

Beryl the Butcher Boy

by Y. Y. Zevin

Translated by Dan Setzer



Translation copyright © 2016 by Dan Setzer

1. His friend Zushe the Shoemaker

I am Beryl the Butcher Boy, I work by Solomon the Butcher – Do you know him?

My boss has the best customers from our block and now things are starting by him the busy. The housewives now are coming back from the country, and every day we are getting more and more orders.

Mrs. Kulich is already back, and Mrs. Pipkin, and Mrs. Gogelson, also, and Mrs. Deich will come back this week. She sent to the butcher, that is, my boss, a picture post card from Tannersville. – That he should be expecting her. Mrs. Kulich has gained, perhaps, sixteen pounds, Mrs. Pipkin, eight, Mrs. Gogelson and Mrs. Deich both gained ten pounds – all together that makes fifty pounds of new meat. At today's prices that would come out to a lot of money.

Do you know Zuche the Shoemaker? He fixes the shoes for the whole block. His shop sits in the basement of our butcher store. He is very good to me, once he gave me a shoelace for my shoe for free. Last week I lost my left heel while walking, he replaced it for me. Zushe is very kindhearted. He is my best friend.

If I am 'needed,' that is to say if the boss or his wife need me and I am not in the shop, they know that, undoubtedly, I will be by Zushe in the basement.

I like sitting with Zushe. I like to watch him hammer nails into shoes and boots, the way he sews on patches, and attaches new soles. It seems to me that shoe-making is the best work in the world.

“You see, Beryl,” Zushe said to me once, “These shoes here, I have fixed at least five times and I'm telling you it is wasted effort. I have told them that the shoes can't be fixed any more. It is already a patch on a patch. But she insisted that I fix them. Her little daughter is going on a picnic with other small children that a rich lady is throwing for them. Nu, I told her I would try. I don't have the heart to take from her the twenty cents. They will fall apart. She will come home without shoes. Do you know Mrs. Atkin?”

“Yes,” I said, “She has boarders. I know that from the meat she orders.”

In the middle of our conversation in ran Mrs. Lokshovitz, the real estate agent who wears the biggest diamonds on our block. Her husband is stone rich. He has, maybe, thirty-thousand dollars and maybe a million. Mrs. Lokshovitz's diamonds cost six hundred dollars, and that is a bargain. Her husband made a good deal for them. All diamonds are a big bargain and regularly cost a lot more. Mrs. Lokshovitz ran in with a torn sleeve and a lot of feathers in her hair. And on her forehead there was some sort of spot. I don't know if it was soot or mud – I didn't look at that, I was looking at the diamonds.

She came in, sat down and began to unwrap a package. From the packet she took a pair of new shoes.

“Yesterday,” she said to Zushe, “I bought my daughter a pair of shoes from the Tsigel-Migel Company and paid five dollars. It was a bargain. They were worth more. Today I realized that the shoes were for her a little tight. We need to have them stretched.

For stretching shoes that were too tight, Zushe did not charge any money. He offered that service for free. He does that to gain the loyalty of the customers. Or so he thinks, but nothing ever comes of it. A shoe always pinches the foot of a wealthy person, but if a rich person's shoe gets torn, they don't get it fixed, they buy a new pair. Zushe is not a businessman.

Mrs. Lokshovitz left the shoes and said she would come back for them later. She had to go to the grocery. Meantime, Zushe started stretching the narrow shoes. "These are fine shoes, real leather," said Zushe, and Zushe is an expert.

Mrs. Lokshovitz was late. When Zushe finished with her daughter's shoes, he began to finish up on Mrs. Atkin's shoes. "These are rags on rags," Zushe said to me, "What is a rag will remain a rag, and you can't do good work on a rag. I feel sorry for Mrs. Atkin's daughter. She will come back from the picnic barefooted."

I said nothing and just looked at the shoes.

"You know what, Berzik, Zushe said to me, "I am going to go to the top floor and get a bite to eat. I won't linger. I will be back in ten minutes. You know, I make my mealtimes hurry-up. Do me a favor and stay here a while. If Mrs. Atkin comes, give her these shoes and get from her twenty cents. Mrs. Lokshovitz you should give these shoes for no money. Pack them in the same paper that they brought them in."

I often do such a favor for Zushe. My boss lets me.

As soon as Zushe left, I took the ragged shoes and wrapped them in the paper that Mrs. Lokshovitz brought.

Mrs. Atkin came in right after that. I gave her the new pair of shoes.

"Oy!" she called out in wonderment, "He is, indeed, a magician, Zushe! Earlier he told me that the shoes could not be fixed, and now he has fixed them so that they look like new. Na, Beryl, give him the twenty cents, and tell him that the next time he can do this work for me for fifteen cents. Already, he has gotten enough out of me."

