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Jewish Children

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JEWISH CHILDREN

translated from the yiddish of

"SHALOM ALEICHEM"

By HANNAH BERMAN

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A Page from the "Song of Songs"

Busie is a name; it is the short for Esther-Liba: Libusa: Busie. She is a year older than I, perhaps two years. And both of us together are no more than twenty years old. Now, if you please, sit down and think it out for yourself. How old am I, and how old is she? But, it is no matter. I will rather tell you her history in a few words.

My older brother, Benny, lived in a village. He had a mill. He could shoot with a gun, ride on a horse, and swim like a devil. One summer he was bathing in the river, and was drowned. Of him they said the proverb had been invented: "All good swimmers are drowned." He left after him the mill, two horses, a young widow, and one child. The mill was neglected; the horses were sold; the young widow married again, and went away, somewhere, far; and the child was brought to us.

The child was Busie.

.....

That my father loves Busie as if she were his own child; and that my mother frets over her as if she were an only daughter, is readily understood. They look upon her as their comfort in their great sorrow. And I? Why is it that when I come from "*cheder*," and do not find Busie I cannot eat? And when Busie comes in, there shines a light in every corner. When Busie talks to me, I drop my eyes. And when she laughs at me I weep. And when she....

.....

I waited long for the dear good Feast of Passover. I would be free then. I would play with Busie in nuts, run about in the open, go down the hill to the river, and show her the ducks in the water. When I tell her, she does not believe me. She laughs. She never believes me. That is, she says nothing, but she laughs. And I hate to be laughed at. She does not believe that I can climb to the highest tree, if I like. She does not believe that I can shoot, if I have anything to shoot with. When the Passover comes—the dear good Passover—and we can go out into the free, open air, away from my father and mother, I shall show her such tricks that she will go wild.

.....

The dear good Passover has come.

They dress us both in kingly clothes. Everything we wear shines and sparkles and glitters. I look at Busie, and I think of the "Song of Songs" that I learnt for the Passover, verse by verse:

"Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes within thy locks; thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from mount Gilead.

"Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn, which come up from the washing; whereof every one bear twins, and none is barren among them.

"Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely; thy temples are like a piece of pomegranate within thy locks."

Tell me, please, why is it that when one looks at Busie one is reminded of the "Song of Songs"? And when one reads the "Song of Songs," Busie rises to one's mind?

.....

A beautiful Passover eve, bright and warm.

"Shall we go?" asks Busie. And I am all afire. My mother does not spare the nuts. She fills our pockets. But she makes us promise that we will not crack a single one before the "*Seder*." We may play with them as much as we like. We run off. The nuts rattle as we go. It is beautiful and fine out of doors. The sun is already high in the heavens, and is looking down on the other side of the town. Everything is broad and comfortable and soft and free, around and about. In places, on the hill the other side of the synagogue, one sees a little blade of grass, fresh and green and living. Screaming and fluttering their wings, there fly past us, over our heads, a swarm of young swallows. And again I am reminded of the "Song of Songs" I learnt at school:

"The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land."

I feel curiously light. I imagine I have wings, and can rise up and fly away.

.....

A curious noise comes from the town, a roaring, a rushing, a tumult. In a moment the face of the world is changed for me. Our farm is a courtyard, our house is a palace. I am a prince, Busie a princess. The logs of wood that lie at our door are the cedars and firs of the "Song of Songs." The cat that is warming herself in the sun near the door is a roe, or a young hart; and the hill on the other side of the synagogue is the mountain of Lebanon. The women and the girls who are washing and scrubbing and making everything clean for the Passover are the daughters of Jerusalem.

Everything, everything is from the "Song of Songs."

I walk about with my hands in my pockets. The nuts shake and rattle. Busie walks beside me, step by step. I cannot go slowly. I am carried along. I want to fly, to soar through the air like an eagle. I let myself go. Busie follows me. I jump from one log of wood to the other. Busie jumps after me. I am up; she is up. I am down; she is down. Who will tire first? "How long is this to last?" asks Busie. And I answer her in the words of the "Song of Songs": "'Until the day break, and the shadows flee away.' Ba! Ba! Ba! You are tired, and I am not."

.....

