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TALES OF MENDELE THE BOOK PEDDLER

FISHKE THE LAME AND BENJAMIN THE THIRD

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THE BRIEF TRAVELS OF BENJAMIN THE THIRD

TRANSLATED BY
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BEING A DESCRIPTION OF HIS EXPEDITIONS, IN WHICH HE REACHED THE FAR MOUNTAINS OF DARKNESS AND SAW AND HEARD MANY A FINE AND WONDROUS MARVEL, HITHERTO RELATED IN ALL SEVENTY OF THE WORLD'S TONGUES AND NOW MADE AVAILABLE IN OUR VERY OWN YIDDISH

A Prologue by Mendele the Book Peddler

A WORD FROM MENDELE THE BOOK PEDDLER:

Praise be to the Creator, Who guides His heavenly orbs in their paths and His earthly creatures in their ways! Surely, if our holy books relate that not even the tiniest blade of grass can stick its head above ground unless an angel taps it and says, "Grow, little grass, get thee up and about," surely, I say, a man must have his angel too, tapping and crying: "Up and about with thee!" And even more so must this be the case with our fine Jews, each of whom most cer-

tainly has one hundred legions of angels at least tapping and rapping and telling him: "Heikele, dear soul, go borrow whatsoever money thou canst, and get thee west of the border to the German, and buy there all the goods that thou art able to. Sprout, Heikele, wax, Heikele, up from thy bog, thou villain! Filch the selfsame goods from thine own store and flinch not when thou claimest the insurance! . . ." Or else they say, these angels: "Go, Itzikl, thou rascal, get thee to thy Polish manor lord and flim him such flammery and skull him such duggery that the tale of it be music to all ears! . . ." Or perhaps they exclaim: "Grow, ye beggars, sprout like grass, like nettles, in the streets. Go, Jewish children, hie ye from door to door and knock on each for your living! . . ." Or it may be: "Go, ye wealthy Jews who lack for nothing, cease twiddling your thumbs and get ye to the bathhouse and start to sweat! . . ."

But I fear that this is all beside the point. The point, ladies and gentlemen, is that one of our own brethren has gone far, far into the uttermost regions of the earth and has been crowned with universal renown.

For the past year all the English and German newspapers have been full of dispatches about a most wonderful journey to the East undertaken by one Benjamin, for thus they spell our Hebrew name Binyomin, and thus we shall spell it here too. Just think of it, they have marveled: a Jew, an unarmed Polish Jew on foot, with but a knapsack on his back and a prayershawl bag beneath his arm, has ventured into climes beyond the ken of the most famous British explorers! Only a Superman, they say, could have done it; that is, our Binyomin may have been human, but just having been human never made a Binyomin . . . Be that as it may, however, the world is indebted to him for his many prodigious discoveries, in consequence of which no atlas will ever be the same. Never has a medal been more rightfully merited than the one presented

to him by the Royal Geographic Society of London. His acceptance speech was rushed into print by all the Jewish gazettes, which talked of nothing else the whole of last summer, as everyone who reads them knows. Lists were drawn up by them of the great Jews in history from Adam to the present day, and of the Jewish travelers, starting with Benjamin the First of Tudela seven hundred years ago and down to Benjamin the Second of Polticzeny, who died a while back in London while looking for the Ten Lost Tribes—not to mention all our innumerable compatriots currently roaming the globe and typically compared by our Jewish correspondents, for the greater glory of our Benjamin, to a pack of poor stumblers, a hapless herd of footloose tramps, the roads taken by whom, set beside those of our intrepid adventurer, are so many blunderings from here to there, like beggars' rounds or the scamperings of monkeys. Of Benjamin's exploits and the books written about them they have said, quoting Scripture on the gifts of the Queen of Sheba: "Never were such precious spices brought from afar." Blessed be the translator, they have declared, and well worth his weight in gold, who will extract the pure nectar of this treasure from its beehive of foreign tongues and serve it to us in our native buzz for our eyes to light up with enchantment.

Thus it was that I, Mendele, having no other purpose than the advancement of my fellow Jews insofar as I am capable of it, could no longer refrain from vowing: If our Hebrew authors, whose knowledge is to mine as a man's waist is to his little finger, do not cast off their slumber and render the books of Benjamin's travels into our holy tongue, let me at least abridge them in plain Yiddish. And old and feeble though I am, dear reader, I girded my loins and laboriously set about selecting from this bounty all the items that might be of interest to our Jewish public and transcribing them freely as is my cus-

tom. I felt, if truth be told, as if I were being tapped from above and told: "Arise, O Mendele! Get thee from thy cozy corner by the hearth, and take thou a pinch of Benjamin's spices, and whip up a dish for thy Jewish brothers such as they relish!" And this, with God's help, did I do, and now the tasty meal is set before you. Eat up, ladies and gentlemen, eat hearty and may it please you! Let us all set out in the wake of Benjamin's travels howsoever and wheresoever we see fit, each keeping to his own pace and inclinations—and if any of you, God forbid, should meet with a mishap on the way, you need only thrust it from you as if it were a plate upon a table and remain well and firm in your faith, as I, your humble servant, Mendele the Book Peddler, most devoutly wish you to be.

1

IN WHICH WE ARE TOLD WHO BENJAMIN IS, WHERE HE HAILS FROM, AND HOW HE CONCEIVED OF HIS JOURNEY

"ALL MY DAYS," Benjamin has said, "I was raised in Tuneyadevka—that is, until my grand voyage. I was born there, I was schooled there, and I was married there to my faithful wife, Zelda, may she have a long life."

The small town of Tuneyadevka is a God-forsaken place, far off the beaten track—so removed from the world indeed that, should a visitor appear in it, every door and window is opened at once and all stare at him in amazement. Leaning into the street, the neighbors ask each other the Four Questions. Who is this fellow? Where out of the blue has he dropped from? What is he doing here? Can he have come for

no reason at all? Tuneyadevka is not the sort of place that a person just happens to turn up in. And since there must be more to him than meets the eye, it is imperative to eye him well.

Whereupon each and every Tuneyadevkan feels obliged to prove his sagacity and the speculations fly like dust. The old folk spin yarns about similar visits made fifty years ago; the wits crack jokes, not always very nice ones; the menfolk stroke their beards while smiling into them; the old women scold the wits with one baleful and one gleeful eye; the young ones steal a glance from lowered visages, hands hiding their giggles. Rumors grow like snowballs, getting bigger and bigger until they roll right into the synagogue and stop before the cast-iron stove, where all things reach their final destination: family secrets, business deals, Turkish and Austrian politics, the wealth of Rothschild, the latest mail delivery with news of recent pogroms or the discovery of a tribe of lost Jews, and so on and so forth. All this is duly examined by a panel of distinguished citizens, which sometimes sits late into the night, leaving wives and children waiting anxiously at home while it selflessly examines the intricacies of each case without receiving a farthing in recompense, after which its conclusions are presented for approval to a plenary assembly of Tuneyadevkans convened on the upper benches of the bathhouse. Such are the by-laws of Tuneyadevka, and it would not avail to change a single one of them if all the monarchs of the East and West were to descend on the town and stand on their heads with their feet up. More than once at such sessions the Turkish Porte has nearly come to grief, and if not for the efforts of certain prominent tribunes the Sultan might long ago have been thrown to the dogs. Rothschild himself, on one occasion, lost nearly fifteen million rubles in an hour, which

he did not recoup until several weeks later, when, the topmost benches being in a mellow mood and several sheets to the wind, he made a good one hundred and fifty million.

Although the inhabitants of Tuneyadevka are almost all famous beggars, they are also most merry ones, with a faith that might be described as reckless. Ask one of them where and how he makes a living, and you will get a bewildered stare. Soon, however, he will come to his senses and answer frankly:

"You want to know what I live from, is that it? Well, let me tell you, there's a God above and He doesn't forget us down below. He's provided until now and He won't stop now, that's what my answer is."

"But what is it that you do? Do you have some kind of trade or occupation?"

"God be praised! I happen to have, believe me, a fine gift that He gave me, a voice that makes music like an instrument. On the High Holidays I work as a cantor; I'm also a circumciser and a matzo roller, the best you ever saw; I dabble a little in matchmaking too, that's a fact; I keep on the side—this is just between the two of us—a little tavern that doesn't bring in much; but my goat, knock wood, is a good milker; and I have a rich cousin not far from here who can be milked in a pinch too. The main thing, I tell you, is that God is our father and no one is more merciful than a Jew, don't ever say I said otherwise . . ."

It must also be pointed out that the inhabitants of Tuneyadevka are content with what they have and not choosy about their garments or their food. Let their Sabbath caftans be ripped or torn, or less than immaculate, or down at the seams, none of this matters as long as the satin still has a bit of shine. In fact, it can be as full of holes as a sieve, through which the wearer's skin shows; since no one looks at such private parts anyway, why worry about them? They're no differ-

ent from the bottom of a man's foot, which belongs to him too. What Tuneyadevkan would go around with his nose to the ground just to see whose shoes have soles on them? . . . While as for victuals, a bit of soup and bread, if it's available, is a meal; and if there's some challah and a soup bone on Friday night, why, a king could eat no better. Try mentioning anything fancier, unless it happens to be a piece of stuffed fish, a plain pot roast, or a sweet carrot stew, and your Tuneyadevkan will give you as strange and mirthful a look as if you had told him that your cow flew over the roof and laid an egg. A dry carob pod on Tu b'Shevat is his idea of a luscious fruit; just looking at it makes him roll his eyes and sigh, thinking of the Land of Israel from which it comes. "Merciful Father," he prays, breaking his teeth on it, "bring us back to Thy promised land, where even the goats eat such treats . . ."

Once, it so happened, someone arrived in Tuneyadevka with a date. You should have seen the town come running to look at it. A Bible was brought to prove that the very same little fruit grew in the Holy Land. The harder the Tuneyadevkans stared at it, the more clearly they saw before their eyes the River Jordan, the Cave of the Patriarchs, the tomb of Mother Rachel, the Wailing Wall. They bathed in the hot springs of Tiberias, climbed the Mount of Olives, ate dates and carobs, and stuffed their pockets with holy soil to bring back to Tuneyadevka. There was many a heartfelt exclamation and damp eye on that day.

"For a moment," Benjamin has recalled of that occasion, "the whole of Tuneyadevka was in the Land of Israel. The coming of the Messiah was all anyone talked about. If from the Creation to the millennium is but a week in God's eyes, the Lord's Sabbath seemed just around the corner. There was at that time a new constable in town who had introduced a reign of terror. He had snatched skullcaps from men's heads,

snipped off someone's earlock, raided a back street late at night for Jews without their papers, and even arrested a Jewish goat for eating the straw roof of a local peasant. Since, though a Christian, he was possessed by the spirit of Ishmael, of whom Scripture says that his hand is against every man, the panel by the stove debated the future of Mohammedanism. Then it turned its attention to the latest communications concerning the whereabouts of the lost tribes beyond the River Sambatyon and I first conceived of my expedition."

Until that day Benjamin had lived like a chick in its egg or a worm in a jar of horseradish. Beyond Tuneyadevka, he had thought, the world came to an end, nor was there a better or sweeter place anywhere. "I believed," he has been quoted as saying, "that the richest man on earth was our tax collector, and the finest mansion, his house. It had in it four solid brass lamps, a six-branched candelabrum topped by an eagle, two copper pots and five copper frying pans, a shelf full of pewter plates and no less than a dozen fool's-gold spoons, two silver kiddush cups, a spice box, a Hanukkah menorah, a grandfather clock in a silver case that hung from a chain of glass beads, two cows and a pregnant heifer, two Sabbath caftans, and no end of other good things. I thought there was no wiser person anywhere than our rabbi, Aron-Yosel-and-Soreh-Zlote's-Eizik-Dovid, who was said to have so excelled at algebra as a youth that he could have been an adviser to the Czar; no one more impressive-looking than Heikel the Stammerer with his winning smile; no one more knowledgeable than our doctor—who, it was well known, could bring the dead back to life and had studied medicine with a gypsy possessing a degree that was written in Egyptian hieroglyphics."

In a word, Benjamin's life in Tuneyadevka lacked for nothing. True, he lived in penury while his wife and children went about in tatters—but before eating of the apple, did it occur

to Adam and Eve to be ashamed of going naked and barefoot in Paradise? Now, however, the fabulous tales of distant places worked their way into his heart, which went out to them and drew him after them like the arms of children reaching for the moon. On the face of things, one might not expect much to result from a date, a constable, some skullcaps, an earlock, a Jew or two caught in an alley late at night, a goat with a taste for straw roofs; yet taken together these wrought a great change in Benjamin, nor would he otherwise have enriched the world with his voyage.

Indeed, one frequently observes in life how great and even monumental consequences are the product of minute causes. A peasant sows wheat; a miller mills some of it into flour; the rest finds its way to a distillery where it is made into vodka; a portion of both is delivered to Gittel the tavernkeeper; she adds a bit of yeast and water to the flour, kneads it, and rolls it into knishes; in her pantry, thanks to the Phoenicians, who invented the art of glassmaking thousands of years ago, are some glasses; and when the vodka is poured into them, and the hot knishes are put on platters, and these are set before a band of hungry and thirsty Jews, there is no telling what may happen . . . It may well be, in short, that Benjamin's soul always housed a traveler's spark; but this same spark might have died long ago had not circumstances breathed it into a flame; and even had it not gone out entirely, it might have flickered too feebly to produce anything more than a coachman or the owner of a water wagon. I have known many a hack driver in my time who, had things gone differently, might today be circumnavigating the antipodes . . . But this too, I fear, is beside the point.

From that day on, Benjamin began avidly immersing himself in the Talmudic stories of Rabba bar Bar Hanah, the great traveler who once was carried so close to a star by a wave that

he was nearly burned to a crisp. Next he turned to the adventures of Eldad the Danite, to the travel book of Benjamin of Tudela, to Ya'akov ben Moshe Hayyim Baruch's *Praises of Jerusalem*, and to Matityahu Delacrut's *Shadow of Eternity*, which explained the Seven Arts in as many brief pages and listed the greatest wonders and strangest beasts in the universe. Such books opened Benjamin's eyes and transformed him. "I was tremendously excited," he has written, "by all their wonderful stories, sometimes to the point of crying out loud: 'Ai ai ai, if only God would enable me to see a hundredth of this with my own eyes!' My thoughts were carried far, far away."

Tuneyadevka was now too small a place for Benjamin. He was determined to venture forth from it, just like the chick that pecks at its egg before emerging into the light of day.

2

IN WHICH BENJAMIN BECOMES A HOLY MAN AND ZELDA AN UNMARRIAGEABLE WIDOW

BY NATURE BENJAMIN was a great coward. At night he was afraid to step out by himself and all the money in the world could not have induced him to sleep alone in his own house. Little dogs made him quake with fear and straying beyond the confines of Tuneyadevka struck him as risking his life. "Once," he relates, "on a sweltering summer day—I remember it as if it were now—our rabbi set out with one of his fellows to take a dip in the stream outside of town. A few young friends and myself walked at a respectful distance behind him, confident that no harm could befall us in his presence. He was not just a rabbi, after all; he was a man universally esteemed and most

venerable. Why, his rabbinical titles alone filled a whole sheet of paper! He reached the stream well ahead of us, having walked at a brisk pace, and had begun to undress when a peasant boy appeared out of nowhere and sicced his dog on him. Holding, to put it plainly, the open fly of his pants with one hand and his round fur hat with the other, our Shield and Protector turned and ran for dear life. This made us youngsters lose our heads also; when the whale is hooked with a fishing rod, what are the small fry to think? We galloped off like wild horses, hollering all the way home and arriving helter-skelter on the heels of our hero. You would have thought from the uproar that the town was on fire. Help! Murder! Police! No one could hear his own voice."

Prior to setting out on his expedition, therefore, Benjamin had to vanquish his fears. To this end he forced himself to go out alone late at night, to sleep by himself, and to venture beyond the town limits, all of which gave him an extreme pallor and cost him no little health. His changed behavior, wanly preoccupied look, and new habit of disappearing at all hours were a puzzle to everyone and soon made him the talk of the town. According to one theory, he was quite simply mad. In the first place, it was said, he had been born a bit soft in the head; secondly, there hadn't been a madman in Tuneyadevka for years and it was common knowledge that every town had its idiot; and thirdly, even if Benjamin hadn't been crazy to begin with, the summer heat was clearly making him so . . . To this, though, an opposing school of thought, led by Rabbi Aron Yosel and Soreh Zlote's Eizik-Dovid, said: "Feh!" Granted, Benjamin had always had a screw loose—indeed, he had several; but this in itself explained nothing, since it failed to answer the question of why these had fallen out now and not the previous summer, when the heat was even worse; while as for town idiots—how, if they were so necessary, had Tuneya-

devka gotten along without one until now? . . . This latter objection, however, was easily refuted by the first school, which pointed to the stream outside of town. It was, that is, no secret that its waters took a life every year; yet in the past several years they had not taken any, as a result of which they were now so low that they could be crossed in some places without even getting one's feet wet; from which it followed as night follows day that even an absolute law had its exceptions . . .

