

The Affair of the Mikvah

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The sad voice in the village street of Polana, though it affected indifference in tone, sounded anxious, and pretty much as if the moment was drawing near when the speaker would need all he had to defend himself before the judge in a matter of life and death:

‘Moyshe, what do you think the time is?’

Under the wild pear tree that hangs over the fence of the Wolfs’ back garden (because the branches were already laden with hard, sour little pears, they were bent and battered by the village boys’ stoning), two friends had paused for a moment in their ambling walk. The broad man with the frame of a peasant and hardly a grey hair in his beard was Moyshe Kahan, *beder* and *shames*; we should call him bath-house keeper and beadle. And the other, looking like a fence-pole weather-beaten for decades, scrawny and somehow threadbare all over, with a scant fair beard and miserable side-curls drooping in front of over-large ears, limp, thin, sad and forlorn, was Pinches Yakubovich... perhaps... perhaps one of the Thirty-Six of God’s Chosen on whom the preservation or destruction of the world depends.

Moyshe Kahan shrugged with his head on one side at the question Pinches Yakubovich had put to him:

‘Do I know?’ he said in an injured tone, and as he furrowed his brow in deep wrinkles his greasy hat moved forward on his head.

Pinches Yakubovich nodded sadly in agreement.

Being asked the time brought the mind of Moyshe Kahan to slow realisation that this was the afternoon of the eve of the Sabbath, Friday afternoon, and stirred in him a sense of his responsibilities. For in a little while all the men of Jewry in Polana would turn their laggard

steps towards the ritual bath-house, in order to appear before the Almighty in the synagogue that evening in the beauty of holiness, and to rely on his fifteen-year-old son Riva (as a matter of fact it was he, the biggest mischief in the village, who was largely responsible — along with Benjie Fuchs — for the shameful state of the pear tree) would indeed be foolishness in the eyes of the Lord.

And so Moyshe Kahan nodded to Pinches Yakubovich to show that he was in a hurry and left him standing there alone by the Wolfs' back garden; quickening his pace ever so slightly, he shambled over the stony Polana road towards the bath-house: past the fences of wattles, slats or stakes round the Ruthenian peasant cottages with beans and potatoes ripening on the other side; and past the fences round the Jewish cottages where on wattle frames the last vestiges of impure blood were dripping from the salted hens; or where the mother of the family sat at the threshold plucking a hen between her knees, a gory wound in its neck; or where black, tawny, white or speckled wings were beating in pools of blood in the shallow muddy ditches by the roadside — marking the path followed by the ritual slaughterer as he went from one family to another to do his masterly job with a specially sharpened two-edged knife, in honour of the Sabbath Queen approaching; for indeed, what would the Sabbath supper be without a fowl?

Moyshe Kahan the *beder* is hurrying to the ritual bath-house. To the *mikvah*.

Look, smoke is already rising from it. Look, there it stands alone, puffing steam through the thatch of the chimney-less roof. There it stands, below the road, by the spreading little stream, there where the steep wooded side of the great hill of Menshul rises from the opposite bank.

The *mikvah*!

The *mikvah*...

Heavens, how can the idea of the *mikvah* be brought home to people from the west, used to the narrow horizons of their streets, or to minds preoccupied with technical progress and incapable of comprehending the depths of mystery, nay, doubtful even whether mystery exists?

Of course. We can try the descriptive approach and say that the *mikvah* is a cottage with its windows blocked up; inside it is partitioned and in one half, blackened with smoke, that good-for-nothing Riva plies the stove with beech logs to heat a cauldron of water, while in the twilight of the other half there stand two wooden bath-tubs where every month the women wash the traces of their blood away, and sunk into the ground there is a tank that holds forty pails of water, and on the edge of the tank there are mountain formations of stearin and tallow with scraps of black wick in them, from the way the women have of sticking their stumps of candles on to those they find there when they come for their ritual night baths... But have we learned anything about the *mikvah*? Not a thing!

Of course. We can tackle the question from a rationalist point of view. Something like this:

The holy law-givers who commanded Israel to wash and be clean, and above all Baal Shem Tov, may he rest in peace, the famous lumberjack who came from these mountains, the defender of the poor and simple against the learned and a great prophet of the Lord, who taught his Khassidim that bodily cleanliness was a necessity without which they could not find favour in the eyes of the Lord, those holy men knew their Jews. They knew, for instance, that if they were to say, 'Carpathian peasants, lumberjacks, cobblers, tailors, shopkeepers, carters and beggars, remember that cleanliness is next to godliness!' the Jews would meditate profoundly over this piece of

wisdom, that they would proclaim it in the synagogues and teach it in the *keheder*, the *yeshiva* and the rabbinical schools, that in the seven trades mentioned they would find the likeness of the seven choirs of angels in the heavens, that they would fight tooth and nail over whether the word 'godliness' meant 'eternal life' or 'divine wisdom', and that in the maxim they would find a group of three or five letters that are no letters at all but a mystery of such profundity that you will never discover its true meaning, but feel it worth while spending the rest of your life pondering over it — but that they would not wash. The wise old men and above all the father of all the Khassidim, Baal Shem Tov, may he rest in peace, knew equally well that if they commanded briefly and clearly: 'See that you wash every Friday!' their Jews would make the command into an impressive ceremony accompanied by wailing or rejoicing, their prayer shawls covering head and shoulder, and all their movements dignified and graceful; that as they washed they would remember the Spirit of God moving upon the face of the waters; the water from the rock that Moses smote with his rod; the waters of the Red Sea that the Lord caused to go back by a strong east wind, so that the children of Israel went upon dry ground and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand and on their left; the waters of the rivers of Babylon and the harps hung upon the willows in the midst thereof; but that of the original intention there would be nothing left but the tips of three fingers at the most, ceremonially dipped into a bowl of water.

Oh, dear me, no! The people of Polana have to be spoken to in a very different way. Much more definitely and sharply. Like this:

I, the Lord your God, who light the stars in the heavens and seal them up again, the Holy and Everlasting One,

who brought your forefathers out of the land of Mizraim and out of the house of bondage, say unto you thus: In every community, O Israel, and of course in Polana too, build a bath-house, and in this bath-house dig a tank to hold forty pails of water, and let everyone who wishes to find favour in My sight bathe himself in it every day, and let the froward whose only thought is to flee my sore displeasure bathe in it at least once a week, on Friday before the Sabbath! And let the women bathe in this tank also, once a month, fourteen days after the flowers of their blood appear, and for those fourteen days they shall be unclean, and whosoever touches them shall be unclean and abominable unto me; for only hungering will force those lazy creatures to the good work of multiplying My people Israel. But because your bath-house keeper is a lazy good-for-nothing full of iniquity and highly displeasing to Me, who if I allowed him would soon have you wallowing in a little puddle of mud, let there be a line on the inner side of the tank, to mark the level of forty pails of water, and if the *beder* let the water sink lower than this line, the bath shall be unclean until he fills it with milk at his own expense—may it be a lesson to him! And since you pay Moyshe Kahan—it makes Me feel quite ill to think of him!—83 crowns 30 hallers a month for being *beder* and *shames*, and the price of a litre of milk is 60 hallers, it will be a lesson all right. So be it! And you shall hearken unto My words in whole and in part (which I shall say unto you through the mouths of My prophets) and whosoever shall not obey shall perish from among My people, shall not live and shall die the death.

Yes, indeed! That is the way to talk to the people of Polana.

Anyway, neither the Lord God, blessed be His name, nor Baal Shem Tov, may he rest in peace, were mistaken in what they thought could be expected of the people

of Polana. Every one of them has a good idea what he is like without and within, and what the All-knowing probably thinks of him, and so nobody is vainglorious enough to want to find special favour in the sight of the Lord, and they think it enough to flee His displeasure. Except for old Mordecai Yid Feinermann, perhaps, who really does immerse himself in the bath every day. But Mordecai Yid Feinermann is well off, living with his children and nothing to bother his head about except how to meditate on the works of God and how to annoy the community by watching over the orthodoxy of every single one of them, and nothing else to be ambitious about except how to be best-beloved of God and most feared of men.

Of course. We can tackle the mystery of the *mikvah* from a rationalist point of view. Let us be honest with ourselves: are we any nearer understanding it? Not a bit. We are even further away. And indeed, we cold-blooded rationalists show less understanding for the fearfulness of the sacred mystery than the law of hate has instilled into the mad rabble (may God punish them!) peopling the dank darkness behind the battened windows of the *mikvah* with their ridiculous old wives' tales of ritual murder, vivisection, and the drinking of the blood of Christian virgins. Unwillingness to comprehend that mystery is not a station on the line where the train of reason runs, we get further and further away from it the faster we pound along familiar tracks, urging on the engine of our reason. It is not a question of knowing. It is a question of feeling. But we confuse mystery with anything we happen not to know.

The cottage by the spreading brook below the path conceals a mystery within. The mystery of cleanliness and uncleanness.

The *mikvah* is unclean, and a pure man, when he leaves

it, must cleanse himself, dipping the tips of his fingers in clear water. But when we talk of cleanliness and uncleanliness, let us cast aside the thick stone-breakers' spectacles which prevent us from looking below the surface of things; let us not imagine uncleanliness as a film of slime on the earthen floor and bottom of the bath tubs, and let us not think of the fact that the *mikvah* in Polana, where generations of men and women have bathed, has no other outlet than the muddy floor of the tank itself. The *mikvah* is not outwardly unclean, but intrinsically: by its nature, its essence, God-given. Here no man may even think on Him whose name it is forbidden to speak in this place, or on anything even distantly connected with Him; no greeting may be exchanged here, not even a nod of the head, for some might be tempted to utter the whole of the usual greeting, one word of which is not unlike that which may not be uttered; and if it is necessary to mention (but better far to avoid it) a certain day, it cannot be called by its name, but at the utmost it can be called the day that was yesterday, or the day that will be tomorrow, or the 'seventh' day. And in any case, how could a man in his nakedness and with bare head speak of it?... The *mikvah* is unclean. Yet it cleanses. It cleanses vessels, which are not fit for ritual use until they have been dipped twice in the *mikvah*, each time held in a different hand and by a different side, for the purifying water to reach the spot covered by the fingers at the first immersion. And it cleanses women, when they go down into the *mikvah* at night and immerse their heads under the water three times, three times repeating devoutly: 'Blessed be the Eternal One, who cleanseth me with the spring waters of the *mikvah*!'... Oh dear, what is that? Surely woman cannot speak with the Lord God in this place, where man may not even say, 'Peace be with you'? . . . There we are again with those stone-breakers'

spectacles of ours that prevent us from seeing what is most clear! Or do you want to pretend that you have not realised that not only her outward nature, but the whole essence of woman is different from that of man? Do you not see the likeness between a woman and a vessel? Do you not know that the Lord God has given man 613 commandments (as many as there are veins in a man's body) while He has given women only three: to light the Sabbath candles, to make a burnt offering when baking bread, and to bathe in the *mikvah*? Do you not know why women sacrifice their beautiful hair before marriage and wear a wig of yarn on their shaven heads, that the holy waters of the *mikvah* may reach right to the skin? Poor prisoners of perverted reason, bent in one direction like a broom that has swept too long! Men with heads of *goyim*! The heads of pigs! How can you but be scorned for your stupidity? Blessed, praised be the *mikvah*! Blessed and praised be the Lord God, whose work and moiety it is!

