave the rest of it to me. There's one or two people I need to have a word with. As it says in the Book of Esther, *vehashit'voh kedos*—there's a right and a wrong way to do everything. Tomorrow, God willing, if you haven't changed your mind, you and I will meet again . . ."

"Changed my mind?" he says. "I should change my mind? May sticks and stones break all my bones if I do a thing like that!"

"There's no need for oaths," I say, "because I believe you without them. Now run along home, and sweet dreams . . ."

And with that I went to bed too. But I couldn't fall asleep. I was thinking so hard of plan after plan that I was afraid my head would explode. Until finally I hit on the right one. What was it? Be patient and you'll hear what a brainstorm Tevye had.

In a word, in the middle of the night, when the whole house was sound asleep, snoring and whistling to wake the dead, I suddenly sat up in bed and began to shout at the top of my voice, "Help! Help! For God's sake, help!"

Everyone woke up, of course, and quickest of all, my wife Golde. "My God, Tevye," she said, shaking me, "wake up! What is it? What are you screaming for?"

I opened my eyes, glanced all around as though looking for someone, and gasped in a trembling voice, "Where is she?"

"Where is who?" asks my wife. "Who are you looking for?"

"For Frume Soreh," I say. "Layzer Wolf's Frume Soreh was just here."

"You must have a fever," she says. "God help you, Tevye, Layzer Wolf's Frume Soreh passed away years ago."

"I know she did," I say. "But she was just standing here by my bed, talking to me. And then she grabbed me by the throat and tried to choke me!"

"Oh, my God, Tevye," she says, "you're delirious. It was only a dream. Spit three times against the Evil Eye, tell me what you dreamed, and you'll see that it's nothing to be afraid of."

"God bless you, Golde," I say. "If it weren't for you, I would have croaked on the spot from sheer fright. Bring me a glass of

water and I'll tell you my dream. But I'll have to ask you, Golde, to control yourself and not panic, because our holy books say that no dream can come true more than seventy-five percent, and that the rest of it is pure poppycock, such stuff and nonsense that only a fool would believe in . . . And now listen. At first I dreamed that we were having some sort of celebration, a wedding or an engagement party, I'm not sure which. All sorts of people were there, the rabbi too, even a band of musicians. Then a door opened and in came your Grandmother Tsaytl, God rest her soul . . ."

As soon as I mentioned her grandmother, my wife turned as white as the wall and cried out, "How did she look and what was she wearing?"

"She looked," I said, "like your enemies should, as yellow as wax, and she was wearing something white, it must have been a funeral shroud . . . 'Mazel tov!' she says to me. 'I'm so pleased to hear that you've chosen a fine young man for your Tsaytl, your eldest daughter who's named for me. He's called Motl Komzoyl, after my cousin Mordechai, and he's an excellent fellow, even if he is a tailor . . .'"

"Why in the world," says my Golde, "is she bringing us a tailor? We've always had teachers in our family, cantors, beadles, even undertakers—I won't say that some of them weren't poor, but we never, God forbid, had a shoemaker or a tailor."

"Don't interrupt me, Golde," I said. "Your Grandmother Tsaytl must know what she's talking about—though in fact I also said, 'Grandma, I'm afraid you've got it wrong: Tsaytl's fiancé is a butcher, not a tailor, and his name is Layzer Wolf, not Motl Komzoyl . . . 'No,' says your Grandmother Tsaytl. 'No, Tevye, you've got it wrong: Tsaytl's young man is called Motl. He's a tailor, all right, and he and she, God willing, will have a long and happy life together . . . 'Right you are, Grandma,' I say. 'But what exactly do you propose that we do about Layzer Wolf? I hope you realize that I've given him my word . . . 'No sooner had I said that than I looked up—your Grandmother Tsaytl was gone! Now Frume Soreh was standing in her place, and this is what she said to me: 'Reb Tevye! I've always thought you were a learned, honorable Jew; would you kindly explain to me, then, how you can let your daughter take over my house, sit in my chairs, carry my keys, walk around in my coats, put on my jewelry, and wear my pearls?' 'But why blame me?' I say to her. 'That's what your Layzer Wolf

wants. 'Layzer Wolf?' she says. 'Layzer Wolf will come to no good end, while as for your daughter Tsaytl—I feel sorry for your daughter, Reb Teveye, because she won't live out three weeks with him. If she does, I promise you that I'll come to her in person the next night and throttle her, like this . . .' And with those very words, Golde, Frume Soreh grabbed me by the throat and began to squeeze so hard that if you hadn't waked me when you did, I'd be in the world to come now."

