

Mercy shield us! Rabbi Nissim, of blessed memory, who traveled about in the world for many years, used to say, "May I forfeit my portion in the redemption of Israel, if I did not behold him once floating off into the Great Sea on a red kerchief, with an infant child in his arms. And even though the hour was twilight, and the sun was setting, I swear by all that we yearn for in prayer that it was he, but as for that child—I do not know who that was."

At the present time it is said that he has been seen wandering about in the Holy Land. The world-wise cavil and quibble, and even—some of them—mock. But little children insist that at times, in the twilight, an old man hails them, and peering into their eyes drifts into the gathering dusk. And whoever has heard the tale here recounted surely knows that the man is that rabbi, he, and no other. But God alone knows for a fact.

Translated by BARUCH HOCHMAN

The Kerchief

1

EVERY YEAR my father, of blessed memory, used to visit the Lashkowitz fair to do business with the merchants. Lashkowitz is a small town of no more consequence than any of the other small towns in the district, except that once a year merchants gather together there from everywhere and offer their wares for sale in the town's marketplace; and whoever needs goods comes and buys them. In earlier times, two or three generations ago, more than a hundred thousand people used to gather together there; and even now, when Lashkowitz is in its decline, they come to it from all over the country. You will not find a single merchant in the whole of Galicia who does not keep a stall in Lashkowitz during the fair.

2

For us the week in which my father went to the market was just like the week of the Ninth of Ab. During those days there was not a smile to be seen on Mother's lips, and the children also refrained from laughing. Mother, peace be with

her, used to cook light meals with milk and vegetables, and all sorts of things which children do not dislike. If we caused her trouble she would quiet us, and did not rebuke us even for things which deserved a beating. I often used to find her sitting at the window with moist eyelids. And why should my mother sit at the window; did she wish to watch the passersby? Why, she, peace be with her, never concerned herself with other people's affairs, and would only half hear the stories her neighbors might tell her; but it was her custom, ever since the first year in which my father went to Lashkowitz, to stand at the window and look out.

When my father, of blessed memory, went to the fair at Lashkowitz for the first time, my mother was once standing at the window when she suddenly cried out, "Oh, they're strangling him!" Folk asked her, "What are you saying?" She answered, "I see a robber taking him by the throat"; and before she had finished her words she had fainted. They sent to the fair and found my father injured, for at the very time that my mother had fainted, somebody had attacked my father for his money and had taken him by the throat; and he had been saved by a miracle. In later years, when I found in the Book of Lamentations the words "She is become as a widow," and I read Rashi's explanation, "As a woman whose husband has gone to a distant land and who intends to return to her," it brought to mind my mother, peace be with her, as she used to sit at the window with her tears upon her cheeks.

3

All the time that Father was in Lashkowitz I used to sleep in his bed. As soon as I had said the night prayer I used to undress and stretch my limbs in his long bed, cover myself up to my ears and keep them pricked up and ready so that in

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case I heard the trumpet of the Messiah I might rise at once. It was a particular pleasure for me to meditate on Messiah the King. Sometimes I used to laugh to myself when I thought of the consternation that would come about in the whole world when our just Messiah would reveal himself. Only yesterday he was binding his wounds and his bruises, and today he's a king! Yesterday he sat among the beggars and they did not recognize him, but sometimes even abused him and treated him with disrespect; and now suddenly the Holy One, blessed be He, has remembered the oath He swore to redeem Israel, and given him permission to reveal himself to the world. Another in my place might have been angered at the beggars who treated Messiah the King with disrespect; but I honored and revered them, since Messiah the King had desired to dwell in their quarters. In my place another might have treated the beggars without respect, as they eat black bread even on the Sabbaths, and wear dirty clothes. But I honored and revered them, since among them were those who had dwelt together with the Messiah.

