

The Three Offerings

Weighed In Heaven—Once upon a time, many years and generations ago, in a certain place, a Jew came to the end of his days.

Well, what of it? So a Jew came to the end of his days—no one can live forever. They performed the proper rites over him; they gave him honorable burial. A little mound rose up over his grave; his son pronounced the memorial prayer for him, and his soul went winging upward to appear before the All-Highest.

And in front of the judgment seat hung a pair of scales ready to weigh this soul's sins against its good deeds.

The dead man's Advocate appeared—his erstwhile Good Angel—and took his stand, with a fair, snow-white sack in his hand, to the right of the scales.

The dead man's Accuser appeared—his erstwhile Evil Demon, his tempter—and took his stand, with a foul, grimy sack in his hand, to the left of the scales.

In the white fair sack were the dead man's good deeds; in the black one, his sins.

The Advocate poured the good deeds out of the snowy-white sack onto the right scale—the good deeds gave off a delightful fragrance and glowed like the stars in the sky.

The Accuser poured the dead man's sins out of the foul sack onto the left scale: black like unto coal were they, and reeked of pitch and brimstone.

The poor soul looked on and was astounded. Down there it had never even dreamed that there was so much difference between good and evil. Down there it had often failed to differentiate between the two, mistaking the one for the other.

The scales swung gently up and down. The arrow quivered above them, moving now a hairbreadth to the right, now a hairbreadth to the left.

Only a hairbreadth—and hardly that!

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Just a simple Jew's, that soul, without any evil intent—yet also without any capacity for sacrifices. Petty are its sins; just as small are its good deeds—specks of dust, both the sins and the good deeds, sometimes so minute the eye could hardly detect them.

Yet, whenever the arrow did move a hairbreadth toward the right, rejoicing and jubilation were heard in the upper regions. And whenever—God forbid!—it moved to the left, a grievous sigh swept by and was wafted to the Holy Throne.

Painstakingly, the two Angels kept pouring one mote of dust after another out of their respective sacks, like poor worshippers bidding copper coins for the honor of carrying the Scrolls of the Law.

However, even a well can run dry. The sacks were emptied at last.

"Are ye done?" asked a Court Attendant—he was an Angel, like all the others.

The Good Angel turned his sack inside out; even as the Evil Spirit did the same. There was nothing left in either. Thereupon the Court Attendant looked carefully at the arrow to see where it pointed—to the right or to the left.

And the Attending Angel stared and stared—his eyes beheld something that had never yet occurred since the creation of heaven and earth.

"What is taking thee so long?" asked the Presiding Judge.

"The balance is perfect!" murmured the Attending Angel.

The arrow was at dead center. The sins and the good deeds weighed precisely the same.

"Exactly?" came the next question from the Celestial Seat.

The Attendant looked again and answered:

"They do not differ by a hairbreadth!"

And so a council was held in the Court of Heaven, and long was that council held, and the verdict it handed down was:

"Inasmuch as the sins have not outweighed the good deeds, the soul may not be condemned to the torments of Hell. On the other hand, inasmuch as the good deeds do not outweigh the sins, the gates of Paradise shall not open before the said soul. Therefore, the said soul is sentenced to wander through Eternity. Let it fly, let it soar, half-way between Heaven and Hell, until such time as the Lord shall, in His compassion, recall it into His Presence."

Whereupon the Attending Angel took the soul and led it out of Heaven. And the soul grieved and bemoaned its fate.

"What moanest thou?" the Attending Angel asked. "The joys and solaces of Eden have passed thee by, but then the griefs and torments of Hell will likewise remain unknown to thee."

But the soul would not let itself be comforted:

"Better the greatest of torments," it wailed, "than nothingness! Nothingness is most dreadful of all!"

