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THE  
I . L . PERETZ  
READER

## BONTSHE SHVAYG

Here on earth the death of Bontshe Shvayg made no impression. Try asking who Bontshe was, how he lived, what he died of (Did his heart give out? Did he drop from exhaustion? Did he break his back beneath too heavy a load?), and no one can give you an answer. For all you know, he might have starved to death.

The death of a tram horse would have caused more excitement. It would have been written up in the papers; hundreds of people would have flocked to see the carcass, or even the place where it lay. But that's only because horses are scarcer than people. Billions of people!

Bontshe lived and died in silence. Like a shadow he passed through this world.

No wine was drunk at Bontshe's circumcision, no glasses clinked in a toast; no speech to show off his knowledge was given at his bar mitzva. He lived like a grain of gray sand at the edge of the sea, beside millions of other grains. No one noticed when the wind whirled him off and carried him to the far shore.

While Bontshe lived, his feet left no tracks in the mud; when he died, the wind blew away the wooden sign marking his grave. The gravedigger's wife found it some distance away and used it to boil potatoes. Do you think that three days after Bontshe was dead anyone knew where he lay? There was not even a gravestone for a future antiquarian to unearth and mouth the name of Bontshe Shvayg one last time.

A shadow! No mind, no heart, preserved his image. Nothing remained of him at all. Not a trace. Alone he lived and alone he died.

Were not humanity so noisy, someone might have heard Bontshe's bones as they cracked beneath their burden. Were the world in less of a hurry, someone might have noticed that Bontshe, a fellow member of the human race, had in his lifetime two lifeless eyes, a pair of sinkholes for cheeks, and, even when no weight bent his back, a head bowed to the ground as if searching for his own grave.

Were men as rare as horses, someone would surely have wondered where he disappeared to.

When Bontshe was brought to the hospital, the corner of the cellar he had called his home did not remain vacant, because ten men bid for it at once; when he was taken from the hospital ward to the morgue, twenty sick paupers were candidates for his bed; when he was carried out of the morgue, forty men killed in the fall of a building were carried in. Think of how many others are waiting to share his plot of earth with him and well may you wonder how long he will rest there in peace.

He was born in silence. He lived in silence. He died in silence. And he was buried in a silence greater yet.

But that's not how it was in the other world. There Bontshe's death was an occasion.

A blast of the Messiah's horn sounded in all seven heavens: "Bontshe Shvayg has passed away! Bontshe has been summoned to his Maker!" the most exalted angels with the brightest wings informed each other in midflight. A joyous din broke out in paradise: "Bontshe Shvayg—it doesn't happen every day!"

Young, silver-booted cherubs with diamond-bright eyes and gold-filigreed wings ran gaily to greet Bontshe when he came. The flapping of their wings, the patter of their boots, and the merry ripple of laughter from their fresh, rosy mouths echoed through the heavens as far as the mercy seat, where God Himself soon knew that Bontshe Shvayg was on his way.

At the gates of heaven stood Father Abraham, his right hand outstretched in cordial welcome and the most radiant of smiles on his old face.

But what was that sound?

It was two angels wheeling a golden chair into paradise for Bontshe to sit on.

And what was that flash?

It was a gold crown set with gleaming jewels. All for Bontshe!

"What, before the Heavenly Tribunal has even handed down its verdict?" marveled the saints, not without envy.

"Ah!" answered the angels. "Everyone knows that's only a formality. The prosecution doesn't have a leg to stand on. The whole business will be over in five minutes. You're not dealing with just anyone, you know!"

When the cherubs raised Bontshe on high and sounded a heavenly fanfare, when Father Abraham reached out to shake his hand like an old friend, when Bontshe heard that a gold crown and chair awaited him in paradise and that the heavenly prosecutor had no case to present, he behaved exactly as he would have in this world—that is, he was too frightened to speak. His heart skipped a beat. He was sure it must be either a dream or a mistake.

He was accustomed to both. More than once in this world of ours he had dreamed of finding gold in the street, whole treasure chests of it, only to awake as great a beggar as before. More than once some passerby had smiled or said hello only to turn aside in disgust upon realizing his error.

That's how my luck is, Bontshe thought.

He was afraid that if he opened his eyes the dream would vanish and he would find himself in a dark cave full of vermin. He was afraid that if he uttered a sound or moved a limb he would be recognized at once and whisked away by the devil.

He was trembling so hard that he did not hear the cherubs sing his praises or see them dance around him. He did not return Father Abraham's hearty greeting or bid the Heavenly Tribunal good day when he was ushered before it.

He was scared out of his wits.

His fright, moreover, grew even greater when his eyes fell involuntarily on the floor of the courtroom. It was solid alabaster inlaid with diamonds! Just look where I'm standing, he thought, too paralyzed to move. Who knows what rich Jew or rabbi they've mixed me up with? In a minute he'll arrive, and that will be the end of me!

