

# A SIMPLE STORY

S. Y. AGNON

A NEWLY REVISED TRANSLATION  
FROM THE HEBREW  
AND AFTERWORD BY

Hillel Halkin

INCLUDING A NEW PREFACE  
AND AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY BY  
JEFFREY SAKS

*The Toby Press*

# *Contents*

*Preface to The Toby Press Revised Edition  
by Jeffrey Saks vii*

*A SIMPLE STORY 1*

*Afterword by Hillel Halkin 240*

*Annotated Bibliography 255*

# A Simple Story

## *Chapter one*

**T**he widow Mirl lay ill for many years. The doctors consumed her savings with their cures and failed to cure her. God in heaven saw how she suffered and took her from this world.

As she lay dying Mirl said to her daughter:

“I know I’ll never rise from this bed. If you’re angry with me for not leaving you anything, don’t be. God in heaven knows I never spent a cent on myself. When I die, go to our cousin Boruch Meir. I’m sure he’ll have pity and take you in.”

Soon after, Mirl turned her head to the wall and gave back her soul to its Master.

Blume was left without a father or a mother. The neighbors came to console her, saw that the cupboard was bare, and said:

“There’s a cousin named Boruch Meir Hurvitz who’s a wealthy storekeeper in Szybusz. He certainly won’t turn her away.”

Blume nodded. “That’s just what my mother said,” she said.

As soon as the seven days of mourning were over, Blume’s neighbors got together, hired a horse and wagon, gave her some provisions for the trip, and sent her off to Szybusz. “This cousin of yours is a very rich man,” they told her. “Everyone in Szybusz

knows him. Just ask for him and you'll be shown where he lives right away."

Blume boarded the wagon and left for Szybusz. When she reached her cousin's house she sat down on a chair in the entrance hall with her belongings beside her.

On coming upstairs from the store that evening, Tsirl Hurvitz saw a new face. She took it by the chin between her fingers and asked:

"Who are you, my dear? And what are you doing here?"

Blume stood up. "I'm Hayyim Nacht's daughter," she said. "Now that my mother is dead and I have no parents, I've come to you because you're my family."

Tsirl pursed her lips and said nothing.

Blume looked down at the floor and reached for her bags as though they were all she had to take hold of in the world.

Tsirl sighed. "It was very sad for us to hear about your mother, may she rest in peace. I never met her, but I've been told that she did not have an easy life. Not everyone is fortunate. Your father too was taken before his time. What a pity that was, because there was no better Jew than he. I've been told that he spent his whole life studying, and I suppose that he passed some of his knowledge on to you. I myself don't have much book learning. But I do hope that you were also taught a few things that a woman ought to know."

In a different tone of voice she went on:

"Well, you're not going back to where you came from tonight. Tomorrow we'll have a talk and see if we can think of something."

Then she showed Blume to a room.

Blume lay down to rest in her cousin's home. She was so tired that she fell asleep right away. In the middle of the night she awoke with a start. Where was she? The bed she was in was not her own, nor was the room. She began to fear that she would have to spend the whole night awake in this place. Never before had she been so afraid of not sleeping.

When she awoke again it was daylight. She tried to recall what had made her sleep so troubled and remembered dreaming that she was sitting on a wagon in a street back home. It embarrassed her

to be where everyone could see her, and so she climbed down; just then, though, the horses bolted and galloped off, leaving her waiting with her arms out for the coachman to come and stop them before someone was trampled. But he did not. She felt sure that some terrible accident would take place and hid her face in her hands so as not to see it.

No one was up yet in the house. Blume lay in bed, considering her situation. Carriage wheels rumbled through the street beneath her window. There was a railroad line connecting Szybusz with Stanislaw and a train that stopped in Szybusz twice a day, where it was met by the coachmen who brought passengers to and from the station. If one was not planning to take the morning train there was no need to rise early, but Blume had woken before the first carriage passed. She was used to it, for her bedridden mother had left all the housework to her; and yet though she was up early as usual, there was nothing usual about the day itself. Strange sounds came from the street and strange walls stared down at her. The ceiling was much higher than her parents', which made the room seem to float in air. Blume had lived all her life in a one-story house; now, lying in bed on the second story of the Hurvitz house, she felt precariously perched.

