

REB SIMKHE PLAKHTE¹

or

The World Swindler

Anyone who reads this story will experience enjoyment. Young and old, rich and poor, will be equally entertained. The story will bring the reader to his senses. Anyone who reads it will be forced to laugh.

by JACOB MORGENSTERN

aka Yekl Lerer of Lodz

TRANSLATED BY MYRA MNIEWSKI

¹ Reb: Respectful form of address similar to Mr. SIMKHE: A man's first name; party or celebration.
PLAKHTE: A piece of coarse cloth.

In the land of Uz² there was a small town named Narkov³. It was a Jewish *shtetl* and also a very religious one. The rabbi who lived there was an old man, and also a *rebele*, a small-town rabbi in the manner of a *tsadik*⁴. He wore a long white robe. On Friday nights he wore his *talis*, his prayer shawl, while praying. He often prayed for remedies. He also brought gifts to Hasidic rabbis quite often. He was truly an very benevolent Jew. And also, regrettably, very impoverished.

In this town there was an orphan girl, a girl who unfortunately had no father or mother. So out of compassion, the rabbi's wife took her in and raised her. Already in her twenties she was a great beauty with a nose like a beer keg on a caved-in face. Her eyes were big like a Hungarian calf's and her lips resembled those of a Russian ox. Her fingers were as thick as an elephant's legs and she was as smart as an old donkey. But, knock on wood, she could eat like a horse. And as if that wasn't enough she went around barefoot and unclothed. And who was there to buy or make her anything when she woefully had no parents and the rabbi was so pitifully poor. Pathetically, she had no beloved either. Whoever looked at her got the dry heaves as her beauty had no equal. And alas, because of the way she was designed, no one could be found to marry her. There were no available blind men and she didn't want anyone who could see. **(4)** Long story short, she was already over 30 years old.

One day in the women's section of the synagogue the rabbi's wife overheard the women berating her for not finding a match for the orphan girl. One very orthodox, upper crust matron distinguished herself by projecting in her very loud voice. She went on and on about the 30-something unmarried woman saying that if this orphan lived at someone else's house the rabbi and his wife would surely have something to say about it. She felt that the rabbi and his wife were committing a great sin by not marrying her off, but since

² Hebrew: Place name mentioned in the Old Testament, Book of Job.

³ The word *nar* in Yiddish means fool. So the town name Narkov could be translated as Foolstown.

⁴ A title in Judaism given to people considered righteous, such as biblical figures and later spiritual masters; or as in this case, leaders of a Hasidic community.

it was they who were committing this sin, they didn't see it as sinning. To them it was not sinning. And all the other pious women grumbled along in agreement.

The *rebetsn* went home and told the *rov*⁵ who responded that the women were quite right—it was truly a huge transgression they were committing. So the *rebetsn* wanted to know what to do about it? The rabbi said he would tell her what to do but that she had to obey him.

‘Take the silver handle from my cane and the pair of silver phylactery cases and my fox fur, and also take your gold box with its chain and the two strings of pearls and go and pawn them. That will enable us to, first of all, clothe her. Although she isn't overly bright and not very smart either, the blackest mark against her is that she is barefoot and naked. Who would want her like that? So, if she were better dressed she'll look better. And a match will promptly appear.’

The *rebetsn* went off to pawn the collateral and brought back some gold coins that came to 150 gulden. The rabbi declared the orphan girl be respectably clothed. 50 gulden was to be spent to dress her from head to toe. He also declared that she be given an opulent dowry. ‘I will give her the entire 100 gulden for her dowry,’ he said. ‘Her clothing and dowry will leave her nothing to be ashamed of. She will be equal to all the other wealthy young women in town. And that is how a groom will be found for her.’

And it was done. A beautiful dress of batiste was made for her that cost three kopeks a yard. A couple of blouses, a pair of shoes for six kopeks, a red kerchief, an apron, were all procured for her. In short, the circus bear was clothed. She looked like (5) a sacrificial ox and had the charm of a ferocious beast.

And when she was already beautifully dressed the *rov* declared, ‘God provided for her to be sumptuously dressed and her prosperous dowry is, thank God, ready. Now let's get

⁵ A *rebetsn* is a rabbi's wife and the *rov* is the rabbi.

down to finding her a groom. And even if he isn't exactly the brightest light in town, I will wed her to him anyway.'

So the brightest lights in town gathered to confer about who to marry her off to. The *roy*, the *rebetsn*, the *beys-din shamesh*, the *shul gabe*, the *shul-klaper*, the Talmud Torah *melamed*, the *mikvenik*⁶, Reb Nakhum the meat-kosherer, Reb Traymel, the trustee of the butcher shop, and several other great thinkers gathered together to brainstorm and offer suggestions as to finding a match for the beast. But nothing was resolved. The matchmaker was afraid to approach whoever was suggested as a possible groom for the Queen of Sheba. He feared he would be violently thrown out, or worse yet, beat to a pulp for his matchmaking.

In that same town there was a youth whose name was Shimon. Everyone called him Simkhe. And because he was unclothed and barefoot, with only a piece of coarse cloth covering his flesh, people yelled Simkhe Plakhte when they wanted his attention.

The whole town knew him. He was the water carrier. His entire holdings consisted of a couple of carrying poles, several water cans and the piece of coarse cloth he covered himself with. That was all he possessed. He wasn't a great thinker nor was he even a bit of a fool. He didn't have any common sense concerning the slightest thing. The only thing he knew how to do was eat and haul water. He would deliver six cans of water in exchange for a piece of bread. Big and small, young and old, all knew him.

His custom was as follows: Every Thursday evening and every holiday eve he brought water to the servant girls. He also brought them sand with which he would help them polish the candlesticks and silverware. For that he would be given the scrapings from their pots. All year he brought water and chopped wood for a certain baker. In exchange for that he was allowed to sleep on the bed above the oven. And when there was a

⁶ The *beys-din*: Rabbinical court. *Shames*: Official who takes care of day to day affairs. *Shul*: Synagogue *Gabe*: Charity overseer at the synagogue. *Shul-klaper*: *Shul shames* who calls the congregation to services by banging on people's window shutters with a ritual knocker. Talmud-Torah: Parochial primary school for boys of modest backgrounds. *Melamed*: Primary school teacher. *Mikvenik*: Ritual bath attendant.

wedding (6) or a holiday meal, he then worked like a horse, carrying water and chopping wood. In exchange he was given the dishes to lick. He went naked and barefoot summer and winter with only his piece of *plakhte* covering him. And he was never referred to as anything else but Simkhe Plakhte.

As the *rov* was conferring with his colleagues about a match for the beautiful heifer, the *shul* caller suddenly came upon the brilliant idea that Simkhe Plakhte would make her a perfect groom. At first everyone cracked up but after some consideration they thought it would actually be a great *mitsve*⁷. Simkhe was already 40 years old at the time and pitifully naked and barefoot. Who would want him? And she too was not wanted by anyone. So then everyone agreed it would be a good match. But they were afraid to approach Simkhe with the proposition. They feared he might get violent and put an end to them. So the *rov* told his shamesh to bring Simkhe to him without telling him why he was being sent for. The shamesh promptly went to summon Simkhe to appear before the rabbi.

While the *shamesh* was summoning Simkhe, the *rov* told his wife to dress the bride in her new respectable clothes. He wanted her attired from head to toe by the time Simkhe arrived. And it was done.

Simkhe Plakhte arrived wrapped in his coarse cloth with his water cans hanging from his shoulders. As he entered the *rov*'s foyer to meet with the rabbi, the *rebetsn* told him to leave his cans and poles in the foyer. 'It won't look good for you to meet with the rabbi with those cans hanging from you.' He did not want to do that saying, 'This is all I own. I cannot leave it unattended.' And into the house he walked with the poles and cans hanging from his shoulders.

The *rov* welcomed him kindly and said to him, 'Listen to me my dear Simkhe—why aren't you married yet? Is it a custom of ours for a man to be without a woman? We Jews (7) are instructed otherwise. Every Jew must take a wife.'

⁷ A religious obligation and a blessing; a good deed.

Simkhe responded in his coarse peasant voice. ‘I thought you were smart because you take bribes. It turns out you are quite an ox. You sound like a snake charmer—with no sense whatsoever. Listen up—you say I should find a wife—*Nu, nu*⁸, who will have me? Even someone fished out of a garbage heap would not have me.’ He then removed his little piece of coarse cloth showing the rabbi his nakedness. ‘Can’t you see that I am naked. I do not possess anything more than this little piece of sackcloth and these water cans. I don’t have a cent to my name. And I’m not very good at praying either. When my parents died I was but a child. So who would want me?’

‘I have some news for you,’ the *rov* responded. ‘I have found you a very beautiful, well-to-do bride who has a lot of money.’ He then motioned to the *rebetsn*, giving the sign she bring in the well-to-do bride wearing the red kerchief and looking like a turkey. The *rov* displayed the beautiful apparition before Simkhe, and said, ‘Did you ever see such a beauty? This kind of rarity is not an everyday occurrence. Take a good look at her. Notice her rich garments. And she also possesses her very own fortune.’ At this point the *rov* opened a drawer containing the pile of gold coins, the hundred gulden, her dowry. He showed it to him and said, ‘Our overlord, who owns this town, does not have this much money.’

As soon as Simkhe saw the decked out bride and the pile of money he bounded toward the rabbi and screamed, ‘*Rebe, Rebe*—all right! I will take her for my wife right away. I love you.’

‘No my child,’ the *rov* said, ‘We must first arrange to write a contract and shake on it. Then I must get you some clothes. And then we will have a formal engagement ceremony to bring luck. After that you and she may get married. And then she will be your wife.’ ‘No Rabbi,’ Simkhe replied, ‘First make her my wife, and we’ll write the contract another time.’

⁸ All right; so.

THE WEDDING

Long story short, the *rov* sent for the cantor and for an audience. (8) Some old clothes were produced by the townspeople—a shirt, a pair of pants, a pair of shoes and socks, a fedora and a *gartel*⁹, and Simkhe was clothed from head to toe. And in great good fortune the wedding contract was written and the rabbi gave Simkhe two guildens to give to his bride as a signing bonus. The bride received twelve yards of satin for a *shabes* coat, to give to her groom as a wedding present. A very festive wedding was planned for the very near future and a wedding garment was made for the groom out of the satin.

A few days before the wedding the *rebetsn* and several other pious women scoured the neighborhood collecting shirts and other items of clothing for the groom and bride. Every housewife donated some feathers and some donated an old sheet. Others donated some more feathers until bedding materialized for the groom and bride.

