

## **The Déclassé**

**by**

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Whenever Tsivye, the younger and more embittered of the two spinster Fuzis sisters, was eaten up with resentment at their unchanging, impoverished life, she left off eating, drinking and washing her face. For several consecutive days she would wander about in her petticoat with a knitted woollen scarf on her dishevelled head, cleaning all the rooms and the great, empty salon in particular, briskly wiping the dust from the walls, the ceiling, and from every yellowing leaf on the tall old rubber plant, breathing heavily through her nose as she did so, never responding to anything said to her, and falling into a rage because she was called to eat in the dining room.

For several days she would fast like this, without a bite to eat, without even a glass of hot tea, but eventually she would crawl into bed in her perpetually untidy bedroom, and would break into heartrending weeping. Full of despair and grief, weeping of this kind could drag on a whole day or even two days.

Master of the Universe, she would sob, her breast heaving, -- we're rotting away without shrouds here in this house ... we're steadily rotting away while we're still alive ...

And what she said would deeply distress the elder sister, Rokhele, a short woman of thirty-four whose upper lip was shadowed by a line of dark hair. She was constantly to be found there in the room with Tsivye, tending to her. She stood with her face to the window watching their neighbour, the cooper's wife, appear in the courtyard, her dress tucked up, a heaped tub raised high next to her pointed, pregnant belly, continually scolding a small, grubby-faced little girl who was falling under her feet. Rokhl stared through the closed window, watching the ceaseless movement of the woman's thick swollen lips but hearing no voice. With tears in her own eyes, staring through the window, Rokhl gnawed one of her knuckles and thought constantly of Tsivye:

-- Master of the Universe, what does she want of my life, this Tsivye?

And more:

-- Tsivye, do you know what you're doing now? ... Tsivye ...

She did not think these words; she merely remembered them.

For the most part, all this generally occurred after the festival of Shvues, in June or July, when inside the mouldering old house the thick brick walls, set three feet into the ground, once again began sweating. From above, their bricks exuded flecks on the whitewash, exhaling around themselves a musty vapour, sweetish and fermenting, like the odour of the seething distillery of whose walls they were once part. Throughout the day, at such times, all the rooms were chill and silent. And only in the dining-room, piled up on the sofa, lay old Fuzis, the father of the house. He was blind. He blinked his sightless eyes, which consisted entirely of cornea, listened to the weeping that resonated from Tsivye's room, and demanded to know:

-- Why is she weeping over there, that Tsivye?

In great boredom he would scratch about in his grey head and beard, would yawn with great gaping yawns, whispering as he did so with a mouth stretched wide and a tongue idle with disuse:

-- *Akh, ti*, Master of the Universe ... dear Lord ... dear Father...

He was waiting;

Yekusiel the bookbinder, the disorganized beadle of the Sadegerer prayer house, would pop in a little later to see whether there might be a glass of tea on offer, and the old man would detain him a little while, and would tell him that they were torments, those girls of his:

-- Huge torments ...

He would chat with him about the town generally, about well-to-do people, and about himself, Kalmen Fuzis personally, about his former business affairs: on one occasion he'd bought a wood for next to nothing, the Zavalina, they called it; he remembered it as clearly as though it had been today:

--Trees in that Zavalina, that wood, were cut down repeatedly, cut down for twelve successive years, and in those days one had money. After all, Yekusiel knew that he, Kalmen Fuzis, had once been the clever one ... But

later on, when the wheel of fortune turned, Leah, his late wife, had become the clever one because she had wealthy relatives. Now his children regarded him, Kalmen, as a fool.

-- *Pkhe!* What did Yekusiel have to say about that?

But Yekusiel was shrewd, sharp and reserved. He had a great flaxen beard with great flaxen eyebrows and when he entered the room, he shrewdly glanced at old Fuzis from a distance, and a smile flitted across his clean-shaven upper lip.

-- What news can there be? he yelled at blind old Fuzis -- It's bad, Reb Kalmen! On such a long summer's day it's bitter to be a pauper.

And the old man was suddenly discomposed; he did not know to whom Yekusiel was referring: to himself, or to him, old, impoverished Fuzis. For a while he lay there, feeling worthless, blinking his blind, foolishly embarrassed corneas.

-- Sit, Yekusiel.

-- Thank you kindly, Reb Kalmen.

