

THE FUGITIVE

BY
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EVERY morning, when the rising sun was streaking the window-panes of my chamber with purple light, I would quickly dress, seize the Prophets or Psalms, and run out into the blooming garden which was in front of Malke's chamber. I would stretch myself upon the grassy ground, and with an open book in my hand lose myself in the fixative poetry of the king of prophets, Isaiah, or reflect upon the consoling, soul-inspiring verses of David. I would look up to the blushing sky above, to the verdant trees all around, the floating sunbeams, feel the cool earth beneath me—then, ah! then I would bathe in the great singer's meaning! "Who covereth himself with light as with a garment; who stretcheth out the heavens like a curtain; who layeth the beams of his chambers in the water; who maketh the clouds his chariot; who walketh upon the wings of the wind. He sendeth the streams into the valleys which run among the hills; by them the fowls of the heavens have their habitation, which sing among the branches; the trees of the Lord are full of sap. O Lord, how manifold are thy works! The earth is full of thy riches. I will sing unto the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have being." Homer, Virgil, Chaucer, Heine, Byron, Shelley—who of them could express so much beauty in lines so few?

One morning as I lay stretched on the ground, reading and pronouncing the lyrical words of Psalms which chimed in my ears like exquisite music, Malke opened the window of her chamber and thrust out her head. Her eyes were only half open, and the mist of sleep was still hovering over her face.

"Why did you get up so early?" she asked me, and faintly blushing as she covered her partly-exposed bosom with her naked hand.

I raised my eyes to hers, and beholding her head, resting between her hands, her luxuriant hair hanging down her bare neck like a loosened skein of silk, her rising and falling breast between her arms, I faltered shyly, "Ah, it is so beautiful!" and I spread my arms and dropped them in despair.

She smiled, blushed and lowering her head she asked me to pluck a violet for her.

I was delighted to obey her, to be of some service to her, to please every whim and fancy of hers.

As I handed the flower to her she bent forward through the open window, and smelling the violet she murmured, "What a delicious fragrance!" and glanced blushing at my face with a charming twinkle in her eyes.

She remained leaning on the window sill and staring in front of her meditatively, while I gazed and gazed at her face that spoke of unsatiable life, youth, passion, beauty. The garden with those many trees and shrubs and flowers and birds, the shimmering sky, the spreading sunbeams, the verdant earth, the delicious air, the blooming incident with that wondering gaze of hers—ah! Nature in all her splendor and supreme beauty stood before me.

She again glanced at me, with a sad smile playing around her lips, and with what I thought teasing mockery she said in a very low tone, "Ah, it is so beautiful!" and her pretty head disappeared.

I threw myself upon the ground with the book clasped to my breast, and looked listlessly at the bits of sky screened by the branches above me.

In my heart I felt a longing mixed with venom. She was so near to me, and yet her confidence in me, her frankness, her calmness, her self-possession in my presence, indicated the distance between us.

Thus passed the summer in a state of doubt and despair. Malke grew more and more absent-minded and melancholy. She frequently spoke to me of her lack of friends, of the monotony of her life, and expressed a longing to visit theaters and attend balls as did the ladies of big cities.

One day she asked abruptly: "Israel, is it such a great sin to marry a gentile? Magdeline Grubovski, the surveyor's daughter, says she would marry a Jew if she only loved him, and she is a Christian. Why should it be a greater sin for a Jew to marry a Christian?"

I could give no definite answer to this, so I said nothing. Then she resumed: "I like Magdeline so much. She has parties and balls, and oh! what nice, gallant gentlemen come to her! I have been invited many times, but I do not like to go there because the young men call me 'pretty Jewess,' and they seem to take more liberties with me than with Magdeline. But they are so pleasant, so polite. Isn't Count Losjinski handsome? Did you notice how erect he walks? How beautiful his long black mustache becomes his dark blue eyes! He always pulls and twirls his mustache when he talks to me, and he acts very strangely. Once he said to father—in a joke, of course—that if he could get a girl like me—Here she burst into feigned laughter and covered her blushing face with both hands. 'Isn't it nice of him to say that? He's a count and owns this village and the next, and what a palace he has! Think of his marrying a plain Jewish girl—Why do you keep so quiet, Israel?' she asked abruptly. 'You're always angry at me when I speak of Count Losjinski. You're a good little tutor, nevertheless," she added, emphasizing every syllable by stroking my chin in a playful manner and laughing sweetly. How little I understood the world or even myself! I did not know that there is something deeper in words than the mere meaning of them; that things spoken are only a part of what one wishes to convey; that in order to understand a person, one must be able to divine that part of his thought which remains unspoken. The first instructor of this enigmatic language is love, and the best pupil is the lover.

Not long after this Count Losjinski stopped for a few minutes at the inn. His coachman, who was a baptized Jew, amused the barroom by talking Yiddish and reciting Hebrew blessings, which we thought very strange.

