



The
WORLD of
Sholom Aleichem

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CHAPTER XIII

The Judgments of Reb Yozifel

LILIES that fester smell far worse than weeds," sang a poet unknown to old Kasrievky — a poet old Kasrievky might have loved because as many commentaries have been written on him as on the Talmud, and as many interpretations grown up round his text as round that of the Torah. The Kasrievkites were so organically interpenetrated with religion that they had nothing to be good with except religion, and nothing to be bad with except religion. (Somewhere among the old prayers there is one which runs approximately thus: "O Lord, let me worship Thee not only with my good inclination, but also with my evil inclination.")

Shalachmonus, the sending round of sweetmeats on the festival of Purim, was not a religious rite, properly speaking. But it had a semi-religious character, and in any case it was a charming tradition; certainly it added, or was supposed to add, to the jollity of the celebration and the sweetness of life.

The Kasrievkites sent one another plates of *hamantasch*, a delicacy already described, of *teiglach*, tiny squares of dough boiled in honey, chopped nuts and spices, of cakes, tarts, biscuits, cookies, scones with rai-

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sins and scones with currants; they sent one another everything that the ingenuity of the housewife could devise with flour, eggs, milk, sugar, fruits, and an oven. All day long, as we have seen, boys and girls, messengers and maidservants, scurried through the streets of Kasrievky, carrying gift and return gift from neighbour to neighbour, acquaintance to acquaintance, relative to relative, and receiving a little cash reward — Purim money. A lovely and gracious tradition it was, which gave a special tone and colour to Purim, the most secular of the festivals.

Lovely and gracious, that is to say, in the spirit, and for that matter in the execution too, most of the time. But how can one ensure a lovely and gracious tradition against petrification into the formal and snobbish? How can we prevent the gifts of Father's Day and Mother's Day and Wedding Day and Birthday and Christmas from degenerating into — well, into missiles instead of missives? Consider a housewife of Kasrievky, with her Purim list of relatives, in-laws, friends and acquaintances, each one of whom had to be considered individually. There were gradations and standards and precedents, featherweight distinctions in the sending and return of *shalachmonus*; particularly in the return, if you happened to be the first recipient. For instance, two *hamantasches*, five cookies, a currant scone, and a slice of honey cake called exactly for one *hamantasch*, two tarts, eight biscuits, and a raisin scone, or its equivalent, three slices of honey cake, a slab of *teiglach*, two currant scones, and three cookies. Of course the size of the slices and the density of the baking also entered into the reckoning.

You had to know your way about these usages; it was a question of feeling rather than of weights and meas-

ures. You had to be the possessor of a massive memory, as well as of a delicate sense of social values. For a disparity in gifts was permissible, or, rather, expected, as between the poor and the well-to-do; the former were not abashed to receive a plateful of good things out of all proportion to their own sending; the latter did not expect in return more than a token greeting. But God help you if you sent more than you received to one whose inferior status was not established and acknowledged; or less than you received if your own inferiority was not similarly established and acknowledged. The *nogid*, or rich man, ranked everybody except the other *negidim*; the trustees of the synagogue were in the upper brackets; the Rabbi, the cantor, and the ritual slaughterer were in the middle class for substance, but high up for honours. There were ✓ class and personal distinctions, individual and group subtleties — all in all an etiquette as complicated as the hierarchies of the Byzantine court and the rigid ceremonial compulsions of the hidalgos. And people knew their rights and stood on them.

A particular sense of delicacy was needed by the first sender of *shalachmonus*, especially as the gifts might be crossing and still had to correspond to the weights and measures of the code. Here was where memory came in, the *shalachmonuses* of previous years, the relative standing of the parties, and the interpretation thereof in *shalachmonus* rating.

How deep the code went, and what calamities might follow from the contravention of it, we learn from the incident of the two Nechamahs, or rather of their employers. Nechamah the black and Nechamah the red were two servant girls. Nechamah the black worked for Zlota, the wife of Reb Isaac the storekeeper, and her pay

was four and a half roubles the season — six months — with clothes and shoes. Nechamah the red worked for Zelda, the wife of Reb Yossie the storekeeper, and her pay was six roubles the season, no clothes and shoes. On a certain muddy Purim — that is to say, on a certain Purim, for the festival occurs in the early spring, when the unpaved streets and alleys of Kasrievky were covered by six inches of ooze — Nechamah the red and Nechamah the black came face to face as they were carrying their covered trays of *shalachmonus*, Nechamah the red on her way to the employer of Nechamah the black, and vice versa. A happy meeting! The girls were tired with delivering gifts in all quarters of the town. So they sat down on a doorstep to swap experiences, compare tips, and revile their employers.