A pause.

-- There were good days once, eh? Yekusiel.

-- There were, Reb Kalmen.

-- And gone, Yekusiel.

-- Gone, Reb Kalmen.

The old man lost himself in thought.

--How old are you, Yekusiel?

There was no reply.

The old man was anxious to know what the world he hadn't seen for twelve years looked like now; what Yekusiel looked like now.

--Yekusiel, he asked warily, like someone walking on tiptoe, -- are you grey by now, Yekusiel?

But Yekusiel was no longer there. He had noticed that something was not quite as it usually was in the house, and that no tea would be readily forthcoming, and had quietly withdrawn. And old Fuzis lay once more alone in the huge dining-room and heard from a distance Tsivye's haunting weeping. Overcome with ennui, he waited:

At five o'clock in the hot afternoon, shadows would creep over the cobblestones of the shtetl. The blazing heat outdoors would be dead, and the local postman would hurry along the narrow lane and might perhaps pop in here and leave behind exactly one hundred and fifty roubles with a coupon, on which would clearly be written:

-- On the instructions of your son, the rich man, I send you enclosed herewith ... and so on.

And this would be from the only son Shmuel, who owned several of his own distilleries somewhere near Ekaterinoslav and sent a living allowance here every month.

But the postman came by very seldom, all in all once a month. Unendingly long summer days dragged by, and Tsivye wept. The old man scratched about in his grey head and beard and whispered with every long, drawn-out yawn:

-- *Akh, ti, Master of the Universe! ... Dear Lord! ... Dear Lord!*

2.

It happened:

From Shmuel, the wealthy son, a letter arrived bidding Tsivye to come. There was a postscript from the daughter-in-law:

-- Henceforth Tsivye need no longer have regrets."

And more:

--Don't let the lack of a dress stand in her way.

It was as clear as daylight: this was all about a match. The bridegroom was clearly no nonentity; if he pleased Shmuel and Brokhe, he was probably not looking for a pretty face, and the main thing for him was character, class.

The old man was excited. Lying on the sofa, he continually blinked his blind corneas and was content:

-- How else? Shmuel .... Wasn't it obvious long ago that he'd find a bridegroom for her?

He could barely contain himself, so badly did he want to know who the bridegroom was and above all, who was the father-in-law, the new father-in-law. In order ascertain whether or not there were a few words about this in Shmuel's letter, he continually wheedled the girls:

-- I beg you, Rokhele, dear heart, how many distilleries does Shmuel own?

Knowing that they held Shmuel in the highest esteem, he went on and on talking to himself about it:

-- As a young man, Shmuel was once a pious Hasid ... immediately after his wedding, he and his father-in-law travelled abroad to visit the Rebbe. And now, they say, he wears kid gloves and shakes hands with the wives of the landowners with whom he does business. And by now he ought to have a great black beard, eh? Not so, Rokhele, a black beard?

But the young women believed that all good sense had been their mother's, the late Leah, and they regarded him, their blind father, as a fool. For the sake of decorum, they kept silent, but the expression on their faces suggested that they were thinking,

--Alas the day, poor us ... is there anyone worth answering?

For a few days the house was filled with repressed, excited commotion. Constantly present in Tsivye's room was the local assistant rabbi's wife, she with the modern education, who had once been Rokhl's closest friend and who already had three children and who had been brought up somewhere in a big city in the home of an observant step-grandfather, a very wealthy man. She was sewing trifles for Tsivye and giving advice. Pregnant, with blotches on her face, she spoke with absolute assurance, as though she were a great expert in such things and possessed a magic formula for the way to please a bridegroom; she had herbs ...

Eventually Tsivye was ready to leave. Before the house stood a hired coachman with Tsivye's tied-up basket, and Rokhl stood there with tears in her slightly crossed, compassion-filled eyes and aching with the pain of a repressed envy that would never be articulated, patting the cushion on the hired britzska:

--Will you at least be comfortable sitting here, Tsivye?

But four weeks later Tsivye returned, famished and sunburnt, as though from a spa, with an unspoken, newly-born despair in her heart and a massive pain in her head from the sleepless night in the train compartment.

