

Chaim the Customer Peddler

by Y. Y. Zevin

Translated by Dan Setzer



1. He goes to fulfill his civic duty

Since election day had come, the day for voting, I began to feel festive. Benele my youngest, seven years old, had hung an American flag in our window, and said to me, that today is a great holiday for all citizens, because on this day we witness the equality of America, namely: that I am equal to the President of the United States, because he has only one voice and I only have one voice, it is called a 'vote.' We are truly on the same level.

Friends, let me explain: There really is between us a little difference, a substantial one, so to speak, but I hate to contradict a child. Benele said it is so, so let it be so. What purpose would it serve to eat his little heart out?

Enough aggravation have we had in the house in the weeks leading up to the elections. The whole house by us had gone *hodorom*, the peace of the household wrecked, and neither I nor my wife could have a minute's rest.

This is why: My son, Shlomeh'ke, a boy of 15-years, supports the Republican candidate. My second son, Jackie, who is already a bar mitzvah boy is steel-and-iron for the Democratic candidate, and my youngest, Benele, who is a real scamp, was behind the Socialist. That is all the kids talked about. But I have three daughters, who are older than the boys, and they also mix in with politics. My oldest daughter, Betsy, who is a school teacher (an educator in a city school), said to me that I should vote for a Mr. Randell. I asked: "Who is this Mr. Randell? Nobody is talking about him." She explained to me, that Mr. Randell is from the Prohibition Party, which wants to close all the beer saloons. I said: That is a good thing indeed, if my Irish customers would stop getting drunk, they would be able to make regular payments on the merchandise they buy from me; but how can one vote for a man that no one has heard from and no one knows? My second daughter, Flossie, works in women's hats, and she wants that I should vote for somebody called Mr. Jackson. I ask: "Who is he?" She tells me that he is also a Socialist, but the right kind of Socialist, not like Mr. Chase, that Benele is always screaming about. And my third daughter, Jenny, a half fool and a little anarchistic, she wanted me not to vote at all. She gave me to understand, that voting is a Capitalistic swindle, to fool the poor people to get into the sack, – the poor should think buto-boo that they are making the government, but in reality the government is listening to them like they would a tomcat. Nu, so be it, with such a fool there is no reasoning.

As I told you, the battle in my house went on for several weeks before election day. Only as the day got closer it was like my children were on a knife edge. I said to them: Why are you getting yourselves so excited? My enemies should benefit that the candidates can get by with all your talking. You, girls, can't even vote. And you, foolish boys, are too young to even have an opinion! Stop making all this commotion! But my speech didn't help a bit, and they continued to squabble.

It continued like this: Flossie with Benele clamored for their Socialist candidates. Benny said that Flossie's Socialist wasn't a Socialist at all; Flossie said that Benny's isn't a Socialist. Benny said: "Yours is a faker!" Flossie said: "Yours is a demagogue!" Then the voices of Shlomeh'ke and Jackie chimed in. Jackie yelled: "Aha! You are for the blaggard trusts and corporations!" Shlomeh'ke yelled back: "You are for them that are ruining the credit of the land!" Jackie got angry and yelled: "What is worse than the coal trust, and the milk trust, and the meat trust and the Panama Canal?" Shlomeh'ke waved his hand and said, "Dats easy tok." I could see that my bar mitzveh boy was getting hot and it

was coming to blows. Only now my oldest daughter, the teacher, mixed in, took one boy by the ear and the other by the other ear and told them they had to behave, that is, be a little more stately. After that she herself began to fuss with Jackie, and they fought, and yelled, and cried, and sobbed, and gasped, just like over a dead person, God forbid!

The night before the election I came home exhausted, *fermatert*. Such a day it was, a bad one. Wives buy things from me on credit, but when they get a little money, they carry it away to the dressmaker or the department store. And when I came home I met my wife in the kitchen, and she said to me a little shamefully:

“Chaim, I want to say something to you, but I am ashamed.”

“What are you ashamed of?” I asked, “Are you a little girl?” So, be a Mama of six children, they should live.”

She said, “Nu, Chaim, he has persuaded me.”

I looked her in the eye a little puzzled, and said angrily:

“Yidene! What are you flapping about? Who is he, this *HE*?”