In short, Benjamin remained a conundrum. Nonetheless, the majority opinion, which also happened to be that of all the womenfolk, was that the matter had something to do with . . . that is, that Benjamin had taken up with . . . well, quite simply with the Devil. Why else would he go out on midnight rambles? Where else could he be vanishing every time you turned your back on him? What else could make him sleep in the pantry? His wife, Zelda, even said that she heard the floorboards creak at night, as if someone were walking on them!

Like everything else, these rumors reached as far as the synagogue stove and from there to the top benches of the bathhouse. Although the plenum was not of one mind, it unanimously resolved to draw up a list of Tuneyadevka's houses and deputize its leading citizens to accompany the local Torah scribe on an inspection of their mezuzahs, a flaw in any one of which could easily have let the Evil One into town; and since the expenses of this delegation were a public responsibility, it was also decided to raise the tax on meat. In Tuneyadevka indeed there was a saying, "No matter what gossip starts with, it will end with someone's death, and no matter what is debated, the price of meat will go up," thus accounting for the presence of death and taxes in the world, two things that only a heretic would question, although why

everybody died while only Jews paid taxes remained an unanswered riddle.

Subsequently, Benjamin had an adventure that greatly enhanced his reputation. One hot midsummer day at exactly twelve noon, when the sun was at its fiercest, he set forth from town and wandered into the forest a distance of some three permissible Sabbath walks, that is, about six thousand ells. In his pockets he had several of his books, without which he never went anywhere, and after a while he sat down beneath a tree and lapsed into thought. Before long his imaginings flew far away to the ends of the inhabited earth. He crossed mountains, valleys, and deserts, following in the footsteps of Alexander the Great, Eldad the Danite, and others; he saw the hideous basilisk, the fire-breathing cockatrice, the Minotaur, and the roc; he reached the lands of the Ten Lost Tribes and spoke there with the descendants of Moses; until at last, arriving safely home again, he roused himself from his reveries and wondered when he would set out on his great journey.

By now night had begun to fall and Benjamin rose, stretched himself, and set out for Tuneyadevka. But though he walked and walked, he did not emerge from the forest. He tramped for an hour, for two, for three, for four, deeper and deeper into darkness too thick for the eye to penetrate. Suddenly a storm blew up and it began to rain. Thunder and lightning crashed all around and the trees shook with frightful sounds. Cold, wet, and frightened, his teeth chattering from the downpour, Benjamin came to a halt. It occurred to him that he might be attacked by a bear or torn to shreds by a lion or a leopard, or perhaps even by a wyvern, which was a kind of dragon with a barbed tail that could lift and fling an elephant. Worse yet, he was terribly hungry, having had nothing to eat all day but a single buckwheat cake.

Beset by worry, Benjamin stopped to say his nighttime prayers, reciting them with all his heart. And indeed they were answered, for it soon grew light out and he resumed walking as though at God's behest. He hiked on and on and came at last to a narrow path, which he followed for an hour or two until he heard a voice in the distance. And yet, confound it all, this only made him shudder even more. Suppose it was a highwayman? The thought frightened him so that he turned around and started to run the other way as fast—may it never, dear readers, happen to you—as he had fled the rabbi's floggings as a child. Before long, though, he told himself: For shame, Benjamin! You dream of voyaging to far deserts and oceans teeming with griffins, hydrae, and anthropophagi yet tremble at the thought of encountering a robber in the forest? I swear, I thought better of you! Did Alexander the Great turn and run at the first sign of danger? Did he cower like you when astride his trusty eagle that he spurred skyward with a piece of meat held before it on his spear point? No, he did not. He hacked off and speared a fresh piece and rose higher. Courage, Benjamin! This is God's test. Pass it and you will be worthy of finding the lost tribes and telling our Jews all about them, even in this little neck of the woods. Now is your chance to put your fears behind you. Just think of the glory—of the honor to your people—of the fame to your native town—when Tuneyadevka and Macedonia, the birthplace of Alexander, are mentioned in one breath . . .

Whereupon Benjamin about-faced again and strode bravely forward to face the highwayman, a peasant in a wagon loaded with sacks and pulled by a team of oxen. "Good morning!" he called out in a passing strange voice, which had in it all possible shades of exclamation and entreaty, as if to say: "Well, you can see for yourself that I'm at your mercy, and

mercy is what I demand—for me, my wife, and my poor children . . ."

After uttering this combination of a shout, scream, and supplication, Benjamin stood still, unable to get out another word. Then his head began to spin, his eyes went blank, his legs buckled beneath him, and he toppled to the ground.

When he came to, he was lying in the wagon on a large sack of potatoes, covered with a rough cloth coat. By his head was a trussed rooster, which gave him a one-eyed stare and clawed at him with a toenail; at his feet were crates of fresh garlic, onions, and other greens. There must have been some eggs around too, for their packing straw kept getting in his eyes. The peasant was calmly smoking a pipe and calling "Gee-up!" to the oxen, who plodded along so slowly that each wheel had its own distinct sound, all four adding up to a single creaky quartet. The rooster, it seemed, did not like this concert one bit, because each time a wheel reached its groaning crescendo he raked Benjamin with a talon and emitted an angry cock-a-doodle-doo that went on gurgling for a long while in his throat.

Benjamin, who was having trouble telling his limbs apart, lay there feeling stunned. In his imagination a Saracen had taken him captive in the desert and was on his way to sell him into slavery. He fervently hoped it would be to a Jew, who might set him free again; if bought by a Christian prince, or worse yet, a Moslem princess, he could bid the world farewell. Thinking of Joseph languishing in the dungeon because of Potiphar's wife, he let out an anxious sigh. The peasant heard it, turned around, and asked:

"Nu, zhidka, a shtsho, troshki lipshi?"

Indeed, Benjamin really did feel a bit better and had sufficiently recovered to remember what had happened. Still,

knowing only a few words of Ukrainian, his situation was far from promising. How could he answer a goy who spoke no Yiddish, much less inquire where he was being taken? Worse yet, when he tried sitting up, his legs refused to obey him.

"Troshki tebi lipshi?" asked the peasant again between one "Gee-up" and the next.

"Lipshi," replied Benjamin. "But my legs," he added, pointing to them as best he could, "*ribi moi,* ouch!"

"Izvidko ti, zhidka?"

"Izvidko ti, zhidka?" Benjamin repeated, chanting the words as though he had found them in a Torah scroll. "*Ya* Binyomin. Binyomin *ub* Tuneyadevka."

"Ti iz Tuneyadevki? Kazhi-zhe shtsho ti vitarashtshil na meni otshi i glyanish yak shilani. Alye mozshe ti take i shilani. Trastse tvoi materi."

And having delivered himself of this speech, in which he asked why Benjamin was blinking like a madman while declaring that he must have the very Devil in him, the peasant turned back to his oxen and cried: "Gee-up!"

"That's so," agreed Benjamin, who had understood only the first three words. "I already told you, *ya ub Tuneyadevka.*" Making a beseeching face and raising a hand to his mouth as if emptying a glass, he went on: "*Ya* have wife in Tuneyadevka, give you *tsharka vodka* and *zhidki hallah.*"

The peasant must have guessed Benjamin's meaning, for he replied *"Ti iz dobri zhidka,"* to wit, "Thou art a good Jew," and geed his oxen up again.

A few hours later the wagon drove into the marketplace of Tuneyadevka. Men and women came running. *"Tshoyesh skilke khotshes za pivan? Za tsibuli?"* called a prospective buyer of the rooster and the onions. *"Mozshe mayesh kartofli, yaytsi?"* shouted a customer for potatoes and eggs. It was a while before someone thought of asking about Benjamin, who had disappeared

as if swallowed by the stream. Before the peasant could answer, the women, who were going through his wagon like locusts, pulled back the coat and let out a scream. "Benjamin! It's him! Tsippe Kroyne! Basheve Breindl! Go, run tell Zelda that she's not a widow after all!"

Bedlam broke out. There was not a dry eye in town. Young and old ran to see Benjamin. He was besieged by congratulations, by questions; all day and all night, he was told, he had been searched for everywhere. In fact, he had been given up for dead, assumed martyred by man or the elements. Soon Zelda arrived, sobbing at the sight of her husband, who was pale as a ghost, and wringing her hands so hard that she nearly broke a finger. She did not know whether to relieve her vexed spirits by cursing him roundly, or to dance with joy at having been spared a long widowhood, forbidden to remarry until his body was found and he was declared officially dead.

Before long Benjamin was carried home, still lying on his sack of potatoes, in a grand parade that wound through the marketplace. Every last soul in Tuneyadevka was there. No one waited to be invited and the hallelujahs in his honor were like the cries of *Holy, Holy, Holy* during the kedushah prayer in the synagogue.

Indeed, Benjamin was beatified that same day. Henceforth he was known as Holy Benjamin and his wife as The Widow Zelda.

The gypsy-trained doctor was called for and prescribed every remedy he could think of. He treated Benjamin with cups and leeches, shaved all the hair from his body, and promised before departing that his patient would, with God's help, feel well enough to go to synagogue the next morning and give thanks for his miraculous deliverance.

3

IN WHICH BENJAMIN FALLS IN WITH DAME SENDREL

IT STOOD TO reason that this adventure of Benjamin's, which caused his wife much grief and led to no end of debate by the stove and upper benches, would have rid him once and for all of the thought of his grand expedition. In fact, it only made him more determined. He now regarded himself with new respect as an experienced man of the world and held in highest esteem the courage and strength exhibited during his recent ordeal, in which he had displayed such self-mastery. And having become something of a hero and an adventurer in his own eyes, a man versed in the Seven Arts of *The Shadow of Eternity* and replete with scientific knowledge, he felt distressed that a person so well-informed should have to languish, a veritable lily among the brambles, in a backwater town like Tuneyadevka, the simple inhabitants of which had no notion of anything. Their homely sayings and platitudes grew onerous to him and heightened his desire to escape. If only, he thought, my voyage were accomplished and I were already home again, world-honored and acclaimed, with rare tidings for my fellow Jews! Everyone in Tuneyadevka would then know who I am—yes, they would know what it means to be Benjamin . . .

Nothing but a few last details now stood between him and his departure. Where, to begin with, was he going to get the money for his trip? He didn't have a farthing to his name, having spent all his days in the study house while his wife struggled to make a living from a little store she had opened after her parents ceased supporting them as newlyweds, the entire stock of which consisted of the socks that she knit, the down feathers that she stayed up plucking on winter nights, the

chicken fat that she fried and rendered before Passover, and the bit of produce that she haggled for with the peasants on market days and resold at a scant profit. Should he pawn some household item? But apart from two brass candlesticks, an heirloom from Zelda's family that she polished faithfully and lit the Sabbath candles in, there was nothing pledgeable in the house; its sole jewelry was a silver headband with a pearl inherited by Zelda from her mother and used for fastening her kerchief on special occasions. Should he sell off something of his own? All he had was his Sabbath caftan, which, though new when he was married in it, had become so bedraggled that its yellow lining was falling out. True, he owned a sheepskin coat too; but the lower half of its wool nap was worn away and its fur collar had not a filament of fur. This coat had been a wedding gift from Benjamin's father, who had told the tailor not to skimp on the collar and to line it temporarily with the leftover cloth from an old gaberdine until the dowry was paid off and he could afford a bit of gray squirrel; the dowry, however, was never paid off and the squirrel remained in the trees.

Secondly, Benjamin had no idea how to part from his wife. Should he take her into his confidence and reveal his plan? This could only lead to wild tears and the conviction that he had taken leave of his senses. How much, after all, could a Jewess from Tuneyadevka understand? She might be a brave breadwinner, but she was still a woman, and there was less in the head of the canniest female than in the little finger of the most doltish man. Should he slip away without saying goodbye? This struck him as disagreeable, the kind of thing that only a cold-blooded Lithuanian Talmudist might do. But what other choice was there? To sit at home for the rest of his life? The prospect was intolerable. He might as well lie down and die, since he and his journey were one; as other Jews turned toward Jerusalem in their prayers each day, so it was con-

stantly before him. He even thought of it when he slept, for it was all he dreamed of at night, and his waking eyes and ears saw and heard not the world around them but the exotic places that he yearned for. Often, in the course of an ordinary conversation, he found himself uttering words that only he understood: the Indies, Cathay, Timbuktu, the Northwest Passage, the source of the Nile . . . No, there was no going back. He just didn't know how to proceed. He felt that he needed someone to talk to, a kindred soul.

NOW IT CAME to pass, dear reader, that there was, in those days, in Tuneyadevka, a man named Sendrel, thus named after his great-grandfather; and he was, this same Sendrel, a simple soul, that is, a man without guile. In the synagogue he had his place behind the dais, which is sufficient to tell you that he did not belong to Tuneyadevka's upper crust. In discussions he generally kept silent, as if he were a mere bystander, and any words he spoke were greeted with hoots of laughter though uttered with no intention to amuse, not because they were witty but because they were his. And yet this laughter, which made him look round with wide eyes for the cause of it, was never minded by him, for being as meek as a brindled cow, he was not one to take offense. Someone had laughed? Well, then, let them laugh; if they did, it must give them pleasure. Sometimes Sendrel spoke truer than he knew.

People liked to play pranks on him. When the children threw burrs at each other on Tisha b'Av, most landed in his beard, and he received more than his share of blows in the traditional pillow fight on the long night of Hoshanna Rabbah, though not of the cookies and vodka consumed on the same occasion. He was, in a word, the butt of every joke, which was why people called him Sendrel the Kickpuppy. He

never insisted on his opinion if there was a different one, let others have their way when they wanted it, and did what he was bidden. "What's it to me?" and "Why should I care?" were his mottoes.

With the children Sendrel was a child. He liked to talk and play with them and suffered them with bovine good nature to ride his back and pull his beard. "You young rascals!" folk scolded them. "Where's your respect for your elders? A Jew's beard is not a bellpull!" "Eh, it's all right," Sendrel would say reassuringly. "What's it to me if they stroke my beard? Why should I care?"

At home he did not lick honey either. His wife wore the pants and let him know it, and his fate at her hands was a bitter one despite his loving efforts to put up with it. Worst of all were holiday eves when, tying a kerchief around his beard, she ordered him to whitewash the house, peel potatoes, roll and cut noodle dough, stuff fish, and kindle the oven, all women's jobs that earned him the additional name of Dame Sendrel.

And it was to Dame Sendrel that Benjamin now attached himself and opened his heart, asking for advice. Why Sendrel? The fact was that Benjamin had always liked the fellow. Something about Sendrel appealed to him. Since the two of them generally saw eye to eye, conversing with him was a pleasure, nor did it escape Benjamin's attention that, with his yielding nature, Sendrel was likely to go along with most any plan laid before him. Even if he had a qualm or two, there was nothing, with God's help and Benjamin's quick tongue, that could not be overcome.

AND SO IT was one day that our Benjamin went to see our Sendrel; and he found him, our Sendrel, seated on a milking

stool, and he was peeling potatoes. One of his cheeks was flame-red and beneath his eye was a bluish mark that could very well have been made by a fingernail. He was in mournful spirits, like a bride whose husband has abandoned her for some adventure or returned from it to give her a beating. Sendrel's wife was not at home.

"Good morning, Sendrel," said Benjamin. "What are you moping about, old fellow?" He pointed with a finger at Sendrel's cheek. "Again, eh? Where is she now, your beloved?"

"In the marketplace."

"Most excellent!" Benjamin exclaimed, nearly crowing with delight. "Put down your potatoes, my dear boy, and come with me to the back room. Are you sure no one's there? I need to bare my breast to you. I can't keep it to myself any longer. My blood's on fire! Quick, my dear, quick! She mustn't come and take us by surprise before we're ready."

"What's it to me?" said Sendrel, heading for the back room. "If it's quick you want, I'll be quick. Why should I care?"

"Sendrel!" said Benjamin. "Do you have any idea what's beyond Tuneyadevka?"

"Of course I do. A tavern with first-rate vodka."

"You *are* a booby. I mean beyond that."

"Beyond the tavern?" Sendrel shook his head wonderingly. "No, I don't. Do you?"

"Do I? What a question! Why, the whole world!" said Benjamin as grandly as if he were Columbus presenting the king of Spain with America.

"But what's out there?"

"What's out there?" Benjamin could not control himself. "Sea monsters, that's what! Basilisks . . ."

"You mean the little creatures that cut the stones for King Solomon's Temple just by looking at them?"

"The very same, dear boy! And the Land of Israel is out there too, with all its holy places. Wouldn't you like to go there?"

"Would you?"

"What a question! I not only would, I soon will!"

"I envy you, Benjamin. Just don't get a stomachache from all those dates and carobs."

