

◆◆◆ *Songs of the Megillah*

This Little Book Is Dedicated to My Brother, the Journeyman Tailor, Notte Manger, My Very Best Friend from My Earliest Childhood Days

PROLOGUE

The poems gathered in this little book are once again a kind of mischief-making on the model of Purim* players in every age.

In this little book is retold the lovely old story of Queen Esther, who, together with her uncle Mordecai, set themselves energetically against wicked Haman, whom, finally, they vanquished. May their merit sustain us, now and forever, *amen, selah*.

True, the story is told here a bit differently. The official authors of the Megillah,* for example, have kept silent about the existence of such a significant figure as the tailor lad Fastrigosso, though his despairing love for Queen Esther and his attempt to assassinate King Ahasuerus were crucial elements on several important occasions.

The official chroniclers have kept silent even about the pious old Master Tailor Fonfosso. It would seem that they did not want to weaken the Persian court legend with such crude liveliness.

The reader will conclude that, evidently, they have falsified historical truth, and the reader would be right. But they, the chroniclers, have

been lying with stubbornly clenched teeth so long in the earth with their bottoms pointed to the stars that you can call them anything you like, until the coming of the Messiah.

The author of the Megillah Songs has worked diligently to rediscover the personages that have been thus overlooked. He spent years doing research in all sorts of archives, until he succeeded in finding the journeyman tailor Fastrigosso and his old master, Fonfosso.

Was all that work worth it? The author thinks that it was. First of all, he corrected the injustice done by the ancient chroniclers to the two knights of the Society of Needle and Shear. And second:

This work enabled him to approach the comedy of which he had been dreaming for a considerable number of years.

INVOCATION

For this book, no thought was stinted / That would make it nicely
printed / And it was made for everyone / For women, and for men
/ It's filled with wonders dark and deep / To make you laugh or
weep / With sayings that they used to say / In dear Queen Esther's
day / Then hurry come and look / From crannies, and from nooks,
/ Come buy this lovely book / So that the vagabond / Who comes
from Wallach land / Itzik Manger named / Can pay for his
carousing / And, while our Itzik's sousing, / Our God, for Itzik's
sake, / Will send away bad luck / As quickly as the wind, / And may
the Lord soon send / Messiah ben David down / Amen, selah.

THE SONG OF THE RUNNER

Quiet, people. Stop your din
And let the Purim play begin.

A Purim play in rhyme,
So great you'll love each line.

A play for eyes and ears,
That makes you laugh through tears.

There they go, so still—ah,
The heroes of the Megillah.

Ahasuerus, the drunkard king
Who drinks. Drinks anything.

Esther, the innocent queen,
And Vashti in crinoline.

Mordecai, bilious and wise,
And Haman, the crook, damn his eyes.

And Zeresh, the cursing witch;
Plague take the ugly bitch.

There's Vayzosse, the crashing bore,
The chatterbox edit-or.

And Fastrigosso, with a sigh,
Letting the grander folk go by.

He'll tell you himself what haunts him,
What joy, what sorrow taunts him.

In short, there's plenty of stuff
To cry over—and laugh.

It's all in the play. You'll see,
If you watch carefully.

And if I've told you a lie—
Shut up and watch the play.

HOW THE BLESSED MORDECAI FOUND FAVOR IN THE EYES OF THE KING

“Who's that man at the king's gate
With a knapsack on his back;
The sneaky fellow who sidles up
To eavesdrop when people talk?”

“You mean to say that you don't know
His name? You little fool—ah,
That's the Blessed Mordecai,
The hero of the Megillah.

He found favor with our king—
Our king who's always drinking;
Whose shiny nose is always red,
Whose breath is always stinking.”

“How was it he found favor with
Our king who's always drinking;
Whose shiny nose is always red,
Whose breath is always stinking?”

“It happened this way, dear. One night
When he went by, eavesdropping,
He heard Bigthan and Teresh say,
‘To hell with our drunken king.

He is a tyrant, he's a boor—
No drink will ever slake him.
Let's put poison in his cup
And let the devil take him.’

The plotters agreed and then
Away they went, so still—ah.
And Mordecai squealed on them
In the accents of the Megillah.

Oh, the king was furious
And punished those poisonous fellows.
The rebels dangled side by side
On two adjoining gallows.

The king rewarded Mordecai,
With a permanent right to sell
Shoelaces, almonds, and kosher soap
For sending those rebels to hell.”

The evening turns blue as a prayer,
The child and its mother are still—ah . . .
Quietly, the flies on the wall
Hum the music of the Megillah.

QUEEN VASHTI

Wearing her nightshirt, Queen Vashti sits—
The morning is bright and fair;
She dandles a sunbeam on her knee
Then lets it play in her hair.

Vashti's embarrassed and she says,
"Go away, you impudent thing,
Play with the kitchen servant girls,
But stay away from the queen."

Pretending he doesn't understand,
The sunbeam, that little flirt,
Slips for an instant down her neck
And gambols about in her shirt.

"Ah, you," she trembles—and dreads to think
What her husband, that simpleton,
Would do if he knew that she, the queen,
Had toyed with a common man.

