

The Given Years

Emil Bernhard Cohn

Men have always vied with each other to keep alive in books the memory of one who has given his life for a fellow man. But the name and fate of the man sentenced to receive such a gift has generally been unheeded and forgotten.

This is the story of one who did not know what else to do with the gift of another's life except to live on for the life of the giver and in this way to have experienced doubly of God and the world. It is a dark tradition, spoken about in certain neighborhoods of Poland, and it is also to be found in a few old books -- dry and brief. But the truth in it is still to be separated from the trimmings of superstition and just what happened must be clearly told to show how wisely it was said that a man must serve God with every impulse both good and bad.

In the days of the Poniatowskis, when the Council of the Four Lands would excommunicate Jews and punish the stiff-necked with stripes and heavy fines, there lived in Dobrze, a little town of Volhynia, between the cities of Zamosc and Vladimir, a rabbi who was called among the people Reb Elye, although his name in full was Eliyahu Sussman. He was a tall man of forty, with a black beard and under his forehead, the eyes were hard and stern.

One could see that he had known all sorts of trouble in his life. He had been married twice, and yet had no child by either wife, and it was clear that he was unhappy because he was lonely and childless. However, he did not wish to marry

again and lived alone in his house, an unbending man -- but stricter with himself than with others -- respected as well as feared. Only a penniless *bocher* (young man), whose right name was Shamuel, but who was called "Long Shmelke," lived with him and shared his meager food and the long hours of study that lasted until late at night. Shmelke's eyes looked sadly from his pale face and at times became anxious, as if in all that study of the thick heavy books somehow or other -- without even noticing it -- he might be losing his share of this fair world.

Now there lived across the street from the rabbi a poor *schulklopper* whose business it was, among his other duties, to knock at the windows of the Jews with his wooden mallet and call them to the services in the synagogue. He had an only daughter, Hanneh Mirel, a sensitive, pretty girl of sixteen, whom God had blessed with a lovable nature that spread happiness about her.

There was, to be sure, not much happiness in that street. The years came and went, the yoke of the Torah was heavy, and the rabbi did nothing to make it lighter, but vexed the people from morning till evening with all sorts of inflictions and the strict obedience he required. If there was any singing in the street, the people would peer out of their windows at the rabbi's house, and only if all was quiet there, did they breath easily again and listen to the singing as if it brought news of a better world that they had left behind long before and hardly remembered. Such a singing bird was Hanneh Mirel. As her father, with his wooden

mallet, shuffled through the streets while it was still dark to wake the Jews with his knocking that they might hurry to praise God early in the morning, his house rang with the folksongs -- now gay, now sad -- that his daughter sang.

One evening in spring, Hanneh Mirel stood at her window looking at the dark clouds across the red sky and felt, for the first time, that she was no longer a child but a woman. Fears and longing oppressed her, but she did not know just what she longed for; and the darker it grew the more fearful she became and her eyes filled with tears. Across the street the *Rov* (rabbi) and his students had lit the candle and were sitting over their books. She could see how Shmelke, the young bocher, was leaning his head on his hand and, for a moment, would look away sadly from his book to gaze dreamily into space.

She tried to drive away her melancholy with a lively song. Hanneh Mirel spread her arms within the window-frame and sang in a voice which she herself found new and strange:

I know a little *liedele* (song)
Of my *yingle* (young man),
Of my *yingle*
A little *liedele*.

Oh, my *yingle* is reading
In his *bichele* (little book),
In his *bichele*
The holy words.

Oh my *yingle* is wearing
On his head a *cappele* (skull-cap)
A pious little *cappele*
On his head.

I catch a *peiele* (lock of hair)
Beside his *cappele*
And kiss my *yingle* --."

"Stop singling! Come over here!" a voice called from Reb Elye's window, and Hanneh Mirel fled back into her room, her hand upon her beating heart. It was Shmelke's voice that had called and, trembling, the girl walked shakily across the street and stood in the doorway. The rabbi sat bowed over the holy books. She waited for him to speak and he let her wait. At last he lifted his head and looked at her so sternly that her heart stood still for fear.

"Singing is lewd. Go!" he said. And, as she lingered in her confusion, "Go!" he commanded.

Hanneh Mirel did not know how she crossed the street again. But when she found herself in her room, she began to weep and, seated in her little room, kept on weeping bitterly. Her old father found her so when he came home late that night and did not know how to comfort her. And certainly he did not know that that evening Hanneh Mirel had fallen in love.

A few days after that, Reb Elye fell desperately sick so that it seemed he would die. And the Jews of that town in their anxiety went in and out of the *Shul* (synagogue) and summoned each other to "say *Tehillim*" (recite psalms) for the rabbi's recovery. From time to time "Long" Shmelke hurried home to the rabbi's house to look after the sick man and would hurry back to *Shul*, quite out of breath. "More psalms!" he would say and wipe the sweat from his face. And they recited more psalms. And the young fellow went back home again and came again, his face white as chalk, and said nothing. But one could see by the way he looked that the sick man was worse.