4

Those were fine nights in which I used to lie on my bed and think of Messiah the King, who would reveal himself suddenly in the world. He would lead us to the Land of Israel where we would dwell, every man under his own vine and his own fig tree. Father would not go to fairs, and I would not go to school but would walk about all day long in the courts of the House of our God. And while lying and meditating thus, my eyes would close of their own accord; and before they closed entirely I would take my fringed garment and count the knots I had made in the fringes, indicating the number of days my father stayed in Lashkowitz. Then all sorts of lights, green, white, black, red, and blue, used

to come toward me, like the lights seen by wayfarers in fields and woods and valleys and streams, and all kinds of precious things would be gleaming and glittering in them; and my heart danced for joy at all the good stored away for us in the days to come, when our just Messiah would reveal himself, may it be speedily and in our days, Amen.

While I rejoiced so, a great bird would come and peck at the light. Once I took my fringed garment and tied myself to his wings and said, "Bird, bird, take me to Father." The bird spread its wings and flew with me to a city called Rome. I looked down and saw a group of poor men sitting at the gates of the city, and one beggar among them binding his wounds. I turned my eyes away from him in order not to see his sufferings. When I turned my eyes away there grew a great mountain with all kinds of thorns and thistles upon it and evil beasts grazing there, and impure birds and ugly creeping things crawling about it, and a great wind blew all of a sudden and flung me onto the mountain, and the mountain began quaking under me and my limbs felt as though they would fall asunder; but I feared to cry out lest the creeping things should enter my mouth and the impure birds should peck at my tongue. Then Father came and wrapped me in his prayer shawl and brought me back to my bed. I opened my eyes to gaze at his face and found that it was day. At once I knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, had rolled away another night of the nights of the fair. I took my fringes and made a fresh knot.

5

Whenever Father returned from the fair he brought us many gifts. He was very clever, knowing what each of us would want most and bringing it to us. Or maybe the Master

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of Dreams used to tell Father what he showed us in dream, and he would bring it for us.

There were not many gifts that survived long. As is the way of the valuables of this world, they were not lasting. Yesterday we were playing with them, and today they were already thrown away. Even my fine prayerbook was torn, for whatever I might have had to do, I used to open it and ask its counsel; and finally nothing was left of it but a few dog-eared scraps.

But one present which Father brought Mother remained whole for many years. And even after it was lost it was not lost from my heart, and I still think of it as though it were yet there.

6

That day, when Father returned from the fair, it was Friday, after the noon hour, when the children are freed from school. This fact should not be mentioned to children. Those Friday afternoon hours were the best time of the week, because all the week around a child is bent over his book and his eyes and heart are not his own; as soon as he raises his head he is beaten. On Friday afternoon he is freed from study, and even if he does whatever he wants to, nobody objects. Were it not for the noon meal the world would be like Paradise. But Mother had already summoned me to eat, and I had no heart to refuse.

Almost before we had begun eating my little sister put her right hand to her ear and set her ear to the table. "What are you doing?" Mother asked her. "I'm trying to listen," she answered. Mother asked, "Daughter, what are you trying to listen to?" Then she began clapping her hands with joy and crying, "Father's coming, Father's coming." And in a little

while we heard the wheels of a wagon. Very faint at first, then louder and louder. At once we threw our spoons down while they were still half full, left our plates on the table, and ran out to meet Father coming back from the fair. Mother, peace be with her, also let her apron fall and stood erect, her arms folded on her bosom, until Father entered the house.

How big Father was then! I knew my father was bigger than all the other fathers. All the same I used to think there must be someone taller than he—but now even the chandelier hanging from the ceiling in our house seemed to be lower.

Suddenly Father bent down, caught me to him, kissed me, and asked me what I had learned. Is it likely that Father did not know which portion of the week was being read? But he only asked to try me out. Before I could answer he had caught my brother and sisters, raised them on high, and kissed them.