The thought of her husband turns her pale—
A fool and a drunkard, too,
God knows what dangerous things a man
Like that in a rage can do.

She looks at herself in the mirror.
An aging general
Killed himself because of her
In the yard of the arsenal.

"Much good my beauty . . ." the question is,
Is the banquet set for tonight?
Music, lieutenants, champagne, ballet,
Much laughter and delight.

As for Haman, let him sit at home,
That rascal, that parvenu.
God, how she hates his guts—she knows
That Haman hates her, too.

"Zoschye!" The chambermaid comes in,
"Give me the gorgeous dress."
Vashti's unable to hear the sob
Of her inward loneliness.

THE KING'S BANQUET

The king is drunk, as he talks
There's a glistening tear in his eye,
"Vashti my queen is more beautiful
Than the morning star in the sky.

Her braids reach to her knees,
And her body's snowy white,
And her eyes will turn you dizzy,
They are so dazzling bright."

Then, Haman slyly says,
"Why not let Vashti the queen
Come naked before us, here,
So her beauty may be seen?"

Then all these noble lords,
By whom you are surrounded,
Can see her loveliness
And stare, astounded."

Then says the drunken king,
“Good thought . . . thus I decree . . .
Let Vashti the queen come naked
Here . . . so they all can see . . .”

The messengers run swiftly,
Come swiftly running back,
“Vashti, the queen can’t come.
She says that her teeth ache.”

Then slyly Haman smiles,
“Those teeth, my lord—excuses
That wouldn’t fool a child—
One of her female ruses.”

Then says the drunken king,
“She’ll come when I command her
Or else I’ll have her shot,
And then I’ll hang her.”

The messengers run swiftly
And return with baited breath,
With chattering teeth and trembling limbs
Because they’re scared to death:

“The queen has barred her door,” they say
“With seven bands of steel,
And the message she sends the king:
‘I will not do his will.

The king’s a sorry drunkard,
And more than that, a lout.
If he wants to make a fool of himself,
Why should I help him out?’”

One lord to a second says,
“Time to be getting home,
The old woman must be grumbling,
Lying in bed alone.”

A third takes out his watch
And holds it to the light—
They put their stovepipe hats on
And file into the night.

VASHTI’S SONG OF GRIEF

Vashti the royal queen
Is weeping bitterly
Because, young though she is,
She is condemned to die.

“My father was a mighty
Nobleman, a *pan*,*
Whatever made me marry
A drinking man?

Oh, my father warned me,
‘Vashti, daughter. Don’t.
You’ll do better to marry
That Lithuanian count.’

I chose not to listen—
And now I wish I had.
In just a little while,
Queen Vashti will be dead.

I chose not to listen,
Now see my punishment—
Oh you hills and valleys
Pay heed to my lament.

I filled up countless jars
With jellies and with jams;
And now I’ve got to leave
My spacious rooms.

To leave my spacious rooms,
My bedsteads made of brass,
My silk and satin clothes,
And my designer hats.

Young and beautiful
The king's new wife will be;
While the worms gnaw a young corpse
As beautiful as she.

Back, hangman, back.
Don't come quite so soon.
Let me stand another moment
Grieving here alone.

Give me one more moment
To see my last sun set.
An instant more to feel
A last pang of regret.

How lovely was my life,
My youthful years, how fair—
My rings were all of gold,
And golden was my hair.

Back, hangman, back,
Hold back the night a while,
Give me one more moment
To smile a final smile.”

Thus, Vashti, the queen,
Weeps bitterly
Because, young though she is,
She is condemned to die.

QUEEN VASHTI BEING LED TO EXECUTION

“D’you see, Tsippi, through *that* street
Queen Vashti will be led.
Poor thing, the king’s condemned her
To a bitter death.

And well deserved. If the king calls
Ought not the queen to go?
You! Had you been in her place,
Would you have gone, or no?”

“Rivke, dear, have you gone mad?
I’d have flown there like a bird.
Mother naked I’d have stood
Before that noble crowd.

I’d have said to Ahasuerus
Just this, word for word:
‘You called me—here I am,
My king, my destined lord.’

The king would have enfolded me
In his royal mantle red
And with no cause for anger,
Would not have wished me dead.”

“Tfoo! Dvoyre. It isn’t nice
To talk so nastily.
My grandpa says that any girl
Who talks like that may be . . .”

“Make way, make way.” They lead the queen
To her execution.
Above her young and lovely head
Wheels a youthful falcon.

She walks along with measured tread,
Her eyes brimful of meaning,
Before the sad and silent crowd
Of tailor lads and maidens.

"I leave you now forever,
Forever and a day,
Speak kindly of me please
When you play the Purim play."

"Make way, make way." They lead the queen
To her execution.
Above her young and lovely head
Wheels a youthful falcon.

ESTHER GETTING READY FOR THE KING

Slim Esther stands at her mirror
In her blue velvet dress.
It's dusk, and at her throat
Her pearls are luminous.