She could not go on lying there because it was already day, yet neither could she get up for fear of waking the rest of the household. For a while she lingered in bed thinking of her mother, who, while sick all her life and barely able to eke out a living, had never asked her cousins for anything. If ever one of the neighbors said to her, "You have such rich relations, why don't you let them know that you exist?" she would reply with a smile, "Do you know what the best thing about rich relations is? That you don't have to support them." Every year around Rosh Hashana they had received a New Year's greeting from the Hurvitzes. Blume remembered these cards well: they were made of stiff, heavy paper blazoned with gold letters. Every year they were placed on little straw ladders that her mother made in bed and fastened to the wall. There they stood until the gold letters peeled, the paper turned yellow, and they were finally thrown away. Now Blume's mother lay in the grave and her daughter in their cousins' bed.

Suddenly the bed felt too narrow. Blume jumped out of it, washed, dressed, and went downstairs to prepare breakfast, using the same dishes that Tsirl had used the night before.

She heated a saucepan of milk and made coffee, set out cups, saucers, spoons, and knives, sliced bread, and cut a slab of butter from the churn. Then she opened her bags, took out some little cakes, and put them on a serving dish. When Mrs. Hurvitz came down to make breakfast, she found it waiting for her.

Soon Boruch Meir appeared, rubbing his hands. He said good morning to Blume, lifted the tails of his jacket, and sat down at the table, where he poured himself some coffee and regarded his cousin and the cakes she had brought with approval. He was followed into the dining room by his son Hirshl, who declared:

“Those cakes look awfully good!”

He took one of them, ate it, and said, “These deserve a special blessing.”

“Who baked them?” asked Tsirl, breaking off a little piece and tasting it. “Did you?”

“No,” Blume said, looking at her. She too tasted a piece. “But I can bake just as good.”

“Thanks be to God,” said Tsirl, her tone of voice changing, “that we aren’t cake eaters and pastry nibblers here. Plain ordinary bread is good enough for us.”

Blume looked down at the table. The munching of cake did not stop.

“Mama dear,” said Hirshl, leaning toward his mother, “I have something to say to you.”

Tsirl looked at her son. “Then say it,” she said.

“It’s a secret,” said Hirshl with a smile.

Tsirl bent an ear toward him.

Hirshl put his mouth to it as though intending to whisper and said in a loud voice, “You must admit, Mother, that these cakes are delicious.”

Tsirl frowned. “All right,” she said.

Blume cleared the dishes from the table and went to the kitchen. Tsirl followed her and showed her where the dairy sink, the

wash basins, and the dishrags were while Blume took in the dairy counter with the corner of one eye and the meat counter with the corner of the other.

Tsirl watched her. "Can you cook a cut of meat?" she asked.

"Yes," Blume said.

"By the time you wash the dishes," Tsirl said, "the meat delivery will come. Here's rice, here's noodles, here's kasha, and here's everything else."

Blume nodded as if asking to be left alone. Tsirl watched her move about the kitchen, stepped out, came back in, stepped out once more, and did not come back again until half past one in the afternoon, when she returned to find the table set and dinner ready to eat.

It was a day in May, the first of the Hebrew month of Iyyar, when servants and household help renewed their annual contracts. Not long before Blume's arrival the Hurvitzes' maid had given notice and a new maid had yet to be found. When the employment agent came to Tsirl with a replacement, Tsirl said to her:

"Just where, please tell me, am I supposed to put her? A cousin of ours is staying with us and sleeping in the maid's bed."

So Blume went to work in her cousins' home. God in heaven gave her strength, and her small hands did every kind of task: the cooking and the baking and the washing and the mending. There was not a corner of the house in which her presence was not felt. Work came naturally to her; she had not been raised by a sick mother for nothing, and the same habits that had served her well then did so now too. It did not take Tsirl long to discover that Blume had indeed been taught all the things that a woman ought to know. Nor, since she was family, was there any need to pay her a wage. "After all," said Tsirl to her husband, "she is one of us, isn't she? He who rewards us will reward her too."