Moyshé Kahan the *beder*, quickening his pace the tiniest bit, left the melancholy Pinches Yakubovich standing by the paling round the Wolfs' back garden. And Pinches Yakubovich, loitering for a tiny moment, scratched his ribs, pushed his hat a bit further on his head, and ambled slowly on again in the direction of the *mikvah*.

Pinches Yakubovich looks dreadfully unhappy. He always looks dreadfully unhappy. Pinches Yakubovich is afraid, as if there were always someone waiting to hit him. He has been afraid all his life. But today he is ten times as afraid, and the anxious line at the corner of his mouth formed there first thing in the morning, almost before he had opened his eyes and realised what the day would bring.

Oyoyoyoy!

Pinches Yakubovich is a man of learning. Wrestling earnestly with the Lord, and striving ceaselessly to read His mysteries. A *Khassid*, but more *Cabbalist* than orthodox, a disciple of the mournful Rabbi of Belz who teaches the elect to rise at midnight for secret ceremonies, to mourn for the destruction of the Temple and to call for the Messiah in ecstasy, rather than a follower of Baal Shem who teaches the elect to rejoice in their calling, in nature, love, dancing and strong drinks, that bring man nearer to God. Pinches Yakubovich is also a tailor... A tailor?... No. Pinches Yakubovich is a man of learning wrestling earnestly with the Lord. Maybe... maybe he has a part in the highest grace and sorrow man can achieve... maybe he is one of the Thirty-Six on whose shoulders lies the whole burden of sorrows of the Jews and on whom the preservation or destruction of the world depends. Maybe... maybe Pinches Yakubovich is... *lamet vav*.

There are only thirty-six in every generation that bear the name of the holy number: *lamet vav*. There are only thirty-six who ensure the continued preservation of the world. God does not choose them from among the learned rabbis, nor from among the powerful of this world, nor from among the rich men; he takes them from among the tailors, the bearers of burdens, and, in the east, from among the carriers of water. Nobody knows them. For it is their destiny to keep silent forever about their vocation, and the moment they betray the knowledge to whomsoever, they shall perish; and the Angel of the Lord, perhaps in the guise of a beggar, perhaps in the guise of a white-stockinged student of the rabbinical school, or an unknown stranger, will appear to another of the sons of the chosen people, maybe in Buenos Aires, maybe in Bombay, maybe in Cape Town, maybe in Po-

lana, and will say unto him: 'Thou art chosen.' And so there are thirty-six poor, insignificant and hard-working men, but men of vision and learning, travelling hither and thither over the world, unloading barrels of paraffin oil and crates of chicory in front of Maurice Schönfeld's in Berehovo; sitting, needle in hand, in an attic in a New York slum sewing cheap trousers for the ready-made shop; carrying water-bags about in Egyptian harbours; and nobody has the slightest inkling who they are and what a tremendous burden they bear on their shoulders. But woe to any man, and woe to the whole of Israel, if any man should injure or revile them. Only sometimes, very rarely indeed, do two of them meet and are revealed by the power of their spirit. Only very rarely does a learned rabbi recognise one of them, from the power and efficacy of the prayers of the community when the two pray together.

Is Pinches Yakubovich *lamet vav*?

Ach, that is the greatest sorrow of his life. Yet is not this great sorrow itself one of the proofs? Perhaps... perhaps the Lord God has granted His grace to a man so imperfect, but so longing for perfection, as he. Is this uncertainty perhaps an essential aspect of being chosen? Or is this inner state but a preparation, and the messenger will appear again, to give his message more clearly and more definitely? Or has the Almighty chosen him just because he is so far from perfect and because God has decided—*ach*, the dread thought!—to destroy the world, as He destroyed so many imperfect worlds before He created this world and saw that it was good, and is he, Pinches Yakubovich, to further the destruction of the world by his sinfulness? Or is it all a snare and a delusion and the idea of linking his name, Pinches, with the figure of *lamet vav* is but iniquitous pride and an abominable sin before the Lord?

Oy, what wonder that thoughts so heavy have drawn lines of sorrow round the corners of his mouth and between his eyes, and made his side-curls limp and forlorn by his over-large ears! What wonder that the shoulders on which a thirty-sixth part of the weight of the whole world rests (what will happen if they cannot withstand, and sink beneath their burden?) droop, and that the coat on them is threadbare and the shirt shows through?

Years ago, when he was working as a journeyman for young Leyzer Rosenstein in Mukachevo, and spent his nights poring by candlelight over the holy Zohar which no one has ever yet understood and probably never will, on his way to work one morning he met an old beggar.

'Beggar Jew...' said the beggar, and held out his right hand. '*Shalom aleikhem*, peace be with you!' Pinches greeted him first as was his duty, and gave him a gift—not alms. And at that moment Pinches felt that they were alone in the street together. And that there was nothing else in the world but the two of them. And that the beggar seemed strangely clear.

The beggar accepted his gift, stood motionless for a moment, and then put one hand over his mouth in such a way that his forefinger rested against one nostril and the thumb and little finger against his chin, and then he whispered between the forefinger and the middle finger something that sounded like the terrible number: '*Lamet vav*.'

Pinches was still standing in the street; now he could see the whole of it again but the beggar had disappeared. What was it? ... What had happened? ... Had he had the good fortune to meet one of Thirty-Six Chosen Ones? Then why had *lamet vav* not perished on the spot when he betrayed his secret?

Pinches went on pondering it as he sat with the other

journeymen on the big tailors' table at Leyzer Rosenstein's, with his legs crossed under him. What a day that was! In the next room the master's wife was in labour for the first time; the midwife was with her. Leyzer Rosenstein, who was forbidden to remain in the room where his wife lay unclean, kept jumping up from the light-coloured overcoat he had begun cutting out, whenever a cry from his wife was heard; he ran about the room distracted and kept coming back in a sweat to his big cutting scissors and taking up the cloth again (poor customer!), beside himself with fear and impatience to know whether his wife would be able to pray '*Oide ladonai*' for the birth of a son, or whether she would not pray at all after the birth of a daughter. But Pinches Yakubovich was too taken up with the great event of that morning to take the slightest interest in the private affairs of the Rosenstein family. 'A boy, it'll be a boy,' all the other journeymen kept saying in excitement, respecting the master's anxiety; they had been saying the same thing for months with mocking smiles.

And that was when a strange and incredible thing happened, incredible at first to Pinches himself, for he had shown such utter indifference to the feelings of the boss and his wife.

Like a bolt from the blue Pinches Yakubovich jumped down from the table as though he had sat on a pin. And waving high above his head the jacket he was sewing, with the needle and white thread stuck into the lining, he shouted at the astonished tailor and his men in a shrill voice:

'It will be two sons: Riven and Shimen!'

And two sons it was. And they were given the names shouted out a few moments before they were born: Reuben and Simeon.

Then it was that Pinches Yakubovich realised that he

was a tailor. And he realised, too, that he had been granted a much greater favour than merely to *meet a lamet vav*.

Really truly?

Just then Pinches Yakubovich's mother married him off. Into the village of Polana. Which he had never seen before.

Oyoyoyoy!

To Brana Shloymovich, a childless widow, who had a cottage, a cow and two strip fields there. Whom he had also never seen before.

Yoy!

Oy, Brana, wicked woman! Is it not you that hangs like the asses' millstone on the ankle of Pinches Yakubovich, preventing him from exalting himself and endangering thus, all unwitting, the very existence of the world? You, who know so well and from so many reproachful conversations with your husband that husband and wife should come together in piety and with no thoughts but for the Messiah they may engender in the next few moments, did you not to the horror and terror of Pinches rush at marriage like a maddened wolf bitch, eyes distracted and claws tearing at his unhappy body? Have you not prevented him, the disciple of the great Rabbi of Belz, from getting up to perform the mystic rites at midnight; did you not quarrel with him over it in the very first week of your marriage, cursing him with the terrible word 'fool' who then of course sleeps in the evening and sleeps in the morning and sleeps all day; and a week later did you not shriek so loudly that you woke the neighbours up, and when you threatened to kick the holy candlesticks over did you not kick your husband so hard that he was forced to flee before you into the yard and out into the street in his burial shift?

Oyoyoyoy!

This evening Brana is going to the *mikvah*.

Pinches Yakubovich is also going to the *mikvah* this afternoon. But he doesn't feel quite like it, it's not time yet, and he doesn't know what to do with himself. He would have liked to soothe his troubled spirit in wise converse with friends. But he had already been to see Nakhamkes after dinner, and Hershkovich and Glück as well; Moyshe Kahan had to go and see to heating the *mikvah*, and Pinches Yakubovich had nowhere to go.

On Friday afternoon at this time strange things are happening in Heaven and on earth. The angels are adorning the Sabbath Queen in her choicest raiment, getting her and themselves ready for the moment when they are allowed to light the first three stars in the sky as a sign that they are leading the most gracious, delightful, and best-beloved of God away from His throne adorned by symbolic Hebrew characters from which the world was once created, to pass through the Golden Gates of Heaven and give her into the keeping of the Chosen People for one day. And down here in Polana they are preparing to receive her. The women have baked white loaves, after first making a burnt offering to the Lord (*ach*, they only licked their fingers, pinched off a bit of dough, flicked in into the fire and muttered something—but at least they did that much), ironed the white cloths, bought the Sabbath candles, or calling upon the religious feelings of their fellow-believers have shouted so loud that they got them on credit, and now, with their skirts tucked up into the waistband, they are scrubbing floors and cleaning windows; then they will start cutting noodles, boiling the Sabbath fowl and preparing the Sabbath table, so that while the men are in the synagogue they may fulfil one of the commandments laid upon them by the Lord and welcome the Sabbath Queen by lighting the Sabbath candles.

