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Edited and with an Introduction  
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NEW HAVEN AND LONDON

And with the rabbi of Chelm it's this way: when he comes to a decision, he acts without delay.

On the Sabbath, in all the houses of prayer, large signs with glaring letters are already hanging: "A MEETING WILL BE HELD! THE WHOLE TOWN IS IN DANGER!"

Danger? The notables gather, the ordinary citizens come running, they sit packed together, cheek by jowl.

"Now tell us everything; what's it about, Rebbe Leyb?"

"Let Yankele say," says he.

So Yankele tells his story. Then the rabbi tells how the supposition was revealed to him, but that, nevertheless, Yankele is in the right throughout.

"A murderer," yells Yankele, "a murderer!"

"So what's to be done, Rebbenyu?"

The rabbi does not keep them in suspense and speaks as follows. "Were I," he says, "to have a say in the community, if I were to be asked in all sincerity, this is what I would say: In the first place, and before anything else—to satisfy the Divine Name—in fact, right away, tomorrow before dawn, Yankele should go away, someplace else, because on him the Shabbes goy has a claim already—more than a claim—a *fixation*.

"Now, in order to appease his resentment, and with the object of redeeming the entire community from dire peril, let us give the Shabbes goy a raise: a larger portion of the Sabbath loaf and *two* drinks of brandy instead of one. And what else? Perhaps he'll have compassion!"

You're laughing?

Still, there's a little of the rabbi of Chelm in each of us.

1894(?) (translated by Etta Blum)

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### THE POOR BOY

A Story Told by a "Committee Man"<sup>1</sup>

▼  
"Give me eight groschen for a hostel."<sup>2</sup>

"No!" I answer sternly and walk away.

He runs after me with a doglike entreaty in his burning eyes; he kisses my sleeve—it doesn't help! "My income doesn't permit such daily handouts!"

"Poor people," I think, leaving the soup kitchen where I had treated the beggar boy so harshly. "Poor people quickly become a nuisance."

The first time I saw the dirty, skinny little face, with its sunken, blazing, sad, but clever eyes, it went straight to my heart. Before I even heard him speak, my heart began to ache, and a ten-groschen coin flew out of my pocket into his skinny hands.

I remember distinctly that my hand did this *by itself*. It didn't ask my heart whether it felt compassion, nor the auditor, my mind, if a man on a monthly salary of forty-one rubles and sixty-six kopecks could afford five kopecks for charity. His entreaty was an electric spark that shocked every last corner of my body. Only later did my mind factor in the new expense, after the boy, jumping for joy, had already left the soup kitchen.

Caught up in my own and others' business, I quickly forgot about him. But not entirely, it seems. Somewhere inside me there must have been a planning conference. Because the very next evening, when the same boy stopped me once again, and in his shivery ragamuffin voice asked me for a hostel bed, from somewhere within me ready-made thoughts emerged: a seven-or-eight-year-old boy shouldn't be begging, shouldn't be hanging about the kitchen; eating in the kitchen before the dishes are collected only turns him into an idler; he'll never become a proper person that way.

My hand again slipped into my pocket, but this time I discovered it there and restrained it. Had I been pious, I might have thought: Is the good deed worth the eight groschen? Or couldn't I get by just as well with afternoon prayers? Or with an ardent groan while praying? *Not* being pious, I kept the boy's welfare in mind. With my eight groschen I would do him *harm*! Turn him into a lifelong beggar!

And yet I did give him something then. When my hand finally tore out of my pocket, I did not restrain it. Something ached around my heart; my eyes turned moist. Again he left the kitchen rejoicing, and I felt my heart grow easy and a smile spread across my face.

The third time it all took longer, quite a bit longer. I had already calculated that my salary didn't allow me to hand out eight groschen a day. It was certainly a pleasure to see the shy, tearful youngster dance for joy, see his eyes shine, know that because of my eight

groschen he wouldn't sleep in the street, but in the hostel, where he'd be warm and in the morning even get a glass of tea and a roll. All this was a pleasure, but I, with my income, dared not allow myself such "joys"—not for anyone!

