
This is a reproduction of a library book that was digitized by Google as part of an ongoing effort to preserve the information in books and make it universally accessible.

Google™ books

<https://books.google.com>



51380



~~375~~

~~32~~

The God of Vengeance

Drama in Three Acts

By SHOLOM ASH

Authorized Translation from the Yiddish
With Introduction and Notes

by ISAAC GOLDBERG

Preface by Abraham Cahan
Editor of The Jewish Daily Forward
and Author of "The Rise of
David Levinsky"



BOSTON

THE STRATFORD CO., PUBLISHERS

M C M X V I I I



892.4
A319 E

Copyright 1918
The STRATFORD CO., Publishers
Boston, Mass.

The Alpine Press, Boston, Mass., U. S. A.

Preface

By ABRAHAM CAHAN

Editor of the Jewish Daily Forward and author of "Yekl," "The White Terror and the Red," "The Rise of David Levinsky," etc.

THE birth of Yiddish literature in Russia and the beginning of the great Jewish exodus from that country to America are two effects of one and the same cause. The same anti-semitic crusade that forced the Children of Israel to go beyond the seas in search of a safe home, aroused them to a new sense of their racial self-respect and to an unwonted interest in their native tongue.

Prior to the anti-Jewish riots of 1881 educated Jews were wont to look upon their mother tongue as a jargon beneath the dignity of cultured attention. Yiddish, more especially in its written form, was the language of the untutored. People with modern training spoke and wrote Russian. As for the intellectual class of the Talmudic type, it would carry on its correspondence and, indeed, write its essays, verse and fiction, in the language of Isaiah. One wrote Yiddish to one's mother, for the mothers of those days were not apt to understand anything else. For the rest, the tongue of the Jewish masses was never taken seriously and the very no-

PREFACE

tion of a literature in "a gibberish that has not even a grammar" would have seemed ludicrous.

Popular stories and songs were written in Yiddish long before the end of the nineteenth century, but, barring certain exceptions, these were intended exclusively for the most ignorant elements of the populace, and were contemptuously described as "servant-maid literature." (As for Yiddish poetry, it was almost wholly confined to the purposes of the wedding bard.) The exceptions here mentioned belong to the sixties and the seventies, when some brilliant attempts were made in the direction of literature in the better sense of the term by S. J. Abramovitch. But Abramovitch's stories were not even regarded as vanguard swallows heralding the approach of Spring. They aroused an amused sort of admiration. Indeed, it required a peculiar independence of mind to read them at all, and while they were greeted with patronizing applause, it was a long time before they found imitators.

All this changed when the whip of legal discrimination and massacres produced the "national awakening" of the educated Jew. Thousands of enlightened men and women then suddenly made the discovery, as it were, that the speech of their childhood was not a jargon, but a real language,—that instead of being a wretched conglomeration of uncouth words and phrases, it was rich in neglected beauty and possessed a homely vigor full of artistic possibilities. A stimulus was given to writing Yiddish "as the Gentiles do their mother tongues." Abramovitch was hailed as "the father of Yiddish

PREFACE

literature" and his example was followed by a number of new writers, several of whom proved to be men of extraordinary gifts.

The movement bears curious resemblance to that of the present literary renaissance of Ireland.

Some truly marvelous results were soon achieved, the list of writers produced by the new literature including the names of men like Rabinovitch (Sholom Aleikhem) and Peretz, whose tales were crowned with immense popularity.

Sholom Ash belongs to a younger group of Yiddish story-tellers and now that Abramovitch, Rabinovitch and Peretz are in their graves (they have all died during the last two years) he is the most popular living producer of Yiddish fiction.

His narratives and plays are alive with a spirit of poetic realism, with a stronger leaning toward the poetic than toward reality, perhaps, but always throbbing with dramatic force and beauty. Sholom Ash's passion for color and melody manifests itself as much in his rich, ravishing style as in the picturesque images it evokes. The "jargon of servant maids" becomes music in his hands.

His "God of Vengeance," which is his strongest play, is one of the best things he has written in any form. Absorbingly interesting and instinct with human sympathy, it mounts to a natural climax of cataclysmal force and great spiritual beauty.

The theme, while thoroughly original and unique, reflects the artistic traditions of the country in which the author was born and bred. It was a matter of course that the young literature of which he

PREFACE

is a conspicuous representative should shape itself under the influence of the much older and richer literary treasures of Slavic Russia and Poland. If it was natural for the novel of countries like France, Germany, Norway or Italy to fall under the sway of Turgenev, Tolstoi, Dostoyevski, Chekhov and Gorki, how much more so was it for a non-Russian fiction produced on Russian soil to seek guidance, directly or indirectly, in the same source.

Human sympathy is the watchword. Pity for and interest in the underdog—the soul of Russian art—became, from the very outset, the underlying principle of the new-born Yiddish art. No human being is so utterly brutalized as to possess not a single spark worthy of the artist's sympathetic, though ruthlessly impartial, attention,—this is the basic rule of Yiddish letters.

Himself a creature of the gutter, Yekel Tchaftchovitch, the central figure of "The God of Vengeance," is stirred by the noblest ambition known to a father in the world of orthodox Judaism. Imbedded in the slime that fills Yekel's soul is a jewel of sparkling beauty. But the very income by which he seeks to secure his daughter's spiritual splendor contains the germs of her loathsome fall and of his own crushing defeat.

The clash between Yekel's revolting career and his paternal idealism, and the catastrophe to which it inevitably leads form one of the strongest and most fascinating situations known to the modern drama.

PREFACE

I cannot conclude without a word of well-earned praise for the English version of "The God of Vengeance." Dr. Isaac Goldberg's translation is not only a thoroughly correct and felicitous equivalent of the original, but a piece of art in itself.

New York City, April, 1918.

Introduction

SHOLOM ASH is one of the chief authors in contemporary Yiddish letters,—a literature at present enjoying a renaissance that attests the remarkable vitality of a people long oppressed in intellectual no less than in economic domains,—a literature that has much to teach America in the way of fearlessness before the facts of life, frankness in their interpretation and persistent idealism in face of the most degrading and debasing environment. Indeed, the conjunction of squalid surroundings, sordid occupation and idealistic yearning to be met so frequently in Jewish writers arises most naturally from the peculiar conditions of much of the life in ghettos the world over.

It is interesting to consider Ash's "The God of Vengeance" in connection with a play like "Mrs. Warren's Profession." To be sure, there is no technical resemblance between the two dramas; nor, despite an external similarity in backgrounds, is there any real identity of purpose. Shaw's play is essentially sociological, and is a drama of disillusionment. Ash's piece glows with poetic realism and recounts an individual tragedy not without symbolic power. Yet the essentially (though not conventionally) moral earnestness of both Shaw and Ash brings the circles of their themes in a sense tangent to each other.

Mrs. Warren cherishes no delusions about her

INTRODUCTION

dubious profession,— neither the delusion of that sentimentalization of the prostitute which Dumas helped so much to effect and which Augier strove to combat, nor the delusion of the conservative, conventional horror before an institution for the perpetuation of which conservatism and conventionalism are much to blame. If Yekel and his wife (in Ash's play) are not so enlightened as Mrs. Warren in their views upon the traffic off which they live, they are in their own crude way equally sincere in beholding in it a business quite as legitimate as any other. With the same inconsistency with which Hindel implores Heaven for aid in achieving her nefarious aims, after which she promises to be a model wife and mother (See Act Two), Mrs. Warren at the end of Shaw's play swears by Heaven that henceforth she will lead a life of evil.

In the case of Yekel and his wife, as in Mrs. Warren's, another touch of inconsistency is added by the agreement that theirs is not the best of professions. Crofts, too, in the English play, discusses the business with all the matter-of-factness of Ash's Shloyme, yet considers himself a gentleman none the less.

Rifkele, of course, is no Vivie. Ash's simple-minded Jewish girl is a victim, not a rebel. Yet in either case the daughter is lost to the parents, and the power of money is of no avail to win the child back. And just as Yekel, in his impotence, blasphemously thrusts the Holy Scroll from his household, so does Mrs. Warren, defeated in her attempt to win back her daughter, cry "From this

INTRODUCTION

time forth, so help me Heaven in my last hour, I'll do wrong and nothing but wrong. And I'll prosper on it." Perhaps, too, the retribution which in each case is visited upon the parent arises from the fact that both Mrs. Warren and Yekel have, in Vivie's accusatory words, "lived one life and believed in another."

"The God of Vengeance," despite conclusions too easily drawn, is not a sex play. When Ash wishes to deal with sex as sex he is not afraid to handle the subject with all the poetry and power at his command. Such a play as his "Jephthah's Daughter" treats the elemental urge of sex with daring, beauty and Dionysiac abandon. Here, too, a golden symbolism wafts through the piece. Again, in his powerful novel "Mottke the Vagabond," Ash has given us scenes from the underworld of Warsaw that are unparalleled for unflinching truth to detail. "The God of Vengeance," however, despite the sordid environment in which the play takes place, possesses a certain moral beauty,—a beauty much dimmed, perhaps, by the repellant human beings who are its carriers, but a beauty none the less. Its symbolism and its poetry lift it far above the brothel in which it takes place. And what a strong conception is the Holy Scroll, itself one of the chief characters, and how frightfully eloquent in the mysterious, religious power that the dramatist has woven around it!*

*The Holy Scroll, the religious significance of which is fully explained in the course of the play, is a parchment manuscript containing the first five books of the Bible, together known as the Torah, or Law. (Pentateuch).

INTRODUCTION

First produced by the famous director Max Reinhardt, at the Deutsches Theater, Berlin, in 1910, Ash's powerful play quickly made its way to the chief stages of Europe. It has been played all over Germany, Austria, Russia, Poland, Holland, Norway, Sweden and Italy. In Italy it created a marked impression during the entire season of 1916. "The God of Vengeance" has been translated into Hebrew, German, Russian, Polish, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, Italian and French.

Ash himself is yet a young man, having been born near Warsaw, some thirty-seven years ago. He is at present settled in New York, where pages flow in rapid succession from his prolific pen. Among his better known works are the following:

THE TOWN. A collection of sketches depicting Yiddish life in the "staedtil" of the Old World. It was this work that brought him into prominence at the age of twenty-four.

MERI and THE ROAD TO SELF. A pair of novels forming a continuous whole, in which the author, with a wealth of color and episode, depicts the wanderings of Jewish souls in search of self-realization. The background, mainly that of the Russian revolution of 1905, shifts to various parts of the globe. The books are rich in poetry and movement, and have been referred to as the epic of the Yiddish part in the revolution of 1905. Besides this the love story of Meri Rosenzweig and Misha, and the figures of Rachel and Kovalski the

INTRODUCTION

artist, lend to the novels all the charm that love can add to adventure and beautiful language to both.

MOTTKE THE VAGABOND. (Translated into English.) A powerful tale of life in the underworld of Warsaw, and the career of a Yiddish "cellar-child." American critics have found Ash, in this book, comparable in various respects to such authors as Hugo, Dickens and Gorki.

THE SINNER. (Translated into English.) A one-act symbolic play of intense power, which has been likened for its atmosphere to certain of Maeterlinck's dramas. The story, which deals with the refusal of a Jewish grave to receive the corpse of a man who has sinned by marrying out of the faith, is developed with penetrating skill and impartial outlook.

OUR FAITH. A full-length drama upon a theme similar to that just touched upon. The author's refusal to cater to orthodox views shows his artistic independence.

SHORT STORIES. The best of the numerous short stories that Ash has published in his various collections attain a high degree of artistic excellence. That same nervous prose as distinguishes his longer pieces, that same linguistic iridescence,—one might term it,—as he achieves in such remarkable places as Chapter XIII (Part One) of "Meri" and Chapter XLI (Part Two) of "The Road to Self," are encountered often in his many shorter tales.

INTRODUCTION

In his more notable work Ash glows with a spontaneous artistry. It is this part of Ash's work that holds much pleasure in store for an increasing number of American readers who are awakening to the beauties of Yiddish literature.

ISAAC GOLDBERG.

Roxbury, Mass., April, 1918.

Persons of the Drama

YEKEL TCHAFTCHOVITCH, *familiarly known as the "Uncle;" the owner of a brothel.*

SARAH, *his wife; formerly a prostitute.*

RIFKELE, *their daughter; a young girl of about seventeen.*

HINDEL, *first girl of the brothel; a girl of some thirty odd years, but much older in appearance.*

MANKE, *second girl; rather young.*

REIZEL, *third girl.*

BASHA, *a country lass, recently arrived.*

SHLOYME, *a procurer; Hindel's betrothed, a handsome chap of twenty-six.*

REB ALI, *a matchmaker; neighbor of the "Uncle."*

REB YANKEV, *a pious Scribe.*

A STRANGER, *father of Rifkele's proposed husband.*

A POOR WOMAN, *blind in one eye.*

Poor Men and Women of the neighborhood.

TIME: The Present.

PLACE: One of the larger towns of a Russian province.

ACT I

SCENE: *The "Uncle's" private dwelling on the ground floor of an old wooden house. Below, in the cellar, is the brothel. A flight of rickety wooden stairs, whose creaking announces the coming of all visitors, leads from the outside into the home, which consists of a large room with a low ceiling. The furniture is new, in the cheap Warsaw style, and does not at all harmonize with the old-fashioned structure. On the wall hang pictures embroidered upon canvas, depicting scenes from the Bible, such as "Adam and Eve at the Tree of Knowledge," etc. These are evidently a young girl's handiwork. At the rear, the door leading to the outside. To the right, a door leading to Rifkele's room. At each side of this door, placed against the wall, a bed piled high with bedding. To the left, two low windows, hung with curtains and provided with shutters that close from the inside. Before the windows, pots of flowers; between, a cupboard; at the side of one of the windows, a bureau.*

The finishing touches are being put to the cleaning of the room. . . Evidently guests are expected. . . Extra tables and benches have been placed about, laden with baskets of bread, cake, fruit, etc.