No, today nobody has any time for Pinches Yakubovich and his wise conversation.

Where should he go?

He went to the house of his friend Moyshe Kahan. He knew Moyshe was not at home, but he just dropped in to sit awhile.

In the living room he found only nine-year-old Froyem and ten-year-old Davie; Mrs. Kahan had slipped out somewhere, too, probably to fetch home fodder for the cow. But Pinches Yakubovich, who had only come because he could not make up his mind to go anywhere else, was glad he had come. For the boys were making something that vaguely resembled a violin from bits of wood and wire; they were quarrelling; and now Froyem stood in a corner with the violin in his hand, ready to strike, and Davie, crimson with fury, was yelling at his brother:

'Fool! Fool! Fool!'

And in truth, there is no greater scorn than this in Israel.

Pinches Yakubovich was most indignant. And full of sorrow. How could this be, the children of his friend Moyshe Kahan? Oy, vay.

The boys faltered as Pinches Yakubovich came in. He sat down solemnly upon a chair, straddled his legs, fixed his hat more firmly upon his head, and after sitting for a moment said in a voice of concern:

'Davie, come here.'

The boy came unwillingly.

'I know that you learn your lessons in the *kebeder* well. Now tell me who will go to Heaven.'

'The Jews,' Davie answered still rather unwilling, but smiling a little scornfully at the easy question.

'All of them?'

'All of them.'

‘Even those who do not keep the Law, who profane the Sabbath and eat unclean food?’

‘Yes.’

‘That is right,’ Pinches Yakubovich nodded; ‘when they have suffered their punishment they too will go to Heaven. But there are some who will not enter Heaven. Do you know who?’

‘Yes,’ said Davie in a guilty voice, ‘but he pinched my violin...’

‘Wait!’ Pinches spoke with affectionate sternness. ‘A violin, a violin, a bit of lifeless wood and a piece of lifeless wire, what’s a violin? But you have abused your own brother...’ and Pinches Yakubovich said these words with sorrowful emphasis, his eyes wide open in distress. ‘You have called him by the most terrible name in the language. Do you know who your brother Froyem is, Davie, do you know what is hidden in his soul and what the Lord’s intentions for him are? You do not, you do not, you cannot know. And you have scorned the glory of God in him. Unhappy child! And God Almighty may forgive you just because you are a child. For it is written: “Every Jew has a place in the world to come, but he that has scorned his neighbour has no place there...” and what happens, Davie, to the souls of those that have scorned their neighbours?... You do not answer, but you know what happens. Their souls enter the bodies of fishes, my child. In that little pail I see a small trout and two minnows in the water, and if you caught them, may you be praised for doing so. Maybe... maybe, although we cannot know it, one of these three fishes imprisons the soul of some Davie Kahan who scorned his brother for a miserable violin... Now, Davie... Come along, Davie, and ask your brother’s forgiveness.’

The boys went towards each other and shook hands, grimacing.

Pinches Yakubovich went on:

'Do you know, my children, the story of how Baal Shem, may he rest in peace, had to forgo the greatest happiness of all Jews, that of keeping the Sabbath in glory and joyousness, and was forced to pass the Sabbath in misery and uncleanness because his wife poured abuse on a maidservant for breaking a vessel, and he, being deep in his studies, failed to take the girl's part?'

Pinches Yakubovich fell silent. He pondered deeply. His limp beard and wispy sidecurls swung from side to side as he shook his head. With both hands he pulled his hat more firmly down on his head.

Then he thought of something else:

'One of the heathen came to Rabbi Hillel, may he rest in peace, and said to him: "I will accept your faith, but only on condition you can expound the principles of it while I can stand on one leg." "Stand on one leg," said the great rabbi, and when the heathen was ready he said: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself!"... Just that!... Do you know the three things that hold up the world as on pillars, my children? *Al hatora*, learning; *al haavoda*, work; *al gemilut kbasidim*, neighbourly kindness... That's right, my children, *al gemilut kbasidim*... And that is a great thing in Israel.'

With both hands Pinches Yakubovich glued his hat even more firmly to his brow, and went out deep in thought.

The boys put their tongues out at each other. As far as they could.

Pinches Yakubovich found himself in the street once more.

He moved towards the *mikvah* deep in thought and with bent head.

Brana was going to the *mikvah* that night, too!

'*Shalom!*' said Srul Nakhamkes, catching up with Pinches and falling in by his side.

'*Shalom aleikhem!*' answered Pinsches solemnly.

They went along together, and Srul's energetic stride forced Pinches to quicken his step ever so little.

Here in the Carpathian valleys evening falls early, and today's sunny afternoon was soon swallowed up by the advancing shadows of the mountains. Polana's main street is lively, for now is the right time to go to the *mikvah*, before evening prayers. And all the men of the little Jewish community are slowly gathering there. Tradesmen, labourers, carters, peasants, lumberjacks, shopkeepers, beggars (and often all these trades in one person), with side-curls and without, in caftans and in ordinary clothes or what is left of them, the men of forty-eight families, for that is the number of *talliths* in the synagogue, not counting the families of a few widows. The men walk slowly and with their bodies relaxed, as if they are already preparing for the moment when it is forbidden to think of work or hunger, of injuries or debts (yoy!), when there will no longer be any of these things, but only the clapping of hands and joyfulness, singing and swaying of bodies in a dance-like rhythm, when it will be the duty of each of them on this one evening in the week to eat his fill of the best food he can get, to drink a glass of spirits, consume at least one little fish, and if she is not unclean, to lie with his wife.

There goes Mr. Solomon Fuchs, dignified and solitary, in a good serge suit, with only a trace of side-curls and his beard clipped short, no longer a shopkeeper but a merchant, the wealthiest man in the community and the owner of the most beautiful *tallith* of all, trimmed with silver, the *tallith* which brought such ill luck to the Shafar family. There goes eighty-three-year-old Mordecai Yid Feiner-

mann surrounded by his three bearded sons, in a greasy caftan and what was once a velvet hat, Mordecai Yid Feinermann, the tormentor of Moyshe Kahan, the man who steps into the *mikvah* every day, the very wise *Tsadike* who rivals Pinches Yakubovich in piety, not as learned as Pinches, perhaps, but enjoying greater respect on account of his wealth, his severity and his blameless family life. And there, with Khaim his hope and joy, Baynish Zisovich goes towards the *mikvah*, the owner of Julie fleet as a swallow, marching along in incredibly torn tennis shoes and a short rust-coloured dressing-gown frogged with braid, apparently something sent from the city by the irascible anti-Semitic gentleman tourist. And Joseph Shafar, very tall and with a face like a sheep, is about to open the glass door of his little shop when he sees his mortal enemy Solomon Fuchs and turns back quickly as though he has forgotten something.

'Srul,' asks Pinches in a sad voice, 'what do you think the time is?'

'Do I know?' Nakhamkes the smith tosses his head scornfully and droops his lower lip.

Oyoyoyoy!

Suddenly Pinches Yakubovich is brought up short.

At the turn in the road, rounding the corner by the Ruthenian village shop, appears his wife Brana. She and Feiga Kahan, the wife of Moyshe, are coming straight towards him.

Brana! By her side skips six-year-old Benjie (oy, vay, how wrong Pinches was when he gave him the name Benjamin, thinking that after him there would be no more!) and four-year-old Mendl toddles along and in her arms Brana is carrying little Hudya and in one hand a basket of potatoes while the arm that holds the little girl is holding a hoe as well. She looks like Judith with the head of Holofernes, carrying a sword. Her legs are like sycamore

trees and her breasts like two full sacks of grain, and her belly, which has borne twelve sons and three daughters, proclaims defiantly that she has no intention of giving up the good work for a long time to come. Behold her, Brana. Behold her, Feiga. They look like two sisters. Behold, weak and faint-hearted generation!

Tiny beads of sweat appear on Pinches Yakubovich's forehead.

As the two women pass the friends, in the mud and stones of the Polana street (as God is my witness, the stones crack beneath their tread!), Brana throws a glance at her husband.

Yoy!

No, Pinches Yakubovich does not complain. Oh dear me, no. Of course life would be difficult without Brana. That was best proved after the affair of the illicit distilling of drink from methylated spirits (and indeed, it was no *goy*, but Solomon Fuchs who anonymously informed on them), when the customs and excise men confiscated two litres of methylated spirits from Brana and she gave one of them a broken nose and scratched his face, while the other hadn't got a single button left on his tunic except the strap, and then they sent her to prison for three months and the cottage looked like a rubbish-heap, sometimes the cow was fed and sometimes she wasn't, and the children screamed from morning to night because they were hungry. True enough, if it were not for Brana, Froyem and Moyshele would not be earning money in Mukachevo and Gutman would not be apprenticed to a smith and the little ones would not even grow up, because it is all thanks to Brana, who works in the garden, helps out at the Fuchs's, can always manage to get something on credit by begging, weeping, shouting or threatening, and can always manage to drag out of her sister in America if not twenty dollars every time, then at

least a parcel of old clothes. Certainly if it were not for her, Pinches Yakubovich would do far less tailoring and much more often would have to tell his customers that they must wait until somebody happens to be going into the town and brings him buttons or needles or thread, and his clothes would be even more torn than they are, and he would spend even more time pondering over learned books and would meditate even more devotedly on the wisdom of God. Let us not expect women to take a higher view of things, let us admit that their nature draws them more to the physical than to the spiritual world, and let us not be indignant with Brana, who in defence of her rights and those of her family, treats her husband no less cruelly than she did the excise men. No, Pinches Yakubovich would not dream of complaining.

Oyoy!

This morning, as the law commands, exactly fourteen days after the flowers of her blood had come upon her, Brana went to the ritual bath-house. She sat in hot water in the wooden bath tub for a whole hour, and with a splinter of wood she scraped every bit of dirt from her toe and fingernails. For Brana had been unclean for fourteen days.

And this evening she will go to the *mikvah*. When the first three stars appear in the heavens and all the men are gathered in the synagogue, she will enter the ritual bath-house for the second time. No, she will not light a candle today, and she will not stick the stump on to the remnants of other candles on the edge of the tank; the Sabbath has begun, and so it is forbidden to have anything to do with lights; Brana will enter the water, naked, in the darkness. Then she will be purified.