Naturally, I didn't say all this to the boy. Instead, I determined to teach him a lesson, what else!

I gave him to understand that he spoiled himself with begging, that every man—and he too must grow up to be a man—has the responsibility to work—work is a holy thing! And, when you *look* for work, you find it! And I preached other such nice things I'd seen in books, none of which could replace the hostel for him, nor even serve him for a night as a borrowed umbrella against the rain or snow.

He just stood there kissing my sleeve, raising his eyes to mine looking for a spark of compassion, trying to see if his words were having the least effect. His hopes were not in vain. Under the dogged plea of his eyes, I felt my cold thoughts warming up. I with my battery of ledgers and morals would shortly surrender. And this is what I decided: I would give him something, but tell him once and for all that he should never beg again. Hard and sharp, so he'd remember! I had nothing smaller than a five-kopeck piece, so I changed it and gave him eight groschen.

"Here! But never, you hear me, never beg from me again!"

Where had that "from me" come from? Apparently, I wasn't so selfless after all. I hadn't wanted to say those two words, and I would gladly, for any number of kopecks, have swallowed them. I felt a chill in my soul, as if I had suddenly torn away its ragged covering and now the spot was naked. But this lasted only a flash. My stern face and sharp voice, my right arm extended and left foot planted forward, had done their work. I had a powerful effect upon the boy. Standing as if on burning coals, straining to rush from the kitchen to arrive early at the hostel, he nevertheless paled at my words, and a tear trembled on his lash.

"But no more begging," I concluded my moralizing. "Do you hear? The last time!" The boy caught his breath and fled.

Today—I gave him nothing! I will not break my word. I'm not one of your Jewish hypocrites who use "No vow, no commitment" to get away with anything.<sup>3</sup> A word is a precious thing. Unless people stand firm, there will be no order in anything!

So calculating once again what I'd done and said, I felt very pleased with myself. I can't afford to hand out eight groschen charity every day, and yet that was not the main thing. The main thing was

that I was concerned about his welfare, and about public welfare too. For what is charity worth without order, and what kind of order can there be without firm authority? To the boy I spoke plain Yiddish; to myself somewhat more pedantically: "Beggary is the worst germ in society's body. Whoever does not work, has no right to live," and so on.

As the door of the soup kitchen closed behind me, my feet sank in the mud, my face hit the wind, and I stepped body and soul into the dark night.

A terrible wind was blowing. The streetlights shivered as if cold, and their flicker cast thousands of reflections in the wet mudholes, making me dizzy. An awful voice piped along, as though a thousand souls were begging for redemption, or a thousand boys—for a hostel bed.

Damn! That boy again.

It would be a sin to drive a dog out in this weather! And yet the boy would spend the night in the street. But what should I do? Three handouts weren't enough? Let someone else take care of him now! For my part, wasn't it sufficient that despite a sore throat and a cough I had checked in at the soup kitchen? No one on the Charity Committee would have required me to do this, especially in such weather, and without a fur. If I were pious, this would all be self-serving: I'd run quickly home, throw myself into bed, and fall asleep, while my soul flew up to heaven to add another little good deed to my account. The good deed would be my "credit" toward a fat morsel of Leviathan on Judgment Day.<sup>4</sup> But in going to the soup kitchen, I hadn't given a thought to such rewards. My good heart led me there.

Praising myself somehow warmed me up a bit. Had someone else praised me, I would have had to wave him off in embarrassment, but to myself I could listen without shame. And I might have continued to discover other good qualities in myself, but unfortunately, my half soles—and God knows that I wore out the other halves on my way to the soup kitchen!—my half soles stepped right into a mudhole. The Talmud says, "Emissaries of good deeds come to no harm," but this seems to apply only when you're going, and not on your way back; afterward, as the newly created angel rushes up to heaven, you're liable to break every bone in your body.<sup>5</sup>

My feet were wet and my entire body chilled; I felt sure I was going to catch cold, if I hadn't already. I felt the onset of a coughing fit, of stabbing pains in my chest, and was overcome with fear at the

thought that I'd just spent four weeks in bed! "One dare not do this!" something inside me rebelled. "No! You may sacrifice yourself, but what gives you the right to risk the welfare of your wife and child?"