At that the old *schulklopper* stood up and said: "We must gather years for the *Rov*, as our fathers

would do. Let the *bocher* take a book and every man write in it how many years, months, or weeks of his own life he will give the *Rov* for the *Rov's* longer life in this world and for his own merit in the world-to-come."

And so they did. The *bocher* took a book and went from door to door and one Jew gave two years, another one year, a third scratched his head and took a deep breath before he wrote down "six months," and so it went. "Long" Shmelke ran up and down the streets, and by evening he was through and stood breathless before Reb Elye's house. He was about to go in and push the book under the *Rov's* pillow when Hanneh Mirel darted from her father's house and held his arm so tightly Shmelke cried out in pain.

"Write, Shmelke," said the girl and at every word her grasp tightened, "my life! My whole life for the *Rov*! Haven't you written it yet?"

And so, as if it were nothing much, the *bocher* entered the life of the girl at the very bottom of the row of names. Then he hurried into the house, quite confused, and Hanneh Mirel outside could hear how he stumbled upstairs in his heavy boots to bring the *Rov* the years he had gathered and the rest of a girl's life. As it became quiet in the house and grew slowly dark in the street, the girl stole back to her little room. And the little town slept peacefully through the night.

Next morning Hanneh Mirel, the daughter of the *schulklopper*, was found dead in bed. Reb Elye, however, awoke in the rays of the spring sun from a deep sleep, and lived.

When Rabbi Elye learned that years had been gathered for him and that Hanneh Mirel had died

the very night he himself, as by a miracle, was saved from death, he became a silent man. He studied until late -- later than ever --and was hardly seen in the street during the day. He did not dare to look at Shmelke who sat facing him at their studies and only spoke to his *bocher* if he could not help it. Although Reb Elye lived like this, apart, the news soon spread how wonderfully well he looked after his sickness. He was taller and his eyes much brighter. The people whispered to each other, "Poor Hanneh Mirel!" and shook their heads.

No one knew about Reb Elye's anguish, however. When he heard the old *schulklopper* unlocking his door in the gray of morning, Reb Elye was sick at heart. He could no longer hear the mallet without a shudder; he could no longer look at his *bocher* without a twinge of pain. His heart became heavy, indeed. And Reb Elye did things he had never done before: for example, he would stand for hours beside the window at night and stare into the darkness. He who had been a stern man all his life would suddenly, for no good reason, find his eyes full of tears; and, in the middle of his studies, he might find himself dreaming. Before that he had thought dreams, as well as tears, an evil impulse within him. Now he let his sweet dreams carry him away, although, afterwards, he did penance for it by praying many hours and by fasting. Who knew of all this in the street? They merely saw that his cheeks were ruddy with health and wondered why he was so silent.

One night -- a year or so afterwards -- the mallet of the *schulklopper* beat furiously at Reb Elye's door. Frightened, he jumped out of bed and leaned far out of the window to see why the old man was rapping away so loudly and at such an

unusual hour. When the *schulklopper* slowly lifted his eyes to the window, the moonlight shone on his deathly white face.

"The *Rov* is to go to the house in the woods of Dobrze!"

The words sounded hollow and it seemed to Reb Elye that the voice came from afar and that he who spoke had already gone off -- a long, long way.

So, in the dead of night, Reb Elye went towards the house in the woods. It had been an inn on the road to Vladimir, but now it was abandoned and the haunt of smugglers and other questionable people. Reb Elye was ill at ease as he entered the lonely road in the dark, gloomy woods. When he saw lights in the house and heard hay music in it, he felt better. He walked faster, to leave the black shadows of the trees, and was soon standing before the old inn among wagons and the horses tethered to the tall pines. There was not a man to be seen outside, and it occurred to Reb Elye that it was very strange for him to be here alone, in front of this inn, in the middle of the night.

Within the inn all was merry. "Join us, Rebbe," some one behind him said. He turned his head: it was the *schulklopper* who had spoken. Reb Elye was surprised that he had not noticed that the old man had been following him.

"Join us," said the old man again and made a clumsy gesture with his hand towards the door.

Reb Elye shuddered, and he did not want to go in. Through the door that had been left ajar and the cracks in the shutters, he could catch glimpses of

a gay wedding inside and hear the merry tunes the fiddlers were playing.

Suddenly the door was flung open. And now Reb Elye could see the guests feasting at the long tables and at their head sat the bridegroom and his bride. Reb Elye was startled as he recognized the bridegroom and much frightened. "Why didn't they tell me?" he asked himself. For the bridegroom was his *bocher*, Shmelke -- magnificently dressed in a caftan of silk and wearing a tall pointed cap trimmed with the finest sable, and looking very merry, his eyes shining with joy.