As she descended from the britzska, she was still smiling; she seemed content to have returned home. A festive air prevailed inside the house as well. A fresh yellow tablecloth was spread over the table in the dining-room; tea was served. The assistant rabbi's wife with the modern education was also there, and Tsivye grimaced, complained of a headache and of the noisy wedding that had been celebrated for a whole week long in the house of Shmuel's father-in-law.

-- Oh my, she groaned, -- so much noise, that even when a door creaks I still seem to hear the wedding band playing.

The old man lay to one side on the sofa, blinking the corneas of his blind eyes.

-- Well, he asked, -- and what are things like in the father-in-law's house? He's rich, eh? Was it a lavish affair? ...

And about the letter that Shmuel had sent a month previously, no one any longer spoke a word. Tsivye slept on for thirty-six hours in her room, and when she rose, there was still buzzing in her ears and every creak of the door sounded to her as if musicians were playing or the train were whistling. Long summer days dragged by once again, and there was no one in the house. In the chill within, the old man lay all alone on the sofa. In great ennui, he scratched about in his grey head and beard and whispered with every long, drawn-out yawn:

-- *Akh, ti*, Master of the Universe! ... Dear Lord! ... Dear Lord!

Now, it seemed, nothing more would ever again take place in the house.

### 3.

But then something did happen:

One day a telegram arrived from Shmuel, the rich son, announcing that in two days' time, hurrying abroad to a spa, he was travelling through the small station nearby, and he asked them to drive out to the railway station to see him.

This was before sunset. And the late summer's day was so clear and fresh. At the time, old Fuzis was lying on the sofa in the dining-room waiting for them to dress him in his Sabbath capote and lead him outside to walk in the street for a while. Not long before, here in the shtetl, amidst great wealth, his former longstanding partner Yisroel Kitiver had died, and Kitiver's grandson Note-Hirsh was now rebuilding his grandfather's house and was extending a new porch right into the market-place. The old man lay on the sofa imagining how, blind as he was, he would soon stand there in the market-place next to the house that was being built. In his Sabbath capote he would stand there and with his stick would point things out to Note-Hirsh:

-- You see, Note-Hirsh. Just here, where you're extending the porch, there was once, I recall, a deep trench, so it's advisable to dig down and see whether or not the ground will bear the weight.

And townsfolk stood about all around, staring:

-- Whatever next? people remarked. -- Kalmel Fuzis the builder... Has anyone ever counted how many buildings he put up in his life?

The old man could barely contain himself, so strongly did he yearn to go into the market-place to Kitiver's house.

-- Well, Rokhl, dear heart? he kept on asking, -- where is it, my Sabbath capote? But Rokhl did not answer. Something had happened in the house: the telegram from Shmuel had apparently been handed to the young women through the window in their room, and from there someone had dashed away to spread the news. Now the local assistant rabbi's wife with her modern education was there once more. Mouths chattered all at the same time, and a

festive commotion enfolded everybody. At the very last despairing moment, it seemed, the house had been suddenly restored, unexpectedly and for ever and ever. Surely Shmuel's telegram had some connection with his letter, in which, at the beginning of summer, he had written, sending for Tsivye? ... Surely he was now bringing salvation with him to the house here? He was probably not travelling alone ...

Tears stood in Rokhl's slightly crossed, compassion-filled eyes. She stared, smiled, and was unable to speak. And suddenly she flung herself down on a side bench in one corner, and burst into a loud cry:

--Shmuel! ... We've not seen him for eight years, Shmuel! ...

And it seemed as if she were calling to him, that he was present here in the next room.

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The next morning, and for the rest of the day, the young women busied themselves with laborious preparations.

Cakes and other sweet things were baked for the journey. Handkerchiefs were rinsed, and jackets personally pressed. The windows stood open. The maidservant suspected that Rokhl was curling her hair, and the old man lay on the sofa in the dining-room and it seemed to him that from the third room, where the girls stood at the table heating and reheating the flatiron, he often heard a snatch of song ... He prattled on to Yekusiel, the disorganised beadle of the Sadegerer prayer-house:

-- As a young man, Shmuel was once an observant Hasid, eh? After his wedding he travelled abroad to the Rebbe with his father-in-law ... And now he's rich, Shmuel, immensely rich.

When he fell silent, he blinked his blind eyes and pictured to himself how Shmuel might look nowadays:

-- He ought to have a great black beard. He wears kid gloves and shakes hands with the wives of the landowners with whom he does business ... Shmuel! ...