An afternoon in early spring.

Act I

SARAH and RIFKELE are discovered as the curtain rises. Sarah is a tall, slender, prepossessing woman. Her features have become coarsened, yet they retain traces of her former beauty, which has even now a tone of insolence. On her head lies a wig, through which, from time to time, shows a lock of her alluring hair. She is dressed quite soberly, as befits a mother, yet a vulgar display of jewels spoils this effect. Her movements, too, reveal that she is not quite liberated from the influences of the world out of which she has risen.

Rifkele is a fascinating girl, dressed very neatly and modestly; still in short dresses, with two long braids hanging across her shoulders. She is busy decorating the room.

RIFKELE, as she pins some paper flowers to the curtain.

There! That's the way, mamma dear. And now to decorate the mirror. See, mamma dear. Won't this be pretty?

SARAH, busy arranging the table.

Hurry, daughter dear, hurry. Your father has already gone to ask the guests to bring the Holy Scroll home.

[3]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

RIFKELE

Won't that be lovely! We'll have a house full of people. . . There'll be playing and singing. . . Yes, mamma dear?

SARAH

Yes, my darling. It's a sacred event, — a great merit in the eyes of God. . . Not everyone can have a Holy Scroll written. Only a man of dignity, a person of standing.

RIFKELE

And will there be girls, too? And dancing? Really, mamma dear? (*Suddenly.*) I'll have to buy myself a waist, ma. And a pair of white slippers. (*Sticking out her shoes.*) You can't dance in shoes, can you?

SARAH

When you'll be engaged, in God's good time. Next Passover I'll make you a long dress and buy you slippers. Girls will come, fine young ladies, respectable ones. And you'll chum with them.

RIFKELE, *stubbornly.*

You're always putting things off until Passover. I'm a grown-up girl already. (*Looking into the mirror.*) See, ma. I'm a big girl. (*Showing her hair.*) And just see how long my braids are. Why, Manke tells me. . . (*Inter-*

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

rupting herself.) And Manke will be there, too, won't she, mamma dear?

SARAH

No, my darling. Only nice, respectable girls. For you are a respectable child, a decent Jewish daughter. . .

RIFKELE

Why not, mamma dear? Manke sketched a David's shield for me on the cover of the Holy Scroll. . . I'm going to embroider it now in silk thread, — a wreath of leaves and a garland of flowers. You'll see how beautiful it'll be, ma. (*Points to the pictures on the wall.*) A hundred times prettier than these. . .

SARAH, *with deep concern.*

Woe is me! Don't tell that to your father! He'll scold and fly into a rage when he hears of it.

RIFKELE

Why, mamma dear? It's for the Holy Scroll, isn't it?

SARAH

Your father will rave! (*Footsteps are heard.*) Hush, Rifkele, father is coming.

YEKEL, *still without.*

What? Do they think I'll get down on my knees and beg them? Not on their lives! (*En-*

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

ters. He is a tall, strong man of about forty, stout; swarthy countenance, covered with dark hair; his black beard cut round. He speaks in loud, gruff tones, at the same time making coarse gestures and grasping the lapel of the man whom he happens to be addressing. Despite this, his face and person beam with a certain frank geniality.) So they won't come! They don't have to! . . . So I got together some poor folks. . . Don't you worry. . . We'll have plenty of customers for our honey-cakes and our geese. (*Noticing Rifkele, he sits down.*) Come here, my little Rifkele, come to papa.

SARAH, *angered, but trying to conceal her feelings, continues to set the table.*

Do they think they'll soil their pedigree by coming to you? And when they need to borrow a hundred-rouble note. . . or take a charity contribution. . . they're not at all ashamed of your company then. . . The Gentile is impure, but his money's untainted.*

YEKEL

She's afraid already. Something new to worry about, eh? Never fear, it'll spoil nothing of yours. . . (*Calls Rifkele.*) Well, well, come to daddy, won't you?

* The force of this in the original is increased by the use of the terms 'trayf' and 'kosher,' i. e., that which, according to the Mosaic dietary laws, is unfit or fit to be eaten.

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

RIFKELE, *approaches her father very unwillingly, in fear.*

What does papa dear want?

YEKEL

Don't be afraid, Rifkele, I won't hurt you. (*Takes her hand.*) You like your father, don't you?

RIFKELE

Nods "yes."

YEKEL

Then why are you afraid of him?

RIFKELE

I don't know.

YEKEL

Don't be afraid of papa. He loves you. Very, very much. Today I'm having a Holy Scroll written. It costs a good deal of money. All for you, my child, all for you. (*Rifkele is silent. Pause.*) And with God's help, when you are betrothed, I'll buy your sweetheart a gold watch and chain — the chain will weigh half a pound... Papa loves you very dearly. (*Rifkele is silent. She lowers her head bashfully. Pause.*) Don't be ashamed. There's nothing wrong about being engaged. God has ordained it. (*Pause.*) That's nothing. Everybody gets engaged and married. (*Rifkele is silent. Pause.*) Well, now. Do you love daddy?

[7]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

RIFKELE, *nodding, and speaking softly.*
Yes.

YEKEL

Well, then. What do you want me to buy you? Tell me, Rifkele. (*She makes no reply.*) Tell me, now. Don't be afraid. Your daddy loves you. Tell me, like a good little girlie. What shall I buy you? (*Rifkele is silent.*)

SARAH, *busy at the table, to Rifkele.*

Well, why don't you answer when your father speaks to you?

RIFKELE

I don't know. . .

SARAH, *to Yekel.*

She wants a silk waist and a pair of white slippers.

YEKEL

Is that it? A silk waist and a pair of white slippers? Eh?

RIFKELE

Nods "yes."

YEKEL

You certainly deserve them. (*From his pockets, which jingle with coins, he takes out a gold-piece and offers it to Rifkele.*) Here, give this to mamma. And let her buy them for you.

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

(Rifkele takes the money and hands it to her mother. On the stairs outside is heard the noise of the poor folk whom Yekel has invited. Yekel turns to Sarah.) See? You said *(He opens the door.)* that you would have no guests. *(Calls.)* Now then. Come in. Come in. *(Enter a crowd of poor people, men and women, at first singly, as if they were stealing in; then more boldly, in groups. All greet Yekel, some of them ironically.)*

PEOPLE IN THE CROWD

Good day to you, host! *(To Sarah.)* Good day to you, hostess.

SARAH

Puts on an apron, places in it loaves of white bread, rolls, honey-cakes and so forth, and distributes them among the guests.

ONE OF THE POOR MEN

Long life to you, hostess, and may you live to celebrate joyous events beyond number.

A WOMAN

May the Holy Scroll bring good fortune and be a blessing to your home.

YEKEL, *throwing slices of white bread to the poor people. To Sarah.*

Give them a whole pound of cake apiece. And a bottle of brandy to take home with them.

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

Let them know that I'm celebrating today. . .
Never mind. I can well afford it.

A WOMAN, BLIND IN ONE EYE, *praising Yekel and Sarah before her poor neighbors.*

This is a house for you, such luck may I have. Nobody ever leaves this place empty-handed. There's always a plate of soup for the sick, a shirt for a poor fellow. What then? Do you think you can get anything over there where the proud purses live!* (*Sarah, as if not hearing the woman's words, throws into the apron of the latter a few more portions of food. The old woman holds up her apron and continues to talk.*) Whenever there's a celebration here. . . whoever you are. . . however humble your trade. . .

OTHER POOR FOLKS, *among themselves.*

That's so. May we know such luck. . . May such good fortune be ours! . .

YEKEL, *takes out a handful of small change and casts it into Rifkele's apron.*

Here, divide this among the poor folks. (*Rifkele distributes the money.*)

THE BLIND WOMAN, *now enthusiastic, pointing to Rifkele.*

And show me, in the whole town, another girl as respectable as she! . . . (*To the other women.*) Why, Rabbis haven't such virtuous

* Literally, 'under the high windows.'

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

children! (*More softly, yet loud enough for Yekel and Sarah to hear.*) God alone knows how such a pure child came to them. . . Imagine, brought up in such a place, — may Heaven not punish us for mentioning it. (*Louder.*) And they guard her like the apple of their eye. . . They weigh and measure every step she takes. It's a delight to look at her. (*Goes over to Yekel.*) Never mind. Everybody knows it. (*Pointing to Rifkele.*) If I had a Rabbi for a son, I'd choose her for his bride.

THE OTHER WOMEN, *among themselves.*

Everybody knows it. It's the talk of the town.

YEKEL

Just wait till I lead her under the wedding canopy, in God's good time. You'll all get a whole goose apiece, and a pickarel just out of the water, and roubles galore. And if I lie, then my name isn't Yekel Tchaftchovitch!

THE BLIND WOMAN

And I tell you, it's just as if she had been brought up in a synagogue, — Heaven pardon the word in this place. So pure and modest. . . finer than any child of the most respectable family.

THE OTHER WOMEN

Folks will learn all about it. It's the talk of the town.

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

YEKEL, *distributing glasses of brandy. Blurts out, before he realizes what he is saying.*

Even though her father is Yekel Tchaftchovitch. . .

SARAH, *giving out glasses.*

Look at the people before whom he must boast!

YEKEL, *pouring brandy into glasses. With passionate unrestraint.*

It makes no difference to me, — poor or rich. Let everybody know, — let the whole town know. What *I* am, I am. (*Points to his wife.*) What *she* is, she is. . . It's all true, — everything. But let them not breathe a word against my daughter. . . And if anyone dares to do so, I'll break his head with this bottle here. Even if it's the Rabbi himself, it'll make no difference to me! . . . She's purer than his own daughter. (*Pointing to his neck.*) You may slash my throat if that isn't so!

SARAH, *stops passing around the brandy.*

We've heard all that before. . . That's enough. (*Rubs her hands and goes to a corner for the broom.*) We must clean the room now for our guests. (*Turning to the poor folk.*) You're not offended, I hope?

THE POOR PEOPLE

Not at all, hostess. May happiness and joy

[12]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

be yours forever. . . (*They leave the room singly, uttering profuse blessings. Yekel, behind his wife's back, throws them more food. The last woman speaks to Rifkele, loud enough for the others to hear.*) Go, Rifkele, and prepare the robe for the Holy Scroll. Reb Ali will soon come, and the Scribe, too. (*Rifkele goes into her room.*)

SARAH, *sweeping the floor.*

To think that he had to boast before such people! I tell you! . . . And otherwise, do you imagine, they wouldn't have come to you? Make a celebration every day, and every day you'll have them here. In respectable houses people know how to act so that they'll be looked up to. What do you think, — they're all like you, with your "Hello, good brother!" right away? What kind of host are you, anyway?

YEKEL

Do you expect respectable folks to come to your home? Have you forgotten who you are, perhaps?

SARAH

"Who you are!" What! Have you stolen anything? You have a business. Everybody has his own business. You don't compel anybody, do you? You may deal in what you please, can't you, if you yourself do no wrong? . . . Just try to give them some money, and see whether they'll take it from you or not!

[13]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

YEKEL

They'll take it from you, all right, but they'll look upon you as a dog, just the same. . . And at the synagogue you'll have the back seat, and they'll never call you up to the altar, to read from the Holy Book.

SARAH

Do you really believe that they're any better than you? You don't need their favors! . . . That's the way of the world these days: if you've got the money, even so pious a Jew as Reb Ali comes to your home, — a Pietist,* mind you, — and accepts handsome alms from you. He asks no questions, — whether you got it by theft or by murder. So long as you have the cash. That's the chief point!

YEKEL

Don't climb too high, Sarah. Do you hear? Not too high. . . For if you do, some fine day you'll fall and break your neck. (*Shakes a warning finger at her.*) And don't try to break into the upper crust. Don't, I tell you. You've a home of your own, — stay there. You've got bread, — eat. But don't intrude where you're not wanted. . . Every dog must know his own kennel. (*Leaving the table, with a gesture of apprehension.*) The whole business is beginning to

* 'Khossid.' The 'Khassidim' are noted for the religious frenzy of their worship.

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

make me uneasy. . . I'm afraid that this will bring the downfall of our hopes. . .

SARAH, *stops her work, placing her arms akimbo.*

And you're a man! Shame yourself! I'm only a woman, but I can say to myself, "The past is gone forever." Whiz! Flown away! . . . There's nobody to be ashamed of. The whole world isn't any better. Why, if it were, people would have to go about with their heads bowed to the earth. (*Coming nearer to him.*) In a little while you'll have money. You close up shop and not a rooster crows. . . Who needs to know what we were?

YEKEL, *meditatively.*

That would be best. . . (*Pause.*) To buy a pack of horses and smuggle them across the border, just like Eisikl Furman did. . . And become a respectable person. . . not have people eye you like a thief. .

SARAH, *considering the matter.*

Just the same it's too bad to go out of our business. . . You'll never make such good money from your horses. Here, at least, it's all cash.

YEKEL

That's certainly so.

SARAH, *goes into the next room, returns with a tray of plates and begins to arrange them upon the table.*

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

And just see what a daughter we have. Thank God, more decent than all the daughters of the best families in town. She'll marry some highly esteemed fellow, raise a respectable family. . . Isn't that so? Then what's wrong?