Then it was that the Heavenly Servitor took pity on it:

"Fly down, little soul," he counseled it, "and soar thou over the many-peopled earth. As for the heavens," he went on, "do not even look up to them. What canst thou see up there? Nought but the little stars! For even if those stars be creations of light, yet they are chill; they will not exert themselves in the slightest for thee, they will not put in the least word in thy behalf before the Lord. 'Tis only the Saints of Righteousness in Paradise who can try to do something for a poor soul. Now and then memories of their contemporaries haunt them; they become filled with pity for the souls that languish, and then they try to do something for them. And as for the Saints of Righteousness of thy generation, thou woeful one—well, 'tis of no avail trying to conceal the truth—they are not at all reluctant to accept gifts. This, then, is my counsel to thee. Fly low over the earth; keep a sharp lookout as to how people toil there. But shouldst thou see ought that is amazingly beautiful, seize thou upon it and bring it as an offering to the Saints of Righteousness in Paradise. Knock thou on the gate with an offering in thy hand, and tell the Keeper of the Gates who thou art—thou mayest mention my name. And when thou hast brought three offerings, be thou assured that the gates of the Heavenly Mansions will open before thee."

And, gently and pityingly, the Angel thrust the soul out of Heaven.

The First Offering—And so the poor little soul flew low over the populous earth, searching for gifts which it could offer up to the Saints of Righteousness in Paradise. It flew over the dwellings of men. It flew under the blazing rays of the sun, in needle-sharp downpours. At summer's end it flew among the silvery threads of gossamer suspended in the air. In winter, it flew among the falling flakes. And it was constantly searching, ever watchful.

No sooner did it spot a Jew than it fluttered up to him and gazed deep into his eyes: was he, perhaps, about to sacrifice himself for the sake of the Holy Name?

At night, if a light glowed through some window, the soul would fly near and look in, to see if any precious little flowers of God, known as good deeds, grew in the quiet house.

Usually, however, it was forced to retreat, trembling with fear, from the eyes that gazed out of the windows.

Months passed, and years, and the soul fell into grave despair. By now towns had become graveyards, and the graveyards were plowed up for fields. Forests had come to full growth and been cut down. Boulders on the seashores had turned into sand, and rivers had changed their courses. Thousands upon thousands of stars had fallen from the heavens and millions of souls had ascended—yet the Lord had not once recalled the poor soul to His thoughts. And the soul had not once come upon a thing of beauty to offer up to the Saints of Righteousness.

"The world is so poor," thought the soul, "and its people are drab. Their good deeds are trifling. How is one to come upon anything extraordinary among them? It is ordained that I wander forever, miserable and forgotten."

But hardly had this thought occurred when its eyes perceived a red glow in the midst of the dark, dismal night. The soul looked about and saw that the glow was escaping through a high window.

Thieves with their faces masked had broken into the house of a certain rich man. One brandished a blazing torch which lit up the whole scene; another had put a glittering knife to the breast of the rich man and was saying over and over, ceaselessly: "If you move, Jew, this knife will plunge right through your breast!" The others were ransacking chests and drawers, seizing on anything they could find. The Jew looked on, motionless, not a hair quivering in the white beard that reached down to his loins.

He stood there as if it were not he at all whom they were robbing! "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away," he seemed to be thinking. "'Blessed be the Name of the Lord!' A man is not born with all this, and no man can take it with him into his grave," his wan lips whispered. He looked on calmly as the last drawer of the last bureau was pried open and bags of gold and silver and precious gems were removed from it, and he remained silent.

It may well have been that, in renouncing his goods so completely, he sought to absolve the robbers from their evildoing.

But suddenly, when the thieves came upon the very last repository and pulled out of it a tiny bag—the old man's most cherished possession—he was overcome. His eyes blazed up, he stretched out his hand to retrieve it, and his lips opened to cry out: "Touch it not!"

Instead of the words, however, came a stream of blood, spurting from his breast in a thick jet. The knife had done its work.

Heart-blood spattered on the tiny bag.