She left and right after her Mrs. Lokshovitz came in. I gave her the other pair of shoes wrapped in paper.

"That is very fine," she said, "wrapped in paper just like in the big stores. Tell Zushe, "Thanks.""

Mrs. Lokshovitz left and I started counting the minutes until I could go.

This time Zushe ate more than ever.

From the basement window I could see little girls dressed in white with small packets under their arms – They were the children going to the woman who was going to give them the picnic.

Mrs. Atkin's little girl was among them, and I could see how she couldn't take her eyes off of the shoes.

"Did both of them come by," Zushe asked me. I was so intent looking out the window that I did not

hear him come in.

“Yes,” I said, “Here is the twenty cents from Mrs. Atkin. And Mrs. Lokshovitz left a 'thanks' for you. You can put that in your pocket also.”

“The 'thanks' you can keep for yourself, Berzik,” Zushe said to me, “and that is because you have been a good boy.”

Ay, Zushe knows how to put words together!

“Pity Mrs. Atkin's little girl,” Zushe said over again, “The shoes are not going to last very long. She is going to have troubled picnic.”

“Don't worry,” I said to him, “She will have good shoes.”

Zushe looked at me. I almost said more out loud. But I stopped myself just in time, and he did not hear another word from me.

I took to my feet and ran out of the basement, and went into the store.

My boss, Mr. Solomon, asked me where I had gotten to. He had been waiting for me. I had six orders to carry out: Two ducks for Mrs. Kulich, a big steak for Mrs. Gogelson, a liver for Mrs. Pipkin and two more.

All that did not take me a long time. All six orders I could deliver in about twenty minutes time – I am a kid with feet. But this time I dawdled and did not get back until about an hour later.

When I got back, I went straight into the butcher shop, but I found Zushe there waiting for me. Mr. Solomon laughed. I realized that Zushe already knew what happened and had told him.

Zushe took me by the ear, and dragged me down to the basement.

“Tell me,” he asked, “Why did you do it? – Ah, you good-for-nothing, you!”

I kept silent. I didn't know if I should cry or laugh. I knew that I should cry because I had caused dear, good Zushe such trouble, but it tickled me a little and I wanted to laugh.

“Mrs. Lokshovitz came running in here like someone who had been poisoned,” recounted Zushe, “She screamed that she was going to have me arrested. She had given me a new pair of shoes to stretch, and got back a pair of old socks to tie to the feet with patches on every side. I understood immediately that this was your work. I ran to Mrs. Atkin, but her little girl was already in the shoes and gone off to the picnic. Apparently, it was destined that the little poor girl was to have new shoes to go to the picnic. Tell me, you little good-for-nothing, why did you do it?”

“Because – because – , I answered, stuttering from fear, “Because I heard what you said about how it was a pity that the little poor girl would come back from the picnic without any shoes – that's why I did it.”

Zushe gave me another sharp pull on my ear, but without anger, this time with tenderness.

“Tell me, has anyone ever pulled on your ear? It is a great reference to have someone pull your ear. Sometimes it is done out of anger, and sometimes – love. This time it is with love.”

“Nevermore,” Zushe said to himself, “I have lost a customer – The next time when Mrs. Lokshovitz's shoes pinch, she will be taking them to another shoemaker.”

2. A new janitor

By us in the house has come a new janitor. He is an evil person. The last janitor was a dog compared to him.

How can I describe him to you? He is a thin man, dark, and the evil is visible on his face. When I encounter him in the hall, a shiver runs through my body. I hate bad men, I am afraid of them. He gives you a look like he wants to cut you open with a knife and inspect your intestines. The children in the building tremble before him like a before a demon of destruction. All day long he screams at the tenants. If he is not yelling at the tenants, he is yelling at his wife, and if he is not yelling at his wife, he looks for a dog or a cat, chasing them with a broom while yelling and cursing. If he does not have a dog or cat, he screams at the wall, or just grumbles to himself.

What is he yelling about? I have no idea. Once he was yelling that it stinks because of our butcher shop. Nu, I ask you, where does it not stink? Another time he was yelling because people were putting their feather bedding on the fire escape. I ask you, is it something, feather bedding? Once he yelled because people were making noise with their shoes while walking through the hall. And yet another time (this is a story for another day) that people were mixing ashes with rags. With what should you mix ashes...oranges?

About that, every day there is a big to-do. The janitor claims that there is a law saying that you can not put ashes and rags in the same trash barrel. He claims that it is worse than linsey-woolsey.

