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THE
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READER

STORIES

He strolled along the bank of the Vistula, thinking, "Today she will come."

And so thinking, he saw it all in the most vivid colors: He is sitting on the bed in his room, in the darkness, waiting. Every sound on the stairs makes his heart beat faster, and he asks himself, "Why? I'm not in love with her, am I?"

And then it is really she; he recognizes the light, swimming step. He gets up and kindles the lamp on the table. She, meanwhile, pauses on the other side of the door. She is catching her breath; the flight of stairs is a long one. She is putting her hair in order; she stops and peeps in through the keyhole. Then she taps with one finger on the door, almost inaudibly.

"*Proszę*. Come in."

She opens the door, and asks from the doorway, "Got any stories for me?"

"Yes, I have."

If he hasn't, she turns back. She doesn't like him, she says. In fact she's frightened of Jews. But she loves his stories.

Their acquaintance began in Warsaw's Saxony Park, in a downpour of rain. She stood under a tree. She wore a thin white blouse, and she had no galoshes on. The tree afforded little protection, and she kept glancing up through the sparse branches, her face expressing

mingled fright and hope. As he was carrying an umbrella, he went up to her and offered his assistance. She hesitated. He pleaded earnestly with her, and finally she yielded. She excused her hesitation: there are so many bad people about. . . . But his voice, she said, gave her confidence. Encouraged, he offered her his arm; still hesitant, she took it and gave him her address.

As they walked along the streets—he had not the money for a droshky—she told him she was a seamstress. (True, he had noticed that her fingertips were pitted with tiny holes.) And she learned from him that he was a writer. Does he write songs? No, stories. Stories! She loves stories! To which he answered that he could tell her no end of stories. Would she let him come to see her? No. She had no father, and her mother was mean. When she said this, her voice trembled a little. The idea! A man coming to visit her, and a— a Jew at that. She did not use the word "Jew" easily; she blushed and threw a comical sideways glance at him. He asked, "How do you know I'm a Jew?" The eyes, the hair, the way he spoke, and— well—the nose. She giggled. Her voice was pure and childlike; and yet the forehead was already wrinkled.

During the summer they used to meet in Saxony Park. During the winter she would steal up to his room, at rare intervals, for a story. When she planned to do that, she would leave a message for him in the morning with the janitor. This very day he had received such a note from her. Her Polish was illiterate—a dozen mistakes on every line—but so childishly warm.

"Jew, have a story ready for me. But a happy one, with a princess. Life is so sad. And you musn't dare to touch me. I'm not interested in you. You are so ugly. If you touch me, I shall scream and run away. Do you hear?"

And yet he had ways of softening her: the story he is telling takes on a mournful tone—the king's son and the queen's daughter are in danger. The lovers have been driven apart by a terrible slander, the work of false people. And if he feels like it, he can throw the queen's daughter into a dungeon, while somewhere else, in an alien land, the king's son is being led to the gallows. They're the victims of a horrible frame-up. And then the listener throws herself on her knees before him and catches his hand; or she strokes his face in sheer pity for the unfortunate lovers. Then, for one kiss on the lips, he conjures away the dangers and brings prince and princess together to the strains of the wedding march.

Why does he do that? What does he want her kiss for?

He is sorry for it every time it happens—and yet there is something

that draws them to each other. Both are filled with longing for happiness; both have missed it; both are willing to be deluded for a few minutes. Two lost, desolate souls.

Once he asked her, "Does your mother ever hit you?"

She turned pale and her eyes flooded. "I won't tell you. I'd rather hear your stories." And he stroked her brown hair and went on.

Now, as he strolled along the riverbank, he felt that he had no story for her. His mind was confused and restless, like the water dashing up against the bank. His thoughts wandered vaguely, like the formless clouds overhead.

What obscure thing was it that was eating at his heart?

He remembered suddenly that he had not yet eaten that day.