The old man fell. The robbers hastily opened the tiny bag, in which they thought to find the most precious possession of all.

But they had erred grievously; in vain had they shed blood. Neither gold nor silver, nor precious stones lay in that bag—it contained nothing which is considered of great value in this world.

There was only a handful of dust inside, dust from the Holy Land, to put under the head in its grave. This was what the rich man had wanted to save—it was for this that he paid with his own life.

Bearing one blood-soaked grain of the holy dust, the wandering soul ascended to the gates of Heaven.

And the soul's first offering was accepted.

The Second Offering—"Remember!" the Attending Angel called after the soul as he shut the heavenly gates behind it. "Two more offerings!"

"God will help me!" the soul voiced its hopes and plunged down into space.

It was not long, however, before its joy dimmed. As years and years passed, it found no extraordinary deeds.

And the soul despaired anew.

"As a living wellspring did the Universe spurt forth through the will of God, and as a torrent did it begin to course down the river bed of time. And the further it flows, the more turbid, the muddier it becomes. The pettier people become, the shallower their good deeds, the more unprepossessing their sins; anything out of the ordinary is scarce.

"Were the Lord to ordain further weighing of the good deeds, and the sins of the whole world," the soul kept on thinking, "why, the marker would hardly swing, would barely tremble. Like me,

the world can neither fall nor rise. It wanders, as do I, between the radiant heavens and the gloomy nether regions. And Advocate and Accuser contend throughout all eternity as light and darkness, warmth and cold, life and death contend here throughout all eternity.

"The world is troubled and can neither soar aloft nor plummet down, and therefore will there be weddings and divorces, births and burials, celebrations and funeral feasts, and love and hatred, forever and forever!"

Suddenly the soul heard the sound of trumpets and kettledrums. Looking down it saw a medieval German town: gabled roofs, covered with tiles of many colors, surrounded the square where the Magistrates sat in assembly. The square buzzed with its motley throng; the windows were crowded with heads; people were perched on the rooftops, some actually astride the gables, and the balconies were overflowing.

In front of the Rathhaus was a table covered with a green cloth and fringed with gold tassels. Seated behind this table were the Councilmen in robes of velvet with clasps of gold; their caps were of sable fur, the white plumes fastened with diamond studs. In the place of honor sat the Presiding Rathsherr himself; a banner, surmounted by an eagle cast in bright metal, fluttered over his head.

Standing to one side was a Jewish maiden, bound with ropes, while not far off ten or so Landsknechts had all they could do to restrain a wild horse. The Presiding Rathsherr arose and, holding the parchment on which the verdict that condemned the Jewish maiden was inscribed, addressed the people:

"This Jewess, this Israelite maid, has committed a grievous offense—so very grievous that the Lord Himself, for all His great mercy, could not forgive her! She sneaked out of the ghetto and, on our last holy day, paraded through the fair streets of our town. She hath defiled with her shameless eyes our holy images, which we were carrying through the streets to the sounds of song and trumpets. Her accursed ears heard the chanting of our innocent, white-clad children and the rolling of the holy drums. And—who knows?—it may be that the Foul One, in the guise of a Hebrew maid, daughter of the accursed Rabbi, hath touched our sacred things and desecrated them!

"What was the Devil after in the guise of this beautiful maid?

For—this is past denial—beautiful she is; she captivates with all the charms of Hell! Look upon her eyes, shining boldly from under their lowered, sullen brows. Look ye upon that face of marble, which during her long stay in prison has become paler but not less beautiful! Look upon her fingers, her long, slender fingers—the sun is shining right through them!

"This is what the Devil was after: to draw some Christian away from the ecstasy of the solemn procession. And he has succeeded!