YEKEL, *arising.*

Yes, with an example like you as her guide. Go, let Manke steal up to her from downstairs. . . Have her here, in this room, all the time!

SARAH

Just see how he's carrying on! I once asked Manke to teach Rifkele how to embroider on canvas. Rifkele's a young lady, you must remember. Has she any companions at all? You don't let her step out into the street. . . (*Pause.*) If you don't want her to have anything to do with Manke, then she won't.

YEKEL

No, I don't want her to! Do you hear? I don't! I don't want my home to mix with downstairs. (*Points to the cellar.*) My home must be kept apart from that place! Understand? Just like pure and impure!* Below (*Indicating the cellar.*) is a brothel, and here lives a pure girl, worthy of marrying the best of men. Do you hear? (*Bangs his fist upon the table.*) A pure, virtuous maiden lives here!

* Cf. previous note on 'trayf' and 'kosher.'

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

Keep the two places apart! . . . (*Footsteps are heard outside.*)

SARAH

All right. Just as you say. Only don't make such a racket. (*Listening.*) Hush. People are coming. It's Reb Ali. (*She thrusts her hair back underneath her wig and pulls off her apron. Yekel strokes his beard and straightens his coat. Both stand by the door, expectantly. . . The door opens wide. Enter Shloyme and Hindel. The first is a tall, sturdy chap; wears long boots and a short coat. He is a knavish fellow, whose eyes blink with stealthy cunning as he speaks. The second is a rather old girl, with a wan face and wearing clothes much too young for her years. Shloyme and Hindel are evidently at ease and feel at home.*)

YEKEL, *to Sarah.*

Take a look at these guests of mine, will you? (*To Shloyme.*) I do no business here. Down below. Everything down below. (*Pointing to the cellar.*) I'll be down right away.

SHLOYME

What's the hurry to get rid of us? Are you already ashamed of our company?

YEKEL

Well, what have you got to say for yourself?

[17]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

SHLOYME

You're having a celebration today, aren't you? So we came in to wish you good luck. Old friends. . . eh, what?

SARAH

Look at our "old friends," will you?

YEKEL

That was all once upon a time. From today on, — all over! You want to talk business with me? All right. But everything downstairs. (*Indicating the basement.*) Here I don't know you, nor do you know me, — from now on. You're welcome to a glass of brandy. (*Pours out brandy.*) But be quick. Somebody might come.

SHLOYME, *taking his glass, speaks to Hindel, roguishly.*

You see? It's a great thing to get married. You become a somebody, on a par with everybody else. And you have Scrolls of the Law written. Not like us chaps, us scamps. (*To Yekel.*) Yes, and I've really taken an example from you and have today become engaged to this thing here. (*Points to Hindel.*) She'll make a dandy housewife, eh? You'll see. She'll put on a wig and she'll be the living image of a Rabbi's wife. As true as we're alive. . .

[18]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

YEKEL

May I always hear such good news! So! You're engaged, are you? And when will the wedding take place, — may it be with luck!

SARAH

Just see with whom he's stopped to talk! It really becomes him! With outcasts, God forgive my words. Reb Ali and the Scribe will be here at any moment!

SHLOYME

When'll the wedding take place, you ask? When does one of our kind ever have a wedding? When we'll get a couple of girls we'll get married and open a house of our own. What else can one of us become? Certainly not a Rabbi. But the girls must be something fine, — first class. Fiery and hot-blooded. (*Winking to Yekel.*) Otherwise it doesn't pay.

YEKEL

And what do you want of me, I'd like to know?

SHLOYME

What do I want of you? A mere trifle. (*Points to Hindel.*) She's your woman, isn't she? And she's my sweetheart. She has a claim upon you. (*Takes from Hindel her wage-book.*) From this day on you'll have to deal

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

with me. Today I ask a mere bagatelle. Ten roubles, on this book. (*Slaps the book.*) It's good money, safe money. (*Looking at Hindel.*) She wants to buy herself a hat.

YEKEL

All that downstairs. Down below. I'll be down soon and we'll transact all business down there. Here I don't even know you. Here I do no business with you at all.

SHLOYME

It's all the same to me. Above or below. Downstairs live no strangers, nor upstairs either. Same thing. The same devil.

YEKEL

Get a move on! Off with you! Do you hear?
— We're expecting people!

SARAH

May an evil night descend upon their heads, their hands and their feet. They came here to spoil our celebration. . . (*Looks at Hindel with scorn.*) It pays to have so much vexation over such a slut!

HINDEL

If I'm not good enough to be one of your women, go down into the cellar yourself.

SHLOYME, to *Hindel*

Tell her to send her daughter down there. (*To*

[20]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

Sarah.) Upon my word, you'd do a rushing business.

YEKEL

Curse me, — do you hear? (*Points to Sarah.*) Curse her, too. We're your kind. But don't dare to breathe my daughter's name. Understand? (*Coming closer to Shloyme.*) Don't dare to mention her name, or I'll rip your bowels open. Do you hear? She doesn't know you, and you don't know her!

SHLOYME

Then I *will* know her. She's the daughter of a fellow-tradesman, so we're quite closely related.

YEKEL, seizing Shloyme by the throat.

I'll rip your bowels open. . . You may slap my face; kick me about, if you will, but don't mention my daughter's name! (*Yekel and Shloyme engage in a struggle.*)

SARAH, running over to them.

A curse has been visited upon me! There he goes, starting a fight with such low-lives! Somebody's liable to come in at any moment, woe is me. Yekel! — Reb Ali and the Scribe. . . Yekel, for God's sake! (*Dragging him away from Shloyme.*) What's come over you? (*Heavy footsteps are heard outside.*) Yekel, Yekel!

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

Reb Ali is coming, — the Scribe is here! This is a shame and a disgrace before people!

YEKEL

Let me go. Right on this spot I'll. . . (*Tightening his grasp upon Shloyme.*)

REB ALI'S VOICE

Right here, Scribe. This is the home of the Scroll's donor. (*Reb Ali appears in the doorway, first thrusting in his large head, with a pipe between his teeth.*) What's all the noise about? In the home of one who has a Scroll of the Law written, all must be joy and happiness. Not quarrelling. (*To the Scribe outside.*) This way, please, Scribe. (*Yekel, at the sound of Reb Ali's voice, releases Shloyme. Sarah runs over to Shloyme and thrusts into his hand a piece of paper money which she has taken from her stocking. She shoves Hindel and Shloyme toward the door; the latter two encounter the Scribe and Reb Ali on the threshold. The pious men stand back from the woman, making way for her and Shloyme.*)

SHLOYME, *to Hindel, as they leave.*

Take a peek at the folks he's hob-nobbing with these days. He'll become head of the town before long. (*They go off, conversing in indistinct tones.*)

REB ALI, *a short, corpulent fellow, who speaks*

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

rapidly, making ingratiating gestures as he does so. He appears to be much at home, and evidently entertains a high opinion of himself.

I beg your pardon, Scribe; I beg your pardon. (*Quietly, to Yekel and Sarah.*) You ought to act more decently. It's high time. People are coming and. . .

THE SCRIBE, *enters. A tall old man, whose long, thin body is enveloped in a broad overcoat. His beard is long, white and sparse. He wears spectacles and has an air of cold aloofness and mystery.*

REB ALI, *pointing to Yekel.*

This is the donor of the Scroll.

THE SCRIBE, *proffering his hand to Yekel, at the same time surveying him.*

Greetings. Peace be to you, fellow Jew.

YEKEL, *Thrusts out his hand, uncertainly. Sarah reverently steps to one side.*

REB ALI, *takes a seat at the table and pushes a chair over toward the Scribe.*

Be seated, Scribe. (*To Yekel.*) Take a seat. (*The Scribe sits down. Yekel, still uncertain, sits down opposite him, next to Reb Ali. The latter addresses the Scribe.*) This is the gentleman on whose behalf I ordered the Holy Scroll. (*He helps himself to brandy, first pouring out a glass for the Scribe.*) He has no son, so he

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

desires to do honor to the Lord with a Scroll of the Law. Such is the custom among the people of Israel, — and a very beautiful one, too. So we must aid him. . . Your health, Scribe. (*Gives his hand to the Scribe, then to Yekel.*) Your health, host. Today you are the Master of Festivities. (*Yekel stretches out his hand, at a loss. Reb Ali drinks. Sarah approaches the table and pushes toward Reb Ali some jelly preserves. Yekel pulls her by the sleeve and signals her to withdraw from the table. Reb Ali, after drinking, turns to the Scribe.*) Drink, Scribe. (*To Yekel.*) Drink, host. Today you must rejoice. God has favored you with the means of having a Holy Scroll written. It is a divine merit indeed. A very great one.

THE SCRIBE, *holding his glass in his hand, to Reb Ali, referring to Yekel.*

Who is this man?

REB ALI

What is the difference? A Jew. . . And if he isn't a learned scholar, must all men be scholars? A Jew wants to earn a divine blessing. Then we must befriend him. (*To Yekel.*) Drink a health. Here's joy to you.

THE SCRIBE

Will he know how to take care of the Holy Scroll?

[24]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

REB ALI

And why not? He is a Jew, isn't he? And what Jew doesn't know the holy significance of a Scroll? (*Drinks.*) Your health, your health. And may the Lord send His blessings to His people.

THE SCRIBE, *gives his hand to Yekel.*

Your health, host. (*Admonishing him.*) And know, that a Holy Scroll is a wondrous possession. The whole world rests upon a Scroll of the Law, and every Scroll is the exact counterpart of the tablets that were received by Moses upon Mount Sinai. Every line of a Holy Scroll is penned in purity and piety. . . Where dwells a Scroll, in such a house dwells God himself. . . So it must be guarded against every impurity. . . Man, you must know that a Holy Scroll. . .

YEKEL, *awed; he stammers.*

Rebbi, rebbi*. . . I want to tell the Rebbi the whole truth, — the honest truth. . . I am a poor sinner. . . Rebbi, I'm afraid. . .

REB ALI, *interrupting Yekel. To the Scribe.*

The man is a sincere penitent and it is our duty to befriend him. The Talmud counsels us to. Of course he understands the significance of

* 'Rebbi' is a term usually applied to teachers of Hebrew. It is often interchanged with the more dignified 'Rabbi,' which means, properly, a doctor of Hebrew law. The term 'Reb' is a form of address used by Jews before first names only. Of the Spanish 'Don.'

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

a Holy Scroll. He's a Jew, after all. (*To Yekel.*) You must have reverence for a Scroll of the Law. Great reverence, — precisely as if a noted Rabbi were under your roof. In the house where it resides no profanity must be uttered. It must dwell amidst purity. (*Speaks to Sarah, looking toward her but not directly at her.*) Wherever a Holy Scroll is sheltered, there no woman must remove the wig from her head. . . (*Sarah thrusts her hair more securely under her wig.*) Nor must she touch the Scroll with her bare hands. As a reward, no evil overtakes the home that shelters a Scroll. Such a home will always be prosperous and guarded against all misfortune. (*To the Scribe.*) What do you imagine? — That he doesn't know all this? They're Jews, after all. . . (*Sarah nods affirmatively.*)

THE SCRIBE

You hear, sir, that the whole world rests upon the Scroll. The fate of our race lies rolled up in that parchment. With one word, — with a single word, God forbid, you can desecrate the Law and bring down upon all the Jews a grievous misfortune, — God forbid.

YEKEL, *arising from the table.*

Rebbi, I'll confess everything. . . Rebbi (*Comes nearer to Reb Ali.*) I know that you are a holy man. I am not worthy, Rebbi, of your presence in this house. . . under my roof. . .

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

Rebbi, I am a sinner. She (*Pointing to his wife.*) is a sinner. We have no right to a Holy Scroll. . . Inside that room. (*Pointing to the door at the right.*) For her sake, Rebbi. . . (*Goes into Rifkele's room and returns, leading her by the hand. She holds a velvet cover of a Scroll, upon which she is embroidering a David's shield in gold thread.*) Rebbi, she (*Pointing to Rifkele.*) may go about a Holy Scroll. She is as pure as the Lord's Law itself. It is for her that I ordered it. (*Indicating her embroidery.*) See, Rebbi, she's embroidering a cover for the Scroll. She may, Rebbi, for her hands are pure. I, Rebbi, (*Striking himself over the heart.*) I promise not to touch your Holy Law. She (*Pointing to his wife.*) will not touch your Holy Scroll. She (*Resting his hand upon Rifkele's head.*) will carry it. It will be placed in her room. (*To Rifkele.*) And when you are married and leave my roof, take the Scroll of the Law with you to your husband's home. . .

REB ALI, to Yekel.

In other words, when you marry off your daughter, you'll give her the Holy Scroll as her dowry. Isn't that it?

YEKEL

Reb Ali, when my daughter is married, I'll give her as a dowry a pile of money, and I'll say to her: "Go out of your father's house and forget. . . forget your father. . . forget your

[27]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

mother. . . and have pure children, Jewish children, just like every Jewish daughter." That's what I'll say to her.

