

JEWES WITHOUT MONEY

(From a Book of East Side Memoirs)

By MICHAEL GOLD

GENTILES believe every Jew is born with a racial secret that teaches him how to make money. This is an old belief; Jews have been crucified, mothers' breasts torn off, Jewish children have been split on Cossack spears for this Gentile belief.

A lie. The Rothschilds are rich, but the Jews are poor. The vast horde has no money, its only secret is poverty. Poverty is in our blood; poverty is in the eyes of Jewish babies ripening in the womb.

Jews are greedy, fearful, grasping, they haggle, they buzz with nervous clutching excitement, and lack of poise and pettiness and scramble; they have no manners. No drowning or starving man has good manners. The Jews have been drowning and starving for twenty centuries. Jews are racially desperate, they must fight or die.

1. Yelling For Bananas

My Uncle Herman was no fighter; my mother's brother, arrived from Hungary with a timid little wife and two children; to escape from poverty. They lived in our crowded home; tented on the floor, or stuffed into bed with the rest of us. Later they rented two rooms that had no windows. My Uncle Herman was gentle and tall, his sad pockmarked face looked like the young Lincoln's.

He and his plump little wife were two children lost in America. He seemed to have no luck. He worked in a sweatshop for a while, then contracted tuberculosis. The doctor ordered that he live outdoors, that he eat well, rest, breathe deep, or die.

So my Uncle Herman took to peddling bananas.

I met him by accident near Cooper Union one winter dusk. I was returning from an errand for my father. There was a wet bad clinging snow. The work crowds were home from factories. Uncle stood there, frozen and sad, in an old overcoat fastened by a safety pin. He saw me. His face lit with his beautiful lonely smile, Charlie Chaplin's smile.

"Well, well, it's little Mikey, so far from home, come here and eat a banana," he said. He smiled, and held out a banana.

I refused it. I knew too well about his poverty, it was crucial that he sell his bananas, not give them away. But he thought I was shy, and coaxed and joked, so I ate the banana smelling of wet straw, and stood with him in the snow. The workers pushed home morosely over the pavements. The rusty sky darkened over New York, the tall lamps came up, wagons and street cars rattled by. After I ate the banana, I felt I must remain there and pay for it by helping my uncle.

"You haven't sold many bananas today, Uncle," I said anxiously.

"No," he said, "nobody wants my bananas, Mikey."

Among the people streaming past us in a mystic river of faces nobody seemed aware of our pushcart. We did not exist. It was like being a ghost; we shivered and were miserable.

"I ought to yell, I was advised by other peddlers to yell and make a big noise," said my Uncle mournfully, "but my throat gets sore. Anyhow I'm ashamed of yelling yet, it's like making a fool of yourself."

"I know how to yell good," I said, "I'll yell for you, Uncle."

"Nu, yell then, Mikey," he said doubtfully, "it wont hurt your throat, will it, and maybe, with God's help, we'll sell the bananas."

So I yelled and yelled bananas, while my uncle admired me, but no one else paid any attention, for the army of workers was weary and wrapped like soldiers after a defeat in desperate dreams of home. Nobody halted to buy our spotted bananas.

Elevated trains crashed, the Cooper Union clock burned above us (a civilized moon), the sky blacked, the wind poured, the slush burned our feet. There were thousands of mystic human faces, bubbling on the sidewalks in snow. It was cold, it was heart-breaking: I yelled and yelled; nobody heard me.

My Uncle tried to stop me at last. "Nu," he said with a smile to cheer me, "that was good, Mikey dear. You're a wonderful yeller, but its plain we're unlucky. Let's go home."

But I was determined and frantic, and almost in tears, and I yelled and yelled, but nobody wanted to buy our bananas. At last, long after nightfall, we covered the bananas with an oilcloth, and started for the pushcart stable. My Uncle shook his head as we plodded down Second Avenue.

"You see how it is, Mikey, even at selling bananas I'm a failure in this country," he said. "At cloakmaking I get consumption, at banana selling I have no luck. When you grow up, you will not have it so hard; you will have luck. You are an American, I am a greenhorn. It is a rich country, but I see I will always be poor here. Don't be poor when you grow up, Mikey dear, it's better to be dead. My bananas are good bananas, yet nobody will buy them. And your yelling was good, and the prices are cheap; is there a trick to selling bananas? I have asked other peddlers, but they say it is just luck."

All that night in my sleep, I was yelling bananas, bananas, and weeping because a great snowy gloomy city of strange faces whirled in spirals and refused to buy bananas. Elevated trains crashed through me, and the Cooper Union clock bobbed and grinned like an idiot's sinister face.

2. All Jews Have Relatives

There was always somebody arriving from Europe in search of the new luck; endless caravans of bustling cousins and their families, bunches of uncles and aunts and distant and near relatives, *landsleute*, village neighbors of Hungary and Roumania, friends of our friends, frightened children, misers, optimists, solemn graybeards in fluttering alpaca robes, dipping snuff, rosy young girls, melancholics, army deserters, witless fools fallen out of a familiar nest like fledgling birds, madmen scheming for money, tall sombre men in caracul conical hats and peasant boots, raff-raff and dreamers and rats and eagles and timid baby mice.

