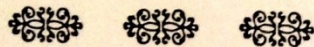


SHOLOM ALEICHEM



The Adventures of MENAHEM-MENDL

TRANSLATED FROM THE YIDDISH
BY TAMARA KAHANA



G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK

ספרות הר הצופים
למדעי הרוח והחברה

*Menahem-Mendl from the road to his wife,
Sheineh-Sheindl, in Kasrilevka*

To my dear, wise, and modest helpmeet, Sheineh-Sheindl,
long may she live!

Firstly, I am come to inform you that I am, by the
grace of God, well and in good cheer. May the Lord, blessed
be His name, grant that we always hear from one another
none but the best, the most comforting, and the happiest
of tidings—amen.

And Secondly, I want you to know, my dearest
wife, that I am now a refugee. That is to say, I have had to
bolt. I managed to escape misfortune by the skin of my
teeth—very terrible misfortune! I thank the Almighty
for having delivered me from peril. I found myself in such
a pretty kettle of fish, God alone knows how I managed
to squirm out of it. All I can say is that I was close to being
clapped into jail and maybe even sent to Siberia for hard
labor, although I am as innocent as you in the whole af-
fair. As your mother says, "When you have terrible luck,
it follows you from door to door and through the gate.
. . ." But now that the Almighty has come to my aid and I
have managed to escape disaster in time, I am sitting down
to write you everything in detail, from beginning to end.

From my last letter you will perhaps recall in what a fix
I was after that pretty betrothal of two females, may we all

about
grandfather
Yerzerov.

be spared the same. At that time I figured it was the end to everything. Menahem-Mendl was finished. However, what happened was that I met a character, an agent, an inspector in the Aquitable, who insures people against death and makes money on it hand over fist. This agent pulled out a notebook and showed me how many people he had already insured against death and how many people have already died on him. In this kind of business, the more people die, the better—for both the dead and the living. You will probably ask why. Well, the reason is really very simple. For instance, Aquitable insures me against death for ten thousand shekels. All I have to do is pay a mere two or three hundred a year until I die. Then there are two alternatives: If I pass away, God forbid, during the first year, it's *your* good fortune since you are my wife, and ten thousand shekels is quite a pretty sum. But what happens if I go on living? Then it is Aquitable's good fortune.

Lots of people are working for Aquitable as agents—most of them Jews who have wives and children and who also have to make both ends meet on God's earth. So am I any worse than they? The trouble is, not everyone can become an agent. An agent must, first and foremost, be well dressed—and I mean *well*: a fine suit of clothes, collar and cuffs (they can be made of cardboard, but they have to be white), a handsome tie—and it goes without saying that he must wear a hat. But the most important thing is—language, the gift of speech. An agent has to know the language. That is to say, he has to know how to talk! Talk against time; talk at random; talk glibly; talk himself out of breath; talk you into things; talk in circles—in short, he has to talk and talk and talk until you surrender and get yourself insured against death. And that's all there is to it! In short, that character—the agent-inspector—saw at a

glance that I would make a good agent, a first-class inquisitor.

Now, my dearest wife, I must explain to you the difference between an agent-inspector and an agent-inquisitor. An agent-inquisitor is an ordinary agent who insures people against death, whereas an agent-inspector is a senior agent who appoints ordinary agents. Then there are also district agent-inspectors whose business is to appoint agent-inspectors, and over and above all those agents, inquisitors, inspectors, and district heads, there is an overlord who rules over them all and who is called an inspector general. There is nobody higher than he in the whole wide world. Naturally, in order to become a general, you must first start as an inquisitor; then you become an inspector, then a district inspector, and so on. And if, by the grace of God, you've served a long time and worked hard enough till you've become a general—then you are on Easy Street for the rest of your life. There are, says my character, some generals who spend no less than thirty thousand a year!

To make a long story short, he started talking me into becoming an agent. So I thought it over carefully. What, in fact, have I got to lose? Just figure it out: If I succeed—well and good. If not—I'll be back where I started from! He says I don't have to invest my legacy in the business. On the contrary, I'll even get an advance, he says—that is, they'll give me a few shekels on account in order to cover my expenses, get decently dressed, and buy a portfolio. Considering all this, you must admit it was quite a good proposition. So I let myself be talked into it, and in a lucky moment I became an agent.