There had been a sort of restlessness, a running about and a rummaging in his lodgings. The sun had unexpectedly broken through the clouds that morning, and, getting out of bed, he had left the house without even drinking a glass of tea. The streets too were oddly agitated. What the devil was it all about? Now and again passersby jostled him. He had barely managed to make his way down to the riverbank, where it was his habit to stroll mornings. By now he was quite faint. He felt in his vest pocket. Yes, he still had some change. He turned and made for the restaurant where he usually took his lunch; there he sat down by a window that looked out on the Vistula.

The restaurant was empty. Blondie sat behind the food-laden counter, dozing. She woke as he came in, and greeted him sleepily. Still half-asleep, she served him, then went back to her perch to doze again. He ate meditatively: There *had* to be a story of a king's son and a queen's daughter. She, the queen's daughter, would have to be asleep somewhere on a mountain peak. A magician or a witch would have to be guarding her. Today he would add something—there would be a serpent at her feet. He'd given her so many queens' daughters—the serpent would make a special impression. And the mountain peak would be a lofty one. He had never seen a high mountain but he would say: "High, very high, very high up . . ." and she would lift up her eyes and follow his forefinger. Below the point where the queen's daughter slept, he would draw about the mountain a circlet of clouds, and to make it prettier the clouds would be edged with crimson. Down in the valley no one knows about the queen's daughter; the clouds conceal her. All through the year the circlet hangs there. That too is a piece of magic. But high up, way above the sleeping princess, there is an eternally blue sky; she lies between cloud and heaven, the serpent at her feet.

He finished his meal. A king's son would have to be found on the way home. Meanwhile, he had to pay the check. Blondie still dozed.

He tried to waken her in his old, approved fashion: He would make bread pills and flick them at her long nose. One in twenty would hit the target, and Blondie would start out of her sleep, frightened. "I beg your pardon, sir. Is that your idea of a joke? What did you have, sir?" He would smile good-humoredly, tell her, and pay.

This time it didn't work. He aimed countless bread pills, but never hit the waitress. Meanwhile, he kept thinking of his prince.

He clawed out a soft lump of bread, rolled a few pills, forgot to aim them. The prince! He saw him suddenly. There he was, marching across field and forest. A raven, which he had once rescued from certain death, had told him the secret of the sleeping princess. . . . The raven flies before him, showing him the way. But of course, it won't be as simple as all that. One can't let the prince reach the happy end of the story in a single chapter. For when the story is ended, the listener goes home, and he is left alone with his agitated nerves and his incomplete thoughts. Well, then, he will bring in a wolf, and after that a river. So the prince will uproot a tree and float himself across the river on it. After that an impassable mountain will confront the prince, whereupon the raven will take him on its wings and fly him over. No, not the raven, but an eagle, the raven's uncle. And then—and then—well, after that the prince will simply start feeling hungry. The banal and the commonplace always have to come in. Even a king's son can become hungry in the midst of his adventures. The raven sets out to get food for him, but it's a long way to the nearest village, and the raven does not return. The sun blazes overhead; the barren fields stretch in every direction. If only wheat grew hereabouts, he would forget his dignity as a king's son and tear a few ears from the stalks. But nothing grows here except bitter herbs, and before flying away the raven warned him: "Don't touch them. They are poison." That's the work of the magician who guards the sleeping princess; for now we are not far from the mountain, and more than one adventurer has eaten of these bitter herbs and been poisoned.

How hard, how frightfully hard, it is to wait for the raven. The prince's heart faints in him. His eyes burn. Meanwhile, a peasant girl passes, carrying a loaf of bread, fresh, odorous bread; the smell of it fills his nose tormentingly.

"Peasant girl," he calls out in a weak voice, "a piece of bread."

"Pay," she answers curtly.

"I have no money."

"Those who have no money don't eat."

"I am a king's son. When I return to my home, I will send you a king's treasure."

"Tell it to the wind. . . . Debts written in water . . ."

"I am dying of hunger."

"What's new about that? It's happened to your betters."

She walks on a little space, then turns back.

"I'll tell you what. I like you. Marry me and I'll give you bread."

"I can't. I'm in love with the queen's daughter."

"And you want to eat?"

"I'm hungry."