As Reb Elye put his head in the doorway and stood there, leaning against the doorpost and uncertain what to do, the bride saw him and began to weep. She wept so loudly and violently that men were saying, "Pst! Pst!" to the fiddlers. Suddenly the music stopped right in the middle of a tune and it was very quiet. The women ran up to the bride, kissed and caressed her, began to weep, too, and led her outside -- around the tables right to the door where the *Rov* was standing, gazing speechless at the scene. As the bride came closer, surrounded by the weeping women, he leaned backwards to let them pass, and just as she went by he recognized her -- Hanneh Mirel!

"Let the *Rov* sit down! A seat of honor for the *Rov*!"

The guests whispered to each other and some of them began to bustle about. Before Reb Elye knew what had happened, he had been led to the seat the bride had left and pushed into it -- next to the *bocher*.

"*Mazzel tov*!" they shouted at him from all sides,

and many hands reached for his hand to shake it. "Mazzel tov! Mazzel tov!" At last Shmelke could also get at his hand. Reb Elye shuddered, for he felt that the *bocher's* hand was hot and damp and, as he looked into Shmelke's eyes, he saw what he had never seen in them before. Reb Elye wished to stand up and leave the house; but he could not, for Shmelke's hand held him with a terrible grip and was burning like fire. Reb Elye was frightened; he began to scream and screamed so loudly the wedding guests scattered. Schmelke, however, would not let him go and was shaking him -- so that he awoke!

It was morning, and Reb Elye was lying in his bed, and his *bocher*, Shmelke, was standing beside him and saying: "What is it, Rebbe? Why are you screaming?" At that, Reb Elye knew it was a dream. But when he looked up at the *bocher*, it seemed to him that Shmelke was looking down at him angrily, as if the *Rov* had harmed him -- God knew how.

But Reb Elye was not rid of his dream that easily.

"I have dreamed a dream," he said to himself, "but I have no one to tell me the meaning of it. Why did she weep? And why did she stand up? Am I the cause of her grief? She did not begin to weep until she saw me in the doorway." He thought of the happy wedding and asked himself: "Did I deprive her of that? And if I did, how am I to make amends? Why did I sit in her place? And why did the bridegroom hold my hand after he had held hers? Eternal God, am I living my own life?"

So his thoughts troubled Reb Elye and he could not sit still, but walked about in his house. When

he came near the *bocher*, he looked down at the floor. And it seemed to him that Shmelke was looking at him angrily.

The next day, Reb Elye called the women of the little town together in the synagogue and asked: "Have we a marriageable young woman here to marry off?" And they told him of one, named Sosshe. Reb Elye sent for her and spoke to her a while of this and that. Then he went to the *bocher* and spoke to him of that and this and said at last:

"I have a bride for you, Shmelke."

But that met with a fine reception! Poor Shmelke jumped to his feet, gave him a poisonous glance, and spluttered:

"I don't want to."

Reb Elye's heart beat a little faster and he began to understand his dream. He would have loved to know if the *bocher* had also dreamed that night; but he did not dare ask him. And his heart was heavy, heavy with sorrow for the dead young woman and also for the poor *bocher* with whom he had shared table and books so long.

The people in the street were puzzled that the *Rov* had concerned himself about the marriage of a penniless girl: that had never been known of him in the many years he had lived among them. But from then on, Reb Elye pursued this *mitzvah* (meritorious work) as if possessed, as though, indeed, all the marriageable young women in Volhynia had to be brought to the marriage canopy. He was curt and stern at it as he used to be, and listened to no contradiction. But to his *bocher* he said no more about marriage.

Hardly a year went by, and Reb Elye had another strange experience.

One night, Reb Elye had sent his *bocher* to bed, while he himself sat a few moments longer over his books. Under his window, he heard the heavy steps of a man running down the street: step, step, step, step! Then it was quiet, and after a while he heard the steps again, and after that a third time. Reb Elye looked out of the window. He was astonished to see that it was Shmelke -- running breathlessly past the houses. Reb Elye hurried downstairs and ran after his *bocher*.

"Shmelke!" he cried. "Shmelke, what does this mean?"

Shmelke ran on but turned to answer: "Rebbe, I can't find a midwife for her!"

And, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, Reb Elye ran after his *bocher*, and they ran up and down the streets, until Shmelke had a stitch in his side for running and groaned aloud but ran on, and still Reb Elye followed him. They left the town behind and Reb Elye saw that they were on the road to the house in the woods, and was not at all surprised that the *bocher* ran faster and faster.

A storm gathered over the woods. The wind roared in the trees and the great trunks groaned. Every blast of the wind increased the terror in Reb Elye's heart. And then, in the howling of the wind, as it was blowing here and now there, Reb Elye heard a cry. Then another. And then all was still. He stood trembling, bathed in sweat; Shmelke was gone in the darkness. Reb Elye called, but no one answered him. He waited a

long time, his heart beating fast and loud, and then went home.

He found his house quiet. He stopped at Shmelke's room; the *bocher* was sleeping peacefully, and the *Rov* could not even hear him breathe. Reb Elye went on to his own bed and fell upon it, dead tired.