REB ALI

That is, you will present the Holy Scroll as a wedding-gift to your son-in-law. That's the idea, isn't it? (*To the Scribe.*) Do you see, Reb Aaron, there are still pious Jews in the world; here's a man with a daughter, and has a Scroll of the Law written for her future husband. . . How beautiful that is, — how virtuous . . . I tell you, Reb Aaron, that the spirit of Israel, the Jewish spark. . . the. . . ahem. . . ah! . . . ah! . . . (*Smacking his lips.*)

YEKEL, *leads Rifkele back into her room. He closes the door after her.*

Rebbi, I can speak plainly to you. We're alone. My wife may hear it, too. We are sinners. I know, God will punish us. Let Him punish. That doesn't bother me. Let Him cripple me, disfigure me; let Him make me a pauper, so that I'll have to go begging from door to door. . . Anything but *that*. . . (*More softly.*) Rebbi, when a man has a son who goes to the bad — the devil take him. But a daughter, Rebbi. If a daughter falls, it is as if the mother had sinned in her grave. So I went to the holy synagogue and approached this man (*Pointing to Reb Ali.*) and I said to him: "Give me some-

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

thing that'll guard my home from evil." . . . So he said to me: "Have a Holy Scroll written and place it in your home." Rabbi, as for us, our souls belong to the devil anyway. . . For her, and in her room I'll place the Scroll; for her to have as a companion. As for us, we dare not, we must not. . . (*Reb Ali bends over to the Scribe, whispers something to him, making various gestures and pointing to Yekel. The latter and Sarah stand at the table in tense expectancy. Pause.*)

THE SCRIBE, *after brief consideration.*

And where are the guests in honor of the Holy Scroll?

REB ALI

We'll go to the synagogue and gather a quorum* of Jews. It will be easy enough to find men who are willing to honor the Law. (*Arises from the table, pours brandy into the glasses, slapping Yekel on the shoulder.*) There, there! God will help you! Rejoice, host! The Lord befriends the sincere penitent. . . Don't worry. You'll marry your girl to some proficient scholar; you'll take some poor Yeshiva** student for a son-in-law, and support him while he sits and studies the Holy Law. And the blessings of the Law will win you the Lord's forgiveness.

* 'Minyan'. The quorum of ten males above the age of thirteen required for all religious services.

** 'Yeshiva'. An academy of Hebrew studies.

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

(*Pause.*) I've really been thinking about it, and have a certain fellow in view, — a jewel of a chap, — smart head on his shoulders. . . his father is a highly respected man. (*Abruptly.*) Are you going to give your daughter a large dowry?

YEKEL

Rebbi, take away all I own. I'll let you strip me bare. . . Take everything, everything. . . And I'll say to my girl, "Forget your mother. . . forget your father." And I'll send her and her husband all they need, in a roundabout way. "Here's your food and drink, keep on studying in your holy books. . . I don't know you. . . you don't know me. . ."

REB ALI

Everything will be all right, in the virtue of the Scroll. . . Come, Scribe. Come, host, let's be off to the synagogue. We'll hunt out a quorum and celebrate the Holy Scroll. . . (*To the Scribe.*) Do you see, Reb Aaron? A Jew, even if he sins, still remains a Jew. A Jewish soul — seeks a pious scholar for a son-in-law. . . (*To Yekel.*) Never you mind. Don't worry. God will help you. . . The Lord loves a repentant sinner. But you must give generous donations to the students of the Law. If you cannot study the Law yourself, at least support those who can, for the whole world rests upon the Holy Law. . . (*To the Scribe.*) Is that not so, Reb

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

Aaron? And why not? (*Pointing to Yekel.*) I knew his father. . . He was a fine man. . . a teamster. . . handsome chap. . . Believe me, the Lord will come to his aid, and he will become a Jew as worthy as any other. (*To Yekel.*) The important thing is to repent deep in your heart, — that is, you must abandon the path of iniquity that you've followed hitherto. . . and you must contribute liberally to the support of the students of the Holy Word.

YEKEL, *summoning courage, he approaches Reb Ali.*

Just let me make a little more money, Reb Ali, so that I can give my daughter a handsome dowry, and my name isn't Yekel Tchaftchovitch if I don't go out of the business altogether. . I'll deal in horses, just as my father did, may his soul rest in peace. I'll get together a stable of horses and go to the Lovitch fair. And my son-in-law will be sitting inside there studying the sacred Law. I'll come home for the Sabbath and sit down right here and listen to him reading from the Commentaries. And if I lie, my name isn't Yekel.

REB ALI

Don't worry. It's all right. The Lord will come to your aid. Yes, God will help you. Isn't that so, Reb Aaron?

[31]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

THE SCRIBE

Who can tell? Our Lord is a God of mercy and forgiveness, but He is also a God of retribution and vengeance. (*Leaving.*) Well, it's getting late. Let's be off to the synagogue. (*Leaves.*)

YEKEL

What did the Rebbi say?

REB ALI

It's all right. Don't worry. God will help you. . . He *must* help you. . . Come, come and take your Holy Scroll home in rejoicing. (*About to depart. Yekel hesitates, undecided. Reb Ali notices this.*) What? You want to speak a few words with your wife, — to tell her to prepare for our return with the Scroll?

SARAH, *to Reb Ali.*

Everything's ready, Reb Ali. Everything.

REB ALI

Well, what are you waiting for? The Scribe has already gone.

YEKEL, *at the door, uncertain, pointing to himself.*

I, walk together with the Rebbi, through the streets?

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

REB ALI

Come, come. If the Lord pardons you, surely we may do so, too.

YEKEL, enthusiastically.

Reb Ali, you're a good Rebbi. (*About to embrace Reb Ali; suddenly recalls himself and draws back.*) A good Rebbi, may I live so! (*Reb Ali and Yekel leave together. The evening shadows gather.*)

SARAH, betakes herself assiduously to cleaning the room and setting the table. Calls into Rifkele's room.

Rifkele, Rifkele, come in and help me out a bit. They'll soon be coming with the Holy Scroll.

RIFKELE, appears on the threshold of her door, uncertain.

Has father left already?

SARAH

Yes. He went to the synagogue with Reb Ali and the Scribe. The Rabbi will soon be coming, and other guests, too.

RIFKELE, showing the cover for the Holy Scroll.
See how nicely I've embroidered it.

SARAH

Yes, yes. I see. But comb your hair. Dress

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

yourself. The guests will soon be here. The Rabbi and. . .

RIFKELE

I'll call up Manke and have her comb me. . . I love to have her comb me. She does it so beautifully. Makes my hair so smooth. . . And her hands are so cool. (*Takes something and taps the floor with it, calling.*) Manke! Manke!

SARAH, frightened.

Rifkele! What are you doing? Don't! Your father will be furious! It isn't becoming for you to chum with Manke. You're already a marriageable young lady, a virtuous child. And we've just been talking about some good matches for you, — excellent matches with learned scholars. . .

RIFKELE

But I do love Manke so much!

SARAH

It's a shame for you to chum with Manke, I tell you! You are a decent girl; you'll have clean, respectable girls to go around with. . . We're arranging a match for you, an excellent match. Your father's just gone to see the bridegroom, Reb Ali said, . . . (*Goes into the next room.*) We must wash, dress, and put on our best clothes. . . The guests will be here at any moment.

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

RIFKELE

A bridegroom? What kind of bridegroom, mamma dear?

SARAH, *from the other room.*

A sweetheart, — a golden one. A wonderful student, of a fine family.

MANKE

Appears in the doorway at the rear. First she thrusts in her head, shaking her finger playfully at Rifkele; Rifkele goes over to her, walking cautiously backwards, beckoning to her as she does so. The room is fast growing dark.

RIFKELE, *falls into Manke's arms. To her mother.*

A handsome sweetheart, mamma dear? (*Manke kisses her passionately.*)

SARAH, *from within.*

Yes, daughter dear. A handsome sweetheart, with two jet-black temple-locks and a satin coat, and a velvet skull-cap, dressed just like a Rabbi. He's a Rabbi's son, Reb Ali said.

RIFKELE, *in Manke's embrace, caressing Manke's cheeks.*

And where will he stay, mamma dear?

SARAH, *from within.*

There in your room, where the Sacred Scroll

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

will be kept. He'll live there with you and study the Holy Law.

RIFKELE, *in Manke's arms.*

And will he love me, mamma dear?

SARAH, *as before.*

Ever so much, daughter dear, ever so much. And you'll have pure, respectable children, virtuous children. . .

SLOW CURTAIN

falling as they speak.

ACT II

SCENE: *In the cellar-brothel. A spacious basement in an old building; low-arched ceiling; high up on the wall, close to the ceiling, two deep, narrow windows, hung with curtains. On the sill, flower-pots. The rain is coming in through the windows. A flight of stairs leads to the door above, which is constructed like that of the entrance to a cabin on board ship. Half of the door is ajar, revealing the gloom of the night. Rain drips down. In the background of the cellar, several small compartments, separated from one another by thin partitions, and screened by thick black curtains. One of the curtains has been drawn aside; in the compartment are seen a bed, a wash-stand, a mirror and various toilet articles. A colored night-lamp sheds a dim light over the tiny room. The furniture of the cellar itself consists of several lounges, a table, benches and card-tables; on the walls, looking-glasses bedecked with gaudy ornaments; chromos representing women in suggestive poses. . .*

On one of the lounges sleeps Shloyme; his long boots reach to a nearby bench. It is a night in spring.

The room is lighted by a large hanging-lamp.

Act II

HINDEL

Enters. Halts for a moment upon the top stair and looks down at Shloyme. She is wrapped in a thin shawl, coquettishly dressed in a skirt much too short for her age. Descends into the cellar, stepping noisily so as to wake Shloyme.

SHLOYME, *awakes. Looks around.*

It's you, is it? Why aren't you outside?

HINDEL

It's begun to rain.

SHLOYME, *sitting up.*

So you deign to answer me, milady? Have you, then, forgiven me?

HINDEL

I wasn't angry in the first place.

SHLOYME

So. . . Well, if you wish, you can get angry again, for all I care. (*Lies down.*)

HINDEL, *looks around. Runs over to one of the screened compartments and listens, then runs back to Shloyme.*

Shloyme, I don't want to leave this place.

[39]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

See, now we're all alone and nobody can hear us. Tell me, as truly as there is a God in heaven, — tell me, do you really mean to marry me?

SHLOYME

Go, my grand dame. Make knots in your shirt and hide your money there, and then run to "Uncle" Yekel and complain that I take all your earnings, — that you haven't even enough to buy yourself a hat. . .

HINDEL

Yes, I did tell him that. It made me furious and cut me to the quick, — to have you tear the very clothes off my back and then go and make eyes at that yellow bitch. . . I'll dash vitriol into her face. Why, her breath smells terribly. How can anybody get near such a thing? A fine young lady he's hunted out!

SHLOYME

Away from me! I'll give you such a crack between the eyes that you'll see your great-great-granny's ghost!

HINDEL

Crack away! Tear strips of skin off my body . . . (*Pushing up one of her sleeves and showing him her arm.*) You've covered me with black and blue marks. (*Baring her other arm.*) Here, pinch, slash, whatever you will. But tell me, here on this very spot, by the memory of your

[40]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

father and as truly as you pray for the repose of his soul, — will you really marry me?

SHLOYME, *still stretched out.*

Once I wanted to. Now I don't.

HINDEL

Then it's no. That's the way I like to do things. Only no deceit. Do you want money? — Say the word. A coat? — Here's the price. Only no fooling me. (*Walks off.*)

SHLOYME

That's all right. There are plenty of sweet-hearts. You'll catch your fish, all right.

HINDEL, *drawing aside the curtain of her compartment.*

Don't give yourself any worry on my account.

SHLOYME

You object, do you? Have it your way. (*Pause.*) But you're not too angry to pour a fellow a glass of tea, are you?

HINDEL, *fetches him a glass of tea from her compartment and places it upon the cellar table. She then returns to her place and sits down before her trunk of clothes, as if looking for something. After a brief silence she addresses Shloyme, from her compartment.*

So you like her, eh? . . . Well, well. . . You'll soon be busy, all right, — buying towels to pad

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

out her flat bosom, paying dentists for putting a set of teeth into her jaws, and getting her a pair of stilts to make her look human size. Then you can hire a barrel-organ and take her around people's backyards. A fine hurdy-gurdyman you'd make, upon my word. I'll throw you a two-kopeck-piece from the window, I promise.

SHLOYME

Hold your tongue, I tell you!

HINDEL

And what'll you do if I don't?

SHLOYME

I'll beat you black and blue.

HINDEL

Ho, ho! There's no beating folks these days. Nowadays a beating is answered with a knife.

SHLOYME, *springing to his feet.*

And who'll do that? (*Striding into Hindel's compartment.*) Who'll do the knifing, eh? (*He struggles with her, tearing from her grasp a red waist. He returns to the cellar.*) Now we'll see. (*He rips the waist open eagerly. A photograph falls to the floor.*) Aha! Moyshe the locksmith! So that's your champion, is it? And since when have you become so thick with him? (*Goes back to her room.*)

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

HINDEL

What business is that of yours?

SHLOYME

This is what business it is of mine! (*He gives her a hard slap; she falls upon her bed and begins to weep.*) So you're going around with Moyshe the locksmith, are you? Exchanging photographs, eh? A regular pair of sweet-hearts! And all behind my back? (*Silence. He returns to his table.*) And I knew nothing about it. . . (*Drinks more tea, arises, and mounts the stairs.*) And I knew nothing about it. . . (*He stops at the door.*) Hindel! (*She does not answer.*) Hindel! Come here this instant! (*No reply.*) Hindel! (*He stamps his foot, then runs down the flight of stairs in a rage.*) Come here, I tell you! Do you hear what I say!

HINDEL

Arises from her bed and walks over to him, hiding her face in her handkerchief.

SHLOYME

Have you spoken to Manke?

HINDEL, *whimpering.*

Yes.

SHLOYME

Well, what does she say?

[43]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

HINDEL, *still crying.*

If we'll have our own "house," she'll come to us.

SHLOYME

Sure?