Zushe the shoemaker who has the basement below our butcher shop tells me that the law not to mix ashes with rags was made for business. The City wants the trash from the buildings sorted, because they sell it to several businessmen who make from it various products. From ashes, for example, they make chicory and chocolate candy. From thrown out pieces of fish and meat they make types of American *floden* [a type of flat-cake], or mince pie. And from the rags and paper they build bridges like the Delaney Street Bridge. Nothing goes to waste, says Zushe. Even tossed out plum seeds find a use. They crush them with a machine and from the grounds they make from them imported coffee beans.

Every day our janitor gives out new rules and regulations. In order not to forget them, I write them down on a paper bag. Here they are:

Rules and Regulations from Tsimbyl the Janitor, recorded by Beryl the Butcher Boy.

Rule number one: When one walks through the hall, they must be careful not to wear heavy shoes, or shoes that scrape. One should walk slowly and place their foot on the steps so as to not make a sound. It is best to remove shoes and walk in socks. For violating this rule you will be asked to move.

Rule number two: If one throws out a cigarette butt in the trash barrel, they must first sort the cigarette. The ash goes into one barrel, the paper in another and the remaining tobacco – in a third. Violation of the rule will result in ten-days in jail.

Rule number three: Every tenant who passes by the janitor must say, “Good morning,” during the day and, “Good night” in the evening. It doesn't matter if the janitor answers or not. On that practice he is independent.

Rule number four: No tenant shall patronize a store where the janitor doesn't get presents. Tenants must deal with those butchers, groceries and peddlers from which the janitor receives commissions. Tenants who break this rule will fall out of the janitor's good graces, and he will shut off the steam with the hot water.

Rule number five: You should have respect for the janitor, the janitor's wife and the janitor's dog. Do this so that you can be allowed to remain a tenant in the house for a long time.

Rule number six: When the news-dealer brings you a newspaper you should first allow the janitor to read it. Think of the janitor as a priest that is due tithes and contributions. He gets a portion of the meat that the butcher delivers, he gets some of the potatoes from the grocery order, he gets a little schnapps from what the peddler brings.

Rule number seven: Always remember that you should have the janitor in mind and often give him a quarter, and his wife should also get a percent. If not, you will have troubles from him.

Those are just seven rules. Later I will give you more of them. Our janitor, Mr. Tsimbyl, is like a legislator, every day he makes new laws.

But Fritz is a greater evil than the janitor. “Fritz” is the name of Tsimbyl the Janitor's dog. He is a dog among dogs. The janitor himself is a dog compared to him. Every time I have to go to see the janitor, I roll up my pants legs. I don't worry about my legs. Flesh can grow back, but the pants (new pants bought for the holidays) cost me a dollar with a quarter. Say, how many dollars with a quarter do you think a butcher boy makes?

3. Beryl makes a trip around New York

Once Zushe came in and said to my boss: "You are a smart person, give me some advice how I should get rid of this ten-cent piece?"

Zushe took out a dime, Mr. Solomon took it in his hand and said:

"Even a blind man can tell that this is lead. How did a person take this coin?"

"I will tell you the truth," said Zushe, "That was given to me by Mrs. Deich for stretching her new shoes. She never has ever given me anything for such a job. Today was the first time she wanted to please me. Nu, who would have the nerve to tell her that it was a false dime? Ah, I will give away to Berzik. He should have a gift from me. Come her, Berzik."

"What do you want," I said, pretending that I did not hear anything of what they were talking about.

"Take this, a ten-cent piece," said Zushe, "Don't be shocked, Beryl, it is made of lead. It is a gift from a great and wealthy Jewish woman who wanted to honor a poor shoe-maker. Listen, Beryl, I give you this dime with the condition that you don't use it to speculate in Wall Street, and you don't gamble it on horses."

"I will make good use of it," I said to Zushe.

"Don't spend it on actresses," said Zushe to me, "If you do it will come to a bitter end."

You will, perhaps, already know what one does when they have a lead ten-cent piece. A youngster like me can give you an idea.

Sunday, as you know, is my free day, because a Jewish butcher shop is closed on the Sabbath as well as Sunday. Usually, on the Sabbath I sleep nearly all day. But Sunday I divide into two portions. Part of the day I sleep, and the rest of the day I travel a bit around the town.

Nu, if you have a lead dime in your pocket you can make a nice trip around the town. You can travel thirty miles, and the lead dime will stay in your pocket. You want to know how to do this, I will teach you, I am an expert.