"Marry me and you'll not be hungry."

The peasant girl was obstinate; hunger gnawed at him, and he had to yield. He pledged her eternal faithfulness. A hare ran across the field, and they called it to witness the marriage. The king's son snatched a piece of bread, and followed the peasant girl to the village.

Blondie opened an eye and closed it again. The story wove itself on.

For a long time the prince lay sick in the village; the fresh bread had been too much for him. Then he became better and married the peasant girl. And since he could neither plow nor sow nor reap, but could read and write, he became the village teacher. Their married life was peaceful. The peasant girl used to call him, lovingly, "my little loony," and he would smile foolishly. But he kept the queen's daughter in a secret place in his heart. Who knew? The peasant girl used to work with the nobleman's automatic reaper; someday something might happen, then he would renew the quest. Of course, he never clothed the thought in words—quite possibly he was not even aware of the thought. The hope found a hiding place in an obscure corner of his heart, and he kept the secret to himself.

But nothing happened to his peasant wife. Indeed, she became sturdier and stronger from day to day. Not so with him. It may have been the coarse peasant fare, and it may have been the vain longing in his heart; in any case he aged early. And when he observed that his beard had turned gray, that his eyes were dimming, that his forehead was wrinkled, he called his pupils to him and, weeping, revealed to them the secret of the queen's daughter. They broke into laughter: Teacher had taken leave of his senses! And yet . . .

He became aware that the light had changed. Darkness had fallen.

He looked out through the window; the weather too had changed. A wet snow was falling. He felt a contraction of the heart. Hastily, he picked up a bread pill and threw it. This time he hit the target, and Blondie woke up.

"Come here, Blondie. I'll tell you a story."

"*Mnie poco?* What would I want stories for?"

"It's a pretty story, all about peasant boys in search of a princess."

"That's silly."

"No, it's not silly. The princess is asleep on a flowerbed on the summit of a mountain. The village teacher told them to look for her."

"Not a bad idea."

"Sure it's not a bad idea. The princess is good and beautiful and clever."

"Quit making fun of me. You'd better pay and go."

"Sure, sure. But the youngsters of the village armed themselves with wooden swords and wooden spears."

Blondie yawned.

"Are you tired?"

"God, what weather!" And she added irritably: "Whenever there's a Jewish holy day, there has to be bad weather."

"What sort of holy day do you mean?"

"It's their Easter."

So that was the meaning of the running about in his lodgings, the restlessness in the streets! Passover!

He paid and ran out.

In the street he burst into laughter.

Somewhere in him a reincarnated soul was stirring: a grandfather's, or a great-grandfather's. What a pang of homesickness! Every man is a carrier of reincarnated souls.

The first year he was away from home he nearly went out of his mind with homesickness when the night of the seder came around. The family where he lodged had been invited out for the seder, and he had the run of the house to himself. He went to bed early, having nowhere to go. But he had forgotten to pull down the shades, and the moonlight woke him. He came to with a painful beating of his heart. He lay there a long time, wondering what it was. Then he remembered. Suddenly, he sprang up, tore the sheet off the bed, wound it about him like the white ceremonial garment his father wore at the seder, and ran from room to room bellowing the seder prayers at the top of his voice, by heart. The second year, terrified

by the recollection of his homesickness, he sold his overcoat and made a trip home for Passover. On the way home he kept repeating to himself that he was going to give in, give in completely. And indeed, he went with his father to synagogue, came home, let his mother prepare the seat for him at the seder table, with the ceremonial cushion; and at the right moment he asked the ritual Four Questions of the seder. But when it came to that part of the ceremony which recounts the Ten Plagues visited on the Egyptians, he could not stand it anymore. He simply refused to follow the hallowed custom of flipping a drop of wine out of his glass at the mention of each plague. And further on in the service, where the sages of old discuss the manifold character of the plagues—the plagues within the plagues, as it were—he almost ran from the room. It was all his mother could do to keep him there. But on the third day of Passover he left, without saying good-bye to his father. His mother waited for him outside the city.

He mounted the stone stairway from the riverbank.