"They can be yours, too, for the asking, Sendrel. The Land of Israel belongs to you as much as to me."

"So it does. But right now it belongs to the Turk."

"The Turk can be dealt with, Sendrel. Tell me, my dear, have you ever heard of the Ten Lost Tribes?"

"A lot, by the stove in the synagogue. Not that I know who they are or where to find them. If I did, I'm sure I'd tell you. Why shouldn't I? What's it to me?"

"Well, I do!" said Benjamin excitedly, pulling *The Praises of Jerusalem* from his pocket. "Here, listen to this. 'Reaching Baruti,' he commenced to read, 'I encountered four Babylonian Jews and was able to converse with one of them, who spoke the Holy Tongue and was named Moshe. He told me indubitable truths about the River Sambatyon that he had heard from some Ishmaelites and about the Sons of Moses who live beyond it.' And look at what it says here: 'The governor of the province revealed to me that thirty years previously he had entertained in his home a man from the Tribe of Simeon, who told him that four tribes of Israelites reside in his district, including that of Issachar, which devotes itself to the study of Torah and sires the royal house.' And there's also this passage in *The Travels of Benjamin of Tudela:* 'A march of twenty days brings one from there to Mount Nisbon, on the bank of the River Gozan. Four tribes live there in many towns and cities: the Tribe of Dan, the Tribe of Zebulun, the Tribe of Asher, and the Tribe of Naphtali. The river runs around them on one

side, and they are subject not to the yoke of the Gentiles but only to their own king, whose name is Yosef Amarcala Halevi. And they are the allies of the heretical el-Torek.' Besides which, I can show you numerous references to the descendants of Yonadav ben-Rechav in the Land of Tema, who have a Jewish king and pray and fast constantly for the end of the Exile. Just suppose, my dear fellow, that I should suddenly turn up there, their brother Benjamin from Tuneyadevka, as their guest! What do you think, Sendrel? Tell me."

"They'd be honored to have you, Benjamin. A guest like you is nothing to sneeze at. I'm sure they'll all invite you for dinner, King Amarcala too. Please give him my best regards. I wish I could be there."

"Eh!" A new idea took hold of Benjamin. "Maybe, Sendrel, my dear, you'd like to come along. I swear, this is your chance, you silly goose! I'm going anyway, and I'll be glad to take you with me. Two is jollier than one. Who knows? Perhaps they'll crown me their king and you can be my grand vizier. Here, let's shake hands on it. Why go on living under the thumb of that shrew of yours? Just look at what she's done to your cheek! It's a wretched life you lead with her. Come, Sendrel. You won't regret it, I promise."

"All right," Sendrel said. "Have it your way. Why should I care about her? I'd be a fool to even tell her where I'm going."

"Dearest, I could kiss you!" said Benjamin blissfully, taking Dame Sendrel in his arms. "You've just answered a question for me, a fool's question, you're quite right. Why should I care about my wife? But that still leaves one problem. Where do we get the money for expenses?"

"What expenses? You don't plan to outfit yourself especially for your trip or have your coat turned in its honor, do you? There's nothing you need for it. On the contrary: when

you're on the road, the older your clothes, the better. We're sure to be given new coats when we get there."

"That's true. What happens when we get there doesn't worry me. But we still have to eat along the way, don't we?"

"Eat? A person might think you planned to bring a chef along! We'll pass plenty of houses, you can be sure of it."

"Sendrel," said Benjamin in bewilderment, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about the fact that if there are houses, they have doors to knock on. Isn't that the Jewish way? Today I knock on your door, tomorrow you knock on mine. How else would we all get to give charity?"

"I'll be hanged if you're not right!" exclaimed Benjamin. "And now that I know that I'm ready to leave, I feel like a new man. We can start out early tomorrow morning when the town is still asleep. It's a sin to lose a single minute, isn't it?"

"If you say tomorrow morning, let it be tomorrow morning. What's it to me?"

"But early, Sendrel, do you hear? I'll slip out of the house and wait for you by the deserted windmill. Don't forget!" Benjamin turned to go. "Don't forget!" he repeated.

"Wait a minute, Benjamin!" Sendrel reached into his jacket pocket and took out a blackened bit of old leather tied with a string and knotted in twenty places. "In here is all the money that I've managed to put away in the years I've been married. It will come in handy, don't you think?"

"I swear, one kiss isn't enough for you!" cried Benjamin, embracing Dame Sendrel again. "Here's more!"

"The plague take you both!" they suddenly heard someone cry. "The goat's in the house eating the potatoes and these two lovers couldn't care less!"

It was Sendrel's wife, furiously holding the goat with one

hand while beckoning to Sendrel with the other. Like a naughty child resigned to a paddling, he hung his head and walked as slowly as he could across the room to her.

"Courage, dear boy!" whispered Benjamin in his ear. "This is the last time. Just don't forget: tomorrow morning!" And quick as a cat, he was off.

4

IN WHICH BENJAMIN AND SENDREL SET OUT FROM TUNEYADEVKA

EARLY THE NEXT morning, before the town shepherd took the cattle out to pasture, Benjamin was waiting by the windmill with a bundle under his arm. In it were all the necessary items for his journey: his prayershawl, his phylacteries, a prayer-book, a Psalter, and several other volumes that he could no more do without than a worker could manage without his tools. His Sabbath caftan was packed away too for occasions on which he would have to look respectable. In his pocket were fifteen and a half farthings, taken from beneath his wife's pillow. He was prepared for all eventualities.

A fine sun had risen and was beaming down on the world, its every glance a wholesome tonic. As an infant will go from tears to laughter at the sight of a shiny bauble, so the grasses and trees smiled through the night's dewdrops that had yet to dry on their leaves. Frolicking birds took to the air with a song as if to say: "Come, let us chant our matins for that fine-looking fellow by the mill! Why, 'tis Benjamin—Benjamin of Tuneyadevka, the latter-day Alexander—the stalwart soul who has set out from his native land, leaving behind his wife

and children, to follow God's path where it leads him! 'Tis Benjamin the Great, come forth from his tent like the sun in the Psalm, like the strong man that runneth his course with joy, yea, with a bundle under his arm! Sing, ye winged creatures, frolic, ye feathered ones, trill ye, tra-la-la ye, for his pleasure!"

Indeed, Benjamin felt most pleased with himself. I am without a doubt, he thought with no offense meant to the Evil Eye, the happiest man alive! What do I lack? I have left my wife, God be praised, well provided for, with a living she knows how to earn, and I am now as free as these birds. The world lies before me. With my experiences, my courage, and my knowledge of the Seven Arts, how poorly can I fare? And besides, I'm a Jew, which means that I have faith. Even when things seem less than bright, we Jews know there is a God who looks after us.

Benjamin was in such fine fettle that his lips parted by themselves and out came a High Holiday tune that sounded like a royal march. Accompanied by the song of the birds, the buzz of the flies, and the shrilling of the crickets, it was an oratorio fit for God's throne in His highest heaven.

After a while, however, there being no sign of Sendrel, Benjamin began to fret and his spirits flagged. In vain he looked everywhere, straining to catch a glimpse of him: Sendrel was not to be seen. Could his old battle-ax have given him some last-minute chore? But it was too early for that; Tuneyadevka was still fast asleep. It was not yet time for peeling potatoes, which no housewife put her mind to before having her morning spat with her husband, soundly beating all her children, and putting the bedding out to air. Benjamin was in a quandary. Should he retrace his steps and go home? The very idea was repugnant. Why, Alexander the Great had

burned every bridge on his way to India to make sure there was no turning back! Should he set out by himself? This appealed to him even less. Sendrel was indispensable. It had been a great boon when he decided to join the expedition, which now seemed no more conceivable without him than a ship without its rudder or a kingdom without its lord chancellor.

Just then Benjamin spied a figure in the distance. Could it be Sendrel? But no, it was wearing a calico dress and had a kerchief on its head. Benjamin's heart skipped a beat and he turned white as a sheet. For sure, it was his wife!

The figure approached—or rather, came toward him on the run as if to seize him by the collar and drag him yammering home. "God alone knows," Benjamin has told his biographers, "how, at that moment, I would have more gladly faced a hundred fire-breathing dragons than my wife; for an angry dragon devours only the body, while an irate wife consumes body and soul. But God in His great mercy gave me courage, and I quickly hid behind the windmill and lurked there like a lion in the bush."

A minute later Benjamin sprang from his hiding place with a frightful cry that sounded like a madman's:

"Sendrel!"

It was indeed Sendrel in a calico smock and a greasy kerchief clinging to his cheeks. He had a gash beneath each eye, a stick in one hand, and a large pack on his back—but to Benjamin he was as beautiful as a bride. "As a hart longing for a spring, or a thirsty man in the desert, when water gushes from a rock," he has said, "so I leaped for joy to see my trusty companion!"

"What took you so long?" asked Benjamin. "Where have you been?"

"To tell you the truth," answered Sendrel candidly, "I

started out from home quite some time ago and even woke your Zelda."

"You woke my Zelda?" gasped Benjamin. "Sendrel, you lunatic, what did you do that for?"

"What do you mean, what did I do it for?" asked the surprised Sendrel. "What should I have done after knocking on the pantry door and not finding you? I went around to the front door and knocked again. Pretty soon Zelda came and opened it, looking like a warmed-up corpse, and I asked her where you were."

"Sendrel, we're in for it now! You've gotten us into a pickle, you have. Zelda will be here any minute and she'll—"

"Never fear, Benjamin. She sent me to the Devil so fast that you'd have thought I'd stepped on a new dress of hers. 'You can go with my husband straight to Hell!' she said and slammed the door in my face. I stood there for a while not knowing what to do until I remembered that we had agreed to meet at the windmill and reckoned you must be there. But if that's where your wife told me to go with you, I suppose she must know that you've gone."

"What? Do you think she saw me leave? Do you think she'll come after us?"

"Not a chance, Benjamin. I heard her put the chain back on the door. She didn't even say a word when I asked her, 'Zelda, is there any message you'd like me to give your husband? Anything I can bring him?' She must have been still half asleep. And so I told her, 'Go back to bed, Zelda, and take your time getting up,' that's exactly what I said."

These last words braced Benjamin like a spoonful of valerian drops. A load off his mind, he sighed with relief and brightened up. "Well, then, Sendrel," he said with a whoop, "we're off!"

From the nearby pond came a croak of frogs, as if in a fan-

fare of farewell. Your Tuneyadevka frog may live in muck and mire, but it has a voice like a brass trumpet. It's as famous in its way as the bedbugs of the Dnieper.

5

IN WHICH OUR HEROES HAVE THEIR FIRST ADVENTURE

OUR TWO HEROES set out at a breakneck pace, as furiously as if tugged by a leash or driven by a whip, their broad coattails flapping in the wind like a schooner's sails. To tell the truth, more than one drayman in our parts would have been delighted to see his nags run half as fast. Alarmed by such swift bipeds, the crows and magpies hopped deferentially out of their path, squawking and flying off in all directions. Words cannot describe our couple's contentment with themselves and with the world. Sendrel was overjoyed to have cast off his wife and the bitter existence he had led with her; his last day in Tuneyadevka had been his worst and had left a trail of bruises all over his body, a missing clump of hairs in his beard, and a conspicuous black-and-blue mark on each cheek. Lucky is the male of the species who need not suffer such mayhem from his consort.

For a long while the two men raced along in breathless silence, exchanging not a word. Large drops of sweat ran down their flushed faces. Little by little Sendrel began to lag and huff like a goose. "Faster, Sendrel, faster!" Benjamin spurred him on, flying forward like a warrior into battle.

"Have a heart, Benjamin," Sendrel pleaded. "I can't keep

up with you. You're running, God bless you, like a mountain goat."

"Faster, Sendrel!" Benjamin urged again, much taken with his own mettle. "I'm telling you, I could go on running like this to the end of the world!"

"But what for, Benjamin? Good Lord, it's not as if we're late for anything. If it takes us a day more or a day less to get there, what difference does it make? The world won't come to an end. God made it, so I've heard, to last seven millennia, and there are still a few hundred years to go."

"Faster, Sendrel! It's a crime to lose a single minute. The sooner the town is behind us, the better. Try to push yourself a little harder. You'll make up for it when we arrive and you can live like a king without lifting a finger."

"I don't doubt that you're right, Benjamin. If it's faster you want, why should I care? But it isn't me you have to convince, it's my legs. What do you suggest I do about them?"

Benjamin had no choice but to slow down. Meanwhile, the sun rose like a great ball of butter from its churn and shone down on our two travelers, who soon dropped by the roadside in the shade of a little woods, panting and sweating. The perspiration dripping on his cuts and bruises stung Sendrel like sharp needles. After resting a bit, the two men took out their prayershawls and phylacteries and said the morning prayer, which Benjamin recited with much ardor and strenuous rocking back and forth. A bit of grog, such as was set out after Sabbath services in the synagogue, would have been his just reward, but where was he to find it? Worse yet, he had not brought with him a single piece of bread, not even a thumbkin's worth, and the appetite worked up along the way now made him faint with hunger. He glanced about, cracked his knuckles, yawned, scratched himself fiercely, let out a few

grunts, smoothed his beard and earlocks, scratched himself again, grunted once more, and finally extracted a quarto volume from his bundle and perused it while humming a tune. After a while he stopped and asked:

"Sendrel! Do you know what I'm humming?"

"What I know," came the frank reply, "is that you're hungry."

"Thunderation!" exclaimed Benjamin. "How did you guess?"

"With the help," answered Sendrel, "of the Ukrainian proverb that says that the hungrier the Jew, the louder he sings. Go ahead and sing, Benjamin, while I attend to some business."

Whereupon Sendrel reached into his pack and pulled out a small bag.

"Tsk, Sendrel, you ninny," chided Benjamin, "I can see that my purpose escapes you."

But Sendrel was occupied with slowly undoing the bag, which made Benjamin glow all over with pleasure as soon as he caught sight of its contents. In it was all a body could desire: a piece of leftover Sabbath challah, some pickles, radishes, onions, and even a bit of garlic. Good housewife that he was, Sendrel had thought of everything, which made Benjamin prize him more than ever and thank the Lord for providing him with a fellow explorer every bit as precious as the manna with which He sustained the Children of Israel in the desert.

After they had eaten to their hearts' content, Sendrel repacked what was left and said:

"This food will be good for another meal and this bag for another thousand. We need only go with it from house to house and let God worry about filling it."

What, indeed, compared to a Jew's bag, are the magic tablecloths of fairy tales on which one knocks while declar-

ing, "Tablecloth, tablecloth, give me all I crave to eat"? The tablecloth grants every wish, but so, with wondrous ease, does the bag, which can be handed down to one's children and grandchildren. Moreover, it changes its shape quite magically too; for while among most Jews it is a simple haversack, among others it may resemble a satchel, a suitcase, a briefcase, a carpetbag, a saddlebag, a billfold, a basket, a casket, a hamper, a hopper, a rucksack, a reticule, a pottle, a punnet, or a pannier. And yet each and every one of these still serves as a bag, the authentic Jewish almsbox.

"Sendrel," said Benjamin, heartened by his friend's words, "the two of us are a pair made in heaven. We go together like a body and its soul. You'll be in charge of the physical half of our expedition, eating and drinking and all that, and I'll be in charge of the mental half. And by the way, do you know what I was humming? It was the Akdomus for *Shavuos,* and don't think I didn't have my reasons. You see, once we arrive, God willing, in the land of the ten tribes, we're going to have a great deal to talk about, and the language spoken there is the very same Chaldean that the Akdomus is written in. In fact, it was composed by Eldad the Danite and I'm brushing up on it right now. *Shorayes shusa,* Sendrel, how's that? That means, 'Attend and lend an ear.' You see, I'm pretty handy at it already! If we were bound for Europe we could get along in German, which is what they call Yiddish there, but I'm quite certain that none of the ten tribes knows a word of it."

"I'm sure they don't," said Sendrel humbly. "You're an educated man and can look things up in your books. There's no doubt that you know what you're doing. That's why I haven't even asked you if we're heading in the right direction. If you say we are, why should I care? You go ahead, Benjamin, and I'll follow you like a cow behind its calf."

Sendrel's faith in his wisdom was greatly to Benjamin's lik-

ing. He pictured himself as the captain of a ship, steering his vessel over the boundless main. And yet it did not fail to occur to him that he had no idea where they were. Could they have strayed so soon from their route and gotten lost? He was still mulling the matter over when a peasant appeared, driving a wagon piled high with hay.

"I declare, Sendrel!" said Benjamin. "Just to be on the safe side, why don't you ask this fellow where we are? You're better at speaking these foreigners' tongue than I am. After all, your wife dragged you to the market all the time."

Sendrel rose, walked over to the peasant, and said as politely as he could:

"Dobry dyen! Kozhi no tshelovitshe kudi dorogi Eretz-Yisro'eyl?"