If we meditate more profoundly on the works of God, we cannot fail to see that for him who keeps God's commandments there is neither constant good fortune nor

constant misfortune; that life is balance; and that in the division of time the sacred number seven is all-important. After the seven years of plenty as well-favoured as kine feeding in a meadow come seven lean years as thin as ears blasted with the east wind. After twice seven pleasant days come twice seven days of gloom and affliction.

For twice seven days it was good to be alive. The days were like ducats, elevating thoughts came of their own accord, and conversation between friends was full of wit and wisdom. At home all was peace and quiet. For all those twice seven days Brana was not allowed to touch her husband, she was not allowed to look at him, she was not allowed to speak to him much, she was not allowed to laugh or sing, she was not allowed to make his bed (this merely for the sake of accuracy, for Brana never made it for him anyway), and she had to sleep on a sackcloth-covered couch from which the straw was coming out, and Pinches was not allowed to sit on it, nay, he even had to make a wide circle round it in case the hem of his garment should touch it as he passed. What a wise injunction, and what a goodly life! And if it was absolutely necessary for her to address him, for instance, if she held out a piece of wood and said: 'Get a move on, you lazy creature, and chop some sticks,' or said as she stood at the pastry-board: 'May he drop in his tracks, he wouldn't even cut a few noodles for me, the fool, the fool, the fool!' she was not allowed to hand him the knife or the piece of wood; she had to put the knife down nicely on the table and the wood on the floor, or at any rate to throw it at his feet (but only at his feet and not on them) and wait for him to pick it up himself. How good life was!

But the mystical number of seven days have twice passed before the starry throne of God. And evil days are fast approaching. There will come up out of the river twice seven kine, poor and very ill-favoured and lean-

fleshed, such as have never been seen in the whole land for badness. Brana is going to the *mikvah* tonight. And every step and every glance of his eye is bringing him nearer to that moment, and time is racing away like stags over a meadow. And of all those evil days the first is the worst. As it is always and in everything.

For Brana will come back to her husband's bed, and when the children fall asleep all the kicking and pushing and pulling will begin and in the darkness Pinches will gesticulate despairingly and pull himself away and push himself away and will whisper very loud in the last hope that he can still waken the eight-year-old: 'Yankel, are you asleep?' But Brana, who has given up so many rights in her life, clings to this one, the last of all, to her right to this one day, clings to it grimly, relentlessly, and with fury. And the poor *lamet vav* will feel miserable and horror will seize hold of him and all that was noble and holy coming down to him from above he will see disappearing again far, far up in the heavens and there will be nothing left but the earth, the earth, the earth, and its foundations will be shaking.

How could a man be anything but utterly miserable?

Down there the bath-house is steaming below Pinches Yakubovich and Srul Nakhamkes, where the brook splits into rills winding their way like gleaming ribbons among the dry patches of pebbles and boulders left behind by the waters. Down there, where the great mass of Menshul rises sheer from the other side of the brook. The shadows have already touched the woods and only the bare top of the mountain is still glowing in bright sunshine.

And as Pinches Yakubovich gazes sadly ahead and as his glance climbs the mountainside and comes to rest on the summit of Menshul, he suddenly recalls the mountain over against Gibeon.

'Joshua was a great warrior, Srul!'

Srul Nakhamkes is not interested in Joshua. He does not even ask Pinches why he thought to mention him. Srul Nakhamkes the smith is an *amborets*, a simple man without learning, and he does not know that it was Joshua who, when the coming of night threatened to interrupt a battle that was almost won, cried in a loud voice: 'Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon.' And God performed a miracle for His just warrior; the sun stood still and the moon stayed. Time stood still and the hours did not move forward. Until the just man was victorious.

Oyoy!

The men of Polana are stripping in the bath-house, and the *beder* Moyshe Kahan is chatting with them. They are pulling off their trousers, peeling off their shirts, and putting aside the sacred *tsitsith*, the garment that covers their back and chest, woven by their Jewish women from pure wool. Pinches Yakubovich among them.

Do these *amborets* know why they are wearing the *tsitsith* with its mystic numbers, the five knots and eight tassels that peep out so elegantly from under the jackets of the dashing young men, and on the old men are so sweat-grimed and grubby? They may know that all their life they are forbidden to take the *tsitsith* off except in the *mikvah*; they know that the *tsitsith*, with a fourth part cut away, will go with them into the grave; they know that the *tsitsith* protects them from all evil—and that is all they know. But Pinches Yakubovich has learned whence this mysterious power comes. *Tsitsith!* The letters *ts* come twice in the word; *ts* stands for the number 90, so that makes 180; the letter *i* comes twice, making twice ten; and the letter *th*, which hides the number 400; and altogether that makes 600. If you add the eight tassels and five knots you get once more the holy number 613—that is the

number of veins in a man's body and the number of commandments the Lord has given to men.

Pinches Yakubovich, too, takes off his *tsitsith* with pious respect, forcing himself not to think of divine matters in this place, and to consider it a piece of woollen clothing and not that which it really is.

The severe old man Mordecai Yid Feinermann comes into the half-dark of the bath-house. Alone. For it is certainly not lawful for a son to uncover his father's nakedness, and so the bearded sons have stayed respectfully outside the bath-house. When Moyshe Kahan saw his tormentor coming, he thought it better to disappear quickly into the little room to help Riva pile on more wood under the cauldron, in case old Mordecai should find something to pick on.

The dignified old man is stripping too. His long white beard is yellowing with age, his skull is bald right to the crown, and his body is hairy. The great-grandchildren of Mordecai Yid Feinermann, living in Košice, coffee-house loungers and half *goyim* that they are, have been heard to say that in Polana they have got such a hairy old grandad that he has to be put away in camphor balls for the summer.

Pinches Yakubovich is the first to prepare to enter the *mikvah*. He has solemnly taken one step down.

He wants to go on down to the second step, where the water reaches; he has lifted his foot. Just as he prepares to put his big toe into the water he stops dead.

What is that he sees?

Pinches Yakubovich stares frantically at the line round the tank... and his heart starts hammering.

What is it that he sees?

The *mikvah* is not full! The water is at least half a centimetre below the line. And according to God's commandment the water in the *mikvah* must never fall below this line. Never!

Pinches Yakubovich is dismayed indeed.

Of course, he could go on in, the water would rise and cover the gap, and nobody need know anything about it. But in his fright this is just what Pinches does not do.

He turns his head and fixes an agonized look on Mordecai Yid Feinermann.

The stern-eyed old man, dignified even in his nakedness, returns his frightened gaze with a firm stare. But he does not consider his rival in piety worthy of a reply. Not until a little later, when Pinches Yakubovich has been gazing despairingly at him for too long, and when Pinches has added to the urgency of his appeal with the corners of his mouth, does the old man decide—not to answer, but just to draw his wrinkled brows together and to make a tiny gesture with his little finger, held slightly apart from the rest:

We-e-ell?

'Mordkhe...' Pinches whispers terrified, and his eyes turn towards the line round the *mikvah*.

The old man's gaze comes to rest on it.

He peers more closely at it.

And terrible anger inflames him.

No, he does not say a word, but his hairy white form towers high, his arm is outstretched and one bony finger points at the line. And the awful countenance of an avenging prophet turns blazing eyes towards the other men.

They hurry forward.

They are shocked.

They rush to the door, push their way into the little entrance and shout for Moyshe Kahan the bath-tender. He is just making up the fire with beech logs.

Moyshe Kahan hurries in. Of course it's old Mordkhe again. Of course old Mordkhe has found something wrong, what else could you expect? Oh, how Moyshe Kahan

hates his tormentor, the thief of his leisure and his money, for whom alone he will have to heat the bath-house six days of the week in winter!

The prophetic old man is still standing with his arm stretched out over the *mikvah*.

At last Moyshe Kahan understands. And turns pale.

It is a fact. Fifteen-year-old Riva, his son, the accursed youth, had taken too much water out of the *mikvah* when he was filling the cauldron to heat it.

'Do you know what this means for you, Moyshele?' calls Alter Itskovich, doing his best to imitate the prophetic pose of Mordecai Yid Feinermann.

His knees quaking, Moyshe Kahan answers, subdued: 'Yes, I know.'

Eight men are pulling on their shirts again indignantly, putting on their *tsitsith* with the sacred number of the letters, tassels and knots, drawing on their trousers, getting into their shoes and dashing out of the bath-house to spread the dreadful news throughout the Jewish community: the Polana *mikvah* is unclean.

They scatter in all directions.

Pinches Yakubovich is the only one who does not hurry. He strolls out and pauses to look towards the reddening summit of Menshul, saying to Srul Nakhmkes who is already two strides ahead of him:

'The evening is turning out fine. It'll be a nice Sabbath.'

But all the smith can think of is the news which will stun everyone he meets, and he hurries off with long, energetic strides.

Pinches Yakubovich had time to go home first. It was a good moment, for just in the late afternoon before the Sabbath, Brana would go to the common grazing ground for their cow.

He changed into a slightly less torn suit, stroked the second boy's head and reminded him to polish the candlesticks nicely to please Mother; in the yard he told the eldest to chop the wood nicely not to annoy Mother, and he smiled at the youngest playing in the mud of the street, shaking a warning finger at them in fun; then he went to pay a few calls. True, everybody was excited about the dreadful business of the *mikvah*, recounting the causes and effects, and anxious to talk about nothing else, but Pinches devoted surprisingly little attention to the event and turned the conversation to general happenings and elevated themes. Indeed there is no greater pleasure than to talk of wise matters with thoughtful friends. At the Tsins, after exchanging a few brief words with old Abraham about the business of the *mikvah*, Pinches recalled the devout and instructive story of what happened when Baal Shem, may he rest in peace, met an Archbishop who was a renegade Jew. Then he went on to Nakhamkes' house and told the children there the story of Ahasuerus' basket—everything had to jump into it, even Death. The last house he called at was the Eizigovichs' where he and the blind grandfather talked about *shekinah*, the divine majesty today dispersed in material objects and one day to be united by the Messiah. And indeed it was amazing what elevated thoughts came to him that day, and what beautiful words came to his lips of their own accord.

The shadows crept up the steep sides of Menshul, covering the woods and climbing right up to the bare summit, until only the tip of the mountain still glowed. And then even that faded and the valley was hidden in dark mist. Now only a few minutes and the short *minkhe* prayer separated the world from the advent of the Sabbath Queen.