Next morning, Reb Elye noticed that his student was deathly pale and looked worn out and miserable. The rabbi did not want to talk to him at first; but, after a while, he began to question him.

"Shmelke," he said, "what was going on last night in the street?"

"Don't know," said Shmelke and spoke so curtly Reb Elye was taken aback.

But, after a while, he began again: "You spent the night in vigil, Shmelke?"

"No," said Shmelke.

Reb Elye's heart trembled at this answer. He groaned, was silent for a while and began again.

"You are fasting too much, Shmelke."

"I don't fast," said Shmelke sharply. He was almost insolent. Reb Elye had never heard the like from his gentle *bocher*. The *Rov* looked at him astonished and for the first time saw how wasted and careworn he had become that year.

Reb Elye felt wretchedly unhappy and remorseful. He said gently to his *bocher*:

"Shmelke, you are getting on in years. Get married."

"I don't want to," said Shmelke venomously.

He turned his back upon Reb Elye and bent over the large volume of the Talmud that was lying open before him. And again all was still in the room.

Reb Elye went out noiselessly, closed the door quietly behind him and walked along the street. The sun was shining. Children were playing on the stone steps the quiet games they played in that Jewish street. Reb Elye did what he had never done before: he watched them.

As he stood there, the wailing of an infant fell upon his ear through an open window. The Egyptian princess, when she heard the infant Moses, could not have been so deeply shaken as Reb Elye at that moment. Tears filled his eyes and he listened as if entranced. He was still standing thus when a young mother passed him, holding her little boy. The child was happy and crowing in the sunshine.

"Give me that child," said the *Rov* to the startled young woman.

Blushing to the roots of her hair, she gave him the little boy and the *Rov* rocked him once in his arms. He became red himself and gave the child to her again and she hurried away embarrassed.

Then Reb Elye heard two men behind him.

"What has he to do with children?" said one.

"What business has he to talk to women?" said

the other. "Why isn't he at his studies? He should be studying!"

Reb Elye burned with anger. With long firm steps he walked towards the two, but they hurried away.

He went home, sat down in the room where his *bocher* was and began to study earnestly. He did not eat or drink that day and studied with such zeal the *bocher* could not keep up with him and sat gazing at him with lifted eyebrows. In the evening, Reb Elye sent Shmelke away. He locked himself in his room and began to pray.

"Lord of the world," he said, "I no longer know what you want of me. The girl gave me her life. Is this my life or is it still hers? If this is my life, how can a poor worm like me bear so great a sacrifice? But if this is still her life, what shall I do? Must I live as she would, or can I live my own life? Am I I, Lord of the World? Help me, for the waters have reached over my head!"

So Reb Elye prayed that night and thought that Hanneh Mirel -- if she lived -- might now have a child and would be sitting at the cradle and singing the old songs to it. And he remembered songs his mother sang to him and hummed them. But even as he did so, he became frightened and hurried to his books. Still he could not help thinking of Hanneh Mirel and how she sang that evening when he scolded her for it, and how it had all ended bitterly.

So the months went by and little by little Reb Elye's thoughts became less disordered. He began to distinguish between day and night. "If my days do not belong to me," he said, "the nights do. Who can quarrel with me about what I manage to

squeeze out of my hours for sleep? Yes, that's mine, if nothing else belongs to me now."

So in broad daylight he went among his people and did kind deeds, joked with children in the street, married off girls, saw that orphans were provided for, and thought of everything that a good woman would do for others and joyfully went and did it. But at night he burned candle after candle and studied until it was morning. The men grumbled about it and the women wondered; but they saw how he tormented himself for others day and night and were more or less quiet.

But the mallet of the *schulklopper*! Reb Elye could not hear it without shuddering. When he heard it, he felt as if another world were calling. And when he met the old man, his heart was troubled and he was touched to see that the *schulklopper's* coat was torn and buttons gone and that he looked unkempt. Now and then the *Rov* could see him standing alone at his fire-place cooking his meager meal. Reb Elye asked a kind widow to look after him; but the old man was stubborn and said, "I won't have it!", just as the *bocher* had said with a venomous look, "I don't want to!" And Reb Elye prayed often and wept at night.

The months became years, and Reb Elye heard more than once by day or night cries of pain and knew that another child was born. He felt the greatest joy then and the deepest pain, as though heaven and hell competed for him. And he kept count of the children. "Now she has the second child; now the third," he said to himself. He measured the pain and the rapture of which he had deprived the girl by the rapture and the pain which he himself experienced. "The day is for

her and for me the night," he groaned often. Every sabbath, however, when the holy day was over and he sang the *habdalah* with which the sabbath ends, Reb Elye wept. He sang: "He Who distinguishes between the holy and profane, His pardon may we attain," and wept.