Thence they proceeded to show each other the contents of their respective trays. Nechamah the black was the bearer of an appetizing square of strudel, two big honey cakes, a fish-shaped cake stuffed with ground nuts and sugar, and a slab of poppyseed cake rich with honey. Nechamah the red carried a fat *hamantasch*, black with poppyseed, two “cushion cakes,” so called from their shape and softness, a golden cookie starred with black raisins, a slab of tart, and two cherub cakes. As any Kasrievkite expert could have told you, the gifts were balanced to a nicety, both in respect of each other and of the relative social status of the senders.

Who would have thought that from this casual encounter of two servant girls would ensue a *cause célèbre* never to be forgotten in the annals of Kasrievky? And who but a Kasrievkite could understand, and even sympathize with, the circumstances? Beginning with loose, idle talk, the two Nechamahs, tired and hungry, as

well as rebellious and envious, passed from the scrutiny of each other's trays to the consideration of conspiracy. What would be the harm, they asked, if an equal quantity of sweetmeats were removed from each tray, leaving the balance where it had been? Thus, if the strudel disappeared from the tray of Nechamah the black, and the golden cookie from the tray of Nechamah the red, the gifts of Zlota the wife of Reb Isaac and of Zelda the wife of Reb Yossie would still be perfectly matched. One could go further: if a honey cake faded from the tray of Nechamah the black, accompanied by a cushion cake from the tray of Nechamah the red, the equilibrium would still remain undisturbed. And was it not more fitting that the said strudel and honey cake and cookie and cushion cake should go to the feeding of the stomachs of the Nechamahs rather than the vanity of their employers?

Said and done; which showed they were only two foolish servant girls; for they left two fatal considerations out of the count. Zelda the wife of Reb Yossie and Zlota the wife of Reb Isaac would remember what they had sent, but see only what they received. There was, moreover, the unalterable status established and maintained throughout the years.

Thus it was: Nechamah the black brought her depleted shipment to Zelda, the wife of Reb Yossie, who uncovered the tray, took one glance, and uttered a shriek which woke from his afternoon nap her husband Yossie, Yossie the Washrag as the Kasrievkites had named him because he was the most henpecked husband in Kasrievky.

"Tell your mistress," hissed Zelda to Nechamah the black, "that I hope she lives till next Purim and doesn't get a nicer *shalachmonus* than this from anyone in town."

Nechamah the red brought her diminished offering to Zlota, the wife of Reb Isaac, who uncovered the tray and almost fainted. She could not call to her husband, Reb Isaac, because he was not at home. One-a-year Isaac was *his* nickname, because every year, without fail, his wife brought forth a baby. That was the way of the Kasrievkites; they gave a man a nickname and it stuck. Reb Isaac might live to the age of ninety, and cease to procreate at the age of seventy, but it would be One-a-year Isaac till the day of his death.

"Look at this *shalachmonus*," gasped Zlota. "May all the nightmares of my life, and the nightmares of the lives of all my ancestors, be visited upon the heads of my enemies! Is this a *shalachmonus* or a joke? Take this back to your miserable mistress, do you hear?" Wherewith the wife of One-a-year Isaac thrust out of doors Nechamah the red and sent her back to Zelda, the wife of Yossie the Washrag.

It would have been bad enough if One-a-year Isaac and Yossie the Washrag had been mere acquaintances. They were friends, which was odd enough since their two dry-goods stores stood side by side on the marketplace and they were for ever snatching away each other's customers. But friends they were. They lent each other a couple of roubles now and again, they came to each other's homes on Friday evenings for the Sabbath benediction, and in the winter they went into each other's stores to warm up at the stove or play a game of checkers. Their wives, too, were on friendly terms, exchanging pots and scandal, pouring out their hearts to each other, and taking counsel on their domestic problems. Friends have, of course, larger foundations on which to erect a quarrel than have mere acquaintances. On the morning

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following this Purim, Reb Yossie the Washrag and One-a-year Isaac, well primed by their respective wives, opened their adjacent stores as usual and stationed themselves at their respective doors, each one waiting for the other to say "Good morning" in order that he might not answer. Customers being scarce that raw spring day, Reb Yossie and Reb Isaac stood there grimly, hour after hour, till their wives arrived.