She said, “Our Benele, a child, took me to the side, as I should support the Socialists, and Betsy on the other side, begged for mercy as I should support the ones who wanted to close the beer saloons. Nu, I didn't know what to do. My heart felt like it would stop – I wanted to make both of them happy. Then I said to Betsy, “You are a grown-up, don't make Benele eat his own heart, he is just a child. Let me be on his side. It is obvious, if men have enough to eat they will stop getting drunk.” And Betsy said: “I don't care. I will see to it that Papa will vote the way I want.”

Since it is your supper time, I ordered the children they should not say one word of politics at the table. But Jenny could not hold herself back. She had gotten from Shlomeh'ke a book, Lots of Gags, which had a picture of a candidate in it and threw it into the soup tureen. Benele and Jackie laughed. Shlomeh'ke got mad and ripped off his campaign button and also, voilà, into the soup! That made me really angry and I said I was going to vote for Mr. Randall who wanted to shut down the saloons.

I saw Flossie turn pale and she said she was not going to eat supper: “Why should I give in, especially to Betsy? Because she, Flossie, had worked very hard in the shop so that Betsy could go to college? Now Betsy works by just talking. And I sew only using tools,” and she yelled: “I am not going to vote. I am going to follow Jenny.”

“Hurray for the social revolution!” Jenny called out, jumping up onto a chair. ‘Down with voting and the corrupt capitalistic gangs with their followers, the seducers of the people!’”

“G-d in Heaven!” screamed my yidene, “Sit yourself down, meshugene! What are you screaming about? People will come running from pure evil curiosity, you foolish girl!”

To have lived through that night I must be stronger than iron. The whole night the children wouldn't let me get any sleep. They fought and yelled and even tried to talk Mama into taking their side. Early the next morning I saw through the window that it was light in the street, and that the neighbors on the block were going to vote. My children remarked what a big deal this was, what a good citizen I

was, and how lucky I should feel that I was in America.

I said to them: "I would, indeed, feel lucky, if you, my children, wouldn't shorten my years with all your squabbling."

Betsy came to me, dressed up as for a holiday, it was a joy just to look at her, and she whispered a secret in my ear, that Mama was on her side, and that I should be a good Papa, I should join her, and vote against schnapps and drunks.

I thought to myself: "With you, my daughter, things are good. You have a good job, today is a holiday for you, but Flossie and Jenny unfortunately have to work today, and they have harder work than you; should I vote for your Mr. Randall and embitter their heats?"

Shlomeh'ke, Jackie and Benele would not let me go and said they would accompany me to the ballot box, and each one pounded me in the head with their arguments. I shooed them away and put the thing off for later – I wanted to ponder things a bit more; and I looked into my heart: would it be a bad thing to follow my Jenny's wish and not vote? Its always a mistake to follow a fool.

In the end I took heart and made myself ready to go vote. How to vote, I still didn't know. But I thought, in the last minute the Almighty would help me and put into my head the thought of how to act like everyone else.

When I got there (it was in a real estate office), and told them my name, they looked at me like I was a greenhorn and said to me that in their book it says that I had already voted.

I said to them, "How can it be written there? I haven't left the house today until now!" But he just smiled, the clerk that was sitting there, and the fat policeman smiled also, and a man with a ribbon on his lapel took me off to the side and said to me in Yiddish:

"Too late, Mister, you have been swindled. Someone came in here a little earlier and voted in your name."

"Good health to him!" I said, "A blessing on his head. He spared me from a very unpleasant business, and the children will have no arguments with me!"

I left and heard how the man with the ribbon laughed. He should laugh in good health.

2. He goes to the opera

My daughter Betsy, the teacher, she should live long, gave me and my wife tickets to the opera house.

My yidene and I gave it considerable thought: What should we take with us to eat? There one could get weak in the heart and want to eat something. My yidene asked me if I would like marinated herring, a little cheese, preserves, and if I wanted her to take along a challah, or rolls? I said to her: “Go already, yidene! You are still green! What are you thinking, you are taking something into a Yiddish theater? A yenta you are? In the opera house come all of the aristocrats from uptown, and if you sit there with a herring and cheese in a paper sack, they will laugh at you. It will be better to take wurst. Salami and tongue and make from them sandwiches, or cook a half a hen and make chicken sandwiches. The sandwiches you can put into two small parcels and we can eat from the parcels, like one eats at a picnic.