I get on a streetcar, sit down, and look in a newspaper that I find in the car. The conductor is not in the aisle to collect. He is in the opposite corner. He is letting passengers off. Once the car begins to fill with a few people, he starts going around saying his phrase, "Fare please!" When he comes to me, I give him the lead dime, he takes one look at it and says to me, "It is no good, Johnny." I think that when he calls me "Johnny" that tells me that he is not a bad gentleman. I say to him, "It's good, sir, it is all I got." He looks at me and says that he is very sorry, and suggests that I search in my pockets, and maybe find a good nickel, or a good dime. I start search and he goes on to the other passengers, and the streetcar keeps moving on. Then the car comes to a stop. New passengers get on. There is one. A lot of people must stand. I see the conductor come back toward me, I stand up and give my seat to a lady, and I go to the platform. "Wait until the car stops," the conductor says to me, and the car

stops a couple of blocks farther on. As I leave the streetcar I see that I have traveled eighteen blocks, and I still have the dime and the newspaper that I found in the car.

I climb into the next streetcar. This car is nearly empty. The conductor came to me right away, and without saying a word, and without looking at me, he sticks out his hand. I was starting to get worried about him. From the start I did not like his face. I hand him the dime. He takes a look at it – he was not happy with it. He put it between his teeth and bit down on it. “No good,” and handed the coin back to me.

Well, when I saw that he was talking to me like a human being, I took courage and said to him, “It is good, it is good.”

He took the dime in his mouth again and bit down on it, then showed me the tooth marks in the lead. He explained to me that a silver dime was hard to make any marks in, and if you can bite into it then it is undoubtedly lead.

A man who was sitting next to me mixed in, and asked to look at the dime. He also tried biting it, and showed me the marks.

“Somebody got you,” the man said with sympathy, “the conductor can't take that.”

I took the dime back and went outside on the platform. I waited until the next stop then I got off.

So far I had traveled thirty blocks, only now my dime was looking chewed up. It would be a shame to show it to another conductor.

On the third streetcar things did not go as well. There the conductor was very fresh. He roughly shoved my dime back into my hand, and gave my ear a sharp tug. I wrested myself out of his grasp and jumped from the car while it was still moving. On this car I only traveled a block and a half.

But afterwards, I had some good luck on the fourth car. The car was packed. The conductor was not in the aisle and he did not see me at first. Three times he walked right past me. We rode and rode on like that until we got to 59th Street. There I got out with all the other passengers, and a man on the corner issued all of us transfers.

(A transfer at 59th Street at that time of day, is worth a treasure. With that transfer you can travel all the way to City Hall, and even farther, to Castle Garden or the Battery.)

I sat down in a cross-town car, then with the same transfer I got on the 3rd Avenue car. Now I was feeling a little like the boss of the streetcar because I had a real transfer. I stretched out my feet, leaned my head against the wall, pushed my hat down over my eyes, and dozed off just like somebody who felt right at home. At the People's Theater I got out and stopped to look at all the posters. After I got my fill of looking at the pictures, I started to make my way home, but by another route. I was afraid that if I took the same streetcar line I might run into one of the earlier conductors.

But since the dime was chewed-up, and was looking like a broken pants button, the conductors did not make any ceremonies, and immediately made me get moving. I had to change twenty-four cars in order to get home to Harlem. I still have the dime. I will use it again.

4. With the “400” at the Educational Alliance

Once, on a Wednesday evening, I said to Mr. Solomon, my boss, “I want to go downtown.” Mr. Solomon didn't say anything. I said, “Mr. Solomon! I want to travel a little downtown.” He was silent. That's the kind of person he is! One moment he is just like other people, talks, gossips and laughs, and another time as his elflock takes a turn he is angry with the whole world and will not talk to anyone or answer them.

I said to him a third time, “Mr. Solomon! I'm going downtown for a while.” He looked at me finally and said, “Go! And don't bother my head – who's not letting you go?” I said, “What do you want from me? I have asked you if I can go, can't you say to me yes or no, but yelling – what are you yelling for? Don't I earn my bread from you? Why do you need to yell at me?”

“Go to hell,” screamed out Mr. Solomon, “Look how he has to argue! Just like a Socialist!”

“What do you have with him, ha? Why are you screaming at the boy?” That was the voice of Mrs. Solomon, who had come to take my side. I have, already, the good fortune, that when the butcher yells at me, his wife comes and takes up for me. When the butcher's wife yells at me, the butcher comes and takes up for me.

I left them fighting with each other, and I went out into the street, and took a train to ride downtown.

I got off at Canal and Allen Street because I had heard that on East Broadway there was a candy shop where every evening they gave away chocolate for free and they also showed moving pictures for free. When I got close to that store, I saw that by Jefferson Street there was a big uproar. I gave chase with my little feet and one, two three – I was there, right next to it all. A policeman gave me a shove and said, “Go on, get out!”

Because the policeman drove me away, I went, but came right back a little farther away. I took a look and saw that the uproar was a strange one. All around the big Jewish school on the corner (Beryl means the Educational Alliance) there were carriages and automobiles. Every minute another carriage came by or an automobile, and out of them came ladies and gentlemen, who you could see immediately were great aristocrats.