He was too frightened to hear the presiding judge call out, "The case of Bontshe Shvayg!" adding as he handed Bontshe's file to the defense counsel, "You have the floor, but be quick!"

The whole courtroom seemed to revolve around him. There was a buzzing in his ears. Gradually, he began to make out the counsel's voice, as sweet as a violin:

"The name of Bontshe Shvayg, Bontshe the Silent," the counsel was saying, "fit him like a tailored suit."

What is he talking about? wondered Bontshe just as the judge remarked impatiently:

"No poetry, please!"

"Not once in his whole life," the counsel for the defense went on, "did he complain to God or to man. Not once did he feel a drop of anger or cast an accusing glance at heaven."

Bontshe still understood nothing. Again the brusque voice interrupted:

"You can skip the rhetoric too!"

"Even Job broke down in the end, whereas this man, who suffered even more—"

"Stick to the facts!" warned the bench.

"At the age of eight days his circumcision was botched by a bungler—"

"That doesn't mean the gory details!"

"—who couldn't even staunch the blood."

"Proceed!"

"He bore it all in silence," continued the counsel for the defense. "Even when, at the age of thirteen, his mother died and her place was taken by a stepmother with the heart of a snake—"

That does sound like me, marveled Bontshe.

"No hearsay evidence!" snapped the judge.

"She scrimped on his food. She fed him moldy bread and gristle while she herself drank coffee with cream in it—"

"Get to the point!"

"She didn't spare him her fingernails, though. His black-and-blue marks showed through the holes in the old rags she dressed him in. She made him chop wood for her on the coldest days of winter, standing barefoot in the yard. He was too young and weak to wield the ax, which was too dull to cut the wood, which was too thick to be cut. He wrenched his arms and froze his feet more times than you can count. But still he kept silent, even before his own father—"

"His father? A drunk!" laughed the prosecutor, sending a chill down Bontshe's spine.

"—he never complained," continued the defense counsel. "He hadn't a soul to turn to. No friends, no schoolmates, no school . . . not one whole item of clothing . . . not a free second of time—"

"The facts!" repeated the bench.

"He even kept silent when his father, in a drunken fit, took him by the neck one snowy winter night and threw him out of the house. He picked himself out of the snow without a peep and followed his feet where they took him. At no time did he ever say a word. Even when half-dead from hunger, he never begged except with his eyes.

"At last, one dizzy, wet spring evening, he arrived in a great city. He vanished in it like a drop of water in the sea, though not before spending his first night in jail for vagrancy. And still he kept silent,

never asking why or how long. He worked at the meanest jobs and said nothing. And don't think it was easy to find them.

"Drenched in his own sweat, doubled over beneath more than a man can carry, his stomach gnawed by hunger, he kept silent!

"Spattered with the mud of city streets, spat on by unknown strangers, driven from the sidewalk to stagger in the gutter with his load beside carriages, wagons, and tram cars, looking death in the eye every minute, he kept silent!

"He never reckoned how many tons he had to carry for each ruble; he kept no track of how often he stumbled and fell; he didn't count the times he had to sweat blood to be paid. Never once did he stop to ask himself why fate was kinder to others. He kept silent!

"He never even raised his voice to demand his meager wage. Like a beggar he stood in doorways, glancing up as humbly as a dog at its master. "Come back later!" he would be told—and like a shadow he was gone, coming back later to beg again for what was his.

"He said nothing when cheated, nothing when paid with bad money.

"He kept silent!"

Why, perhaps they mean me after all, thought Bontshe, taking heart.

"Once," continued the counsel for the defense after a sip of water, "things seemed about to look up. A droshky raced by Bontshe pulled by runaway horses, its coachman thrown senseless on the cobblestones, his skull split wide open. The frightened horses foamed at the mouth, sparks shot from under their hooves, their eyes glittered like torches on a dark night—and in his seat cringed a passenger, more dead than alive.

"And it was Bontshe who stopped the horses!

"The rescued passenger was a generous Jew who rewarded Bontshe for his deed. He handed him the dead driver's whip and made him a coachman, found him a wife and made him a wedding too, and was even thoughtful enough to provide him with a baby boy. . . .

"And Bontshe kept silent!"

It certainly sounds like me, thought Bontshe, almost convinced, though he still did not dare look up at the tribunal. He listened as the counsel went on:

"He kept silent when his benefactor went bankrupt without giving him a day's pay. He kept silent when his wife ran off and left him

with the little infant. And fifteen years later, when the boy was strong enough to throw his father into the street, Bontshe kept silent then too!"

It's me, all right! decided Bontshe happily.

"He even kept silent in the hospital, the one place where a man can scream.

"He kept silent when the doctor would not examine him without half a ruble in advance and when the orderly wanted five kopecks to change his dirty sheets. He kept silent as he lay dying. He kept silent when he died. Not one word against God. Not one word against man.

"The defense rests!"

Once again Bontshe trembled all over. He knew that the defense was followed by the prosecution. Who could tell what the prosecutor might say? Bontshe himself hardly remembered his own life. Back on earth each minute had obliterated the one before. The counsel for the defense had reminded him of many forgotten things; what might he learn from the prosecution?