"See what a handsome maid that is! a certain knight, scion of one of our noblest families, had cried out. This was too much. The halberdiers noticed her and seized her. The Devil did not even try to resist. Pure were those Christian soldiers just then, cleansed of their sins, and he had no power over them. This, then, is the punishment to which we have condemned the Devil in his guise of this Hebrew maid—" here the Presiding Rathsherr began reading from the parchment—"Let her be tied by the hair, to the tail of the wild horse. Let the said horse run and drag her along the streets which her feet have trod, contrary to our sacred law. Let her blood stain these stones she has defiled with her steps!"

A wild shout of approval was heard. When the turbulent rejoicing subsided, they asked the girl who had thus been condemned to death what her last wish was.

"All I ask for," she answered in a calm voice, "is a few pins."

"She is out of her mind with fright!" the members of the Council decided.

"Nol" she answered calmly and coolly. "That is my last wish—that, and no other."

And her last wish was carried out.

"Now," came the Presiding Rathsherr's command, "tie her to the horse!"

The halberdiers approached and with trembling hands tied the long, raven braids of the Rabbi's daughter to the tail of the wild horse, which they could hardly restrain.

"Clear a path!" the Presiding Rathsherr commanded the crowd.

There was great turmoil. The people cleared a path, hugging the walls of the houses. And all raised their hands—some with quirts, some with thorns, some with knotted handkerchiefs—and all were ready to urge on the wild horse: all held their breath; their faces flushed, their eyes glittering. And during the turmoil no one noticed how the condemned bent down quietly and

pinned the hem of her dress to her leg, sinking the pins deep into her flesh—so that her body might not be exposed when the horse dragged her through the streets.

Only the wandering soul noticed this as it hovered over her.

"Let the horse loose!" commanded the Presiding Rathsherr.

The mercenaries leaped back from the horse, and it broke away instantly, as the shouts of the mob burst forth. Quirts, thorns, and handkerchiefs cut and swished through the air, while the horse dashed through the square, and left the town behind.

But the wandering soul had already taken a bloodstained pin out of the condemned girl's flesh, and with that offering it soared upward.

"Only one gift more!" the Angel proclaimed.

The Third Offering—And again the soul flew downward, in search of one more offering.

But again months passed, and years, and again dismal thoughts overcame the wandering soul. The Universe, it reflected, has grown still shallower. Even pettier have the people become, and still even their deeds, the good as well as the evil.

"What if the Lord," it pondered on one occasion, "blessed be His Name, were to conceive the idea of halting all Creation and judging it once and for all, just as it is, and all of it at once. . . . And what if the Advocate were to take his place on one side and start pouring out of his sack the grains of sand and motes of dust while, on the other side, the Accuser were to pour out of his sack his motes of dust and grains of sand—why, it would take a long, long time for both sacks to become empty, so many are the petty deeds—so very many!

"Yet when the sacks were finally empty—what then?" the soul asked itself.

"The arrow would probably stop dead center!

"With humanity's deeds so insignificant, so trifling, can there be any tipping of the scales either way: what is there to make the good deeds outweigh the sins, or the sins outweigh the good deeds?"

One more straw, one more bit of down, one more speck of dust, one more grain of sand. . . .

And what would the Lord say then? What verdict would He

IN THIS WORLD AND THE NEXT

pronounce? That the world be turned into chaos again? But the sins did not outweigh the good deeds.

That it be saved? But the good deeds did not outweigh the sins.

Well, what then?

"Go thou on!" the Lord might say. "Fly thou on between Hell and Heaven, amid tears of sorrow and streaming blood, between the cradle and the grave. . . . On, on!"

However, redemption lay ahead for the wandering soul.

Its thoughts were interrupted by the roll of drums.

Where was it? In what period of time?

The soul could recognize neither the place nor the era. But it saw a square before a prison. Sunbeams were playing over the iron bars of the small windows; they glided down the bayonets stacked along the walls.

The soldiers were ranged in two long rows, face to face, with a narrow passage between them. Someone was going to run the gauntlet.

Who was that someone?