"Isaac," said Zlota, acidulously, "why don't you thank your friend for the wonderful *shalachmonus* he sent us yesterday?"

"Yossie," said Zelda, poisonously, "have you returned adequate thanks for the noble present you received?"

"I don't speak to a Washrag," announced Reb Isaac loudly.

"I wouldn't answer a One-a-year," responded Reb Yossie.

There you had it! The battle was joined. In less time than it takes to put on a prayer-shawl, the husbands were in each other's beards, the wives in each other's hair. The market-place came to life; half the town assembled to separate the combatants or to join in the *mêlée*. The air was filled with questions and answers: "*Shalachmonus*," "insult," "*Shalachmonus*," "fit for a beggar," "*Shalachmonus*," "*Shalachmonus*," "*Shalachmonus*." Before the day was over, One-a-year Isaac and Yossie the Washrag invaded the office of the prefect, Pan Milinievsky, to lodge charges of libel, assault and battery, and malicious slander. With them came their wives, relatives, acquaintances, and enemies.

It is as shocking to report as it would be dishonest to deny that recourse to Pan Milinievsky the gentile on matters connected exclusively with internal Jewish dif-

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ferences was only too frequent. Particularly was this true in the autumn, round the time of the festival of Booths and Simchas Torah, the Rejoicing for the Law. But no season of the year was exempt from such scandals. There could always be an explosion over precedence in the synagogue, over privileges denied or honours misplaced. Feivel, the son of Chantze Mirke, got the most coveted section of the Torah to read out on a Sabbath morning when obviously it should have gone to Chaim, the son of Leah Dvosse; Kiveh One-eye was called twice in one month to roll up the sacred Scroll, and Deaf Itzig not even once in two months. Pan Milinievsky, a Russian with a high forehead and a vast beard, had been prefect of Kasrievky so long that he spoke Yiddish like a native and even understood something about the delicate problems of precedence and social status in the synagogue. A decent enough man, considering that he was a gentile and an official; reasonable enough in the taking of bribes and, though an anti-Semite, devoid of viciousness. A trifle impatient, though, as he showed again on this occasion. For having tried for over an hour to get a word in edgewise between the accusations and counter-accusations of Zlota, Zelda, Isaac, Yossie, and their partisans, he rose to his feet and roared: "Get out! Get out! The whole kit and kaboodle! Go to your Rabbi!"

So the litigants and their partisans streamed toward the house of Reb Yozifel, the old and honoured Rabbi.

Patient, wise, long-suffering Reb Yozifel! He cannot be introduced casually. I must digress and present Reb Yozifel according to his merit. He was an old man even in old Kasrievky, and he lived on into the wonders and terrors of new Kasrievky. The word "rabbi" has been denuded, among us moderns, of the connotations which

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clung to the word "*Rav*." Reb Yozifel, the *Rav* of Kasrievky, has not his like among us. To say that he was a scholar and saint is to give him his formal due. He was the conscience of Kasrievky, its purer self and its suffering heart. Himself without sin (you would not have dared to suggest this in his presence), he did not believe in the sinfulness of others. He saw only childishness and error. No man, in his view, was wicked by choice. It was all misunderstanding. If you only listened to the "sinner," if you gave him a chance to talk himself out, you would discover nothing but good intention gone astray.

Now, just as an instance of Reb Yozifel's way with "sinners" (let Zelda and Zlota and Isaac and Yossie and the rest of them wait awhile), there was the matter of the Old People's Home which Reb Yozifel set his heart on, and of the rich Jew — not a Kasrievkite — who donated the money for it. This was in later years, in the period of new Kasrievky, when they were building the station for the railroad which the Kasrievkites did not believe in. The rich Jew in question was a contractor; a St. Petersburgier; a modernized man; one of the Poliakovs, whose name was mentioned in an awed murmur, like that of the Brodskys and Rothschilds; and he came to Kasrievky on business.