(Did I hear the Mayflower mentioned so proudly? There have been thousands of Mayflowers; my parents, too, were Pilgrims, daring for liberty to uproot themselves, and to conquer a wild dangerous land.

(Who preached the gospel of America to them? Letters came from lucky fools here; or the legend grew in dark ghettos and squalid villages that Messiah had risen in America, or steamship agents spread a madness, so that whole communities sold house, land and market stall, and bought tickets and followed the shrewd steamship liar to his America.

(Can you see the Jews? Can you see the vast melancholy international migrations of a pauper race for twenty centuries, plodding on foot and in rags from Asia to Europe, from Europe to America, losing hope on the way, losing God and virtue and peace, finding in each new paradise the plains cropped short, the water wells dry, the grass gone, so the tents were folded again, the herds gathered, the children strapped on women's shoulders, the tribe moves again to the west?

(Always defeated; never defeated.

(There was no steerage on the Mayflower; all were poor and equal. But my people came like cattle; did not their hearts sink when they saw the foul steerage bilgewater, and the roaches, and the decayed food, and the hard-eyed stewards jabbing at them like stockyard cowboys? This was their antechamber to America; did they not know what to expect of the promised land?

(No.

(After Ellis Island on land in the city there were robber Americans waiting with hacks, to steal your money, to steal your luggage, to take you to robber dens, and yet my people hoped. But the Indians had been kinder to the British pilgrims. They brought them pumpkins and turkeys, and listened mildly to their Christian preachings.

(The land was free then; you could freely dig and build, but now you came from a sunlit village of sunflowers and cows to a rat-hole in a tenement, where a landlord cursed you on rentday, and you slept five in a bed.)

When I woke of a morning, I was never greatly surprised to find and smell and see a new family of immigrants beside me, sleeping in foreign baggy underwear, pale and exhausted, all of them stinking of Ellis Island disinfectant, a smell that sickened me like castor oil. Around the room were strewn and piled all their wealth, all their striped calico bags, and monumental bundles of featherbeds, pots, pans, fine peasant linen, embroidered towels, queer blanket clothing.

Every tenement home was a Plymouth Rock like ours; the hospitality was taken for granted until the new family rented its

own flat. The immigrants would sit around our supper table, and ask endless questions about America. They would tell the bad news of the old country (the news was always bad). They would worry the first morning as to how to find work. They would be instructed that you must not blow out the gas (most of them had never seen it before). They would walk up and down our dismal East Side street, peering at policemen and saloons in amazement at America. They would make discoveries; they would chatter and be foolish.

After a few days they left us with thanks. But some stayed on and on, eating at our table. Don't think my mother liked this. We were too poor to be generous. She'd grumble about someone like Fyfka the miser, grumble and curse and spit and mutter, but she'd never really ask him to move out. She didn't know how.

3. A Crazy Man

Imagine the kind of man this Fyfka the Miser was. We did not even know him when he came to us from Ellis Island. He said he was the friend of the cousin of a boyhood friend of my father's, and he had our address and the name of this distant, mythical and totally unknown friend of the cousin of a friend in Roumania. Nothing more; and we didn't like him from the start; but for seven months he ate and slept at our home—for nothing.

Squat as a snail; with a glum black muzzle, and nostrils like a camel, and a thatch of black uncombed hair down on his forehead, and small eyes, too bright and too morbid, like a baboon's; one arm was twisted, and he never smiled, he never said a pleasant word, and he was always scratching himself, never cleaned his nose.

He got a job in a pants factory a week after he arrived; good pay for an immigrant, eight dollars a week. He worked from six a. m. to seven at night. Every morning he bought two rolls for a penny. One roll and a glass of water was his breakfast. For lunch he ate the other roll, and a three-cent cut of herring.

Every night, time exactly right, just as we were finishing supper, he came home. He sat himself gloomily in the same chair in the corner of the room, and watched us as we ate; didn't say a word, just sat and watched. It got on your nerves; your food choked you as you felt that dumb, gloomy, animal face in the room.

When the tension became too great, and all conversation had been dampened by the silent stranger, my father would spring from the table.

"Nu, Fyfka," he would say bitterly, as if defeated in a contest, "draw up and eat something, for God's sake. There's still some soupmeat left."

So Fyfka drew up his chair, and would eat, gobble and grab, with a slinky look at us out of the corner of his eye, like a dog.

All this took place every night in the same way, like a well-rehearsed farce at a theatre. It's a wonder neither Fyfka nor my parents sickened of the farce. My mother gently suggested to him once that he move, and he began to whine and cry and say he had no money. My father (in private) threatened to take Fyfka by the collar and throw him out some day, but he never did.

Fyfka paid us no rent; he never changed his shirt or the clothes he had worn in the steerage; he went to no picnics, parks, or theatres; he didn't smoke, or drink, or eat candy; he needed nothing.