The *shabes* before the wedding the *rov* announced that everyone was invited to attend the wedding. And it so happened that the whole town, young and old, rich and poor, all came to the wedding. Some came to poke fun at the display. Others truly came as a *mitsve*. Long story short, not even one child remained at home. Everyone was at the wedding.

For blessings people donated a bushel of potatoes, others a sack of peas, some gave millet, others kasha, still others, a half tub of butter. Someone in the crowd donated a half-year's rent. In short, enough food for a whole year was donated to the bride and groom. They also got a place to live for half a year. And the pious women collaborated and lugged an old cabinet, a bench, a dresser and some dishes—*milkhiks* and *fleyshiks*¹⁰—to their abode. There was nothing missing. Then, even those who came to the wedding, not to gain merit by performing a *mitsve*, but to have a good laugh, even they contributed

⁹ A long sash used as a belt to symbolically separate the upper part of the body from the lower.

¹⁰ Dairy and meat, which requires separation by Jewish law necessitating two sets of dishes and utensils .

something. So that not even one Jew was kept from fulfilling a *mitsve*. Long story short, it was a very festive wedding. (9) Everything possibly needed was supplied for the young couple to be treated well.

The rabbi made one request: that no one take advantage of Simkhe by not paying, for even a single pail of water. And to not pay with only a piece of bread, for 6 pails of water but that every proprietor pay at least one *groshn*¹¹ for every pail of water. After all, Simkhe now had a wife to support. Long story short, the *rov* and the town did everything possible for both orphans to have a livelihood.

Early in the morn on the day after the wedding, the *rov* had a breakfast for the young couple and they were shown into their own dwelling. The pious women arranged they have everything needed for a household. And everyday of the seven days of post wedding celebrations, another shopkeeper prepared a feast.

When the seven days of feasting were over, the rabbi instructed Simkhe on how to treat his wife well. And the *rebetsn* and the other pious women instructed her on how to behave according to Jewish law, and also, how to treat her husband and properly run a household. And the newlyweds locked their fortune of gold coins, the hundred gulden dowry, in their safe box.

Reb Simkhe Plakhte and his Madame were now happier than Rothschild. They had enough to live on for several months and free rent for half a year. And they had as much money in cash as a banker. They said to each other, ‘We can now live with gusto.’

And so Reb Simkhe got down to business and said to his Madame, ‘My dear wife, everything pleases me well, but there is one thing I am not pleased with. You should know that the pots and pans are not to my liking. They’re appropriate for little children but not for us. Go to the market and bring the biggest pots and pans you can find—ones that are suitable for us.’

¹¹ Polish coin of the smallest denomination..

Mrs. Plakhte did not have to be told twice and went off to buy pots (10) two stories high, pans as big as cows and bowls the size of tubs. And they cooked their meals in two to three, two-story pots at a time, and didn't feel like it was too much food or that they had overeaten. And they didn't wait too long after eating to start thinking about their next meal and putting up more pots to cook.

There was not much pause between one cooking and the next. Who then had it as good as Herr Plakhte and his Madame? Long story short, their household was conducted in this way for several weeks until the Madame noticed that the larder was diminishing—getting progressively smaller. So she said to her husband, 'My dear husband, get your poles and pails and go carry water in town to earn money. That way we'll have your earnings in reserve for when our food supplies and our money run out and we'll be able to buy more food. But if you don't earn anything and the little that we have runs out we will then suffer hunger.'

Reb Simkhe heard what she said and replied, 'My dear wife, did I get married to continue hauling water? I've hauled water from the time I was a child till I got married. My shoulders can no longer bear those yokes and water cans. I thought that when I got married it would no longer be necessary for me to work so hard. If I thought I would have to keep hauling water I never would have gotten married.' 'No my dear husband,' she replied, 'everyone must work. If one doesn't work one doesn't eat.' 'Then why does the rabbi you used to live with not work at all and have plenty to eat?' He asked. 'He is a rabbi and a *tsadik* and you aren't a rabbi nor are you a *tsadik*,' she replied. 'But you were raised by him so you know his habits and how he conducts himself. Tell me and I'll do what he does and we too will earn a living and I will not have to haul water.'

'First of all, he wears a white robe fastened by a long white *gartel*, and a *spodek*¹² (11) on his head and he carries a big staff with a white handle. I don't know what it is but it is probably made of metal. And he sits over a big, thick prayer book, rocking back and forth and yelling. And when he's praying he runs back and forth clapping his hands and

¹² A very tall, cylindrical fur hat worn by Hasidim in Poland. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spodik>

making such a ruckus it can be heard a mile away. That's why Jews visit him and give him money. That's why he doesn't have to work.'

When Reb Simkhe heard this he said, 'Not bad, my dear wife, all you have to do is carry out my orders and I too will not have to haul water and we'll be drinking and eating even better than the *rov*. All the things you've mentioned to me I can do better than he can. I can clap my hands better than he can. I can run back and forth faster than he can. And I can yell loud enough to be heard from one end of town to the other. The only thing that I don't know how to do pertains to that huge prayer book. But that doesn't matter. If one can clap his hands, run back and forth, yell and rock back and forth, that should be enough. Not too bad my wife. We will live with relish. Just do what I say—go and have a white cassock made for me—make it long and broad—and get me everything that you know of that the rabbi has. And we'll do very well.'

The smart Madame heeded her husband's instructions and bought a big width of white fabric to make him a long white cassock with very long sleeves and copper hooks for buttons and a white sash made of five yards of fabric for a *gartel*. She knew of an old *spodek* that had been in the rabbi's attic from Terach¹³'s times. So she went and got the fur hat. Then she took the pole from the mop and had the tinsmith make her a white metal top for it and Reb Simkhe put on the outfit.

As he was trying it on he said to her, 'So what do you think, am I now a complete rabbi?' 'Yes,' she responded, 'The only thing you're missing is a hefty prayer book.' So he told her to go to the rabbi's where there was a closet full of prayer books and *shlep*¹⁴ a big heavy one over. 'Make sure it's big and fat,' he said.

¹³ Father of the Patriarch Abraham.

¹⁴ Drag.

She went to the rabbi's and purloined **(12)** a volume of the entire Gemara¹⁵ and said, 'I brought you a large siddur¹⁶. Now you have everything.'

'Good, good, my wife,' he replied, 'Now, cook up a few more big pots of food fitting for a rabbi. We are almost out of provisions. We only have enough for a few more days.'

It was already after Shavuot—the longest days—so she cooked six times a day in the big pots. But a well too, will dry out. Nonetheless, she cooked up several large pots of food because her husband had now become a rabbi and she was certain that now that he had become a *rov* she wouldn't have to worry about their livelihood and that there would be no lack of income. So she cooked up a load and they stuffed themselves like forest rangers.

Reb Simkhe then put on his white robe and his thundercloud *spodek*. He took up his mop pole, his staff, and sat down at the table by the window. He opened the large siddur and began convulsing back and forth like a *gidokhes*¹⁷ and asked her to go out to check whether people were coming to give him money. She stood outside as he swayed back and forth—plunging and pitching, back and forth. Not even a dog showed up. Long story short, he rocked this way and that for several days but no one came. And at night they ate what was now leftovers—the last bits of scrapings. The only food left in their house was a small amount of potatoes—only enough for one meal the next day.

When they finished eating that night she said, 'What will we do now? Tomorrow morning the last bit of potatoes will be gone. We will suffer hunger. We won't have anything more to eat. You are rocking and swaying, pitching and plunging, and no one is coming.' 'I am still unknown,' he said, 'no one yet knows I'm a rabbi. No one has yet seen me in these rabbinical vestments. Tomorrow I will go pray in the study house. They'll see me and then they'll come. But remember that I'll be going out to pray, so

¹⁵ The Gemara and the Mishnah together make up the Talmud, the book of Jewish laws. The core text is the Mishnah and the Gemara is comprised of rabbinical analysis and commentary on the [Mishnah](#).

¹⁶ Hebrew: Jewish prayer book containing a set order of daily prayers. The joke here is that the Plakhtes do not know the difference between volumes.

¹⁷ A person suffering from a fever marked by paroxysms of chills.

don't eat the rest of the potatoes without me.' 'Okay,' she said, 'I will cook them up and leave some for you (13) —but if you linger too long I will get hungry and eat them all. There is very little food left and I cannot bear to suffer hunger.'

The next morning Reb Simkhe got up early, put on his tall *spodek* and his long white cassock with the broad sleeves like sacks, girdled it with his long white sash and took up his mop pole. He put his *talis* and *tfiln*¹⁸ under his arm and again warned his wife not to, God forbid, eat up everything that was left of their food, and went on his way.

His arrival at the market square caused an uproar. People were stricken with fright, yelling and screaming, thinking a devil was walking among them. As soon as they realized it was Simkhe they broke out laughing and tumult ensued. The whole town, young and old came running, determined to chase him down. He barely escaped with his life as he ran into the study house.

You can well imagine what occurred when the students and regulars at the study house saw him. What went on there! An old fedora, a slipper, a boot, a *shmate*¹⁹, came flying at his head. He barely got out of there in one piece. As he emerged there was a band of strong-arms awaiting him, young and old. The screams and laughter, taunts and jibes were horrendous. He wanted to pray but he had to get away from them, so he ran towards the edge of town. They chased him for quite a ways until he had run very far into the woods, about five kilometers from town. His pursuers went back to town and he went further into the forest and put on his *talis* and *tfiln*. He draped his *talis* over his head and with his white cassock sparkling out from beneath it, he stationed himself by a big tree and commenced praying and swaying exuberantly.

¹⁸ Prayer shawl and phylacteries.

¹⁹ Rag, piece of cloth or old garment.