HINDEL, *drying her eyes.*

Yes. But she doesn't want to come alone. She wants to bring a chum.

SHLOYME

Certainly. Do you imagine you can make any money on one girl, — even enough to pay the rent?

HINDEL

We ought to have a fresh young girl. . .

SHLOYME

Upon my soul! Then we'd do business! But where can we get her?

HINDEL

I've got my eye on one — as beautiful as the day,* and still untouched.

SHLOYME, *curious.*

Can we get her for the business?

HINDEL

I should say! . . .

* Literally 'as beautiful as a tree.'

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

SHLOYME

A girl. . . from a "house"?

HINDEL

No. A pure maiden.

SHLOYME

How do you come to know her?

HINDEL

She comes to Manke every night. . . Steals out of her home. . . Nobody sees her. Something seems to draw her here. . . she is so inquisitive. . .

RIFKELE, *thrusting her bare head through the window, beckoning to Hindel.*

Ps-s-s! Is my father down there?

HINDEL, *signalling back.*

No.

RIFKELE, *disappears from the window.*

SHLOYME, *eyeing Hindel closely.*

She! "Uncle" Yekel's daughter! A genuine gold-mine!

HINDEL

Hush! She's coming!

RIFKELE, *slender and beautiful; dressed modestly, and wrapped in a black shawl; steals through the door, runs down the stairs with trembling caution. She speaks more with signs than with words.*

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

Where is Manke? There! (*Pointing to a screened compartment.*) There, with. . . ?

HINDEL

Nods "yes."

RIFKELE

Approaches the curtain of Manke's room and listens with passionate intentness, looking around every other moment with palpitant apprehension.

SHLOYME, *very softly, to Hindel.*

Tomorrow we must go and take a look at that house on Pivna Street.

HINDEL

And when shall we be married?

SHLOYME

First we've got to have a home.

HINDEL

I wonder how much the Rabbi will ask for performing the ceremony.

SHLOYME

As long as there's enough left to buy some furniture with. The place must make a decent showing. (*The door is suddenly banged open and Yekel bursts in.*)

YEKEL, *his face still betrays signs of his cunning and of his youthful dissipation. He is*

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

dressed in dignified, orthodox fashion. Removes his hat and shakes the rain from it.

A fine business! It has to rain! (*Suddenly noticing Rifkele, he explodes with rage.*) What! You here! (*Seizes her by the collar and shakes her, clinching his teeth.*) What are you doing here?

RIFKELE, *terrified, stammering.*

Mam. . . Mamma told me. . . to. . . c-call. . .
(*Bursting into tears.*) Papa, don't hit me!

YEKEL

Your mother. . . your mother sent you. . . here! (*With a loud outcry.*) Your mother! (*Dragging her upstairs.*) She'll lead you to ruin yet! Something draws her to it! . . . She wants her daughter to be what the mother was. . .

RIFKELE, *crying.*

Papa, don't hit me!

YEKEL

I'll teach you to mind your father! (*Leads her out. Rifkele's crying is heard from without.*)

SHLOYME

There's a virtuous Yekel for you! It doesn't become his dignity for his daughter to be a brothel-woman. (*Through the ceiling is heard a noise of angry stamping, and the weeping of a*

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

woman.) He must be giving it to his wife now, all right! Biff! Bang!

HINDEL

He's right. A mother should guard her daughter well. . . Whatever you were, you were, but once you marry and have a child, watch over it. . . Just wait. If God should bless us with children, I'll know how to bring them up. My daughter will be as pure as a saint, with cheeks as red as beets. . . I won't let an eye gaze upon her. And she'll marry a respectable fellow, with an orthodox wedding. . .

SHLOYME, *slapping her across the shoulders.*

We'll see about that, all in due season. But talk to Rifkele in the meantime. Work upon her, I say. Otherwise everything's lost.

HINDEL

Don't you worry about my part. I'll know how to go about it.

SHLOYME

We'll see, then. (*Silence.*) If you land her, bring her right to me. You know. . .

YEKEL, *enters, in anger.*

It's time to close up. It's raining. In any case no dog's going to stick his snout into this place tonight. (*With a sharp look at Shloyme.*) Enough, enough of this billing and cooing. Time to close up. (*Mounts the steps, opens the*

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

door and calls.) Reizel! To bed! Basha! Time to go to sleep! (From without are heard girls' voices: "Soon. Right away!")

HINDEL

Points to Yekel and signals Shloyme to leave.

SHLOYME

Goes up the steps. As he is about to go out he comes face to face with Yekel. They eye each other.

YEKEL

Get a move on. Time to close up. You've whispered secrets long enough.

SHLOYME, *thrusting his hands into his trousers pocket. Looks sharply at Yekel.*

Since when have you become such a respectable personage?

YEKEL

Off with you, now. Get a move on. I'll tell you later.

SHLOYME

To the devil with you!

HINDEL, *runs up the stairs to Shloyme.*

Shloyme, go home, I tell you. Do you hear? Go home!

SHLOYME, *leaving, with a defiant glance at Yekel.*

There's a fine lout for you!

[49]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

YEKEL

As if I need him here! . . . (*Pointing to Hindel.*) Here! You may take your old carcass along with you and start a place of your own.

HINDEL

People don't open places with old carcasses. You merely lie down to rest with them. But little dolls. . .

YEKEL, *calling into the entry.*

Reizel! Basha! (*Enter two girls, running. Rain is dripping from their wet, filmy dresses and from their unbraided hair. They are in a merry mood and speak with laughter. Yekel leaves, slamming the door behind him.*)

BASHA, *a stout girl, with red cheeks. Naive in manner; she speaks with a harsh accent.*

What a sweet odor the rain has! . . . (*Shaking raindrops off her clothes.*) Just like the apples at home drying, in the lofts. This is the first May rain.

HINDEL

Such a crazy idea: to stand in the rain. As if they'll attract the whole world. . . Nobody'd ever show up in a downpour like this. . . (*Goes into her compartment and sits down near her trunk, packing various articles.*)

REIZEL, *shaking off raindrops.*

To the deuce with the whole lot of them. I

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

paid my account the day before yesterday. . .
We were standing under the eaves, the rain is
so fragrant. . . It washes the whole winter off
your head. (*Goes over to Hindel.*) Just look. . .
(*Showing her wet hair.*) How fresh it is. . .
how sweet it smells. . .

BASHA

At home, in my village, the first sorrel must
be sprouting. Yes, at the first May rain they
cook sorrel soup. . . And the goats must be graz-
ing in the meadows. . . And the rafts must be
floating on the stream. . . And Franek is getting
the Gentile girls together, and dancing with
them at the inn. . . And the women must surely
be baking cheese-cakes for the Feast of Weeks.*
(*Silence.*) Do you know what? I'm going to
buy myself a new summer tippet and go home
for the holidays. . . (*Runs into her room, brings
out a large summer hat and a long veil; she
places the hat upon her wet hair and surveys
herself in the looking-glass.*) Just see! If I'd
ever come home for the holidays rigged up in
this style, and promenade down to the station. . .
Goodness! They'd just burst with envy.
Wouldn't they? If only I weren't afraid of my
father!

REIZEL

Why? Would he hurt you?

* Pentecost.

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

BASHA

He'd kill me on the spot. He's on the hunt for me with a crowbar. Once he caught me dancing with Franek at the village tavern and he gave me such a rap over the arm with a rod (*Showing her arm.*) that I carry the mark to this very day. I come from a fine family. My father is a butcher. Talk about the fellows that were after me! . . . (*In a low voice.*) They tried to make a match between me and Nottke the meat-chopper. I've got his gold ring still. (*Indicating a ring upon her finger.*) He gave it to me at the Feast of Tabernacles.* Maybe he wasn't wild to marry me, — but I didn't care to.

REIZEL

Why didn't you care to?

BASHA

Because I didn't. . . He always smelled ox meat. . . Ugh! His name is Pshorik. Think of marrying Pshorik and having a little Pshorik every year! Ugh!

REIZEL

And how is it any better for you here?

BASHA

Here, at least, I'm a free person. I've got my chest of finery, and dress swell. Better clothes, upon my word, than the rich daughters

* Succoth.

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

of my village. . . (*Fetching from her compartment a brown dress.*) When I go walking on Marshalkovski street in this dress they all stare at me. . . Fire and flame! Mm! If I could only put in an appearance in my home town dressed in this fashion, here's how I'd promenade to the station. (*Struts across the room like a lady of fashion, raising her skirt at the back and assuming a cosmopolitan air.*) They'd die of jealousy, I tell you. . . They'd be stricken with apoplexy on the spot. (*Promenades about the room playing the grand dame.*)

REIZEL, *straightens the folds of Basha's dress in the back and adjusts her hat to a better angle.*

That's the way! Now raise your head a bit higher. . . Who needs to know that you were ever in a place of this sort? You'll tell them that you were with a big business house. A Count has fallen in love with you. . .

HINDEL, *from her room, where she is still busy with her chest of clothes.*

And what's the matter with a place of this sort, I'd like to know? Aren't we every bit as good as the girls in the business houses, eh? The whole world is like that nowadays; that's what the world demands. In these days even the daughters of the best families aren't any better. This is our way of earning a living. And believe me, when one of us gets married,

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

she's more faithful to her husband than any of the others. We *know* what a man is.

BASHA, *still strutting about the room.*

Ah! Do you imagine they wouldn't recognize me right away? Their hearts would tell them. . . You know, my mother died from the shock. . . She couldn't live through it. . . To this day I haven't visited her grave. . . (*Suddenly comes to a halt.*) Sometimes she comes before me. . . At night I see her in my dreams. She appears to me in her shroud, covered with thorns and briars, because of my sins. And she pulls me by the hair.

REIZEL

Oh, mother! And did you really see her? How does she look, your dead mother? Is she pale?

HINDEL

Shut up, will you? Late at night they have to start telling stories about the dead. No dead people can come here. Our boss has a Holy Scroll upstairs. . . (*A sudden hush.*) What's wrong about our trade, I'd like to know? (*She leaves her little room and goes into the cellar.*) Wasn't our mistress in a house like this for fifteen years? Yet she married. And isn't she a respectable God-fearing woman? . . . Doesn't she observe all the laws that a Jewish daughter must keep? . . . And isn't her Rifkele a pure child? And isn't our boss a respectable man?

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

Isn't he generous? Doesn't he give the biggest donations to charity? . . . And he's had a Holy Scroll written. . .

REIZEL

But they say that you mustn't read from such a Holy Scroll, and that the daughter of such mothers become what the mothers themselves were. . . that something draws them on like a magnet, and that the Evil Spirit drags them down into the mire. . .

HINDEL, *frightened.*

Who said so?

REIZEL

An old fortune-teller, — a sorceress told it to me. . . it's just as if such a daughter were in the power of an enchantment. . .

HINDEL

That's a rotten lie! . . . Where's the old gypsy who told you that? . . . I'd scratch her eyes out for her! There is a God in heaven, I say! We have a God in Heaven!

MANKE, steals from her compartment into the cellar. She is half-dressed, with a shawl thrown over her. Her colored stockings are visible, and her hair is in disorder. Her eyes sparkle with wanton cunning. Her face is long, and insolently pretty; she is quite young. A lock of hair falls over her forehead. Her eyes blink as she

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

speaks, and her whole body quivers. She looks about in surprise.

What? Nobody here?

REIZEL, *to Manke.*

Is it you, Manke? A good thing you came. (*Pointing to Hindel.*) She's almost made a Rabbi's wife of me. Where have you left your guest?

MANKE

He fell asleep. So I stole out.

REIZEL

Some generous land-owner, perhaps? Maybe he'll stand for the drinks?

MANKE

Bah! He's a fool. Third time he's come. And he keeps asking me, who's my father, who's my mother, — as if he intended to marry me. . . Whenever he kisses me he hides his face in my bosom, closes his eyes and smiles as if he were a babe in his mother's arms. (*Looks around. In a low voice, to Hindel.*) Hasn't Rifkele been here yet?

HINDEL, *with a soft laugh.*

She was here. . . and her father caught her. . . and maybe he didn't raise a rumpus. . .

MANKE

Good heavens! How long since?

[56]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

HINDEL

Quite a while ago. . . He must be asleep by now. (*Softly.*) She'll surely be down again soon.

REIZEL, *to Manke, in a merry mood.*

Come, Manke, let's go out into the street. It's raining. The drops are like pearls. . . The first May shower. Who's coming out with me for a rain bath?

MANKE, *approaching the window.*

It's raining. And what a thin drizzle. And how sweet it smells. . . Let's go out.

BASHA

At home when we have a shower like this the gutters run over and flood the narrow lanes. And we take off our shoes and stockings and dance in the rain barefoot. . . Who's going to take her shoes off? (*Removes her shoes and stockings.*) Take off your shoes, Manke, and let's dance in the rain!

MANKE, *removes her stockings and lets down her hair.*

There! Now let the rain soak us from head to foot. . . Standing in a May shower makes you grow. Isn't that so?

BASHA, *runs over.*

Come. Let's splash each other. . . Let's sprinkle handfuls of raindrops over each other. (*She*

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

lets down her hair.) Let's drench our hair just like the trees. . . Come!

HINDEL

Wait. Wait. "Uncle" isn't asleep yet. He might hear us. (*All listen, their ears directed to the ceiling.*)

REIZEL

Come along! Can't you hear him snoring?