"Shtsho?" asked the peasant, eyeing him bewilderedly. *"Yaki Yisro'eyl? Nye batshil ya Yisro'eyl."*

"Nye, nye," interrupted Benjamin impatiently from where he sat. "He thinks you're asking about a person named Israel, not about the land. What a pumpkinhead of a peasant! Tell him it's the land we're looking for. Come, Sendrel, be sharp!"

"Kudi dorogi Errrretz-Yisro'eyl?" asked Sendrel again.

The peasant spat, told them both to go to the Devil, and drove away muttering: "Eres-Srul, Eres-Srul!"

Our heroes set out again. By now Benjamin's calves were aching and his feet felt like two stumps. Nevertheless, he sought to take heart and ignore them; and since walking like an ordinary Jew was not possible, he advanced with a hop-step-and-jump, an awkward gait that he struggled to keep up. What other choice, hang it all, did he have? To lie down in the middle of the road? But this was not something that a Jew did and would only have distressed Sendrel and impeded their progress even more.

In short, they walked all day until God brought them safely at nightfall to the town of Pievke.

Once arrived, Benjamin went straight to the local tavern, where he threw himself down in a corner to rest his legs and catch his breath while Sendrel went to see about supper. The tavernkeeper looked Sendrel up and down, concluded that he was no ordinary wayfarer, bade him a hearty hello, and inquired where a Jew like him might hail from and what his name might be; to which Sendrel replied forthrightly that it was Sendrel, that for all practical purposes he was already a Jew from the Land of Israel, and that he had the honor of being the valet of the illustrious Reb Benjamin who was now relaxing in the corner. Adopting a thoughtful and pious mien, the tavernkeeper told Sendrel to take a seat.

But let us leave the princess of our tale with the tavernkeeper and return to the prince, who lay like a stone in his corner, barely conscious of his surroundings. The blood in the swollen veins of his legs roiled and rankled like a swarm of biting gnats; his temples throbbed as if struck by hammers; and when his ears were not blasting like a shofar at the end of Yom Kippur, they were crackling like fireworks, each rocket exploding before his eyes in bright colors—yellow, green, blue, red, orange, and still more and more. All at once, though, the fireworks ended; he could now see nothing but darkness; and the sound in his ears resembled the rumble of millstones.

For a long while Benjamin lay in a daze, from which he was roused by a distant chime of bells. These drew nearer, becoming clearer and louder, and suddenly there was a creak by the gate like a wagon coming to a stop. All kinds of shrill, hoarse, gurgling, drowsy, piping, throaty voices tumbled out of it, as if a momentous town meeting were being held and everyone was trying to be heard. When the cats yowled on the rooftops of Tuneyadevka, Benjamin may not have understood them, but at least he knew he was listening to caterwauls; now,

however, it was impossible to say whether he was hearing screams, cries, laughter, groans, whispers, shrieks, or grumbles, brash razzing or obsequious cajolery, the hawking of throats or the blowing of noses, the rattle of rales or the clatter of handclaps. Who could begin to figure it out?

Just then the door opened and a gang of men poured pell-mell into the room. Benjamin huddled in his corner, trying to make himself small. The room was now full of light, which came from many brass candlesticks. Some of these were stuffed with old tallow that fused with the candles in strange shapes; others had sockets that were too wide and shallow, so that the tapers stood at mad angles, propped up by lumps of coal. Around a long oak table in the far corner sat a group of musicians tuning their instruments, the fiddler tickling the strings of his fiddle, which chuckled that they were ready and that all that was needed was a bow. This he proceeded to produce, poising it for the first stroke; the flutist spoke quietly to his flute, which answered with a soft note; the cymbalist ran a pair of little hammers slowly over his cymbal; and only the blind drummer slumped over his drum went on snoozing beneath his fur hat while making no move to begin.

Near the musicians stood a man on a small stool, who reduced the room to peals of laughter each time he attempted to speak; even the children crowded outside the windows giggled and made funny faces. Finally, he opened his mouth one more time, let out a loud "Hear! Hear!" and proclaimed: "In honor of the bride, and of the groom, and of their parents, and of our host, and of all of you gathered here tonight, I say: Strike up the band!"

Men and women leaped up and began to dance in a circle. In no time the room was so lively that even the cockroaches crawled from their holes and hopped upon the walls. Sud-

denly a dancer tripped over Benjamin in his corner, took a good look at him, and exclaimed:

"Benjamin! By God, I've found him! It's him, all right, the lost sheep in person!"

At these words, people came running. Benjamin recognized some of Tuneyadevka's finest Jews, Rabbi Eizik-Dovid too. All called in one voice:

"On your feet, Benjamin! Dance, Benjamin! Benjamin, get up and dance!"

"I'm afraid I can't," Benjamin pleaded. "There's no way I can move."

"But there's nothing to it!" he was assured. "Anyone can dance. It's as easy as duck soup. Shake a leg, you lummox! We'll go spread the news that you've been found."

"Zelda!" Benjamin let out a croak. "Please, don't tell Zelda!"

"Shake a leg!" the voices repeated. "On your feet!"

"Have pity on a Jew," begged Benjamin. "I swear, I can't move. There's a reason why I can't, but it's a secret. I can only tell it to the rabbi." He grabbed Eizik-Dovid with both hands and began whispering into his ear, but just then he felt a blow in his ribs that was as sharp as a mouthful of horseradish. Starting with pain, he opened his eyes and saw that the room was dark. The moon was shining in the window, and by its light he saw that he was holding on hard to a calf.

You may wonder what the calf was doing there. Had Benjamin given birth to it? And if so, how could that be? Even assuming that he was an ox, the biggest and lummiest ever, since when do oxen bear calves? And while calves were abundant in the houses of Pievke and Tuneyadevka, these were mooncalves with human faces, like as not pretty ones with dimples, whereas the creature that Benjamin was gripping so tenaciously most definitely had a brute's physiognomy.

Where had it appeared from? Did I hear you say straight from the sky?

Wrong you are, gentle readers! Put no stock in heavenly calves, not a single one of which is to be found among all the yearlings of our region. Let us keep our explanations sweet and simple. What actually happened was this:

When Benjamin collapsed in his corner more dead than alive, he was too exhausted to notice that next to him was a calf. As he lay there with aching legs he dozed off, and in his sleep he dreamed the whole wedding with its musicians and its guests. Tossing and turning, he rolled onto the tavern-keeper's calf, and mistaking it for the rabbi of Tuneyadevka, began to confide in it. The calf, however, seeing no reason to suffer such unwanted intimacies, gave Benjamin a good kick.

Groggy at first, Benjamin hung on to the calf with all his might. It took him a while to push it away, jump frantically to his feet, and beat a hasty retreat. The calf, for its part, sought to get away too, which it did by charging straight into Benjamin and knocking them both with a loud crash into a water bucket.

Sendrel and the tavernkeeper were alarmed by the noise and rushed from the next room with a candle to see what the matter was. It was not a laughing one. Benjamin and the calf lay sprawled on the ground in a pool of liquid. Had an inspired poet been present, he might have vied with David's elegy for Saul and Jonathan by saying, "Lovely and pleasant in their corner, in their puddle they were not divided." But the tavernkeeper and Sendrel were distinctly prosaic souls and the two lovelies were quickly pulled apart. The calf was sent back to its mother with a scolding and Benjamin was led off to be washed, after which he was taken to an alcove and laid down on a straw mat with a pillow underneath his head.

6

IN WHICH OUR HEROES WEND THEIR WAY TO TETEREVKE AND BENJAMIN GETS A THRASHING

BENJAMIN'S LIMBS FELT better after a tub of cold water was poured over them. Indeed, he awoke in the morning feeling so chipper that the calf now struck him as having been sent by the healing hand of Providence. How often men rail at some misfortune, he told Sendrel, without perceiving that it is for the best, nothing being too tiny to serve as an agent of God's will. Why, God could even make a physician of a calf or drive a man mad with a bug, like the gnat that crawled into the ear of the emperor Titus and grew to the size of a bird that pecked his brains out. The incident of the water bucket was an auspicious sign that their expedition had the Lord's blessing and would, with His help, achieve its goal.

"I suppose," replied Sendrel, loath to disagree, "that if breaking a glass at a wedding brings good luck, kicking over a water bucket must bring even better."

Nonetheless, still feeling a bit achy and happy to have a soft mattress beneath him, Benjamin spent the entire day in Pievke like a beached ship waiting for a wind. The next morning he rose early and resumed his journey with Sendrel.

For a long while he walked in melancholy silence, sunk in thought. Suddenly he struck his hand to his forehead and came to a troubled halt. After a few more minutes he sighed:

"Ah, Sendrel, I totally forgot!"

"What? Where?" exclaimed Sendrel, running his hand over his bag.

"At home, Sendrel. That's where I left it."

"Benjamin, what can you be thinking of?" Sendrel asked.

"Everything is right here in our bag. We have our prayershawls and prayerbooks; we have our Sabbath caftans; and I'll be blamed if we need anything else. What can you possibly have forgotten?"

"The most important thing of all, Sendrel, and I only hope that God looks after us, because we'll wish we had it if He doesn't. It's a spell from an old manuscript, which I left behind in my hurry to set out. It's to be said at the beginning of a journey, as you pass the first tollgate, and it's a sure protection against all accidents and dangers. And now I've gone and forgotten it!"

"Maybe," said Sendrel straightforwardly, "you'd like to turn back."

"Are you out of your mind?" cried Benjamin, the blood rushing to his cheeks. "After all that we've been through, how could you even think of it? And the world, what will the world say, tell me that!"

"But what does the world have to do with it?" asked Sendrel. "Did the world ask you to take this trip of yours? Has it given you a signed contract to walk to the other end of it with all expenses paid?"

"What logic!" jeered Benjamin. "I suppose the world asked Alexander the Great to go fight his wars in India! Do you think all the Jews roaming the world right now are being paid to do it?"

"How should I know?" shrugged Sendrel good-naturedly. "For my part, they needn't roam at all. I'm sure they'd be better off if they didn't. Your Alexander must have been a great fool not to have stayed in his palace, eating and drinking and having himself a fine time. What did he need India for? They say there's no place like home, and a saying's as good as an old manuscript. I swear, Benjamin, why ruin your health and your

boots just to get to the far side of nowhere? If I ever see your Alexander that's what I'll tell him, manuscript or not."

Our two worthies had it out at length, Sendrel thrusting away and Benjamin riposting each time that his friend was a dunderhead to think he had any notion of such matters. Like a horse that always has done its master's bidding, following him to the ends of the earth until one fine dudgeony day it rears and balks, Sendrel dug in his heels. But resorting to the whip, Benjamin gave him such a tongue-lashing that in the end he pricked up his ears like an old dobbin and whinnied:

"All right, have it your way. What's it to me?"

And so the two set out again, and after following many a high road and byroad they arrived dead on their feet in Teterevke.

Teterevke was the first large town that our wanderers had ever seen. No wonder that they gawked at its broad boulevards and tall buildings and all but tiptoed along its sidewalks, treading queerly, as if afraid to damage the cobblestones, on small-town feet that never had been pampered by so much as a floor beneath them; that had floundered in mire all their days like the trotters of swine; that had hurried humbly to and fro on their bumpkinish business; and that now wavered as though drunk in the big-city streets, uncertain where to put themselves down. Timid and tense, our Tuneyadevkans stepped aside for everyone, Sendrel seizing Benjamin by the coattails and yanking him out of the way.

And then Sendrel began to dance. It happened when he encountered someone coming straight toward him. The man stepped to his right just as Sendrel stepped to his left and the two remained facing each other; then Sendrel stepped to his right just as the man stepped to his left and they were facing each other again. In the end they do-si-do'd around each

other, but another time, when his opposite number was in no dancing mood, Sendrel found himself hurled so violently sideways that his teeth nearly tumbled from his mouth.

Everything being new to them, our two heroes kept pointing with their fingers. Droshkies clattered by; phaetons rattled along; the tall buildings looked haughtily down from their glass windows; the passersby threw them strange looks. "Stand back, you yokels!" these seemed to say. "Yield and make way!"

"I tell you, Benjamin," said Sendrel, craning his neck to look timorously up at the buildings, "we must be in Stambul!"

"What a nit you are! How could this be Stambul?" asked Benjamin as assuredly as if he had been born there. "Why, Stambul has tens of thousands of main streets, and each street has thousands of buildings, and each building has hundreds of people and ten or twenty floors. And that's not even counting the side streets, and the back streets, and the alleyways, and the lanes, and the walks, and the squares, and the courts, and the yards, and the passages."

"Ai, ai, ai!" exclaimed Sendrel in amazement. "It must give a body a great fright to live in such a place, I swear! But I ask you, Benjamin, where do all these big cities come from? You might think there was no room left anywhere else, the way people are piled on top of each other here! There must be something that makes them want to live so high, up in those tall windows. Do you think it's because our souls come from heaven and are always being drawn back, so that if only we had wings we'd fly right up there? What do your books say, Benjamin? I'm sure you've run across some explanation."

"The most reliable sources," Benjamin replied with a frown of concentration, "have a lot to say about the matter. Once, by the stove in the synagogue, there was a discussion of

a passage in the Talmud concerning the verse in Genesis, 'And the earth was filled with violence.' I'll try to explain it—after all, Sendrel, even you have studied some Bible.

"Well, then, according to the Bible, our ancestors long ago lived in tents. Just before Noah's Flood, though, they all got together in a place called Babel and began to make bricks and build a city with tall houses until they started to bicker and fight. The trouble was, you see, that they couldn't understand each other's language and bollixed everything up. Luckily, God chased them out of there and they went back to living as men should. But the sin of Babel is still with us. In every age the old craving returns to get together. That's why Abraham said to Lot, 'Is not all the land before you? Separate yourself from me.' What he meant was, stop being such a leech. You've got the whole world to live in, so shove over . . ."

Benjamin was only halfway through his dissertation when he was interrupted by the cry of a coachman who nearly ran them both over. "Looksmartyoutwo!" he shouted in one breath, cracking his whip, which scuttled devilishly in front of them like a crab and blocked their path. "Heads up, you hayseeds!"

Our two heroes took to their feet and dodged in circles like poisoned mice. Sendrel tripped over a stoop and went flying headfirst, while Benjamin crashed into a basket of eggs borne by a woman shopper. The eggs broke, but this was nothing compared to his own fate: the oaths, the screams, the mouth on the woman! Every egg was paid for with curses and blows, some merely promised and others delivered in advance, plus a power of hair-pulling. In a word, he barely escaped with his life, taking refuge in a back alley, where he was soon joined by Sendrel.

"How do you like your big city now?" asked Sendrel, wip-

ing the sweat from his face with a corner of his coat. "No walking allowed, no stopping allowed, no looking allowed. The Devil take it!"

"It all goes back to Babel," panted Benjamin. "Everything you see here, Noah saw too. A thieving bunch of murderers!"

"Well, I say to hell with them!" said Sendrel with a wave of his hand. "Come on, Benjamin, let's find a place to rest. You look awful and one of your cheeks is all red. A pox on the old crone's father! And you'd better wash your face, because it's got egg yolk all over it."

7

IN WHICH BENJAMIN CAUSES A POLITICAL UPHEAVAL

IN ONE OF the little synagogues of Teterevke the Crimean War was being hotly debated. The parliament by the stove was divided into factions, each with its party whip and politics. Heikel the Engineer and his band were ranged solidly on Queen Vicky's side, which they upheld with a plethora of proofs. Actually, Heikel was something of a watchmaker, but he was no mean matzo roller either, to say nothing of a master sukkah builder: when it came to constructing a holiday booth from a noodle board, an old shovel, a milking bench, a stove lid, a broken chicken coop, and other such things, no one could hold a candle to him. As a result he was deferred to on all mechanical questions, to which "That's something for Heikel," or "Heikel will know," was the standard response. When he delivered a lecture on the latest English machine he could make your hair stand on end with its marvels, and if interrupted in the middle by a skeptical question about it, his

smiling explanation of the thingamabob that made it work left his questioner feeling benighted. There were, his listeners knew, thingamabobs in watches, in telegraphs, in windup toys, and in all manner of other inventions. Only Itzik Show-Me, who scoffed that if Heikel was to be believed, the Lord God must have created the world with the help of a thingamabob too, dared deny their existence.

Needless to say, all of Itzik's objections stemmed from ignorance and envy, but since Heikel the Engineer was enamored of Queen Vicky, Itzik Show-Me, as loyal leader of the Opposition, took the side of Mother Russia with all the means at his disposal. Both vied for the votes of the other parties, and just as Heikel was about to strike a deal with Shmuel Bokser, the head of the pro-Turk faction, and was far advanced in negotiations with French Berl, the chief supporter of Napoleon III, Itzik Show-Me staged a parliamentary coup by coming to terms with Tuvya Mock, an ally of the Austrian Kaiser. The floor buzzed with rumors; tempers flew; the Crimean War seemed about to take a new turn; the whole synagogue was in an uproar. And it was at this exact moment that our two worthies, in search of lodgings, walked in.