Thus out of eight dollars a week he managed to save almost two hundred dollars in the months he sponged on us. He had heard of Rothschild. He wanted to go into business in America. Poverty makes some people insane.

Do you know how he finally came to move from our house? His money was stolen from him; I will tell about it later.

4. I Never Touched Her

And this thing, this Fyfka the Miser, this yellow somnambulist, this nightmare bred of poverty; maggot yellow dark ape with twisted arm and bright, peering, melancholy eyes; human garbage can of horror; fevered Rothschild in a filthy shirt; madman in an old derby hat.

This perfection had a flaw, this monster needed women.

This Caliban was tortured, behind his low puckered forehead, by a ghastly conflict between body and mind.

Our East Side, as I have said, was then administered by Tammany Hall as a red light district. My childhood street was a noisy marketplace of loud, painted women in kimonos, transacting the oldest business in the world. Stores, tenement flats, furnished rooms and even hallways waited for Caliban's body's peace.

He watched the busy women night after night until he could endure it no longer. He came to know some of the women, clutched at them, stole contacts, grovelled before them to be kind. He came to be the joke of the neighborhood—the madman who wanted

a woman, but was too stingy to pay the regular price of fifty cents.

"Yah, yah!" Mendel Bum jeered him at our supper table, "Fyfka tried to touch that fat Sarah in the hallway tonight, and she slapped him, and screamed. The pimps will yet stab you for this, Fyfka!"

"It's a lie, I never touched her!" the monster muttered. "I don't care for women. All they want is your money."

"Don't talk of such things before the children," said my mother.

"Nu, give the girls money, then!" said Mendel laughing, as he winked at my father. "That's what money is for, hay, Fyfka; not to be hidden in a corner, for the rats to eat. Money was made for fun; look at me, how fat and healthy I am, because I spend my money!"

Fyfka glared at him. Hate for the jovial Mendel made the big cords swell in his neck; the miser trembled with hate.

"It's a lie; I've got no money; I don't save money; why do you spread such lies about me? You're a liar! and a bum! a bum!"

"Sure I'm a bum," said Mendel cheerfully, "so everyone likes me, Fyfka, but you're a miser, so you everyone hates. Yah!"

"Gerarahere, mind your own business!"

Fyfka snarled like an ape, everyone laughed at his grotesque rage, he got up from the table.

"Don't talk about such things before the children," said my mother.

But everything was talked before us, we heard everything, and knew the strange world at seven.

5. Mendel the Bum

Mendel had been a sailor; an anchor was tattooed on his strong left arm; but tattooing is forbidden to Jews; the body must be returned to God as he created it. Mendel also freely ate pork and ham, forbidden to Jews; and one winter, he did a terrible thing. He went the rounds of the Bowery missions; and permitted each in turn to baptize him. For this he received money, sacks of potatoes, suits of clothes, various jobs, a chance to learn the cornet.

My mother was horrified when she discovered how Mendel had earned the groceries he brought her.

"Take them at once out of my house," she said, "those Christian potatoes!"

"Are't all potatoes good when you're hungry?" said Mendel, slyly.

"No. To sell your Jewish soul for a sack of potatoes—to be baptized—it's a sin, Mendel! Your momma in Hungary would die if she knew about it."

"How will she know about it, will I tell her?" said Mendel.

"And who says I'm baptized? No, momma, you're wrong; I wouldn't give up being a Jew for anything. This is just a way of making a living; I am out of work, so why should I starve? Those Christians, a black year on them, are so crazy to have Jews baptized they even pay for it. So what do I do—I fool them. I let them sprinkle their water on me—and all the time, under my breath, I am cursing them, I am saying them, to hell with your idol! To hell with your holy water! When they are through, I take my potatoes and go—but I am the same Mendel still, a Jew among Jews!"

My mother, like everyone else, was bewildered by the flow of Mendel's glib charlatan logic.

"And the baptism doesn't mean anything, you're still a Jew, Mendel?"

"Certainly, of course I'm still a Jew, a firm Jew, a good Jew, and these are my potatoes now—they're Jewish potatoes. But I won't be baptized again, I promise it," he said.

Mendel lived with us about twice a year, when his bum's luck had failed him elsewhere. He did everything—peddled needle threaders, acted in a burlesque show, enlisted in the Spanish-American war only to desert before the fighting began, he had been with cowboys and Indians out west, a miner, a barber in Rio de Janiero, a prisoner in Chattanooga, Tennessee, a lemonade vendor with a circus, a Turk at Coney Island, runner for a gambling house, a thousand other things.

Everyone liked him, even my mother. He was husky, cheerful, with red hair, blue eyes, and a humorous face like an Irishman's. He brought gales of bold life into the stale bedrooms of the East Side. It was amusing to Jews that Mendel could fool Americans with his tricks. It was flattering to Jews to know that he often passed himself off as a real American, yet talked Yiddish and was loyal to his race.