But it's more easily said than done. Because, first of all, an agent has to meet the general. If the general doesn't give his signature—that puts the lid on! So the inspector

took me to Odessa—at his own expense, too!—in order to present me to his general at the Aquitable, who lords it over more than twenty districts and, they say, has under his thumb almost eighteen hundred agents.

It's no use even trying to describe to you the greatness of that general. That is to say, he himself is not as great as the racket that's raised around him. He has large sharp eyes, a bright little face and little red cheeks, and his name is Yevzerell. The general's office occupies an entire building with hundreds of rooms. There are a lot of desks, benches, books, and papers, and agents mill about, rushing and pushing, coming and going, talking and shouting; telegrams are flying back and forth—it's bedlam!

Before anybody manages to make his way into the general's office, he has to pass all the seven circles of purgatory. By the time I was brought before this Yevzerell I was half-dead. However, he received me very nicely, even offered me a seat, treated me to a cigarette, and asked me who I was, what I was, and what my business was. So I told him everything from beginning to end: how I was on my way to Kishinev and blundered into Odessa by mistake; how I dealt in London there; how from Odessa I went to Yehupetz, where I roved about the exchange, buying and selling Putilovs, Lilliputs, and other papers to the tune of millions; and then how I became (may you be spared the same) a broker in sugar and gold, in houses and estates, in forests and factories; and afterward how I even became a writer, and still later a matchmaker—how I simmered and seethed and bubbled and foamed and made a great big noise all over the world, and how in the end, it all turned out to be a case of bad luck following me from door to door and through the gate. . . .

After he listened to the whole story, the general rose, put his hand on my shoulder, and said, "You know what I

have to say to you, Mr. Menahem-Mendl? I like you! You have a good name, and, thank God, you know how to talk. I foresee that you'll be a big agent in due course—a really great one! For the time being, you'll get an advance. You'll go out into the world; you'll travel through Jewish cities and towns where you are well known—and may luck follow you! . . ." And that was that.

As soon as I received several shekels from them, I got myself dressed up like a prince. If you were to see me in my new clothes, you wouldn't recognize me. I also bought myself a portfolio—a big one—which they packed for me with a wagonload of notebooks and papers. And I started to travel over the face of God's earth.

My first goal was Bessarabia the blessed, the land of milk and honey. There, I was told, it's easy to do wonderful business—no end of insurance. But as luck would have it, I had to commemorate the day of my father's death, so between trains I found myself in a little town, far from nowhere. What I did not know was that this town was famous throughout the world for its rascals, rogues, swindlers, perjurers, and informers. Oh, why didn't it burn to an ash before I ever set foot in it! But since misfortune was in the books—I had to commemorate my father's death in this cursed town and sink in the bog, may the Lord preserve us! In fact, something told me I wouldn't leave this place the same man. But if one has to arrange a memorial for the dead, is there any choice?

So I went straight to the synagogue and arrived just in time for the evening prayers. When the prayers were over, the beadle comes up to me and says, "Memorial?" Say I, "Memorial." Says he to me, "Where does a Jew come from?" Say I, "Out of the wide world." Says he, "What may your name be?" Say I, "Menahem-Mendl." "Well, allow me to greet you!" and he stretches out his hand. All

the other worshipers follow suit, and before long I am encircled by a group of men, all trying to pump me: Who am I; where do I come from; what is my business? . . . I tell them I'm an agent. So they ask, "An agent of what—machinery?" I say, "As a matter of fact, no. I am an agent-inquisitor for Aquitable." So they ask, "What kind of plague is that?" I tell them that I insure people against death. And I try to explain to them exactly how it is possible to insure people against death. They stare at me, their jaws hanging loose, as if I had told them there's a cow jumping over the moon. However, I noticed a couple of chaps among the crowd, one of them tall, thin, and crooked, with a very shiny nose, which was also crooked, and with a habit of picking hairs out of his beard as he talked. The other one was short, broad in the beam, dark as a gypsy, with a single eye that looked northward and had a sly twinkle in it. Even when he talked seriously, you had the impression that he was smiling. These two apparently did understand what it meant to insure people against death, because I caught them exchanging peculiar glances and overheard one mutter to the other, "This ought to go well. . . ." I immediately gathered that they were quite different from the rest; obviously they understood business, and with them one could make a deal. And that was that.

