

IT WAS a tiny town, worse than a village, inhabited chiefly by old people who so seldom died that it was really vexatious. Very few coffins were needed for the hospital and the jail; in a word, business was bad. If Yakov Ivanov had been a maker of coffins in the county town, he would probably have owned a house of his own by now, and would have been called Mr. Ivanov, but here in this little place he was simply called Yakov, and for some reason his nickname was Bronze. He lived as poorly as any common peasant in a little old hut of one room, in which he and Martha, and the stove, and a double bed, and the coffins, and his joiner's bench, and all the necessities of housekeeping were stowed away.

The coffins made by Yakov were serviceable and strong. For the peasants and townsfolk he made them to fit himself and never went wrong, for, although he was seventy years old, there was no man, not even in the prison, any taller or stouter than he was. For the gentry and for women he made them to measure, using an iron yardstick for the purpose. He was always very reluctant to take orders for children's coffins, and made them contemptuously without taking any measurements at all, always saying when he was paid for them:

"The fact is, I don't like to be bothered with trifles."

Beside what he received for his work as a joiner, he added a little to his income by playing the violin. There was a Jewish orchestra in the town that played for weddings, led by the tinsmith Moses Shakess, who took more than half of its earnings for himself. As Yakov played the fiddle extremely well, especially Russian songs, Shakess used sometimes to invite him to play in his orchestra for the sum of fifty kopeks a day, not including the presents he might receive from the guests. Whenever Bronze took his seat in the orchestra, the first thing that happened to him was that his face grew red, and the perspiration streamed from it, for the air was always hot, and reeking of garlic to the point of suffocation. Then his fiddle would begin to moan, and a double bass would croak hoarsely into his right ear, and a flute would weep into his left. This flute was played by a gaunt, red-bearded Jew with a network of red and blue veins on his face, who bore the name of a famous rich man, Rothschild. This confounded Jew always contrived to play even the merriest tunes sadly. For no obvious reason Yakov little by little began to conceive a feeling of hatred and contempt for all Jews, and especially for Rothschild. He quarrelled with him and abused him in ugly language, and once even tried to beat him, but Rothschild took offense at this, and cried with a fierce look:

"If I had not always respected you for your music, I should have thrown you out of the window long ago!"

Then he burst into tears. So after that Bronze was not often invited to play in the orchestra, and was only called upon in cases of dire necessity, when one of the Jews was missing.

Yakov was never in a good humor, because he always had to endure the most terrible losses. For instance, it was a sin to work on a Sunday or a holiday, and Monday was always a bad day, so in that way there were about two hundred days a year in which he was compelled to sit with his hands folded in his lap. That was a great loss to him. If anyone in town had a wedding without music, or if Shakes did not ask him to play, there was another loss. The police inspector had lain ill with consumption for two years while Yakov impatiently waited for him to die, and then had gone to take a cure in the city and had died there, which of course had meant another loss of at least ten rubles, as the coffin would have been an expensive one lined with brocade.

The thought of his losses worried Yakov at night more than at any other time, so he used to lay his fiddle at his side on the bed, and when those worries came trooping into his brain he would touch the strings, and the fiddle would give out a sound in the darkness, and Yakov's heart would feel lighter.

Last year on the sixth of May, Martha suddenly fell ill. The old woman breathed with difficulty, staggered in her walk, and felt terribly thirsty. Nevertheless, she got up that morning, lit the stove, and even went for the water. When evening came she went to bed. Yakov played his fiddle all day. When it grew quite dark, because he had nothing better to do, he took the book in which he kept an account of his losses, and began adding up the total for the year. They amounted to more than a thousand rubles. He was so shaken by this discovery that he threw the counting board on the floor and trampled in under foot. Then he picked it up again and rattled it once more for a long time, heaving as he did so sighs both deep and long. His face grew purple, and perspiration dripped from his brow. He was thinking that if those thousand rubles he had lost had been in the bank then, he would have had at least forty rubles interest by the end of the year. So those forty rubles were still another loss! In a word, wherever he turned he found losses and nothing but losses.

"Yakov!" cried Martha unexpectedly, "I am dying!"

He looked round at his wife. Her face was flushed with fever and looked unusually joyful and bright. Bronze was troubled, for he had been accustomed to seeing her pale and timid and unhappy. It seemed to him that she was actually dead, and glad to have left this hut, and the coffins, and Yakov at last. She was staring at the ceiling, with her lips moving as if she saw her deliverer Death approaching and were whispering with him.