It might have seemed that Blume was being taken advantage of; yet anyone considering the matter closely would have concluded that Tsirl was right. After all, was it conceivable that, when Blume's time came to marry, Tsirl would beg a dowry for her from some local



charity? She would surely recompense her then for each year of work, and, if the match was a good one, even double the sum that was due her. Besides, what sort of wage could Blume expect to receive? She had never worked as a housemaid before and was learning the trade from Tsirl, which made her case the same as a shopgirl's who worked her first year without pay, or as an apprentice's who served his master for three years before earning even a penny.

So Blume lived with her cousins, cut off from the rest of the world. The girls from poor families who worked for the Hurvitzes' neighbors did not seek her company—nor, needless to say, did she seek theirs. The employment agents whom the housemaids tried to cultivate were not so shameless as to approach her—and, needless to say again, she did not approach them. Of necessity she was confined to the Hurvitz household, which was not one with many diversions. Its members were busy all day in their store, from which they returned only to gulp down a meal or to sleep, while if they went for a walk on the Sabbath or a holiday, or were invited to dine with friends, they always left Blume behind. A house needed watching, and who was there to watch it if not she? Thus, she was left to her own devices, with neither the amusements of a housemaid nor the entertainments of a better-off girl her own age to help pass the time.

Blume's stay with her cousins was a long one. Tsirl neither pampered nor picked on her. Indeed, Tsirl knew how to get along with people. She ran a shipshape shop, knew the customs of each customer, and never looked down at anyone, not even at the poorest of buyers. "Today he bought for a penny," she would say, "but tomorrow he can win a lottery and buy for a pound." The tiniest tot who came to make the smallest purchase was treated by her with affection, fondled by the chin, and given an extra little something. "Now that he's small," Tsirl said, "so are his needs. But when he's big they'll be great. If I'm nice to him now, he'll keep coming back then. Lots of rich men in this town used to come to my father once a year as boys to buy a carob pod on Tu b'Shvat. Now they buy whole bagfuls of almonds and raisins every day."

The Hurvitzes' store was not the only one in Szybusz. A whole row of shops ran along the big market, one squeezed tightly against

the other, quite apart from those in the little market and along various other streets. Each had its slack and busy seasons, its good and bad days, except for the Hurvitzes', which was crowded with shoppers all the time. A man might have found himself hard-pressed to explain why he preferred it; yet even for ordinary smelling salts of the kind prescribed by the doctors and sold in every pharmacy, it was the place one went to, for Tsirl's cheery manner in itself was good for whatever ailed one.

And just as she was considerate toward everyone, so she was with Blume. If, for instance, she came across an old dress that did not fit her, or a shoe that had seen better days, she was sure to give it to her cousin. As long as it was usable, Blume could use it, and only when it wasn't was it discarded. "I myself save everything," Tsirl liked to say. "Not like our Blume, who throws out whatever she doesn't care for." Though a person might have thought that Tsirl was finding fault, anyone knowing her would have realized that she was simply stating a fact. And her husband was no less thoughtful; in fact, the slightest service performed for him by Blume always met with profuse thanks on his part. Not only did he never forget to say goodbye or hello to her when he left town on business or came back, he even thought of her when he was away, such as the time he brought her a small trinket from Karlsbad along with the gifts for his son and wife. "Most men," remarked Tsirl, "haven't the faintest notion of what a woman likes to get. But not my Boruch Meir. He knew exactly what Blume needed, and that's what he brought her. Or maybe he just felt it in his blood, because she is a blood relation."

Even Hirshl was friendly toward Blume and never forgot that the two of them came from the same stock. If his shirt collar was creased while being ironed, he did not complain about it, nor did he ever ask her to polish his shoes. Hirshl did not have his mother's knack of making even his criticisms sound like compliments, nor did his eyes twinkle good-humoredly like his father's. He was young and still had to learn that a twinkle or a kind word could be turned to one's advantage. And yet, though he was only sixteen years old, he was old enough to know that life was no idyll. There were those who claimed that the whole problem with the world was its being

divided into the rich and the poor. Indeed, that was a problem. Certainly, though, it was not the main one. The main problem was that everything came about with so much pain.