I thought to myself, what kind of a holiday is this? Apparently, the aristocrats are also coming to East Broadway to enjoy some free chocolate. As I was standing there I overheard someone, a young man with glasses talking to a young woman with glasses: “That is the 'Four Hundred.' They have come to see how poor Jewish children from the East Side perform a theater piece written by Mark Twain.”

It goes without saying that I, Beryl, immediately became enthusiastic about getting inside. And also I wanted to see the Four Hundred. I had often read in the newspapers about the Four Hundred, their elegant balls, their banquets, and their dinners that they given in honor of deer, monkeys, Parisian Marquis and Spanish Counts. I really wanted to be able to sit with them for a while, and see what they do, how they amuse themselves, how they sit, how they stand, and how they look at other people.

But how does the cat get over the water? There stand the cops and the robbers, and they won't let anybody through. If one wants to get by them, they will get caught by a policeman who smells his breath. If his breath is clean, they will let him go to the other side of the street. But if he smells of

onions or radishes, they make him go two blocks farther on through Grand Street. A yidene came along yelling that in Henry Street she left two small children with a pot of milk on the fire and asked to be let through. But the police were hardheaded and told her go by way of another street. I saw that there was no chance for me to get through.

As I stood there in the middle of the street, a carriage drove by next to me, and out of the carriage stepped a young lady with a small package in her hand. I jumped forward and took the package from her hand. She gave me a smile and allowed me to carry the package for her. The policeman saw that I was walking with the lady and carrying her package, he let me go through. The lady smiled at me as she walked and opened her pocketbook looking for a coin for me. "Never mind, lady!" I said to her, "I don't want anything for my trouble." By this time we were right by the door. The lady nudged me through and said to the man at the door, "Let him in, the poor young boy, as my guest. He seems to be a little gentleman." Going through the door we were approached by two ushers at once. One escorted the lady to a seat, and the other wanted to throw me out, but the lady took me by the hand and pulled me after her. She gave the small package to the usher. It was candy for the little actors.

I really felt good in my heart. Tell me, have you ever had a beautiful lady take you by the hand? How did it make you feel? That act made me forget the whole world. It made me want to dance, to jump and act foolish. And as the lady sat me down next to her, I wanted to take both her hands and press them to my heart. How I would have loved to do that if I were not so shy! I would have asked her not to look at me like that. It reminded me of the looks my mother used to give me, may she rest in peace. I don't remember anything more about her than her eyes – I was still a baby when she died.

Little by little I came back around to being myself and began to look at the people around me. So that's the Four Hundred? I thought to myself and started counting them. I counted and counted and found that there were only eighty or ninety people. Where are the Four Hundred tonight?

On the platform was a honorable, elderly gentleman with gray hair who was speaking. "That is Mark Twain! Mark Twain!" You could hear from all sides. When the Four Hundred heard that it was Mark Twain they began to laugh at every word he uttered.

Afterwards they began to perform the theatrical piece. The actors were little Jewish children. One of them, a little Jewish boy, I recognized right away. His name is Artsik, but he made his name over to Archibald. His mother runs a soda water stand in Delaney Street. A little later I recognized a girl on the stage. Her name is Hiene, but she calls herself Teresa and her mother has a pickle stand on Allen Street.

The aristocrats watched the little actors with their opera glasses, and the aristocrats were quite charmed. "The children are very clean," I heard a lady say, "Even though people say that the East Side children are never washed."

"Yes," called out another lady, "It is remarkable! The children are clean and look very respectable, and they speak English no worse than American children. I don't know why people clamor so about the unfortunate East Side children!"

The play ended around half past ten, and the Four Hundred, I mean the eighty or ninety, headed toward the door, slowly, little by little. Not shoving like people leaving a Yiddish theater. The lady that I came with, once again took me by the hand, and looking into my eyes like before. I wanted to ask her something, but it stuck in my throat. Oy, if only she did not look into my eyes like that, and if those

eyes did not remind me of my mother!

“What's your name?” she asked as we were leaving.

“Beryl,” I answered, “Beryl the Butcher Boy.”

The lady chuckled a bit.

“And you?” I asked. I really wanted to know who she was.

“I am a housemaid by a rich lady, one of the Four Hundred,” she answered me. “My mistress received an invitation to this performance. She gave the invitation to me so that I could come and donate the little package of candy for the children.”

“You are not one of the Four Hundred?” I asked a little disappointed.

“No,” she answered, “There are very few here from the Four Hundred. You see that lady, the blond, is also a maid. And that one, the brunette, is also a maid. And that gentleman with the little beard, he is a valet. They all work for the aristocrats of the Four Hundred, and the aristocrats who did not want to come all gave their invitations to their servants.”