That someone was a Jew. A tattered shirt hung over his emaciated body, and a skullcap covered his half-shaven head.

He was led up.

Why had he been condemned to this punishment? Who knows? For robbery perhaps? Or perhaps because of false information lodged against him.

But many a soldier smiled and thought: "Why have they called so many of us together and lined us up here like this? Why, he'll fall down when he's gone only half-way!"

There, now, they have pushed him in between the rows. He walked on. He walked straight. Without stumbling, without even flinching. He took the blows and stood up under them.

The soldiers became enraged. "He's still going—still going!"

And the birch rods swished through the air, coiling about his body just like snakes. Blood spurted from the emaciated body.

A bestial grunt came from one of the soldiers—he had struck too high and knocked off the condemned man's skullcap. A few steps—and the Jew was aware of his loss. He stopped, thought a little, and turned back—he would not walk on with his head bared. He came back to the spot where the cap was lying, picked it up, turned around again and walked on once more—all crim-

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soned with blood but calm and wearing his skullcap. He walked on, until he fell.

But no sooner had he fallen than the wandering soul flew up to him, seized the skullcap which had cost so many blows, and soared up with it to the gates of Heaven.

And the third offering as well was accepted.

And the Saints of Righteousness interceded for the poor soul: the gates of Paradise opened before it.

And a Voice was heard, coming from the Celestial Palace:

These are truly beautiful offerings—magnificently beautiful. . . . Though of no intrinsic worth, they are wondrous gifts."

Buntcheh the Silent

IN THIS WORLD, the death of Buntcheh the Silent passed utterly unnoticed. Just try to ask whether anybody knew precisely *who* Buntcheh was, *how* he lived, *why* he died: because his heart had burst, because his strength was exhausted, or because perhaps his back had broken under his inordinate burden?

If a horse pulling a street-car had dropped dead, it would have attracted more attention. The horse's death would have been written up in the newspapers; people would have come running by the hundreds to have a look at the unfortunate animal and at the spot where the accident had happened. Of course, horses *do* have the advantage of not being as numerous as human beings.

Quietly did Buntcheh live out his time; he passed quietly through this world—our world.

There was no wine at Buntcheh's circumcision rite, no clinking of the goblets. He did not deliver a militant speech at his confirmation. . . . He lived like an imperceptible grain of sand on the seashore, among countless numbers of others like itself. And when the wind lifted this grain of sand into the air and carried it over to the other shore, no one noticed.

When he was among the living, he left no footprints even on wet ground, and after his death the wind blew down the small board that had been placed as a marker over his grave. The wife of the cemetery-keeper found this small board and used it as firewood to boil a pot of potatoes. Only three days had passed, but already the cemetery-keeper could not for the life of him recall where Buntcheh was buried.

If there had been a monument over his grave, then perhaps a hundred years later some archaeologist might have found it and the name of Buntcheh the Silent would have sounded once more in this world.

BUNTCHEH THE SILENT

He passed by like a shadow. His face left no impression in the mind or heart of a single person. Not even a trace of him was left. He lived alone and died alone.

If it weren't for the tumult in which people lived, someone would probably have heard Buntcheh's back creaking under his heavy burden. If people weren't so frightfully busy, someone might have noticed that the fire in Buntcheh's eyes had been extinguished while he was still among the living and that his cheeks were horribly sunken; someone might have noticed that, even when Buntcheh was not crushed under a load, he plodded along with his head down, as though he were seeking a grave for himself while he was still among the living. If there were as few human beings as there are horses pulling coaches, one or another might have asked: "Whatever has become of Buntcheh?"

When Buntcheh was carried off to the hospital, the corner which he had occupied in a cellar did not remain unrented; it had been coveted by a dozen people just like Buntcheh, and they cast lots for it. From his cot in the hospital, Buntcheh was carried to the morgue—and his cot was awaited by a dozen of the indigent sick. . . . When he was carried out of the morgue, they carried into it twenty corpses—bodies of people who had been killed when a house had caved in and buried them under its ruins. And who knows how long he will rest in his grave, who knows how many people are already waiting for this patch of ground?