I look about me now to try and find something to which to compare my father when he stood together with his tender children on his return from afar, and I can think of many comparisons, each one finer than the next; yet I can find nothing pleasant enough. But I hope that the love halving my father, of blessed memory, may wrap us around whenever we come to embrace our little children, and that joy which possessed us then will be possessed by our children all their lives.

The wagoner entered, carrying two trunks, one large, and the other neither large nor small but medium. Father looked with one eye at us and with the other at the medium trunk;

and that second trunk too seemed to have eyes and smile with them.

Father took his bunch of keys from his pocket and said, "We'll open the trunk and take out my prayer shawl and phylacteries." Father was just speaking for fun, since who needs phylacteries on Friday afternoon, and even if you think of the prayer shawl, my father had a special one for Sabbath, but he only said it in order that we should not be too expectant and not be too anxious for presents.

But we went and undid the straps of the trunk and watched his every movement while he took one of the keys and examined it, smiling affectionately. The key also smiled at us; that is, gleams of light sparkled on the key and it seemed to be smiling.

Finally he pressed the key into the lock, opened the trunk, put his hand inside, and felt among his possessions. Suddenly he looked at us and became silent. Had Father forgotten to place the presents there? Or had he been lodging at an inn where the inn people rose and took out the presents? As happened with the sage by whose hands they sent a gift to the Emperor, a chest full of jewels and pearls, and when he lodged one night at the inn, the inn folk opened the chest and took out everything that was in it and filled it with dust. Then I prayed that just as a miracle was done to that sage so that that dust should be the dust of Abraham our father, which turned into swords when it was thrown into the air, so should the Holy One, blessed be He, perform a miracle with us in order that the things with which the innkeepers had filled Father's trunk should be better than all presents. Before my prayer was at an end Father brought out all kinds of fine things. There was not a single one among his gifts which we had not longed for all the year around. And that is why I said that the Master of Dreams must have revealed to Father what he had shown us in dream.

The gifts of my father deserve to be praised at length, but

who is going to praise things that will vanish, and be lost? All the same, one fine gift which my father brought my mother on the day that he returned from the fair deserves to be mentioned in particular.

8

It was a silk brocaded kerchief adorned with flowers and blossoms. On the one side it was brown and they were white, while on the other they were brown and it was white. That was the gift which Father, of blessed memory, brought to Mother, peace be with her.

Mother opened up the kerchief, stroked it with her fingers, and gazed at Father; he gazed back at her and they were silent. Finally she folded it again, rose, put it in the cupboard, and said to Father, "Wash your hands and have a meal." As soon as Father sat down to his meal I went out to my friends in the street and showed them the presents I had received, and was busy outside with them until the Sabbath began and I went to pray with Father.

How pleasant that Sabbath eve was when we returned from the House of Prayer! The skies were full of stars, the houses full of lamps and candles, people were wearing their Sabbath clothes and walking quietly beside Father in order not to disturb the Sabbath angels who accompany one home from the House of Prayer on Sabbath eves: candles were alight in the house and the table prepared and the fine smell of white bread, and a white tablecloth spread and two Sabbath loaves on it, covered by a small cloth out of respect so that they should not feel ashamed when the blessing is said first over the wine.

Father bowed and entered and said, "A peaceful and blessed Sabbath," and Mother answered, "Peaceful and blessed." Father looked at the table and began singing,

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"Peace be unto you, angels of peace," while Mother sat at the table, her prayerbook in hand, and the big chandelier with the ten candles—one for each of the Ten Commandments—hanging from the ceiling, gave light. They were answered back by the rest of the candles, one for Father, one for Mother, one for each of the little ones; and although we were smaller than Father and Mother, all the same our candles were as big as theirs.