I am glad that Busie does not know what I know. And I am sorry for her. My heart aches for her. I imagine she is sorrowful. That is her nature. She is glad and joyous, and suddenly she sits down in a corner and weeps silently. My mother comforts her, and my father showers kisses on her. But, it is useless. Busie weeps until she is exhausted. For whom? For her father who died so young? Or for her mother who married again and went off without a good-bye? Ah, her mother! When one speaks of her mother to her, she turns all colours. She does not believe in her mother. She does not say an unkind word of her, but she does not believe in her. Of that I am sure. I cannot bear to see Busie weeping. I sit down beside her, and try to distract her thoughts from herself.

.....

I keep my hands in my pockets, rattle my nuts, and say to her:

"Guess what I can do if I like."

"What can you do?"

"If I like, all your nuts will belong to me."

"Will you win them off me?"

"We shall not even begin to play."

"Then you will take them from me?"

"No, they will come to me of themselves."

She lifts her beautiful blue eyes to me—her beautiful, blue, "Song of Songs" eyes. I say to her:

"You think I am jesting. Little fool, I know certain magic words."

She opens her eyes still wider. I feel big. I explain myself to her, like a great man, a hero:

"We boys know everything. There is a boy at school. Sheika the blind one, we call him. He is blind of one eye. He knows everything in the world, even '*Kaballa*.' Do you know what '*Kaballa*' is?"

"No. How am I to know?"

I am in the seventh heaven because I can give her a lecture on "*Kaballa*."

"'*Kaballa*,' little fool, is a thing that is useful. By means of '*Kaballa*' I can make myself invisible to you, whilst I can see you. By means of '*Kaballa*' I can draw wine from a stone, and gold from a wall. By means of '*Kaballa*' I can manage that we two shall rise up into the clouds, and even higher than the clouds."

.....

To rise up in the air with Busie, by means of "*Kaballa*," into the clouds, and higher than the clouds, and fly with her far, far over the ocean—that was one of my best dreams. There, on the other side of the ocean, live the dwarfs who are descended from the giants of King David's time. The dwarfs who are, in reality, good-natured folks. They live on sweets and the milk of almonds, and play all day on little flutes, and dance all together in a ring, romping about. They are afraid of nothing, and are fond of strangers. When a man comes to them from our world, they give him plenty to eat and drink,

dress him in the finest garments, and load him with gold and silver ornaments. Before he leaves, they fill his pockets with diamonds and rubies which are to be found in their streets like mud in ours.

"Like mud in the streets? Well!" said Busie to me when I had told her all about the dwarfs.

"Do you not believe it?"

"Do you believe it?"

"Why not?"

"Where did you hear it?"

"Where? At school."

"Ah! At school."

The sun sank lower and lower, tinting the sky with red gold. The gold was reflected in Busie's eyes. They were bathed in gold.

.....

I want very much to surprise Busie with Sheika's tricks which I can imitate by means of "*Kaballa*." But they do not surprise her. On the contrary, I think they amuse her. Why else does she show me her pearl-white teeth? I am a little annoyed, and I say to her:

"Maybe you do not believe me?"

Busie laughs.

"Maybe you think I am boasting? Or that I am inventing lies out of my own head?"

Busie laughs louder. Oh, in that case, I must show her. I know how. I say to her:

"The thing is that you do not know what '*Kaballa*' means. If you knew what '*Kaballa*' was you would not laugh. By means of '*Kaballa*,' if I like, I can bring your mother here. Yes, yes! And if you beg hard of me, I will bring her this very night, riding on a stick."

All at once she stops laughing. A cloud settles on her beautiful face. And I imagine that the sun has disappeared. No more sun, no more day! I am afraid I went a little too far. I had no right to pain her—to speak of her mother. I am sorry for the whole thing. I must

wipe it out. I must ask her forgiveness. I creep close to her. She turns away from me. I try to take her hand. I wish to say to her in the words of the "Song of Songs": "Return, return, O Shulamite! Busie!" Suddenly a voice called from the house:

"Shemak! Shemak!"

I am Shemak. My mother is calling me to go to the synagogue with father.

.....

To go to the synagogue with one's father on the Passover eve—is there in the world a greater pleasure than that? What is it worth to be dressed in new clothes from head to foot, and to show off before one's friends? Then the prayers themselves—the first Festival evening prayer and blessing. Ah, how many luxuries has the good God prepared for his Jewish children.

"Shemak! Shemak!"