No sooner do I emerge from the synagogue than these two follow me, catch up with me, and say, "Where are you rushing, Reb Menahem-Mendl? Wait a minute, we want to ask you something: Do you intend to do business in this town, in this hole?" Say I, "Why not?" Says the tall man, the one with the crooked nose, "With our brethren, the children of Israel? . . ." and his one-eyed friend chimes in, "The only thing you can do with Jews is to share a noodle pudding." Say I, "So what would you advise me to

do?" Says the tall one, "To deal only with gentile noblemen." "Long live nobility!" chimes in the one-eyed fellow. . . .

Talking in this vein, we stroll along, and we talk and talk until we talk ourselves into a deal. It appears these two fellows have a nobleman all their own—a big, rich Bes-sarabian, thanks to whom they often manage to turn a penny. In their opinion, he could be insured very properly. . . . Say I, "And why not? It would be an honor! On the contrary," say I, "let's get going and make this deal in partnership. I'm in no hurry to get rich. . . ." So it was decided that tomorrow, please God, in the synagogue, during the first morning prayer, they would bring me their nobleman's reply. There was, however, one important point: They asked me to keep the matter strictly secret; that is to say, I was not to drop even a hint at my inn that I had met them and talked business with them.

At daybreak, I hurried to the synagogue to join the very first morning service. The prayers done with, I looked around—my chaps were not in sight. I waited till the second service was over—there was still no sign of them. Why didn't I ask for their names and addresses, fool that I was! Should I ask the beadle? But I was afraid—I promised them to keep it secret. . . . After I had given up all hope, they finally appeared with their prayer shawls and phylacteries. When I saw them, my heart leaped for joy. I had to restrain myself from going up to them and asking what news they had for me—that wouldn't have been good manners. They made short work of the prayers, packed up their prayer shawls and phylacteries, and dashed out—and I at their heels. "Well?" I say to them. "Mum's the word!" they tell me. "Don't talk in the street—you don't know what our town is like, may it burn to an ash for your sake! Just walk behind us, and follow us home. There we can talk

business and at the same time get a bite to eat. . . ." So says Crooked Nose; he winks to One-Eye, and One-Eye immediately vanishes. The two of us walk through dark, dank, narrow lanes—he leading and I following. We walk and walk until, by the grace of God, we finally arrive at his home safe and sound.

We entered a small, dark, smoke-blackened room with a lot of flies all over the walls and ceiling, a hand-painted Biblical picture hanging on the east wall, a red cover on the table and a lampshade decorated with faded paper flowers. Sitting near the oven we found a tiny, dirty woman with a pale, frightened face. The little woman gave her husband a frightened glance. As he passed her, he barked, "Food!" In an instant, there appeared a white tablecloth, a loaf of white bread, a bottle of brandy, and some tidbits. Before long, the door opened, and One-Eye entered the room; after him in rolled a creature weighing about three hundred pounds, with a huge, blue nose, fat, hairy hands, and a pair of peculiar legs—thick in the thigh but so thin at the ankle that it was hard to believe they could support such an enormously heavy carcass.

This creature was the Bessarabian nobleman. The moment he caught sight of the bottle of brandy on the table, out of his great fat belly there issued a great fat voice, speaking in dialect: "*Otzeh dobreh dilo!*" (Just the job!) After each one of us took a drop of spirits (the nobleman took two drops), both my fellows started to talk to him about corn and wheat. In the meantime, One-Eye whispered to me, "This baron is ready to burst—he must have about a thousand measures of wheat, to say nothing of oats. . . . Don't take any notice of the rags he's wearing—he is simply stingy. . . ." The tall one continued talking to the baron; he advised him not to sell his flour because wheat was going up in price; he would do better to hold

on to it till winter. "*Otzeh dobreh dilo!*" the baron repeated over and over again. He drained glass after glass and shoveled in the food, like a man who had just ended a fast, blowing out his lips and snorting through his nose.

After the meal was over, the tall one said to me, "Now you can talk to the baron about your business." So I retired to a corner of the room with the baron and began preaching a sermon to him, I myself don't know how it came to me! I gave him to understand how important it is for certain people to be insured even if they are as rich as Croesus. "As a matter of fact, the richer you are," say I, "the more important it is to get insured, because for a rich man to lose money in his old age is a thousand times worse than for a pauper. A pauper," I say, "is used to misery, but when a rich man is left penniless, God forbid, it is worse than being dead. *Yak napissano oo nass*, I say"—that's what's written in our books—"Oni hashuv kamett—a pauper is about as important as a corpse. That is to say, it's worse to be poor than to be dead. Therefore, your honor," I say, "you ought to get yourself insured against the day of your death in a hundred and twenty years," I say, "for ten thousand." "*Otzeh dobreh dilo!*" says the baron, blowing out his lips like bellows. I feel the gift of speech bubbling inside of me, my lips breathe fire, and I want to continue talking, but the tall one interrupts, "Turn off the tap! Take the policy, and fill it out. . . ." One-Eye brings me a pen and a bottle of ink, I fill out whatever is necessary, and when the time comes for him to sign, the poor baron starts sweating profusely until he manages to set down his signature. Then I go with him to a doctor who examines him; I receive a deposit, give him a receipt—and the deal is done.