THE FOREST or SIMKHE'S FIRST TRIAL

The overlord who owned the town was a revered count. He was very wealthy and owned many towns and villages. He was also a renowned government minister. (14) When there was a conflict in the realm, he was sent for. This overlord lived several kilometers from this forest where he loved to hunt. He would ride his horse there to shoot game. He possessed a certain riding horse that he valued like his own eyes. On this particular day, he had tied his horse to a tree so that he could go hunt. When he was ready to go home he went to get his horse where he had left him, but the horse was not there. This upset him very much and he ran about the forest frantically searching for his horse. He was in great distress. It was very hot that day. As he was searching for his horse, he saw from afar, a man dressed in white, wrapped in a *talis*, furiously swaying back and forth. This dignitary was very learned and knowledgeable, due to all the books he had read in his library. He knew that in ancient times the holiest of men studied and prayed in the forest. Moses, RIP, studied in the forest. King David, RIP, Elijah the prophet, and other great men, prophets and great sages alike, did the same. They all studied and prayed in the woods. So when the count encountered a man in the forest wrapped in a *talis* and *tfiln*, wearing white vestments, he was certain it had to be a very powerful man—a secret *tsadik*, a saintly man, or a prophet. He waited for him to conclude the *shimenesre*²⁰, at which point he bowed and kneeled before him. ‘Who are you?’ the count asked. ‘I am the assistant rabbi of Narkov,’ Simkhe responded. ‘I believe you are from Narkov, but not that you assist the rabbi. I know the Narkov rabbi and it befits him to be your servant.’ Long story short, the overlord implored Simkhe, ‘Dearest Under Rabbi, I know well that coming into the forest to pray indicates that you are very powerful. Your role as the assistant rabbi serves to keep people from knowing how powerful you actually are. So therefore, I

²⁰ The Eighteen Benedictions, liturgy recited thrice daily by observant Jews.

beseech you, I have lost my horse in this forest today. I would rather lose my greatest love than this horse. I beg you, please, tell me where my horse is.'

(15) Simkhe stood there trembling. He was afraid his wife was going to eat up the last of their potatoes so he was in a big rush to get home. It was in his interest to get rid of the count as quickly as possible. 'Get to the other end of the forest as fast as you can. There you will find your horse bucking by a tree. Two wolves are stalking him and are about to tear him to pieces. The horse is for now, holding his own, but it's exhausting him. Get over there as quickly as you can with your gun. You will shoot one of the wolves and the other one will flee in fright at the sound of your gun,' Simkhe instructed him.

The dignitary instantly took off for the other end of the forest and Simkhe quickly took off for home, feeling more dead than alive. As soon as he got home he went directly under the bed to hide and said to his wife, 'Do not tell anyone that I am here hiding. The functionaries will soon be here to put an end to me because I deceived the count.' In olden times overlords were thought of as royalty and could do whatever they wanted. 'Get out from under there you jerk and sit down at the table,' his wife admonished him. 'First of all there's the possibility that no one will come. And if God forbid someone does come they will find you under the bed.' With much prodding and effort she finally got him out from under the bed. He sat down at the table where she served him a bowl of potatoes. But Simkhe could not eat. He felt worse than death. His heart was embittered and his stomach was locked.

Let us now leave Reb Simkhe Plakhte where he is and go see what the count is up to. The overlord had rushed to the other end of the forest and encountered everything exactly as Simkhe had described. His horse stood facing a tree with two wolves at his back ready to pounce. To protect himself the horse was kicking his hind legs in defense. **(16)** But he was already foaming at the mouth in exhaustion. The lord witnessed this as he approached and deftly raised his gun to shoot one of the wolves dead. The other wolf quickly ran off.

The count mounted his horse, but instead of riding home to his palace, headed for town, saying to himself, this is no assistant rabbi [*pod-rabin*], this is a *Pod Pan Bog*²¹. And he is not even a man but an angel. How good it is to have a man like that living in my town and how happy I am to have run into him and been able to converse with him. Millions of people seek such opportunities and have yet to find them. And he rode very quickly, in his hunting clothes, into town, directly to the rabbi's house, to speak to him.

The rabbi wondered about the visit. Even though they knew each other he had not once received a gift from the lord—not a bushel of wheat, not a cord of wood. As the rabbi showered him with compliments the overlord replied, 'I beg you rabbi, stop complimenting me, but speedily send for the assistant rabbi. Have him come here this minute.' The gabe immediately went to summon the real assistant rabbi, a scholarly old man.

As soon as the overlord saw him he said, 'That's not him. Go and bring the correct assistant rabbi.' They swore up and down insisting that this was the one and only assistant rabbi. The count got angry and said, 'I demand you bring the right assistant rabbi. You know very well who I mean.' The rabbi promptly sent the gabe to summon the elite and overseers of the community. They quickly arrived and were eager to know what the lord wanted.

He said to them as well, 'I'm asking you nicely—bring the real deputy rabbi. If you don't, I will take vengeance on you.' They sent for, not only a scholar, but also a teacher and a *Hasid*²². As each one appeared the overlord said, 'This is not him!' 'This is not him!' 'This is not the one!' (17) So they beseeched him, 'Revered Sir, what does he look like?' The overlord replied, 'You are all worthless! Have him come here! You are not worthy of polishing his boots. He is a great man and compared to him you are beasts. He

²¹ POD PAN BOG: Polish: Formal designation for God is *Pan Bog*, *Pan* being the honorific, Mr. and *Bog* being God. *Pod* is a prefix meaning under or beneath. This honorific appellation is used throughout the text in reference to Simkhe Plakhte and will be variously translated as: God's Deputy, God's second-in-command, or God's right-hand-man.

²² A follower of *Hasidism*, a very religious, mystical movement founded in the 18th century.

doesn't even want to pray with you. He studies and prays in the forest. And if you refuse to bring him forth, I will cause devastation comparable to Sodom.'

The gathered grew very mournful. No one knew how to resolve the issue. There was only one scholar in town and he was already there with the assembled. But the lord was still insisting it was not him. But as soon as the lord said that the one he was looking for prayed in the forest, the study-house gabe, quietly approached those gathered. 'It could be he's talking about Simkhe Plakhte. The students, just this morning, chased him out of the study house and said he had run into the forest.' So the *rov* said to the overseers, 'Let's send for him and see what happens.' So the overseers said to the lord, 'There is still one in town who we will send for. He might be the one you're talking about.'

The gabe set out for Simkhe's house to summon him to the rabbi's. 'The overlord of the town is requesting your presence,' he informed Simkhe. Under no circumstances was Simkhe willing to go. When the gabe returned with the news that he wouldn't come, the leaders said to the lord, 'We sent for him and told him you were here and he refused to come.' The lord said, 'If he is the one I am talking about he has every right not to come. I am not worthy of him coming to see me. You all don't even know who he is. I do know. So I say to you, take me to him.'

So the great, powerful men of the community, the overseers and the rabbi, took the overlord to Reb Simkhe Plakhte's house. Reb Simkhe, in his white robe with the Turkish *spodek* on his head, his mop pole by his side, sat at the table poring over his huge *sidur* hurling himself back and forth, like a *gidokhes*. And because he was so frightened, he was as white as a ghost.

The overlord at the head **(18)** with the delegation behind him, opened the door to Simkhe's house. As soon as the lord caught sight of Simkhe, he tore off his hat and fell to his knees like a subject before his king. This gesture frightened and puzzled the community leaders.

When the overlord noticed Simkhe's pale face, his dark abode and depressing menage he became incensed with the group and addressed them very severely. 'You are thieves, murderers, swindlers! Your ways are not new. Who among you is not a thief, a swindler? And if there were a just and worthy servant of God among you, you would murder him, just as you are murdering our helper here. You threw Jeremiah the Prophet into a lime pit. You killed Zechariah the Prophet in the Holy Temple. You cut Isaiah's tongue out. And you want to do the same to him. You can all go to hell. You live in stately homes and you allow him to live in a pigsty. I will, with no help from you, avenge him.'

As soon as Madame Plakhte heard this she opened her mouth like Balaam's donkey²³ and said to the lord (though she was not versed in blessings or even the morning prayer, she did know Polish) right in front of them: 'It is not enough we suffer hunger and need with no compassion from them, but my husband fears for his life if he goes out. They throw stones at him. Just today, they beat the living daylights out of him in the Study House.' And then she showed him their bit of cold potatoes and said, 'This is all we have in the house. And he can't even eat it because of how they tortured him today.'

When the lord heard that, he became infuriated and snarled like a tiger at everyone gathered. 'I am going home now but will soon return with a peasant delegation. Anyone who dares to touch him will receive 100 lashes in the market square. Anyone who so much as lays a finger on him **(19)** will have to answer to me.' He then took a big silk purse out of his pocket filled solely with gold coins and gave it to her, as he wasn't bold enough to hand anything to him, and said to her, 'You must promptly spend this money on food. Don't worry about tomorrow because tomorrow, and maybe even today, I will come back and bring you everything you need. You will not lack for anything. And I want you to point out every single person who tortured your husband so that I can skin him alive.' He then bowed and kneeled before Reb Simkhe and with great humility bid him goodbye. As he walked out he said, 'You will not be living here very much longer. I

²³ Numbers 22:21-39

will arrange to have splendid accommodations prepared for you—something worthy of who you are.’

As everyone one departed the overlord said to them, ‘Didn’t I tell you that you were unworthy of him coming to you. He is a Holy Spirit sent from God. And because you tortured him I will now torture you...’ and he rode away from them in a fury. They remained very shamed and frightened. At that moment they feared the overlord as if he were the Angel of Death. And they had no idea what was going on with Simkhe Plakhte.

After a while, the leaders of the community and the rabbi decided they should go see Simkhe and his wife to ask them to speak to the overlord on their behalf. The overlord had the power to kill anyone and their children and they wanted him to leave them alone. When they got to Simkhe’s house, it was impossible to talk to them. Madame Plakhte was very overheated, busy and excited. By the time they got back there, she had already put up 12, 3-story pots filled with meat, dermas, potatoes and sweetbreads. The chimney was fuming like a smokehouse. And Simkhe, acting as registrar, was reminding what more needed to be bought for the eating machine. Simkhe’s heart was filled with delight as he gazed at the hearth. They were barely able to achieve the honor of talking to him.

When they began beseeching him to intervene with the overlord on their behalf **(20)** Balaam’s ass spoke up. ‘Yes, yes, why don’t you just not let him walk through the streets. And you might as well torture him some more so that he flees to the forest.’ They all swore up and down no one would ever again say a bad word about him and that they would all display the greatest respect for him. So Simkhe agreed to intercede with the overlord on their behalf. Upon receiving his word, they took their leave with great respect, and left. The *rov* and his coterie of learned men looked at each other and couldn’t decide if they were dreaming or awake. After all, they knew Simkhe and his wife very well and they were also well acquainted with the overlord. They knew he was intelligent, very learned, and a count, so they were at a complete loss as to what was going on. Yet they feared Simkhe might incriminate them to the count.

When the count got home he was very happy. His face was aglow with joy. His wife, the countess, and his children, very respectfully asked him where he had been all that time. He must certainly have had a great hunt, meaning he must have shot many animals, to fill him with such joy. ‘My dear wife and children,’ he replied, ‘I did have a blessed hunt. It was more dear to me than my entire fortune and everything I possess. I feel happier than the whole world. And you and the children must also consider yourselves very lucky because of the glorious day I had at the hunt today. Today I was triumphant, as I came upon a treasure that will secure our happiness forever. Today I encountered a man in the forest who is a *Pod Pan Bog*, God’s second-in-command. His knowledge is comparable to our beloved God’s. He is the greatest scholar and wisest of men among Jews. He knows what is happening on earth as well as heaven.’