He was sorry for that incident now. What sense had there been in hurting them so? In those days he used to justify himself by saying, "For the sake of the truth." Was there such a thing as truth?

His thoughts ran on. "We, the younger ones, must suffer. Our pains are creative; they drive us to new work, the production of new forms. But the pains of the old people are fruitless; they only end in futile tears, and the heart remains petrified."

He traversed Krasinski Park. The dairy stand was deserted. Belated people hurried along the walks. He drew near the hillock that looked out over Nalewki Street. He was tired, but it was still too early to go home. He sat down on a bench facing the hillock.

On its lower slope the hillock was bare, as if a barber had shorn it; higher up there were tufts and patches of grass and thorns, here and there a bush or even a clump of trees. Birds could nest and sing there. *She* was very fond of birds. Once she used to work in the country, and whenever she heard birds singing, the tears came to her eyes and she couldn't hold them back; it was as if her soul wept, she said, it was so sweet.

And there were times when she talked in such a strange, wonderful way. She would play with the tips of her long white fingers, with their needle scars; or she would touch the tips of her even whiter teeth. She would use expressions like "soul-star." Where had she picked it up? Perhaps she too was a concealed princess; her mother, with her washing bales, was no mother, but a witch, watching over her to see that no stranger prince approached and woke her up.

Well, if that was so, he wasn't the prince. The prince had to be free from sin.

A nurse with four little charges hurried by. The boys turned aside and began running toward the hill. Boys armed with swords and spears—"they ascend the mountain." The nurse became angry: it was time to go home; their parents would be worrying—it was a festival day. The boys paid no attention: "To the princess!"

He closed his eyes and saw the village schoolmaster's pupils mounting the hill to the princess, their wooden weapons in their hands. A cloud is spread between the "rescuers" and the princess. They do not see her; they only believe in her. Shall he let them reach her?

And here the old witch comes swooping down through a cloud, riding on her broomstick.

She takes one of the boys by the hand.

"Where are you going, little one?"

"To the princess."

"What have you to do with her?"

"I want to waken her."

"What for?"

"I want to marry her."

"What do you want to marry her for?"

"She's so good! Our teacher told us. And she's clever and sweet. Teacher knows."

"Sure he does! And you, of course, like good, sweet things."

"You bet I do. Mama calls me 'Sweet Tooth.'"

"Well, you silly little boy, what's the sense of crawling all the way up the mountain and getting tired out? I can see you're a noble and delicate child—"

"What's that got to do with you?"

"You silly fellow, don't you see I'm your auntie? Don't you know me? I'll give you all kinds of sweet things."

She waves her broomstick in the air. Hocus-pocus! And right at the boy's feet falls a basket full of the loveliest things; almonds in their yellow chemises, pressed figs, bunches of raisins, flaming oranges, chocolates, and other tempting things that the boy doesn't even know by name. He utters a cry of glee and falls on his knees before the lovely basket.

Meanwhile, the other three go on. Against them comes the magician, old, white-bearded, with heavy white eyebrows, and big blue spectacles on his nose.

He heard the creaking of the park gate and opened his eyes. The

nurse and her charges had disappeared. He got up from the bench and hurried out into the almost deserted Nalewki Street. Meanwhile, the story went on weaving itself in his brain.

The old magician stops one of the three.

"Where are you off to, young man?"

"To waken the princess. I want to marry her."

"What for?"

"Teacher told us wonderful things about her. She's so clever."

"You want to learn from her how to be clever?"

"Sure I do. A man ought to be clever. If you're clever you get money and medals."

"Well, well, I can see that you're quite clever already. And if you want, you can become as clever as can be, without the princess."

"How?"

"Very simple. Here!"

The old man takes out of his inside pocket a little book bound in white leather and edged with gold, and hands it to the boy who is quite clever already.

"Sit down and read. When you'll have read one page through, you'll be cleverer than Daddy and Mama; after the second page you'll be cleverer than everyone in the village; and by the time you're in the middle of the book you'll be as clever as three professors."

The youngster snatches the book and sits down to read.