My yidene, Tsipe Yenta, she should live long, made ready the sandwiches and smeared them with chicken fat. She made two equal packets from the sandwiches. One I put in the right pocket of my overcoat and the other in the left pocket. In addition she took along two lemons tucked in her muff in case you get a little weary in the heart. A lemon can be useful. If you heart gets sour, you can just suck on the lemon and it will get lighter right away. Sour chases away sour.

You shouldn't think, heaven forbid, that me and my yidene are such big gluttons and guzzlers. Only a few provisions to nibble on the way, is an old Jewish custom. It is true, that the Jew is not all that much on eating, that is to say, he does not believe in stuffing himself, like a gentile, but the Jew does believe strongly in nibbling, tasting, supporting the heart, and other such things that don't cause you to get over-full, but just something to keep the stomach from crying out, “eat!” That is why you see that the custom now to nibble and snack is playing a bigger role with the Jews. Even in synagogue (usually among the Chasidim) one takes along a little schnapps and a snack. And even in the presence of a corpse the Jewish Burial Society-man in the middle of the preparations, has a little schnapps and a bite. Is it then a wonder that this custom has eaten its way into our lives, and is carried with us into the theater?

Therefore, you shouldn't wonder when you see Jews sitting in a theater eating roasted chicken on challah and sour pickles from a paper bundle. It is and old, historic custom, rightly said, a tradition, an ancestral tradition, come down to us generation to generation from the yarzeit schnapps, to the Burial Society snack, and from the mah berekhus [one hundred blessings] that a Jew is bound to recite to heaven above every day, as a tax to the Master of the people. But I have digressed a little – back to the matter at hand.

Blessed be the Name, we are finally at the opera house. We wanted to go in the front door, but they had us go in to one side. From that side they sent us farther on. From there at last we got, it seemed, to the right place. A man looked at our tickets, and twisted his face as though we were bad customers, and he put us out again in the street, to a different door.

Coming to the last door we showed the man our tickets, he bid us to go up. We climbed and climbed until our feet were swollen, going until we reached the highest balcony. A young man came up to us and asked if he could take my coat, and I said, “All right,” giving him my coat, and he gave me a little piece of tin with a number on it. Then another young man led us to our places.

My eyes were blinded by what I saw there. It was a regular museum. On the stage people were

already working, but who had it in their head to pay attention to singing and acting? Everyone was looking at the lodges, because every lodge looked like a jewelry store, and every woman was hung with diamonds. And in the middle of this I heard my yidene say to me:

“Ptuy-ptuy! Disgusting, Feh!”

“What feh?” I asked.

“There, everyone, take a look,” she said, “Everyone of them is naked!”

“Go on, yidene,” I said to her, “It just seems like it to you. They are only naked on top, on the bottom they are clothed. Besides from where we are sitting you can only see a head with shoulders. What are you thinking? It is something obscene? They won't let naked people in here. It is against the law to go to the theater naked, except on the stage.”

Nevertheless, my yidene can not take her eyes off the naked shoulders. She looked and I looked also. I looked at the strings of pearls, at the bracelets, precious stones and diamonds that were hanging from necks, and she looked and wondered at it all, and how they had no fear of the evil eye or of getting a chill. I looked and tried to calculate how much value there was in total from so many women with jewelry, and my yidene looked – and I noticed how much it bothered her that I looked.

The smartest man in the world can not understand the thinking of a woman. When one talks with a man you can understand him very easily, even if everything he says is not clear. From a word you already understand a quart, from a hint a whole story. But a woman has an entirely different machine in her head. She says one thing and means something totally different. She talks of rubble, and means Hotseplotse [*a mythical land*]. With the tongue it is day, and in her heart it is night. She says that she is not angry, but she is really angry. She says it is not your bubbie's business, and eats her heart out because of it. She says she is not jealous, yet she is jealous.

I noticed that the way I looked and the way my yidene looked were of two different sorts. Mine was the look of a businessman, who was interested in merchandise, that is to say, jewelery. But her look was a strange one, as though she suspected me of unclean thoughts. For twenty-eight years I have lived with a yidene, not failed to come home in the evening one single time, never gave her the slightest care, and she is still suspicious that I am looking around with an evil design. Be a genius and try to understand women!