Malke's little brother asked his father what became of the coachman's soul when he turned Christian. The innkeeper smilingly replied that after the conversion the Jewish soul was changed into a gentile one. Malke wondered very much and could not see the difference.

"Papa, what is the soul, anyhow?" Malke asked her father with a pensive air.

"A soul is that part of godliness," explained her father, "that every Jew possesses."

"Has not a gentile that part of godliness in him, father?" asked the girl again.

"This is too deep for you to understand, my child," responded Mr. Takiff, and puffed at his pipe. "You're a girl, and a woman's brain is not able to comprehend such serious problems. A Jew whose soul was present on Mount Sinai when the Torah was given to Israel, as the Talmud says, has got that part of godliness because he answered: 'All that the Lord spoke we will do and hear.'"

This explanation did not seem to satisfy Malke. "Will not the gentiles have gan-edem (heaven), father?" she resumed. "Not even Count Losjinski, who is so good to every one and favors the Jewish people in particular?"

"Oh, yes, my daughter. The Talmud also says: 'All good gentiles will have the world to come. In heaven all will be Jews.'"

"It will be so nice," laughed Malke. "All will be alike and there will be no more Jews and gentiles, but all the same, and the Jews will be permitted to own land in their own names, like the gentiles, and will be allowed to live everywhere, even in St. Petersburg and Moscow."

"Oh, you fool!" interrupted her little brother. "In gan-edem all the noble men will make fire in Jewish houses and snuff the candles on Shabbos. And Vanka, who calls me Christ-killer, will carry mama's prayer-book to the synagogue on Shabbos. It will be so nice!" The innocent little martyr, who already bore the yoke of the Torah, clasped his wee hands and danced with joy.

CHAPTER XXII.

A PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE.

Mrs. Takiff often sighed because Malke, as she fondly called her daughter, was already going on eighteen and there was "nothing suitable" for her. Shadchonnin (marriage brokers) proposed many bridegrooms, and each one whispered to Reb Nosen (as they addressed him) that he had the very best article in the market. But none quite satisfied the innkeeper. As for Malke, who of course was never consulted when the merits of the various candidates were being considered, she was as heedless of all matrimonial talk of

her parents as if she had been a girl of twelve.

One afternoon at the end of August we were in the sitting-room—Mr. Takiff in his big armchair before an open window, puffing at his long pipe, Mrs. Takiff mending a stocking, Malke working over a piece of embroidery, and I scanning the pages of a Russian book—when Koppel the shadchan, who had taken a keen interest in Malke's future, appeared before the window at which Mr. Takiff sat.

"Good afternoon, Reb Nosen," he said, with his indolent, oily smile on his face.

"Sholom Aleichem," returned Mr. Takiff, offering his hand through the open window. "How do you come here at this time of the day?"

"What a question—ha! ha! ha! ha!" The shadchan's laugh was dry and cackling. "Isn't a person allowed to pay you a visit? When one has merchandise he should not close the door against a prospective purchaser." And winking significantly he cackled again.

"Well, Reb Koppel, well," rejoined Mr. Takiff, somewhat eagerly, "anything new?"

"Sure, indeed, Reb Nosen. The very article you are looking for is at hand, and one to suit—I should rather say becoming—an Honorable Jew like Reb Nosen Takiff. Well—spreading his arms—"a young man who is a rarity among millions—millions, I say; of the very choicest in the realm of Lithuania. An Illul upon whom thousands of wealthy fathers are casting their eyes and are trying to take him into their nets. 'But no, no,' said I to myself, and my wife said the very same, 'this goldfish must go to no one else but Reb Nosen's daughter.' You see!" he drew an old, dirty, tattered note-book from his pocket—"Reas Reb Nosen L'Javolin Illul (the daughter of Nosen for the Javolin prodigy). He! he! he! Koppel the shadchan is no fool."

"Well, well, come into the house and let me hear what you have to say."

The shadchan disappeared from the window and a moment later was with us in the sitting-room. He had an extinguished corn-cob pipe in his mouth, and he playfully swung a snarled cane between his thumb and forefinger, which were yellow from the tobacco he snuffed. He was a man of medium size, with a weakened head, which he carried bent slightly forward and to one side. His eyes, set deep in their sockets, were overhung by shaggy eyebrows, his beard, though thin, was broad and long, and his pelis fell to his shoulders. He wore a long caftan, the skirt of which registered his movements on his shining boots, into the tops of which his trousers were stuck. The caftan was of a distinguished appearance, parted in the back in the fashion of a frock coat, but pinned together at the very bottom so that it

might be technically regarded as having but two corners and so be exempt from tzitzis! Only the lowest button of his coat was fastened; the upper part hung loosely forward, exposing a large red handkerchief protruding from his inside pocket, where a snuff-box could invariably be found.

"Good morning, bride," the shadchan bowed to Malke, who blushed scarlet at this salutation.

"Go, my daughter, to the next room," said Mr. Takiff. "We have something to talk about which is not fit you should hear."

Malke left the room, agitated and blushing. But I, in an agony of expectation, pretended not to hear the last remark and remained in my seat.