“And the carriages and automobiles?” I asked.

Ah, every so often we give the coachmen and chauffeurs a chance to take a promenade.

On the other side of the street, peddlers with pushcarts appeared, with biscuits, with ovens on wheels. The peddlers hoped to get some proceeds from the big crowd. The peddlers were crying out and yelling to the customers.

“Wursts, hot ones! Two cents with bun and mustard!”

“Baked potatoes: big and hot! A penny a piece.”

“Blintzes with cheese and potatoes! Hot and ready! A penny a piece, a treat for your soul!”

“Hot coco, to drink! A penny for a cup, a full one!”

“Turkish candy! Health in your bones. Sweet as manna!”

“Carob, fine carob, Jews! A penny a bag!”

“Cooked peas! Jews, give to help a poor widow! A penny a portion for cooked peas!”

“Jews! Give to help a poor orphan! Two portions of peas for a penny!”

Leaving the theater, everyone went over to the peddlers to get something from them. Some ate the wursts, with the blintzes, the Turkish candy, and the cooked peas. Others had the things packed in

paper and took them home as souvenirs.

Afterwards, everyone went home. The lady who was so friendly to me the whole evening said 'goodbye' and gave me a quarter for candy.

It was a good quarter, not one made of lead.

5. He has business with a cat

My boss, Mr. Solomon, has a cat. The cat is a big eater and messes the house. For a long time my boss has shown his dislike for the cat and said that we should be rid of it. He has chased it from the house several times, but the cat always came back. A cat never finds himself perturbed: Someone drives him away now, he just comes back later. One time Mr. Solomon said this to me:

“Listen, Beryl, put the cat in a basket, take him somewhere downtown, and let him out.”

I did not care for that job. I have a trick that when the boss gives me a job I don't like, I make out as though I don't understand what he wants from me, and I keep asking questions until he is exhausted. He gets angry, screams that I am a jackass, have a thick head, and he ends up doing the work himself.

So, when he told me to pack the cat in a basket, take it downtown and leave it there, I started peppering him with questions:

What kind of a basket? With a cover, or without a cover?

Should I take it on a streetcar, the elevated, or hang it off of an express wagon?

In which neighborhood downtown should I leave him? On East Broadway or Grand Street?

What should I do if a policeman catches me and arrests me?

What should I do first: Catch the cat, or put it in the basket?

Perhaps it is an obvious conclusion that the cat should stay with us?

After that last question, my boss jumped up. “You cow, you!” he began screaming at me. “Every day you get more foolish, just shoot yourself. What are you good for, you can't even tie up a cat's tail.”

“Ah, nu,” I asked him, “How can anyone tie up a cat's tail? It is so smooth that no knot will hold on it.”

My boss spit, then he brought up from the cellar an empty crate that fruit had come in. He started calling the cat: “Pussy, pussy, come here, pussy.” But Pussy, as it turned out, was not a fool and did not want to go. She looked at me, then ducked under an old cabinet, and complained, “Me-oo-ow,” as though she were asking for advice. “Come, pussy, don't be afraid, pussy,” I said to her, all the while being unhappy with myself that I was tricking an innocent, living creature who trusted me and depended on me. The cat came out, still a little frightened, looking at me and meowing as if to say: “See, Beryl, I follow you, I depend on your honesty, on your humanity.” And just then the butcher grabbed her neck, threw her in the basket and covered it with a dirty rag, then tied it down with a cord on all sides. That was all done fast, in a couple of seconds. The cat was a prisoner. Through the slats in the basket I could see the cat sitting there, betrayed, and looking at me with strange eyes, and soon I heard the plaintive cry: Me-oo-ow, me-oo-ow – which means: “You should be ashamed, Beryl! I trusted your word, your humanity, your decency – and you betrayed me and imprisoned me in this basket. What are you going to do with me now? This is a fine thing to happen!”

"Now, Beryl," my boss said to me, "Take the basket, sit yourself down on the Third Avenue streetcar which goes downtown. Go into a side street somewhere, way down, near the Bowery, open the basket, let the cat out, get back on a streetcar by yourself and return. Bring the basket back, it won't be heavy."

"Meow, meow," *kvetched* the cat. Undoubtedly, she meant to say, "*Gevalt*, where is your humanity? Where is justice? Why am I being punished like this? Why? Why?"

By now it was half past seven in the evening and the streetcars were packed with people going to the theaters, to weddings, to balls. They were full with dressed-up ladies and freshly shaved men. I got on with my basket, with the cat inside. It seemed to me that everyone was looking at me and knew my secret. My heart was pounding like a thief's, then the cat began to *kvetch*. The conductor came to me and took my nickel, then looked at me again. I lowered my eyes. The car stopped at every corner, and more ladies got on and more gentlemen. The car was full of silks, flowers, bouquets, stove pipes [top hats], powder, perfume. People were standing over me holding on to the straps.