The count then proceeded to tell his family the whole story of his horse and the wolves. After they heard the story they said, ‘Why didn’t you ask him where you could reach him? You will most likely **(21)** need him from time to time.’ ‘I had to labor very skillfully all day to find out where he lived but was ultimately successful in speaking to him and his wife. It was initially very difficult for me to find him. None of the Jews wanted to tell me where he was. It could be that they themselves don’t know the extent of his powers and who he really is. I will take you to him tomorrow so that you may also meet him.’

The family was overjoyed to hear this and eagerly awaited the coming of day when they would ride in to meet God’s Second-in-Command and his wife. In short, they could barely wait for day to break. They had breakfast earlier than usual. Four horses were harnessed to beautifully hand-decorated coaches. The count and countess rode in one coach while their married children rode in another and the still unmarried children, in yet another one. Several big wagons were laden with grain, poultry, veal and a variety of other things, like all sorts of fruit. Very many peasants joined them to form a majestic procession all the way to Reb Simkhe’s door.

The entire town witnessed the convoy, and realizing it was the count's cortege, were curious as to where it was headed and followed it to Reb Simkhe's door. The overlord and his sons, their hats in their hands, were the first to enter very honorifically. Everyone kneeled and crossed himself before the *pod-rabin*, and kissed his hand. The overlord then asked for permission to bring his wife and daughters in. Each of them individually kissed Madame Plakhte's hand. The overlord then said to Reb Simkhe, 'Pick any grand house in town that you would like.' Well, there was a three-story establishment right in the middle of the market square. It was the biggest and most beautiful property in the whole town (22) and the one Reb Simkhe chose. So the lord promptly went and bought it. He registered it at the Notary's to be Reb Simkhe's house forever. Very regal furniture was bought for it without delay. All six of its chambers and a magnificent kitchen were fully furnished and Reb Simkhe and his wife were shown in.

SIMKHE'S NEW HOME

So now Reb Simkhe Plakhte resided in his own establishment made up of six fully furnished drawing rooms.

The overlord then sent for his personal tailor and ordered Reb Simkhe be regally clothed from head to toe in the best silks available. Five to six outfits, a silk bathrobe and a genuine white satin cassock with a big white silk sash and several expensive furs were made for him. The countess took Madame Plakhte's hand and brought her to her court's ladies' tailor and then to a store where they loaded up on dresses. All household items including underwear and bed linens of the most sumptuous quality were provided for

them. A mass of jewelry was bought for the Madame Simkhe at the goldsmith's and she was adorned like a princess. She was given a purse containing several hundred gold coins and the count and his wife told Reb Simkhe and his wife not to spare any of the money. 'You must buy anything your heart desires with it. You will never have a lack of funds. I will send you more every week.' Two peasants were assigned to serve and protect the household. They were given a small apartment on the top floor to live in. Wheat and veal and poultry were provided and the lord gave Simkhe his gold pocket watch. And his wife, the countess, bestowed many splendid gifts upon Madame Plakhte. Then they took their leave, with great respect, and made sure the two peasants, would in no uncertain terms, be true and devoted to the Plakhtes. And then they went home.

When the overlord got home, greatly exhilarated, he arranged to throw a huge ball. He invited all his servants **(23)** and village peasants to tell them about God's right-hand man. All were in great wonderment and very happy.

Our Reb Simkhe and his wife, once again got very involved with their pots and pans, vessels and receptacles. They put their old ones aside because they were now too small. Pots as big as kegs and basins the size of tubs were bought. And all they did all day long was devote themselves to their meals. An entire peasant community could not have consumed all that they devoured each day. And every week they received flour from the count's estate, and food, and veal, and poultry. And every week a purse full of money was sent them. The countess sent over several very good milk cows so that Madame Plakhte would have enough milk and butter. Servants were sent to tend to the cows—to milk them and make butter. In short, Reb Simkhe Plakhte regally resided in very lavishly furnished rooms. He had a staff of peasant men and women to serve him and everything was conducted like on a manor. He wore only silk and his old *spodek* was traded in. Reb Simkhe now wore a sable hat that cost 100 rubles. And his long white robe and sash were now made of pure satin. He carried a genuine Moses staff with a good silver head that weighed about half a pound. Madame Plakhte now wore a countess' attire and two Jewish domestics worked in the kitchen. And all the townsfolk were witness to it all.

Some of them laughed and others could not contain themselves but everyone had to show respect, as they were afraid to be reported to the overlord.

Reb Simkhe went around dressed like one of the greatest good Jews²⁴. To maintain this stance, he understood that he would be in need of counsel. So he hired a man well versed in all the customs of a good Jew and an expert in putting on a sanctimonious, holier-than-thou face. That swindler sang the praises of the Holy Rabbi—that he ate nothing, that he demonstrated great wonders **(24)** and that he was a sworn-in emissary of God.

This very person became his *shames*, his personal *gabe*, and he taught the rabbi how to pray a little. An old woman, who also knew how to pray and read, hooked up with them as well, so that the *rebetsn* would also learn some praying and reading. And off she went proudly to *shul* holding her women's prayer book just like a proper *rebetsn*.

The *shamish* became Reb Simkhe's manager. He managed everything very judiciously so there was never a lack of money. He had a *mikve*²⁵ installed and a big study house with several closets filled with *sforim*²⁶. A separate little study hall, fitted out with holy books for the Holy Rabbi, where he could spin out his talks, was also provided for him.

Reb Simkhe established his house be open to the poor. Whoever came in hungry, left sated. He and she both gave a lot to charity. And his little study house was beautifully painted, furnished and illuminated by many candlabras and lamps. There was a large copper washstand by the door with a big washbasin and two large towels. A big mezuzah hung on a silver doorpost. Everything was in place to make it look like a real Hasidic Master's establishment. He would sit all alone in his study hall and pitifully gorge day and night, like a horse.

Every week the overlord sent far more than needed. And the lord and his lady, along with their entire court, believed they had attained great honor by having lived to have such a

²⁴ *Guter Yid*: Literally Good Jew; a fanatically pious Jew; a saintly personage; a Hasidic Master.

²⁵ Ritual bath.

²⁶ Holy books.

unique *Pod Pan Bog* in their town. They were convinced that he could relieve any problem or illness that might befall them. And all the dignitaries and peasants of the surrounding villages and towns knew about the God's Deputy. The count and countess saw to it that he be very well known among all the gentry and heads of state. The most distinguished and eminent members of the upper crust sent splendid gifts to God's Second-in-Command. Long story short, Reb Simkhe Plakhte and his wife lived so happily and pleasurably that the wealthiest, most powerful denizens could not match up to the way they lived and enjoyed. **(25)** They had everything good and they never lacked for money. There was never any business that worried them. Their only concern was thinking about food preparation and consumption, like where they would obtain the biggest pots, basins and pails. They lived this way, in peace and enjoyment, for several years.

THE COUNT'S TREASURE CHEST or SIMKHE'S SECOND TRIAL

But the day arrived when something befell the count! Aside from all the rooms he had in his palace, the count also had a small apartment that no one was allowed to enter. It was always locked and its window looked out on a courtyard surrounded by a high wall. It was where he kept his entire fortune. In a very large trunk there was a beautifully decorated little coffer. It was made out of pure gold and filled with diamonds and gemstones. It was worth millions. But that wasn't the main treasure that was in there. That same golden box contained a large roll of parchment, a gold-lettered document

authenticating the count's bloodline—that he was a born count who stemmed from royalty. And to him that document was more precious than the diamonds and gems. He proudly went to look and delight in that little box everyday.

But one day, upon approaching the cottage, how terrified he grew when he discovered the front window smashed, the big trunk broken into, and his little treasure chest missing. He immediately ran out screaming. Everyone searched high and low. Many were suspected. People were beaten and tortured, but to no avail. Nothing helped—no sign of the box was discovered. So the count made a trip to the courthouse. Experts and judges were called upon to investigate and A reward of a village was posted to whoever cracked the theft. **(26)** But that didn't help either. So he went to the *vrazyorzes*²⁷. These priests weren't helpful either. The count spent a lot of money to no avail, but still did not want to go to Reb Simkhe. He did not want to impose on God's Holy Deputy and figured that he could probably solve the crime by other means. But after half a year of spending a lot of money with no results, it was beginning to affect his health and he was going crazy. So the time came to impose upon God's Deputy.

Our Reb Simkhe Plakhte was caught completely unawares. One day, when he was sitting like a king at the head of his troops, stuffing his face like a greedy pig, a royal coach drawn by four horses, arrived. It pulled up to his door out of the blue. The overlord's son, the young count, coachmen and lackeys in tow, emerged from the coach. The young overlord entered, very respectfully with his hat under his arm, and said to Reb Simkhe, 'Panye Prarakov (meaning Sir Prophet), my father and mother and our entire household, all in good health, send warm regards, and bow at your feet. My father has an issue—a very important matter that he did not want to burden Your Honor with. But because no one has as yet succeeded in coming to his aide he has been forced to impose upon you. So then, I have come to you with my father's request to humbly beseech you to be so kind as to come see him, as my father is convinced that you will certainly be able to help him.'

²⁷Polish: Old-world priests who invoked remedies that were often successful.

When Reb Simkhe heard this he thought he was going to have a heart attack. He got morose and went to his wife. With a bitter heart he said to her, ‘My dear wife, it is time to bring my yoke and water cans out of storage. Who knows whether I will even be worthy of them. It could be that rather than having my abscess lanced I will be killed. **(27)** The fact that I am nothing but a lowly, crass oaf will be discovered. He will figure out that the time with the horse was a fluke. He will then be remorseful that he has spent so much on me. It will shame him greatly that he was so deceived by me. So, he will take revenge on me.’

Long story short, willingly or not, he went. When he got there the count greeted him with the highest honors and profusely apologized for imposing on him. ‘I’ve done all I can do not to have to burden you. But because no one has been able to help me I have been forced to impose on you. For you this will be just a trifle.’ The lord proceeded to tell him the whole story from A to Z.

When Reb Simkhe heard the story he grew bilious with dread. I would have been better off hauling water, he thought. ‘So then,’ he said to the count, ‘know that this is not a trifle. This is a very big thing. This cannot be as quickly solved as you think. I need three days to work on this. This is something for the heavens. I must remain in solitude in order to be able to solve this.’