As in all other things, Sendrel was only too happy to yield in politics too. "If that's your opinion," he told everyone right off, "why should I care?" This greatly pleased the members of parliament, who deemed him a likable chap and not the least stubborn or devious. Benjamin, on the other hand, though choosier about his associates, took instantly to Shmuel Bokser, with whom he hit it off so well that the two of them were soon fast friends; hearing of Benjamin's expedition, Shmuel went to tell Heikel, who ruled that it merited serious consideration, problematic though it was. He therefore conferred with French Berl and Tuvya Mock, both of whom were equally impressed. From the very first, they said, they had re-

alized that Benjamin was not your run-of-the-mill individual. There was a remoteness about him; often he seemed lost in thought; when he spoke it was hard to grasp his meaning; when he smiled his eyes were far away; his gestures and demeanor were uncommon. In a word, all things pointed to the fact that, far from being a simple Jew, he was a person of rare degree. Who was to say? Perhaps our Benjamin was more than just a mere man . . .

By now there was a frightful commotion in the synagogue, for Itzik Show-Me, beset by his opponents, had cleared his throat and was tapping a book with one finger while shouting:

"Here! See for yourselves! It's written in Yosifon's history, and I quote: 'When Alexander the Great desired to visit the descendants of Yonadav ben-Rechav, he and his warriors set out for the Mountains of Darkness. They were unable, however, to proceed, for their legs sank into mud up to their knees, the region being a swampy one on which the sun never shone.' And I ask you: if the great Alexander, who flew his eagle to the very gates of Paradise, could not cross the Mountains of Darkness, how, no matter who he is, is this Benjamin going to do it? Not even all of Heikel's thingamabobs could help!"

"You numskull!" thundered Heikel, poking Itzik with his thumb while snatching away the book. "Where are your eyes? It says on the same page, and I quote: 'Then Alexander heard birds speaking to him in the tongue of the Greeks, one of which said: All of thy efforts must come to naught, for thou mayst not enter God's house and the house of His servants, the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.' Is it clear to you now, you dunce, why Alexander the Great couldn't get across the mountains?"

"That's all very well, my ingenious engineer, but the best authorities believe that the lost tribes live far beyond the

Mountains of Darkness, in the land of Prester John, and I'd like to see this fine fellow of yours find *that*. We'll all be eating cold porridge before he does."

"Good Lord, Itzik, you're talking balderdash!"

"You just wait, my genius. He's got to cross the Sambatyon too. How is he going to do it when its waters are full of hurtling rocks? Even if he crosses the mountains and finds Prester John, he's still got the Sambatyon, blast it all! He'll never get his foot into it, not even if Queen Vicky does cartwheels with her arse up."

"Leave Vicky out of this! This time you've gone too far."

"Really, Itzik," French Berl intervened angrily, "there's no need to make fun of royalty. We're talking about Benjamin. You can mock him if you want, but not kings and queens."

"Why mock Benjamin?" cried Tuvya Mock. "Benjamin is setting out on an expedition that will be a great thing for the Jews."

"Ah, Mock, Mock, it's you who mock, Mock!" cried Itzik, shaking an aggravated head. "I never would have thought that you would be taken in by all this talk about Benjamin. What do you see in him?"

"Will you listen to that! *What do you see in him?*" repeated Shmuel Bokser sarcastically. "Have you gone totally mad today, Itzik? Why, his bearing, his breeding, the way he talks, the brains he has—they're all the mirror of the man. If that's not enough to convince you, I don't know what is. Why don't you take another look at him and tell me which one of us is crazy. Look at how his cheeks glow! Look at the three lines under his eye that form a perfect Shin, the first letter of Shaddai, the name of God! Well, what do you say now, Itzik?"

Itzik stepped up to Benjamin, surveyed him from head to toe, barely missed hitting him with a gob of spit, and walked irately away. Benjamin had caused a political upheaval.

Shmuel Bokser and French Berl now joined forces with Heikel; Queen Vicky sent thousands of warships from England, bristling with fearful guns; the Turk retreated across the Prut; Napoleon ordered a bombardment of Sebastopol; Tuvya Mock stood saying now one thing and now another, not knowing with whom to cast his lot; and Itzik Show-Me, having resorted to every possible device and all but leaped out of his skin, was left high and dry. Such a setback was no joke. From then on he had it in for Benjamin.

"God is my witness," Benjamin has written, "that I never intended to become involved politically. In the first place, what good could it have done me? And in the second place, what business was it of a Jew's? As far as I was concerned, the Crimean War could have ended however it wanted. My Sendrel, of course, kept strictly aloof from such matters, and subsequently, Itzik did his best to make my days and nights difficult. Once he stuck tarred feathers to my back; another time he threw a cushion at me; yet another, he hid my shoes while I racked my brain looking for them. He tickled my heels with a straw when I was asleep, making me jump out of bed, and blew smoke in my face, so that I awoke coughing like a consumptive, all because of his political debacle."

8

IN WHICH OUR HEROES MAKE THE ROUNDS OF TETEREVKE

OUR HEROES SPENT the better part of their days providing for their needs. They made the rounds of Teterevke's homes and before long became so well-known that people pointed them

out in the street and even stopped to laugh and grin at them. Others might have put on airs upon seeing the delight they were glimpsed with, the pleasure brought by a word from them, and the smiles that ushered them in and out of houses, but our two Tuneyadevkans were unspoiled souls who took such honors in stride. Benjamin was preoccupied with the next stages of his expedition, while Sendrel's main concern was keeping his bag full of food and his purse with a few farthings in it. As long as Jews gave, he did not particularly care if they looked happy or sad. In the words of the old Purim ditty:

A penny is all I'm asking for:
Fork it up and I'm out the door!

Often indeed as he made his rounds Sendrel would hum these lines, which so well expressed his and Benjamin's simple modesty. "A good morning to you and God bless!" he would say as he entered a house with Benjamin in tow. Giving Benjamin an encouraging push and reminding him in a whisper that there was no need for embarrassment, he would let him do the talking while standing respectfully to one side.

On one of these visits our heroes encountered a young man who had preceded them and was talking intensely to the owner of the house. He was, it appeared, seeking to persuade the latter of the importance of a certain undertaking that the whole world was agog over while taking care to promote his own self with the help of some documents he displayed. His host, who was frowning and fidgeting as if to evade the young man's clutches, grasped at Sendrel and Benjamin like a drowning man at a straw, obviously hoping that they had arrived on some urgent business that would allow him to show

his petitioner the door. Upon hearing what they had come for he stood there dumbfounded, like a man overwhelmed by adversity.

"More travelers!" he exclaimed to the young man as soon as he recovered his speech. "These two Jews are travelers too! You can see for yourself, there's nothing but travelers!"

The young man and our Tuneyadevkans exchanged glances.

"Did you hear that?" whispered Sendrel to Benjamin, pulling him aside. "Maybe this young fellow is headed where we are. Suppose he gets there first and leaves us in the rear?"

"You wouldn't happen to belong to the same party, would you?" inquired the owner of the house.

"Not a chance!" cried Benjamin and Sendrel in one voice. "We're on our own, entirely on our own."

"Well, have a good trip then," said their host, reaching into his pocket for a coin. "You still look like one party to me, though."

"Here, sir, let me, sir, I'll be glad to relieve you of that, sir," cried Sendrel, holding out his hand. "We'll see to it that this young fellow gets his share. Come, young man, we'll settle with you outside. I have some change."

Just then the kitchen door swung open and a horrid voice shrieked:

"It's him, it's him! The one standing next to the small, thin Jew! They were hanging around together then too. I'd know him anywhere, the innocent angel, by that face and that yellow beard. Oh, I'd give it a good trimming, I would! God in heaven, the plague take him and his scheming heart! May his brains melt and ooze out of every bone in his body!"

"We'd better get out of here," said Sendrel, tugging at Benjamin's coat. "A pox on the old crone's father! She still hasn't gotten over her broken eggs."

9

IN WHICH OUR HEROES ARE SAVED BY A MIRACLE

ONE CANNOT BUT heave a commiserating sigh upon reading the histories of the many renowned men of intellect who suffered so greatly at the hands of a world for which they sacrificed the best years of their lives, while making it the gift of their invaluable discoveries. The world is like an infant that likes to cuddle in its mother's lap, from which it fears to take the slightest step, and its favorite stories are the credulous tales that it hears a hundred times a day from its nannies and grandmothers, the moral of which is that nothing exceeds its childhood games, so that, although beyond its doors are wisdom and science, it kicks and screams as if kidnapped by a murderer when the time comes to be taken off to school. Its greatest desire is to remain as it is; nothing provokes it more than what is new; and then it fights back with tantrums and mud-throwing. And for the same reason, once the new has taken root, and the world has grown accustomed to it and its benefits, it embraces these with such pleasure that it forgets the sweat and tears of the poor genius who first thought of them even as it honors him with a mass or a monument.

Do not millions of men today live happily and breathe free in America? And yet when Columbus first conceived of setting out for that continent, he was called a lunatic and made to suffer for his views. Such, dear reader, was the case with Benjamin. Those who saw him considered him mad; hearing of his journey, they clutched their sides with laughter; they played pranks on him, abused him like an alley cat. It was a great stroke of luck that he failed to notice any of this, for

otherwise he might easily have grown disheartened, or worse yet, physically ill, and abandoned his expedition. Indeed, if we have chosen to omit here the greater part of the world's tomfoolery toward him, we have done so only to prevent the eternal shame of it from being transmitted to future generations. Keeping our knowledge of these indignities locked forever in our breast, we shall resume our tale.

Teterevke, Benjamin relates, is inhabited by a large number of Jews, may they continue to be fruitful and multiply. Just who they are, whereof they are composed, and whence they hail are weighty questions to which they themselves have no answers; yet there is an age-old tradition among them that they derive from Jewish stock, and a goodly portion of their apparel, language, business practices, and other habits clearly points to such an origin, albeit one traceable to diverse uprooted tribes that chanced to settle in one place, as is evidenced by the fact that they have to this day so little to do with each other that, if one of them falls in the street, the others, strange to say, will refuse to help him up even should his life depend on it. Not a few of them understand and talk thieves' Latin or *jargonus iudeorum,* and they are highly versed in the art of palmistry or palm-crossing and often expert cutters, pressers, and turners, for they will cut each other on a whim, press on when told to desist, and turn their backs on those in need of them. Notable among their customs is a prohibition on uttering God's name in vain, which they obey by pronouncing it in all other fashions, such as whispering, shouting, crying, and sobbing it until they bring tears to your eyes. According to one school of thought, they are all that is left of the ancient race of Caphtorites mentioned in the Bible, for Caphtor is Crete and there are not a few cretins among them, but in any case, concludes Benjamin, "They were good and honorable souls who always greeted me with a special

smile that expressed their contentment with me. My profoundest wish is that man and God be no less content with them."

One of the marvels of the region, Benjamin has said, is that one frequently encounters in it two-legged creatures with the faces of swine. One theory holds them to be a separate species, while another maintains that they are local variants of men. Benjamin himself has no firm opinion on the matter, being of the view that it is best left to further scientific investigation. In either case, he observes, the phenomenon was noted long ago by Matityahu Delacrut, who wrote that "In the land of the Britons there dwells a people that has tails on its behinds like animals. Moreover, there are women there, large as giants, who have bristles like pigs . . . And in the land of the Franks a people has been sighted that grows horns, and in the mountains of that country are women with crooked limbs, and the crookeder they are, the fairer they are deemed." To which Benjamin adds: "Such women, indeed, wanting in symmetry, can be found among us Jews today too, for often, if I may express myself indelicately, we see them with drooping rears that dangle to the ground like tails. How true is the verse that says that there is nothing new under the sun, and that what is, is what will be!"

Teterevke, reports Benjamin, is a sizable town with fine buildings and long streets, but despite one's first impression of a place teeming with vitality, it turns out on closer acquaintance to be little more than a magnified Tuneyadevka. Its inhabitants rise every morning just like the Tuneyadevkans, and they too divide their days into waiting for breakfast, waiting for lunch, and waiting for supper, the three oases for which they long like a cow in barren fields for green pasture. It is commonly said that the very air of Teterevke makes a man sluggish and slothful, and that whoever arrives there

with a bit of pluck or drive soon loses both and wishes only to eat, sleep, and rise to eat some more.

During his stay Benjamin met a number of provincial accountants and lawyers who had come to Teterevke from elsewhere. "A man has to get out into the world," they had told the folk back home. "He has to roll up his sleeves and apply himself and get ahead and do some good." In point of fact, being an accountant or a lawyer in Teterevke was like being a fifth wheel on a wagon, since the taxes remained just as high even without anyone's help, but so great was the ambition of these Teterevke-bound souls that they borrowed money to pay their bills and travel expenses and set out for there full of hope. And yet fiendishly enough, no sooner did they set foot in the town than their initiative declined. Declined? Disappeared totally! Sluggish and slothful, they so quickly fell to eating, drinking, and sleeping like a native Teterevkan that one might have thought them the victims of a spell. The days and years went by; the folk back home sent them money on request, and one request followed another; and their lives passed like Sleeping Beauty's in the fairy tale, no medicine man or wonder worker being ever again able to conjure them forth from Teterevke.

Benjamin was all afire to make the acquaintance of the town's renowned scholars and authors. He was, after all, something of a scholar himself, having read many a Jewish book; furthermore, he knew the titles of many more, in both rabbinics and the Seven Arts; what, then, could be more natural than to introduce himself to his fellows? Moreover, he sorely desired to talk to them about his expedition. These were the people who could best understand and appreciate him, and who might give him letters of recommendation that would open doors for him. Missives of this sort were routinely issued for all sorts of trifles; in a truly important case

like his, he had no doubt, they would be written so avidly that the pen would gallop across the paper like a horse.

There was just one problem, which was that whenever he came to the house of one of these learned gentlemen, the latter was either eating or sleeping. Once, however, he found one of them, a quite splendidly famous writer, reclining on a wooden bench in his study. "Good morning," said Benjamin. "And to you," replied the man. "What can I do for you?" "Oh," said Benjamin, "I just dropped by for a chat." But the chat went none too well. The writer looked comatose; his lips barely moved when he spoke; his eyelids kept drooping; and he seemed in all respects about to give up the ghost. Although Benjamin did his energetic best to keep the conversation going, he might have had better luck with a block of ice. In the end the man roused himself, let out a mighty yawn, and called for his wife. "Tell me," he asked, stretching himself so hard that Benjamin heard his bones crack, "when are we going to eat? I hope it's soon, because I'd like to take a little snooze . . ."

In a word, Teterevke was one big bedroom in which everyone and everything slept well: the scholars, the merchants, the banks, the courtrooms, and the shops. There was no waking them from their slumbers, and even when the Teterevkans spent time in company, they sat staring at each other like so many mannikins until, one by one, they dozed off. The only thing that could breathe a spark of life into them was the dinner bell, which they responded to with great gusto before turning in for the night.

It was not long before Benjamin began to feel the influence of the town. He did little more than eat and sleep himself, and his enthusiasm for his expedition waned. He was like a ship becalmed at sea, in danger of being stranded in Teterevke. And there indeed he might have remained for the rest of his

life were it not, luckily for him and the world, for a stormy incident that drove him out of his lull.

Itzik Show-Me's hatred of Benjamin had grown from day to day and he plagued him with arguments against his expedition, one more discouraging than the next. Benjamin, said Itzik, would see hair sprout on his palm before he reached the Sambatyon, and his chances of finding the Ten Lost Tribes were like those of glimpsing his own ears. Benjamin did not take this lying down. There was, he retorted, a God above who did not forsake those who put their trust in Him, and with God's help he would reach his destination whether his enemies liked it or not. The more heated he became, the more fiery was the stream of words that issued from his mouth: basilisks, sea monsters, Minotaurs, juggernauts, jackasses! In a word, he was saying: "You can go on barking up that tree forever, but I myself will soon be far away, trekking across the wilderness, on and on . . ."

Itzik's response to all this was to spit three times against the Evil Eye and declare that Benjamin was out of his mind and in need of an exorcist. It reached the point that, as soon as Benjamin stepped into the street, he was followed by ragging idlers who cried: "Sea monsters! Basilisks!" Once, as he and Sendrel were out walking at night, they were set upon by such a swarm of ruffians that they had to escape through a back alley. In the course of their flight they found themselves speeding downhill toward a long, narrow footbridge, coming across which was a man who could not be avoided without breaking their skulls, or at the very least their legs, in a last-minute leap. Since both these parts of their anatomy were crucial for their expedition, they had no choice but to run into him nose first.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't Benjamin!" exclaimed this per-

sonage with a humph of a laugh. "Of all places to meet up with you, my word! I couldn't have wished for a better."