Then I looked at Mother and saw that her face had changed and her forehead had grown smaller because of the kerchief wound around her head and covering her hair, while her eyes seemed much larger and were shining toward Father, who went on singing, "A woman of valor who shall find?"; and the ends of her kerchief which hung down below her chin were quivering very gently, because the Sabbath angels were moving their wings and making a wind. It must have been so, for the windows were closed and where could the wind have come from if not from the wings of the angels? As it says in the Psalms, "He maketh the winds His messengers." I held back my breath in order not to confuse the angels and looked at my mother, peace be with her, who stood at such a lofty rung, and wondered at the Sabbath day, which is given us for an honor and a glory. Suddenly I felt how my cheeks were being patted. I do not know whether the wings of the angels or the corners of the kerchief were caressing me. Happy is he who merits to have good angels hovering over his head, and happy is he whose mother has stroked his head on the Sabbath eve.

9

When I awakened from sleep it was already day. The whole world was full of the Sabbath morning. Father and Mother were about to go out, he to his little prayer room and

she to the House of Study of my grandfather, peace be with him. Father was wearing a black satin robe and a round shtrimeil of sable on his head, and Mother wore a black dress and a hat with feathers. In the House of Study of my grandfather, where Mother used to pray, they did not spend too much time singing, and so she could return early. When I came back with Father from the small prayer room she was already seated at the table wearing her kerchief, and the table was prepared with wine and cakes, large and small, round and doubled over. Father entered, said, "A Sabbath of peace and blessing," put his prayer shawl on the bed, sat down at the head of the table, said, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," blessed the wine, tasted the cake, and began, "A Psalm of David: The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." When the Ark is opened on the eve of the New Year and this psalm is said, the soul's awakening can be felt in the air. There was a similar stirring in my heart then. Had my mother not taught me that you do not stand on chairs and do not clamber onto the table and do not shout, I would have climbed onto the table and shouted out, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof"; like that child in the Talmud who used to be seated in the middle of a gold table which was a load for sixteen men, with sixteen silver chains attached, and dishes and glasses and bowls and platters fitted, and with all kinds of food and sweetmeats and spices of all that was created in the six days of creation; and he used to proclaim, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."

Mother cut the cake, giving each his or her portion; and the ends of her kerchief accompanied her hands. While doing so a cherry fell out of the cake and stained her apron; but it did not touch her kerchief, which remained as clean as it had been when Father took it out of his trunk.

8

10

A woman does not put on a silken kerchief every day or every Sabbath. When a woman stands at the oven, what room is there for ornament? Every day is not Sabbath, but on the other hand there are festivals. The Holy One, blessed be He, took pity on His creatures and gave them times of gladness, holidays and appointed seasons. On festivals Mother used to put on a feather hat and go to the House of Prayer, and at home she would don her kerchief. But on the New Year and the Day of Atonement she kept the kerchief on all day long; similarly on the morning of Hoshana Rabbah, the seventh day of Tabernacles. I used to look at Mother on the Day of Atonement, when she wore her kerchief and her eyes were bright with prayer and fasting. She seemed to me like a prayerbook bound in silk and presented to a bride.

The rest of the time the kerchief lay folded in the cupboard, and on the eves of the Sabbaths and festivals Mother would take it out. I never saw her washing it, although she was very particular about cleanliness. When Sabbaths and festivals are properly kept, they themselves preserve the clothes. But for me she would have kept the kerchief all her life long and would have left it as an heirloom.

What happened was as follows. On the day I became thirteen years old and a member of the congregation, my mother, peace be with her, bound her kerchief around my neck. Blessed be God, who has given His world to guardians. There was not a spot of dirt to be found on the kerchief. But sentence had already been passed on the kerchief, that it was to be lost through me. This kerchief, which I had observed so much and so long, would vanish because of me.