"Tfu! Tfu! Tfu!" goes my wife, spitting three times. "May the river drown it, may the earth swallow it up, may the wind carry it off, may the forest blot it out, and no harm come to us and our children! May the butcher have black dreams himself! He should break a hand and a foot before anything happens to Motl Komzoyl's little finger, even if he is a tailor! Believe me, if he's named after my cousin Mordechai he doesn't have a tailor's soul. And if my grandmother, may she rest in peace, has taken the trouble of coming all the way from the next world to wish us a mazel tov, we'd better say mazel tov ourselves. It should only turn out for the best. They should have lots of happiness, amen and amen!"

Why make a short story long? I must be made of iron if I could manage to lie there under the blankets without bursting from laughter. *Bornukh shelo osomi ishoh*—a woman is always a woman . . . Needless to say, we celebrated the engagement the next day and the wedding soon after, and the two lovebirds are as happy as can be. He tailors in Boiberik, going from dacha to dacha for work, and she's busy day and night, cooking, and baking, and washing, and scrubbing, and fetching water from the well. They barely manage to get by. In fact, if I didn't bring them some produce now and then, and sometimes a bit of cash, they'd be in a real fix—but listen to her and she's sitting on top of the world as long as she has her Motl . . .

Well, go argue with today's children! It's like I said at the beginning, *bonim gidalti veroyamami*: you can slave for them, you can knock your head against the wall—*vehetym poshu vi*, they still think they know better than you do. No, say what you will, today's children are too smart for their own good. But I'm afraid I've chewed your ear off even more than usual today. Please don't hold it against me—you should only take care and be well!

(1899)

 HODL



You've been wondering, have you, Pan Sholem Aleichem, where I've been all this time? Teveye's changed quite a bit, you say, grown suddenly gray? Ah, if only you knew the troubles, the heartache, that I've been through! It's written that *odom yesoydoy mi'ofor vesoyfoy le'ofor*, that a man can be weaker than a fly and stronger than steel—I tell you, that's a description of me! Maybe you can tell me, though, why it is that whenever something goes wrong in this world, it's Teveye it goes wrong with. Do you think that's because I'm a gullible fool who believes whatever he's told? If only I'd managed to remember what our rabbis said a thousand times, *kabdeyhu vekhoshdeyhu*—a man musn't trust his own dog . . . But what can I do, I ask you, if that's my nature? And besides, I'm a man of faith, as you know, I have no complaints against God. Not that they would do me the least bit of good if I had them! Whatever He does must be for a reason, though. It's like the prayer book says, *haneshomoh lokh vehaguf shelokh*—what does a man ever know and what is he really worth? My wife and I quarrel about that. "Golde," I'm always telling her, "it's a sin even to think such things. There's a story in the Talmud that—" "Leave me alone with your Talmud!" she says. "We have a daughter to marry off, and after her, touch wood, two others, and after them three more, if first they don't break a leg . . ." "You musn't talk that way, Golde," I say. "Our rabbis warned against it. In the Talmud it also says—" But she never lets me finish. "A house full of growing daughters," she says, "is all the Talmud I need to know!" Go argue with a woman, I tell you!

In short, I don't have to remind you that I have, touch wood, some fine goods at home, each better-looking than the other. God forgive me for boasting. It's not a man's job to praise his own daughters, but you should hear the whole world tell me what knockouts they are! And most of all my Hodl, who's next after Tsaytl, the one who fell for the tailor, if you recall. I can't begin to tell you how gorgeous she is—I mean Hodl, my second daughter; she's like the Bible says of Queen Esther, *ki toyvas mar'eh hi*—prettier than a picture! And if looks aren't bad enough, she has