"Well, well, it's Rabbi Eizik-Dovid," answered Benjamin in a voice not quite his own.

It was indeed Rabbi Aron-Yosel-and-Sorah-Zlote's-Eizik-Dovid, the sage of Tuneyadevka.

"A fine pair you are!" scolded Rabbi Eizik-Dovid. "Since when does a man get up and walk out on his own home like a thief in the night, eh? Who goes and makes a widow out of two wives without dying? It's beyond me, it is. There's a way to do everything and some things aren't done! And of course—because it isn't as though—since even without that—although on the other hand—but the fact is—well, of course, of course! And not that I'm asking, but what are you doing here? I mean you too, Sendrel. Don't think I don't see you standing in back of Benjamin. Your wife, Sendrel, is going to give it to you good, she'll wipe the floor with you like a herring. Something told her, it did—I mean your wife—she had, your wife, a notion that—she even said to me—and now she will!"

"There he is!" cried a voice belonging to a woman looming behind Rabbi Eizik-Dovid.

Sendrel recognized it as his wife's and turned white as chalk. Catching his breath, he clutched at Benjamin's coat with both hands to keep from falling off the bridge. Not that it mattered, he thought, because he was about to be split in two like a log.

"Just look at the lovely couple!" shrieked Sendrel's wife, pushing Rabbi Eizik-Dovid aside. "They can both go to the Devil! Wait until I get my hands on that worthless tramp. I'll teach him that there's a God, I will!"

"Come, calm down," urged Rabbi Eizik-Dovid. "What's

the rush? If you've waited this long, you can wait a little longer. A widow, thank God, you'll no longer be. And as for the rest, well, what is there to say, eh? A woman can't help being a woman. Just when you think she has a bit of brains, that's what she turns out to be. Because if we begin with the end of the story, why fret? Of course, he shouldn't have done it. Some things aren't done and there's a way to do everything! But since he did it, it's done, and since it's done, what are you doing? Forgive me if I talk to you like a mother, but you're acting just like a woman."

Rabbi Eizik-Dovid was just getting going, which usually happened in his case only after turning everything over backwards and forwards several times with pepper and onion, but by now there was a line of angry people at either end of the bridge, grumbling about the Jews who were blocking traffic in order to have themselves a chat. The bridge was so narrow that it could only be crossed in one direction at a time, and as the pedestrians at Sendrel and Benjamin's end began to surge past them, Rabbi Eizik-Dovid and Sendrel's wife were forced to retreat to the other side. Benjamin was the first to rally himself and say:

"Sendrel, what are we waiting for? We're standing here like the boy in the story who was tied to a table leg with a rope the other end of which was put in his mouth. This is the time to drop it and clear out!"

"As I'm a Jew, you're right!" answered Sendrel as gladly as a man released from irons. "Hurry, Benjamin, hurry, if you don't want to fall into her hands! This is no ordinary bridge. God's put it here just for us . . ."

Our two heroes made a quick getaway and were soon at the far end of town. Without further ado they took their packs and said farewell to Teterevke.

10

HURRAH! THE LOST TRIBES!

"HEY, HEY, OUT of my way!" shouted a driver from the seat of his coach as he nearly ran into two women standing in the middle of the busiest street in Glupsk, both carrying baskets of foodstuffs—meat, radishes, onions, and garlic—under their arms. The two were exchanging confidences in voices that could be heard a mile away, each hastening along on opposite sides of the street, so that by the time they finished their conversation they were shouting operatically above the din of coaches, cabs, wagons, and carts piled high with firewood, which formed a long, impassable column of traffic.

"Hasya-Beile! Will I see you at the gypsy fortuneteller's tonight? I'll be there with my boyfriend, and he told me that yours will be there too. We'll have a grand time. Come on, you goose, you'll enjoy it! Won't you come, Hasya-Beile?"

"My missus, drat her, has given me the honor of making farfel and sourdough bread tonight, but I'll try to slip away. Please, though, Dobrish, not a word of it to anyone!"

"Listen here, Hasya-Beile! Your missus won't croak if she has to wait another hour for her dinner. If she gets hungry, tell her to eat worms. And Hasya-Beile, don't sift your flour so well, because all you'll have left is the bran. How much did you manage to pocket from your market money today?"

"The rascal! The rascal! Somebody grab that sneak! What the Devil does he think he's doing? He should be strung up from a lamppost!"

"Why, what happened, Hasya-Beile? What are you screaming for?"

"A thief, Dobrish! He very nearly made off with my basket. It's a lucky thing I had my eyes open."

"Then look up ahead, Hasya-Beile! What's that crowd doing there? There must be a fire. That's the second one today, and I'll bet it's not the last!"

"But there are no fire bells, Dobrish. We'd be hearing them if there was a fire."

"Wait, here comes Sima-Dvosse the market-woman, I'll ask her. Sima-Dvosse! Sima-Dvosse! What's all that commotion?"

"I don't know and I'm not sure I care to. Maybe Nehame-Nisa does. Nehame-Nisa, sweetheart! What are all those people standing in a circle for? Tell your ducks to pipe down, because I can't hear you. I'll bet Hodl will buy them all for the feast. Didn't you hear she gave birth this morning? Ooh, my, what fat ducks! There wasn't an egg to be had in the market today. What's going on there?"

"How should I know? I suppose it's the lost tribes. I heard someone shout something about them."

"What, lost tribes in Glupsk? Ai ai ai! We'd better go take a look!"

With a cry the women ran to join the circle. In it a large gang of drifters was hooting:

"Hurrah, sea monsters! Hurrah, basilisks! Hurrah, the lost tribes!"

The lost tribes were none other than our two heroes, Benjamin and Sendrel, who, shortly after the incident of the bridge, arrived in Glupsk and within a few weeks were quite famous. The town's leading Jews were as excited about them as they were about the local shoemaker who was discovered in those days to be a hidden miracle worker. First to come across the two was a pair of proper old ladies, Toltze and Treine, whose well-known habit it was to don their best Sabbath jackets and kerchiefs every evening and sally forth from town to greet the Messiah. One day as the sun went down, it fell to their happy lot to encounter our worthies, freshly ar-

rived from Teterevke, on the hither side of the tollgate and to escort them into Glupsk. It did not take long for the old women to find out everything about the two strangers entrusted by fate to their care. Toltze and Treine exchanged wondering glances and poked each other smilingly in the ribs. "Well, Toltze?" "Well, Treine?" they whispered, yielding quickly to their premonition that the travelers were no ordinary mortals. So overcome with joy were they that, hearing of the two men's journey, they seemed to grow younger on the spot. "Well, Toltze?" "Well, Treine?" they whispered again, staring at the heaven-sent figures and nudging each other once more.

In the days that followed, Toltze darned the newcomers' socks while Treine patched their shirts and made new laces for their shoes, and both were as blissful as a pair of young brides. Nor were our heroes well received just by them. Where else but in Glupsk, indeed, could they have been so appreciated? Yea, get ye Glupskward, Jewish children! Why languish in loafery by the stoves of small-town synagogues when you can be in Glupsk, blast it all! There you will meet your true equals, your Toltzes, your Treines, and your thousands of other Jews, fine, reputable folk every one; there you will prosper and be made whole again; there you will find favor, there you will gain merit, there you will begin at last to live . . .

Glupskward ho and the Devil take the hindmost!

HERE IS BENJAMIN'S description of the place:

"Arriving by the Teterevke Road, you must indulgently cross a large bog, then a second, and then the third and largest, into which, to put it baldly, empty the sewers and chamberpots of Glupsk, bringing with them all the town has to offer. Each day has its own items, colors, and smells and can easily be guessed by what comes along. If, for instance,

you encounter an effluvium yellowed by scrubbing sand and mixed with fish scales, the heads and toes of chickens, animal hairs, and charred bits of hoof, you may, confident that it is a Friday, reach for your bucket and birch rod and run straight to the bathhouse. On the other hand, if floating your way is a solution of eggshells, onion peels, radish stems, herring tails, the gristle of calves' livers, and empty marrow bones, it is time to wish your fellow Jews a good Sabbath and hasten home to eat your weekly noodle pudding. Sundays, the tide slows to a bare trickle; now it carries bits of burned kasha, dried lumps of dough, torn dishrags, and an occasional scouring pad; the water carrier has not begun his weekly rounds and there is barely enough in the bilges of the barrels to wash out the Sabbath stew pots. And so it goes throughout the week, no two days of which bear the same sludge or stench.

"Once you have safely passed the slop-bogs, you will come, gentle reader, to a small mountain of debris that is the remains of a burned house. On top of it, looking like an itinerant preacher on his soapbox, generally stands a cow, serenely chewing her cud while staring bemusedly at the throng of Jews below running back and forth like drugged ants with their walking sticks, canes, and umbrellas. Now and then she lets out a bovine sigh or exhalation, as if in pity for the world, and also, alas, for her own wretched fate at having fallen into the clutches of such a people . . .

"Putting the burned house behind you, you may now proceed straight ahead, and if, as I most sincerely hope, you do not slip and break a leg on any of the treacherous cobblestones that lie somewhat oddly distributed, but rather regain your footing each time, you will reach a kind of square, in which you will find the true life of Glupsk. Indeed, if there is reason to call the Teterevke Road Glupsk's guts, this square can rightly be considered its heart, which beats without stop-

ping day and night. Here are the shops with their shelves of goods, and especially, with their odds and ends of cloth, lace, ribbons, satins, and furs that are Glupsk's famous discount fabrics, so called because its tailors disdain to count them as the customer's when they are left over from what he has paid for. Around them noisily swarms a solid mass of Jews, pushing, pushed, and poked by carts and wagons; but although it is claimed by Glupsk's doctors that the average autopsy of your local Jew turns up at least one wagon shaft in his body, little credence can be put in their statistics, most of the town's medicine being practiced by its barber-surgeons.

"Among the familiar voices in the town square of Glupsk are those of its little ragamuffins, who go about shouting in a peculiar singsong: 'Hot kasha cakes! Hot pudding! Come and get it! Get your onions! Get your Jewish garlic!' Vying with them are the sounds of outdoor prayer, a group for which can always be found before sunset, while loudest of all are the cries on nights of the Sanctification of the Moon, when passersby are accosted with the call of 'Yes sir, come and bless 'er!' Porters, their bodies coiled in thick rope, wait for work; retired veterans stand about in their puttees and tattered greatcoats; rag ladies hawk old underclothes, caftans, jackets, and other wear; and in the midst of all this stands the town watchman, a Gentile munching on a piece of Jewish challah given him for snuffing out the Sabbath lights in houses and guarding its crumbs as zealously as if it were the Passover afikoman. Pickpockets are hard at work; out of nowhere springs a grimy, wild-haired beggar girl and shrieks in a practiced voice while grabbing your lapel, bawling as if she meant to kill you for your money; scamps run jeering after a madman in a crumpled cap who is crooning a sad ballad; and a young man stands by a chest with a peephole, into which Jews peer while he mimes and chants:

"'That's London that you're looking at . . . There goes the Pope in red breeches—see how people doff their hats . . . Here are Napoleon and his Frenchies fighting the Prussians. The Prussians are running like roaches! . . . And now see the Sultan with a fine lady in his carriage. The man holding the whip and reins is his grand vizier. No, the horses are rearing! The carriage has turned over! The Sultan has taken a spill! They're trying to free themselves . . . All right now, that's enough! How much do you expect for a copper farthing?'

"In the town square of Glupsk you may also see long rows of Jewesses sitting with baskets of garlic, cucumbers, cherries, gooseberries, currants, crab apples, Kol Nidre pears, and all sorts of other wares. Slightly beyond them is a tumbledown, windowless, doorless old shack, which the graybeards remember as once having been the barracks of Glupsk's single hussar; the whole town, they recall, turned out to see his wondrous spit-and-polish. Next to this shack, which is spoken of with the reverence due an ancient fortress, beneath a roof of moldy boards covered with rotting straw and rushes and supported by four crooked corner posts, sits Dvosye the greengroceress, surrounded by more baskets of her own. Before her is a heated pot, which she roosts on in winter like a hen on its eggs, rising only to blow new life into the coals or to retrieve a roasted potato.

"There is a very old legend about the Jews of Glupsk, which relates that they are descendants of the Israelites sent in ships by King Solomon to the Hindoo port of Ophir, where they traded for gold and other exotic things. For sundry reasons they remained there and opened shops and counting-houses, buying from the local Teutons, as the natives were called, at great discounts and selling to them at high profits, so that they prospered for long years. But in the end the wheel of fortune spun round and our merchants lost all and were

forced to wander on. Some perished in the wilderness; others safely crossed the border and set out in ships, ultimately reaching the Fetidnelevka River, which in those days debouched into the sea. Up it they sailed until assaulted by a terrible storm; waves high as the sky battered the ships and swept their passengers ashore. Here they built a town and called it Glupsk.

"Our modern historians, whose erudition can build monuments from mustard seeds, have written volumes about this legend, demonstrating with a thousand clever arguments, in each case leading to different conclusions, that it contains a grain of truth. Among the proofs advanced by them are, first, the structure of Glupsk's houses, which, though oddly built, are in an ancient style going back thousands of years to the times when men lived in tents and caves. And yet while many a home in Glupsk resembles a burrow or the yurt of a Mongol, none looks quite like any other. If one leans this way, the next leans that way to spite it; if the first stands broadside to the street, the second stands lengthwise; if this one has steps, that one has a ladder designed for acrobats; if your patchwork roof slants crazily up, mine slopes wildly down. If you don't like it, you don't have to look.

"Architecturally, in a word, there is plentiful evidence of antiquity. Secondly, many of the customs of Glupsk that continue to be observed to this day bear clear traces of the heathens among whom the town's inhabitants lived long ago. Reading, writing, and arithmetic are practically unknown, in consequence of which all communal business is conducted without books and no accounts are given or expected.

"Thirdly, like the Hindoos, the inhabitants of Glupsk are divided into castes. First and foremost are the Muck-a-mucks, who hold sway over the rest; next come the Harum-Scarums, who fight their masters' battles in return for divers

favors and the choicest cuts of meat; and after them are the Slipslops, who are the cause of many a downfall but always land on their feet. They consist of the Banca Ruptas, or merchant class, and the Januses, or priests, and are followed by the Untouchables, or common folk, who serve all the others, for which they are rewarded with the rheum, the ague, the catarrh, and the pox.

"Fourthly, there is the old coin that was found in Glupsk in the course of digging a ditch. On its badly effaced obverse side it is barely possible to make out what appears to be part of an apron attached to a stick, below which is an object resembling a mixing bowl full of human skull bones; the reverse side is practically blank, yet careful scrutiny reveals the letters YESHELG VEANAF in ancient Hebrew characters. This inscription has taxed the ingenuity of the scholars, each of whom has sought to decipher it in keeping with his views. Some are of the opinion that the Y and G of YESHELG are not letters at all, but rather remnants of illustrations, thus leaving the words ESHEL, 'a tamarisk tree,' and VEANAF, 'and a branch,' which explain the apron and stick. Others have disputed this, occasioning a fierce debate, the latest contribution to which is the striking theory that YESHELG is an acronym of *YEhudim SHE-ba'u Le-Glupsk,* 'Jews who came to Glupsk,' and VEANAF of *VEnityashvu Al NAhar Fetidnelevka,* 'and settled on the Fetidnelevka River.' The apron, stick, mixing bowl, and skull bones, it is claimed, are actually a ship with its mast, sail, and passengers. The author of this theory has written a lengthy book defending it, in which he proposes that the Fetidnelevka be drained in the hope of finding further evidence bearing on the origins of Glupsk's Jews. The Jews of Glupsk themselves, however, reject the idea, insisting that the waters muddied by their ancestors be left unclarified.

"Close to two score more slops-bogs are to be found in the

town itself, some large enough to contain meadows, and all linked by a series of underground passages to the source of the Fetidnelevka. At certain times of the year, especially before Passover, these erupt and flood the streets with such a deep current of filth that not even the tallest pedestrian can keep his hat clean.

"At night Glupsk is lit by a small streetlamp and patrolled by two watchmen. Those walking where the houses block the light often fall and break their necks, and there are frequent thefts while the watchmen watch each other. The conclusion reached by the Glupskians is that such protective measures are in vain and that what is fated will happen regardless of men's attempts to circumvent it."

And so, Benjamin concludes too, the best way to tour Glupsk is with one's eyes closed, trusting in the Lord and His angels to guide one safely through its streets. There's never a slip unforetold from God's lip, as the saying goes. Besides, Benjamin relates, "The only possession I had to guard was my prayershawl bag, which I left on a shelf in the synagogue, surely the safest place imaginable. If it was nevertheless stolen like everything else in Glupsk, this could only be because the Divine Will did not decree otherwise."