He was greatly troubled that he could not again do by day what he was doing at night. "But the night is for study," his wise friends said in order to comfort him. So he continued to study at night, let the men with questions come, smoothed out their quarrels by candlelight, deciding strictly -- as he used to -- but only at night. Then he slept an hour, stood up and left the world of learning to sing with children or sorrow with women, walked alone in the woods and heard the voice of God in the trees.

In the meantime, the old *schulklopper* sank lower still and stank of brandy ten steps away. People called Reb Elye's attention to it: the *Rov* should talk to him! Reb Elye, however, found himself tongue-tied when he saw the old man, and was silent.

One day Reb Elye received his third important call. A cart came from Zamosc and the peasant who drove it had a letter for Reb Elye. In it was written:

"Rabbi Shamael, the son of Nathan, to Rabbi Eliyahu Sussman, the light of Dobrze, the shining light of our exile, he who strengthens the hands of the weak, supports the stumbling, makes the blind see and the deaf to hear." And in the letter, with many fine words of the holy tongue, Reb Elye was invited to go at once in the cart to

Zamosc as the guest at a *bar mitzvah* in the home of the wise Rabbi Shamael.

Reb Elye wondered that he had never heard of a Rabbi Shamael in Zamosc but when the Torah called, how could he refuse? So he climbed upon the cart and was driven away. It was Friday and all that worried Reb Elye was reaching Zamosc before the Sabbath began at evening. The cart went through the woods as though on wings, and he caught only a glimpse of the abandoned inn. At that, he began to feel uneasy and asked himself why he had gone on this journey at all. Just then he saw the church steeples of Zamosc and in no time they had reached the suburbs of the city and -- shortly before the Sabbath began -- they stopped before a tall handsome building.

The master of the house, magnificent in fur and silk, was waiting for his guest before the door and welcomed him with the customary wish for his peace. The master of the house, magnificent in fur and silk, was waiting for his guest before the door and welcomed him with the customary wish for his peace. And who should the master of the house be but Shmelke! His Shmelke, who had been a *bocher* in Reb Elye's home, and now the light of Zamosc! And how splendid he looked! A tall man with a shining forehead and bright piercing eyes, Shmelke walked towards Reb Elye and led him into the house. Many Jews were gathered there. First they prayed together and welcomed in the Sabbath, and after that all went into the dining-room. Children were seated there about the table, like shoots of an olive tree, and when their father came in, they began to sing:

Peace to you,
Ministering angels,

Angels of the Most High,
Of the Holy One, praised be He!

Suddenly they were all seated, men and women, and the *bar mitzvah* lad stood up -- a fine boy with gentle eyes -- and began to speak. Reb Elye was astonished at how well the lad spoke and how learned he was in the Torah, and all nodded and smiled -- men, women and even children. As Reb Elye marveled at the lad, he heard someone near him sobbing gently and saw that it was the child's mother who was weeping. Must she always weep when I come, thought the *Rov*. But then he saw that they were tears of joy. And he heard her ask:

"What do you say, Rebbe, as to how I had my boy taught?"

She asked that as only a Jewish mother can and then only at the *bar mitzvah* of her eldest.

"Oh, oh, oh!" said the rabbi to show his appreciation.

Shmelke was already standing up, Shmelke who had been Reb Elye's *bocher*. Well, now, thought Reb Elye, what will he have to offer? He was never thick-headed, but tired, always tired.

When Rabbi Shamael began to speak, Reb Elye was all ears: it was as if one had walked out of darkness into the light. All closed their eyes and listened entranced to the wise and profound words that the master of the house spoke. Reb Elye was quite taken with them and again he heard the warm eager voice near him asking:

"What do you think, Rebbe, of my Shmelke?"

Yes, Reb Elye's highest expectations had never equaled -- for depth of thought and wisdom -- the vast learning of the illustrious Rabbi Shmuel, the great man of Zamosc, as he spoke to his people at the *bar mitzvah* of his eldest son.

Reb Elye sat a long time with his eyes closed and listened. When he opened them at last, he rubbed them: all was gone, and he was sitting in his room, facing poor Shmelke, who was staring at him with sad eyes as he came to. It was evening, the candlelight flickered, the books were open on the table and the letters danced before his eyes.

When he saw poor Schmelke sitting there, looking so miserable, Reb Elye's grief overwhelmed him. He thought: "He might have become all that I was if she were his wife, as she should have been; until now I thought I had merely taken from the dead, but now I see that I took from the living too. Skin for skin, I must give back to the living what I took from the living."

In the morning, Reb Elye went about and gathered money and founded a house of study. He let the lads who studied there live in his own home as if they were his sons, fed them at his table and taught them. He taught them from morning until noon and so -- as he had wished to for a long time -- he brought to the day the good deeds that belonged to the day's hours. For, he said, not only the dead but the living have a right to my days. He set Shmelke over the lads to teach them also, and taught him besides, although Shmelke remained as sullen as ever and kept himself aloof from the flock of happy pupils.