She murmurs, "The Purim players
Mock me and say I'm 'green.'
Enough! I know I'm beautiful—
I wonder what they mean?"

Night falls. At Esther's window
An aged walnut tree
Says, "Esther, where is your uncle?
Esther, where can he be?"

Esther blushes, "My uncle's gone
To the courtyard of the king,
Where maidens fair and their matchmakers
Are gathering.

Ah, walnut tree, in a little while
I, too, will be going there.
Tell me, dearest walnut tree,
Can one be green and fair?"

Steps. Mordecai and his umbrella
Make shadows that seem to crawl,
Like versions of his thin hunched back,
Slowly across the wall.

Scratching his beard, he says,
"Are you ready, are you done?
God bless you. Ah, how fine you look
In that blue velvet gown.

Esther, as I live and breathe,
The king, when he sees you—
You'll knock him absolutely dead.
I give you my word, as a Jew.

Well, best foot forward, Esther dear."
They go off, hushed and still,
The humpbacked little uncle
And Esther, slim and tall.

MORDECAI LEAVING ESTHER'S WEDDING

It's dawn and old Reb Mordecai
Leaves the wedding, tipsy.
The wind toys with his beard
And earlocks like a Gypsy.

What's old Mordecai to do?
Chase him? What the hell!
He's old and tired. Who wants to fight
With a windy ne'er-do-well?

What matters is that Esther,
Thank the Lord, is queen,
And that she's inherited
Vashti's golden crown.

Mordecai imagines himself
In the study house surrounded
By bright-eyed Jews with trembling beards
Whose happiness is unbounded.

“Well, what if Esther’s no daughter of mine—
In fact, she’s only a cousin.
Still, think of the favors she will do
For me and the Jewish nation.”

And Mordecai hears Reb Godl saying,
“Here’s how it was. When I
Made my annual Succoth* trip
To ‘him,’* Reb Mordecai.

God bless him! I heard him say,
‘Who knows the good Lord’s mind?
But I think if He means to save the Jews
It’ll be by a woman’s hand.’”

He prattles on, but though the words
At first seem very near,
They slip away from Mordecai
As to a distant star.

It’s dawn, and old Reb Mordecai
Leaves the wedding, tipsy.
The wind toys with his beard
And earlocks like a Gypsy.

What’s old Mordecai to do?
Chase him? What the hell!
He’s old and tired. Who wants to fight
With a windy ne’er-do-well?

FASTRIGOSSO’S ELEGY

Under Queen Esther’s window stands
Fastrigosso, the tailor’s lad.
“Ah, Esther, do you remember?
‘I love you. I love you,’ you said.

Don’t you remember, Esther dear?
I know what it was I heard.
Esther, why have you deceived me?
Say something, a phrase—a word.

Remember, remember that rainy night
At the gate when we clung together,
And I whispered a secret in your ear
And we did not mind the weather?

I whispered, ‘Esther, marry me,
Let’s elope to Vienna.’
You were wearing a calico dress
And beads the color of henna.

‘But there’s my uncle Mordecai,’
You said, ‘We can’t forget him.
He’ll be awfully mad.’ You blushed
And said, ‘Alright, then, let him.’

Holding each other’s hands,
Each of us plighted our troth
And vowed we would be married
On the Saturday after Shavuoth.*

But see what you’ve let your uncle do!
You’re a queen surrounded by guards.
And I hold the wreck of my youth in my hands
Like a gambler who holds bad cards.

Yes, I’ve thought of drowning myself,
And I’ve hurried down to the river;
But then I worried that even dead
I would yearn for you forever.

And I have thought of wandering
The world's highways and byways.
But then I thought, 'Wherever I go
Your image will greet me, always.'

And you'll tell me again that you love me—
I know what it was I heard.
Esther, why have you deceived me?
Say something . . . a phrase . . . a word."

QUEEN ESTHER CAN'T SLEEP

The king's asleep. Queen Esther lies
Sleepless in her bed.
She stares at the shadows on the wall
And her eyes are wet.

Pale Fastrigosso's in her thoughts—
The tailor's journeyman.
He loved her truly. Now his love's
Forbidden to the queen.

His latest letter's on her shelf.
Written with tears, not ink.
He writes that he means to kill himself.
What's she supposed to think?

It's true, he's made that very threat
A hundred times or more,
And nothing came of it,
For which she thanks the Lord.

But when he writes that he wanders about
And can't find peace of mind,
Then she grows sad and feels herself
On the verge of losing her mind.

She sees him standing before her with
That puppy-dog look in his eyes,
Singing that song for the thousandth time
Of the golden peacock that flies.

But what's accomplished by her tears,
What good's her sorrow for him?
She is the queen through whom will come
The miracle of Purim.

She prays: "Ah, Fastrigosso, go,
My love, my one desire.
It's true that your needle gleams with gold
But the crown draws me with fire."

And Fastrigosso goes. His head
Is bowed. He walks alone,
Singing to himself the song
Of the peacock that has flown.

And tomorrow another letter will be
Slipped somehow onto her shelf,
A letter threatening, once again,
That he means to kill himself.