I noticed that in the crush my basket, which was sitting by my feet, had gotten pushed away from me. It happened without me realizing it. In the meantime fresh passengers were coming onto the car, and the basket got pushed even farther away. It was so crowded that I almost lost sight of the basket. It was being covered on all sides by the skirts of the ladies who were standing and holding on to the straps.

Suddenly: "Meow, me-oo-ow," the cat let herself be heard. The ladies looked around with fright, and the men broke out in laughter. I pretended not to hear anything and gazed at the door.

"Me-oo-oo-ow!" the cat's voice became even clearer. I could have sworn that she had crawled out of the basket and was asking a gentleman for a seat. I thought to myself: Now is not the time to delay. I took to my feet and ran. I pushed my way to the front exit, so that I wouldn't encounter the conductor. Meantime, the cat started *kvetching* again, the ladies squealed even higher and sobbed with fright and the men guffawed. But I did not hear much of it. My one thought was: "Flee." One jump and I was on the street, the streetcar flew on, and I felt myself a free man.

I looked around to see where I was. It was a full thirty blocks from our butcher shop. What should one do? I thought for a moment. If I went home now, Mr. Solomon wouldn't believe that I had gone all the way downtown. The only thing for me was to wander around in the streets for a couple of hours, then go back home.

When I did get back home it was nearly ten. Mr. Solomon asked me to tell him the whole story about the trip with the cat. I had not reckoned on this situation. I started to think quick, then tell him a whole story about how I had followed his instructions just as he had given them to me. Only I couldn't bring the basket back with me because I saw a policeman close by, so I left the basket with the cat in it near a private house.

"On what street did you leave the cat?" Mr. Solomon asked me.

"I just told you," I answered.

"On Rivington Street?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered.

“Earlier you said it was on Delancey Street.”

“No,” I said, “On Rivington Street. I made a mistake.”

“You made two mistakes,” said Mr. Solomon, “Once you said on Houston Street, a second time on Delancey Street, and now you say on Rivington Street. *Alzo*, my dear Beryl, you are a dear liar. The cat came home over a hour and a half ago. Go upstairs and you will see her.

The blood drained out of my head. This was not good for me – I can't describe for you how one feels when he has been caught in a lie. Perhaps it has also happened to you? You say you never tell lies? Then you are a liar!”

Upstairs in Mr. Solomon's living room was, indeed, the cat. And when she saw me, she happily ran to me and *kvetched*: “Meow—ow—ow, meow,” – that means: “Beryl, I forgive you, don't eat your heart out, meow-ow, you are forgiven, forgiven!”

6. He travels to a funeral and arrives at a wedding

In our block there has been some big news. Mrs. Pampushke died and Mr. Pampushke made a funeral procession. You will of course want to know who Mrs. Pampushke is and how she died. I will tell you, because I knew her very well. Mrs. Pampushke was the wife of Mr. Pampushke and that should be enough for you to know who she was. Perhaps you don't know who Mr. Pampushke is. I will tell you. Mr. Pampushke is our landlord. He has the house where my boss, Mr. Solomon, has his butcher shop and where Zushe, the shoe-maker has his basement. Mr. Pampushke has another, maybe, dozen houses uptown and downtown. From what Mrs. Pampushke died, no one is quite sure. All we know is that she was a little too fat. Doctors told her that she should eat very little, but she did not follow their advice. Her favorite treat was *schmaltz* [chicken fat]. She liked eating *schmaltz* with radishes, *schmaltz* with hot challah, *schmaltz* with onions, *schmaltz* with gribenes, and *schmaltz* with potatoes. Her ice box and even her fire escape were crowded with pots full of *schmaltz*, chicken and goose. She always had fresh *schmaltz* in her fryer. She lived with *schmaltz* and died from *schmaltz*.

The whole time Mrs. Pampushke lived, her husband never had an opportunity to show how much he loved her, but after she died everyone got to see what a good man he was. He made a really great funeral, inviting all of his tenants to ride in carriages. Mr. Pampushke paid for all of the carriages. It was his 'treat' for the tenants. My boss, Mr. Solomon, and Zushe the shoe-maker were also invited to ride to the funeral. I asked Mr. Solomon to take me along with him. Zushe put in a good word for me, and the boss said, "All right." I was happy that I was going to have a little picnic. I had not been out of the city all summer. I had not seen anything more than Central Park.