In the afternoon, however, Reb Elye used to go out, sing with children as he went through the streets, arrange marriages for girls without dow-

ries, and was like a father to widows and orphans, so that his name was blessed throughout the land. He also wandered deep into the woods and delighted in listening to the birds, rejoicing as he gazed about. Many a mother passing his house of study would stop to listen to the voices of those studying within and was proud when she heard the voice of her son among them. And then she would ask herself, as only a Jewish mother does: "I wonder what the rabbi thinks of my youngster."

Again the years went by, until one day, at the time for *selichos* -- the penitential prayers recited before the new year -- the *Rov* was awakened by a heavy knock at his door. It was dark, and he did not try to open his window but went down and opened the door: there on the threshold lay a man and did not move. Reb Elye shook him. Lord of the world, it was the *schulklopper* laying dead at his feet! Reb Elye woke Schmelke.

He brought a candle and they let it shine on the dead man's face. It was bloated and the stink of brandy came out of the open mouth. The old man, it seemed, had had a stroke, but before his death had managed to strike -- with all his might -- a single blow at Reb Elye's door.

As Reb Elye, stunned, stood before the dead man and looked down upon him and at Shmelke kneeling above the corpse, he thought with a heavy sense of guilt that the old man would never have been a drunkard and Shmelke would never have become so pale and thin if Hanneh Mirel had not died, as she had, for him-- the ever young Eliyahu Sussman. He knew, too, that she would never have died for him, if he had not scolded her so sternly. But even as this thought filled his soul and his breast was heaving -- as if it would burst

iron hoops that hemmed it in -- he thought, feeling a new strength within him: "I live! This guilt, come of it what will, is my life. And I live, yes, I live my life!"

When they had buried the old *schulklopper* and the *Rov* came back from that difficult journey to his own home, he suddenly saw the world with other eyes. He had seen himself as a person and yet a ghost, had felt a strange being in him and had not dared to believe in his own life; now it seemed to as if by a magic word the whole entanglement had been unraveled. His sense of guilt became a sweet remorse, and a deep love for the dead girl took hold of him. He began to see in her a secret guide -- one who through the sacrifice of her own life had shown him the true road; and now, morning and evening, he begged her to forget how he had scolded her once and now he prayed for her soul to become wedded to his so that a woman's soul, as well as his own, should rule in his breast: for this clearly was the road.

And behold, Reb Elye was, indeed, a changed man. He stopped distinguishing between day and night, tormented himself no longer, became serene and wise. Yes, now he lived the life of Hanneh Mirel and knew his own life enriched. Besides his own thoughts, he thought hers; and from the solid shore of his own life, he looked out upon her life's surging stream. He was changed and the world was also changed for him.

Again years went by. A bride was led in procession before his house. How the fiddles jubilated and the Jews clapped their hands! "Now they are leading their daughter to the marriage canopy;" thought Reb Elye, and sat with eyes closed for grief and listened to the joyful sounds passing his window.

Shmelke became ever more worn, more withered. His temples were gray, his back bent, and the youngster at Reb Elye's table made fun of him. "If he keeps on, there will be just nothing left of him soon!" And that is just what happened. One morning he was found dead, lying across the books. His pitiful wasted face was full of sorrow -- as if he had missed all the happiness there was in life. When, at his funeral, they brought out the body, Reb Elye stepped forward to make the speech of eulogy.

"What can he say about the poor old *bocher*?" the people thought as the *Rov* began.

But Reb Elye did not speak of Shmelke at all, nor of a poor *bocher*, but of Rabbi Shamael, the star of the exile, the light of the Torah, a light untimely gone. His listeners did not know whether they were dreaming or awake; but they did not know what Reb Elye knew. They saw, however, how the tears were running down his cheeks, and they stared at each other in silence and surprise.

Now because Shmelke was unmarried, although an old man, he was buried among those who had died young and single. And it happened that he was buried near little Hanneh Mirel. And so they were united at last -- under the green turf.

Reb Elye went home. He walked alone, slowly, and the people looked after him and shook their heads. But Reb Elye felt someone beside him. He did not dare to turn his head, but he clearly heard a bitter sobbing at his shoulder and a warm breath on his cheek. Then Reb Elye felt again how much he had taken from her and her Shmelke and when he reached his house and was among his pupils, he groaned aloud and cried out: "How dark the word has grown! Your father, my sons, is dead. Let us say *kaddish* for your father" -- that

is to say, the prayer recited by orphans in memory of their dead. With that he fell down senseless so that the lads were frightened. With much trouble they brought him to. He stood up, washed himself, ate and drank and was at peace.

Reb Elye -- on that day -- had never felt as untroubled before. An air of nobility and serenity surrounded him; his pupils noticed it, drew away from him and yet gazed at him with eyes full of love; and when he went out, the people in the street also noticed it. The children, who had jumped noisily about him shortly before, merely smiled at him from a distance. The women, with whom he used to chat, lowered their eyes. The men, who grumbled about him behind his back, looked at him earnestly and in silence. So Reb Elye went through the streets, and awe and love went with him.