FASTRIGOSSO DREAMING

Fastrigosso smiles in his sleep, he sees
Esther, all loveliness,
Walking as he remembers her
In her simple calico dress.

Barefoot, devout and slender, she smiles
And the breeze is in her tresses
And her body is fragrant with spring rain
And it smells of fresh-cut grasses.

Bending over him, she says,
"Please forgive me, dear.
Love is not a trivial toy—
It burns like a blazing fire."

And he—he smiles and is content,
"Ah, my darling bride.
You know, I longed for you so much
I thought of suicide.

Come, dear Esther, let's elope
To Vienna as fast as we can;
I'll be a master tailor there
And have three journeymen.

And you will wear a velvet dress
And bake and cook our food;
And I will rock our little child;
And I will chop the wood."

He sees them already mounted on
A horse as fleet as the wind.
Fastrigosso sits behind Esther,
Who holds the reins in her hand.

"Giddap—oh, Esther, I'm falling . . . help!"
But she doesn't see him fall;
She doesn't see his bloody head
Or his bloody nose at all.

He gets to his feet, he runs, he tries
To catch her, but she's gone;
She's disappeared into the east,
Where now there's a rising sun.

Fastrigosso groans deeply in his sleep,
"I've lost her again, my Esther.
And the golden peacock, once again,
Has lost a golden feather."

THE BLESSED MORDECAI, THE MEDIATOR

Mordecai's weary, but still they beg
For favors, large and small.
"Esther the queen, Reb Mordecai,
Is a relative, after all.

She is the darling of the king,
As anyone can see.
For love of her he will annul
His very own decree."

Mordecai groans. They call from their shops
In their thousands, and each is a Jew.
"They've banned us from the marketplace,
Dear Lord! What shall we do?"

And on top of that, his old rabbi and he
Have just ended another discussion:
About decrees and more decrees—
There's no end to the repression.

In the bathhouse they say that What's-his-name,
Haman, the Wicked, is planning
Trouble for us, but Esther the queen
Can undo all of his cunning.

Reb Mordecai smiles. Our enemies
Are self-important asses.
Not a thousand troops have the power that lies
In one of Queen Esther's blouses.

He sets his watch. Tomorrow he'll be
At her back door in the morning.
And, God willing, he means to give
His niece a few words of warning.

She'll wind the king round her finger
Till he does what she wants, you'll see.
For love of her he will annul
His very own decree.

Reb Mordecai pulls off his boots,
He muses a while, and hears
Off in the distance, a pack of dogs
Who bark at the autumn stars.

THE QUEEN COMES TO THE KING

Surely you know that the king
When he sleeps, doesn't sleep alone.
Into his royal bed
Comes Esther in her nightgown.

She creeps under the covers;
She cuddles up to him;
She blows in his ear and whispers
As she tickles him,

"Daddykins, sweetie, my Lord,
Do you really think that it's right
To make that Wicked Haman
A Panjandrum of the State?

And, darling, my dear, if it's true
That you really love me best,
Then you'll do me this tiny favor—
I'll tickle you if you resist."

The king embraces Esther.
"Stop, sweetheart. You cut that out.
I promise you that Haman
Will have an ugly fate.

I'll hang him one fine morning,
Esther, just wait and see.
But darling, stop that tickling.
Esther . . . tee, hee, hee!"

Outside, a wind is blowing,
Outside there is a rain.
If that wind were clever,
If it had half a brain,

It would carry the news to Mordecai
And it would let him know—
To Mordecai the hunchback
Who has a singed eyebrow.

The king whispers to Esther,
"Will you do . . . that thing . . . that I want?"
She cuddles close, and closer:
"I'm yours, Lord, to command."

Until the clock strikes two,
They hug and kiss and play
Then, sadly, Esther falls asleep:

*"Vayhi . . . vayhi bimey."**

FASTRIGOSSO HAS THE BIRDS CARRY A GREETING TO ESTHER

Fly, little birds, fly my darlings,
You know how my heart aches.
Sing, sing at Queen Esther's window,
Sing her this song till she wakes.

Tell her that you have met me
Wandering about on the road.
And tell her the loaf in my knapsack
Is all of the wealth that I own.

And ask her—and tell her—my darlings,
Fly to her roof, fly away.
And sing, along with the breezes,
The words that I've taught you to say:

If the loaf of bread in my knapsack
And the needle in my lapel
Were all that I owned—and Queen Esther,
I'd heed the world not at all.

What was it my master, Fonfosso,
Said—he said it so well?
Ah, yes, a man who is yearning
Is stronger than iron and steel.

How right he is, my old master.
A pearl each word that he says.
Isn't it yearning that drove me—
And drives me—from place to place?

Fly little birds, fly my darlings.
You know how my heart aches.
Sing, sing at Queen Esther's window,
Sing her this song till she wakes.

And if you should chance, my darlings
To see the queen shedding a tear,
Catch it up on a wingtip
And bring it to me here.

The tear of a distant lover
Is wealth of a sort, one might say,
Making it easier and harder
To keep wandering day after day.