Had I been reading this sentence in someone else's manuscript while holding a pencil in my hand, I would have known what to do with it. But the sentence was my own.

Suddenly, I felt that I really had caught cold. There I was, still far from home, and my boots filled with water, cold and heavy. Across the street I noticed the brightly lit windows of a tearoom, the worst in all of Warsaw, disgraceful tea, but since there was no choice, I hastened across the street and into its warm fog.

After ordering a glass of tea, I picked up an illustrated paper. The first cartoon to catch my eye was a reflection of things outside. Under the caption "Who has too much of what?" two figures approach each other on a rainy, windswept street. One, a heavy, middle-aged woman, bursting at the seams, in a silk dress, velvet coat, and white, feathered hat, had apparently gone for a stroll or a visit while the sun was shining, and was caught unprepared by the sudden change of weather. Her face is anxious: she's afraid of the rain and the cold—but perhaps only for her coat. As she hurries along, unsteadily, drops of sweat appear on her white forehead. Both her hands are filled. One, passed through her muff, clasps a silk handbag already edged with mud, and the other, a small silk umbrella that barely shields the feathered hat on her head. Although the lady has too much of everything else, she still needs some more umbrella!

Approaching the lady is a young girl—skin and bones! Her hair may be long and beautiful, but as she obviously has little time for it, it flies around, disheveled by the wind and smacking across her skinny shoulders. Her flimsy dress has many patches, and the wind clings to it, seeking a hole through which to reach her body. Her steps, in a pair of mud-spattered boots, are also unsteady against the wind, and both her hands are also filled, one with a big pair of men's boots—obviously her father's that she's bringing in to repair. (The split soles don't allow the suspicion that she's taking them to a tavern to pawn for a bottle of whiskey.) The father obviously came home tired from work, the mother is cooking dinner, and she, the eldest daughter, was sent out to have the boots repaired. She hurries, knowing that if the cobbler can't finish the boots by morning, there will be no fire in the hearth all day. She pants, the big boots are too

heavy for the child, but even clumsier is the burden in her other hand, for she wields overhead an enormous umbrella! She carries it with pride; it was entrusted to her by her father.

The child may lack many things: warmth in winter, clothes and nourishment all year long. Yet she has too much umbrella, which I am certain the wealthy lady envies her at that moment.

The skinny little girl with the roguish eyes, though nearly bowled over by the wind, smiles up at me from the page: "So you see? We too sometimes have our pleasures! I'm laughing at the expense of that lady!"

But when paying for the unfinished tea, I'm reminded again of my begging boy. For him there's no umbrella, nor is there a home, not a dry potato either, nor even the least bit of space at the foot of a father's or a mother's bed. Even the unfortunate lady would find nothing in him to envy!

What made me think of him like that? Oh yes—it occurred to me that the ten groschen I paid for the nearly untasted tea might have provided the poor boy with half a bowl of soup or a piece of bread, and—a place to spend the night. Why had I ordered tea? At home, waiting for me, was a steaming samovar, food on the table, and sitting by it someone with a ready smile. I, however, had been embarrassed to sit in the tearoom without ordering tea. "Well," I console myself, "dealing with my shame has its price too!"

The wind outside was even fiercer than before.

It tore furiously at the roofs, like an anti-Semite pursuing Jews. But the roofs are iron and they're in their element. With murder in its heart the wind swooped down on the streetlamps, but they remain unbent and continue to shine like scholar-heroes in the days of the Inquisition. Descending even lower, it tore at the pavement, but the stones are deeply buried, and the earth doesn't give its neighbors up so easily. Angrily, the storm rose up again, ever higher, but the heavens are distant, and the stars look down with indifference or derision.