The last two have meanwhile gone on. Suddenly, a snake blocks their path. One of them runs away; the other remains, paralyzed with fear.

But the snake doesn't bite him. It draws its tail across its fangs and asks in a snakish-friendly voice:

"Whither away, young man?"

Well, he's going to the princess, to wake her up and marry her, because Teacher said she was beautiful.

"Do you like beautiful things?"

"Of course."

"Then come with me. Do you see that crystal palace over there? It's full of little dolls; they wear sateen dresses and slippers of white silk. They have cherry-red lips and eyes that flash like precious stones. You'll choose the doll that you love best, and look, you won't have far to walk; it's close by, no climbing."

But what about the fourth one, the one who ran away and returned? What's to be done with him? Let him reach the princess? That would be a pity. He would be the unhappiest of boys. He

would be left without anything—he would not even have a vain longing to look back on or self-reproaches to cling to.

And yet for her sake he must do it. He must let the boy reach the princess.

After which, a wedding ceremony, music, dancing, a honeymoon trip, a stroll in the hanging gardens.

And *she*—she will close her eyes blissfully, and she will be so moved that she will let him put his arms round her and draw her on to his lap, and he will wonder what he is doing it for. She will put her hot cheek to his, he will feel her sweet breath, he will kiss her, and inwardly he will say to himself, "Swine!" She will jump from his lap, terrified, and she will start crying brokenly, and he will throw himself at her feet and implore her pardon, and in his heart he will say to himself, "Clown!" And she will forgive him at last, but for a long time she will not come to see him again.

Somebody elbowed him aside; he slipped and almost fell down on the wet pavement.

The staircase lay in shadow—only one oil lamp for two flights. He had no matches. His neighbor on the same floor had a flashlight, but he didn't envy him that; the man's wife was so ugly. Whenever he passed their door, he trembled lest she show herself. Ugliness is the greatest of all sins. And if the woman was ugly, the servant girl was uglier. He shuddered, partly out of revulsion, partly with the cold. He had forgotten that his spats were torn and he had stepped into puddles. In the night he would cough and perhaps run a temperature. The doctor would come and threaten him again with tuberculosis. Who cared? Let it be tuberculosis, as long as something happened.

He stood stock-still in terror.

There in the dark corner of the stairway a picture had suddenly risen before him. A seder table, a snow-white, gleaming tablecloth, three engraved red wine beakers, gleaming plates, silverware, candles in three tall, wrought-silver candlesticks: Mother stands there, saying the benediction over the candlelight. . . . She has her back to him. . . . Her shoulders tremble. . . . She is weeping into her hands . . . weeping for him. . . . Where is he? Where is he now?

"Ha, it's beginning!" In a rage he dashed up the remaining steps three at a time. And then suddenly he regretted the rage and the hurry. His mother might have turned around to him. What did she look like now? She wrote that she lay awake through the nights.

She'd sent him four pairs of socks a little while back. "Do be careful and keep your feet warm."

"Bah!" He shook himself. "A man must be a man."

He entered his room with firm footsteps; with firm hand he lit the lamp. He didn't like the dark. He looked around. "What poverty!" Cobwebs in the corners; but, as against that (he smiled bitterly), at least no scrap of the forbidden leavened bread. Well, tomorrow someone would invite him out; he would hang around the German synagogue at service time; he knew a certain teacher. . . .

He sat down on the bed. The lamp smoked a little; he got up to fix it, and forgot himself. What was it he had got up for? He sat down again, drew his feet onto the bed. His eyes fell on the mirror hanging by the bed. He took it down and examined himself.

He smiled. "I'm not as ugly as she makes me out." He hung the mirror up again. "Yes, rather dark, like a Tatar, but what eyes!"

He is proud of his eyes. Few women can look at them and not be moved. When he becomes intimate with a woman, she always kisses him on the eyes. His lips—well, they were a little too full—too ready to kiss, dangerous. Even in the old days, when he lived at home . . .

The thread breaks. What's happening at home just now? Has Father come back from the synagogue service?