11

IN WHICH WE HEAR OF THE WONDERS OF THE FETIDNELEVKA

THE FIRST TIME our heroes caught sight of the Fetidnelevka they were startled and amazed, for they had never seen such a river. Sendrel reckoned that it must be the largest in the world. He had never thought about rivers before, and this

one, which looked a hundred times the size of Tuneyadevka's, was no joke. Indeed, Tuneyadevka was all Sendrel had to go by, and since he was not much on book knowledge, whatever he encountered for the first time seemed an unsurpassed marvel. Benjamin, on the other hand, being well-versed not only in the Seven Arts, but also in the four ancient rivers of Paradise, the three holy rivers of India, and any number of other flowing bodies, was not above managing a smile that said: "Yes, this is all very nice, but it's nothing compared to what's ahead . . ." The Fetidnelevka, he informed Sendrel, was a mere trickle next to the Jordan. Why, the Leviathan described in the Book of Job could swallow it in one gulp!

"Do you know what I've been thinking, Sendrel?" he asked one day, halting while deep in thought by the river's edge. "I've been thinking that we should continue our journey by water."

"God help you!" Sendrel gave a frightened start. "If our stream in Tuneyadevka, Benjamin, takes a life a year, just think of what this river must do. Have pity on us both, and on your wife and children!"

"It's not pity we should have, Sendrel, it's faith! Faith is the Jewish way. It was on faith that Jacob crossed the Jordan with but a stick, and it's on faith that a Jew opens a store with no stock. Not even the houses of Glupsk could stand without faith."

"But why must we have faith in water," asked Sendrel, "when we can just as well have faith on land?"

"For several reasons," answered Benjamin. "In the first place, because it's faster. The sooner we arrive, the better. For the moment you'll have to take my word for it, but every minute counts. Ah, Sendrel, I'm on fire to get there! It's all I think of—I'd give anything to be there already. If only I had

wings and could fly . . . And in the second place, when Benjamin of Tudela set out on his voyage, he began by sailing down the Ebro. It says so in his book—and if that was the way to do it then, it's the way to do it now. He knew what he was about, I can promise you. When it comes to following the ancients, ours is not to reason why."

"Well now," said Sendrel, "that makes all the difference. As I'm a Jew, Benjamin, you explain it so well that I wouldn't stop at water. If your Benjamin of Tudela had ridden on a pitchfork, I'd choose pitchforks without thinking twice."

"And thirdly," Benjamin continued, "it won't hurt to start getting used to water now, before we have to cross the ocean. In fact, while we're finishing up our business in Glupsk it wouldn't be a bad idea to do some sailing. Look, there's a fellow over there with a fishing skiff! Hang it all, why don't we ask him to go for a spin?"

A few minutes later our two wanderers boldly boarded the skiff and embarked on the Fetidnelevka. At first they were rather nervous. Sendrel, indeed, trembled with fright; the boat had only to capsize and he would soon be at the bottom of the river with a real widow for a wife. Yet after a while he calmed down a bit, and as they sailed out into the current Benjamin said comfortingly:

"You're doing fine, Sendrel. Never mind if your head is spinning and you don't feel well. It's called seasickness and it's meant to happen on a first voyage. The second time will be better, you'll see. You won't feel a thing then."

From that day on our heroes often sailed on the river and came to enjoy it immensely. They grew so expert at it that crossing the ocean seemed like child's play. With Sendrel as his interpreter, Benjamin engaged the fisherman in conversation, drawing him out with overtures like: "Sendrel, ask the

captain how far it is to the sea . . . Ask him if there are any islands on the way . . . Ask, Sendrel, what sort of people live on them . . . Now ask if there are Jews among them . . . What king do they pay tribute to? Are they ruled by Gentiles . . . ?" Or else he might begin: "Ask the goy, Sendrel, if he happens to have heard of Mount Nisbon and the heretic el-Torak . . . Ask him if he knows anything about the Ten Lost Tribes . . . Go ahead, maybe he does."

But although there was no end to Benjamin's queries, the smattering of Ukrainian that Sendrel had learned by his wife's side in the market was insufficient for such weighty matters. Haggling over onions, eggs, and potatoes was one thing; discussing learned subjects with a ship's captain was another; and as he squirmed, waved his hands, and worked himself into a sweat he was as sorry a sight as a dog trying to talk with its tail. God alone could have rescued him from the tight spot he was in, wedged between the fisherman, who spat and muttered angrily, and Benjamin, who kept peppering him with questions and staring at his mouth as if the answer were hiding there and needed only a good poke to come out.

"Vin zahubleni zhidki vin pitaye?" Sendrel might say, asking if their captain knew of any lost Jews.

"Zahublenikh zhidkov ya zna Leibko, Shmulko," would come the answer, viz.: "Aye, two of them, lost and gone forever, Leibko and Shmulko."

"Ni Leibko, ni, ni!" Sendrel would expostulate. "*Zhidki* on Mount Nisbon."

"Explain to him what a mountain is, Sendrel," Benjamin would urge. "Go on, use your hands."

Sendrel would raise his hands and begin to draw a mountain; their captain would spit and wish them all the bad dreams in the world; and so they sailed on.

WRITING OF HIS voyages on the Fetidnelevka, Benjamin has recounted many wonders that have set the world astir. Here are a few of them.

Once, while out on the river, Benjamin spied a green patch that he took to be a grassy island. He extended a leg and was about to leap onto it when the fisherman grabbed him from behind with a cry and flung him so powerfully back into the skiff that he lay there in a stupor. Dimly he heard the boat struggling to break free and slowly making headway. When he recovered and asked what had happened, he was told that he had been in great danger of drowning, because the green patch was not an island but a glutinous sward put forth by the Fetidnelevka. "Frankly," writes Benjamin, "I found this hard to believe. True, there was a rank smell in the vicinity, but I had never heard, or read in any book, of water sprouting a lawn. Next it would be growing fruit trees! We had far more likely, in my opinion, encountered the sea monster known as the kraken, of which there is an excellent discussion in *The Shadow of Eternity* that reads: 'This horrible great fish is covered all over with earth and grass and resembles a large island. Sailors catching sight of it have been known to mistake it for a mountain on which they go ashore to cook their dinner; but feeling the heat from their fire, the kraken dives to the nethermost depths and all aboard it are drowned.' In fact, this constitutes a clear proof of the Glupskians' origins in India, for the kraken is native to that land and must have migrated to the Fetidnelevka in ancient times, its nature being to swim after sailing ships."

Another time, as Benjamin stood gazing into the river, he saw creatures with the faces of women. "For many years," he says, "I had read about mermaids, always in ancient accounts of unquestionable veracity. I had also heard of their joining traveling circuses and being exhibited in peepshows, but this

was the first time that I had ever laid eyes on them myself. In my excitement, I pointed them out to our captain—who, however, turned around at that very moment and pointed to some washerwomen on a promontory above us. Over and over I pointed to the mermaids and over and over he pointed to the washerwomen, and since we did not understand each other's language I could not explain to him what I saw or get him to enlighten me."

Not far from shore and from Glupsk, Benjamin noticed a spot in the river where the water was oddly thick, in some places curdled like jelly and in others even more viscous. Large draughts of it were scooped by the water carriers, who went from house to house selling it. There it was mixed with ordinary barrel water and used to cook various dishes. "I tasted a number of these," relates Benjamin, "and more heavenly food I never have eaten. A simple pot roast thus prepared is a royal treat. I filled my pockets with this liquid and told Sendrel to save a bag of it, knowing that it would be useful when crossing the desert."

There came an afternoon that found our two heroes close to town and in a playful mood, laughing, joking, and regarding each as blissfully as a pair of newlyweds honeymooning in the country. What so gladdened their hearts? To what shall we ascribe the antic way they frolicked and sang as though deranged? The answer, dear reader, is that, if all went well, they were about to set out from Glupsk in the morning for the wide world.

Just then a wagon approached. In it were sitting two men, one holding the reins while the other lounged with his hat pushed back and a straw dangling from his mouth—always a sure sign that a Jewish brain is hard at work. The two Jews looked our merry pair over and stopped to chat. As usual, the

first question was, "Well! Where might a Jew be from?" and the second, "And what might a Jew's name be?"

A long list of other queries followed, of the kind that Jews commonly put to each other upon being introduced. Our heroes only needed to be asked; in no time they were talking a blue streak. The two men exchanged smiles and whispers, and the straw chewer mused half aloud: "Yes, it just might work. And if it does, we'll clear a few coppers . . ."

The two turned to Sendrel and Benjamin. "You know what?" they said. "The town we come from would like a chance to host two fine fellows like you. Please, do us the honor—we won't take no for an answer! You have our word that you'll be wined, dined, and waited on hand and foot."

"Thank you kindly," replied Benjamin. "We would be only too happy to join you if we hadn't already made up our minds to head down the river."

"Begging your pardon," said the two Jews, "but we don't know what you're talking about. The Fetidnelevka a river? Why, it's nothing but a mudhole, a cesspool, a pisspot, a slops basin, a smelly, sticky, slimy, scurvy sewer! Our town is on the Dnieper, which runs right into the ocean. From there, God willing, you'll quickly reach your destination. Please don't be stubborn with us. Hop aboard and let's be off!"

"What do you think, Sendrel?" asked Benjamin. "Should we oblige these two gentlemen by accepting their offer of a ride?"

"What's it to me?" answered Sendrel. "If it's a ride you want, why should I care?"

Quicker than the shake of a lamb's tail our worthies were seated in the wagon, highly pleased to be so honored and promised such a fine reception. It was a jolly journey. The two Jews saw to Sendrel and Benjamin's every need, plying them

with food and drink as if they were new mothers in confinement. It was more than either of them had ever dreamed of. On the afternoon of the second day they arrived safely in Dnieperovitsh. Their escorts brought them to lodgings in an inn and ordered them a fine dinner.

"We can see that you're tired from your trip," they said. "Get a good night's sleep, and tomorrow, God willing, you'll rise feeling fresh. We'll bring you to some important people and put in a good word for you. Once they take you under their wing, you'll have nothing more to worry about; all your needs will be provided. Good night!"

"Good night and sleep well!" answered our heroes. And they quickly said their bedtime prayers, patted their full stomachs, yawned, scratched themselves a bit, and fell into a sweet slumber.

12

IN WHICH OUR HEROES ARE TAKEN TO THE CLEANERS

"HELP! I WANT TO confess my sins before I die!" cried Sendrel in his sleep, his strangled voice waking Benjamin.

Benjamin jumped blearily out of bed, splashed water over his hands, quickly said the day's first blessing, and ran to see what the matter was. Outside the dawn was breaking; the only sounds were the snores in the room, each in its own register. One blared like a trumpet, another skittered like a lute; this one was short as a semiquaver, that one rose in three measures to a percussive snort; and still another performed a solo nose concerto for the bedbugs of Dnieperovitsh, who were banqueting on the sleepers. The little cannibals had come

from all over the city to pasture in this dowdy boardinghouse, where they were served all the Jewish blood they could suck.

Indeed, your Jew arriving in Dnieperovitsh did so with the knowledge that his only hope of departing again lay in bribing its bedbugs. "Step right up, you Dnieper cooties!" he all but called to them upon bedding down at night. "Dig in, drink up, and the Devil take you!"

"What are you screaming for, Sendrel?" asked Benjamin, going over to his friend. "Did a bug take a bite out of you? They kept me up all night. In fact, I just fell asleep."

"Ow! Quick, let's get out of here!" shouted Sendrel, still half-asleep.

"For goodness' sake, Sendrel, what's the matter? It's a bug, after all, not a man. How big a bite can it take?"

For a moment or two Sendrel stared at Benjamin bewilderedly. Then he rubbed his eyes and sighed:

"Ah, what a terrible dream I had! I only hope nothing comes of it."

"Tsk! What man doesn't dream?" replied Benjamin. "I had a dream too. In it an ogre galloped up to me and said: 'Are you Benjamin of Tuneyadevka? Please be so kind as to come with me, because Alexander the Great is camped nearby with his army and is eager to have a word with you.' The ogre took off on the run and I followed close behind. Suddenly I heard a voice call: 'Why, you're running like the wind! I can't catch up with you.' I turned around—and there was Alexander. 'Your Excellency!' I cried, seizing his hand and squeezing it as tight as I could. Just then there was such a horrible stink that I thought I was going to faint. I opened my eyes and in my hand was a crushed bedbug. Feh! Come, Sendrel, spit three times, I'm telling you, and forget your dream. What was it about?"

"Tfu! Tfu! Tfu!" spat the trusting Sendrel and began to relate his nightmare.

"I dreamed that I was walking down a long, long street. All of a sudden someone pounced on me from behind, threw me in a sack, and started to make off with me. I was carried a long ways until the sack was opened and I was given such a smack in the face that two of my teeth fell out. 'That's just the down payment,' I was told. 'The rest will come later.' I looked and saw my wife in a fur cap, foaming at the mouth and with hellfire in her eyes. 'You wait, my little man,' she said with a nasty laugh. 'I'm going to take the poker to you and teach you that there's a God.'

"Well, she went to get the poker, and I took to my heels and ran until I came to a tavern. It was dark and slippery inside, without a soul in sight, and I lay down in a corner, shut my eyes, and fell asleep. As I was sleeping, along came my great-grandfather Sendrel, may he rest in peace, looking sad and teary-eyed. 'Sendrel, my boy,' he said to me, 'get up. If you value your life, Sendrel, rise from your sleep, because wherever you look you're in danger!'

"I tried to get up, but I couldn't. It was as if I were being held down. I put my hands to my head—and there was a bonnet! I wasn't Sendrel anymore, I was a woman, without a trace of a beard, with a bodice over my middle . . . and the way it was hurting me there shouldn't happen to a Jew. 'You'll be all right,' I heard someone say. 'It's always hardest with a first child.' 'Mister, please!' I screamed. 'It's too much for me. I'm going to faint.' 'The best charm to help you get through this,' he said, 'is a good punch in the neck,' and he hauled off and gave me one, two, three rabbit punches, telling me: 'This is for what you've done! This is for what you're doing! This is for what you'll do!' Then he turned and disappeared.

"Afterwards, I lay there until, with God's help, I made myself rise and run to the door. The door was locked. I knocked and knocked but it did no good. And then all at once the door

opened. I stepped out and was snatched by a band of thieves, who brought me to a cave and wanted to slit my throat with a slaughtering knife. That's when I yelled for help. There you have it, Benjamin, my whole dream. I only pray it doesn't come true."

"Spit again three times, Sendrel," Benjamin counseled, "and forget all about it. And you can get up now, because it's already day, and say a chapter of Psalms."

With another sigh Sendrel rose from his bed, washed his hands, said the blessing, put on his robe, and took out his Yiddish Psalter. Opening it to the Tenth Psalm, he began to recite in a doleful voice:

Why hidest Thou, O Lord, from me,
Far from my adversity?

The chant continued, growing more plaintive as it described the wicked oppressor:

He lurketh in his ambuscade,
From there the innocent to raid;
Stalking with his eyes poor men,
Like a lion in its den;
Casting them into his net,
Thinking that God doth forget.

By the time Sendrel was through, it was broad daylight and everyone had risen. A samovar as large as a cauldron was steaming on the table and all sat down to tea. After drinking a hot glass of it, Benjamin and Sendrel felt better. The same room that had been a dormitory and a refectory now became a chapel. Sleeves were rolled up and Jewish arms—hairy, smooth, thin, fat, swarthy, pale, all conceivable shades and

shapes of them—were bared for phylactery straps. Prayer-shawls were donned and everyone had a good pray, most of all our heroes, who clamored and gestured like such woebegone Jews entreating their Father in Heaven that they finished long after the others. At the service's end there was strong grog for everyone, guzzled with much smacking of the lips. Their noses and cheeks as bright as red currants, all wished each other a long and good life and invoked God's much-needed mercy on His people. Eyes glittered; bosoms heaved; and many a glass was drained in the conviction that the quicker its descent, the nobler the swallower's.

One such Jewish aristocrat soon went off into town and lingered there for several hours. When he returned beaming, he was given a searching look by his sidekick and both seemed highly content. They ordered dinner, washed their hands like good Jews, and even checked to see if the kitchen was kosher enough, and asked our heroes to join them for a bite. Their high spirits continued at the table, where they praised the innkeeper's wife for her cooking, which they consumed with great relish while conversing about the Jewish Problem—it being high time, they said, that the Jews take themselves in hand and put an end to their sorry situation. Why, no people was more gifted—there was no head like a Jew's—what couldn't a Jew do if he put his mind to it! All of the world's great inventions, such as the telegraph, the railroad, and other such things had been discovered by Jews long ago . . . and yet these were mere trifles, they were not the main thing at all, which was—which was—the Jewish soul!

And with that Benjamin and Sendrel's companions began lambasting the heretics, the modern Jewish intellectuals, blast them all, and especially the new Jewish schools, in which children were taught every manner of abomination without even a hat on their heads. Why, before long it would be easier to

find a Jew to write a business letter in Russian than to read a prayer in Hebrew. A fine world that would be!