There was a Jewish tavern-keeper in the who had leased an inn in the environs. His inn operated out of a big house and he lived in a little cottage next to it. The windows of the bungalow looked out on a big field. When the count heard from Simkhe that he needed three days, he sent for the Jewish innkeeper and said to him, ‘Vacate your cottage, clean it thoroughly and take your family and move into the big tavern building for three days. God’s Deputy needs to stay in your living quarters for three days. You must treat him as you would me. Now, go to town and buy him food and drink fitting a count. I will pay you well for this. If you treat this great man as befits his stature, you will receive provisions from me for a full year **(28)** at no cost to you. But if I hear that you did not provide him with everything but the best I will throw you out of my hamlet.’ And the

count took the great honor upon himself to escort God's Deputy to the inn. When they arrived, everything was already prepared for him. The count took his leave of him and went home. Reb Simkhe, all alone and in great misery, settled into the cottage.

All the peasants, housemaids and farmhands of the entire hamlet already knew that God's Deputy was there. All those who had been categorized as suspect were extremely happy that the true thief would now be found and their honesty would be affirmed. Everyone at the count's court was very happy, as the count was certain that his treasure would be returned. All the neighboring high nobility were summoned over the three days. Also, peasants from surrounding villages came when they heard that God's Deputy was there. Everyone rejoiced. Only Reb Simkhe's heart was woefully bilious with dread.

As the innkeeper and his wife knew Simkhe, they had a good laugh when the count departed. But nonetheless, the innkeeper went into town bringing with him the finest poultry for slaughter. All sorts of delicious treats—fruit, good wine and other excellent drinks, coffee, sugar and everything that a great man would require, was bought. And the innkeeper's wife cooked and broiled everything delectably. Several large bowls and platters filled with fish, meats and all sorts of festive fare were brought to Reb Simkhe. Since they knew Reb Simkhe well, they knew that he did not fast religiously. In short, his table was set with food like for a wedding. But so wretched was Reb Simkhe that he could not eat. His stomach was shut tight and his heart was like a stone. Not a bit of food passed his lips. **(29)** His mouth's door was shut. All he could do was pace back and forth—that is how miserable he was.

Several hours later the innkeepers brought in fresh meals. How stunned they were when they saw that the previous courses remained untouched. At nightfall, they brought in his evening meal, which also remained untouched, just like all the other courses they had to take away. And all night he was not able to sleep. He tossed and turned imagining his harrowing end.

The next morning, very early, he put on his *talis* and *tfiln* and prayed as best he could. When the innkeeper and his wife brought him his breakfast and saw the food from the night before, exactly as it was when they'd brought it, and him standing there in his magnificent *talis* and broad *tfiln*, they were completely astounded and unnerved. 'This all may not be in vain. Who knows what kind of a latent saint or good Jew he really is,' they said to each other. 'And who knows what punishment will be meted out to us for laughing at him.' In short, the hearth and entire kitchen were loaded with pots, bowls and platters, all of them overflowing with delicacies. But the barest crumb had not passed his lips the entire time so the innkeeper had to show the overlord everything they had prepared for him.

As the second night approached, the night before the third day, Simkhe lay on his bed in great misery unable to shut an eye. His door was closed. The moon shone in through the window. As he lay there absorbed in his thoughts, he heard a low voice coming from the window, 'Panye Proraki,' (The word Proraki means prophet [in Polish]). At first this frightened him but when he heard it repeated several times and the request made **(30)** for him to open the window, and because no other rabbi would under any circumstances open up and speak to anyone in the middle of the night, our Reb Simkhe was not that particular and got up. Whether he washed, I do not know.

Long story short, he opened the window and called out, 'Who's there, who's there?' The answer came, 'Please speak a little quieter. I must talk to you and no one must hear. My name is Stefan. I have the stolen chest containing the diamonds and everything else that was in it. Nothing is missing. Not a soul knows where it is hidden. And no one has touched it. I know very well that you are God's Deputy and that you are well aware of the whole story. If you reveal this to the overlord he will get rid of me and I've only just gotten married a half year ago. I love my Marisha very much. If the overlord finds out about this he will kill us both. So I beg you, please take pity on me and take the box from me. You, in your great wisdom, will know how to give it back to the overlord so that he, God forbid, never finds out. And I will greatly reward you.'

‘Why are you telling me this?’ Simkhe wanted to know. ‘And aren’t you lucky to have come to me now. So then, where is it?’ ‘There are trees lining both sides of the road from here to the forest. I counted 12 trees and buried it under the thirteenth tree. I dug a hole and buried it there. It is well hidden.’ Stefan responded.

‘So no one knows about it?’ Simkhe asked. ‘Even my own wife doesn’t know,’ replied Stefan, ‘Come with me and I’ll show you where it is. You take it, but keep God in mind, and do not reveal me as the thief.’

Reb Simkhe crawled out of the window in the middle of the night and went with Stefan who got a shovel and started digging. And the box (31) was found exactly where he had said it was.

Simkhe instructed Stefan to leave the box exactly where it was. ‘Let’s cover it well with earth and leave it there. Then go home to bed and do not tell anyone about this. If you even say one word about it to anyone you will be stricken dead on the spot.’ Stefan grabbed the spade, kneeled at Simkhe’s feet and said, ‘I will not tell.’ and left.

Reb Simkhe was overcome with joy and went back to his cottage. He quietly crawled through the window and then closed it. But he remained at the window looking in the direction of the spot where the box was buried. Then he got worried that Stefan would change his mind and remove the box. He stood there until dawn started to break. Then he put on his white silk robe and his *talis* and *tfiln* and stood by the window rocking back and forth.

When daylight was already in full bloom, the overlord came with many other landowners and important men. They were all eager to meet God’s right-hand man and partake of his amazing wonders. All of them remained standing outside. Only the overlord went in by himself. The little cottage was still shut. The overlord asked the innkeeper if he had treated the rabbi well. ‘Of course sir, I treated him as I would a count. But don’t you know it, he did not eat or drink a thing the whole time he was here.’ The innkeeper then showed the overlord all the pots and bowls and platters, all filled with food—fish, meat,

boiled, broiled and roasted and good wine. The overlord heard and saw everything and stood there dumbfounded and said, ‘I am so sorry **(32)** I had to impose on him like that, that he had to suffer so on my account.’ He then went to call in all the other overlords to show them the untouched food and tell them that the holy man was now on his third day of fasting.

The overlord then quietly tiptoed over to his door and looked through the crack. He saw the *tzadik* wrapped in his holy garments rocking back and forth. So he motioned to the other overlords to come have a look. They all had a look and were awed. Simkhe sensed the presence of the overlord—he had heard his voice and began exaggerating his motions, wildly clapping his hands and stomping his feet. He then suddenly threw open the door. The overlord and all his fellow lords quickly pulled their hats off and prostrated themselves at his feet. And Simkhe said to the overlord: ‘Today you will have what was stolen from you. You must immediately summon all the inhabitants of the area and have them line up before me—men on one side and women on the other. Everyone else who has come from the surrounding hamlets, including all the overlords and their wives and daughters, must also line up with everyone else. And even all the Jewish children who reside here must line up too. The Jewish innkeeper, his wife, grown children and their wives, must also line up. And when you have absolutely everyone lined up right here, where I’m pointing to, come and get me. But everyone must line-up right here—near these trees.’

The overlord and his fellows promptly rushed off to fulfill the rabbi’s instructions, as they were very eager to see the great wonder. In short, it didn’t take long for everyone to line-up where Simkhe had indicated. The overlord then went to get Simkhe and they both arrived to where everyone was standing. Everyone stood at attention. And everyone displayed the greatest respect for Simkhe, as if he were a monarch. And as Simkhe and the overlord walked together, **(33)** side by side, Simkhe said to the overlord, ‘I now want you to stay by me and observe what I do and listen to what I say, but remain silent.’

Reb Simkhe then proceeded to walk down the line of women, from one end to the other, and put his hand on each of their hearts. Each time he removed his hand from a woman's heart, he shook his head no, and cried out quite loudly, 'No, No, she is clean. She doesn't know anything about the theft.' When he was done with the women, he crossed over to where the men were standing, and did the same thing—from the first to the last. When he put his hand on Stefan's heart, he felt it reverberating like a bell, but pretended not to notice. 'No, no, he is clean of the theft,' he screamed out as he passed each one. Truth be told, not one of these people knew anything about the theft, so therefore, they all truly believed him to be an authentic *Pod Pan Bog*. As a result, everyone began feeling great love for him. 'Know that you have suspected all these people for no reason. They are all honest folk,' he said to the overlord in a loud voice so everyone would hear. 'Today you will have your box back because I promised you would.'

He then wrapped himself in his *talis*, pulled his great *spodek* down to his brow, and took up his great staff. He then proceeded to sway back and forth pointing to the sky and to all four directions. He then pulled his *talis* over his head, covering his big fur hat and his face, and shaking his staff like a *lulov*²⁸. Then suddenly he froze and remained stock-still for several minutes, not moving a muscle, like a corpse. And then of a sudden shouted in wrath at the overlord. 'No, no, it was not a person who took your box from you. It was ordained in heaven. You will shortly have it back.' The entire populace, as well as the several Jews who lived there, saw and heard all of this transpire and were in awe.

Simkhe then gave the overlord his great staff and led him and the entire **(34)** gathering to the first tree in the row of trees and told the overlord to give the tree three hard knocks with the staff. The overlord complied and Simkhe asked him if he heard what the tree said? 'No,' the overlord replied. 'The tree said it does not have the box,' Simkhe declared. And so they went down the row repeating the same procedure on each tree until they got to the tree where the box was buried. When the overlord completed the three knocks on that tree, Simkhe sprang forth. 'Why are you just standing there? Can't you

²⁸ Palm frond shaken during Succoth services.

hear the tree crying out that the box is buried under it? It was placed there by heaven. Hurry, go get a spade—you must be the one to go get it.’

The overlord quickly dashed and brought a spade. Simkhe instructed him to dig a hole two shovel-lengths deep.

What a fright he and all his out-of town lords had when they saw the box lying there. The overlord picked it up and raised it for all to see. All the lords and the entire gathering pulled their hats off and kneeled before Simkhe as if he were a god. And all the peasants,—farmhands and housemaids, kneeled and cried out that this was the work of God’s Deputy.