But you can not blame my yidene too much, because among all of the men who were there, not all of them were looking at the jewelery. By a lot of the couples, I believe, the story was reversed: the women were looking at the jewelery and the men at the naked shoulders. And that made me very disappointed – not in the men, but in the women. Only they, the women, like to dress up so, to flirt, and to tickle the men's evil inclinations, and then when a lighthearted young man returns the coquetterie, they curse him, for the effrontery. Is it a wonder that young people fall into lewdness?!

About the opera itself there is not much to say. It was Romeo and Juliet. Which, had I not already seen in Yiddish theater? But in the opera it was very different. You could not hear a word. Everything was sung with notes and great emphasis!

As I was sitting there, I saw not far from us a Jew who did not take his eyes off the singers. I saw as he tapped his foot slowly, and bobbed his head and in his hand was a tuning fork. It could be that he was

trying to learn the melodies. After that I looked around me some more, and saw more Jews tapping their feet and trying to learn the melodies. I knew one of them – it was my friend's cantor. From that I understood that there were a lot of cantors who were preparing their songs for the coming High Holidays.

By the end of the second act I asked my yidene if she wanted a bite of the things we brought with us. In reality, I was the one that wanted a little something, but it wouldn't do to be the only nasher. My wife said, “With pleasure.”

I left my wife sitting in her place, and myself got up and went to the room where my overcoat was hanging. I said to the guard that I only needed to get from the pocket a packet wrapped in paper. I told him that he could go into my pockets without worry about responsibility and take out the packet for me. In a moment he gave me the packet, but when I got back to my seat and opened it I found that it was just a flask of schnapps.

It was clear that the guard made a mistake and went into the pocket of some stranger's coat. Now, what should I do? I saw people looking at me and smiling. I took the flask of schnapps and headed back to the guard. On the way I ran into our cantor. I told him the story and showed him the flask.

“That is my flask!” He said out loud and laughed, “Go get your snacks and we will make toasts together.”

After he had taken a little from the flask, and after I and my wife toasted “L'Chiam,” the little flask made a circuit of the other cantors who were sitting around us. It was a treat to see the Jews around us making themselves merry.

The end of the opera strongly affected my yidene. The tragic death of two lovers, Romeo and Juliet, brought out a fountain of tears from her eyes. She was still crying even after we got home.

“What is the reason that G-d punishes with such misfortune?” she reasoned as we were riding home on the streetcar. “It's because the world has fallen into lewdness and women go to the theater like hussies, naked as the day their mothers bore them. Ptui! May G-d not punish me for saying these words!”

3. He takes in a lady boarder

One day when I came home, my yidene greeted me with a smile. She only smiles like that when she knows she has a wonderful supper for me. On the other hand, when the supper is not successful, when the pot overflows, and the meat is burnt, then she greets me with an evil look on her face as though somehow it is my fault. I sniffed the air with my nostrils, and with my sense of smell I detected that aroma of borscht. There was also something else, but it was hard to tell if it was strudel, varenkes or gribenes.

All of the children were already home and they were sitting in the front room. I go in and see that sitting with them is a stranger, an elegant lady, and my nose was hit with the strong smell of perfume. Since I already had a little bit of a cold, I immediately sneezed three times.

“Gesundheit to you, Chaim!” my yidene said to me. She gently took my arm and drew me off to the side: “The lady has come to us to be a boarder.”

“But what kind of a woman is she?” I asked. “She is made up like a doll and smells like drug store --- Achoo! (I sneezed again.) Tell me, what does she do? How does she keep herself busy?”

“She is a manicurist – she cuts fingernails.”

“By women?”

“No,” answered my yidene, “By men in a barber shop she sits.”

Na-dir, a profession, I think to myself, she cuts the nails of strange men. Who would think of making nail cutting a profession? What is there in that for a skill? One just takes a little knife and one cuts. A pious Jew knows that nails must be cut by skipping a finger: First you cut the thumbnail, then the middle finger, after that you do the little finger, then the forefinger and you end with the ring finger. Once the fingernail cutting is done, you cut some wood chips and put them together with the fingernail parings and wrap them in a piece of paper. Then you put that away somewhere or you burn them. There, that is the whole art of cutting fingernails. But the rascals of today only want their nails cut by a women – Men should cut them properly.

The nice supper that evening didn't do anything for me. I couldn't taste a thing, because every aroma from the food was covered up by the smell of perfume. And my head cold wouldn't give me any peace: Achoo! Achoo! I could not stop sneezing.