The dawn was just breaking and the eastern sky was glowing with a faint radiance. As he stared at the old woman it somehow seemed to Yakov that he had

never once spoken a tender word to her or pitied her; that he had never thought of buying her a kerchief or of bringing her back some sweets from a wedding. On the contrary, he had shouted at her and abused her for his losses, and had shaken his fist at her. It was true he had never beaten her, but he had frightened her no less, and she had been paralyzed with fear every time he had scolded her. Yes, and he had not allowed her to drink tea because his losses were heavy enough as it was, so she had had to be content with hot water. Now he understood why her face looked so strangely happy, and horror overwhelmed him.

As soon as it was light he borrowed a horse from a neighbor and took Martha to the hospital. As there were not many patients, he had not to wait very long — only about three hours. To his great satisfaction it was not the doctor who was receiving the sick that day, but his assistant, Maxim Nikolaich, an old man of whom it was said that although he quarreled and drank, he knew more than the doctor did.

“Good morning, Your Honor,” said Yakov leading his old woman into the office. “Excuse us for intruding upon you with our trifling affairs. As you see, this subject has fallen ill. My life’s friend, if you will allow me to use the expression...”

Knitting his gray eyebrows and stroking his whiskers, the doctor’s assistant fixed his eyes on the old woman. She was sitting all in a heap on a low stool, and with her thin, long-nosed face and her open mouth, she looked like a thirsty bird.

“Well, well – yes...” said the doctor slowly, heaving a sigh. “This is a case of influenza and possibly fever; there is typhoid in town. What’s to be done? The old woman has lived her span of years, thank God. How old is she?”

“She lacks one year of being seventy, Your Honor.”

“Well, well, she has lived long. There must come an end to everything.”

“You are certainly right, Your Honor,” said Yakov, smiling out of politeness. “And we thank you sincerely for your kindness, but allow me to suggest to you that even an insect dislikes to die!”

“Never mind if it does!” answered the doctor, as if the life or death of the old woman lay in his hands. “I’ll tell you what you must do, my good man. Put a cold bandage around her head, and give her two of these powders a day. Now then, good-bye! Bonjour!”

Yakov saw by the expression on the doctor’s face that it was too late now for powders. He realized clearly that Martha must die very soon, if not today, then tomorrow. He touched the doctor’s elbow gently, blinked, and whispered:

“She ought to be cupped, doctor!”

"I haven't time, I haven't time, my good man. Take your old woman and go, in God's name. Good-bye."

"Please, please, cup her, doctor!" begged Yakov. "You know yourself that if she had a pain in her stomach, powders and drops would do her good, but she has a cold! The first thing to do when one catches cold is to let some blood, doctor!"

But the doctor had already sent for the next patient, and a woman leading a little boy came into the room.

"Go along, go along!" he cried to Yakov, frowning. "It's no use making a fuss!"

"Then at least put some leeches on her! Let me pray to God for you for the rest of my life!"

The doctor's temper flared up and he shouted:

"Don't say another word to me, blockhead!"

Yakov lost his temper, too, and flushed hotly, but he said nothing and, silently taking Martha's arm, led her out of the office. Only when they were once more seated in their wagon did he look fiercely and mockingly at the hospital and say:

"They're a pretty lot in there, they are! That doctor would have cupped a rich man, but he even begrudged a poor one a leech. The pig!"

When they returned to the hut, Martha stood for nearly ten minutes supporting herself by the stove. She felt that if she lay down Yakov would begin to talk to her about his losses, and would scold her for lying down and not wanting to work. Yakov contemplated her sadly, thinking that tomorrow was St. John the Baptist's day, and day after tomorrow was St. Nicholas the Wonder-Worker's day, and that the following day would be Sunday, and the day after that would be Monday, a bad day for work. So he would not be able to work for four days, and as Martha would probably die on one of these days, the coffin would have to be made at once. He took his iron yardstick in hand, went up to the old woman, and measured her. Then she lay down, and he crossed himself and went to work on the coffin.

When the task was completed Bronze put on his spectacles and wrote in his book:

"For 1 coffin for Martha Ivanov — 2 rubles, 40 kopeks."

He sighed. All day the old woman lay silent with closed eyes, but toward evening, when the daylight began to fade, she suddenly called the old man to her side.

"Do you remember, Yakov?" she asked. "Do you remember how fifty years ago God gave us a little baby with curly golden hair? Do you remember how you and I

used to sit on the bank of the river and sing songs under the willow tree?" Then with a bitter smile she added: "The baby died."

Yakov racked his brains, but for the life of him he could not recall the child or the willow tree.

"You are dreaming," he said.

The priest came and administered the Sacrament and Extreme Unction. Then Martha began muttering unintelligibly, and toward morning she died.