Hirshl himself could not explain this pain. From the moment he first saw the light of day he never lacked for food or clothing, nor for the attention of good people who lavished him with kindness and lovingly fulfilled his every wish. Perhaps he had eyes to see that the same people who were so good to him were not always as good to others, which grieved him. And perhaps he was still only a boy with a somewhat impractical turn of mind.

## *Chapter two*

**H**irshl was his parents' only child, born to them when they were no longer young. Not until they had despaired of having a son were they finally granted one, whom they called Shimon Hirsh after his maternal grandfather. The first of these two names, however, vanished in the cradle, while the second gained an affectionate diminutive.

As soon as Hirshl was weaned, Tsirl went back to working full-time in the store. She was not expecting more children. Not that she sought to prevent them. Yet neither was she anxious to have them, especially since one never knew in advance who was lucky to be born and who was not. And though Hirshl was her only child, she was careful not to show him too much love in order not to spoil him. Boruch Meir, on the other hand, more than made up for this by loving his son to excess.

Boruch Meir was a man smiled upon by fortune. All his undertakings prospered, and whatever came his way increased in his possession. He never bothered to ask whether he deserved such success; nor, so it seemed, did success. In a dim way he felt sure that anyone who

worked as hard as he did would get his just deserts in the end. He himself had started out in the store as a shopboy and was now its wealthy proprietor and the husband of its first owner's daughter.

Indeed, fortune's smile could be seen in Boruch Meir's face, glistening in his beard and sparkling in his eyes that were jolly even when he was alone. Life treated him well, his inner life too, for if conscience generally kept him from temptation, self-regard saw to it that, if tempted, he did not reproach himself overly much. On Sabbaths, holidays, and days of the New Moon he regularly attended synagogue, though had anyone told him, A man like you ought to pray in public more often, Boruch Meir would have gone daily, for he was willing to take advice and did not make a point of relying too much on himself. He was not especially generous; yet when asked to give to charity he did, sometimes more, sometimes less, and sometimes handsome sums to the beggars whom Tsirl simply scolded and told to go do something useful and stop bothering honest folk. "The world," Boruch Meir would say to her, "is not going to change if a single do-nothing does something, and I am not going to lose my shirt if I give him a penny." And just as he got on well with the world, preferring to let it have its way so that he might concentrate on his business, so he was on good terms with his own employees, whom he never was bossy with, though he did forbid them to nibble at the merchandise, since this made it unappetizing to the customers.

From the day Boruch Meir went to work in Shimon Hirsh Klinger's store he felt a special bond with his patron. At first sight the old man, who used to bathe in the river until nearly wintertime and insisted on attending to all his own needs, won Boruch Meir's heart. Indeed, Boruch Meir could not say which amazed him more, the fact that the whole world did not seem worthy to Tsirl's father of being looked at, or the fact that Shimon Hirsh knew all about it without having to look at it at all. The moment he stepped into his store, without even lifting his eyes, he knew exactly what and how much had been sold, even of bulk items like almonds, raisins, and the like. The town gossip had it that the old man went over his stock every night, weighing all the merchandise and checking

each box and crate. Boruch Meir, however, did not believe a word of this. And since he could think of no rational ways to account for Shimon Hirsh's omniscience, he was left with irrational ones, which only increased his amazement. Shimon Hirsh Klinger, for his part, was sparing of explanations. "A store," he once said, "is not a synagogue, where everyone sits around and gabs." In fact, apart from an occasional "hmmmm," his employees never heard a word from him, a long "hmmmm" being a sign that he was pleased with them and a short one that he was not. Yet there were no slackers among them. Whoever landed a job in Shimon Hirsh Klinger's store soon taught himself to do its owner's bidding.