I drooled when I saw my mistress, the butcher's wife, preparing for us a huge package of eats. Because what Jew goes to a funeral without something to chew on? There was enough food for the boss, for Zushe, for me and a couple more people. A baked tongue was included, cut into thin slices. Added to that were two marinated herring, a piece of baked liver, a braided bread, bagels, freshly soured pickles, fresh tomatoes, peppers, and hard-boiled eggs. When I saw that the Mrs. had turned her back, I snatched a pepper with a piece liver and had a *nash*.

Since the funeral would be held in our block, we did not rush. Mr. Solomon ordered me to stand in the street and watch that the funeral did not start without us. Maybe 40 carriages were standing along our block. But when it came time to start it looked like there would not be enough carriages for everyone. Mr. Pampushke had telephoned to a livery stable telling them to send a few more extra carriages. I was afraid that there still would not be enough carriages for everyone and that we would be left out. "I have a plan," I said to Mr. Solomon and to Zushe, "Let's run out to the new carriages that have been ordered and grab one. Come, I know the route that they must travel."

"You are a genius," Zushe said.

"You are playing around with my Beryl!" said Mr. Solomon, he was so proud of me.

We talked as we walked along. After only four blocks, I saw an empty carriage coming our way.

"Look, that must be it," said Mr. Solomon. And Zushe stopped the driver and asked him:

"Is that from Mr. Kliachki's stable?"

“Yes,” answered the driver.

“If so then it is for us,” answered Zushe, “Take us to the funeral.”

“What kind of funeral?” the driver asked.

“A funeral like every other funeral,” answered Zushe as he helped Mr. Solomon into the carriage, “We are burying a daughter of the Jews.”

The driver laughed.

“I should have such a year,” the driver said, “How right you are. You are, indeed, burying a daughter of the Jews. A wedding is just like a burial.”

“On your head, what kind of wedding? Why are you talking about weddings?” asked Mr. Solomon after we were all seated in the carriage.

“Perhaps he has something in his head,” said Zushe and put his fist to his mouth, which in silent language means, “*L'chaim*.”

But not I, nor Mr. Solomon, nor the clever Zushe realized that we had fallen into some trouble. The carriage took us to a wedding, not to a funeral. The carriage was headed to someone in our block who had telephoned for a carriage to take him to a wedding, and when we stopped the carriage in the middle of the street and asked him if he was from Mr. Kliachki's stable, he took us for the family relative that needed to go to the wedding. How could he have known? Is he obliged to know everybody in New York? He only knew that his boss gave him an order to take one or two people to a marriage canopy in a shul and from the shul to a hall.

Just like the driver didn't know, we also didn't know from anything being wrong. The only thing we knew was that the trip was a 'treat,' and we wouldn't have to pay anything. Furthermore, whose worry was it that the coachman drove through side streets and not direct to the Brooklyn Bridge?

We had not traveled ten minutes when the carriage stopped in front of a shul.

“See! What do you say about that?” said Zushe, “How Mr. Pampushke lets himself go! He must still be in deep mourning for his wife! That is really high tone.”

“A wealthy man can permit himself anything,” my boss answered.

We got down from the carriage. My boss told me to take the packet of food into the shul, and Zushe stuck the bottle of schnapps in his back pocket. It really is not a nice thing to do, to bring a package into a shul, but there is always the risk that someone will steal it out of the carriage.

Around the shul there were a lot of carriages standing, and in the shul there was a big crowd, men and women – but they were all dressed-up like for a wedding.

“What is going on here?” asked Mr. Solomon, “Look how everyone is dressed! I am afraid something is wrong. We have to ask someone.”

My boss went over to one of them, a young man, and asked:

“See, Mister, is the funeral already over?”

“Not yet,” answered the young man, “We are waiting for a family member who is running late.”

“Are you in mourning?”

“Yes,” answered the young man and smiled.

“And where is the deceased?” asked Zushe.

“He is standing over there. That's my brother,” the young man pointed out another young man who was dressed-up like a bridegroom headed to a marriage canopy.

“We've gotten totally lost! We climbed into a stranger's carriage that belonged to one of the family members. What do we do now? We've got to get out of here, and do it in such a way that the coachman doesn't see us.”

In that instant I had the impression that something had fallen close to me. What fell was food out of my package. The wet pickles in the packet had soaked through the paper and broken through. Out of the packet fell pickles, tomatoes, peppers, slices of tongue, slices of liver and buns. There was a burst of laughter, a ho-ha. Young men and even young ladies came running to grab the snacks. Apparently, they were quite hungry, because as it got closer to time for the wedding, people naturally begin to hunger a bit. The people who were sitting in their seats got up to see what was going on. People laughed, called out, murmured, *kvetched* and in the turmoil we three slipped out of the shul. We went to the opposite corner so that the coachman who brought us would not see us, then away toward home.

Perhaps he is still sitting there, the coachman, next to the shul, in his carriage and still waiting for us.

End