



SHOLOM ALEIKHEM

*The Bewitched
Tailor*



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= The Bewitched
tailor

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
Moscow

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ЗАКОЛДОВАННЫЙ ПОРТНОЙ

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MY FIRST LOVE AFFAIR

Chapter One

I PULL STRINGS AND GET MY FIRST SITUATION

HE WHO HAS had to sit hungry late into the night, muffling himself in a threadbare old coat, poring over a Russian grammar in the light of a bit of candle and declining the noun and adjectives in the phrase "fresh white bread" while he dreams of a crust of ordinary black bread; he who has had to sleep on a hard bench with his head pillowed on his fists, while the lamp smokes, the baby squalls, and the old woman grumbles; he who has had to trudge through thick mud in broken-down boots—one with the heel torn off, the other with a loose floppy sole, which he does not know how to get rid of; he who has tried to pawn his watch which the pawnbroker won't take because it isn't pure silver, and because the works are not worth a pinch of snuff; he who has had to ask a loan from a friend, who, putting his hand in his pocket and drawing out his purse, swears that he hasn't a penny to bless himself



with—he who has been through all this, as I have, will no doubt understand how I felt when I got my first situation at twelve rubles a month all found.

I shall not weary you with the story of how I came to get this job, nor need you know that I have an uncle, who has an aunt, who has a friend, who has a kinsman, who has an in-law, who is a very wealthy, though simple man, living in the village. This man has an only son, for whom he wants a private tutor in Yiddish, Russian, German and Book-Keeping. The tutor must be a respectable young man of good family who will not charge too much, not more than they can afford. I make a supreme effort, rush off to my uncle, and ask him to ask his aunt to ask her friend to ask his kinsman to persuade his in-law—the rich man—to hire me and none but me, as there are other young men in Mazepovka besides myself who know Yiddish, Russian, German and Book-Keeping and are prepared to go anywhere to earn a crust of bread. My employer takes quite a time to make up his mind before he consents to have me. For one thing, he is not sure whether he wants a tutor at all, and secondly, he does not know whether to have me or someone else. At last, thank God, he decides in favour of hiring a tutor, and his choice falls upon me, because, if you really want to know, he doesn't attach much importance to learning. Learned men these days, my employer says, are as plentiful as stray dogs. The main thing is that his tutor should be a man from a respectable family, and as I am from a respectable family, he takes me on. That's what my new employer said, but—forgive me for saying so—I'm afraid he lied. My rivals were from families no less "respectable" than mine. Then what is the reason? Just this—influence—the strings.

Yes, the strings are a tremendous power. For blessed is he who hath an uncle, who hath an aunt, who hath a friend, who hath a kinsman, who hath an in-law—a rich man living in the village, who hath an only son for whom he wants a tutor in Yiddish, Russian, German and Book-Keeping, who must be a respectable young man of good family, who will not charge too much, not more than they can afford.

Chapter Two

MY EMPLOYER'S YARNS SEND ME TO SLEEP

Who then was my employer? What did he do for a living? What did he look like? Was he tall or short, fat or thin, ginger or dark? I don't think you need know that. What was his name? That, too, is not so important. He may still be alive, and it would be rather awkward for me to mention names. Let me rather repeat the first conversation I had with him when he invited me into his carriage—a splendid turn-out drawn by a pair of magnificent horses—and treated me to a cigar. It was my first cigar, and that cigar was my undoing.

"So this is your first experience of village life, young man?" he said, studying the grey ash of his black cigar. "I daresay you think that the country is a godforsaken hole and that we village Jews have no taste for good living. Let me tell you, young man, that you will have the pleasure of seeing the real country-house of a rustic Jew—a house with a farmyard, a garden, an orchard—a real palace of a house! As for rooms—front and back, sitting and living—let me tell you, young man, without exaggeration—there are about twenty of them. Twenty, did I say?—why, over thirty! What we want so many rooms for I don't know myself. Unless it's for