HAMAN TELEPHONES VAYZOSSE, THE EDITOR, AT HIS OFFICE

"My son! God damn it to hell,
I have news that you never will guess—
An item for your *Daily Fool*
So hot it will stop the press.

The king—long may he live—
Went last night to the market to hunt.
As usual, he caught nine flies—
Then ten, his usual stint.

There among Jew butcher shops,
Suddenly a wild young man is
Who wields a dagger and shouts,
"Sic semper, o King, tyrannis.

Give me my Esther at once—
Or your days on earth are done.
You think you're a king. Not at all—
You're a bastard, a charlatan."

The king's in the hospital now
And they've jailed the wild young man.
Now, Vayzosse, be smart, spread the news
As widely and quick as you can.

Say it's a dastardly plot
A dreadful intrigue of the Jews.
And when the king gets well,
I'll tell you what else I will do.

"Kill the Jews, my Lord," I will say,
"They're immigrant scum . . . who knows . . .
Lithuanians, Russians, or Poles . . .
And all of them wear funny clothes."

Ah, Vayzosse, my son, you'll see,
The revenge I will take will be good.
This year, the kikes will have
Quite a Purim—a Purim of blood."

Vayzosse smiles. "Yes, yes, yes.
We'll play 'Run, rabbit, run.'
And laugh as they round the kikes up.
And laugh when they're all dead and gone."

Vayzosse at his desk sits and writes;
He laughs, he talks to himself,
As the portrait of the king
Looks benignly down from its shelf.

FONFOSSO, THE MASTER TAILOR, DELIVERS A EULOGY
ON FASRIGOSSO

A crowd of tailors sits in the tavern,
Members of Needle and Shear.
Fonfosso, the Master Tailor, stands
And wipes away a tear.

"I knew Fastrigosso well—
A fine young journeyman.
A decent lad with a heart of gold
And gold in the touch of his hand.

He was quick, very quick with his needle,
Much quicker indeed than the wind.
Many's the time that I offered
To give him my daughter's hand.

I mean my dear Hannah-Dvoyre,
The oldest daughter I have—
A woman as meek and as mild
And true as a turtledove.

But the boy always said, 'My master,
That wedding's not meant to be.
There's only one woman, Queen Esther,
Who's destined to marry me.'

He went on, 'We'll run off to Vienna
And there we'll be married soon.'
It was easy to see that the lad
Was crazier than a loon.

But that he'd make use of a penknife—
My gift—to attack the king
There in the public market . . .
Who could predict such a thing?

Surely you know that rebellion
Is punished by death, to this day.
It's a crime for which Fastrigosso
On the gallows, in chains, had to pay . . .

All the while the poor fellow was singing
Of Esther the beautiful queen,
And that other song of the peacock
That flies on golden wings.

He had bad luck from the outset—
Fastrigosso, the poor journeyman,
Here's to him and pray that his fortunes
Improve where he lies underground."

Thus spoke the old Master Tailor
To the members of Needle and Shear,
And dabbed with his sleeve at his old eyes
To wipe off a second tear.

THE KING AHASUERUS AFTER THE ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT

The king in his underpants looks out
At the sparkling summer night.
He thinks, "How plentiful the stars . . .
How marvelous their light."

He takes a breath, "How sweet it is
To be alive; to shout;
To guzzle wine and fornicate
And wave my sword about.

Just think what might have happened—
Just think what might have been,
If that crazy young tailor had killed me,
What would have happened then?

They'd have stuck me ten feet under,
And there I would have lain
Where birdsong never reaches
And starlight's never seen.

Who knows? Perhaps my Esther
Would mourn for me a year?
If that. Good Lord, what if
She has a love affair?

While I, underground, meet Vashti,
Who cries, 'So it's you, little man—oh!
Tell me, how does my canary,
And who's playing on my grand piano?'"

He shudders. "That Haman is right.
Get rid of them all this time.
Tomorrow I'll send off the letters
At a quarter after nine.

Let the kikes understand that I mean it.
It's not just a Purim play."
Slowly, he closes the window
Against the cool damp of the day.

He sits at his desk. He spits in
The inkwell and takes a deep breath.
Then signs, page by page, the decree
That will send the Jews to their death.

MORDECAI COMES TO QUEEN ESTHER

It's night, Queen Esther patches
The king's shirt in her hand.
Once she was only an orphan,
Estranged in a strange land.

But her mother's soul interceded
And her uncle, the go-between.
Now the fool of a king is her husband
And she is his proper queen.

And Esther can have what she wants—
The king's true and faithful to her . . .
She can bathe both in milk and in wine.
Who could ask for anything more?

Knock, knock. There's a knock at the door.
Slowly, Mordecai comes in.
"Esther, I've brought you some news.
And I'm glad that I find you alone."

She says, "Perhaps my dear uncle
Would like a nice cup of tea?
It's been raining and snowing outdoors—
Storming the livelong day."

"As for that," Uncle Mordecai sighs,
"Things, Esther, are really not good.
On the fourteenth of Adar*—that's Purim—
Blood will be shed. Jewish blood."