Boruch Meir had worked six and a half years for Shimon Hirsh Klinger and been spoken to by him no more than were his fellow employees when one night the two men happened to lodge in the same roadside inn. Boruch Meir was returning from his native town in high spirits, both because of an army exemption he had gotten and because of an attractive cousin of his whom he was about to take for a wife. In the room in the inn was a guest who was doing sums in an account book so loudly that no one was able to sleep. At last, feeling that Boruch Meir was looking at him, the man asked, "Am I disturbing you?" "Not at all," answered Boruch Meir gently, going over to the table as he spoke and blowing out the lamp. Shimon Hirsh Klinger was staying in the same room. "I liked that," he said to Boruch Meir. "I always thought you were an innocent lamb, but now I see that you have character." Whereupon he began to chat with him like a friend. Before they had gone their separate ways, Shimon Hirsh Klinger had given Boruch Meir his daughter's hand in marriage.

At first, even when he was already married, Boruch Meir felt uncertain whether his new wife saw in him anything more than her lawful husband; all day long he courted her as though they had just met and some part of her was not yet fully his. Often he would sit looking at her and wonder, What is it about her that she still is withholding from me? Not that she seemed to be concealing anything, but whatever she revealed was a mystery to him too. Every movement of her body, every dress that she wore, made her seem like a different person. Day by day he felt his love for her grow, yet the more he loved

her, the more baffled by her he became. And this baffled her and made her ask, What does he want from me that he hasn't yet gotten?

Only with the birth of their son did Boruch Meir feel at last that all had been given him and that the most deeply treasured of Tsirl's desires was now in his hands. Did he not hold the boy in his arms, press him to his heart, and play with him even in her absence? Henceforward he loved her more than ever because of her son, just as he loved the boy because of his mother. And though Boruch Meir had never shirked work in his life, he now worked twice as hard. Not a day went by without some innovation in the store or some new item for sale there. He even began selling tanning and smelling salts, as well as house paints and sign paints, for Szybusz was changing with the times. Once, if a man had been sick, he was bled, whereas now he took baths full of salts; once, he whitewashed his house, now he painted it; once, the sign above his shop had hung there for a lifetime, while now shops went bankrupt as fast as they were opened and new signs were needed right away, sometimes with the name of the owner's first wife and sometimes with the name of his second. But whoever wanted to buy cheaply still bought from Boruch Meir, it being a known fact that his prices were the lowest in town. Even other shopkeepers had begun to order from him, because Boruch Meir obtained all his merchandise at the source and bought and sold at a discount.

## *Chapter three*

**H**irshl was seventeen years old when he went to work in his parents' store. He was neither as sharp-witted as his mother nor as quick on his feet as his father, but he did have the virtue of doing whatever he was told. As long as he had attended the old study house in the Little Synagogue his parents had hoped he would become a rabbi, yet in the end he had disappointed them by losing interest in such a career. Indeed, the study of Torah had lost its old prestige, so that many young Jewish boys nowadays were putting their religious books aside and turning to more useful occupations. The brightest of them enrolled in the universities, where they might acquire a well-paid profession, while those of more ordinary talents went into business or trade. There was also a third class of youngsters who neither studied religion nor did anything useful but who, supported by their parents, spent their days in such unworldly pursuits as Zionism or socialism. Neither the Zionists nor the socialists, however, were thought very highly of, the former because they were laughed at and the latter because they were feared.

Of course, there were adults in Szybusz who were pro-Zionist themselves, attended every Zionist function, and held receptions,



complete with coffee and cake, for visiting Zionist speakers, whom they then took to see the local sights, such as the Great Synagogue with its sun, moon, and twelve signs of the zodiac painted on its ceiling and its copper lantern, etched in whose glass panels was the blessing for the New Moon, or the old study house with its illuminated Hebrew Bible that had a marginal gloss in Latin written by a cardinal, and its copy of the original Venice edition of the *Sefer Melekheth Mahshevet*, which bore on its frontispiece an unusual engraving of the author, Rabbi Moses Hefetz, his hair unrabbinically long and his chin unrabbinically beardless. Even on ordinary days you might find such people in the Society for Zion clubhouse, reading a newspaper, or even debating from time to time what Zionism was all about. Yet their ranks, it must be said, were restricted to those Jews who were already comfortable enough off to have put away a nest egg and to have no worries about making ends meet.