Reb Elye became very old. All his generation was now gone -- he had survived them all. His pupils became teachers in Israel, lived here and there in the land and were already old men. Reb Elye was fully a hundred years old, but his eyes were not dim and his strength had not failed. The name of the centenarian, who was a wise man among the wise and a child among children, who was stern with himself and indulgent to others, who looked at the living graciously but was strict about the Law, became known everywhere.

So the news of the remarkable age of Reb Elye, with all sorts of rumors, came to the ears of the renowned Rabbi Elijah, "the Vilna Gaon," -- that is to say, the prince of learning in Vilna. He had just put under a ban, as "mischief," the teaching of Israel of Miedziboz, who was called by his followers *Baal Shem Tob* -- "the Master of the Good Name." Now, when the Vilna Gaon was

told how the man of a hundred years lived -- how the greatest was not so great but that he rejoiced over it like a child, and the least not so small but that he saw the holiness within -- and when the Vilna Gaon also heard that certain pupils of Reb Elye, now respected teachers in Israel, sanctioned the new teaching that the Vilna Gaon hated, he said to himself one day: "I must really see what the facts are about the *Rov* of Dobrze." And he got into a carriage and drove straight to Dobrze.

He reached the town one beautiful evening, and the place rang with the news when they heard what a distinguished visitor they had. Reb Elye sat in front of his door enjoying the evening air with his pupils -- those shoots of his planting -- about him. They chattered away, while Reb Elye was cutting a whistle of elderwood for a little boy with black curls leaning against his knee. The high and mighty rabbi from Vilna climbed down from his carriage.

"I have something to say to you, man of Dobrze," said the Vilna Gaon.

The centenarian stood up and led him into the house.

"Sit down," Reb Elye said.

But the great rabbi from Vilna answered: "I won't sit down until I have spoken. Tell me, Reb Elye, what is this I hear about you? It is said that you study, you teach your students and you judge your people strictly, according to the Law. Good! But they also say that you joke with children, talk much with the women and are indulgent to everyone. Your students have been surprised reading alien books, and a few have even become followers of that swindler, Israel of Miedziboz, who is

called the 'Master of the Good Name' -- because of whom there is so much fuss in the land. Answer me once and for all, man of Dobrze, are you also one of those who sway between both sides?"

So spoke the man of fifty years to the man of a hundred, and Reb Elye looked silently at the younger man, a smile playing about his lips.

"Sit down, Gaon, you have been standing long enough!" he said suddenly, so that the rabbi from Vilna was confused and did not know how to act just then.

As they were talking, there was a murmur and stir among the people under the window, and exclamations of wonder. Right after that, the door was opened wide and in came a tall man unusually handsome. He wore a caftan of white satin with a silver girdle. Behind him many men -- who, it seemed, belonged to his following -- were pushing forward. He, however, closed the door behind him looked sharply at old Reb Elye, and said:

"My name is Dob Baer. I am the *Maggid* (preacher) of Meseritz and a disciple of the Holy One of Miedziboz."

As he said that, the Gaon of Vilna was heard to snarl something or other, but Reb Elye greeted the newcomer and said:

"Peace be with you! Sit down, man of Meseritz."

But Dob Baer also remained standing and said: "I am not your guest. I have not come to you but to your hundred years. I am looking for the miracle of that fact! You vexed the days and nights of your youth stamping upon your mind the six

hundred and thirteen laws with their explanations and the explanations of the explanations that now number sixty times six hundred and thirteen. But a hundred years need speak only one word, one word, and all thirteen gates of Heaven will fly open. Why did you not come, Reb Elye Sussman, to the Master of the Holy Name in Miedziboz?"

At that the *Maggid* of Meseritz looked at the man of a hundred years with his most piercing glance. Reb Elye smiled, as he had smiled at the rabbi from Vilna and again said graciously:

"Sit down, *Maggid* of Meseritz."

Someone was cracking a whip in front of the house. Even while the *Maggid* of Meseritz was speaking, the fellow had begun to crack his whip -- like an impatient driver. The twilight was almost gone and it had become dark in the room where Reb Elye sat, facing his two guests and listening to the cracking of the whip. He became uneasy and began to speak. His voice trembled. And in the darkness his guests could hardly see his face.

"Do you hear how he is cracking his whip? Should a driver be so impatient? O you impatient drivers, I will kindle a light for you!"

He stood up and brought a candle. He placed it on the table and by its light saw with what hostile glances the Gaon of Vilna and the *Maggid* of Meseritz were taking each other's measure.

"Ah, that one must always go where the driver wishes," sighed Reb Elye and turned away slowly to leave the house.

He went out and found before his door a cart on

which a well-dressed Jew was sitting cracking his whip. As soon as he saw Reb Elye step from the house, he called out impatiently:

"Come, Rebbe, to recite the prayer for a dying mother!"

And before his pupils were aware of it, the cart was gone with their master.