Esther is silent. She knows
How angry the king has been
Since he was attacked in the street
By the tailor journeyman.

And she knows that Haman is whispering,
"Jews this . . . and Jews that, and Jews do . . .,"
Reminding the king that the man
Who attacked him was also a Jew.

Softly, old Mordecai says,
"Esther, prepare your great fast.
Satan and I've made a deal
And he's promised to do his best."

He whispers a word in her ear,
"Do you know what I mean or not?
This Purim, with God's help, and yours,
We'll have something to celebrate."

Esther turns feverish, the shirt
She holds falls out of her hand.
Again, she feels like an orphan
Estranged in a strange land.

WICKED HAMAN CAN'T SLEEP

"Haman, what's wrong? Why can't you sleep?"

"I can't, my dear. It's true.

The minute I doze, old Mordecai
Appears in my dream—that Jew.

'Haman,' he says, 'What news, old boy?'

Then he sticks out his tongue.

'I see I've got you climbing the walls:
And your nose . . . good Lord, it's long.'

Then he utters a curse and laughs, 'Ha, ha!'

And he eats a *hamantash**

And takes a drink from my bedside flask—
Jack Daniels, sour mash.

'Haman,' he says, 'To your defeat!

That's what I drink to you.'

Then he hums through his crooked nose some tunes
From *The Essential Jew*.*

'Beat it, you kike,' I cry. He says,
'Like hell,' or something worse.
'Who led whom through the market square
Astride the king's own horse?'"

"Plague take you, my love. You're a man of rank . . .
Remember that you once said
To my father you had a knack for power,
That you had a prime minister's head.

And here you let some scabby Jew
Lead you around by the nose.
Dear jackass, we ought to start feeding you
Oats and chaff and grass."

"Zeresh, my wife, enough, enough.
Spare me your woman's speeches.
Tell me what I'm supposed to do
When the queen wears the royal breeches."

"Do? The thing is to flatter her.
To wind her about, like a thread.
Praise her, Haman, my darling oaf,
And turn her foolish head."

"You're right, as always, Zeresh dear.
And it's true, I'm a simpleton.
Now hand me my trousers, Zeresh, my love . . .
Ah, flattery—that's the plan."

Haman smiles, "I'll fix you, you kike.
Do you hear what I have to say?"
In the garden, a thousand sparrows
Sing to greet the day.

WICKED HAMAN IN THE KING'S COURTYARD

Peter, the royal watchman,
Is sweeping up the dirt
When he sees wicked Haman
In the yard of the king's court.

Peter thinks as he scratches his neck,
"Lord Haman looks a fright;
You can tell from the bags he has under his eyes
That he hasn't slept all night."

"Good morning, Sir Haman," Peter says,
And then he doffs his hat.
"We had one terrible time last night
Because of Queen Esther's cat.

You know her. Well, Mitzi died—
God spare us both. And the queen—
Such weeping and wailing . . . I tell you, Sir,
'Twas like nothing you've ever seen."

Haman twisting his black moustache
Says, "Beat it," and utters a curse;
Then he strides across the palace court
Jingling his sword and spurs.

And Haman sees the queen herself
Where, at the window, she stands
Emptying her silver chamber pot
With her royal hands.

"I thank you, my queen," he says aloud,
"For the favor I've been shown."
Then mutters softly, "Can you believe
The Jewess sleeps in her crown."

"Good morning, Lord Haman," Esther says,
The silver pot in her hands.
"I'd like to invite you, Haman, Sir . . ."
Confused and perplexed, she stands,

And then goes on, "Next Saturday night
I'm giving a great masked ball.
And you're invited, Haman, Sir,
It'll be in the royal hall."

Esther closes the window
And Haman laughs with delight,
"Well, my beautiful Esther, well,
Just wait until Saturday night."

FONFOSSO AND HIS APPRENTICES SEW A UNIFORM FOR HAMAN

Fonfosso, the chalk in his hand, says,
"Better to cut the sleeves short.
Or else," continues the tailor,
"The risk is, we'll run out of cloth."

He says, "Now, apprentices, listen,
You've done fine, and the work's well begun,
But we only have till tomorrow
To get Haman's new uniform done."

Their needles fly, and they're singing,
And the time's just past two A.M.
Fonfosso finds himself musing—
"Merely the thought makes me sick.

Haman—who issues his edicts
As if edicts are all he can do.
If it makes even converts uneasy,
Don't ask what it does to a Jew."

Tall Lozer sings, "A tailor's lad
Saw the queen in a mirror one day
And the beautiful Esther stole
The young man's heart away.

So he said to her, 'Esther, my dear,
Let's elope to Vienna, my queen.
We'll pawn what we own and we'll buy
A Singer sewing machine.'

Fonfosso sighs, "That song was the one
His union comrades made,
Remembering poor Fastrigosso,
Who worked at the tailor's trade."

Their needles fly, they glitter;
And the hands of the clock show four.
The work has to be done by tomorrow,
Haman's new uniform.

Outside, in the court, the apprentice
Waves the iron he has filled with hot coal,
Sending up showers of sparks
Scorching the night as they fall.