Hirshl himself was certainly bright enough to attend high school and university and even earn his doctor's degree. His mother's apprehensions, however, ruled out such a course, for Tsirl had had a brother who, instead of turning out normal, had been driven mad by his academic studies. Nothing done by his parents to cure him had helped in the least; when they tore up his books he had simply found others, and when they finally threw him out of the house he took to the woods and lived there on berries and plants like a beast until his vital powers failed him and he died. No sooner did Tsirl realize, therefore, that her son had tired of the Talmud than she hastened to put him to work in the store before he could develop any other interests. And though it started with no more than an odd day here or there, eventually Hirshl began to work full-time for his parents. There's nothing like a business, thought Tsirl, for keeping a man healthy, wealthy, and safely out of harm's way. Not that she respected religion and its scholars any less than the average woman did; still, like any occupation whose practical value was doubtful, it seemed to her less than ideal. Of course, there were rabbis who earned handsome livings too, but how many of them could you point to? Not even one per town, whereas the goods of a merchant were always in

demand. And since Hirshl had given up his religious studies anyhow, what better future for him than the store?

The fact of the matter was that, even when Tsirl had wanted her son to be a rabbi, this had stemmed less from her piety than from her desire to atone for the sin of her grandfather's grandfather, who had once accused the rabbi of the town he lived in of an excess of religious enthusiasm. One time, that is, when this rabbi had done something that seemed quite absurdly pious, Tsirl's great-great-grandfather had remarked to a fellow townsman, "I'm afraid that our rabbi is going out of his mind," to which the rabbi had retorted, "If anyone is going to go out of his mind, it's that man and his descendants." And indeed, though Tsirl's ancestor had spoken in an entirely disinterested manner, the rabbi's vengeful curse came true nonetheless, since not even the most principled dispute is ever above personal animus. From that day on there was not a generation in Tsirl's family without its madman—which was why, when Hirshl was born, his parents had sought to consecrate him to sacred studies as a penance for this ancient transgression. Not all men's plans, however, are approved by Providence, especially when their motives are not selfless. And since Tsirl saw that Hirshl would never be what she desired of him, she decided that he might as well be what she could make of him.

Hirshl's first day in the store came at a time when his father, who was away taking the baths at Karlsbad, had left Tsirl alone with two shopgirls. "Come, give us a hand until your father gets back," Tsirl had said to him, and Hirshl had folded down the corner of the page of the Talmud he was studying as though intending to return to it soon—nor did it ever cross his mind that he would not. Yet the smell of the ginger, the cinnamon, the raisins, the wine, the brandy, and all the other good things there proved more enticing than the Talmud, just as the customers he waited on appealed to him more than did his fellow bench-sitters in the study house. For who, after all, still frequented the study house in those days? Young men who were bored to tears with their studies, the very opposite of the shopkeepers and their customers, most of whom seemed to know and do so much. By the time Boruch Meir returned from Karlsbad, Hirshl had become a shopkeeper himself. Instead of debating the Law in

the study house he now haggled over prices in the store. Before long he never entered the Little Synagogue at all except to attend prayers on the Sabbath, holidays, and days of the New Moon.

Like other boys from well-to-do homes who had studied to be rabbis and stopped, Hirshl joined the Society for Zion. The society owned a large room to which its members came to read newspapers and journals, or else to play chess on a board that stood on a table in a corner. Not all the newspapers and journals dealt with Zionism, nor was everyone who read them a Zionist. There were some who came to the clubhouse simply to read, just as there were others who came to socialize, for one way or another it was never a dull place. Sometimes, of a winter evening, as darkness descended on the world and one was filled with vague yearnings, a few of the club members might begin to sing such sad songs of longing for Zion that all hearts welled together. At such times the youngsters gathered there would appear to be as winningly transfigured as once they had been by the study of Torah.

Among those who came to the clubhouse for non-Zionist reasons was Hirshl. It was difficult to say why, when most of the sons of the better-off families in town were Zionists, Hirshl was not. Perhaps there was something about the movement and its followers that he disliked. Perhaps he had simply not thought the Jewish problem through to the end. Or perhaps he had and had concluded that Zionism was not the solution for it.