The last Jews were hurrying in groups along the village street to the Polana synagogue, a building not

unlike the cottage that housed the ritual baths. Pinches Yakubovich went along too, with old Eizigovich, his sons and grandsons.

Come, my friend, to meet the Bride, let us welcome in the Sabbath!... Enter in peace, thou crown of thy husband, enter in joy and rejoicing into the midst of thy chosen people! Enter, oh bride; enter, oh bride!

Then Moyshe Kahan lit the candles in their candlesticks of wood and tin and the spotless windows of God's house shone gloriously into the evening darkness of Polana.

But this Sabbath, perhaps because the law of ritual washing had not been observed and evil powers were in the ascendant, the men in the synagogue were thinking less about the Queen of the Sabbath and the Lord, than about Moyshe Kahan and rascally Riva and many other things connected with those two, and there was a lot of running about between the prayer-stands, a lot of shouting and excitement.

The *mikvah* is unclean!

How did it happen? When did it happen? Who saw it first? How did it come about? What will be the consequences? What will happen next? What is to be done? Who is going to pay for it? Every one of those gathered there felt that the defiling of the *mikvah* was a personal insult.

At the prayer-stand with two candles, standing by the tabernacle with the sacred *Torah*, is Leyb Abramovich the cobbler, the only one of the community this Friday evening to be wearing a black and white striped silk *tallith*; he is the cantor welcoming the Queen in a cheerful though rather hoarse voice; he sings, he bows a hundred times, he bows in a long chain of hundreds of times, straining his congested vocal chords to unaccustomed high notes, all a-tremble with delight and effort—and the

Jews are not listening to him, the Lord God is probably not listening either, and the Sabbath Queen certainly not.

For there is discord in Israel.

As to what should happen next, the whole community is agreed:

Let Baynish Zisovich, as soon as the Sabbath is over, the very first moment, as soon as day breaks, harness his horse and ride straight away into the town, let him go at a gallop and not spare the horse! Let him bring the Rabbi straight back with him!

And indeed, the whole of the indignant community, thirsting for quick action, can see Zisovich's Julie thundering wildly through the pale light of morning and can see Baynish standing as if in a war chariot, flourishing the reins and curling his whip over the horse's head.

But they are not agreed about the rest.

'Who's going to pay for it?'

'It stands to reason that Moyshe's got to pay for it.'

'Why Moyshe?'

'Because it's his job, clever!'

Mordecai Yid Feinermann takes no part in the argument. He is sitting on a stool at his prayer-stand, his skull is quite bald and his beard yellowing with age, and he is wearing iron-rimmed spectacles on his stern eyes. He is gazing at the large characters in the book and swaying backwards and forwards chanting the responses. He, most cruelly insulted of all, hurt to the depths of his soul, his fifty years of unbroken observance of the Lord's commandments by daily immersion in the *mikvah* forcibly interrupted by the hand of a criminal, is seeking comfort in prayer and not finding it. No voice, no chant, can silence the profound feeling of misfortune and injustice. What horrors has life not brought him already? How many more are still to come, before he is allowed to die? If he knew how to weep, after all the blows he has suffered

in his lifetime, he would weep now. But his face is as immobile as if it were carved in old ivory and he sways backwards and forwards with his whole body.

As Leyb Abramovich, bowing a hundred times and many hundreds of times, calls for the third time into the flickering candle flames, at the top of his straining voice: '*Rititi! Tarara!* Come, my friend, to meet the Bride. Let us welcome in the Sabbath!' the argument in the synagogue rises to a climax.

A fundamental question is troubling the minds of the congregation at this moment: will Moyshe Kahan the *beder* fall, or will he hold his own? The question was broached in the village that afternoon by Gutman Itskovich the cobbler, who had applied for the paid job of *beder* and *shames* the year before last, but without success. It is true that Gutman Itskovich is sitting calmly by Mordecai Yid Feinermann and piously chanting the responses with him, but his brother Berko and his brother-in-law Shmule are fanning the fire, going from one to the other and pouring oil on the flames. The question has taken on definite form, and it is a challenge to open fight.

'What do you expect of Moyshe? Can he help what his madcap son does?'

'That's a good one! And who's responsible? A madcap boy, eh? And who gets paid for doing the job?'

Near the door, in the middle of a group of men, stands Berko Itskovich holding Leyzar Marton by the lapels and shouting at him, gesticulating in his face; each of them is shaking the other. The rest of the men are quarrelling too, and Froyem Hergot gives Moyshele Schneider such a push that he falls against the door with a thud.

'What is going on there?' Joseph Shafar the merchant rises from his book, tall and with a face somewhat like a sheep; to see better he pushes his spectacles up on his brow.

Not even Pinches Yakubovich can raise his thoughts to God today. He is trying hard, he keeps trying again with all his ardent will, but on all sides his Sabbath ecstasy keeps coming up against the threat to his friend Moyshe Kahan's livelihood, and he feels, nay, he can even see the words of the exasperated community taking form and casting his prayers back down to the ground just as they are about to pass beyond the rafters of the synagogue; it is the word 'Moyshe' fired from all sides that flies like a heavy cannonball to catch up with the canticles of his benediction, lays its full weight on them and falls with them down to the floor again, raising a little cloud of dust as they land.

Is it his conscience troubling Pinches Yakubovich?... Temptation, keep your distance! Who would dare to speak of a bad conscience?... Would any Jew have allowed himself to act otherwise?

Between the prayer-stands walks Moyshe Kahan, pale, and today scorned of men; he mounts the stools and straightens the candles in their wooden candlesticks, pretending assiduity as if that could help him now. And at the back, in the corner by the *veiberish shul*, the alcove set apart behind thick lattice, where the women will be allowed in tomorrow, that rascal Riva cowers in simulated distress. When he is sure none of the grown-ups is looking he grins wickedly, and he and Benjie Fuchs put their tongues out at each other from a distance.

Shrouded in his prayer-shawl, Leyb Abramovich the cobbler calls his refrain in a loud voice for the seventh time: '*Rititi! Tarara!* Come, my friend, to meet the Bride...'

Mr. Solomon Fuchs, with only a hint of side-curls, who tomorrow to the anger of Joseph Shafar will put on his silver-edged *talliith*, jumps up and thumps his prayer-stand with his hand, shouting: 'Will you all be

quiet?' And because he has caught sight of a ragged youth with hair like a sparrow's nest, whom he had taken into his cart the day before, half-way home from the town, and now here is this Shmule Grünberg, shouting there with the rest of them, he shakes a clenched fist at him: 'You just wait, next time you want me to give you a lift!'

No: that Friday evening the gathering of the Polana community could not find favour in the eyes of the Lord their God. The Sabbath Queen must have turned her face away in disgust. The angels, as they have done so often in eternity, once more said to the Lord: 'Oh Lord, look down there! And say truthfully, is it just that Thou shouldst love the Jews of Polana more than us?'

Pinches Yakubovich is on his way home. He can see his cottage shining with light while he is still a good way off. In the sleepy village on a Friday the Jewish cottages can always be seen from far away, gleaming among the dark Ruthenian cottages; their polished windows gleam, and so do the Sabbath candles, standing there within on a table spread with a white cloth, around them the white Sabbath loaves wrapped in a white napkin. Pinches Yakubovich can see his Sabbath table through the window. There are seventeen candles shining there, proclaiming the glory of Brana's womb: there is one for each of them, for him and for her, for the three who have gone out into the world and for the four who have died, and for the eight that are walking and toddling about the room in expectation of supper. The candles are in candlesticks of wood, of pewter, and of tin, and in those four pink holders Brana makes of raspberry pips every year after she has pressed the raspberry juice, and some are just stuck anyhow into empty sardine tins. Shining into the darkness from under the low roof sheltered by the dark

sycamore trees, the window is a moving sight; perhaps it is a dim inherited memory of a safe haven within reach, as we flee from danger. The lights are a moving sight, too. And the children waiting for father to come home. A feeling of gentle affection, a mood of uplifting solemnity comes over Pinches Yakubovich. And a little—a very little—feeling of fear mingles with it.

'*Gut shabos!*' he greeted his family with the Sabbath greeting.

Brana did not acknowledge his greeting; she shot him an angry look and came straight to the point:

'Who told Mordecai the *mikvah* was *treyste*?'

'Mordecai?' Pinches thought hard. 'I don't really know. Perhaps it was Srul Nakhamkes.'

Yes, that is the right thing to do. It is certainly better to aid God with a tiny lie than to cause trouble on such a festive day.

Brana did not answer. She just looked at him for a moment, and in truth, if Pinches had not been feeling so strong at that moment, and had he not worn the armour of invulnerability—at least at her hands—the look she gave him would have pierced him through and through.

But who could bother about a woman's anger on a day like this?

Pinches Yakubovich began his prayers.

'Peace be with you!' he walked about the room, gesticulating and clapping his hands, singing his prayers out loud, or rather declaiming in that strange chant known as *nigun*, that sounds like wailing, complaint and lamentation. And Brana, seething with fury, ran back and forth between the room and the lobby, banging the door behind her and looking for an excuse to scream. Pinches Yakubovich tried not to hear it.

Slap! Yankel came in for a box on the ear for getting in her way by the door.

'The devil take you! Lightning from the seventh heaven fall on you and kill you! The black plague on you all! Lazy, idle good-for-nothings. Playing the fool about the village all day—not one of you'll lift a finger to help and then when supper-time comes: "Give me something to eat!" The boy's too lazy even to move away from the door. Just like his father. Stop howling, you mule, or I'll give you what for!' Slap! And another followed.

Yankel, feeling the depths of the injustice done to him, wept bitterly. Brana banged the door to and fro.

'A plague on the lot of you!'

All Pinches Yakubovich did was to sing as loud as he could, now high, now low, sobbing, wailing and lamenting the refrain: 'Peace be with you!' his hands raised in blessing, and then clapping as he walked about the room, now with a dancing step and now as if deep in meditation.

'Idlers!' Brana brought her refrain to an end too. And added angrily as if talking to herself: 'Of course, Srul Nakhames!' getting the last word anyway, for the moment had come when all anger, trained by thousands of years of discipline, must now go back and hide in the place it burst out from, and if it cannot do that, at least it must refrain from showing itself openly.

The father of the family was pouring a cupful of water over his hands, standing at the tin bucket by the stove.

And all of them, even Brana red with anger and Yankel sulking obstinately, and even the littlest ones, took their places round the white-covered table in the light of the seventeen candles.