PIOUS MORDECAI WAITS FOR SATAN

Mordecai thinks, "Where's the devil—
May his name be blotted out—
Can it be that the fellow's deceived me
Or merely that Satan is late?"

Mordecai's meeting in secret
Tonight with the devil, who said
He would teach him a trick to push Haman
Straight into Queen Esther's bed.

Where she, God bless her, Queen Esther,
Will be lying, apparently sick.
Mordecai, who loves the idea,
Is pleased at this part of the trick.

The king, seeing Haman in bed
With Esther will set up a shout,
"Haman, God damn you, Haman,
What the hell is this all about?"

Making a pass at the queen, eh?
I'll see you six feet underground."
Then turning to Mordecai, he'll say,
"It beats all. I don't understand."

And Haman—here, Mordecai's certain—
Will have a most miserable end.
He sees him strung up on the gallows,
The villain will swing in the wind.

He can hear the excited old rabbi,
"Hey, bring your noisemakers out.
Louder, much louder, the villain
Is dead, beyond any doubt."

But quietly, Mordecai will say—
His voice dignified and genteel,
"I praise the miraculous hand
Of the Lord, who has turned fortune's wheel."

But damn it to hell, where's the devil?
May his name be blotted out.
Can it be that the fellow's deceived him
Or merely that Satan is late?

Mordecai's meeting in secret
Tonight with the devil, who said
He would teach him a trick to push Haman
Straight into Queen Esther's bed.

THE MASTER TAILOR, FONFOSSO, PREPARES TO FAST

The master tailor, Fonfosso,
Sits at his sewing machine;
And sad and dark are the thoughts
That are racing through his brain.

Today, Reb Gedaliah, the rabbi
Read out Queen Esther's decree;
And the rabbi wept as he read it,
It was pitiful to see.

"Jews," thus Esther has written,
"Hear me and obey
All of you, rich or poor,
Shall eat no food today.

The merit of your fast
Will fling bad Haman down.
And pious Jews will get
To keep their beards unshorn

And Jews henceforth will eat
Poppy-seed hamantashn.
And Purim plays each year
Will be in fashion."

The old master tailor sighs,
"The apprentices say they refuse
To fast. They've hidden their needles
And not a one of them sews,

'No, master, no. We won't fast.
No, no, and ten times no.
And if the tyrants come,
We'll break a bone or two.'"

The master tailor Fonfosso
Sits at his sewing machine,
Sad and dark are the thoughts
That are racing through his brain:

He thinks of his wife, Sarah-Gitl,
It's been years since she died.
And of Hannah-Dvoyre, his daughter,
Who's becoming an old maid.

And of his apprentice tailors
Who are plotting some foolish scheme—
And now the master tailor
Sheds tears on his sewing machine.

QUEEN ESTHER, FASTING

Esther, the queen, is weary and pale,
And trembles as if she had fever.
"Soon—in forty-five minutes, thank God,
The fast day will be over."

The king, when he saw her, said, "Dear,
What makes you look so pale?
Tell me what makes you so wan
On a day this beautiful."

How to the foolish king can she say,
"My Lord, I'm pale, it's true . . .
It's Esther's fast and I must fast
Because Mordecai told me to?"

May the fast bring Haman down, Lord,
Him and his flattery . . .
That charlatan, that crashing bore,
That sly old debauchee.

"The light of the sun and the moon and the stars
Compared with you are dim."
Each hypocrite word he utters is false,
But she has to put up with him.

It's what her uncle wants. He says,
"Let him bark on to the end.
Every word of a villain like that
Is a spume that blows in the wind.

The Megillah," her uncle says,
"Has prophesied of him
That Haman one day will be a thing
Of scorn to kith and kin."

That's what her uncle Mordecai says,
And Mordecai understands.
And Esther always does everything
That Mordecai commands.

As she betrayed the tailor's lad
Because it was Mordecai's will:
Yet Fastrigosso, the tailor's lad,
Was a treasure, a perfect jewel.

And here, she's been fasting ever since dawn
At Mordecai's command;
Her uncle's a wise old Jew—
And Mordecai understands.

HAMAN GETS READY FOR THE MASKED BALL

Nervously, Haman paces.
It's almost eight o'clock
And still the uniform's not here—
Damn the tailor kike.

Zeresh, Haman's wife, says, "Dear,
The banquet's not until ten.
No use your getting yourself upset;
You've plenty of time until then.

What matters—pay attention, dear—
The market women say
That the queen is inflamed with desire
And lustful in every way.

They say that on Friday nights
She has a rendezvous
With Satan—and what they say
Is absolutely true.

What more do you need? I myself
Saw you last night in my dream.
You were beside her bed,
Then you disappeared, unseen.

I said to my fortune-teller,
'Interpret the dream,' but he sighed,
'I saw a widow upon a stone
Who lamented and moaned and cried.'

I said to him, 'Uncle, I told you my dream.
Now tell me, interpret, explain.'
He muttered, 'I can't; you'll have to wait
For a while till I know what it means.'

