

more coal—and when an engine has no more coal, he says, the water stops boiling, it runs out of steam, and kaput! It's the same, he says, as it is with a man if he doesn't get anything to eat . . . And you can be sure he said to that priest right then and there: 'Well, Father, what did I tell you? If God hadn't written me down for another year of life, who knows how much steam this locomotive might still have and where we might be in it right now?'

"Those were Berl's very words—and the priest, don't you know, just stood there staring at the ground. It was only later, says Berl, when it was time to say goodbye, that the priest stuck out his hand and said to him, 'All the best, Itzko.'

"My name," said Berl, 'isn't Itzko. It's Berko.'

"All right," said the priest, 'Berko. You know something, Berko? I never would have guessed that you were such a—'

"But Berl never heard the rest of it, he says, because the priest hitched up the skirts of his gown and began wending his way home to Golovonyevsk, while he, Berl, walked into town to visit his friends in Heysen. And in Heysen, don't you know, he celebrated the holiday, and thanked God for his deliverance, and told the story of the runaway engine at least a thousand times from A to Z, each time with more miraculous details. All of us insisted on hosting Berl Vinegar in our own homes and hearing about the Miracle of Hoshana Rabbah straight from the horse's mouth, and a merry Simkhes Toyroh was had by all. In fact, we never had a merrier!"

(1909)

#### THE WEDDING THAT CAME WITHOUT ITS BAND

**I** do believe I promised to tell you about another of our Slowpoke's miracles, thanks to which, don't you know, we were saved from a horrible fate. If you'd like to hear about it, why don't you stretch out on this seat and I'll lie down on that one. That way we'll both be more comfortable."

So said my friend, the merchant from Heysen, as we were trav-

eling one day on the narrow-gauge train called the Slowpoke Express. And since this time too we were all by ourselves in the car, which was rather hot, we took off our jackets, unbuttoned our vests, and made ourselves right at home. I let him tell his story in his jovial, unhurried manner, making a few mental notes as he did so that I could write it down later in his own words.

"Once upon a time . . . it happened a while ago, back in the days of the Constitution, when we Jews were getting the glad hand. Actually, though, we in Heysen were never afraid of a pogrom. Shall I tell you why not? For the simple reason that there was no one to do the job. Of course, I don't mean to suggest that if you looked hard enough, you couldn't have found a few public-spirited citizens who would have welcomed the chance to dust off a Jew or two, that is, to break all our bones—the proof of it being, don't you know, that when the glad tidings began to arrive from other places, some of our local patriots dashed off a secret message to whoever they thought it might concern: seeing as how, they wrote, it was time to stand up and be counted in Heysen too, where there was a dearth of volunteers, could they please be sent reinforcements in a hurry . . . And don't you know that twenty-four hours hadn't gone by when word reached us Jews, and again in strictest secrecy, that the reinforcements were already on their way. Where were they coming from? From Zhmerinka, and from Kazatin, and from Razdyelne, and from Popeline, and from a few other places that were equally famous for their roughnecks. How, you ask, did we get wind of such a top secret? The answer, don't you know, is that we had a hidden agent, a fellow called Noyach Tonkonog. Who was this Tonkonog? I'll try to describe him for you, because being a traveler in these parts, you may run into him some day.

"Noyach Tonkonog is a Jew who grew more up than out. And since God gave him a pair of long legs, he learned to put them to good use. He's always on the run and hardly ever at home. He's got a thousand irons in the fire, most of them not his own. His own business, that is, is a printshop. And because it's the only one in Heysen, he rubs elbows with government officials, and with our local gentry, and with all kinds of people in high places.