He hears his father's greeting: "Happy Festival!" He hears his mother's answer. No happiness in the voices. How can there be, God help them? An only son, and he far away.

He tries to shift his thoughts to other matters, but without success. The seder refuses to be conjured away. This is the fifth year.

He gets up from the bed and walks over to the window. The wet stones in the courtyard below throw back in flickering ribbons the festive lights in the apartments opposite. He will not lift his eyes to the windows above. But he must. He lifts them slowly, but halfway to the first floor he stops again, as if paralyzed. Another picture:

A seder table, utensils of gold and crystal. Is it a family? No, it must be a gathering of several families. The women are in strange habit, fashions that have passed away many generations ago. Men in white, embroidered ruffs under their white covering garments—golden circlets, gold-embroidered skullcaps. What part of the seder service is this? A murmurous recitativo—

Then suddenly a knock at the outside door.

From outside a voice: "Open in the name of the law!"

Ha. The blood libel!

"Quickly! Look under the table!" At the patriarch's order they bend down and discover—a dead child. They freeze in horror.

The patriarch of the family stands up and issues commands in a tense but firm voice.

"Put it on the table and cut it up."

"Everyone take a piece on his plate."

It is done. The intruders are now banging at the inner door.

"Eat!"

The pieces are eaten up. Police and soldiers burst in then. They look everywhere in vain. They go out raging. And when they are gone, the furious cry of the prayer goes up from the assembly of celebrants:

"Pour forth Thy wrath upon the heathen that know Thee not. . . ."

"Not for me," he thinks. "That needs a stronger pen than mine."

Better, then, to lie down on the sofa, with closed eyes.

His strength is gone, eaten away by moodiness.

There are easier pictures to paint.

For instance: the famous seder where the Master of the Name, the Baal Shem, the founder of Hasidism, presided. No—that isn't it either. The seder he is thinking of was celebrated in the house of a rich Jew who was actually a misnaged, an opponent of Hasidism. The Baal Shem humbled himself and sought an invitation to the man's seder. Couldn't get it so easily either.

That was at the synagogue service before the seder. The Baal Shem *asked* for the invitation, saying humbly to the rich Jew: "Let me come. You'll find me useful."

The rich man consulted the rabbi. Was it permissible to have a Hasid at one's seder? The rabbi answered yes; it was a sin to shame a man by a refusal.

And the Baal Shem sits quietly at the seder. The first part passes—the Four Questions—and the passage beginning, "Slaves we were unto Pharaoh." And suddenly the Baal Shem speaks up and asks that an additional prayer book be brought, and an additional prayer robe. Laughter breaks out at the table. The tone of the Baal Shem changes. "I command it!" What's this? An hour ago he was begging for an invitation, and now he's issuing commands at table! The master of the house stares at him; the eyes of the Baal Shem are blazing. Fear takes hold of the host. He orders the prayer book and the robe brought and placed before the Baal Shem. Then the Baal Shem kicks at something under the table and says: "Yantek! Stand up!" And from under the table there crawls forth and rises to his feet a young peasant lad, his face bloodless, a corpse with closed eyes, and across his throat a cut. The guests start back.

"Yantek! Open your eyes!"

Yantek obeys.

"Yantek, put on the robe, tie up the girdle, put on the skullcap."

Yantek obeys.

"Give him a chair. Yantek, sit down!"

Yantek sits down in robe and skullcap.

"Open the Haggadah and say the prayers with us."

The celebrants tremble and mumble the prayers, and Yantek murmurs with them. Suddenly, the door is broken open. It is the old story. They have come to look for the corpse they planted under the table—there is no sign of it. The intruders withdraw, baffled and ashamed.

The Baal Shem turns to the resurrected corpse:

"Yantek! Close your eyes again, and go to the cemetery and bury yourself. And because it has been your privilege to wear a Jewish prayer robe, and say a Jewish prayer, your resting place will be the Jewish cemetery. And when you meet Father Abraham, you will say to him—"

A light tap on the door.

"Come in."

"Got any stories?"

"All kinds."

1903 (translated by Maurice Samuel)