the guests. I often have guests come to stay with me. Often, did I say? Every week, every day. Not a day passes without some guest arriving, if not two or three. And what guests! The landowner, the *pristav*, the *ispravnik*, the Justice of the Peace.... I'm on friendly terms with the whole neighbourhood. The number of times a four-in-hand comes dashing up to my porch. I ask: Who's that out there? His Excellency, they tell me. That's the *gubernator*, if you know what I mean. Well, naturally, you can't be a pig, you have to receive him decently, give him the best rooms in the house where there's a nice bit of garden. And my garden, let me tell you, is a sight worth seeing! It isn't a garden—it's a forest! You ought to see what apples, what pears, what plums! And the grapes, my dear! I grow all my own things, make wine out of my own cherries and grapes, have my own raisins, and even my own fish out of my own river. And what fish! Carp, tench, bream—breams that size!" My employer spreads his hands wide by way of illustration, and I have to draw back a bit to make room for his breams.

He goes on spinning and spinning his yarns, while I take it all in, hanging on his lips. The carriage rocks like a cradle, the horses jog along at a steady trot, and flick their tails, and I can't say what it is—whether the soft seat in the rocking carriage, the flicking of the horses' tails, or my employer's fibs—only I begin to doze. It is a still summer night. A soft breeze fans my face, and I fall asleep with the sound of my employer's snores in my ears.

By the time we arrived the sun was standing high in the sky. It was a clear sky, clear, bright and cheerful, smiling a welcome to me, the new-comer.

Chapter Three

WHAT LIARS THERE ARE. FREEZING LOOKS AND A WARM RECOMMENDATION

There are different kinds of liars in the world. There are liars who lie readily without having to, for the tongue, as you know, has been made to wag in the mouth. There are three kinds of inveterate liars: the liars of yesterday, the liars of today, and the liars of tomorrow. The liar of yesterday tells you yarns and cock-and-bull stories and swears that he had seen it all with his own eyes—try and prove that he hadn't! The liar of today is not so much a liar really as a braggart. He will assure you that he has everything, knows everything and can do everything—try and verify it if you can. The liar of tomorrow is just a good-natured crank, who will promise you God knows what. He says he will go and see so-and-so for you, do anything for you, and you have to take his word for it. All three kinds of liars know that they are lying, but think that everyone believes them. But there are liars who stand in a class apart. It is enough for one of these to tell a lie for him to believe it himself and to be convinced that others, too, accept it at its face value. Lying gives him great pleasure. These people are fancymongers who live in a land of dreams. They are what you might call story-tellers, making up ever new and new tales, and forgetting today what they had said yesterday. Their fantasy is constantly at work hatching new ideas and thoughts.

To this last category of liars my employer belonged. I need hardly tell you that the palace of his turned out to be just an ordinary house with none too many rooms, and the garden just an ordinary garden as gardens go. Instead of grapes there were green gooseberries, instead

of wine—just ordinary cider, instead of whopping breams from the lake—small pikes bought on the market.

We were met by a stout woman carrying a bunch of keys. She looked me over with such a frigid glance that I was taken aback. If looks could speak, hers said: "And who the devil is this?" My employer caught the glance and said in a very meek apologetic tone:

"I have brought a new tutor for the boy. Where is the child?"

"The child is sleeping," she answered in a masculine voice, bestowing another long freezing look upon me. Luckily, the master ordered the table to be laid. He seated me next to him, and during the next few minutes while the samovar was being prepared, told me all about his son—what a good scholar he was, what a beautiful hand he wrote, and what a lot he knew.

"His handwriting is famous here. Everyone enjoys reading his letters. German is his mother tongue! And the way he speaks French!"

The mistress, jingling her keys, served butter, cheese, sour cream, milk, honey and other viands to the table. I would have felt much better, though, if the lady of the house had not sat down opposite me and made me fidget under her kindly glances. My employer intercepted these glances and hastened to explain who and what I was. I felt my face, my eyes, my head and the very hair on my head beginning to tingle. According to him, I was the grandson of the Baal-shem, all my family were rabbis, celebrities and *noggids*, and I myself was better educated than any student, doctor, or professor—better even than three professors rolled into one. I don't know whether she believed these barefaced lies, but her cold hard glance seemed to me to relax a bit.