In any case, Hirshl's parents had nothing against his joining the Society for Zion. As long as it did not interfere with his work and he did his fair share in the store, what objection could there be to his dropping in on the clubhouse at night to look at a newspaper? He might as well know what was going on in the world. Certainly it wouldn't make him any less eligible a bachelor. Suppose, God forbid, that he had been attracted to the socialists instead? A generation that could no longer control its own children had better keep its complaints to itself. More than one well-bred boy or girl of Hirshl's age had already fallen in with wild-eyed radicals, leaving their parents with nothing to do but groan and beat their breasts.

And so once or twice a week Hirshl dropped in on the Zionist clubhouse, where, between lighting a cigarette and chatting with his

friends, he read the latest news, the political dispatches, and the literary and art pages. On Thursday nights, when the librarian unlocked the bookcase and lent out books, Hirshl would borrow three, one for serious and two for light reading. And on wintry Friday nights, when the Sabbath meal was over and his parents were asleep and three candles still burned on the dinner table, one for Boruch Meir and one for Tsirl and one for Hirshl himself, he would sit reading until he fell asleep too. Still another candle burned in Blume's room, where she too was sitting up with one of Hirshl's books. Blume liked books: they opened up worlds for her and reminded her of the distant days when she had sat with her father, might his soul rest in peace, reading aloud with him.

Hayyim Nacht, Blume's father, had married Mirl, who was supposed to have married her cousin Boruch Meir, who, blinded by Shimon Hirsh Klinger's fortune, had jilted her and married Tsirl instead. Shimon Hirsh Klinger, Tsirl's father and Boruch Meir's employer, was a wealthy storekeeper; yet after Tsirl's brother went mad and died it was hard to find a good match for her, even though she was the only child of rich parents. A man who had lost his mind and died without it was not an easy stigma for a family to overcome. Of all life's misfortunes, madness may have been the only one to which the afflicted person was himself insensible; to his family and relations, however, the blow was doubly cruel, for not only were other troubles gotten over and forgotten while this one was passed down from one generation to the next, but, while other chronic patients could be put in special wards run by chronic idlers, nobody wanted to care for a madman: on the contrary, people either fled at the sight of him or else tormented him and turned him into a bogeyman to scare their children. And so when Tsirl's father saw that she was not getting any younger and that the matchmakers were not beating a path to his door, he decided to marry her off to Boruch Meir, who had a good head for business and was a hard worker with an impeccable record in the store. Moreover, being called Hurvitz carried a weight of its own, so that, even though Boruch Meir himself was not a direct descendant of the renowned

sixteenth-century rabbinical authority Yeshaya HaLevi Horowitz, the name still entitled him to respect.

Even after Boruch Meir's marriage to Tsirl, Mirl's parents stayed in touch with him; indeed, they seemed to esteem him all the more for having married into wealth. He too kept up his ties with them and sent them a New Year's greeting each year. And when Mirl married Hayyim Nacht, he sent them a yearly card too: as with father and mother, so with husband and daughter.

Hayyim Nacht was not well-off like Boruch Meir Hurvitz, nor was he regarded especially highly by others; for though he was a well-read and cultured man with a gift for languages, his education, like that of all the Nacht family, far outstripped his attainments. And though Mirl had married him with her father's consent, the old man never stopped reminding her vindictively that, having failed to win the heart of a successful businessman, she had had to settle for a spendthrift of a scholar who frittered away her whole dowry without earning a penny for himself.

Mirl, however, refused to criticize her husband. No matter how great a failure he was, she thought just as much of him. She was grateful to life for having delivered her from the hands of an overly strict father and given her a home of her own, and even when, as hard luck had it, she and her husband were left without a cent, she felt no less fond of him. Do I, she would ask, have to make him suffer at home just because he's no great shakes in the marketplace? And as she pitied him, she loved him even more with a love that sought no earthly reward. Whatever he did seemed right to her. If only everyone else were as honest as her Hayyim, he too would have done well; the trouble was that men were either successful or honest in this world, and that the first group grew rich off the second while the second gullibly let them. Was it Hayyim's fault that he had faith in people who fleeced him and made off with his capital? And since losing one's money meant losing one's credit along with it, Hayyim Nacht had lost all chances of ever recouping his losses. From sitting in a large shop he went to sitting in a small one; from a spacious apartment overlooking the big market he moved to cramped quarters where the sun never shone. For a while he still tried his hand at this or that small-time venture,