They rode a long time through the dark streets -- jolted and jounced. Reb Elye was uneasy. He had plenty of time to think and he thought of much. The wagon went through the woods and

the dark pines were groaning in the wind. He remembered how he had once gone to a wedding at the house in the woods. As the cart flew past the house, it seemed to him that he saw lights again through the cracks in the shutters and heard the fiddlers.

They went on towards Zamosc. Reb Elye, that man of a hundred years, saw racing clouds and falling stars and in the storm and darkness the wind roared about the cart. Then he remembered the night he searched anxiously for a midwife. So they came to Zamosc. "Now we shall stop at the house where her eldest son became *bar mitzvah*," thought the Rov; but, no, the house in the suburbs was dark and silent as the grave. And the driver went on until he stopped at a grating: it was dark inside and the grating was locked.

"Does she live here?" asked Reb Elye, and wondered at the tall building before which he stood.

Strangely enough, he was holding a rusty key, and he put it in the lock. It squeaked as the key turned. He went down a few steps, and then there

was a door, and after that another door. When Reb Elye opened the second door, he found himself in a large room in which were many Jews. They were sitting on the ground as on the Ninth of Ab when Jews mourn for the destruction of the Temple, and each held the end of a burning candle, so that their faces in the darkness were lit up by the flickering lights, and he could see that they wept.

"They are weeping for their mother," thought Reb Elye, and he looked about for the dying woman. But he could see no bed in the room. At that he felt a hand on his shoulder and turned his head. The Jew who had driven him there was pointing the handle of his whip towards the wall. And now Reb Elye could see in the wall an old bedstead in an alcove -- such as may be seen in a peasant's house. The doors of the alcove were shut and above them hung a light flickering behind red glass.

Reb Elye turned and looked at the driver questioningly. But he was silent as a corpse and there was not a sound in the large room. Reb Elye trembled but walked with faltering steps to the alcove and slowly opened the doors. And there she was in a bright light, Hanneh Mirel, in the finery with which her children had decked her out! They had spread a brocaded mantel over her, on which holy words were embroidered in gold, and had put a silver crown like a queen's on her head, and a silver chain was hanging from her neck. So she lay there and looked at Reb Elye.

He saw that she knew him and his heart beat loudly: forgiveness and love were in her steady glance. Tears filled his eyes and he could not speak. But suddenly his gaze was caught by an ornament hanging from the chain on the dying

woman's breast -- a gilded hand with outstretched finger. He recognized it as a threatening finger. And his eyes wandered to the eyes of the dying woman, which were like living water, and back again to the finger.

Now they began to whisper from every corner of the large room: "Recite the prayer for the dying, rabbi, the prayer for the dying!"

The old man went towards the dying woman and began the prayer of the dying: "Hear, Israel, the Eternal our God, the Eternal is one."

His eyes asked her to repeat the words. She was silent, and he went on: "Praised be the name of His glorious kingdom through all eternity!"

He repeated this three times and waited for the dying woman to gather strength and say what he did. But she lay there quietly, looking at him with open eyes that were full of kindness and love. The old man began a third time and seven times over said the holy avowal: "The Lord, He is God!" "The Lord, He is God!"

But she was silent.

He thought: "Why is she silent? Didn't she send for me that I say for her what she should say after me?" And he began again to recite the prayer from the beginning. And still she was silent. Reb Elye wiped the sweat from his face. Again he saw the gilded hand with the threatening finger. Then he thought: "She is still angry because I rebuked her sternly once for her light song; because she regrets the sacrifice of her young life for me." And he wanted to say something and could not. And then again he saw her

eyes full of love, and now he knew that he need say nothing at all.

He sighed deeply and again began to say the prayer for the dying. At that he lifted his eyes to Heaven and prayed that God might loosen the tongue of the dying woman that she acknowledge Him, the All Holiest, and depart as a pious soul should. And he began to cry aloud, as if the dying woman had nothing to do with all this but only he himself, Reb Elye, the man of a hundred years. And suddenly he felt that really it was he who was to die -- after he had lived the life of a man and also that of a woman! The gilded hand at Hanneh Mirel's throat came to life and a voice called: "I am Fear!" But the eyes of the woman were glowing and burning like two suns and said: "We are Love!"

At that moment Reb Elye Sussman, the holy rabbi, felt that he was dying and he began to scream, to scream and to scream: "Hear, Israel.."

The Gaon of Vilna and the Maggid of Meseritz were ill at ease when Reb Elye abruptly left them sitting there in front of the candle. Each would gladly have told the other much, but the old man had left a feeling of dread in the room which kept them quiet. At last the proud rabbi from Vilna, with a toss of his head, asked unceremoniously:

"What do you make of him?"

The *Maggid* of Meseritz was sunk in thought and did not answer. The Gaon did not repeat his question, but with firm steps began to walk up and down the room impatiently and every step seemed to say: "Obey the Law!" The man of Meseritz was lost in reverie and his smile seemed