He was born quietly, he lived quietly, he died quietly, and he was buried still more quietly.

Things were different in the *other* world, though. *There* the death of Buntcheh created a great impression!

A huge trumpet of the "Messianic times" made the news known to all seven of the celestial spheres: "Buntcheh is dead!"

The highest of angelic hierarchy, with wings of tremendous expanse, flew from place to place and informed one and all: "Buntcheh has been summoned to a session of the Heavenly Tribunal!" And in paradise was rejoicing and commotion: "It is Buntcheh the Silent! Just think of it—it is Buntcheh the Silent!"

Boy angels, with eyes like gems, tiny wings of gold filigree, and silver shoes, flew eagerly to meet Buntcheh. The swish of their wings and the gay laughter of their rosebud lips filled the heavens and wafted up to the throne of the Eternal, and the Eternal Himself knew by now that Buntcheh was on his way.

Father Abraham had taken his stand at the heavenly gates and was holding out his hand, ready to greet Buntcheh. A radiant smile lit his aged face.

What is that rumble in the sky? It is the sound of two angels rolling a gold easy chair into paradise—a chair for Buntcheh.

And what is all that glitter? Why, it is a crown of gold adorned with precious stones—for Buntcheh. "Why is all this going on before the Heavenly Tribunal has handed down its decision?" the saints of righteousness ask, astonished and somewhat envious.

"It is only a mere formality," the angels answered.

Even the Heavenly Prosecutor could not find a bad word against Buntcheh. Everyone in Heaven knew that the "trial" would last for no more than five minutes. Just think of it—this was Buntcheh the Silent!

When the boy angels caught him in midair and chanted a song in his honor, while Father Abraham was shaking his hand as if it were the hand of an old friend, and when he heard that an easy chair was waiting for him in paradise and that not a word would be said against him at the Seat of Judgment, Buntcheh *kept silent*, as he had always done in this world. His heart contracted with fear, and he felt certain that it was all a dream or a misunderstanding. He had become accustomed to that sort of thing. Many times during his lifetime he had dreamed that he was picking money up from a floor on which millions were strewn, and yet awoke poorer than when he had gone to sleep. Many times people had smiled at him in a friendly way, or had a kind word for him—and then, realizing that they had mistaken him for someone else, had turned away disgusted.

"Such is my fate," he thought, resigned.

And he was afraid to lift up his eyes, so that he would not frighten his dream away and awaken in a cave full of snakes and scorpions. He was afraid to open his mouth, afraid to move a muscle, in case he would be recognized and cast down to Sheol [Hell].

He trembled and did not hear the praises the angels were heaping on him. He did not observe their joy as they circled about him, nor did he hear the hearty "Peace be unto you!" of Father Abraham, who was leading him up to the Seat of Judgment. He stood there without bowing or offering a word of greeting.

The man was completely beside himself with fright.

And his fear grew even more intense when he glanced at the floor of the Heavenly Tribunal: it was of real alabaster, paved with diamonds! "And here I am, actually standing on it!" With that he lost his head entirely. "Who knows what rabbi, what rich man or scholar they have mistaken me for. The one they expect will come—and that will be the end of me!"

So great was his fear that he failed to hear the announcement of the presiding angel: "The case of Buntcheh the Silent!" The presiding angel then handed the brief to the Angel for the Defense and said: Read it but waste no time!"

Everyone's attention was concentrated on Buntcheh. His ears were ringing, and all he heard was the sweet voice of the Angel for the Defense, pouring forth like the music of a violin:

"His name fitted him like a suit made for a graceful figure by the hand of a master-tailor—"

"What is he saying?" Buntcheh asked himself, and suddenly heard an impatient voice:

"Could you possibly manage without any further analogies?"

