

The Treasure

It's no pleasure to sleep in July in a room, four by four, together with a wife and eight little children, especially on a Friday night. That's why Shmeril, the woodcutter, woke up after midnight, hot and breathless. Quickly he poured water over his fingers, grabbed his robe, and ran barefoot out of his suffocating hellhole. When he came out on the street—all was quiet, all streets were closed, and a high, quiet, starry sky covered the sleeping, little town. It seemed to him that now he was alone with God (blessed be He!). Looking up to heaven he exclaimed: "Well, Creator of the Universe, this is the time to listen to me and to bless me with a treasure out of the abundance of your treasures."

Hardly had he uttered these words than he saw ahead of him an odd little flame running out of the town. "This must be the treasure," he reasoned.

He wanted to run after it. He recalled, however, that a person must not run on the Sabbath. So he walked on after the flame. Strangely enough, no matter how slowly he walked, the flame proceeded at an equally slow pace and the distance between himself and the flame neither increased nor decreased. He kept on walking and at times something in his heart told him: "Shmeril, don't be a fool, take off your robe, dash over, and throw it on the flame!"

He realized, however, that such an idea must stem from the Tempter to Evil. He did indeed take off his robe; he seemed ready to throw it; but, just to spite the Tempter, he took still smaller steps and was gratified to see that, at once, the flame also moved more slowly. And so he followed the flame at a moderate pace and, walking on, he gradually got toward the outskirts of the town.

The road twisted and turned, past fields and meadows, and the distance between himself and the flame never grew wider or narrower. Were he to throw the robe, it would not reach up to the flame.

Meanwhile, his thoughts became confused: if only he would catch the treasure, he wouldn't have to be a woodcutter in his old age; he no longer had the strength he once had for this work; he could buy his wife a pew in the synagogue, in the

section reserved for women, so that her Sabbaths and Festivals would not be spoiled by her not being permitted to sit anywhere. Poor woman! On the High Holidays, she was always falling off her feet. The bearing of children had sapped her strength! He would make her a new dress; he would buy her a few strings of pearls. He would send his children to better schools; he would start looking about for a match for his oldest daughter.

It would be fine, if the Treasure could be caught!

"Again the Tempter," he mused. "If the Treasure isn't meant for me, then I'll have to get along without it." Were this a week-day, he would know what to do. Were his eldest son Yankel here, the urchin wouldn't be so passive . . . children nowadays . . . who knows what they are doing on a Sabbath? . . . The younger son wasn't any better either, always ridiculing the teacher. Let the teacher but try to slap them, why they would tear his beard off . . . and who has time to look after them? What with chopping and sawing all day! . . .

Shmeril sighed and walked ever farther. Every once in a while, he lifted an eye to heaven: "O Creator of the Universe, whom do you want to test here! Shmeril the Woodcutter? If you want to give, give!"

At this moment it seemed to him as if the Treasure were beginning to move a little more slowly. But just then he heard a dog barking. He recognized the barking: it originated in Visoke, the first village beyond the town. In the fresh pre-dawn atmosphere, he saw white spots coming into view. These were the houses of Visoke peasants. This reminded him that he had walked about as far as one may on the Sabbath. He stopped.

"Yes, I've reached the Sabbath-limit," he mused. "You won't lead me astray! You are not sent by God. For God does not make a mockery of man—and this is tomfoolery!" He got rather angry at the adversary and so turned around and hastily retraced his steps towards the town. He made up his mind: "I won't mention this matter to anybody at home. In the first place, they wouldn't believe me, even if I did mention it. And, in the second place, if they did believe me they would laugh at me! Besides, what is there to boast of? The Creator of the

Universe knows—that suffices. My wife might even become angry, as far as I can tell. The children would surely be angry—naked and barefoot, poor things! Why should they transgress against the commandment: ‘Honor thy father!’ ”

No, he wouldn’t mention it. He wouldn’t even remind God of the incident. If he, Shmeril, had done the proper thing, God would not fail to remember it. . . .

Suddenly he felt a strange happy calmness come over him. A quiet satisfaction permeated his limbs. “Money is after all trash. Wealth may even seduce a person from the right path.” He wanted to thank God for not subjecting him to this test. He was so relieved that he felt like bursting into song: “Our Father, Our King”—he remembered this melody of his youth but stopped short abashed.

He tried to recall a synagogue chant—when suddenly he saw that the same flame, which he left behind, had emerged in front of him and that it was moving slowly before him. . . . The distance between himself and the flame grew neither larger nor smaller. It seemed as if the flame were out for a walk and as if he too were walking a bit, in honor of the Sabbath. His quiet happiness persisted. He looked about. The sky was turning paler. The little stars were beginning to fade. There was a slight reddening in the East and the reddish tinge flowed along like a river, narrow and long.

The flame, meanwhile, continued to move. It entered the town and proceeded to his street. There was his house. He saw the door wide open. Apparently, he had forgotten to close it. . . . And now, the flame went in, it was inside his home! He followed it. He saw it creep under his bed. Everybody was still sleeping in the room. He walked over quietly, bent down, and saw the flame under his bed spinning on its axis just like a top. He thereupon took his robe, threw it down under the bed, and covered the flame with it. Nobody heard what was going on, and now the first golden ray of morning stole through a slit into the room.

He sat down on the bed and made a vow that until the end of the Sabbath he would not breathe a word to anyone, not a single word. Otherwise, the Sabbath might be desecrated. His wife might not be able to control her curiosity. His son certainly would want to get to the bottom of this matter. They would want to start counting immediately. They would want to find out how much. Soon the secret would be out. In the large synagogue, in the smaller houses of worship, in all the streets, the tale of his wealth would spread from mouth to mouth . . . the tale of his good fortune . . . and nobody would pray, nobody would wash for the blessings, nobody would perform the benedictions with the necessary devotion. He would cause his household to sin, and half the town as well. No, not a whisper. . . . He stretched out on his bed and pretended to sleep. . . .

In consideration of this piety, on his part, it came to pass that, when he bent down under the bed after *Havdala* and lifted up the gown, he discovered underneath a real bag with thousands upon thousands of gold pieces, an amount almost beyond imagining, an entire bedful of gold. He did indeed become a person of great wealth.

He spent the remaining years of his life in joy and contentment. Amidst his happiness, however, his wife had a habit of reproaching him: “Heavens! how can a man have such a heart of stone, not to mention a word throughout an entire summer’s day, not a single word even to his wife . . . and I still recall that I wept so bitterly during the prayer ‘God of Abraham!’ I cried so much. . . . There wasn’t a penny in the house.”

He would comfort her with a smile: “Who knows? Perhaps it was in answer to your prayer ‘God of Abraham!’ that this reward came to us.”