"It was Noyach who broke the good news to us. That is, he personally spread it around town by whispering in everyone's ear, 'This is strictly for your private consumption, because I'd never

tell anyone else . . . ' Before long the word had traveled like wild-fire that hooligans were being brought in to attack the Jews. We even knew the exact hour of the attack and the direction it would come from—it was all planned like a military operation. Well, there was great gloom in Heysen, don't you know! And it was the poor who panicked the most. That's not what you'd normally expect, is it? After all, it makes more sense for a rich Jew to be scared to death of such a thing, because he's liable to be cleaned out of house and home. If you own nothing to begin with, on the other hand, why worry? What's there to lose? Still, you should have seen them drop everything, grab their children, and run pell-mell for cover . . . Just where, you ask, does a Jew hide in Heysen? Either in the cellar of a friendly Russian, or in the attic of the town notary, or wherever the owner puts you in his factory. And in fact, everyone managed to find a place. There was only one Jew who didn't bother, and you're looking at him right now. I'm not trying to boast, mind you, but you'll see if you think about it that I had logic on my side. In the first place, what good does it do to be afraid of a pogrom? You either live through it or you don't . . . And secondly, even assuming that I'm no braver than the next man, and that, when push comes to shove, I'd like to be someplace safe myself, where, I ask you, is safe? Whose word do I have that, in all the excitement, the same friendly Russian, or town notary, or factory owner isn't going to . . . do you follow me? And besides, how can you just go and abandon a whole town? It's no trick to skedaddle—the whole point is to stay and do something! . . . Of course, you may object, that's easy to say, but what exactly can a Jew do? Well, I'll tell you what: a Jew can find a string to pull. I suppose there's someone with the right sort of influence where you come from, too. In Heysen he's called Nachman Kassoy, a contractor with a round beard, a silk vest, and a big house all his own. And because he builds roads, he was on good terms with the prefect of the district, who even used to have him over for tea. This prefect, don't you know, was quite a decent guy. In fact, he was a prince of a guy! Why do I say that? Because he had his price, if you paid it through Nachman Kassoy. That is, he was perfectly willing to accept gifts from anyone (why be rude, after all?), but he liked getting them from Nachman best of all. There's something about a contractor, don't you know . . .

"In short, I fixed things via Nachman, drew up a list of donors, and managed to raise the funds—and a tidy little sum it was too, don't you know, because you couldn't cross a prefect's palm in such a matter without giving it some good scratch . . . in return for which, he did his best to reassure us that we could sleep calmly that night because nothing would happen to us at all. Fair enough, no? The only trouble was that we still had our secret agent, whose reports went from bad to worse; the latest of them, which he of course passed on in such strict confidence that it was all over town in no time flat, was that he, Noyach Tonkonog, had personally seen a telegram that he very much wished he hadn't. What was in it? Just one word, but a most unpleasant one: *yedyem*, it said—here we come! Back to our prefect we ran. 'Your Excellency, it looks bad!' 'How come?' 'There's a telegram.' 'From whom?' 'The same people.' 'What's in it?' '*Yedyem!*' You should have heard him laugh. 'You're bigger fools than I thought,' he said. 'Why, just yesterday I ordered a company of Cossacks from Tulchin for your protection . . . Well, that put some spunk in us, don't you know: a Jew only needs to see a Cossack to feel so courageous that he's ready to take on the whole world! It was nothing to sneeze at, a bodyguard like that . . .

"In short, there was just one question: who would arrive first, the Cossacks from Tulchin or the roughnecks from Zhmerinka? It stood to reason that the roughnecks would, since they were traveling by train while the Cossacks were on horseback. But we had our hopes pinned on our Slowpoke: God was great, and the only miracle we asked of Him was to make the train a few hours late, which it usually was anyway, in fact, nearly every day . . . Yet for once, don't you know, as though out of spite, the Slowpoke was right on time: it pulled in and out of each station like clock-work. You can imagine how it made our blood run cold to hear from our secret agent that another *yedyem* telegram had arrived from Krishtopovka, the last station before Heysen—and this time, for good measure, the *yedyem* had a *yahoo* after it . . . Naturally, we went right to the prefect with the news, threw ourselves at his feet, and begged him not to count on the Cossacks from Tulchin and, if only for appearances' sake, to send a detachment of police to the station so that the hooligans shouldn't think the only law was that of the jungle. His Excellency didn't let us down. In fact, he

quite rose to the occasion. What do I mean by that? I mean, he put on his full dress uniform with all its medals and went off to the station with the entire police force to meet the train.