MANKE

Wait. . . We'll tap softly for Rifkele. (*Basha and Reizel go out. Manke takes a stick and taps in a corner of the ceiling, very softly. From outside comes the noise of the girls skipping about in the water. They take handfuls of raindrops and throw them in through the open door, calling "Come out! Come out!"*)

RIFKELE, *thrusts her head through the window. She is in her night clothes, covered by a light shawl. She whispers cautiously.*

Manke, Manke. Did you call me?

MANKE, *takes a chair and places it under the window; stands upon it and reaches to Rifkele's hand.*

Yes, Rifkele. I called you. . . Come, we'll stand in the May rain, splash water over each other and grow taller. . .

[58]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

RIFKELE, *from above.*

Hush! Speak more softly. I stole out of bed. So that pa wouldn't hear. I'm afraid, — that he'll beat me.

MANKE

Don't be afraid of your father. He won't wake up so soon. Come, let's rather stand in the rain. I'll let your hair down. (*She undoes Rifkele's braids, reaching through the window to do so.*) There. And now I'll wash them for you in the rain. Just like this.

RIFKELE

I have only a nightgown on. All night I lay in bed waiting for my father to fall asleep, so that I might steal out to you. I heard your tapping and sneaked away. So softly, barefoot, — so that my father shouldn't hear me.

MANKE, *embraces her passionately.*

Come, Rifkele, I'll wash your eyes in the rainwater. The night is so beautiful, the rain is so warm and the air is so full of delightful fragrance. Come.

RIFKELE

Hush. . . hush. . . I'm afraid of my father. . . He beat me. . . He locked the door. . . And hid the key near the Holy Scroll. I lay awake all night. . . I heard you call me. . . You called me so softly. . . And something drew me so irresistibly to you. . . and I stole the key from the

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

Scroll. . . My heart pounded so wildly. . . so wildly. . .

MANKE

Wait, Rifkele, I'm coming right out to you. (*Jumps down from the chair and runs up the stairs.*) I'm coming out to you. Just a moment and I'm with you. (*She leaves. Rifkele disappears from the window.*)

HINDEL, *from the curtain of her compartment she has been listening very intently to the conversation between Manke and Rifkele. She now begins to pace up and down the cellar excitedly, wrapt in thought and muttering to herself very slowly.*

With God's help, if I can only get both of them, Rifkele and Manke, this very night. . . I'll take them directly to Shloyme's. . . And I'll say to him, "Here you are. . . Here's your bread and butter. Now rent a place, marry me, and become a respectable man as well as any other." (*Stops abruptly. Raises her hands toward the ceiling.*) Father in Heaven, you are a Father to all orphans. . . Mother in your grave, pray for me. . . Let my troubles come to an end. Let me at last be settled in my own home! . . . (*Pause.*) If God is only good to me, I'll have a Holy Parchment written in His honor. . . And every Sabbath I'll give three pounds of candles to the House of Study. (*A long pause. She is lost in the contemplation of her future pros-*

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

pects.) Yes, he is a good God. . . a good God. . . Father in Heaven. . . Mother, pray in my behalf. . . don't be silent. . . pray for me. . . do your very best for me. . . (*She returns to her compartment and begins hastily to pack her things.*) I can be ready, anyway. (*A long pause. The stage is empty. Soon Manke leads in Rifkele. They are both wrapped in the same wet shawl. . . Their hair is dripping wet. Large drops of water fall from their clothes to the floor. They are barefoot. . . Hindel, behind her curtain, listens as before.*)

MANKE, *speaks with restrained passion and love, — softly, but with deep resonance.*

Are you cold, Rifkele darling? Nestle close to me. . . Ever so close. . . Warm yourself next to me. So. Come, let's sit down here on the lounge. (*Leads Rifkele to a lounge; they sit down.*) Just like this. . . Now rest your face snugly in my bosom. So. Just like that. And let your body touch mine. . . It's so cool. . . as if water were running between us. (*Pause.*) I uncovered your breasts and washed them with the rainwater that trickled down my arms. Your breasts are so white and soft. And the blood in them cools under the touch, just like white snow, — like frozen water. . . and their fragrance is like the grass on the meadows. And I let down your hair so. . . (*Runs her fingers through Rifkele's hair.*) And I held them like this in the rain and washed them. How

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

sweet they smell. . . Like the rain itself. . . (*She buries her face in Rifkele's hair.*) Yes, I can smell the scent of the May rain in them. . . So light, so fine. . . And fresh. . . as the grass on the meadows. . . as the apple on the bough. . . So. Cool me, refresh me with your tresses. (*She washes her face in Rifkele's hair.*) Cool me, — so. But wait. . . I'll comb you as if you were a bride. . . a nice part and two long, black braids. (*Does so.*) Do you want me to, Rifkele? Do you?

RIFKELE, *nodding.*

Yes.

MANKE

You'll be the bride. . . a beautiful bride. . . It's Sabbath eve and you are sitting with your papa and mamma at the table. . . I — I am your sweetheart. . . your bridegroom, and I've come as your guest. Eh, Rifkele? Do you like that game?

RIFKELE, *nodding.*

Yes, I do.

MANKE

Wait, now; wait. Your father and mother have gone to sleep. The sweethearts meet here at the table. . . We are bashful. . . Eh?

RIFKELE, *nodding.*

Yes, Manke.

[62]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

MANKE

Then we come closer to one another, for we are bride and bridegroom, you and I. We embrace. (*Places her arm around Rifkele.*) Ever so tightly. And kiss, very softly. Like this. (*Kisses Rifkele.*) And we turn so red, — we're so bashful. It's nice, Rifkele, isn't it?

RIFKELE

Yes, Manke. . . Yes.

MANKE, *lowering her voice, and whispering into Rifkele's ear.*

And then we go to sleep together. Nobody sees, nobody hears. Only you and I. Like this. (*Clasps Rifkele tightly to herself.*) Do you want to sleep with me tonight like this? Eh?

RIFKELE, *looking about nervously.*

I do. . . I do. . .

MANKE, *drawing Rifkele closer.*

Come. . . Come. . .

RIFKELE, *softly.*

I'm afraid of my father. He'll wake up and. .

MANKE

Wait, Rifkele, wait a second. (*Reflects for a moment.*) Do you want to go away from here with me? We'll be together days and nights at a time. Your father won't be there, nor your mother. . . Nobody'll scold you. . . or beat you. . .

[63]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

We'll be all by ourselves. . . For days at a time. . . We'll be so happy. What do you say, Rifkele?

RIFKELE, *closing her eyes.*

And my father won't know?

MANKE

No. We'll run away this very night, — with Hindel, to her house. . . She has a house with Shloyme, she told me. You'll see how nice everything will be. . . Young folks will be there aplenty, — army officers. . . and we'll be together, all by ourselves, all day long. We'll dress just like the officers and go horseback-riding. Come, Rifkele, — do you want to?

RIFKELE, *trembling with excitement.*

And papa won't hear?

MANKE

No, no. He won't hear. He's sleeping so soundly. . . There, can't you hear him snoring? . . . (*Runs over to Hindel's compartment and seizes Hindel by the arm.*) Have you got a place? Come! Take us away at once!

HINDEL, *waking with a start.*

Yes, yes. To Shloyme's, right away! (*She throws a dress over Rifkele.*) He'll find us a place quickly enough.

MANKE, *hastily dressing Rifkele.*

You'll see how nice everything'll be. . . What

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

a jolly time we'll have. (*All dress, seizing whatever they happen to lay hands upon. Slowly they ascend the steps. At the door they encounter Reizel and Basha who, drenched to the skin, are just returning to the cellar. Reizel and Basha look at the others in surprise.*)

REIZEL and BASHA, together.

What's this? Where are you going?

MANKE

Hush! Don't make any noise. We're going for some beer, — and lemonade. . . (*Hindel, Manke and Rifkele leave, followed by the amazed glances of Reizel and Basha.*)

REIZEL

There's something suspicious about this that I don't like.

BASHA

Same here.

REIZEL

Something's up. . . Good heavens!

BASHA, *stares at Reizel in fright.*

What? You mean *that*?

REIZEL

It's none of our business. Let's put out the lamp and go to sleep. We know nothing about it. (*Turns down the wick of the lamp. The stage is bathed in gloom. The girls go to their*

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

respective compartments.) That fortune-teller was certainly right, I tell you. She certainly was right! . . . (She disappears. For a moment the stage is empty and in darkness.)

BASHA, *comes running wildly from her room, with a hysterical outcry. She is in night clothes.*

REIZEL, *thrusting aside the curtain of her compartment.*

What's the matter, Basha?

BASHA

I'm afraid to go to sleep. I feel that the ghost of my mother, with her thorns and her briars, is hovering about my room.

REIZEL

The Holy Scroll in the room above has been defiled. We have no one to shield us now!

BASHA

I'm afraid this is going to be a terrible night. My heart's thumping. *(Suddenly, from above, a din is heard. There is a scraping of chairs and tables. The girls, eyes distended with fear, listen intently. Soon there is the sound of something heavy falling down the outside stairs.)*

YEKEL, *outside.*

Rifkele, Rifkele! Where are you?

REIZEL, *to Basha.*

Let's lie down in our beds and pretend we're

[66]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

fast asleep. . . We know nothing at all, remember! (*Both go to their beds and feign deep sleep.*)

YEKEL, *rushes into the cellar, a burning candle in his hand. His hair is in disorder. Over his nightshirt he has thrown a coat. He shouts wildly.* Rifkele! Rifkele! Is Rifkele here? (*No reply. He tears the curtains of the compartments violently aside.*) Rifkele! Where is she? (*Waking Reizel and Basha.*) Where is Rifkele! Rifkele! Where is she?

REIZEL and BASHA, *rubbing their eyes with their sleeves, as if awakened from sound sleep.*

What? . . . We don't know.

YEKEL

You don't know? . . . You don't know? . . . (*Rushes up the stairs, almost at a single bound. Goes out. Pause. There is a sound outside of something falling down the stairs. The door is suddenly banged open and Yekel stumbles in, dragging Sarah by the hair. Both are in night attire. Yekel pulls Sarah downstairs by the hair. Points to the cellar.*) Where is your daughter? Your daughter, — where is she? (*Basha and Reizel huddle close to the wall, trembling with terror.*)

QUICK CURTAIN

[67]

ACT III

SCENE: Same as Act I. The cupboard and the bureau have been knocked out of place. Clothes and linen are strewn about the floor. The door to Rifkele's room is open, and from within the light of a candle comes across the stage. Sarah, her hair dishevelled and her clothes in disarray, is going about the room picking up the things that lie scattered about. She packs them into a bundle, as if preparing to leave, yet eventually puts most of the articles back into their proper places.

It is early morning. Through the closed shutters penetrates the gray light of coming day.

Act III

SARAH

Yekel! What's the matter with you, Yekel! (*Goes over to the door of Rifkele's room and looks inside.*) Why are you sitting there like that? (*Turns back and continues to collect the scattered things.*) What a misfortune! He wants to bring the whole house to ruin. (*Returns to Rifkele's door.*) Yekel! Why are you so silent? What's come over you? (*Turns back, tearfully.*) Did you ever see? A person sits down before the Holy Scroll and thinks and thinks. What is there to think about? A misfortune has befallen us. Go to the police, see the captain. . . Seek out the man by hook or crook. . . There is yet time. (*Returns to the door.*) Why don't you say something? (*She sits down upon a bundle of clothes near the door, buries her face in her hands and begins to weep.*) He sits there like a madman, staring at the Holy Scroll and mumbling. He neither sees nor hears. What on earth can have possessed him? (*Arises. To Yekel.*) It makes no difference to me, — one place or another. If you want me to leave, all right. I'll go. The devil won't take me. . . I'll earn my bread, all right, wherever I may be. (*Resumes her packing, silently. Pause.*)

[71]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

YEKEL, *enters from Rifkele's room. He is without hat or coat; his hair is in disorder. His eyes have a wild glare, and he speaks slowly, with a subdued, hoarse voice.*

I'll go. . . You'll go. . . Rifkele will go. . . Everything and everybody will go. . . (*Pointing to the brothel.*) Down into the cellar. . . God won't have it otherwise. . .

SARAH

Yekel, what's possessed you? Have you gone crazy? (*Approaching him.*) Consider what you're doing. A misfortune has befallen us. Agreed. To whom don't misfortunes happen? Come. Let us hunt out Shloyme. We'll give him two or three hundred roubles and let him give us back our child. He'll do it, all right. . . Well, what are you sitting there moping about? What's the matter with you?

YEKEL, *in the same hoarse voice, as he paces about the room.*

It's all the same to me now. My soul is given over to the devil. Nothing will help. It's no use. God won't have it. . . (*He stops before the window and peers through an interstice of the shutter.*)

SARAH

God won't have it, you say? You've merely talked yourself into that! It's *you* that won't have it. Do you love your daughter? Yekel!

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

Yekel! (*Dragging him away from the window.*) What's come over you? Act while there is yet time! He might take her off somewhere while we're wasting time here. Let's be off to him at once. Hindel must surely have taken her to him. What are you standing there for? (*Abruptly.*) I've sent for Reb Ali. We'll hear what he has to say. (*Pause. Yekel still peers through the shutter spaces.*) What are you staring at there? (*Pause.*) Why don't you say something? Good heavens, its enough to drive a woman insane! (*Turns away and bursts into tears.*)

YEKEL, *pacing about the room as before.*

No more home. . . No more wife. . . no more daughter. . . Down into the cellar. . . Back to the brothel. . . We don't need any daughter now . . . don't need her. . . She's become what her mother was. . . God won't have it. . . Back to the cellar. . . Down into the brothel!