The reader should take note of the great honor Reb Simkhe was receiving. It was then that the innkeeper and his wife became very uncomfortable because they had laughed at him. ‘Who knows what will become of us for laughing at such an angel?’ Long story short, the lord took him to his manor but didn’t want to detain him too long because everyone knew he had not eaten, going on three days now. They showered him with many grand, expensive gifts and a lot of money. Each overlord gave him his own gold watch and all the signet rings on his fingers. The foreign lords’ contributions heaped up into a mountain of money and jewelry that was all put into a trunk. **(35)** Another chest, personally packed by his very own local lord, also contained gold, silver and jewelry. Long story short, he’d hit the jackpot.

Four horses were then yoked to a splendid coach, especially prepared for his journey, and his entire booty was put inside. The countess and her children and all the foreign dignitaries and their wives and children traveled along, in a long train of coaches. Everyone felt greatly honored to merit the honor of accompanying him. Those of the peasant population who only possessed one horse and wagon loaded it with whatever they possibly had—a good calf, some poultry, honeycomb—as gifts to bring along to Reb Simkhe. In short, a great crowd traveled along with them. The overlord asked for

permission to ride with him in his coach and Reb Simkhe allowed him the honor. So they both rode in the same coach.

As the convoy approached the town, the townspeople wondered why so many coaches were entering their town. They wanted to know where they were going. How amazed they were when they saw all the coaches pull up at Reb Simkhe Plakhte's. No one could contain himself upon seeing Reb Simkhe climb out of the coach like for a king, while all the overlords lined-up with their hats in their hands. When he emerged they all followed him into his house. The countess greeted Madame Simkhe, kissing and hugging her, 'How lucky you are that you have such a holy spirit for a husband,' she said and handed her some grand gifts. The overlords had organized a splendid parade to make its way through the town. And everyone, individually, said, 'I will send all good things every week.' And the peasants said they would do the same. Then everyone bade their farewells, with great respect, and took off for home. And everyone kept their word and sent goods every week.

The townsfolk were beside themselves. They had no idea what was going on, so they asked **(36)** the Jewish innkeeper what had happened in the village. The innkeeper told them the whole story. He told them that their overlord and all the other dignitaries were not crazy—that Simkhe Plakhte was truly an angel of God. 'If I hadn't seen the great marvel with my own eyes I wouldn't have believed it either. And know that you have all sinned all those years you spoke badly of him and laughed at him.' The townspeople stood there amazed. Everyone in town started saying that maybe he actually was something of a hidden holy man. They especially noticed that he conducted himself in a very Jewish manner—his home was open to the poor and he supported impoverished scholars. Long story short, he made a name for himself in the world.

People began coming to him for magical cures. His unscrupulous gabe taught him some fraudulent remedies like: To be rewarded with a male child, cook *lulov* in *mikve* water, recite Psalms, Chapter 20, 7 times, and Chapter 7, 20 times, then take feathers from a white hen and lay them on your stomach; Earth from a grave, carried in a white pouch

around your neck, will protect you from a curse, may God save us. Put three times *khai* [3x18] first fruits²⁹ under your pillow and then put money in the rabbi's charity box the next day without anyone seeing you and that will protect you from hemorrhoids. Bayleaf salt and rose-honey cooked in buttermilk was a remedy for the eyes. And a lot more of such foolishness, that the rabbi very quickly learned. After all, he was very apt at dirty tricks. In short, he became famous throughout the land. People, men and women, from all over the continent, came to see him and told of miracles and wonders that the hidden holy man performed. But the holy *tsadik's* and his wife's chief concern remained, their meals, and how they were going to stuff themselves like horses. But everyone who came to see him felt very honored that he had merited an audience with the holy rabbi. Long story short, he was renowned as high as the sky. The whole world believed in him.

²⁹ Hebrew: Khai means life and correlates to the number 18 in numerology. First fruits of Spring, cited in Song of Songs, 2:13, are used for religious offerings.

REBE SIMKHE'S COURT

(37) Real Hasids, rabbis and scholars, also came to see him. They conducted themselves with great respect towards him. It sometimes happened that foreign Hasids would inquire privately of the *gabe* about why the rabbi never uttered a word of Torah at his table.

‘What would you understand of his Torah?’ the *gabe* would respond. ‘He studies only the deepest secrets of Jewish mystical tradition, long may he live, his Torah comes from heaven’s highest spiritual world.’ But then, the scoundrel finally figured out a way for the rabbi to preach Torah at his table. He sat with the drunken glutton day and night and relayed to him all the stories he knew by heart from the *khumesh* and the *tanakh*³⁰, making sure he was clear on all of it.

One *shabes*, when many scholars and rabbis were present, they very much wanted the *rebe* to give a sermon. So the *gabe* gave his word to implore him, who would in turn say, ‘What’s the point, they won’t understand any of it anyway.’ But as long as his Torah commentaries remained hidden mysteries, he’d do it.

Long story short, when they finished eating the rabbi opened his mouth, his eyes glazed over (he was good at mimicking the motions the *gabe* had taught him but he could not remember the stories very well) and proceeded: ‘Ha, ha, ha. Ni, ni, ni. Oy, oy oy. When Noah went to war with the Philistines in the desert and Noah lost the war, it was decreed that Isaac be sacrificed. And that sacrifice was the cause of this long exile. Oy, oy, oy. Ha, ha, ha. Ni, ni, ni.’ With that, the ritual washing after the meal and blessings were performed culminating with the crying out of, ‘Light is sown for the righteous!’³¹

After the blessings, one *hasid* said to another, ‘Are you well versed in Torah?’ ‘Ha why, are you a big expert? This is Kabbala³²!’ he shot back. Another one chimed in, ‘This is

³⁰ The Five Books of Moses aka the Hebrew Bible.

³¹ Line in Psalm 97.

³² Jewish mysticism.

very deep. These are the deepest secrets. I told you, the gabe said that his Torah is not for sentient beings—it's only for angels.'

When the audience went home, the rabbi's reputation regarding hidden Torah mysteries, spread throughout the world. **(38)** His teachings were beyond compare and impossible to describe. In this way, *hasidim* and scholars from many towns, as well as minor rabbis, gathered together and traveled to hear the mysteries of the Torah. At his table, the rabbi continued to proclaim his fraudulent commentaries. 'When King Nimrod waged war against King Saul, Daniel interpreted the dream of the 7 cows that Pharaoh had at the Jordan River. And the reason it doesn't rain now in the Land of Israel is because the Jordan was smitten with blood. Until the crime of Jonah the Prophet's murder in the temple is put right the town of Goshen will not be built and it will rain.' And he kept on delivering more of these types of sermons, like, 'When King Agog waged war against Nebuchadnezzar, Joseph and his brothers were sold into slavery in Egypt and had no rest until Korach built an ark against the flood. And this was an allusion to the First Temple.'

He revealed many more hidden mysteries that required explanations in order to be understood by very learned scholars of Kabbalah. Everyone in his audience would look at each other and be ashamed to say they didn't understand a bit of it. Some even said they understood. 'These deep mysteries are impossible to explain. It was worth traveling a thousand miles to hear about them,' one would say because he was embarrassed in front of another. And if there were several sitting at the table who were true scholars and learned men and knew that this Joe Shmo was an ignorant glutton, only worthy of having his hands and feet broken, they had to remain silent. They had to say they had never in their lives heard such excellent Torah before. And they had to travel to visit him. If, God forbid, a bad word was said against him, the culprit would be branded a heretic and might not escape with his life. For those vile, ignoble people who believed, like the peasants did, that he was truly God's Deputy, his reputation grew ever larger. **(39)** Long story short, pilgrims from all ends of the earth traveled to see him. He was regaled with money

as if it were sand. All who gave him money experienced great joy, feeling they had achieved great merit when the rabbi honored them by accepting their gifts.

The overlords and peasants, particularly his own overlord, sent him the best of everything you ever could imagine, every week. In short, Reb Simkhe sat on his high throne, honored by everyone, and gorging himself to no end. In this way, he lived peacefully for quite some time.

THE KING'S BIRD OR SIMKHE'S THIRD TRIAL

Several years went by with Reb Simkhe living in peace and great pleasure. His reputation resounded throughout the realm. But then something came up in the kingdom that no one was able to solve. All the ministers were sent for to convene in order to work on this problem. So too, Simkhe's overlord was called to the brainstorming session, as he was also a minister.

When the overlord had already been at the king's for several days and no one could come up with a solution, he thought of Reb Simkhe.

The overlord knew the king very well. They had gone to school together and had remained very good friends from childhood. So he said to the king, 'My lord, your highness, we are already saved. It is not necessary for us to bang our heads against the wall searching for answers. There is a man in my town who is a true angel. He knows everything exactly as if he were God. Let's send for him. He will be able to help us.'

But the king was a very wise man. He did not believe in such foolish tales, so he burst out laughing and said to the overlord, 'If I didn't know you were a very smart guy I wouldn't be surprised, but because I am well aware of what an intelligent man you are, I am taken aback by your foolishness.'

‘My lord, your highness! Since you know me well from when we were kids, you know that I too do not believe in such things just as much as you don’t. If thousands of people told me this very same thing, I too would not believe them. But since I have seen it with my own eyes, there is no reason for me not to believe it.’ (40) He then told the whole story about the horse. Then the one about his treasure chest. And everyone was amazed. Several other ministers chimed in that they too had heard of this man—that he was very great and talented. But the king still did not believe. So all the ministers conferred on the matter and agreed that it wouldn’t hurt to send for him.

‘We won’t, in any case, ask him to consult on our problem, because it wouldn’t be right for a Jewish civilian to be privy to our secrets. But we will be able to conclude, if he is indeed, all-knowing.’

The king ordered he come as quickly as possible. But the overlord said, ‘Do you think he is just a regular person like you? Don’t you think you should send the royal coach for him, accompanied by your royal orchestra and several important generals. And I myself will also travel along with them so that I, may impress upon him, very kindly, to come, if only for his regard for me.’

And it was done. The king’s son and our overlord rode in the king’s carriage. Several additional royal coaches bore the most prestigious generals and the cortege made its way to Simkhe’s town. When the townspeople saw the king’s coach and all the other coaches carrying all those important people they were very perplexed. Where could they possibly be going? How amazed everyone was when they saw all those regal coaches pull up to Simkhe Plakhte’s house. All the generals, the crown prince and their very own overlord, disembarked and went into Reb Simkhe’s house. They could not contain their laughter. But they also could not say a word about it.

When the royal guests entered, with great respect, the overlord said to his *Pod Pan Bog*, ‘Look how true I am to you, I want to make you even more fortunate than I am. But I am not in a position to do so. I am only an overlord. I have though, spoken greatly of you at

the king's court. And if you are able to respond to what the king will ask you, **(41)** the king will make you very happy. The king's personal coach has been sent in your honor. All his great generals have been sent to fetch you.'