The father of the family drew near to bless the festive supper.

With both hands he pressed his hat firmly down on his head.

He prayed.

And when he came to the words: 'Blessed be the Lord

our God, King of the Universe, Who draweth bread from the earth,' the lord and priest of the family took up the bread wrapped in a white napkin and with purified hands raised it ever so little before the candles.

He cut the bread, broke off a bit and dipped it in salt, and then ate it; then he broke off more bread, dipped it in salt, and handed it to the others.

Then they sat down to supper: first to the two small minnows stewed in sour pepper sauce and served with pepper dumplings, which Brana pushed in front of the father of the family rather less angrily than she would have done ten minutes earlier; and he, picking morsels of white flesh off the bones with his fingers, and dipping bits of bread into the cold sauce, looked lovingly at his son Yankel. For it was he who had caught this gift; for it was he who had suffered injustice. A fish is not a fish and only ignorant and inwardly deaf people can consider it as such. Have you ever noticed what terribly sad eyes fishes have? For a fish may be a Jewish soul, a soul cast out, the unhappiest of all, and therefore dumb. Souls driven from before the face of the Lord for scorning a neighbour inhabit the bodies of fishes, and only a pious Jew can release them, by eating them piously at one of the three Sabbath meals. *Ach*, Brana, unhappy Brana, who will be a sad fish, for ever mute, how can we but pity you with a sigh? Will you find a pious Jew, Brana, Brana the fish, to eat you?

And after the fishes, while the little ones squabbled over the saucer of pepper and vinegar and licked it clean, the father of the family sang the song ushering in the seventh day, in praise of the King of Kings and in gratitude for this solemn moment; and the older children, Yankel with fair side-curly touching his shoulders, eight-year-old Yossl who sang dreadfully out of tune, and little Benjie as well, who would be a really handsome

child next morning when mother had washed him a bit, and even five-year-old Rivka with the big sore under her nose adding her bit, they all sang at the tops of their voices and their chorus opened the shining window and was carried far out into the night. And then their mother brought in the chicken soup with noodles.

Brana did not say another word that night; she said nothing while they ate, she said nothing as the father intoned grace after supper. But you could see that her anger, which had subsided so unexpectedly at first, was growing again, and fears that it might break out once more arose. She did not say a word except: 'Get to bed!' to the older children, after the younger ones had fallen asleep on the floor and she had put the two smallest to bed on the unclean couch with the straw coming through the sacking—unclean in the higher sense.

Then with defiance at the corners of her mouth and fully dressed as she was, she lay down there herself, wrapped herself in the blanket, and as she angrily turned over and her muscles struck the couch, the wooden frame creaked.

When Pinches Yakubovich had finished his reading of the holy books, he too went to bed. And as he found in the middle of the mattress the comfortable hollow he had made there in the course of those fourteen days, and as he wrapped himself in the eiderdown, he almost wriggled with delight, savouring the exquisite pleasure of lying in bed and taking up as much room as he wanted to.

Indeed, who could fail to rejoice?

There were seventeen candles shining on the white-covered table, and unless the angels came in the night to put them out they would burn out alone, for it is forbidden to touch lights during the Sabbath. They were shining and flickering, casting fitful little shadows on the ceiling. Clear, lovely, holy. Light, Torah, God! Only men to

whom the Lord has not given more vision than to the beasts, can see in a candle an ordinary thing that is made, bought, lighted, left to gutter and smoke and go out. The candle is Light, Light is the Torah, the Torah is the Word of God, the Work of God, a part of Him. It is a part of God in the same sense, but seen with a different awareness. For a part of the Glory of God went with the Jews into exile after the destruction of the Temple, into the Diaspora, the same part of God which it will be the task of the Messiah to unite again in One, when He comes. And this part of God is dispersed like tiny sparks in all things, and man only has to see beneath the surface of things to find it there. It is in the rays of the sun and the breath of the wind, in the ripple of the waves and in the scent of the flowers, in the needle and the thread, in the eyes of an animal, and it may even glimmer in the acts of a *goy*. What eyes are so blind that they cannot see it in the candles shining with seventeen flames on the white-covered table and casting tiny flickering shadows on the ceiling?

What happiness! And what blessedness to feel all this on the Sabbath evening, freed from all evil, peace and quiet all around, and to hear the children's quiet breathing—to feel this after the troubles of the week, when the bed in which he lay alone was so deliciously warm!

Pinches Yakubovich fell into a sweet sleep, and perhaps because his last involuntary glance as he turned over fell on the mountainous and defiant hump of Brana's thighs under the faded blanket, he dreamed that night of the mountain over against Gibeon, of the victorious battle, and of the miracles the Lord performs for those who love Him.

And that same day—for the day begins and ends when the stars appear in the sky—the soul of Pinches Yakubovich praised the Lord with a loud voice yet once more.

This was when he returned from the synagogue on Saturday morning with his striped *tallith* on his shoulders and his beaver cap on his head, and took up his stand in the living room by the open window under the sycamore boughs, to sing. To sing with all the strength of his voice and all the force of his lungs, to sing the song of rejoicing, the most beautiful, most glorious, and most proud song the people of Israel know:

I begin this sweetest song
and on waves of song my soul flies upwards,
longing for Thee, as longs the whole of my being.

This song alone of all the prayers of the people of Israel is written in Aramaic. It has not been translated into Hebrew nor into the tongues of the heathen, and even in the prayerbooks of those who have travelled so far to the west that they need foreign tongues to converse with their God, this song is not translated. Such were the orders of the Lord our God. Because of the angels. He did not want the angels, who speak nothing but Hebrew, to understand the words of this song, that they might not be jealous of man and envy his close familiarity with the Lord.

For my soul will not take on its true form
till Thou mould it in the palm of Thy hand
and it learneth all Thy secrets.

And so while the body of Pinches Yakubovich stood by the open window, his face crimson and his neck muscles strained to the utmost, the song flew up on high and on its waves the soul of Pinches Yakubovich was wafted aloft over the tops of the sycamores and above the clouds, and right up into the vault of the sky, and in

the throng and congregation of souls of all those who were singing at this same moment the soul of Pinches pushed its way forward and thumped with both fists on the gates of Heaven, in furious ecstasy, clamouring to enter before the rest.

Pinches Yakubovich stepped from one foot to the other, nimbly lifting his knees, and shouted with such fervour as nobody else in Polana displayed that day. And it was in moments such as these that Pinches Yakubovich felt that his soul was freed and depended upon no creature on earth, that his soul was pure and holy, with nothing to come between him and God, and that no hostile cloud stood in the path of his prayers to suck them in and never let them go; and he felt that he, Pinches Yakubovich, was... perhaps... after all... *lamet vav*. And that if he was not yet, then the old beggar would appear once more, but this time without his forefinger resting against his nostril and without the thumb and little finger on his chin, and he would not mumble this time, but speak clearly and audibly. And Pinches Yakubovich felt that if it was true that the world was resting on his shoulders, then Israel might sleep in peace and go on quietly sleeping until the early coming of the Messiah.

Pinches Yakubovich sang and behind his back Brana was scolding the children.

'A plague on you! A black year on the lot of you!'

This day of all days! On the Sabbath!

Oh, Brana, Brana, you who will become a dumb, sad-eyed fish; will you find a pious soul to eat you?

The Sabbath Queen returned to the Lord.

God commanded the angels to light three stars in the sky as a sign that the time of His gracious favour had passed and that He was calling His delight, His best-beloved Queen, to take her place at His side again on the throne over which the characters from which the world

was created gleamed like lightning. In Polana they bade her farewell and every family wished its members a good week: '*Gute woch!*'

And Brana remained unclean.

She remained unclean for many days yet.

There are things which are not talked about in public, but which cause a ferment. Are there to be many more unclean women in Polana, many women deprived of their men and many men deprived of their women? Mordecai Yid Feinermann cannot wash. He remains sitting in the synagogue, praying, and his head sinks lower and lower. Put things right!

The moment the Sabbath was over, at the dawn of Sunday morning, at a gallop and not sparing the horses, of course nobody drove to the town at all. Nor did anybody drive there that afternoon. The difference between the ten-crown deposit Baynish Zisovich demanded for the trip and the two crowns Moyshe Kahan was prepared to give him still seemed too great that day, and Nussen Mayerovich refused to set out without at least fifteen crowns down!

Nor did anyone drive off on Monday. However urgent and pressing, action is infinitely more rapid in the fantasy of those who are passionately demanding it than it is in reality, for the mind knows no obstacles while the material world, alas, has only too many. That day Baynish Zisovich and his beloved son Khaim set off to look for Julie in the mountains beyond Menshul. One day the previous week, nobody quite knew which, she had set out as had been her wont for twenty years, trotting slowly and solemnly off into the thick woods on Menshul and far up beyond them, to where she could find sunny pastures on the alpine meadows where her friends the horses grazed.

Mounting the grassy crest of the hilltop they found her, far away on Perechrest, a good six hours away from

Polana... 'Julie!' Baynish called to her joyfully from afar. Julie raised her head from the grass she was cropping, fixed both her eyes—the sound one and the wall one—on her masters, swung her tail in greeting and went on grazing. They came nearer and Baynish sat back on his heels, opening his arms wide as if to embrace his beloved, and his voice caressed her: 'Julie!' Julie nodded her head amiably and tossed her tail, but when they came a little nearer she trotted off a bit. And then a bit further. And then began all the persuasion, promises, flattery, pretending and chasing which the old mare, recapturing her colt days, decided was a game designed for her amusement. And when finally Khaim on one side and Baynish on the other had resorted to stones and cries and wild waving of their arms, and when they started tiring her and themselves out over pastures, stones, grass and bilberry grounds, up the steep grassy slopes and down again, they discovered how much truth there was, after all, in Baynish's dictum that Julie was as fleet as a swallow. They stood it longer than she could. They drove her to a corner among rocks and bushes, and there she waited for them, watching them calmly with her one good eye. This was the way freedom-loving Julie had behaved for twenty years, whenever she was to be led back to her home stable.