My mother has no time.

"I am coming. I am coming in a minute. I only want to say a word to Busie—no more than a word."

I confess to Busie that I told her lies. One cannot make people fly by means of "*Kaballa*." One may fly one's self. And I will show her, after the Festival, how I can fly. I will rise from this same spot on the logs, before her eyes, and in a moment reach the other side of the clouds. From there, I will turn a little to the right. You see, there all things end, and one comes upon the shore of the frozen ocean.

.....

Busie listens attentively. The sun is sending down its last rays, and kissing the earth.

"What is the frozen sea?" asks Busie.

"You don't know what the frozen sea is? It is a sea whose waters are thick as liver and salt as brine. No ships can ride on it. When people fall into it, they can never get out again."

Busie looks at me with big eyes.

"Why should you go there?"

"Am I going, little fool? I fly over it like an eagle. In a few minutes I shall be over the dry land and at the twelve mountains that spit fire. At the twelfth hill, at the very top, I shall come down and walk seven miles, until I come to a thick forest. I shall go in and out of the trees, until I come to a little stream. I shall swim across the water, and count seven times seven. A little old man with a long beard appears before me, and says to me: 'What is your request?' I answer: 'Bring me the queen's daughter.'"

"What queen's daughter?" asks Busie. And I imagine she is frightened.

"The queen's daughter is the princess who was snatched away from under the wedding canopy and bewitched, and put into a palace of crystal seven years ago."

"What has that to do with you?"

"What do you mean by asking what it has to do with me? I must go and set her free."

"You must set her free?"

"Who else?"

"You need not fly so far. Take my advice, you need not."

.....

Busie takes hold of my hand, and I feel her little white hand is cold. I look into her eyes, and I see in them the reflection of the red gold sun that is bidding farewell to the day—the first, bright, warm Passover day. The day dies by degrees. The sun goes out like a candle. The noises of the day are hushed. There is hardly a living soul in the street. In the little windows shine the lights of the festival candles that have just been lit. A curious, a holy stillness wraps us round, Busie and myself. We feel that our lives are fast merging in the solemn stillness of the festive evening.

"Shemak! Shemak!"

.....

My mother calls me for the third time to go with my father to the synagogue. Do I not know myself that I must go to prayers? I will sit here another minute—one minute, no more. Busie hears my

mother calling me. She tears her hand from mine, gets up, and drives me off.

"Shemak, you are called — you. Go, go! It is time. Go, go!"

I get up to go. The day is dead. The sun is extinguished. Its gold beams have turned to blood. A little wind blows — a soft, cold wind. Busie tells me to go. I throw a last glance at her. She is not the same Busie. In my eyes she is different, on this bewitching evening. The enchanted princess runs in my head. But Busie does not leave me time to think. She drives me off. I go. I turn round to look at the enchanted princess who is completely merged into the beautiful Passover evening. I stand like one bewitched. She points to me to go. And I imagine I hear her saying to me, in the words of the "Song of Songs":

"Make haste, my beloved, and be thou like to a roe or to a young hart upon the mountains of spices."

Passover in a Village

an idyll

Let winds blow. Let storms rage. Let the world turn upside down. The old oak, which has been standing since the creation of the world, and whose roots reach to God-knows-where—what does he care for winds? What are storms to him?

The old tree is not a symbol—it is a living being, a man whose name is Nachman Veribivker of Veribivka. He is a tall Jew, broad-shouldered, a giant. The townspeople are envious of his strength, and make fun of him. "Peace be unto you. How is a Jew in health?" Nachman knows he is being made fun of. He bends his shoulders so as to look more Jewish. But, it is useless. He is too big.

Nachman has lived in the village a long time. "Our 'Lachman,'" the peasants call him. They look upon him as a good man, with brains. They like to have a chat with him. They follow his advice. "What are we to do about bread?" "Lachman" has an almanack, and he knows whether bread will be cheap or dear this year. He goes to the town, and so knows what is doing in the world.

It would be hard to imagine Veribivka without Nachman. Not only was his father, Feitel, born in Veribivka, but his grandfather, Arya. He was a clever Jew, and a wit. He used to say that the village was called Veribivka because Arya Veribivker lived in it, because, before Veribivka was Veribivka, he, Arya Veribivker was already Arya Veribivker. That's what his grandfather used to say. The Jews of those times!