Chapter Four

THE "CHILD" EATS LIKE A HORSE, WHILE HIS TUTOR STARVES

My pupil turned out to be a lusty handsome lad of a lively cheerful disposition. He had a round white attractive face with blooming cheeks, a high white forehead, kindly grey eyes, and plump white hands, and there were three things he liked doing: eating, sleeping and laughing. But most of all he liked eating. He ate from morning till night. In between the regular meals of breakfast, lunch, dinner and supper with tea and coffee, his mother kept sending the "child" a *nash* in the shape of a cup of chocolate, or a *beigel*, or a honey-cake, or a pastry, or some preserves, with an occasional titbit such as fried chicken's liver, or other such delicacy, or just a slice of white bread in case he felt peckish, while his tutor looked on and licked his chops and dulled the edge of his appetite with a hand-rolled cigarette.

At first, until he had made friends with his pupil, the tutor experienced the pangs of hunger, for the pupil's mother, the lady with the keys, fed him very sparingly.

They lived in plenty—especially as regards dairy products—but everything was kept under lock and key. Once in a while the master would demand that the tutor should be given something to eat, at which the mistress would start jingling her keys—a sure sign that she was angry.

"But of course!" she would say. "The tutor has his three meals a day. Isn't that enough?"

What a liar she was! I did not have one meal a day, leave alone three. How often did I see chunks of meat thrown away and crocks of milk splashed out, while

I was sitting hungry in my room, dreaming of a piece of black bread. On the days when the master was away I starved. Luckily for me, I quickly made friends with my pupil.

Chapter Five

TUTOR AND PUPIL FORM AN ALLIANCE. THE GAY LIFE STARTS

"Look here, if you want to stay with us, if you want us to become friends," said the "child" to me one fine day, when we were sitting together in his room, the window of which looked out on the garden, "if you don't want to have to leave this place, then chuck those books under the table. We're going to play draughts or 'Sixty-Six,' or let's just loll about in bed and spit at the ceiling."

Saying which, my pupil threw his books under the table, flung himself down on his bed, threw his head back and spat up at the ceiling through his teeth with such skill and marksmanship that we both burst out laughing.

From that day on we had the time of our lives. The pupil taught his tutor to play draughts and "Sixty-Six" (to tell the truth, I had never heard of that card game till then, but when I learned it I became a passionate lover of cards). The tutor formed an alliance with his pupil, and dropping his books and lessons, played draughts or "Sixty-Six" with him, or lay in bed spitting at the ceiling, or helped his pupil to put away the titbits his mother sent him, and managed to do himself quite proud in the process. Happening to glance in the mirror several months later, the tutor was surprised to see how plump he had grown.

No one came into our room except the servant who brought the food. The master of the house was seldom

at home, and the mistress, who never let the keys out of her hands, was busy about the house day and night and never looked into our room at all. We really had a good time. We had no cares or obligations, and were free to do what we liked.

But one day my employer asked me, "Well, how are the lessons going?"

"Splendidly," I answered without batting an eyelid.

"There, you see! What did I tell you!" he said, and I was astonished to find that I could still look him in the eye.

In that house, where everyone deceived one another, where everyone lied, where the very air was tainted with lies—in that house it was not difficult for anyone to learn how to lie.

Chapter Six

FIRST LOVE LETTERS OF THE BETROTHED. THE SPARK IS KINDLED

We nevertheless had one duty to perform—and that was receiving and answering letters. And we received letters almost every day. I say "we" because we both had to answer those letters. The letters to my pupil were written by his betrothed, although he himself admitted to me that his feelings towards her were anything but ardent.

At first the letters did not come very often—once a week, or once a fortnight. But with my arrival upon the scene the correspondence grew more regular and frequent.

"Read that and answer her, will you. What does she want of me?" my pupil said one day, flinging the letter of his beloved into my face. I read it and liked its contents. This is what she wrote:

"My dearest, beloved *fiancé*. If you only knew how weary I am of your letters—they are as like one another as two drops of water from the same river, as if the same mother had given birth to them. I should like to hear some fresh word from you, a word that would warm my heart and illumine my soul.