The neighboring old women washed her and dressed her, and laid her in her coffin. To avoid paying the deacon, Yakov read the psalms over her himself, and her grave cost him nothing as the watchman of the cemetery was his cousin. Four peasants carried the coffin to the grave, not for money but for love. The old women, the beggars, and two village idiots followed the body, and the people whom they passed on the way crossed themselves devoutly. Yakov was very glad that everything had passed off so nicely and decently and cheaply, without giving offense to anyone. As he said farewell to Martha for the last time he touched the coffin with his hand and thought:

"That's a fine job!"

But walking homeward from the cemetery he was seized with great distress. He felt ill, his breath was burning hot, his legs grew weak, and he longed for a drink. Beside this, a thousand thoughts came crowding into his head. He remembered again that he had never once pitied Martha or said a tender word to her. The fifty years of their life together lay stretched far, far behind him, and somehow, during all that time, he had never once thought about her at all or noticed her more than if she had been a dog or a cat. And yet she had lit the stove every day, and had cooked and baked and fetched water and chopped wood, and when he had come home drunk from a wedding she had hung his fiddle reverently on a nail each time, and had silently put him to bed with a timid, anxious look on her face.

But here came Rothschild toward him, bowing and scraping and smiling.

"I have been looking for you, uncle!" he said. "Moses Shakes presents his compliments and wants you to go to him at once."

Yakov did not feel in a mood to do anything. He wanted to cry.

"Leave me alone!" he exclaimed, and walked on.

"Oh, how can you say that?" cried Rothschild, running beside him in alarm. "Moses will be very angry. He wants you to come at once!"

Yakov was disgusted by the panting of the Jew, by his blinking eyes, and by the quantities of reddish freckles on his face. He looked with aversion at his long green coat and at the whole of his frail, delicate figure.

“What do you mean by pestering me, garlic?” he shouted. “Get away!”

The Jew grew angry and shouted back:

“Don’t yell at me like that or I’ll send you flying over that fence!”

“Get out of my sight!” bellowed Yakov, shaking his fist at him. “There’s no living in the same town with mangy curs like you!”

Rothschild was petrified with terror. He sank to the ground and waved his hands over his head as if to protect himself from falling blows; then he jumped up and ran away as fast as his legs could carry him. As he ran he leaped and waved his arms, and his long, gaunt back could be seen quivering. The little boys were delighted at what had happened, and ran after him screaming: “Jew, Jew!” The dogs also joined barking in the chase. Somebody laughed and then whistled, at which the dogs barked louder and more vigorously than ever.

Then one of them must have bitten Rothschild, for a piteous, despairing scream rent the air.

Yakov walked across the common to the edge of the town without knowing where he was going, and the little boys shouted after him. “There goes old man Bronze! There goes old man Bronze!” He found himself by the river where the snipe were darting about with shrill cries, and the ducks were quacking and swimming to and fro. The sun was shining fiercely and the water was sparkling so brightly that it was painful to look at. Yakov struck into a path that led along the riverbank. He came to a stout, red-checked woman just leaving a bath-house. “Aha, you otter, you!” he thought. Not far from the bath-house some little boys were fishing for crabs with pieces of meat. When they saw Yakov they shouted mischievously: “Old man Bronze! Old man Bronze!” But there before him stood an ancient, spreading willow tree with a massive trunk, and a crow’s nest among its branches. Suddenly there flashed across Yakov’s memory with all the vividness of life a little child with golden curls, and the willow of which Martha had spoken. Yes, this was the same tree, so green and peaceful and sad. How old it had grown, poor thing!

He sat down at its foot and thought of the past. On the opposite shore, where that meadow now was, there had stood in those days a wood of tall birch-trees, and that bare hill on the horizon yonder had been covered with the blue bloom of an ancient pine forest. And sailboats had plied the river then, but now all lay smooth and still, and only one little birch-tree was left on the opposite bank, a graceful young thing, like a girl, while on the river there swam only ducks and geese. It was hard to believe that boats had once sailed there. It even seemed to him that there

were fewer geese now than there had been. Yakov shut his eyes, and one by one white geese came flying toward him, an endless flock.