A few nights later a story unfurled like you could have seen in the newspaper on the front page in big letters. I was laying in bed and could not get to sleep. I kept thinking of my customers and how much money they owed to me... I calculated, and calculated, then, I made another calculation and got it mixed up with the first, and went back and recalculated from the beginning. In the middle of all this I remembered that I had left a small box with jewelery out in the front room where the boarder sleeps. I thought: No telling! It can be that she is a completely honest boarder, but a burglar could creep in through the window and steal my jewelery. I woke up my yidene, she should be so good as to go into the front room and get my jewelery box, while it wouldn't be proper for me to do it, an adult Jew, to go into the room where a female stranger was sleeping. My yidene got up, put her slippers on slowly, and

went into the front room. Suddenly, she ran back out shocked and trembling like a leaf and clutching at her heart. I saw that she could not catch her breath.

“What is it? What is it? What happened?” I asked and shook her gently by the shoulders to calm her down. “Is the jewelery gone? Already gone, huh?”

“Murder!” She could hardly say it. “Someone has slaughtered our boarder, and dismembered her alive! --- Not a bone was left whole. --- *Oy, weh iz mir!* --- Chaim! Go already, sound an alarm --- Bring police --- The boarder has been slaughtered!”

I shook her again, harder this time. Seeing that she was in a faint, I splashed some cold water on her face. --- “Tell me already, what happened?” --- I asked her again.

“Our boarder, slaughtered,” she began saying, sobbing deeply, “Murder, bandits are in the house, they cut her up and ripped her apart limb from limb. It is horrible --- just like a pogrom! Her limbs tossed all around the room: Her feet are lying on the big table; her head on the small table; her teeth on on the chair, and an eye ripped out and flung on the plate with the picture of the Western Wall.”

I could see that this was a dangerous moment and I did not have time to reason with a woman. I quickly put on my robe and rushed to the front room. I was frightened by all that had happened and I was shaking like a leaf, because the big question in my mind was whether the murderer was still in the house and waiting for me with an ax.

I came into the room and from the glow of a small gas flame I could, indeed, see that on the big table was a foot made from pumice wood; on the small table there wasn't a head, just a wig of false hair; on the chair were other small items and on the plate, which I had purchased from a Jew who came from Israel, was a glass eye. Suddenly, as I was standing there looking over the anatomy of our boarder, there arose from the bed a bald head, and a mouth without teeth began to scream at me:

“What kind of nerve is that from you, Mister? How dare you to come into a room where a young lady is sleeping, huh? Get out of here, or I'll make a scene!”

I did not delay and immediately ran out. I only had time to snatch my jewelry box. My yidene was just beginning to calm down when I recounted to her my great discovery, but she really began to feel bad when she realized how much humiliation the boarder had suffered. I felt the same way. It is, indeed, a pity to make a person feel such shame.

When we got up the next morning the boarder was already not to be found. She had gotten up before us all, packed all of her things and was gone without even saying a, “Good-bye, stay healthy.”

4. He gets another boarder

A woman can do a lot of screwy things, but sometimes when she does something smart, is it really smart, smarter than the smartest man.

My yidene took in another boarder, and I was very pleased about it. Would you believe us? Even I wouldn't believe it either.

The second one is not a bad one to my mind, it was only four weeks ago that we had a bad experience. I met in the street a rather fashionable woman and she asked me if I sold jewelery on credit. "I sell everything," I said to her, "Jewelery, clothes, furniture, bedding, and do you have nice clothing for your little children? I have great bargains."

"I don't have any children!" she said somewhat angrily, "I am still a Miss."

"Excuse me, Miss," I begged her pardon, "I made an error. In American can anyone tell who is a Miss and who is a Missus?"

"How old do you think I am?" She asked me with a smile.

"I would know?" I said, "Maybe twenty, maybe forty years. I am already an old man, and I don't look very often at wives and young women. If only your credit is good, you please me already."

Soon the Mademoiselle asked me to come with her to her lodging, which wasn't far from where we were in Grand Street. I followed her and thought to myself, what sort of woman is this? As we were climbing the steps she told me that her name was Lilly Kanadik and she was an actress in a concert hall, and that she made forty dollars a week in salary. She led me into the parlor and said that she wanted to purchase a small diamond watch for forty or fifty dollars. In a couple of days she had the watch, and I got five dollars right away, and she promised to pay me a dollar a week for thirty-five weeks following.