"But our local patriots, don't you know, weren't caught napping either. They had also put on their best clothes and their medals, taken along a pair of priests for good luck, and gone off to meet the train at the station—where, in fact, they asked the prefect what he was doing there, which was the exact same question he asked them. A few words were exchanged, and the prefect made it clear that they were wasting their time. As long as he was in charge, he said, there would be no pogroms in Heysen. He read them the riot act, but they just grinned back at him and even had the cheek to answer, 'We'll soon see who's in charge around here . . .' Just then a whistle was heard. It made our hearts skip a beat. We were all waiting for it to blow again, followed by a loud 'Yahoo!'—and what that 'Yahoo!' meant, don't you know, we already knew from other towns . . . Would you like to hear the end of it, though? There was a second whistle, all right, but there never was any 'Yahoo.' Why not? It could only have happened on our Slowpoke. Listen to this.

"The driver pulled into Heysen station, climbed out of the engine full of prunes, and headed straight for the buffet as usual. 'Just a minute, old man,' he was asked. 'Where's the rest of the train?' 'What rest of the train?' he said. 'Do you mean to say you didn't notice,' he was asked, 'that your engine wasn't pulling any cars?' That driver, he just stared at them and said: 'What do I care about cars? That's the crew's job.' 'But where's the crew?' he was asked. 'How should I know?' he answered. 'The conductor whistles that he's ready, I whistle back that I am too, and off I go. I don't have eyes in the back of my head to see what's following behind me . . .' So he said, the driver—there was nothing wrong with his logic. In a word, it was pointless to argue: the Slowpoke had arrived without its passengers like a wedding without its band . . .

"As we found out later, that train was carrying a merry gang of young bucks, the pick of the crop, each man jack of them, and in full battle gear too, with clubs, and tar, and what-have-you. They were in a gay old mood, don't you know, and the vodka flowed like water, and when they reached their last station, that is to say, Krishtopovka, they had themselves such a blast that the whole

train crew got drunk too, the conductor and the stoker and even the policeman—in consequence of which, one little detail was forgotten: to hitch up the locomotive again. And so, right on schedule, the driver took off in it for Heysen while the rest of the Slowpoke, don't you know, remained standing on the tracks in Krishtopovka! Better yet, nobody—neither the roughnecks, nor the other passengers, nor even the train crew—noticed what had happened. They were all so busy emptying glasses and killing bottles that the first they knew about it was when the station-master happened to look out the window and see the cars standing by themselves. Did he raise Cain! And when the rest of the station found out, all hell broke loose: the pogromchiks blamed the train crew, and the train crew blamed the pogromchiks, and they went at it hot and heavy until they realized that there was nothing to do but shoulder their legs and tote them all the way to Heysen. What other choice did they have? And that's exactly what they did: they rallied round the flag and hotfooted it to Heysen, where they arrived safe and sound, don't you know, singing and yahooping for God and country. Shall I tell you something, though? They got there a little too late. The streets were already patrolled by mounted Cossacks from Tulchin, who clearly had the whip hand—and I do mean whips! It didn't take those hooligans half an hour to clear out of town down to the last man. They vanished, don't you know, like a pack of hungry mice, or like snow on a hot summer's day . . .

"Well now, suppose you tell me: shouldn't our Slowpoke be plated with gold, or at least written up in the papers?"

(1909)

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THE TALLIS KOTON

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"Speaking of the Drozhne fire—would you like to hear a good one about how a skinflint of a Jew, a rich man who would sooner have parted with his life than with a penny's worth of charity, was made to cough up a hundred rubles for the relief fund?"