When Simkhe's heard this, his heart shrank. He wished the overlord would fall ill and take to his bed or that the devil had taken him before he had had a chance to speak so greatly of him to the king. To his wife he said, 'God knows, I might have to take up my yokes and water cans again. But it's likely I won't ever be able to use them again because if the king discovers even the slightest swindle, my life will be on the line.' He felt he was on death's door. Nothing brought relief. Gladly or not he was forced to turn his heart to stone. He had to go. In short, they went.

When they got there, he was received with great respect. He was lodged in a Jewish guesthouse. The proprietors were told to accommodate him in kingly fashion. As he could not eat at the king's court, a sumptuous dinner fit for a king, was prepared for him. But he truly could not eat. His mouth, as well as his heart, were locked. The only thing he could think of was the dreadful death he was about to face. But because they regaled and begged him, he forced himself to have a little something.

While he was thus engaged, the Senate and all its ministers, convened to fabricate a test for him. Because they could not come up with anything on such short notice they decided to put him up in the guesthouse for three days. Surely they would be able to come up with something over the next three days. So after lunch they sent for Reb Simkhe to come to the king's court. And the king and his entire senate said to him, with great respect, 'Dear holy man, we ask you, with the greatest respect, to remain in the guesthouse for three days. We will send for you on the third day. And if you are able to solve the riddle we will have prepared for you, we will make you, your children, and your children's children, eternally happy.' **(42)** So Simkhe agreed. With great honors, he was escorted to the guesthouse. The king ordered the innkeeper to treat him as he would the king. 'Give him anything he desires. I will pay you well for everything.'

The innkeeper did as he was told. The visitor in the white robe was installed in a luxurious suite. Treats and delicacies were prepared for him like for a king. But poor him—he was bursting with bile due to his dire predicament. Truth be told though, he was the maestro of gluttony—a virtuoso gorger. But now his heart was locked. He was bitter and sour in anticipation of that third day. This time he was being called to appear before the king and his fear of death was much greater than it had been when he was dealing with the overlord’s treasure chest. After all, an overlord is not a king. A king could, in a flash, sentence him to death if he found out that he was nothing but a common *freser*³³. And add to that the entire senate. In short, he did not have a bite to eat the entire time. Nor did he drink anything or sleep either. All he did was pace back and forth in his quarters. And everyday the innkeeper was sent for and asked if he’d been treating the guest well. He responded with the bare truth: ‘All the delicacies fit for a king were prepared for him yet the slightest bit of food has not passed his lips the entire time. He is fasting. Not eating, not drinking, and not sleeping.’

When they heard this, and what the overlord had also told them—that when he was summoned about the treasure chest, he had also not eaten for three days and three nights—they began suspecting that he might indeed be a great man. And if so, he would certainly be able to solve anything they might cook up for him. They would then know for certain that he truly was a heavenly spirit.

(43) Of all the ministers the most prominent one was chosen to come up with a question for him. That minister was truly a very wise man. So he said, ‘My advice is not to question him about the top secret difficult situation we are currently facing in our kingdom. We must not mention anything about that. One way or another it will not work for us to divulge our secret to a regular civilian. If he is a common man like all other men, he will certainly not be able to help us with our problem. And if he truly is a holy wise man, a *groyser khokhem*, it won’t do either for a civilian to know of our hidden secrets. So then, we must not question him about our troubles, nor mention a word of

³³ Voracious glutton, sponger, freeloader.

them to him. We must come up with something else to ask him about in order to determine what he's really made of.'

This suggestion pleased the king and the entire senate. Now they had to think of something to ask him. So that same minister, the very wise one, said, 'Know that if he is truly a wise man, he will be able to answer the most difficult questions—a real sage can solve the greatest puzzles. But a wise man will not get involved with harebrained stupidities, just like a fool will never grasp wisdom. Riddles are of two sorts—one calls for common sense and the other one requires a God given gift, bestowed in heaven, as it is written...the Lord gave Solomon wisdom...meaning, celestial wisdom, the God given kind. Now that means, if a wise man has common sense he can solve riddles on his own but he would never be able to answer a ridiculous query. But the wise man who receives his knowledge from heaven, can solve anything—a true riddle and a witless one as well. It makes no difference to him, as heaven reveals everything to him—anything he wants or anything he needs becomes apparent to him. So then, present him with an idiotic problem, one that he will be totally unprepared for. **(44)** If he gets it we'll have proof that he is a true sage who receives his knowledge from heaven. It will affirm to us that he is heaven sent and is very great in heaven. If it turns out that he is indeed a sage who channels heavenly knowledge, we will honor him greatly and shower him with the grandest gifts. He will then be obliged to help us with our greatest needs and protect us from all evil.'

The king and the entire senate all agreed with this suggestion. The task at hand was to come up with a question that he wouldn't possibly expect. Each one submitted a different suggestion but no one liked any of them.

In the king's quarters, where they were convening, there was a built-in compartment in one of the walls—a recessed shelf enclosed by a beautiful little door. On that same wall, there hung a cage with a bird in it. An idea formed to put 2-days worth of food and drink for the bird into the recess and then take the bird out of its cage and put it in there and lock the door. The empty cage would be taken out of the room so that it would appear as

if there was never a bird there. Then the question to be put to him would be, ‘What transpired here? If he guesses correctly we’ll know that his knowledge comes from heaven and that he is great.’

Everyone loved this idea. And they proceeded to implement what was proposed. They took the bird out of its cage and put it in the secret compartment. But as they were about to shut the door the bird flew out. They chased it around until it was caught and put it into the recessed compartment a second time. And he flew out again. They again chased it around until they caught it yet again. On their third attempt to conceal the bird, the king firmly held onto it himself **(45)** so that it could not escape. The bird was successfully locked into the niche in the wall. All the ministers swore not to reveal that the bird was hidden in the secret compartment.

Now, my dear reader, we will go to Reb Simkhe to see how he’s doing. Our Simkhe was in great distress. He hadn’t eaten or had anything to drink. He had not slept. And his ox-brain was almost shriveled up from thinking so much. As the last night was already upon him, and the next day was to be the day of reckoning, his death felt palpable to him.

After giving his predicament a lot of thought, he decided to tell the truth. ‘I admit I succeeded the other two times because luck was with me. Now before the king, I feel that my luck has run out. I will tell the whole truth—that I am truly a common, lower class man. And because of my honesty they will not execute me. But my overlord will take everything he has ever given me away. I’ll be a water-carrier but at least I’ll escape with my life. If I don’t tell the truth and pretend, with a straight face, that I am not a fraud and a cheat but a *rebe* and if it turns out that they realize that I am a know-nothing and a liar, then I will certainly not escape with my life.’ Good, this conclusion pleased Reb Simkhe. Truth be told, there was nothing else he came up with.

Very early the next morning, he put on his white robe, his *talis* and his *tfilin*, his huge *spodek* that looked like a thundercloud on his head, and he began *davening*. He looked like an English charlatan.

When the King's great men suddenly came in and saw him in this outfit they caught a fright, as if he were the angel of death. They waited for him to take off his *talis* and *tfilin* and asked him, with great respect, to accompany them to where the king and all the senators were awaiting to honor him with great respect. He went with them without balking as he wanted to appear eager to the task. **(46)** On the face of it, he appeared diligent but inside his anguish was exploding.

When he arrived, the king and all the ministers were already gathered awaiting him. As soon as he entered, he did not wait for them to begin questioning him but immediately began telling the whole truth. 'Dear lords, there is no need to question me. The first time the bird managed to fly free. The second time he also managed to free himself. But the third time, he could not break free of the king's grip and was imprisoned. He didn't manage to escape. The first time with the horse in the forest, he succeeded in pulling it off. The second time, with the diamond filled chest in the countryside, he also pulled it off. But now, the third time, in the king's grip, he was captured. He could not manage.'

But the king and his ministers clearly did not know what was going on in Simkhe's head, nor what he meant. As soon as they heard his initial words, '... the second time the bird managed but the third time he was caught in the king's grip...' they surmised that he was aware of their secret. And before he could even continue speaking, loud applause and the shouting of 'Vivat! Vivat!' broke out. Everyone was awed and fell to their knees at the feet of God's Deputy. To them it meant that his knowledge was gleaned directly from God, just like King Solomon, may he rest in peace. As soon as Simkhe saw and heard this, not another word escaped his lips and he remained as silent as the wall.

HOMAGE TO GOD'S DEPUTY

Because everyone was so overjoyed and in such awe, they did not know what great honor to bestow upon him. And because they knew that he had not eaten in three days, they did not want to detain him, so they all accompanied him, with great honor and respect, to his guesthouse. (47) The king ordered the royal orchestra to play in honor of God's Deputy. The town was brightly illuminated. All the streets and windows were lit up with lamps and lanterns in honor of the heavenly person. And the overlord beamed so bright that his light shot right up to heaven.

The king and all his ministers hugged and kissed the heavenly man. After all, their relationship to him made it possible for them to be honored, if only by virtue of witnessing the holy man's great marvel and having contact with him. And when the queen heard about it, she asked the King to invite the Holy One to the royal palace one more time so that she too could be honored by his presence. The king was not eager to be discourteous to heaven's angel, so the overlord was sent to make the request. When the overlord returned to the queen with the good news that the Holy Man would come, she and all her great ladies dressed up in their finest to greet him. The road to the royal palace was lined with roses and each lady kneeled and showered him with grand presents. The king and all his great men also bestowed him with wonderful royal gifts.

Reb Simkhe made a special trip to the synagogue, and the king and all his great men joined him. There, Simkhe ordered a special blessing be made for the king. All the Jews gathered in honor of the king. He in turn, received them beautifully and endowed the synagogue with a large donation. What's more, all the poor folk were honorably invited to the king's court. And all the Jews accompanied them with great respect and everyone cheered and called out, 'May our King and Queen and all their children live and be well!'

When they got back to the palace, there were already very many coaches waiting. The king's coach was prepared for Reb Simkhe. It was loaded with gold, silver and money and very expensive gifts and the king and queen rode with them for a while and then

wished them **(48)** a good trip. But before the king bid them his leave he said the following to him: 'Everything I've given you is only for now. I will shortly send everything you and yours might need and I will take care of you like a father cares for his own child.' Many Jews also came to bid him farewell. They threw I.O.U. notes and donations into his coach. He took everything with him, nodding his head to every gift sent his way, thinking he had arrived in Seventh Heaven.