On Tuesday morning Baynish Zisovich really did set out for the town. But he did not return with the Rabbi that day. Things are not as simple as impatient minds imagine, and the hostile material world, as we have already remarked, is full of cunning. The Jews of Polana are not wealthy enough to be able to have brakes made by the smith, always supposing they have a cart, and anyway Baynish had forgotten to borrow an axe off somebody for the journey, and so it happened that on the steep path down the other side of the high hill separating

the two transverse valleys, he could not hack down a stake and so he had to shove bits of rotting branches between the back wheels, and they kept on breaking. And then near the bottom, when he thought he was over the worst, the traces broke twice, and because he had no rope with him and had forgotten his knife at home, it held him up dreadfully... Brana, Mordecai, the outraged community and an angry God, they all had to wait. And we must admit that God, who knows so well the disgraceful way things are run in Polana, was least perturbed of all.

Baynish Zisovich did not bring the Rabbi on Wednesday morning, either. 'God in Heaven, what has happened?' people were asking anxiously in Polana, dashing out whenever they heard a cart rumbling up; melancholy Mordecai Yid Feinermann came out to stand on the threshold a while every ten minutes, whether he could hear the rumble of wheels or not. All fears of an accident, thank God, were unfounded. It was simply that the Rabbi could not come. He had driven off to a consultation elsewhere. In the next community the ritual slaughterer had dealt with a calf according to the regulations, but because there were suspicious irregularities to be observed in the entrails, the Rabbi had been called in to decide whether an orthodox Jew could partake of the animal's flesh, or whether it would have to be sold cheap to the Christians.

And so it came about that the Rabbi did not arrive until Wednesday evening, when it was already growing dark.

It was a glorious entry. Baynish sat on the box with the town *shames* by his side, and behind them on a heap of hay, with carpets and wraps spread beneath him, sat a man with a greying beard, motionless, in a silk caftan and velvet hat, holding firmly between his knees the silver handle of a walking stick. Before the fences sur-

rounding their cottages, barely visible in the twilight, their shadowy forms merging in one, the Jews of Polana stood respectfully silent, surrounded by their families; the Rabbi accepted their respect, bending his head ever so slightly, in a spiritual rather than a physical gesture, and Julie stepped slowly and solemnly. It was a great moment. And all those who lived through it were conscious of its greatness.

'At last!... The Lord's name be praised.'

Polana breathed more easily.

Baynish drew up in front of Fuchs' shop. There Mr. Solomon Fuchs and his wife Esther were waiting to receive the Rabbi with smiles of devotion and low bows.

They led the Rabbi into the best room. Into a room that exuded dignity and prosperity, full of plush and oak, the turner's craft and the Viennese taste of our grandmothers. The heavy green curtains had been drawn across the barred windows, and above the thick plush tablecloth hung a massive oil lamp, silverplated and with infinite ornament.

'Bring the *beder* here,' the Rabbi's order was more a whisper than a spoken command.

And after these words uttered in melancholy solemnity Mr. Fuchs and his wife Esther did not really need the rapid, agitated motions of the *shames's* fingers, which seemed to be pushing his hosts out of the room, to make them realise that the holy man wanted to be alone with his thoughts and his heavy responsibilities.

Beder Moyshe Kahan hurried breathlessly in.

He took his stand before the greenish-red plush couch, before that mysterious silence, before the endless blue depths of those eyes gazing steadily not at his head, but somewhere far away in the infinite distance and in eternity.

Moyshe Kahan could not bear this silence and this

gaze for long. Something broke in him and in a voice which shook he faltered:

'Rabbi, I have six children!'

There was no need to ask him anything; he told all there was to know, letting the words come tumbling out, all about the sad business and how it had happened and all about the Polana *mikvah*.

The Rabbi, without showing whether he was listening or not, sat motionless. Not even his eyes moved. There was nothing but his body sitting there in the yellowish light of the lamp. The lamp threw a white circle on the yellow plush tablecloth. On the doors with their heavy locks the polished *mezuzahs* gleamed like gold, enshrining the covenant of the Lord with His people Israel.

Moyshe Kahan trembled.

The motionless eyes of the Rabbi seemed to be taking farewell of infinity, leaving it and setting out on the way back to this world; they seemed to be coming nearer and nearer, until they finally came to rest on the face of Moyshe Kahan.

And the Rabbi spoke. Gently and kindly.

'You understand.'

He said no more than these two words. Yet what an abyss of comprehension yawned before Moyshe! They were the two blows that Moses struck on the rock with his rod, when the water gushed forth; the two upraised fingers that are the sign of the tribe of Kohen (his own, the Kahan tribe); two flashes of lightning parting the heavens. In them were contained all the past and future sins of Polana, in them was a terrible threat, but in them was forgiveness, grace and reconciliation also. And there was infinite wisdom in them.

As if lightning had made all clear he suddenly felt the full weight of his guilt.

The Polana *mikvah* is fed by a tiny spring that bubbles

up at the bottom of the tank and has no natural outlet but the muddy floor of the tank. As long as there has been a *mikvah* there, for generations, as far back as man can remember, and certainly for many centuries, the water never fell below the level of the mark ordained for it. A pit containing forty pails of water? What blasphemy! It is the unity of the people of Israel in exile, in the land of a strange people; the unity of men, women and children in life and death, health and sickness, joy and suffering, sin and virtue, in the keeping of the Lord's commandment; it is the firm bond uniting all the generations that have ever gone down into these purifying waters, through the fathers and the grandfathers and the great-grandfathers right back to the Promised Land, and right forward into the future to those who will welcome the Messiah. This continuity had been broken. Great was the transgression of Riva, son of Moyshe. And great was the transgression of Moyshe Kahan, who had not kept good watch over the holy mystery.

No, the wise Rabbi said no more than those two words.

And Moyshe Kahan went out, in his heart and in his mind those two words: 'You understand!' as heavy as the millstone to the ass.

Early next morning in the dank half-dark of the Polana bath-house the Rabbi, the town *shames* and a dejected Moyshe Kahan stood by the mountains of tallow and stearin at the edge of the *mikvah*. The water had all been scooped out of the tank; a tiny clear bubble of water from the spring came up through the mud, and Riva was mopping up the last drops with a cloth.

Pails of milk were ready by the tank. For the water in every *mikvah* must be spring water, and only milk is equally acceptable in the eyes of the Lord, for that, too,

comes from a pure source. That was what learned men had decided after long debate, and that is what is written in *Shulchan Aruch*.

The Rabbi ordered them to pour the milk into the tank.

The town *shames* poured and Moyshe Kahan poured and Riva stared in fascination at the riches being poured away as a sacrifice to Him whose Name may not even cross the mind in this place, and to expiate his, Riva's, sin.

'You understand!' the words flashed through Moyshe Kahan's mind.

What is happening in the *mikvah*? Look! Down there in the tank! What miracle is being performed there? Look, all who have eyes to see, and listen, all who cannot see:

The water has disappeared, the glass bubble of the spring has disappeared, there is nothing to be seen of them, and all is milk, milk, milk as white as the cloth spread on the Sabbath day, as white as wild cherry blossom. There is no *mikvah*, there is no sin committed by Riva, there is no curse on the people of Polana—it is all hidden, covered in whiteness, lost in the eternity of the ages: look, rejoice and be glad!

The milk rises bubbling, it will go on rising all day; it will flow over the unclean half-centimetre below the appointed line, the milk will separate from the water, the water will be purified: once more there will be a *mikvah* and once more the people of Polana will find favour in the eyes of the Lord.

Rejoice and be glad!

The *shames* from the town is pouring the last pailful in.

In front of the bath-house a little group of Jews is waiting. Mordecai Yid Feinermann is among them, and so is Mr. Fuchs.

Attended by the two *shames*, the Rabbi leaves the bath-house. Wisdom radiates from his head held high, and his delicate, fine hand grips the silver handle of his stick. In front of the group of men Riva stands waiting with a can of water and a cloth so clean that the Kahan family cannot remember the like. Moyshe Kahan relieves the Rabbi of his stick and pours water over the tips of his fingers, to cleanse him from having touched the unclean baths. And while the Rabbi slowly dries his hands on the towel humbly held for him by Riva, he looks long, with all the depths of his blue eyes, into the boy's face, and then nods twice with a barely perceptible motion. This long look, too, was contained in those two words of the day before: 'You understand!' And Riva, his eyes down-cast, blushes to the roots of his hair.

Then, followed by the group of men, the Rabbi went back to the Fuchs' house.

And as Esther Fuchs was putting a small meal before the Rabbi in the best room, and Mr. Fuchs with respectful eyes and hands was showing him to the table, before he began to say grace the Rabbi said gently, kindly and without any hint of reproach:

'Is Baynish's Julie the worst horse to be found in the whole of Polana?'

Mr. Fuchs gave a polite smile and after the meal was over went into the village to find a better proposition, in the name of the Jewish community. He found one. But Nussen Mayerovich, angry because his rival had been preferred to him in the first place, demanded forty crowns. Mr. Fuchs said neither yea nor nay.

After dinner the Rabbi inspected the *mikvah* again and when he saw that all was well, drove away.

On the box Nussen Mayerovich held the reins, and anxious to show the difference between Julie and his Gipsy, shook the reins and clicked his tongue until

Gipsy broke into a gallop and the wheels rattled over the stony Polana road. At his side sat the *shames* from the town and behind them on a heap of hay, with carpets and wraps spread beneath him, sat the Rabbi holding his stick firmly between his knees, and the silver handle gleamed and flashed in the midday sun.

All of the Jews of Polana stood in front of their hovels and cottages and on the lips of all of them was the joyful smile of rejoicing at work well done. *Hashem yisburech!*

Tall Mr. Shafar with a face rather like a sheep came out in front of his shop on the half derelict wooden verandah before his large house. He, too, gave his share of the grateful salutation, although there was great bitterness in his heart. As long as he had been rich the Rabbi used to stop in front of *his* house. Now he stayed with the Fuchses.

Baynish Zisovich bore the insult calmly and with wisdom. And while Gipsy was laboriously dragging her load up the steep hill separating the two valleys, his freedom-loving Julie was slowly and solemnly crossing the brook, testing the ground at every step, in order to climb up through the thick woods of Menshul on the other side, far up beyond them to where she could find sunny pastures and her friends the horses, and where she could graze to her heart's content.

On that same Thursday evening, when dark had almost fallen, as the moon was peeping out from behind the silhouette of Menshul and at any moment the stars would light up in the sky, and when the spreading rivulets of the brook were gleaming silver, Moyshe Kahan sat on his wooden bench in front of the bath-house smoking his short pipe and considering the reckoning for the Rabbi's visit to Polana.