But when I came the next week to collect my dollar, the Missus of the house told me that my Lilly Kanadik had already moved out. Where? She didn't know. She only knew that Miss Kanadik sang every evening in the concert hall. And she gave me the address. I went straight there and found out the following three facts:

First, Miss Lilly Kanadik is not a Miss and has already had three husbands.

Second, that Miss Lilly Kanadik was making six dollars a week not forty.

Third, that Miss Lilly Kanadik had already been let go and was now singing someplace else. Where?...they did not know.

That struck me like a lightning bolt. To be taken so badly – and people think of me as an experienced customer peddler, a careful one! And since this hit me so hard, it spawned in me a great hate for

actresses, dancers and singers.

Imagine my agitation when I made my way home and my yidene greeted me with the news that she had taken in another female boarder, and that this boarder was an actress.

“I will throw her out of here,” I yelled, “I won't have any singers or dancers by us in this house!”

“Sha!” My yidene hushed me, “Don't yell so loud. She is sitting right now in the parlor writing. You should hear how she sings, just like a canary.”

That word, 'canary' made me even more upset, but at the same time it caused me to think.

“What does she call herself, this canary of yours?” I asked.

“Lilly Kanadik,” my wife answered, “She sings in a concert hall and earns forty dollars a week. She is still a Miss.

“You think so? If you thought she was already a Missus, I'm telling you, you wouldn't be making a mistake. She will get really mad if you call her a Missus.”

Blessed be the Almighty who gave the rooster, that is: men, the gift of intelligence so that he can bargain tactfully. And, also blessed be the Almighty that I am not a yidene and know how to control my mouth, and not to say outright to my wife what kind of a connection Lilly Kanadik had with me.

“*Azoy?*” I said, “Lilly Kanadik she calls herself! – Nu, that is something altogether different. Did she bring her things with her?”

“Yes,” said my yidene, “She brought with her two cases for her clothes and she has a lot of jewelery.”

“Good,” I said, “I am very pleased with Miss Kanadik. I would like to get a look at her.”

With that my yidene gave me a strange look as though she suspected me of having suspicious thoughts. And seeing me smile made her suspicions grow even more.

“Why do you need to see her?” My yidene asked me.

“Miss Lilly Kanadik is an old acquaintance of mine!” I answered, “Just take me to her, you will see her throw her arms around me. Oh, I know her! I have been looking for her like with a searchlight for a long time.”

I wanted to have a little fun with my yidene. She deserved to be punished a little. She was no longer looking at me bewildered, but with fire in her eyes.

“You looked for her with a searchlight, ha?” She said with each word sticking in her throat, “Nice, very nice! A father with six children looks with a searchlight for an actress, a dancer, who slinks around with who knows who. I will drive her out of the house, in an instant.!”

“Calm down,” I said, “I have my reasons!”

I went into the front room on tiptoes with my wife behind me. As I entered the room Miss Kanadik was sitting at the table writing.

“Good evening, Miss Kanadik!” I said.

She turned her head and when she glanced at me recognized me and began to tremble. She was speechless.

“My watch, now!” I yelled at her.

Miss Kanadik took off the watch which was hanging from her and handed it to me.

“Now get out of here,” she said, “and don't ever bother me again.”

“Miss Kanadik,” I said, “There must be a big misunderstanding, you must apparently not realize, that you are my boarder.”

“Oy!” she cried out grasping her head, “I had forgotten your name. There are so many of you peddlers...”

“Aha!” I said, “You must know more of us peddlers. What a nice business. Please be so good as to find another dwelling in the morning.”

By eight o'clock the actress was gone. In about an hour she came with an express man and picked up her trunks.

Ten o'clock at night as I was preparing to go to bed I heard a knock at the door.

I went and opened the door and found standing there, three acquaintances of mine, all customer peddlers, and a fourth man, a complete stranger.

“By you a female boarder moved in who we have been searching for urgently,” all three said at the same time.

“I'm looking for her too!” The fourth man cried out.

“You can keep looking!” I said, “I already made her move out, and I don't know where she went.”

“Thief! Robber! You deserve to be ripped limb from limb!” The fourth man screamed.

“Sha, don't get angry,” I said to them and recounted the whole story from beginning to end.