From this the two Jews turned to our heroes' expedition. "We pray and hope," they said, "that God fulfill your endeavors, which are dear to our hearts." Benjamin was in seventh heaven, all the more so for being slightly sozzled. Neither fire nor water, he assured his listeners, could turn him back from his path.

The time came to rise from the table. "Listen here, Reb Benjamin, Reb Sendrel," the two men said heartily. "Simple folk like us have an old custom of lubricating our bones in a bathhouse at a journey's end. You can get a shave and a haircut there too—we promise you, you'll feel like new. Afterwards we'll attend to your business and you'll see it will all work out dandily. Oh, it's a bit old-fashioned, we know, a bathhouse is—the heretics don't think it's genteel—but we're not your la-di-da types. What was good enough for our grandfathers is good enough for us!"

What Jew can resist a bathhouse? Let the peasant have his tavern and the duck its pond; such attachments do not amount to the hundredth part of what is felt for his sweat-bath by a Jew. Here lies the source of his religion—the most sacred of his emotions—the secret of his intimate life. No Jewish soul would consider crawling into a womb without the prospect of a bath at birth. It is the omphalos, the infundibulum, linking heaven and earth, its stokers, scrubbers, and swabbers the midwives of this sublunary incarnation. Nor would that second soul, the Sabbath spirit, deign enter a Jew who is not steamed and rinsed once a week to keep him from going as stale as a crust of old bread. Regard him stepping out of the bathhouse on a Friday. He glows; looks years younger; has the Jewish spark back in his eyes; tingles with keen expectation; twitches his nose at the scent of the stuffed fish and

carrot stew wafted mouthwateringly his way; sings, warbles, carols like a nightingale; basks like a pampered child; effervesces as though already halfway through heaven's gates. Truly, the bathhouse is the Jew's fatherland and in it alone does he inhabit a free country where every man has the right to his own thoughts and can reach the highest rung, that is, the uppermost bench. There, for a brief hour, his downtrodden soul casts off its burden of sorrows. Where would he be without it?

The idea of a bath, therefore, appealed to our heroes greatly, and without further ado they set out and soon arrived with their two new friends. Having imagined a bathhouse such as they were used to, a grimy, gloomy structure entered from the bottom of a dark alley by means of a rickety plank, they stared in wonderment at the handsome three-story building located on a main street. "Why, you're gaping like country boys," their hosts bantered. "Come on inside, it's even grander there."

Stepping into the lobby, our heroes were met by a gleaming floor covered with carpets. Convinced that they had entered a magic castle straight out of *The Arabian Nights,* they felt sure that a princess would soon appear to welcome them to a world of delight.

It was not, though, a princess that appeared but a bemedaled soldier, who politely asked them to undress. "Please do as he says," said the two Jews to Sendrel and Benjamin. "We'll go ahead and pay, and then we'll all enjoy a good sweat."

Our worthies took off their things and stood holding them with their packs, intending to steam them in the bath. They were not traveling with large wardrobes and had for weeks not changed their clothes, which naturally itched a great deal and needed a dry-cleaning. The soldier, however, insisted on

taking these from them and ushering them into a bench-lined room with a table, around which sat several well-dressed men. Although they looked everywhere, neither Benjamin nor Sendrel could detect a hearth for the red-hot stones on which water was poured to make steam.

"Is this the *zhidovski banya?*" asked Sendrel, prompted by a hard jab from Benjamin.

A man rose from the table, went over to have a look at our naked heroes, who were all skin and bones, and addressed them in proper Russian.

"Come, Sendrel, what's he saying?" asked Benjamin.

"I'll be blamed if I understood a word," replied Sendrel with a shrug. "The Devil knows what language he thinks he's talking. All I could make out was something about a billet."

"You puddinghead!" exclaimed Benjamin. "A *bilyet* is a ticket in Russian. This man is the bathhouse attendant and won't let us in without one. Tell him our two friends have already paid."

"*Yak-zhe, pani, teya zhidki . . .*," began Sendrel, breaking off as helplessly in the middle as if he had lost his voice.

"*Bilyet, pani,* it's quite simple, two *zhidki,* they've gone ahead, *zaplatil,* we're all paid up!" said Benjamin, making things perfectly clear.

The man motioned with his hand and they were taken to another room, in which they were made to sweat indeed.

WHEN SENDREL AND Benjamin were led back out into the street, they truly looked like new men. Besides boasting shaves and haircuts that had sheared off their beards and earlocks, they had great drops of perspiration on their foreheads, beady, vaporish expressions, and hot-and-cold flashes that made them shake all over. A detachment of soldiers sur-

rounded them and the sky above them was darkened by clouds. Now and then lightning glittered, accompanied by rumbles of thunder that made the two of them shiver even harder. Soon a wild wind began to blow, carrying dust whirls, refuse, straw, dead leaves, and bits of paper that swirled higher and higher in a devilish dance. Herds of cattle, hastened back from pasture, ran nervously bellowing through the streets as if chased by a pack of hungry wolves. One might have thought that, fed up with the sinful earth, the Lord was casting His bolts of wrath on it.

Just then there was a frightful thunderclap and it began to pour, the torrents of rain quickly mingling with the sweat and bitter tears of our hapless heroes.

Alas, Benjamin and Sendrel had had no inkling that the greatest dangers are not those posed in the wilderness by snakes, scorpions, and other wild creatures, but those of civilization. And no civilized age has been more savage than our own, in which Jew hunts Jew,

Stalking with his eyes poor men,
Like a lion in its den,

and impressing helpless souls into the Czar's army so that others should not have to serve in it. Too late did our heroes realize that they were in the wilderness already, with beasts of prey all around them, none more cruel than the two ogres who had sold them into military service.

13

IN WHICH OUR HEROES BECOME SOLDIERS

THE DESPERATE PLIGHT of our poor heroes being easily imaginable, we shall forbear to describe it in detail. At first they were too confounded to grasp what had happened to them. Everything was totally strange—the soldiers, the barracks, the language, each single order they were given. Their greatcoats hung on them like sacks; their tunics bulged like bodices; their caps fell over their ears like bonnets. One might have thought one was watching two actors in a skit, mugging and mocking army life. Pity the poor rifle that fell into their hands, for it resembled an oven poker. The way they stumbled about the drill grounds was pure comedy.

And yet though our worthies were most reluctant soldiers, is there anything a man cannot get used to? Even the caged bird develops an appetite and begins to hop about and sing as if its little world were an expanse of fields and dales. Our Sendrel in particular adjusted to his condition. He watched the other soldiers at their drills and learned to ape them so successfully that it was a pleasure to see him snap to attention like a fiddle string, stick his neck out like a crane, and strut and puff his cheeks like a turkey until he finally tripped over his own feet.

Benjamin was another story. Like one of those migrating birds that take poorly to captivity, he stopped eating and drinking and thought only of escaping his bars. His expedition, which had gnawed away at him until he left wife and children for it, was by now such second nature that it fluttered and pecked incessantly inside him, crying: "Fly on, Benjamin! Fly on!"

And so the winter went by and our Benjamin chafed at the bit.

One sunny day after Passover, as Sendrel was practicing drilling, Benjamin approached him and said:

"I swear, Sendrel, what a baby you are, playing soldier like a schoolboy! What are you accomplishing? How can a married man, and a Jew to boot, spend all his time making right-faces and left-faces? What difference does it make?"

"How should I know?" answered Sendrel. "If it's right or left they want, let it be right or left. What's it to me?"

"And our expedition, you nit, I suppose you've forgotten all about it! Our expedition, our journey . . . basiliks, Minotaurs, rocs!"

"Hup! Hup! Hup! Hup!" said Sendrel, stamping his legs.

"Why, it's pathetic, Sendrel! You should be ashamed of yourself. Tell me, my soldier boy: are we going to travel on or not?"

"For my part," answered Sendrel, "we can start out the minute they let us."

"But what do I care about them? And what do they want with us?" exclaimed Benjamin. "I ask you, Sendrel, by all that's holy: if the enemy attacks, God forbid, are you and I going to stop him? Do you think that telling him a thousand times, 'You better go away or I'll say boo,' will make any impression? We'll be lucky to get out of it alive. The way I see it, the army should be happy to be rid of us. I myself heard our sergeant say that we're a nuisance he'd gladly send to the Devil. And really, what use to them are we? The fact is that it was a mismatch to begin with. The Jews who sold us down the river must have said that we were a pair of tough old troopers. Is it our fault if they tricked the army as rottenly as they tricked us? No, it's the fault of the low-down, lying Jews!"

"Well then, Benjamin," asked Sendrel, "what do you propose we do?"

"I propose," replied Benjamin, "that we push on with our expedition. A discharge, that's what I propose! There's neither rhyme nor reason to keep us here. And if you're afraid the army won't agree, I have a simple solution: we'll go without asking permission. Whose business is it anyway? There's no need for a formal farewell."

"I'm sure you're right," said Sendrel. "We didn't kiss anyone goodbye when we left home a year ago either."

Subsequently, our heroes turned their minds to their journey and began to plot their escape. Benjamin felt the call of the beyond: he was like a bird in spring that is impelled to reach its roosting grounds. So absorbed was he in his thoughts that he paid no attention to his whereabouts. He forgot to salute his officers, whose orders went in one ear and out the other, and winced no more at the blows given him than if they had landed on someone else. His expedition was the one thing on his mind, which had already flown far ahead of him.

Late one night, when the soldiers in the barracks were sound asleep, Benjamin tiptoed to Sendrel's cot and asked in a whisper:

"Sendrel, are you ready?"

Sendrel nodded, gripped Benjamin's coattails, and followed him noiselessly outside.

A warm breeze was blowing. Tufts of black and brownish-blue cloud floated overhead, one after another, like thousands of laden wagons on their way to some heavenly fair. The moon, like a busy caravan conductor, moved beside this long train, peering out from time to time to survey it before withdrawing again behind a cloudy, pitch-black curtain. Our heroes slipped across the dark yard and quietly reached the

fence, which was easily scaled with the help of a pile of logs. Suddenly Sendrel gave himself a slap and whispered in his friend's ear:

"Ah, Benjamin, I forgot the bag! We had better go back for it."

"Not on your life!" declared Benjamin. "Turning back is not for us. If God has decided to help us, He'll help us to a new bag too."

"I now realize," Sendrel said, "what my great-grandfather, may he rest in peace, meant when he warned me in my dream of danger everywhere. I only hope his merit sees us through. What a fine, no-nonsense Jew he was! My great-grandmother, may she rest in peace, used to say that he . . ."

But before Sendrel could tell Benjamin what his great-grandmother said about his great-grandfather, they heard the steps of a sentry. Holding their breaths, they lay hugging the ground by the fence, beside which they looked like two large rags.

The rags waited for all to be still again, came to life, and crawled away from the fence on hands and legs, avoiding the sentries and eventually reaching a street. There they rested, regarding each other with bright eyes.

"My great-grandmother, may she rest in peace," continued Sendrel when he had caught his breath, "used to say that my great-grandfather always wanted to visit the Land of Israel. On his deathbed he sat up and announced: 'If I haven't had the good fortune, I'm sure that a child of mine will.' Something tells me, Benjamin, that he meant me. May my words go straight to God's ears!"

But these were not the ears they went to. They were hardly out of Sendrel's mouth when a voice called out in Russian: "Who goes there?" And no answer being forthcoming, it came closer and asked again.

The foolish moon had chosen that exact moment to stick its head out from a cloud, casting its light on our worthies—who, their hearts in their boots, found themselves facing their sergeant. And a very angry sergeant he was, with an oath for each of their ancestors and a pair of hot-tempered hands.

A few minutes later our heroes were in the brig.

Words cannot describe their sufferings there. They grew so lean and haggard that they hardly looked like men. Sendrel at least was able to sleep and thus flee for a while from his sorrows, sometimes aided by pleasant dreams. His great-grandfather, indeed, took to appearing in them often and staying to chat. He always brought a gift with him: once a bow and arrow, another time a toy sword, still another a Purim rattle. Pinching Sendrel's cheeks, he would say with a smile: 'Here you are, you little rascal! Have yourself some fun. Go ahead, bing! bang! biff!' . . . Once he came with a Hanukkah top and sat down to play with his favorite grandchild. Sendrel played and played, won a whole farthing, and went about feeling good all that day. But it was only a dream, you say? And this world of ours, is it not a dream too?

Benjamin, however, did not sleep well at all. He was like a pot about to boil over. Through the window he could see the life-giving sun, the gloriously blossoming trees, the green grass growing all around. Men hurried back and forth and birds flew free in the sky. Now was the time for wandering! In his aggravation he could have jumped up and down, torn his hair, run around in circles crying bitterly: "Help! What have I done to them? And what do they want from me? Won't somebody—anybody—help?"

14

IN WHICH WE ARE ALL HONORABLY DISCHARGED

A FEW DAYS later a full complement of officers was gathered in regimental headquarters. The general was there with the colonel, while by the door stood two soldiers hanging their heads and looking like a pair of mice fished from a pitcher of sour milk. The officers took a minute to observe them and then conversed with faint smiles among themselves.

"Listen, Sendrel," whispered one of the soldiers while this confab was going on, "even if they kill me, I've got to tell them the whole truth. I can't keep it in any longer."

"For my part, Benjamin," replied the second soldier, "you can tell them whatever you like. If it's the truth you want, why should I care?"

"Are you the two men who were absent without leave from the barracks at night?" asked the general sternly. "Do you know what the punishment for such an infraction is?"

"Yes, sir, *vasha blagarodya,* sir!" answered Benjamin, launching his defense half in Yiddish and half in a broken Russian that would have made even Heikel the Stammerer of Tuneyadevka bury himself six feet deep.

With a wave of his hand, the general turned away to hide his laughter. The colonel relieved him and said:

"You two are guilty of a serious offense and deserve to be punished severely."

"Vasha blagarodya!" At long last the pot boiled over—and this time entirely in Yiddish. "I see that kidnapping men in broad daylight and selling them like chickens in the market is permitted, but that when the same men seek to free themselves, they're guilty of a crime! If that's the upside-down

world we live in, I don't know what right and wrong are. Suppose you were walking along one fine day and someone stuffed you into a sack, wouldn't you do all you could to get out of it? I tell you, this whole thing has been a cruel hoax. It's all the fault of those Jews and the bill of goods they sold you!

"We wish to make an official statement. Go ahead, Sendrel, speak up! Why are you standing there like a clod? Don't be afraid to tell them the truth, by God! We hereby declare, the two of us, that we are, have been, and always will be ignorant of all military matters; that we are, God be praised, married men with other things on our minds than your affairs, which are totally alien to us; and that we cannot possibly be of any use to you, who have every reason to discharge us!"

Benjamin was speaking the plain truth. Discharging him and Sendrel had long been the army's ambition. The way our heroes talked, gawked, squawked, and walked had made the officers of the regiment, who more than once were reduced by them to stitches, realize from the start what manner of men they were. The whole purpose of the present court-martial, indeed, was to have them medically reexamined. This, with God's help, they were, with results that caused much hilarity. "Well?" asked the general after the doctor had finished talking with our Tuneyadevkans. The doctor put a finger to his head and twisted it in a time-honored gesture.

The officers conferred, filled out a piece of paper, and handed our two heroes their discharge. "And now be off," they told them, "and let this be the last of you."

Benjamin bowed smartly and turned to go. Sendrel clicked his heels like a soldier and marched after him in perfect step.

An Epilogue by Mendele the Book Peddler

While I was engaged in bringing to the public the adventures of Benjamin the Third, of which I have thus far, with God's help, issued this first volume, it was reported in the newspapers that our Benjamin has set out once more with a body of explorers for the far climes and archipelagos beyond the Mountains of Darkness. The details are as follows.

Recently, a treatise entitled *The Torah Upheld* (Right Mind Press, Jerusalem) appeared in the Holy Land. In it the authors declared:

"The Almighty having lately chosen to reveal to us the source of the Sambatyon; and this precious river, which by ceasing its torrential flow on the Sabbath proves the divine origin of the Day of Rest, now lying within reach; it behooves us to hasten to the defense of God's brazenly mocked Law . . . by founding the Torah Exploration Society to mount an expedition thither and back. We therefore appeal to all fellow God-fearers to assist the Society's efforts by either joining the expedition or helping to defray its costs, every man as he sees fit. The expenses are great: travel documents must be obtained; provisions must be purchased; and arrangements must be made for daily prayers to be said on the travelers' behalf. The expedition is open to ten volunteers."

No sooner did this notice come to his attention than Benjamin took Dame Sendrel, his prayershawl, his phylacteries, his walking stick, and his knapsack and hastened to join the right-minded explorers. At present he is marching at their

head through a fearful wilderness and doing battle with basilisks, cockatrices, and the despotic Prester John and el-Torek.

He has my heartfelt blessings. May God bring him safely home again so that I may publish the tidings of his second journey for all the tribes of Israel to read.