The balance was a sad one :

... Baynish, for driving to town and back, and for two days in town, at most and whatever Baynish may say	... 35 crowns.
... Nussen Mayerovich, even if he doesn't get his forty crowns, at least	... 30 crowns.
... For thirty litres of milk	... 24 crowns.
... Solomon Fuchs, for hospitality to the Rabbi and <i>shames</i>	... X
Total at least	... 89 crowns + X

Things looked really desperate for Moyshe Kahan. Where could he find such a dizzy sum of money?

The Jewish community of Polana pays him one thousand crowns a year for both his jobs, that of *shames* and that of *beder*; it works out at 83 crowns 30 hallers a month. Out of that he has to buy wood to heat the bath-house, and it's terrible the way wood's gone up this year. We-e-ell, he has to... well, he doesn't actually have to; he can work off something in the forest, the under-keeper'll turn a blind eye to an ageing beech or two, and you can come to terms with the keeper, too. But he still has to saw the timber and chop it up. What's that? That's a nice thing to say, and who says he doesn't have to buy? Well, I never did! Doesn't have to buy, indeed! What about the goose eggs he has to give the keeper for hatching, he can't steal them, can he, and carting the timber doesn't cost him anything and his labour doesn't cost him anything?... Oyoyoyoy! ... The men don't pay for the use of the bath-house (a plague on old Mordkhe!). The women are supposed to pay. Is there a single one that pays him, though? No, every one of them is in his debt, wherever his eyes turn, because (and there would be no point in denying it) he's in the debt of every one of them, too, wherever his eyes

turn; those mutual accounts in money and in kind will never be settled and God help him if they were... Life is a terribly complicated business. And the whole question, to be or not to be, comes down to whether you can find your way about the mess or not. Can he still find his way about it himself? This business of the *mikvah* has complicated his life for him even more. Where can he find so much money? Of course, he won't dream of paying anything to Solomon Fuchs, the old miser, he can count it an honour to have had the Rabbi under his roof. And of course the milk he borrowed last night and this morning he won't pay for in ready cash either, they'll come to some sort of agreement about it and settle it somehow and shout it off among the mutual debts for the women's baths and the goose eggs. But the journeys to town are there. There's no arguing those away. Of course he will ask the community to reduce the debt to Nussen Mayerovich (the argument: 'Did I order him to go? It was Solomon Fuchs! Did I promise him forty crowns? It was Solomon Fuchs!' is indisputable) and he'll go round everybody in the community and beg them in turn to let him off three-quarters of the money, half, a quarter, he'll pay in a year, in six months, in a month, and there'll be endless negotiations and quarrels in the synagogue of an evening, and in the end he won't pay Nussen Mayerovich anything after all... But there's the snag! He had to give Baynish Zisovich five crowns in advance! Five beautiful, round, honest crowns down, slap on the table. Oyoy! What matter that this bargain can be considered closed for the time being? What matter that he'll fight over the rest of this debt for three, five, eight years and life will get even more mixed up and there'll be even worse complications that he can't even imagine today? Moyshe Kahan could cheerfully bear all that. Where is he to find so much money, though? Five crowns! Do five crown pieces rain down

on him from Heaven? That five crowns could have bought a fowl for the Sabbath supper and it could have bought five kilogrammes of maize flour and it could have bought leather soles for his boots and it could have bought a second-hand coat for the winter... and goodness knows what else... Life is hard. 'You understand!'

The moon has swum out from behind Menshul and sails across the sky, the brook bursting its bank gleams like a rippling silver mirror, and one by one the stars are popping up in the sky. Moyshe Kahan thinks over all the forty Jewish families in Polana and divides them into two groups: for and against. Oy, vay, why did he have to go and quarrel so violently with Ruchla Tsin last week, when her goat hadn't really done his garden any damage?

Who the devil is that coming now?

Yes, there were steps hurrying towards him. Who wanted to disturb him now?

The steps were on the path, and now they were coming down to the brook and the bath-house. Terribly hurried. As if somebody was chasing them. As if there was a fire somewhere. As if they were hurrying to fetch the doctor. As if they were running away with the loot.

Moyshe Kahan strained his eyes into the darkness.

A woman?... Good Heavens!... Coming to the *mikvah*? Whichever of them has gone mad all of a sudden?

What! Brana, Pinches' wife?!?

'Moyshele, open the *mikvah* for me.'

'You're mad! The water's still white. D'you think I've got it heated up so soon?'

'Open the door, open it!'

And so Moyshe Kahan opened the door and Brana disappeared into the darkness of the *mikvah*.

Brana, wife of Pinches!... Brana the first to come to wash, to make sure she didn't miss?... Even before Mordecai Yid Feinermann?

And at that moment a dreadful suspicion shot into Moyshe Kahan's mind. And he stood as if turned to a pillar of salt.

'Do you realise what calamity might have fallen on the whole of our community if Pinches had not noticed it in time?' old Mordecai had said to him the other day... Brana?... Pinches?

In the darkness Moyshe Kahan made as if to sit down on his bench again, but he was uneasy, getting up again before he had sat down properly, and trotting quickly back and forth in front of the bath-house and running down to the brook and back again... So that was it! Pinches. Moyshe knew the minds of Polana. And he knew Pinches. And he knew Brana... So that was what it was all about! Moyshe Kahan ran back from the brook to the bath-house and went to sit down again, and once more he had hardly sat down before he was on his feet again, running hither and thither. Wha-a-at? This was what was to cost him thousands of crowns? He seized his head in his hands. '*Shema Yisroel!*' Pinches! He could feel his friend's presence with all his limbs, with his mind, he could feel him physically near. Nor was he wrong. He knew the custom and he knew:

Three hundred yards away Pinches Yakubovich was walking back and forth in the darkness. With his hands in his pockets, with head hanging down. Waiting for his wife. To come out of the *mikvah*. He, the husband, must be the first to touch her, purified, for if she were to be touched first by a dog, a pig—God forbid!—a cat, a *goy*, or any other unclean thing, she would have to go straight back into the *mikvah*. He really ought to have gone right down to the bath-house to meet her, but he preferred the slender chance of accident and walked about a bit further off, stepping carefully among the pebbles so as not to be heard. Why? He had no need to hide from Moyshe

or from anybody else, but for some unknown reason he was scared whenever he heard the stones rattling under his feet.

At last Brana's form appeared in the gloaming. She looked like a ghost with an unnaturally large head, and Pinches was startled, not realising for a moment that she had wrapped a woollen shawl round her head, coming out of the cold water. He went cautiously towards her and touched her shoulder in the accustomed fashion.

He looked as though he was putting his fingers to a red-hot stove.

And down there below the path, between the bath-house and the brook, Moyshe Kahan stood like a pillar of salt, staring wildly into the darkness and saying over and over again for the tenth time at least, and now out loud: 'Pinches?... My friend, Pinches?'

The two friends did not meet until the next day, Friday afternoon, a week after the catastrophe. When the *shekhter*, the ritual slaughterer, in his long caftan with his gleaming ritual knife in its velvet sheath, was going from one Polana family to another, when tawny, white, black and speckled fowl were beating their wings in pools of blood in the ditch, when plucked feathers were blowing about the street, when the women in Fuchs's shop were shouting or weeping at the last moment to get their Sabbath candles on credit, and when the men, bidding the world of everyday farewell but not yet welcoming the Sabbath Queen, did not know what to do with themselves and were loitering slowly on the way to the *mikvah*.

Pinches Yakubovich was shambling in that direction, too.

Alone.

He dragged himself over the stones and flints of the

Polana road like an ailing horse, past the fences of wood and stakes and wattles; once more he was crumpled, his beard poor and thin, his miserable side-curly drooping in front of over-large ears, limp, sad and forlorn.

He was supremely unhappy. His soul was empty. His body was clammy. *Lamet vav?* He felt that all the abundant fulness of his soul had been poured away, all the fire in it had been put out, and there was nothing left but emptiness and a musty shadow like the dankness of close cellars. That morning when he had tried to pray, his *tefein* on his brow and the straps wound seven times round his left hand, with quite material sight he saw that his prayer was grey in colour, that it was falling to the ground as it left his mouth, and helplessly flapping and beating its wings, unable to rise from the ground; like the hens in the ditch by the road.

Pinches Yakubovich went along with head hanging low, paying no attention to anybody.

He left the road and went down towards the brook and the *mikvah*.

On an island of dry stones in the middle of one of the rills Feiga, the wife of Moyshe Kahan, was bending over, showing her bare legs far above the knee as she beat a pile of wet linen on the stones, with blows like those of a man. Her hips were massive, her legs like two beech trunks, and the terrible naked arm growing from that terrible woman's body dealt blows that hurt the soul and wrung the nerves.

Pinches Yakubovich quickly turned his eyes away. He felt sick, he felt as though he was about to faint. He hurried away.

But there he was, in front of the bath-house steaming from all its cracks.

And face to face with Moyshe Kahan, resting on his bench.

'The water isn't warm yet,' said Moyshe Kahan in a

colourless and almost injured voice, deliberately looking in the other direction.

There was nothing for it but to sit down by the *beder* on his bench.

They sat and said nothing.

The brook murmured.

They sat side by side and gazed into nothingness.

Twenty yards away from them stood Feiga, bending over the brook so that the upper part of her body was invisible and the lower part of it looked like a solidly built fortress, the death of all warriors and the terror of all that drew nigh. Pinches Yakubovich wiped tiny beads of sweat from his brow.

What were the two friends to say to each other?

What were they to say in the next two minutes, three minutes, five minutes, for they could not just go on sitting obstinately side by side, each looking the other way. Would one of them say: 'What did you do that to me for, Pinches?' and hear the answer: 'What else could I have done?' Or will the other ask: 'Are you angry with me, Moyshele?' and hear the answer: 'Why should I be angry, when I'd have done the same myself?' In front of them the stony summit of Menshul shone above the dark wooded slopes, above their heads the roof was puffing up little clouds of steam, and below them Feiga's strong arm was dealing blows that sounded like artillery fire against the murmuring of the stream.

At last they unburdened themselves.

All at once—willy-nilly—they looked at each other. The one was as sad as the other. They gazed and gazed and neither turned his gaze away.

And Moyshe Kahan, husband of Feiga, spoke first; without anger, without reproach, without a trace of ridicule, because he understood it all so well:

'Pinches, was it worth it for those few days?'

And Pinches Yakubovich, far from not understanding his meaning, and far from pretending anything, answered equally sadly:

‘Moyshele,’ and there was deep sincerity in his eyes, ‘I know, but I didn’t do it on purpose.’