He barely slept through the night. And in the morning, when together with the girls he went out in his travelling coat to the hired carriage that stood waiting outside the house, he made no haste to take his seat; blind as he was, he wandered all round the carriage; he groped about to ascertain whether or not it had a leather hood, and he imagined that in the shade of the paved little street, townsfolk stood crowded together, gawking:

-- Kalmen Fuzis is travelling out to meet his son.

-- Is there a hood on this carriage? he asked, -- eh? Is it there?

Following the broad postal highway round and round, a long detour of many miles was made. Smartly dressed, in high festive spirits as though travelling to a wedding, they sat in the carriage, and the old man provoked anger because he would not shut his mouth for a single instant. But when the small station was reached, it was obvious that their setting out had started far too early, and long hours had tediously to be whiled away. Shmuel's train was an express with reserved seats only, powered by electricity and very fast. When it rushed into the little station, the warning bell was immediately sounded twice, and the smartly uniformed stationmaster on this tiny platform, showing no respect for anyone, laid rudely about him, strenuously demanding that the bell be rung for the third time.

-- Finished? Eh?

There was great milling about on the platform, and from the midst of the tumult rose a strong, assured, mellow baritone:

-- Father! I'm here! I'm standing in the window!

In the carriage window stood a broad-chested young man with a great black beard and almost artificially lustrous, somewhat arrogant eyes. This was Shmuel, the rich, fortunate son Shmuel. From above he stretched out his hand in greeting, and the old man stood anxiously next to the window, quivering with apprehension. Rapidly blinking his sightless corneas, he tremulously sought the outstretched hand with all ten of his trembling fingers, and his girls raised his arms by the elbows and helped him to find it. Eventually he touched it, that outstretched hand. Gropingly, he fondled it with all ten of his trembling fingers, stroking it rapidly all the way round, and squeezing it to make sure it was real.

-- This is Shmuel's hand, eh? he queried, --... Shmuel's hand?

But the arrogant, smartly uniformed stationmaster had already clanged the bell for the third time and the train had started to move. For a while longer the old man's fingers continued to fumble feelingly in the air as though they were still stroking the smooth velvet of a new chamois glove, and only then were they slowly lowered.

Now there would be the return home, since in any event no trace of the train now remained. It had vanished somewhere far, far away into the furthest crevice of the late-summer horizon. Places were resumed in the carriage and there was rummaging about on the floor: a tablecloth filled with fresh white little sugar-cookies had been mislaid. But for what reason had these sugar-cookies actually been brought here?

Silence fell. The coachman's horses were tired. They were barely able to stir, and the bridle-bells round their necks scarcely tinkled. But even this weak, tired chink of bells worked on Tsivye's nerves and infuriated her:

-- Master of the Universe, she'd be driven mad by these bells.

In a broad steep valley the coachman was obliged to stop and at long last remove the bells. To the left, above a distant, dwarfed wood, the distended sun was on the verge of setting; around it, yellow and unsullied like the purest amber, flowed a liquescent rivulet, and a short, rose-coloured girdle furled out along the horizon, beckoning to it from a distance. Over there it seemed as though this sun would never set, that it would linger on, continually suspended that way, as once long ago, in the days of old Gibeon.

The old man had already been brought to book. Having been severely rebuked for talking, he had lapsed into silence, merely blinking his blind corneas and smiling privately into his beard:

-- *Pkhe!* ... They took him for a fool, these girls of his.

Without bells they were slowly jolted homewards; in the desire to get back home as quickly as possible, all speech was cut off.

Now assuredly nothing new would ever again take place in the dilapidated old house. In summer, in a year's time, when the thick brick walls would begin sweating once more, Tsivye would once more start drifting about in her petticoat and would stubbornly start cleaning all the rooms; without eating, without drinking, she would eventually hurl herself into bed in her room with a great cry. And then old Fuzis would once again lie on the sofa

in the chill dining-room, and would blink his narrowed, blind corneas. Unwilling to permit Yekusiel the beadle to stumble upon the significance of Tsivye's weeping, he would fall into chat with him:

-- There were good times once, Yekusiel?

-- There were, Reb Kalmen.

-- And gone, Yekusiel, eh? Gone, like a shadow.

-- Dead and gone, Reb Kalmen.