11

Now I shall pass from one theme to another until I return to my original theme. At that time there came a beggar to our town who was sick with running sores; his hands were swollen, his clothes were rent and tattered, his shoes were cracked, and when he showed himself in the street the children threw earth and stones at him. And not only the children but even the grownups and householders turned angry faces on him. Once when he went to the market to buy bread or onions the shopwomen drove him away in anger. Not that the shopwomen in our town were cruel; indeed, they were tender-hearted. Some would give the food from their mouths to orphans, others went to the forest, gathered twigs, made charcoal of them, and shared them free among the beggars and poor folk. But every beggar has his own luck. When he fled from them and entered the House of Study, the beadle shouted at him and pushed him out. And when on the Sabbath eve he crept into the House of Study, nobody invited him to come home with them and share the Sabbath meal. God forbid that the sons of our father Abraham do not perform works of charity; but the ministers of Satan used to accompany that beggar and pull a veil over Jewish eyes so that they should not perceive his dire needs. As to where he heard the blessing over wine, and where he ate his three Sabbath meals—if he was not sustained by humankind he must have been sustained by the grace of God.

Hospitality is a great thing, since buildings are erected and administrators appointed for the sake of it and to support the poor. But I say it in praise of our townfolk, that although they did not establish any poorhouse or elect any administrators, every man who could do so used to find

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a place for a poor man in his own house, thus seeing the troubles of his brother and aiding him and supporting him at the hour of his need; and his sons and daughters who saw this would learn from his deeds. When trouble befell a man he would groan; the walls of his house would groan with him because of the mighty groaning of the poor; and he would know that there are blows even greater than that which had befallen him. And as he comforted the poor, so would the Holy One, blessed be He, in the future comfort him.

12

Now I leave the beggar and shall tell only of my mother's kerchief, which she tied around my neck when I entered the age of Commandments and was to be counted a member of the congregation. On that day, when I returned from the House of Study to eat the midday meal, I was dressed like a bridegroom and was very happy and pleased with myself because I was now putting on phylacteries. On the way I found that beggar sitting on a heap of stones, changing the bandages of his sores, his clothes rent and tattered, nothing but a bundle of rags which did not even hide his sores. He looked at me as well. The sores on his face seemed like eyes of fire. My heart stopped, my knees began shaking, my eyes grew dim, and everything seemed to be in a whirl. But I took my heart in my hand, nodded to the beggar, and greeted him, and he returned the greeting.

Suddenly my heart began thumping, my ears grew hot, and a sweetness such as I had never experienced in all my days took possession of all my limbs; my lips and my tongue where sweet with it, my mouth fell agape, my two eyes were opened, and I stared before me as a man who sees in waking what has been shown him in dream. And so I stood staring

in front of me. The sun stopped still in the sky, not a creature was to be seen in the street; but He in His mercy sat in Heaven and looked down upon the earth and let His light shine bright on the sores of the beggar. I began loosening my kerchief to breathe more freely, for tears stood in my throat. Before I could loosen it, my heart began racing in strong emotion, and the sweetness, which I had already felt, doubled and redoubled. I took off the kerchief and gave it to the beggar. He took it and wound it around his sores. The sun came and stroked my neck.

I looked around. There was not a creature in the market, but a pile of stones lay there and reflected the sun's light. For a little while I stood there without thinking. Then I moved my feet and returned home.

13

When I reached the house I walked around it on all four sides. Suddenly I stopped at Mother's window, the one from which she used to look out. The place was strange; the sun's light upon it did not dazzle but warmed, and there was perfect rest there. Two or three people passing slowed their paces and lowered their voices; one of them wiped his brow and sighed deeply. It seems to me that that sigh must still be hanging there.

I stood there awhile, a minute or two minutes or more. Finally I moved from thence and entered the house. When I entered I found Mother sitting in the window as was her way. I greeted her and she returned my greeting. Suddenly I felt that I had not treated her properly; she had had a fine kerchief which she used to bind around her head on Sabbaths and festivals, and I had taken it and given it to a beggar to bind up his feet with. Ere I had ended asking her to forgive me she was gazing at me with love and affection. I gazed back

at her, and my heart was filled with the same gladness as I had felt on that Sabbath when my mother had set the kerchief about her head for the first time.

The end of the story of the kerchief of my mother, peace be with her.

Translated by I. M. LASK