And the Angel for the Defense went on:

"Not once did he speak out against anyone—neither against God nor men. Not once did there flare up in his eyes the flame of hatred—never did his gaze turn up to heaven with a complaint."

Buntcheh again failed to understand a word, while the harsh voice interrupted the speech anew:

"No oratory!"

"Job could not endure and spoke up, and yet *this one* was far more unfortunate—"

"Give us facts—just bare facts!" the Chairman called out still more impatiently.

"On the eighth day after his birth, the rite of circumcision was performed upon him—"

"If you could only manage without *realism!*"

"The ignorant *mohel* [one who performs circumcisions] failed to stop the flow of blood—"

"Get on with your speech!"

"But he still kept silent," the Defender continued. "He kept silent also when, at thirteen, he lost his mother and acquired a stepmother—the wickedest of stepmothers, a positive snake.

"Are they actually talking about me?" Buntcheh wondered.

"I must ask you to avoid insinuations concerning third parties," the Chairman fumed.

"She begrudged him every morsel, gave him stale, moldy bread and meat so stringy it was like unspun flax, while *she* drank coffee with cream—"

"Stick to the subject!" shouted the Chairman.

"But when it came to blows, she was not sparing, and his body was covered with bruises that show through the holes in the old, rotted rags he had to wear. On the bitterest days of winter, she made him chop wood in the yard, even though he was barefooted. His hands were still small and weak, the logs were thick, and the ax dull—often he injured his arm or got his feet frostbitten, but still he *kept silent*, not even telling his father—"

"His father who was a drunkard!" the Prosecutor interrupted with a laugh. Buntcheh's whole body turned to ice.

"He was always lonely," the Defender went on. "He did not know what a friend was; he knew nothing of Talmud or the Torah; he did not have a single garment that was free of holes, or a minute to himself—"

"Facts!" the Chairman cried out once more.

"And he never complained," the Defender went on.

"Buntcheh kept silent even when his father, crazed with drink, had seized him by the hair and threw him out of the house; into the dead of winter. He rose in silence from the snow-covered ground and walked away in silence. When he was on the road, he did not break his silence, and during the most agonizing hunger he begged only with his eyes.

"One foggy, raw night in early spring, he found himself in a big city, where, one would assume, he was like a drop in the ocean, yet he spent his very first night there in a police station. He kept silent; he did not even ask why he had been arrested. When he was released, he began looking for work of the hardest sort—and still, he kept silent.

"Bathed in a cold sweat, bowed under the heaviest burden, his empty stomach contracting with pain, he kept silent.

"He kept silent when he was spattered with mud by strangers, when some man he did not know spat on him, when, with a burden on his back, he was driven off the sidewalk into the cobble road among the horses, carriages, and street-cars and was almost killed.

"He never even attempted to guess how many hundreds of pounds he had to carry for a single copper, how many times he fell under his burden, how many times he all but starved to death while waiting for his pay. He made no comparisons between *his* fate and that of others; he still kept silent.

"And when it came to asking for the money he had earned through his own labors he did not do so in a loud voice. Like a beggar, he would take his stand by the door, his eyes pleading like those of a starving dog. If he were told to return and come back later, he would quietly disappear, like a shadow, only to return and plead for payment even more quietly later on.

"He also kept silent when people kept back as much as they liked out of the money he had earned or when they palmed off a counterfeit coin on him."

"So it is me they are talking about!" Buntcheh realized.

After a sip of water, the Defender resumed:

"One day a change took place in his life. A rubber-tired carriage was careering through the street; the horses had run wild. The driver had long since been thrown on the cobblestones and split his skull. The bridles of the horses splattered flecks of foam; sparks flew from under their hoofs and their eyes blazed like torches. The man in the carriage did not know whether he was dead or alive. And Buntcheh brought those horses up short.

"The man whose life he saved proved to be generous and he did not forget Buntcheh's good deed.