The shadchan took off his hat, leaving his head covered with an old threadbare skull-cap, and settled himself in a chair which the host pushed toward him. Koppel dropped a large pinch of snuff into the hollow of his left hand and raising it to his nostrils drew in the pungent stuff with one long breath.

"Pshtzi! pshtzi! pshtzi!" he sneezed three times, applying the red handkerchief to his nose as a protection for his host.

"I can never start a conversation of

*Fringes, which, according to some rabbinical law, four-corner garments are to have.

any importance before I take a little snuff," the shadchan commented, wiping his mouth and nose. "It clears my mind and eyes, and I tell you, Reb Nosen, I become fresh and vigorous after a little sneezing. It is simply a refreshment—a restorer of strength. And I tell you there is none better than Kalman's snuff in the whole world. It's a real heaven on earth, so help me God, and it prepares me for active work. By the way, snuff does not cost me anything. Kalman promised to give me as much as I want gratis in addition to the five per cent commission he paid me for the match of his daughter."

"Of the snuff we'll talk later," said Nosen a little impatiently. "Let us approach our subject."

"God be with you, Reb Nosen, have not the Talmud sages said: 'Match-making is as hard as the task of Moses

in dividing the waters of the Red Sea?' The Talmud also says, 'Be patient in our judgment, and we must weigh our words before we decide. Well, now, Reb Nosen, I'll light one of your Prussian cigars, and we'll instantly proceed to business.'"

Mr. Takiff took the hint and handed him a cigar.

"In short," the shadchan resumed, "I have for you a young man—a jewel, a gem, whose real value a Rothschild only could pay for; and furthermore, a real Talmud-Chochem. Ben Talmid-Chochem (a disciple of wisdom, the son of another). As the Talmud says: 'One should give his daughter in marriage to the son of the law.' The truth is—here he stretched his neck and emitted a thin curl of smoke—"that I am too ignorant to mention the qualities that prodigy possesses. A young man that has the six parts of the Tal-

mud at his fingers' ends, and can tell the word a hundred pages ahead; if you stick a pin through a certain spot; a wonderful scribe whose handwriting is like print, and who can read Poskim (a digest of the Talmud) in his sleep, so may the Creator of the universe—blessed be his name!—help me to accomplish my undertaking in a happy hour. Of course you know Rabbi Brill of Javolin; he told me that the young man is a shining star in Israel whose brilliancy will illumine our holy people in exile. As to his personal beauty—here he shrugged his shoulders and made a motion with his hands as if to drive away an imaginary opponent—"he looks like an angel. God's grace rests upon him. Tall, majestic, and in his white and crimson face there is the reflection of angels, so may the Lord send a blessing wherever I turn."

He paused for a moment to wipe the perspiration from his forehead. Nosen Takiff nodded his head in silent approval.

"As to the dowry," the shadchan continued, "we have little to say. He has been offered ten thousand and fifteen thousand rubles, but of course to an aristocrat like Reb Nosen—well, he would go for a little less. I believe you once told me that you were willing to give your daughter six thousand rubles. Well, when you get such a rare gem you will not mind to add two thousand. This young man is worth every penny of it, so help me the one above—every groschen. Yes, this is what I call a bargain which could not be had by the richest of our brethren. Why, did you never hear of the Javolin Illul?" He looked with such astonishment at Mr. Takiff that the latter blushed at his own ignorance.

"So may the holy one—blessed be he!—help me find suitors for my own marriageable daughters—even babes have heard of him! Oh, Reb Israel," he turned to me, as if just seeing me, "you here! I did not notice you at all. Young fellows like you must not listen to talk of marriage; this with his oily smile. "When you will be ripe enough I'll get you a nice girl with a big dowry."

With my heart throbbing painfully over what I had heard I went into the dining-room. There I found Malke, pale and apprehensive, pretending to read a book. I thought I detected the sign of fresh tears on her cheeks.

In about an hour Mr. Takiff came into the room where we sat, smiling blissfully. "My daughter," he announced, "next Friday your intended one is going to stay Shabbos with us." Malke did not utter a word, but her beautiful face changed color, a few tears trickled down her cheeks, and the book in her hand slipped to the floor. "Oh, Israel, I am so unhappy—so unhappy!" she whispered, and without giving me a chance to reply she slipped away to her bedroom.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BRIDEGROOM.

Friday night arrived. Having spent all afternoon brooding in the forest, I had not seen the chosen (bridegroom), who had arrived a little before sunset and was now in the parlor chanting prayers with Mr. Takiff. I found the dining-room brightly illuminated, the finest cloth spread, and the best dishes arranged on the table, and Mrs. Takiff in a new silk gown and a white apron was reading from her prayer-book and frequently raising her eyes in the direction of Malke's room. She likewise had not seen the chosen and was nervously awaiting his appearance.

"Tell Malke to hurry with her toilet



ו' תשרי
"YOM KIPPUR" THE GREAT FAST

BY E. S. BRUDNO