The overlord, the king's son, and Simkhe all rode in the king's coach. All the other great men accompanied them in a train of carriages. Very many coaches with very important people in them, accompanied the king's coach. When Reb Simkhe and all the other important people were already not far from home, only one or two miles from town, a band rode forth on horseback and a big parade was staged in front of Reb Simkhe's door. Music trumpeted in honor of Madame Simkhe. The news that her loving husband was on his way was delivered to her as well as a friendly letter from the queen with warm regards from herself and all her royal ladies. Madame Simkhe opened it and looked at it like a rooster would at a man. She then thanked them very much.

As the coaches transporting Reb Simkhe approached, all the town Jews came out. They witnessed the overlord, the prince, and several generals, escorting Reb Simkhe and honoring him like slaves before their king. All these great men stayed for several days, mounting great parades and joyous parties on every one of those days. When it was time to take their leave of the *tzadik* and his Madame, they left grand gifts and went on their way.

In a few days a newspaper broadside was issued by the king stating, in his own hand, that it be known to the world that there was no greater holy man in all the world, endowed with heaven's holy wisdom, **(49)** as the great genius, Reb Simkhe. And anyone who, God forbid, tried to deny it, or God forbid, speak against His Holy Honor, would be sentenced to death. He stated that gifts and money from the monarch's court would be sent him ad infinitum. In short, his reputation reached from one end of the universe to the other, among foreign nations as well as among the Jews. Everyday people arrived from

all ends of the earth. And if, of a hundred sick people 99 died and one survived, the ones who died were not given any thought—only the one who lived was recalled, and the news that the rabbi had saved a life resounded throughout the world. And that is how the whole world was deceived by this thick-headed scoundrel. Even scholars and wise men were duped. They journeyed to see him because they believed in this greedy pig as if he were a true prophet. The swindle blinded the whole world. One had to wait a very long time at his door to gain the merit of being allowed in. The word was that he fasted from *shabes* to *shabes* and that no one ever saw him eating. The truth was he actually didn't eat—stuffed himself like a blind horse. It was done so cleverly that no one besides his wife knew of it. She in fact brought everything into him clandestinely so that no one would see. And in public she lamented to people about how anguished she was that her husband was not eating.

Very great men came to call—rabbis, good Jews, (also Jews as good as he was), scholars, even ones who were aware of the lies and deceptions—came. At that time there were *hasidic shtibls*³⁴ in every town devoted to the Holy Rabbi, Reb Shimon the Righteous³⁵. The cabalists among them said in private that Reb Simkhe was the reincarnation of the sainted Shimon the Tzadik, may he rest in peace. They said that the word PLAKHTE, in Jewish numerology, was equivalent to the word, TZADIK. And whoever did not go to that *shtibl*, or travel to see Him, was not considered an honorable man. Because of that, scholars, students and wise men had to travel there against their will. And if **(50)** perchance, a learned one was able to see through the dupe, and cried out the real truth—that the world was crazy to go on pilgrimages to such a gorgier, to such a thick skulled Joe Shmo, who deceives God and the world, to believe in such a criminal, such a liar, who doesn't know the difference between cursing Haman and blessing Mordechai—if that happened then all of Plakhte's *hasidim* would scream, 'This man is a heretic, he

³⁴ Local Hasidic places of worship.

³⁵ Genesis (29:33)

will not get his share in the world to come because he doesn't have the faith of a learned man.'

It would happen that another wise man or scholar or learned one, would say to the one who denied Simkhe, 'Listen up dear brother, I understand the sham of the sacred and the craziness of the world just as well as you do. I have given this much thought—when an intelligent person with good common sense finds himself among crazy people he must not tell them they are crazy but agree with them, confirming every insane act he witnesses as good and just. If he says they are crazy they will point back at him, crying out that he is crazy, and very likely threaten his life. So then my dear friend, be still and leave everyone to his foolishness. Then we won't have to worry about turning the whole world upside down.' 'You are right dear friend,' the first would respond, 'I will heed your advice.' So the two learned men would share their secret between them, but they would also go to the *hasidic shtibl* and to the *rebe's shabes* evening meal and partake of leftovers from his table—a chunk of herring from the *rebe's* plate—and drink to his health, 'Long may he live! Long may he live!' They also said of him. 'May great wonders long live through him.' Wonders they never saw nor heard. And Reb Simkhe continued to preach deeper and deeper Torah.

One *shabes* there were very many *hasidim* visiting and the *gabe* worked with him all week on what he would say that *shabes*. But Simkhe Plakhte had a memory like an old cat. When it came time to give his Torah talk all the *hasidim* became very quiet in order to merit hearing deep Torah from the holy source. He began his talk greatly impassioned. The fire of aquavit burned in him, and due to his fiery state he devoured all the fish, along with all of the meat placed before him, not leaving a shred of holy remnants on his plate to share with his audience. **(51)** The gathered looked at each other but everyone thought to himself, who knows the extent of this mystery, and turned instead to quenching their thirst with his sermon.

So he opened his mouth like Balaam's ass and said, 'When Ham murdered his brother Cain, Potiphar built the ark. Balaam the wicked and Nebuchadnezzar were on the ark. Oy,

Jonah, Jonah, Jonah, Jonah. The dove took flight and dragged the wicked Balaam with him on his right wing and Nebuchadnezzar on his left. At that time King Ahasuerus was at war with Balak, the son of Tsipor. In the meantime the Jews of Shushan were feasting at the festival of Balak Ben Tsipor. And that is why Ahasuerus rushed into the desert to curse the Israelites. When the dove saw that the holy Jews were about to be cursed, she spread one of her wings, as is written, ‘...and his wings shall spread...’ and from beneath them one unyielding donkey appeared, as it is written, ‘...a donkey caused it...’ So Balaam sprang forth and seated himself on the donkey, ‘...and he rode upon his ass...’ and murdered Ahasuerus. So Samuel the prophet appeared and killed Balaam because he had destroyed the first temple. Wicked Haman was thus born and had King Nebuchadnezzar hanged in the land of Egypt where Korah made peace with Haman at Rachel’s Tomb, that the patriarch Jacob had purchased from Shechem, son of Hamor. A heavenly voice was heard from the heavens, ‘...no trick or wise actions will help you nor will brave heroics come to your aide...’ It is written in the Holy Gemara that there will be naught for you or for me. That means, the way you make your bed is how you will sleep. Again King David, may he rest in peace, said in the scroll of Esther, ‘...the angel that protects me from harm will bless...’ meaning, if you don’t comb your hair it will get tangled. The explanation of this secret is, as it is written in the verse, ‘...you will not immerse your utensils nor kindle the lights...’ meaning, everyone one is paid what they have earned. And therefore it is true that Korah mocked the honor of the two *tzadiks*, Dathan and Abiram, because he did not want to appear lowly before them so he descended to the lowest level. **(52)** But Haman honored the Tzadik Mordechai by humoring him and doing everything exactly as Mordechai would have liked. So the Tzadik Ben Hamdata merited to achieve the highest level. Ha, ha, ha, may I and all of you, my *hasidim*, also merit to rise to such heights. Time for all of you to say, Amen.’ And they all yelled out, ‘Amen. Amen. Amen.’

Such despicable Torah had the capacity of putting the *Hasidim’s* lives at risk. The boneheads practically died of fright from these fiery secrets of the Torah. At the same time, truly wise men and scholars had to contain themselves from splitting their sides

with laughter. And if they did allow themselves a good laugh, their lives felt at risk. So the true scholars said to each other, ‘The old saying, why do I need wisdom if foolishness reigns, is true.’

EPILOGUE

Reb Simkhe and his wife lived very well and in great wealth. The whole world allowed itself to be fooled by them. They left children who were just as greedy as they were. Great men were coupled with their children and Reb Simkhe and his wife died in great honor. Their children inherited a very large fortune, but the wealth was shortly expended as they were accustomed to stuffing themselves and swilling. Their parents, the holy gluttons, were gone. The calves and poultry and money and all the goods the lords used to send were no longer coming in. No lord no longer wanted to send the slightest amount. This angered them, but as long as they had enough to gorge on, they gorged. But then, when the feed ran out, they didn’t know what to do. To say the least, their kids were raised like wild oxen—they ate and drank like pigs, and danced and pranced and loafed. They roared disrespectfully at their elders, ‘Listen up you, who do you think you are? You call yourself a *hasid*?’ They knew well how to do that. They were accustomed to behaving that way. **(53)** And furthermore—they had no Torah, no learning, and they had no vocations either. No trades. And as their uncles, the rabbis, died off, they stuck their necks out on the chopping block, wandering the country, expecting to be put up in all the *hasidic shtibls*. Sometimes they stole, sometimes they mooched. Wherever there was a wedding or festival they made sure to participate in the good deed of feasting along with everyone else. They, the children of holy ones, made their wives’ lives miserable and raised their children like wild animals.

All of Reb Simkhe’s children knew no other way to live, except one, there was one who was smart—not a big ignoramus. He was a little learned and was truly very clever. He

knew that the whole business of his father's reputation was a lie. So he called his brothers together and said to them, 'Dear brothers! If you heed me you will all be okay. Let us all learn a trade and earn an honest living employing our own ten fingers. Let us not cheat and deceive the whole world like our father did, swindling money out of everyone. We all know that our father's fortune was depleted, like melting snow, at the expense of others. Such money cannot have any worth because it was unjustly obtained. Ill-gotten gains are unjust—they are stolen. Our father, unfortunately, could not help it. He was coerced into it. When it began he was already old and knew no Torah or trade. We have no way of knowing if it would work for us like it did for him. One must be charmed to attain such high levels of thievery. And we cannot be sure that our father's kismet has been passed down to us. After all, he preached Torah that was completely upside down. He mixed parsley with cow pies and buttermilk, and everyone said how wonderful, because his lucky streak held out. Not everyone can be assured of such good fortune. But whoever has a vocation can count on succeeding and acquiring wealth. And if he doesn't get rich, he will at any rate, be assured of his piece of bread.' (54) So his brothers took heed and learned trades. One became a tailor, another a jeweler, and they all conducted themselves very nicely.

Due to their abilities as craftsmen, they gradually accumulated wealth and became merchants and rich men. They loved their brother who advised them to learn trades very much and gave their children good educations and good marriages. They, in turn, became businessmen, well versed in learning, writing and math. They lived their lives in peace, bearing children and grandchildren who were pleasing in the eyes of man and God.

The moral of the story points to how easily the world is deceived. But whoever has common sense need not be blinded by the nihilistic vanity of the world, but search for truth.

THE END