SARAH

So you want to go back to the cellar? — Into the cellar, then! Much I care! (*Resumes her packing.*) He wants to ruin us completely. What has come over the man? (*For a moment she is absorbed in reflection.*) If you're going to stand there like a lunatic, I'll get busy myself! (*Takes off her diamond ear-rings.*) I'll go over to Shloyme's and give him my diamond ear-rings. (*From her bundle she draws out a*

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

golden chain.) And if he holds back, I'll add a hundred rouble note. (*She searches Yekel's trousers pocket for his pocketbook. He offers no resistance.*) Within fifteen minutes (*Throwing a shawl over her shoulders.*) Rifkele will be here. (*As she leaves.*) Shloyme will do that for me. (*Slams the door behind her.*)

YEKEL, *walks about the room, his head bowed.*

It's all the same to me now. . . The devil got her, too. No more daughter. . . No more Holy Scroll. . . Into the brothel with everything. . . Back to the brothel. . . God won't have it. . . (*Long pause. Reizel appears at the door, thrusting in her head. Steals into the room and stops near the entrance. Yekel notices her, and stares at her vacantly.*)

REIZEL, *stammering.*

I went for Reb Ali. Your wife sent me. He'll be here soon.

YEKEL, *with the same empty stare.*

The devil has won her, anyway. No use now. Too late. God won't have it.

REIZEL

She was such a nice girl. What a shame!

YEKEL

Eyes her with amazement.

[74]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

REIZEL, *apologizing.*

Your wife told me to wait here until she came back.

YEKEL

Don't be afraid. I haven't gone insane yet. Not yet. God has punished me.

REIZEL

Who could ever have expected such a thing? She was such a pure child. Oh! what a heart-breaking pity! As true as I live. . .

REB ALI, *enters, carrying a lantern.*

What's happened, that you had to call me before daybreak? (*Going to the window and peering through the shutter spaces.*) It's almost time for the morning prayers.

YEKEL, *not looking at Reb Ali.*

The Holy Scroll has been violated, Reb Ali. Desecrated most foully.

REB ALI, *frightened.*

What are you saying? God forbid, the whole town will have to atone for the sin! What has happened? Speak, man! Good Lord in Heaven!

YEKEL

Down into the brothel. . . (*Pointing below. Then to Reizel.*) Down below, with the rest of

[75]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

them. Down into the brothel. No more Holy Scroll.

REB ALI

Man! What words are these! What's happened here? Speak!

REIZEL, *at the door. Reassuring Reb Ali.*

No, Rebbi. Not the Holy Scroll. His daughter. . . Rifkele. The Holy Scroll is undefiled. (*Points to Rifkele's room.*) Still in there.

~~REIZEL~~
REB ALI, *with a sigh of relief.*

Blessed be His name. But are you sure that the Scroll is undefiled?

REIZEL

Yes, Rebbi.

REB ALI, *more calmly, spitting out.*

Blessed be His Name. I feel easier on that score. (*To Yekel.*) What made you talk such nonsense? (*To Reizel, without looking at her.*) Did she go away? Isn't she back yet? (*To Yekel.*) Has anybody gone to look for her?

YEKEL

My daughter is holier to me than a Holy Scroll.

REB ALI

Don't talk nonsense. Just keep quiet and don't make any scenes. Has anybody gone yet to look for her? To bring her back? Well?

[76]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

What are you standing there for, instead of going after her?

REIZEL

My mistress went to get her.

REB ALI

Do they know where the girl went?

REIZEL

Yes. The mistress will soon fetch her home.

REB ALI

Fine! Then what's all this commotion about? The whole town will know all about it before long. Such things should be kept dark. They're not nice. If a prospective father-in-law ever got wind of the story, her dowry would have to be raised a couple of hundred roubles. . .

YEKEL

It's all the same to me now. Let everybody know. No more daughter. . . No more Holy Scroll. . . Into the cellar. Into the brothel with everything.

REB ALI

Fie! You're out of your head altogether. True, a misfortune has befallen you. May Heaven watch over all of us. Well? What? Misfortunes happen to plenty of folks. The Lord sends aid and things turn out all right. The important point is to keep it a secret. Hear nothing. See nothing. Just wash your

[77]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

hands clean of it and forget it. (*To Reizel.*) Be careful what you say. Don't let it travel any further, God forbid. Do you hear? (*Turns to Yekel, who is staring vacantly into space.*) I had a talk with. . . (*Looks around to see whether Reizel is still present. Seeing her, he stops. After a pause he begins anew, more softly, looking at Reizel as a hint for her to leave.*) With er, er. . . (*Casts a significant glance at Reizel, who at last understands, and leaves.*) I had a talk with the groom's father. I spoke to him between the afternoon and evening prayers, at the synagogue. He's almost ready to talk business. Of course I gave him to understand that the bride doesn't boast a very high pedigree, but I guess another hundred roubles will fix that up, all right. Nowadays, pedigrees don't count as much as they used to. With God's help I'll surely be here this Sabbath, with the groom's father. We'll go down to the Dayon* and have him examine the young man in his religious studies. . . But nobody must get wind of this tale. It might spoil everything. The father comes of a fine family and the son carries a smart head on his shoulders. There, there. Calm yourself. Trust in the Lord and everything will turn out for the best. With God's help I am going home to prepare for the morning prayer. And as soon as the girl returns, notify me. Remember, now. (*About to go.*)

* Assistant to the Rabbi, and usually well versed in religious law.

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

YEKEL, *arises and grasps Reb Ali's arm.*

Listen to me, Rebbi. Take your Holy Scroll along with you. I don't need it any more.

REB ALI, *thunderstruck.*

What are you talking about? What has possessed you? Have you gone stark mad?

YEKEL

My daughter has gone to a brothel. The Scroll has been desecrated. God has punished me.

REB ALI, *trying to interrupt him.*

What are you raving about?

YEKEL

I am a woeful sinner. I know it well. He should have broken my feet beneath me, — or taken away my life in its prime. But what did He want of my daughter? My poor, blameless daughter?

REB ALI

Hear me. You mustn't talk like that against the Lord.

YEKEL, *excited.*

And why not? I may speak everything. It's the truth. Yes, I am Yekel Tchaftchovitch, all right. The "Uncle" of a brothel. But the truth I may speak even to God. I'm afraid no longer. I went into the House of Study to you.

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

I told you everything. So you advised me to have a Holy Scroll written. In there I placed it, — in her room. I stood before it night after night, and used to say to it, “You are really a God. You know everything I do. You will punish me. Very well. Punish me. Punish my wife. We have both sinned. But my poor, innocent daughter. Guard her. Have pity upon her!”

REB ALI

But no evil has befallen her. She will return. She will yet make a fine pious Jewish wife.

YEKEL

No use. . . The devil has won her. She'll be drawn to it. Once she has made a beginning. . . she'll not stop. . . If not today, tomorrow. The devil has won her soul. I know. Yes, I know only too well.

REB ALI

Don't speak folly, I tell you. Calm yourself. Pray fervently for the Lord's pardon. Give up this business of yours. With God's help your daughter will yet marry just like all Jewish women, and bring you plenty of happiness.

YEKEL

Too late, Rebbi. Too late. If only she had died in her childhood, I should have nothing to complain about. . . Then I'd know she was dead, — that I had buried an innocent creature. . . I would visit her grave and say to myself, “Here

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

lies your child. Even if you yourself are a sinner, here lies a pure daughter of yours, a virtuous child." But as it is, what is left me on earth? I myself am a sinner. I leave behind me sinful offspring. And so passes sin from generation to generation.

REB ALI

Don't speak like that. A Jew must not utter such things. Trust in the Lord, and say "The past is dead and gone."

YEKEL, *interrupting.*

Don't try to console me, Rebbi. I know that it's too late. Sin encircles me and mine like a rope around a person's neck. God wouldn't have it. But I ask you, Rebbi, *why* wouldn't He have it? What harm would it have done Him if I, Yekel Tchaftchovitch, should have been raised from the mire into which I have fallen? (*He goes into Rifkele's room, carries out the Sacred Parchment, raises it aloft and speaks.*) You, Holy Scroll, I know, — you are a great God! For you are our Lord! I, Yekel Tchaftchovitch, have sinned. (*Beats his breast with his closed fist.*) *My sins. . . my sins. . .* Work a miracle, — send down a pillar of fire to consume me. On this very spot, where I now stand! Open up the earth at my feet and let it swallow me! But shield my daughter. Send her back to me as pure and innocent as when she left. I know. . . to You everything is pos-

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

sible. Work a miracle! For You are an almighty God. And if You don't, then You're no God at all, I tell you. I, Yekel Tchaftchovitch, tell You that You are as vengeful as any human being. . .

REB ALI, *jumps up and snatches the Parchment from Yekel's grasp.*

Do you realize whom you are talking to? (*Looks at him sternly, then takes the Scroll back to Rifkele's room.*) Implore pardon of the Holy Scroll!

YEKEL

The truth may be spoken even before God's very face! (*Follows Reb Ali into Rifkele's room.*) If He's a true God, then let Him reveal His miracle here on this very spot!

SARAH, *runs in excitedly. Hastens over to the mirror and begins to arrange her hair with her hands. Calls.*

Come in, Shloyme. Why do you remain outside?

SHLOYME, *from without.*

Where is Yekel? Let him know (*Comes in.*) that I'll do anything for one of our brotherhood. Even if he did insult me.

SARAH, *runs over to Rifkele's door. Locks it, leaving Yekel and Reb Ali inside.*

Let him stay there. (*Smiling.*) These last

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

few days he's turned into a saint. . . Seeks the company of pious Jews. (*Runs over to the entrance door and locks it.*) And what a bride you have picked out! Such a pest your Hindel is, I must say! You can't shake yourself rid of her! She trails after you as if you already belonged to her. I'll wager she's tracked you to this place, too! (*With a wily smile.*) Ah, Shloyme, Shloyme, such goods you've selected! (*She goes over to the window and opens the shutters. The room grows lighter.*) Why have they closed up the place, anyway? As if in mourning!

SHLOYME

Don't worry, I tell you. Once I've said "yes," I mean it. Whoever else I'd refuse, I'll do it for you. Even if you *have* treated me shabbily of late. . . Well, never mind. Hindel may go to perdition for all it'll help her.

SARAH, *glides over to him, seizes his hand and looks straight into his eyes.*

A fellow as young as you, — how can you take such a scarecrow as Hindel? Who is she? She's roamed around from one brothel to another. Why, a young chap like you! And you can make a tidy bit now. Then what do you need her for? With your couple of hundred roubles why can't you catch some fine, respectable girl? Why not? Aren't you as young and handsome as any other, I'd like to know? (*Slaps him*

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

across the shoulders.) You just listen to me, Shloyme. You know I was never unkind to you, even if I haven't been all I might have, lately. But I've always been Sarah to you. Isn't that so? (*Looking him straight in the eyes.*)

SHLOYME, *twirling his moustache.*

The devil! Deuce knows! I let my head be turned by the girl. . . Just for the time being. . . to get a few roubles. . . Do you really think I meant to marry her? My mother would have cursed every bone in my body. I have a respectable mother. And my sister?

SARAH

Haven't you any better business prospects than to tie yourself to such a fright and open a place with her? Much there is in the business these days, anyway. It doesn't pay to have to do with outcasts of her type. (*Comes close to him and thrusts her ear-rings into his hand.*) Here, take these and here's another hundred roubles. Now tell me where Rifkele is.

SHLOYME

What's true is true. You were once a good woman. (*Winks at her.*) Lately you've been spoiled. But that's another matter. Just remember that Shloyme is one of your own crowd. (*Pockets her ear-rings.*)

SARAH

And now tell me, Shloyme, where she is. You

[84]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

may tell me everything, even if I am her mother. You know, such things don't affect me. Tell me, — have you led her off somewhere to a . . . ?

SHLOYME

She is very near. . . If I say I'll bring her here, you may depend upon me. And listen, — may I have such luck, what a prize she would make! Such eyes, such motions. And as clever as they make 'em!

SARAH

Ha! Ha! There's life to Sarah yet. . . But tell me, Shloyme, where have you put her? You may speak freely to me. (*Places an arm about him and slaps him over the shoulder with the other, looking into his eyes coquettishly.*) Come, tell me, good brother.

SHLOYME

Not far from here. Not far. . . (*A thumping of fists is heard on the door leading to the outside.*)

HINDEL, *from without,*

You know nothing about her! Nothing at all!

SARAH

Let her hammer her head against the wall. Goodness me! How she holds him in her clutches! Ha, ha! He dare not leave her for a moment! (*Making eyes at him.*) Shame yourself, to have affairs with trash like that! (*Shloyme meditates for a moment. Sarah*

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

seizes him by the arm and draws him aside.)
See here. What do you need her for? I'll get a girl for you. A dream. You'll see. (*Winks at him.*)

HINDEL, *forcing the door open, rushes in.*

What are they pestering him about? Bad dreams to them! Their daughter runs away. . . (*Seizing Shloyme by the hand.*) He doesn't know where she is. What do they want of you, anyway?

SARAH, *sits down, glances teasingly at Shloyme and points to Hindel.*

So that's your style, eh? That thing there? Ha, ha!

HINDEL, *looking around.*

She laughs like an evil spirit! (*To Shloyme.*) You know nothing whatever about Rifkele. (*Takes him aside. Softly.*) Let's be off to Lodz at once. We'll marry there. . . Rent a house. . . With two girls like these we can. . . Consider what you're doing! (*Aloud.*) What are they pestering you for? You know nothing at all about her. (*Pulling him out.*) Come, Shloyme. (*He is undecided.*)

SARAH, *aloud, with a wily smile.*

Well, why don't you go along with her, Shloyme? She's come for you. . . to take you to Lodz. . . to get married. . . and set up house. Tee-hee! (*Comes close to Shloyme and draws*

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

him away from Hindel.) A young chap like you, with a respectable mother, — and your father was a pious Jew. . . What does *she* want of you? What is *she* pestering you for?