When a Jew comes to Kasrievky on business the town organizes itself round him. His room is beleaguered by merchants, messengers, brokers, pedlars and commission men. Within an hour of his arrival Kasrievky must know his name, his occupation, the nature of his mission, the size of his income, and the probable length of his stay. Privacy? Reticence? Kasrievky knows not these things. All Jews are brothers; all Jews have a share in the world to come and in each other's present business.

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But this man Poliakov — of *the* Poliakovs or not — was an unnatural phenomenon. First, he took two whole rooms for himself at the Kasrievky inn; second, he shut himself up and refused to receive anybody; third, he stationed a man at his door (did you ever hear the like?), and if you wanted to see him, you had to be announced.

Reb Yozifel and two of the leading householders of Kasrievky, the *crème de la crème* of its respectability, called on the said Poliakov, and for some reason or other the guardian at the door had left his post. So they entered unannounced, whereupon the fantastic St. Petersburgier, coming out from the inner room, fell upon them in a rage and ordered them out as if they were, God forbid, robbers, or beggars.

The two householders fled, but Reb Yozifel, frail, tottering old Reb Yozifel, stood his ground, and began to explain, in his quavering voice, that this was a holy matter, an Old People's Home for which he was collecting funds, and that he was offering the stranger a share in paradise in exchange for a donation. The man Poliakov, beside himself at the impudence of the funny old Jew in the mediæval gaberdine, lost himself completely, and before he knew what he was doing, he had slapped old Reb Yozifel in the face, so that Reb Yozifel's skullcap fell to the floor, and he stood there bareheaded for several seconds, perhaps for the only time in his life.

Slowly and thoughtfully Reb Yozifel bent down and picked up his skullcap; slowly and thoughtfully he faced the stranger.

"That," said Reb Yozifel, "was for me. Now what will you give for the Old People's Home?"

When Reb Yozifel came out and rejoined the terrified committee, his face was flushed — one cheek being un-

accountably redder than the other. But he had the promise of the man Poliakov of St. Petersburg that an Old People's Home would be built in Kasrievky.

That, as I said, was years later. At the moment Reb Yozifel's home has been invaded by the tumultuous crowd turned away so unceremoniously by Pan Milinevsky. And here the scene was repeated, with this difference, that Reb Yozifel made no attempt to wedge in a word. He let the hours pass while the room resounded with the clamour of accusation and counter-accusation: "*Hamantasch*," "*Shalachmonus*," "insult," "beggarly," "Washrag," "One-a-year."

They quieted down at last and demanded judgment, which Reb Yozifel, as *Rav*, was bound to render. Never had he been known to fail in this duty, no matter how complicated or embittered the dispute. Indeed, Reb Yozifel was famous for his judgments — you shall hear shortly of his subtle solution of an insoluble problem in the case of the Mayers and the Schnayers — not less than for his sanctity.

But before judgment came the summation of the case, which Reb Yozifel began with a heart-broken sigh.

"We stand," he said, "on the threshold of the Passover, the great, the holy festival — the festival, it may be said, without an equal. Thousands and thousands of years ago our ancestors went forth from Egypt in freedom, and traversed the Red Sea dryshod. What a festival! What a sea! What a miracle! Forty years they wandered thereafter in the wilderness, having received the Torah at the foot of Sinai, that marvellous Torah in which it is written *ve-ohavto*, and thou shalt love, *re-echo*; thy neighbour, *komocho*, as thyself. Ah, what a Torah God gave us! And how shall we honour it? With quar-

rels, with foolish disputes, with vanities? Is it not a desecration to prepare thus for the Passover? Come, children, we have serious business before us. We must begin to consider what shall be done in this town of ours for the poor, who must celebrate the Passover like all the others. Have we yet made a list of what they need, in the way of eggs and potatoes and chicken-fat — not to mention *matzos*, of course? But stay! There is a quarrel to be composed, a judgment rendered. Let us begin the summation once more. The Passover is approaching! The Passover! What a festival! Our forefathers went out of Egypt in freedom, and traversed the Red Sea dryshod. And after that they wandered forty years in the wilderness, having received the Torah at the foot of Sinai! What a Torah! A Torah without an equal! Do you know what that means? . . ."

And so Reb Yozifel went on with his summation, in his weak, sad voice, and one by one the partisans began to sneak from the room; one by one they withdrew, and after them the litigants, each one going thoughtfully and shamefacedly home, to wonder what the excitement had been about, and to prepare for the great and holy festival of the Passover.

Could King Solomon have done better?