"He handed over to Buntcheh the whip of the coachman who had been killed, and Buntcheh became his new coachman. More than that, he found a wife for Buntcheh, and what is more, bestowed a child upon him."

Yet Buntcheh still kept silent.

"It's *me* they're talking about, *me*," Buntcheh said to himself, but he still did not dare to look up at the judges. And he went on listening to the speech of the Defender:

"He also kept silent when his benefactor went bankrupt and paid him no wages.

"He kept silent when his wife left him, abandoning a baby that was still at the breast.

"He kept silent likewise fifteen years later, when the child had

grown up and become sufficiently strong to drive him, this Buntchch, out of the house."

"It's me they're talking about—me!" Buntchch rejoiced.

"He kept silent," the Defender went on in a melancholy voice, "even when his benefactor paid off everybody but did not give him a red cent, and when this same benefactor, riding in a new carriage drawn by blooded horses, ran over him, crushing him. . . . He kept silent. He would not tell the police the name of the man who had crippled him.

"He even kept silent in the hospital, where people are *permitted to scream*. . . .

"He kept silent when the doctor refused to come near him because he did not have a fifteen-kopeck piece for him; he kept silent when the orderly refused to change his linen because he did not have a five-kopeck coin for *him*.

"He kept silent during his agony; he did his dying in silence.

"Not a word of protest against God; not a word against men.

"I have finished."

Buntchch was trembling as if with fever. He knew that it was now the Prosecutor's turn to speak. Who knew what he might say! Buntchch himself did not remember all the events of his life; always forgot immediately all the things that happened to him. The Defender, however, had remembered everything—and who knew what the Prosecutor might remember!

"Gentlemen," the Prosecutor began in a dry, caustic voice—and broke off short.

"Gentlemen," he repeated, but in a softer voice—and stopped again.

Finally he spoke in a gentle voice that came from the heart:

"Gentlemen! He kept silent—and I, too, shall keep silent!" And suddenly, amid the ensuing stillness, a new voice resounded, gentle and tremulous:

"Buntchch, my son, Buntchch," it reverberated like a harp. "My dear child!"

Sobs welled up in Buntchch's heart. He tried to open his eyes, but the tears blinded him.

Never yet had he experienced such a tender and melancholy feeling. . . . "My son." "My Buntchch. . . ." He had not heard these words since his mother's death.

"My son," the Supreme Judge went on, "you endured and kept

silent all the time. There isn't an unblemished spot on your entire body—you are all wounds, all blood; there is not an inch within your soul where the blood is not oozing—yet you kept silent.

"That was something they did not understand. And you, yourself, perhaps, did not know that you could cry out and that your cry could make the halls of Jericho shake and tumble. You, yourself, did not know of the power sleeping within you.

"In *that* world, they did not reward you for your silence. For they on earth are false and unrighteous. But here, in the Kingdom of Justice, your due shall be rendered unto you.

"The judges will not judge you; they shall not proclaim any specific reward for you. Take whatever you wish. Everything here is yours!"

For the first time, Buntchch lifted his eyes. He was struck by the dazzling splendor that flooded everything. Here, everything flamed and sparkled; torrents of light spurted from all directions—from the walls, from the angels, from the judges.

And he lowered his tired eyes and averted them.

"In all . . . seriousness?" he asked, at a loss.

"Naturally!" the Supreme Judge said. "I repeat: everything is yours—everything belongs to you. Choose all you desire, inasmuch as everything that shines and sparkles here is but the reflection of your hidden virtues, the reflection of your soul. You will be taking what is only yours!"

"Really?" asked Buntchch, by now in a firmer tone.

"Naturally! Naturally!" he was answered from all sides.

"Well, in that case," Buntchch announced with a smile, "I would like to have a hot roll with butter for breakfast every day!"

The judges and angels were stunned. The Heavenly Informer burst into laughter.