"Gentlemen!" The voice of the prosecutor was sharp and piercing. At once, however, it broke off.

"Gentlemen . . ." it resumed, although more softly, only to break off again.

When it spoke a third time, it was almost tender. "Gentlemen," it said. "He kept silent. I will do the same."

There was a hush. Then, from the bench, another voice spoke tenderly, tremulously, too. "Bontshe, Bontshe, my child," it said in harplike tones. "My own dearest Bontshe!"

Bontshe felt a lump in his throat. He wanted to open his eyes at last, but his tears had sealed them shut. Never had he known that tears could be so sweet. "My child"; "my Bontshe"—not once since the death of his mother had he been spoken to like that.

"My child," continued the judge, "you have suffered all in silence. There is not an unbroken bone in your body, not a corner of your soul that has not bled. And you have kept silent.

"There, in the world below, no one appreciated you. You yourself never knew that had you cried out but once, you could have brought down the walls of Jericho. You never knew what powers lay within you.

"There, in the World of Deceit, your silence went unrewarded. Here, in the World of Truth, it will be given its full due.

"The Heavenly Tribunal can pass no judgment on you. It is not for us to determine your portion of paradise. Take what you want! It is yours, all yours!"

Bontshe looked up for the first time. His eyes were blinded by the rays of light that streamed at him from all over. Everything glittered, glistened, blazed with light: the walls, the benches, the angels, the judges. So many angels!

He cast his dazed eyes down again. "Truly?" he asked, happy but abashed.

"Why, of course!" the judge said. "Of course! I tell you, it's all yours. All heaven belongs to you. Ask for anything you wish; you can choose what you like."

"Truly?" asked Bontshe again, a bit surer of himself.

"Truly! Truly! Truly!" clamored the heavenly host.

"Well, then," smiled Bontshe, "what I'd like most of all is a warm roll with fresh butter every morning."

The judges and angels hung their heads in shame. The prosecutor laughed.

1894 (translated by Hillel Halkin)

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## KABBALISTS

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When times are bad even Torah—that best of merchandise—finds no takers.

The Lashchev yeshiva was reduced to Reb Yekel, its master, and a single student.

Reb Yekel is a thin old man with a long, disheveled beard and eyes dulled with age. His beloved remaining pupil, Lemech, is a tall, thin young man with a pale face, black, curly sidelocks, black, feverish eyes, parched lips, and a tremulous, pointed Adam's apple. Both are dressed in rags, and their chests are exposed for lack of shirts. Only with difficulty does Reb Yekel drag the heavy peasant boots he wears; his pupil's shoes slip off his bare feet.

That is all that remained of the once-famed yeshiva.

The impoverished town gradually sent less food to the students, provided them with fewer "eating days," and the poor boys went

off, each his own way. But Reb Yekel decided that here he would die, and his remaining pupil would place the potsherds on his eyes.

They frequently suffered hunger. Hunger leads to sleeplessness, and night-long insomnia arouses a desire to delve into the mysteries of Kabbalah.

For it can be considered in this wise: as long as one has to be up all night and suffer hunger all day, let these at least be put to some use; let the hunger be transformed into fasts and self-flagellation; let the gates of the world reveal their mysteries, spirits, and angels.

Teacher and pupil had engaged in Kabbalah for some time. Now they sat alone at the long table. For other people it was already past lunchtime; for them it was still before breakfast. They were accustomed to this. The master of the yeshiva stared into space and spoke; his pupil leaned his head on both hands and listened.

"In this too there are numerous degrees," the master said. "One man knows a part, another knows a half, a third knows the entire melody. The rabbi, of blessed memory, knew the melody in its wholeness, with musical accompaniment, but I," he added mournfully, "I barely merit a little bit, no larger than this"—and he measured the small degree of his knowledge on his bony finger. "There is melody that requires words: this is of low degree. Then there is a higher degree—a melody that sings of itself, without words, a pure melody! But even this melody requires voicing, lips that should shape it, and lips, as you realize, are matter. Even the sound itself is a refined form of matter.

"Let us say that sound is on the borderline between matter and spirit. But in any case, the melody that is heard by means of a voice that depends on lips is still not pure, not entirely pure, not genuine spirit. The true melody sings without voice; it sings within, in the heart and bowels.

"This is the secret meaning of King David's words: 'All my bones shall recite. . . .' The very marrow of the bones should sing. That's where the melody should reside, the highest adoration of God, blessed be He. This is not the melody of man! This is not a composed melody! This is part of the melody with which God created the world; it is part of the soul that He instilled in it.

"This is how the hosts of heaven sing. This is how the rabbi, of blessed memory, sang."

The discourse was interrupted by an unkempt young man girded with a rope about his loins—obviously a porter. He entered the house of study, placed a bowl of grits and a slice of bread beside the master, and said in a coarse voice, "Reb Tevel sends food for