Then each of the peddlers told their stories: One had lost thirty dollars, the second twenty and the third lost a whole fifty dollars. All in the value of jewelery.

“And how much did you lose?” I asked the fourth man.

“I lost a woman. She was my wife.”

“Sha,” I comforted him, “Why are you eating your heart out, Mr. Levin? These guys here have lost more than you.”

They all said “Good Night” and left.

“Listen to me, my wife,” I said to my yidene, “Although this time you did well in getting a boarder, if you catch another customer that I am hunting for and can't find, I will buy you a new hat for Shabbes.

5. He toasts “L'Chaim” with a Society-brother

This happened on Shabbes evening. I came home late at night from a meeting. Obviously, after the meeting, we, that is to say me and the other 'brothers,' went to a saloon to patronize the establishment of another society-brother, and there we had a little taste – a little schnapps and a bite. The night was dark and my head spun a little, and my stomach quite a bit more than my head. Our society-brother, the saloon keeper, always said, that he gave us the best schnapps, and though the schnapps is very good it doesn't wait until it gets to your head, it begins to spin as soon as it hits the stomach. With me it wasn't just the head and the stomach that were spinning, so were the streets and the houses, and all of the men that I was with.

Blessed be the Name, I soon got to the house where I lived, put the key in the lock and tried to open the door. I turned the key this way and I turned the key that way but it would not open the lock. But in the middle of this a neighbor came by, he opened the door for me and said, “What's with you, Mister, with a cigarette you want to unlock the door?” I looked closer, it was true: I was holding a cigarette instead of a key. I stood there a while and searched my pockets for a key, but there was no key to be found. “Perhaps,” I said to myself, “I smoked the key.”

And as I climbed the steps I remembered that the secretary of our club had asked me for a cigarette while we were in the saloon. Perhaps, by mistake, I gave him my night key. But what can I do now? How am I going to get into the house? I asked myself this question and sat down on a step to think. Because this new key was of the new type where one side of the key was the same for everyone and opened the hall door, but the other side was different from all the others and would only open the door to your dwelling. As I was sitting there on the step, I heard someone coming toward me, and before I had time to get myself up, the man fell over me. I grabbed him in my arms and the two of us went tumbling down the stairs.

For a while we just lay there groaning. From his groaning I could tell he was a Jew. That calmed me. After that I felt him try to free himself from my arms. I asked him, “Hu iz dat?” He was silent. I asked him in Yiddish, “*Ver zeit ihr?*” He still said nothing and tried to get up. I held him tighter and pressed him to me and caught the whiff of schnapps. The same booze, I thought to myself, I recognize that smell. “Mister, who are you?” I asked. “I won't let you up if you don't tell me who you are. We are after all both Jews, what do you have to be ashamed of, ha? Where were you going tonight, to a wedding? To a mitzvah celebration? Tell me who you are, let's introduce ourselves to each other: I am Chaim the customer peddler. With whom do I have the honor of laying here with, ha?” But he kept silent and said not a word. The two of us lay there in the hallway, in the dark, and he said nothing. He tried to get up again, but I held on to him. “Eh, Mister!” I said to him, “you are so full of pride!? And I have already had the great honor of running into you, at least let me know your honorable name.”

It the middle of this I heard steps – someone was coming. My Jew tried once again to get up, twisted around like a snake, but I held onto him even harder, like one holds onto a treasure in a dream. Suddenly there was light in the hallway, and over us stood two women and two young ones, who must have just come from a wedding, and they laughed, and they guffawed over the state they found us in. And I did not laugh one bit. Because by the shine of the gaslight I could see that in my arms was the secretary of our society, who was probably in my house with the key which I had mistakenly given to him instead of the cigarette. And next to him I saw my jewelery box laying on the floor. That upset me terribly and I began picking up the scattered items up with both fists and putting them back in the box,

in my excitement I stumbled down more steps. When I was done, the secretary had run off, but half of the apartment house had run toward the ruckus in the meantime. Men, women and little children were all around me in night-shirts, robes and in big scarves, sleepy and shocked, and everyone was screaming and no one knew what for.

That is the fate of anyone who goes to patronize a society-brother's saloon and drinks so much schnapps to cause his stomach to spin. So that is what I think, and finding my door open I went strait to my bedroom and went to sleep.