"My heart is cold, my soul is dark.

"Your devoted *fiancée*...."

Without thinking twice, I penned this answer for my pupil:

"My true bride, beloved. You write that my letters are like each other as if the same mother bore them. How can it be otherwise when one feeling has begotten them? You say that they are as like each other as two drops of water from the same river. How can it be otherwise, when they flow from one source, from one heart? You ask for a fresh word, but what can be fresher than the words "I love"? How can your soul be dark when I think of you, dear love?

"Your devoted *fiancé*...."

To this we soon received the following reply:

"Dear, beloved. Your sweet words have cheered and warmed me, and spread light around me. Assuredly I have heard a new song, the heavenly melody of a dear and loving heart. I feel a different person. It seemed to me as if I had grown wings and was soaring in the heavens, and a host of angels flew out to meet me with great rejoicings and brought me greetings and sweet words from my dear beloved *fiancé*, to whom I belong heart and soul for evermore.

"Your loving and ever faithful bride-to-be...."

"Dearest, sweetest, true love mine," ran my reply.

"No, beloved bride, you were not mistaken. Those were no ordinary cold words, they were feelings that

came straight from the heart and found their way to another's heart. They were threads that bound two hearts together with ties eternal. The host of angels that brought you greetings from me, has brought me thine own no less hearty, and with that host I send you back, dear heart, an ardent kiss, the sacred kiss of a friend, who remains your for ever and carries your bright image about in his breast sleeping and waking.

"For ever your devoted lover...."

Chapter Seven

MATERIAL FOR A NEW EPISTOLARY MANUAL

A spark comes flying from God knows where and drops upon a straw-thatched roof. A tiny flame is kindled. The wind fans it into a raging fire. A fire, fire!

Those first letters were the spark from which the hellish flame was kindled. The letters grew ever more ardent. The flame was fanned higher and higher. A great, all-devouring fire raged in my heart; I was ill, terribly ill. I lost my appetite, suffered from insomnia, went about like a lunatic. I poured my heart out in my letters. They were my only solace and joy. The day when I received a letter was a holiday to me. I opened it, read it and wrote a reply. All my pupil had to do was to rewrite it in his own hand, and even so I had to drive him on. And what it cost me to hide the pain away deep down in my heart so as not to betray myself, to bury my face in the pillow and cry softly, then to get up and go about my business with a cheerful mien—to play draughts or a game of "Sixty-Six" with my friend and pupil!

Fortunately, no one noticed that I was suffering, pining away, melting like a candle. Fortunately, my pupil did not take particular note of me. If he had, he would have realized what it was all about, of course. I can

imagine the face he would have pulled on seeing me cover his *fiancée's* letters with kisses. And not to kiss them was impossible!

Judge for yourself. Here is what she writes:

"Angel mine, light of my eyes! I must tell you the whole truth. I must confess, dearest, that I knew you not till now. I never imagined that I would find in you a source of such ardent feelings, such lofty thoughts, such a profound intellect, that I would find in you such a master mind. Your words of wisdom tell me how well-read and educated you are.

"It is surprising that I knew nothing of this before. It speaks of your artless nature and modesty, and raises you still higher in my estimation. How can I help feeling happy when fate has bound up my lot with a man in whom all the finest qualities are exemplified: beauty, intellect, knowledge, simplicity of heart and goodness. Your goodness shows itself in your sweet wise words. You bestow your dear letters upon me with a generous hand. I thank you for them a thousand times, and beg for more.

"Your true-love, eternally yours...."

To this I replied somewhat hazily:

"My dearest, beloved, beautiful, clever one! You knew me not because you had not seen me. The one you have seen is not I, but my reflection. Imagine that we have only just made each other's acquaintance, that we have not yet seen one another, that we have been born anew, as it were. How happy are we not to know this world, this false despicable world and the false despicable creatures who people it.

"Your loving *fiancé*, faithful unto death...."

I received from her the following reply:

"My beloved, dearest, heaven-sent angel mine! Your letter was a seven-sealed book to me, a riddle. You write so obscurely that I had to cudgel my brains for a