SHLOYME, *resolutely.*

Come, Sarah. We'll get Rifkele.

HINDEL, *clapping her hand across his mouth.*

You'll not tell. You know nothing about her. (*She runs over to the door, shuts it and stands with her back against it.*) I won't let you go out. (*Runs over to Shloyme and seizes his hand.*) Remember, Shloyme. It's all right for *them*. Then why not for *us*? Come, Shloyme. We'll leave this place. . . And we'll do such a business — such a flourishing business!

SHLOYME

We've heard all that. . . we've heard it before. (*Thrusts her away.*) We'll talk that over later. I haven't any time now. (*Goes out with Sarah, followed by Hindel.*)

SARAH, *running back. Opens Rifkele's door and calls to the men inside.*

Rifkele is here!

HINDEL, *from the entry.*

I'll not let you. You won't tell!

SHLOYME, *in the doorway.*

Come, Sarah.

[87]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

SARAH, *runs after him.*

I'm coming, Shloyme. (*Sarah, Shloyme and Hindel leave.*)

REB ALI, *enters, with Yekel.*

Praised be the Lord! Praised be the Heavenly Father! (*Following Yekel, who paces about the room.*) See how the Almighty, blessed be His Name, has come to your aid? He punishes, — yes. But he sends the remedy before the disease. Despite your having sinned, despite your having uttered blasphemy. (*Admonishing him.*) From now on see to it that you never speak such words, — that you have reverence, great reverence. . . Know what a Holy Scroll is, and what a learned Jew is. . . You must go to the synagogue, and you must make a generous donation to the students of the Law. You must fast in atonement, and the Lord will forgive you. (*Pause. Reb Ali looks sternly at Yekel, who has continued to walk about the room, absorbed in his thoughts.*) What? Aren't you listening to me? With the aid of the Almighty everything will turn out for the best. I'm going at once to the groom's father and we'll discuss the whole matter in detail. But be sure not to haggle. A hundred roubles more or less, — remember who you are and who he is. And what's more, see to it that you settle the dowry right away and indulge in no idle talk about the wedding. Heaven forbid, — another misfortune might occur!

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

Such matters should not be delayed. (*Glares angrily at Yekel.*) What! You pay no attention! I'm talking to you!

YEKEL, *as if to himself.*

One thing I want to ask her. One thing only. But she must tell me the truth, — the whole truth. Yes, or no.

REB ALI

Don't sin, man. Thank the good Lord that He has helped you.

YEKEL, *as before.*

I'll not lay a finger upon her. Just let her answer the truth. Yes, or no.

REB ALI

The truth. The truth. Heaven will help you . . . Everything will turn out for the best. I'm going to the young man's father directly. He's over at the synagogue and must surely be waiting for me. (*Looks around.*) Tell your wife to put the house in order in the meantime. And you, prepare the contract, and at once, so that he'll have no time to discover anything amiss and withdraw. Arrange the wedding date and have the bride go at once to her parents-in-law. No idle chatter, remember. Keep silent, so that nobody will learn anything about it. (*Ready to go.*) And cast all this nonsense out of your head. Trust in the Lord and rejoice in His

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

comfort. (*At the door.*) Tell your wife to tidy up the place. (*Leaves.*)

YEKEL, *strides nervously to and fro.*

Let her only tell me the truth. The plain truth. (*A long silence.*)

SARAH, *on the threshold.*

Come in. Come in. Your father won't beat you. (*Pause.*) Go in, I tell you. (*Pushes Rifkele into the room. Rifkele has a shawl over her head. She stands silent and motionless at the door, a shameless look in her eyes, biting her lips.*) Well, what are you standing there for, my darling? Much pleasure you've brought us . . . in return for our trouble in bringing you up. We'll square that with you later. (*Interrupting herself.*) Get into your room. Comb your hair. Put on a dress. We're expecting guests. (*To Yekel.*) I just met Reb Ali. He's going for the groom's father. (*Looks about the room.*) Goodness me! How the place looks! (*She begins hastily to place things in order.*)

YEKEL, *seeing Rifkele, fastens his gaze upon her, approaches her, takes her gently by the hand and leads her to the table.*

Don't be afraid. I'll not hurt you. (*He sits down.*) Sit down here beside me. (*Pushes a chair toward her.*) Sit down.

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

RIFKELE, *provoked, hides her face in her shawl.*
I can stand just as well.

YEKEL

Sit down. (*He seats her.*) Don't be afraid.

RIFKELE, *from behind the shawl.*
Why should I be afraid?

YEKEL, *speaks in a faltering voice.*

Rifkele, tell me, Rifkele. You are my daughter. I am your father. (*Points to Sarah.*) She is your mother. Tell me, my daughter. Tell me the whole truth. Don't be afraid of me. Don't feel ashamed before me. I know, — not for *your* sins. . . not for *your* sins. . . For my sins, *mine*. . . For your mother's sins. . . *our* sins. . . Tell me, daughter. . .

SARAH

Just look at the way he's sat down to cross examine her! What does he want of her? The moment she arrives! Let her go in and dress. We'll soon be having company. (*About to take Rifkele away.*)

YEKEL

Let her go, I say! (*Thrusts Sarah away from Rifkele.*)

[91]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

SARAH

He's gone crazy today. What's possessed the man? (*Resumes her cleaning.*)

YEKEL, *seating Rifkele beside him.*

I'll not beat you. (*Clutching her slender throat with his fingers.*) If I had only twisted your neck for you, like this, before you ever grew up, it would have been better for you, and for me. . . But don't be afraid. I won't harm you. It's not for your sins that God has punished us. No. It's for ours. I guarded you like the apple of my eye. I had a Holy Scroll written for you. I placed it in your room and prayed to it for days and nights at a time. "Shield my child from evil! Visit your punishment upon me! On her mother! But spare my daughter!" You'd grow up, I planned, and I'd make a fine match for you. I'd get you a respectable young man for a husband. I'd keep you both here with me, at my expense. You would both live. . .

RIFKELE, *still hidden behind her shawl.*

There's plenty of time for me to marry. I'm not so old.

SARAH

And she has the impudence to argue with him!

[92]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

RIFKELE

They want to turn me into a Rabbi's wife.*
Why didn't mamma marry early?

SARAH

Hold your tongue, or I'll slap you black and blue! Just listen to what she's picked up in a single night!

RIFKELE, *misunderstanding.*

Yes, I know everything now.

YEKEL

Let her alone! (*With nervous haste.*) I want to ask her only one thing. One thing only. Tell me the truth. . . I'll not beat you. I'll not lay a finger upon you. You're not to blame. (*Almost unable to speak.*) Tell me frankly, the — the — whole truth tell me. . . The truth. . .

SARAH

What truth shall she tell you? What do you want of the girl?

YEKEL

I'm not asking you. . . (*Arises, seizing Rifkele by the hand.*) Don't feel ashamed before me. I'm your father. You may tell me everything. . . Speak openly. . . Are you — are you still as pure as when you left this house? Are

* Colloquial expression signifying extreme piety.

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

you still a virtuous Jewish daughter? (*Shouting.*) Yes, — a virtuous Jewish daughter?

SARAH, *tearing Rifkele out of Yekel's grasp.*

What do you want of the girl? The child is innocent of all evil. Let her go.

YEKEL, *holding Rifkele firmly, and trying to look straight into her eyes.*

Just tell me the truth. I'll believe you. Look me straight in the face. Are you still an innocent Jewish child? Look me in the face! Straight in the eye! (*Rifkele, despite Yekel's efforts, hides her face in the shawl.*)

SARAH

Why don't you take that shawl off your head? You don't need it indoors. (*Removes Rifkele's shawl. Rifkele resists, but losing her grasp upon the shawl she hides her face in her gown.*)

YEKEL, *loudly.*

Tell me now. Don't be ashamed. I'll do you no harm. (*Holding her firmly by the hand and looking her directly in the eye.*) Are you still a chaste Jewish daughter? — Tell me, at once!

RIFKELE, *trying to hide her face.*

I don't know. . .

YEKEL, *at the top of his voice.*

You don't know! You don't know! Then who *does* know? What do you mean, — you

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

“don't know?” The truth, now! Are you still —

RIFKELE, tearing herself from Yekel.

It was all right for mamma, wasn't it? And it was all right for you, wasn't it? I know all about it! . . . (*Hiding her face in her hands.*) Beat me! Beat me! Go on!

SARAH

Rushes over to Rifkele with arms upraised, ready to strike her. Yekel casts Sarah aside with a single blow, and falls into a chair, pale and breathing hard. Rifkele sinks to the floor, weeping hysterically. A long pause. Sarah, plainly upset, paces aimlessly about the room. After a while she takes a broom and begins to sweep the room; her silence betrays a feeling of guilt. . . . She then approaches Rifkele, lifts her by the hand and leads her off stage into the room. Yekel is rooted to his place. Sarah returns, runs over to Yekel, grasps his hand and entreats him.

Yekel, consider what you are doing, for God's sake! Who need know anything? (*Pause.*) Calm yourself. (*Pause.*) Rifkele will get married and we'll live to have plenty of happiness from her. (*Yekel is silent.*) Put on your coat, — they'll soon be here. (*Abruptly.*) Who need know anything at all about it?

YEKEL

Silent. Stares vacantly into space.

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

SARAH, brings in Yekel's coat and hat and places them upon him. He offers no resistance.

What a misfortune! What a misfortune! Who could have foreseen such a thing? (*She straightens Yekel's coat, then puts the room in order. Runs into Rifkele's room. She is heard hiding something there, and soon returns.*) I'll have a reckoning with you later. (*Putting the finishing touches to the room.*) Terrible days, these. Bring up children with so much care and anxiety, and. . . Ah! (*Footsteps are heard outside. Sarah runs over to Yekel and pulls his sleeve.*) They're here! For the love of God, Yekel, remember! Everything can be fixed yet. (*Enter Reb Ali and a stranger. Sarah hastily thrusts her hair under her wig and goes to the door to welcome the visitors.*)

REB ALI

Good morning.

SARAH

Good morning. Good year. Welcome. (*Somewhat confused, she places chairs before the guests and motions them to be seated.*)

REB ALI, in a cheerful mood.

Well, and where is the bride's father? (*Looking about for Yekel.*)

SARAH, smiling, to her husband.

Why don't you show yourself, Yekel? (*She*

[96]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

thrusts a chair toward him. The visitors express their greetings and take their seats.)

REB ALI, *gesticulating.*

Let's get right down to business. (*To the stranger, pointing to Yekel.*) This gentleman wishes to unite families with you. He has an excellent daughter and wants as her husband a scholar well versed in Rabbinical lore. He'll support the couple for life.

THE STRANGER

That sounds inviting.

YEKEL, *arising.*

Yes, my friend. A virtuous Jewish daughter . . . a model child. . .

REB ALI, *to the stranger,*

He's ready to settle upon her a dowry of five hundred roubles cash at the time of the engagement. . . And he'll support the couple for life. He will treat your son as his own child.

THE STRANGER

Well, — there's little need of my boosting *my* goods. With two years more of study, he'll have the whole learning at his finger tips.

REB ALI

Naturally, naturally. This gentleman will guard him like the apple of his eye. He'll have the best of everything here. He'll be able

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

to sit and study the Holy Law day and night, to his heart's content.

YEKEL, *indicating Rifkele's room.*

Yes, he'll sit inside there and study the sacred books. . . I have a virtuous Jewish daughter. (*Goes into the room and drags Rifkele out by force. She is only half dressed, her hair in disorder. He points to her.*) Your son will marry a virtuous Jewish daughter, I say. She will bear him pure, Jewish children. . . even as all pious daughters. (*To Sarah.*) Isn't that so? (*Laughing wildly, to the stranger.*) Yes, indeed, my friend, — she'll make a pure, pious little mate. My wife will lead her under the wedding canopy. . . Down into the brothel! Down below! (*Pointing to the cellar.*) Down into the brothel! (*Dragging Rifkele by her hair to the door.*) Down into the brothel with you! Down!

SARAH, *rushing madly over to Yekel.*

Good God! He's gone stark mad! (*She tries to tear Rifkele away from Yekel; he thrusts Sarah aside and drags his daughter out by the hair.*)

YEKEL

Down into the brothel with you! (*He leaves together with Rifkele, whose cries are heard from outside.*)

[98]

THE GOD OF VENGEANCE

THE STRANGER, *with amazement and fright.*

What is this? (*Reb Ali beckons to him, pulls him by the sleeve and points to the door. The stranger stands motionless in his astonishment. Reb Ali draws him to the door. They leave. Pause.*)

YEKEL, *enters, dragging back with him Reb Ali, whom he has met on the stairs.*

Take the Holy Scroll along with you! I don't need it any more!

CURTAIN

... this book should be

...



WV 13 '88

Stanford University Libraries



3 6105 010 348 006

2.4
H81gE

STANFORD UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES
STANFORD AUXILIARY LIBRARY
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 94305-6004
(415) 723-9201
All books may be recalled after 7 days

DATE DUE

F/S JUN 30 1997

JUN 15 1999

JUN 18 2001
MAY 7 2001

**A & B
BOOKSELLERS**
Specialists in
theatre books
W. 161st ST. N. Y. 32