Passersby, bowed and bent, shrink into themselves to take up less space, twist against the wind to catch their breath as they continue on their way. "But the poor, weak boy"—I'm filled with fear—"what will become of him?!" All my philosophy abandoned me, and compassion awakened in its stead.

What if it were *my* child, my own flesh and blood, and he had to spend the night in the street in such a wind? Or, even if he had

managed to beg eight groschen, and had to walk in such a storm to Praga, across the Vistula, over the bridge! Is he worth less just because he isn't mine, or because his parents lie somewhere in a grave under a headstone, does he shiver any less from the cold?

The desire to go home left me. I felt I had lost the right to a warm house, to a steaming samovar, to a warm bed, especially to the smiles of those awaiting me. I felt that with a word like "murderer" or "Cain" surely stamped on my forehead, I couldn't show myself before anyone.

"If only—the devil take it—I were pious!" It wouldn't hurt to know that He who lives higher than all the stars, above all the heavens, never abandons our world for an instant, and would never forget the boy. Why should he lie on my heart? I would rather cast him freely on the whole world's heart. Not for an instant would he stand before my eyes if I were certain that he was under the great Cosmic Eye, which, should it close for but one instant, God forbid, entire worlds would be snatched by the devil, but within Whose sight the tiniest worm may not be lost without a reckoning, without a judgment, without justice. . . .

Instead, with my sore throat and wet feet, and in such weather, I had now to return to the soup kitchen to look for someone else's orphan. It was a shame and a disgrace!

Exactly why and for whom I was ashamed, I do not know to this day. And yet, because of the "shame" and "disgrace" I didn't go to the soup kitchen directly, but rather circled several streets before finally arriving.

The front room, the dining hall, was empty. The day's hell had begun to cool off, and the ascending mist from the wet floor found a new heaven, a new firmament, between the lower waters from the feet of the poor and the drops of mist condensing on the ceiling. Here and there drops rained down, and through the little window into the kitchen I could see the sleepy cook, her wig awry, leaning one hand on the great kettle, and lazily raising the big ladle to her lips with the other. Meanwhile, the "assistant cook" chopped noodles for the next day and the "supervisor" counted out the lunch tickets against the committee's account. There was no one else there. I glanced under the tables—no trace of the boy! I had arrived too late! At least no one had seen me, I thought as I left the kitchen.

Suddenly, I realized that I'd been wandering the streets for several hours. "What the devil's got into me?" Suddenly angered, I began to stride home.

I was glad that everyone was already asleep. Taking off my boots in the foyer, I stole into the apartment and into bed—but I had a bad night. Exhausted and soaked through and chilled, it took me some time to finish coughing and warm up. A constant shiver ran through my bones. When very late I fell asleep, it was only to be tormented by nightmares, and I awoke bathed in a cold sweat. I leaped out of bed straight to the window. The heavens were filled with stars, like diamonds mounted in an iron sky, serene and very far away! The wind still raged, and the whole house trembled.

I tried returning to bed, but now I only dozed a bit, and kept having half dreams, always with the boy in their midst. Each time I see him in another place. Here he drags along the street somewhere, there he sits doubled over on the steps beneath a shop roof, and sometimes I even see demons playing catch with him, tossing him through the air from one hand to another. Later I find him frozen stiff in a trash barrel.

I barely survived until morning, and ran straight to the soup kitchen.

There he was!

Had I not been embarrassed, I would have washed the mud from his face with grateful tears. Had I not been afraid of my wife, I would have brought him home as my own child. He was here; I was *not* his murderer!

"Here!" I handed him a ten-groschen piece.

He accepted it wonderingly, with no idea of the favor he had done me.

May he live and be well!

The next day, when he begged me again for a hostel bed, I didn't give him anything, but now I didn't moralize. What's more, I felt embarrassed and displeased with myself.

I really cannot give him anything, but my heart aches: why can't I?

Not for nothing did my grandfather, may he rest in peace, used to say: "The unpious live with heartache and die unconsolated."

*1894 (translated by Michael C. Steinlauf)*