Haman nervously paces,
"Ah, Zeresh, my wife, be still.
You follow my every step and your mouth
Grinds on and on, like a mill.

And the masked ball takes place today,
And the queen is waiting there.
And today is also the Judgment Day
That I've been so eager for.

There's the bell. My dear, open the door.
No doubt it's the tailor's man."
And Haman hears as Fonfosso says,
"I kiss your hand, Madame."

THE KING IS ANGRY

The king is snuffling—a certain sign
That he is hopping mad—
He mutters, “Who ever would have guessed
That Haman would turn out bad?”

But there it is, the man I chose
To be prime minister
Is a crazy pervert who treats the queen
As if she were his whore.

Lucky for me that Mordecai
Came rushing in today—
Dusty and panting and sweating—
And said what he came to say:

‘Your majesty, watch Haman tonight.
I think you’ll find there’s more
To Haman than the plaster saint
Your majesty takes him for.

I’ve seen him—it’s true—as I wish to see
The messiah on his white horse—
Leap into Esther’s bed . . . she screamed
And drove him away, of course.’”

The king is snuffling—a certain sign
That he is hopping mad.
He mutters, “Who ever would have guessed
That Haman would turn out bad?”

Then the king remembers a certain night
When Esther in her nightgown
Came (like a dream from far away)
To his bed, where she lay down.

He remembers that he promised her,
“My darling . . . hee, hee, hee, hee . . .
Haman will hang one fine morning,
Esther, my dearest, you’ll see.”

And Esther the queen had smiled
And given herself to him.
He remembers the perfume in her hair
And his tongue still remembers her skin.

The king folds his hands on his belly—a sign
That he’s thinking with all of his might:
“Is it better to hang the fellow by day,
Or would it be better at night?”

HAMAN BEING TAKEN TO THE GALLOWS

Open the windows,
Fling the doors wide.
Through the streets of the town
Wicked Haman is led.

He’s being led
To the square where a throng
Surrounds the gallows
Where he will be hung.

“Hangman, Hangman,
You know who I am,
Can’t I see my sons
To take my leave of them?”

“Your sons, your sons . . .
Soon someone will bring them
And then when I have done
With you I’ll hang them.”

“Hangman, Hangman,
See my dismal fate.
I who drove in handsome cabs
Now stumble on my feet.

I am dragged from place to place
And haul a heavy chain.
Hangman: can you tell me why?
Perhaps you can explain.

Never mind, Hangman.
I see the gallows
Dancing toward me,
Behind, the mob follows.

I hear the ravens,
The gallows I see.
In the old graveyard,
Please bury me.

But plug up my ears
To spare me the shame
Of the noisemakers drowning
Out Haman's name."

Thus the villain complains
As the women and children
With laughter and insults
Flock to revile him.

THE MASTER TAILOR, FONFOSSO, PRESIDES OVER A BANQUET

Fonfosso wipes his glasses
And is ready to begin
In his gentle fashion
His speech to his journeymen.

"I gather that wicked Haman
Is now a guest of hell.
They're boiling the villain in asphalt,
And it suits the fellow well.

Two pockmarked demon sextons
With scarlet side-curls and beards
Whip him the way a post-horse
Gets the whip on his rear.

That's what comes of his picking
On Jews and their God. More pitch.
Punish him well, he deserves
What he gets, that son of a bitch."

Fonfosso wipes his glasses
And gets ready to speak again . . .
This time to Hannah, his daughter,
And not to his journeymen.

"Well, Hannah-Dvoyre, my daughter,
It's time to set out the food:
Poppy-seed hamantashn . . .
And fish. Ah, that fish is good.

What are you waiting for, fellows?
Drink up, it's time to begin.
Let's get the Purim play ready,"
He says to his journeymen.

The cups resound and they glisten:
"Long life to Needle and Shears.
We drink to the innocent Esther,
To the king, that simpleton-bear."

But Hannah-Dvoyre, the daughter,
Stands looking out at the night:
"I wonder how many stars it takes
To shed so much Purim light?"

FASTRIGOSSO'S MOTHER LIGHTS A MEMORIAL CANDLE

Fastrigosso's old mother
Has hot tears on her face
As she lights the memorial candle
And puts it back in its place.

"A year, a year has passed
And still the stars shine on . . .
While I, the ancient raven,
Am here, and my son is gone.

It seems only yesterday
That they led him away in chains
To the gallows. A sight so dreadful
It should have moved the stones

To see how at the last moment
He uttered Queen Esther's name—
You'd have to search the world over
To find such another gem.

You may search the wide world over
And still you will not find
A jewel such as Fastrigosso was,
A diamond—one of a kind.

'Was'! Ah, Father in heaven!
Was and is gone . . . and is gone.
While I, the ancient raven,
Live, and the stars shine on.

I wish she was dead and buried
That whore, that Esther, that queen!
All the while that he lay in prison
She never inquired about him.

What if she presides over Purim?
A desolate Purim to her
And to Mordecai, her uncle,
The rich man, the entrepreneur."

Fastrigosso's old mother
Has hot tears on her face
As she lights the memorial candle
And puts it back in its place.