He was puzzled to know why he had never once been down to the river during the last forty or fifty years of his life, or, if he had been there, why he had never paid any attention to it. The stream was fine and large; he might have fished in it and sold the fish to the merchants and the government officials and the restaurant-keeper at the station, and put the money in the bank. He might have rowed in a boat from farm to farm and played on his fiddle. People of every rank would have paid him money to hear him. He might have tried to run a boat on the river, that would have been better than making coffins. Finally, he might have raised geese, and killed them, and sent them to Moscow in the winter. Why, the down alone would have brought him ten rubles a year! But he had missed all these chances and had done nothing. What losses were here! Ah, what terrible losses! And, oh, if he had only done all these things at the same time! If he had only fished, and played the fiddle, and sailed a boat, and raised geese, what capital he would have had by now! But he had not even dreamed of doing all this; his life had gone by without profit or pleasure. It had been lost for nothing, not even a trifle. Nothing was left ahead; behind lay only losses, and such terrible losses that he shuddered to think of them. But why shouldn't men live so as to avoid all this waste and these losses? Why, oh why, should those birch and pine forests have been felled? Why should those meadows be lying so deserted? Why did people always do exactly what they ought not to do? Why had Yakov scolded and growled and clenched his fists and hurt his wife's feelings all his life? Why, oh why, had he frightened and insulted that Jew just now? Why did people in general always interfere with one another? What losses resulted from this! What terrible losses! If it were not for envy and anger they would get great profit from one another.

All that evening and night Yakov dreamed of the child, of the willow tree, of the fish and the geese, of Martha with her profile like a thirsty bird, and of Rothschild's pale, piteous mien. Queer faces seemed to be moving toward him from all sides, muttering to him about his losses. He tossed from side to side, and got up five times during the night to play his fiddle.

He rose with difficulty next morning, and walked to the hospital. The same doctor's assistant ordered him to put cold bandages on his head, and gave him little powders to take; by his expression and the tone of his voice Yakov knew that the state of affairs was bad, and that no powders could save him now. As he walked home he reflected that one good thing would result from his death: he would no longer have to eat and drink and pay taxes, neither would he offend people anymore, and, as a man lies in his grave for hundreds of thousands of years, the sum of his profits would be immense. So, life to a man was a loss — death, a gain. Of course this reasoning was correct, but it was also distressingly sad. Why should the world be so strangely arranged that a man's life, which was only given to him once, must pass without profit?

He was not sorry then that he was going to die, but when he reached home, and saw his fiddle, his heart ached, and he regretted it deeply. He would not be able to take his fiddle with him into the grave, and now it would be left an orphan, and its fate would be that of the birch grove and the pine forest. Everything in the world had been lost, and would always be lost for ever. Yakov went out and sat on the threshold of his hut, clasping his fiddle to his breast. And as he thought of his life so full of waste and losses he began playing without knowing how piteous and touching his music was, and the tears streamed down his cheeks. And the more he thought the more sorrowfully sang his violin.

The latch clicked and Rothschild came in through the garden gate, and walked boldly halfway across the garden. Then he suddenly stopped, crouched down, and, probably from fear, began making signs with his hands as if he were trying to show on his fingers what time it was.

“Come on, don’t be afraid!” said Yakov gently, beckoning him to advance. “Come on!”

With many mistrustful and fearful glances Rothschild went slowly up to Yakov, and stopped about two yards away.

“Please don’t beat me!” he said with a ducking bow. “Moses Shakess has sent me to you again. ‘Don’t be afraid,’ he said, ‘go to Yakov,’ says he, ‘and say that we can’t possibly manage without him.’ There is a wedding next Thursday. Yes sir. Mr. Shapovalov is marrying his daughter to a very fine man. It will be an expensive wedding, ai, ai!” added the Jew with a wink.

“I can’t go” said Yakov breathing hard. “I’m ill, brother.”

And he began to play again, and the tears gushed out of his eyes over his fiddle. Rothschild listened intently with his head turned away and his arms folded on his breast. The startled, irresolute look on his face gradually gave way to one of suffering and grief. He cast up his eyes as if in an ecstasy of agony and murmured: “Okh-okh!” And the tears began to trickle slowly down his cheeks, and to drip over his green coat.

All day Yakov lay and suffered. When the priest came in the evening to administer the Sacrament he asked him if he could not think of any particular sin.

Struggling with his fading memories, Yakov recalled once more Martha’s sad face, and the despairing cry of the Jew when the dog had bitten him. He murmured almost inaudibly:

“Give my fiddle to Rothschild.”

“It shall be done,” answered the priest.

So it happened that everyone in the little town began asking:

“Where did Rothschild get that good fiddle? Did he buy it or steal it or get it out of a pawnshop?”

Rothschild has long since abandoned his flute, and now only plays on the violin. The same mournful notes flow from under his bow that used to come from his flute, and when he tries to repeat what Yakov played as he sat on the threshold of his hut, the result is an air so plaintive and sad that everyone who hears him weeps, and he himself at last raises his eyes and murmurs: “Okh-okh!” And this new song has so delighted the town that the merchants and government officials vie with each other in getting Rothschild to come to their houses, and sometimes make him play it ten times in succession.