6. He salts without his wife, and she – without him

On the morning after that incident, already the whole story was known to my wife and children, and we were ashamed to look one another in the eye. I swore that I would never again patronize a society-brother, even if it came to me leaving the club.

After a few days my wife said, that she had decided to move and had found a dwelling with five nice rooms in the Bronx, where we could live comfortably without boarders. I thought: Moving is moving. It would not do to stay in this place after that terrible story. Truth be told, I was not guilty, but people have evil minds, and they would not forget such an event.

I took the address of the house in the Bronx from my wife and set out to see the dwelling.

I looked inside, the janitor told me that the rooms were already as good as rented. A lady had seen them last night and said that she would surely take them. I quickly hurried home, and told that to my yidene. And when my yidene heard that she clapped her hands to her head: “A fool I was,” she said, “I should have immediately paid a deposit.”

She said to me, “Do what I say, Chaim, go back over there and promise the janitor a present so that he will hold the apartment for us.”

So I made my way back to the Bronx to talk with the janitor. As he listened to me and as he got the scent of a half-dollar or a dollar, he promised that he would make sure that the apartment would be mine.

I left him and went back downtown, came home and told my yidene the whole story that we had the rooms for sure.

“A foolish mistake,” said my yidene, “You should have for sure given him some earnest money, then we would be certain to get the apartment.”

“Just try dealing with a yidene!” I yelled angrily, because this business had already cost me a half day's work, and on top of that it was Tuesday – one of the best days of the week for customer peddlers.-- “If you would,” I said to her, “You go over there and give the janitor a deposit, and let that be an end to it!”

“And who will make supper?” she asked.

“It will be all right,” I said to her, “You just put the pots on the oven, and I will mind them.”

Fast as a whirlwind my yidene flew to the pots. In a half hour she had the pots cooking, and my yidene was off to the Bronx.

“Chaim,” she said to me, “When the soup starts to cook, you should try it, and if it needs salt you should add some.”

She left me with the pots. Thank G-d, everything went properly. I tried the soup three times, but each time I tried it I thought it still needed more salt so I salted it with a full measure. For an hour I had

been sitting like that by the pots, then my wife came home, sad and dejected.

“What is it,” I asked.

“Ay, it is useless,” she said with a sob, “the janitor will not take a deposit, he wants to give me a different apartment with six rooms, but these five are going to another man. Such beautiful rooms, these five! As though they were built for us! Nu, and the oven is going all right?” she asked.

“All right,” I said, “Except I am sure that with supper today you will find something wrong.”

“Oy, a curse on my enemies!” my yidene cried out looking into the pot with the water, pepper and onions, “I forgot to put the meat in the pot!”

I saw immediately that this was not the place for me to be, nor the time, so I looked for an excuse to get away. But before I had time to say anything, my yidene caught me by the arm and pleaded:

“Listen, Chaim! As I understand it, somebody paid off the janitor. I'm telling you, follow my advice, go back over there again, and give the janitor two dollars, a present, and give him five dollars on the rent. I will tell you, I don't care so much for the rooms as for the fact that someone beat us out of them. How can it be that I schlep myself around a whole morning and an afternoon to search for rooms, and another comes and takes them out from under my nose.”

I immediately set out again for the Bronx. I came to the janitor, he greeted me in a very friendly manner. I pressed two silver dollars into his hand and said to him, “That is for you.” and he said to me, “Tank yu.” After that I gave him a five-dollar banknote and said to him, “That is a deposit for the landlord.” The janitor took me into the house and gave me a receipt for the deposit.

“There was a woman,” he recounted to me, “who very badly wanted the apartment. She came back three times. Today she wanted to give me a deposit, but I didn't want to take it, because I had already promised to hold it for you. I keep my word.”

“Tank yu,” I said.

“The woman actually broke down in tears,” the janitor went on, “She told me that her husband was a customer peddler and she had left him to watch the cooking., he-he-he!”

All my limbs grew cold when I heard that, because suddenly the whole story became clear to me. My wife and I were competing for the same apartment without one or the other of us realizing it. And the janitor was totally innocent, he thought he had to do with two different candidates as tenants.

When I got home to my wife and laid out the whole story, all the children laughed. My wife did not have it in her head to laugh. The meat was raw, I had salted the soup and she had salted the soup, and we had to make a dinner out of herring and wurst.

Nu, at least we had the apartment and would soon be moving.