trusting his luck to improve, but in the end he gave up and tried no more. He was not meant, he saw, for worldly advancement, and so he secluded himself with his books, which he studied in the hope of qualifying as an instructor of religion to Jewish students in the Austrian state schools. Yet here too he succeeded only partly, for while he passed his examinations he was never given a job, since wherever one was available it was bagged at once by some illiterate who had managed to bribe the school supervisors. Hayyim Nacht was not a man to get around anyone, not by flattery and certainly not by bribery, even if this meant leaving himself and his family in the cold.

Finally, when he saw that no school would hire him, Blume's father went and opened his own school—that is, he found a few pupils and tutored them in his home for a fee. Before long, however, not one of them was left, for the times were not what they once were: the desire for pure knowledge had vanished, and all that fathers now wanted for was their sons to get ahead in life, which meant that, if they were to receive any schooling at all, it should be something useful like bookkeeping rather than the fables, literature, and philosophy that Hayyim Nacht was cramming their heads with. True, there was not another tutor in town who could pen as fine a letter as he, but what good did his fine style do him if it was impossible to understand a word of his flowery phrases?

By then Blume was old enough to see and understand what was happening. She saw her mother stitching patch on patch to cover their poverty and her father sitting by the window with an unread book in his hand, his blue eyes filled with tears and his silken-soft beard clenched between his teeth. Sometimes he would take Blume's hand and say, "I know, my darling, that a man like me, a husband and a father who can't provide for his own wife and daughter, should be sent to Siberia." And how he cried when he read her the story of the thief who was brought before the caliph. "Why did you steal?" asked the caliph. "Because," answered the thief, "my wife and children had nothing to eat." "I acquit the man of thievery," declared the caliph. "Now take him and hang him for having let his family go hungry."

When the time came for Blume to be given some education, her father took to sitting her beside him and reading together with

her. "I know," said Hayyim Nacht, "that I won't be leaving you any riches, but at least I'll have taught you how to read a book. No matter how black your life may be, you can always find a better one in books."

Blume was a quick learner. Almost before she knew all the letters of the alphabet she was reading fairy tales and legends. Yet it astounded her father, who shed so many tears when he read that they all but rotted the pages, how little feeling she showed. None of the passages over which he was used to weeping or heaving a sigh, no one's sufferings or sorrows, seemed to move her in the least. A tragic tale that made him break down in sobs left her totally dry-eyed.

"But Papa," she might say when he tried explaining the full poignancy of some character's predicament, "it's his own fault. If he hadn't done what he did, it would never have happened to him."

"Blume, my Blume," replied Hayyim Nacht. "How can any daughter of mine talk like that? A man does what he has to do. There isn't a thing we do or don't do that isn't already our destiny at birth."

"I'd better go help Mama now," Blume would interrupt him.

"Go, then," said her father. "Let your heart be your guide. You help your mother while I sit and hide my face from shame because the two of you must slave away while I do nothing. I tremble to think of Judgment Day. I tremble to think of the reckoning there will be. What will I say when I have to stand trial then?"

And, never doubting that he would, Hayyim Nacht sank back in his chair, buried his face in his hands, and burst into tears. One day he sank back and never sat up again. Sorrow and humiliation had killed him prematurely, leaving his wife and daughter destitute.

Blume remained alone with her mother. Little by little they sold off her father's books. Next came his clothes, desk, and bed, and finally they moved out of their small apartment into one that was even smaller. Mirl's father had died too by now, leaving them barely enough money to get by on. And then, whether because of her frailty, her grief, the damp quarters they lived in, or all of these things together, Mirl took sick. For years she lay in bed while the doctors and their cures consumed all her savings without curing her. God in heaven saw how she suffered and took her from this world.

Seeing that Blume was an orphan, her neighbors sent her off to her cousins in Szybusz, in whose home she found room and board, partly because she was their relative and partly because she was their maid. If it were not such a human trait to complain, Blume would not have had cause to, for God in heaven had given her enough strength, charm, and brains to console the unhappiest person.