In the evening, on my return to the inn, I order supper, very happy and pleased with myself. The innkeeper says to me, "What's new with you?" "What can be new?" say I.

"May one congratulate you?" "Congratulate on what?" I ask. "On that little deal you've just finished. . . ." "What little deal?" say I, pretending innocence. "With the baron," he says. "Which baron?" "The fat one." "How do you know I've made a deal with a baron?" I ask. "If he's a baron," says he, "I am a rabbi's wife." "So what is he?" "He's a horned snake," says the innkeeper and bursts out laughing right in my face.

I sit down next to him and begin to plead with him to tell me what he means by a horned snake, and how he knows where I've been and what I've been doing. In short, the innkeeper apparently realized from my questions that I was as innocent as a newborn lamb, because he took pity on me, locked himself up with me in a separate room, and started telling me stories about my two partners that made my hair rise on end. It seems those two fellows are nothing but ordinary swindlers and rascals, he says, second to none in the whole wide world. "Already," he says, "they've managed to pull off such criminal feats in their lifetime that if ever they are caught, they'll be dragged far, far away. . . . But it is their unholy luck," says he, "that they always manage to find a third partner for a scapegoat, while they themselves get away with murder. . . . As for the baron," he says, "whom they introduced to you as a very rich Bessarabian, he is nothing but an ordinary tramp and an illustrious sot . . ." he says. "And it isn't the baron whom you've insured against death—it is somebody else who is either on his deathbed or has already mingled his bones with the dust. . . . Do you understand," says he, "what this smells of?"

When I heard this, I was struck all in a heap. All I needed now, to add to my many achievements, was to be clapped into jail. So I wasted no time on long speeches, immediately sprinted to the railway station, and ran wherever my feet

would carry me. I didn't even want to see my two late partners again—they could go to the blazes together with their baron, together with their town and all of Bessarabia, together with all this business of insuring people against death which can lead you to such a calamity. . . . May the good Lord send me a better kind of business if I only reach some refuge in safety. And because I am now in the midst of a very long journey, I must cut this short. Please God, in my next letter I'll write you everything in detail from Hamburg. For the time being, may the Lord send health and success. Greet the children, God bless them. God grant I find them well and strong, in happiness, in joy and in good fortune. Give my kindest regards to your father and mother, to old and young, to big and small.

From me, your husband,
Menahem-Mendl.

Just remembered! I forgot to tell you where I am going. My dearest wife, I am going to America! I am not alone. I am traveling with a whole group. That is to say, for the time being, we are going only to Hamburg. But from Hamburg we shall sail for America. Why America all of a sudden? Because they say that in America life is good for Jews. They say that gold is rolling in the streets, yours for the picking. Their money is reckoned in dollars, and people—people are held above rubies! As for Jews—they are considered the cream of the lot in America! Everybody assures me that in America I'll make good, please God—and they mean, *good*. Everyone is going to America these days because there is nothing to do here. Absolutely nothing. All business is finished. Well, if everybody is going, why shouldn't I go, too? What have I got to lose? . . . Only you are not to worry, my dearest wife, and for mercy's sake, don't think ill of me. Believe me, I shall not forget

you, perish the thought—neither you nor our dear little children, God bless them. I'll work day and night, nothing will be too difficult for me, and when I am successful, please God—and that I *will* be successful is as sure as the sun shines—I'll send steamship tickets for you and the children, and I'll bring you to America, and you'll live with me in comfort and in honor like a princess, wanting for nothing and having everything your heart desires, and I'll watch over you, I won't let a speck of dust fall upon you, because it is about time—so help me God!—that you too should have some joy of life! Only please do not worry and do not take it to heart—for our God is the All-Wise, the All-Merciful, and the All-Powerful!

As above.