And do you think Arya Veribivker said this for no reason? Arya was not an ordinary man who made jokes without reason. He meant that the catastrophes of his day were Jewish tragedies. At that time they already talked of driving the Jews out of villages. And not only talked but drove them out. All the Jews were driven out, excepting Arya Veribivker. It may be that even the governor of the district could do nothing, because Arya Veribivker proved that according to the law, he could not be driven out. The Jews of those times!

.....

Certainly, if one has inherited such a privilege, and is independent, one can laugh at the whole world. What did our Nachman Veribivker care about uprisings, the limitations of the Pale, of Circulars? What did Nachman care about the wicked Gentile Kuratchka and the papers that he brought from the court? Kuratchka was a short peasant with short fingers. He wore a smock and high boots, and a silver chain and a watch like a gentleman. He was a clerk of the court. And he read all the papers which abused and vilified the Jews.

Personally, Kuratchka was not a bad sort. He was a neighbour of Nachman and pretended to be a friend. When Kuratchka had the toothache, Nachman gave him a lotion. When Kuratchka's wife was brought to bed of a child, Nachman's wife nursed her. But for some time, the devil knows why, Kuratchka had been reading the anti-Semitic papers, and he was an altered man. "Esau began to speak in him." He was always bringing home news of new governors, new circulars from the minister, and new edicts against Jews. Each time, Nachman's heart was torn. But, he did not let the Gentile know of it. He listened to him with a smile, and held out the palm of his hand, as if to say, "When hair grows here."

Let governors change. Let ministers write circulars. What concern is it of Nachman Veribivker of Veribivka?

Nachman lived comfortably. That is, not as comfortably as his grandfather Arya had lived. Those were different times. One might almost say that the whole of Veribivka belonged to Arya. He had the inn, the store, a mill, a granary. He made money with spoons and plates, as they say. But, that was long ago. Today, all these things are gone. No more inn; no more store; no more granary. The question is why, in that case, does Nachman live in the village? Where then should he live? In the earth? Just let him sell his house, and he will be Nachman Veribivker no more. He will be a dependent, a stranger. As it is, he has at least a corner of his own, a house to live in, and a garden. His wife and daughters cultivate the garden. And if the Lord helps them, they have greens for the summer, and potatoes for the whole winter, until long after the Passover. But, one cannot live on potatoes alone. It is said that one wants bread with

potatoes. And when there's no bread, a Jew takes his stick, and goes through the village in search of business. He never comes home empty-handed. What the Lord destines, he buys—some old iron, a bundle of rags, an old sack, or else a hide. The hide is stretched and dried, and is taken to the town, to Abraham-Elijah the tanner. And on all these one either earns or loses money.

Abraham-Elijah the tanner, a man with a bluish nose and fingers as black as ink, laughs at Nachman, because he is so coarsened through living with Gentiles that he even speaks like them.

.....

Yes, coarsened. Nachman feels it himself. He grows coarser each year. Oh, if his grandfather Reb Arya—peace be unto him!—could see his grandson. He had been a practical man, but had also been a scholar. He knew whole passages of the Psalms and the prayers off by heart. The Jews of those times! And what does he, Nachman, know? He can only just say his prayers. It's well he knows that much. His children will know even less. When he looks at his children, how they grow to the ceiling, broad and tall like himself, and can neither read nor write, his heart grows heavy. More than all, his heart aches for his youngest child, who is called Feitel, after his father. He was a clever child, this Feitel. He was smaller in build, more refined, more Jewish than the others. And he had brains. He was shown the Hebrew alphabet once, in a prayer-book, and he never again confused one letter with the other. Such a fine child to grow up in a village amongst calves and pigs! He plays with Kurchka's son, Fedoka. He rides on the one stick with him. They both chase the one cat. They both dig the same hole. They do together everything children can do. Nachman is sorry to see his child playing with the Gentile child. It withers him, as if he were a tree that had been stricken by lightning.

.....

Fedoka is a smart little boy. He has a pleasant face and a dimpled chin, and flaxen hair. He loves Feitel, and Feitel does not dislike him. All the winter each child slept on his father's stove. They went to the window and longed for one another. They seldom met. But now the long angry winter is over. The black earth throws off her cold white mantle. The sun shines; and the wind blows. A little

blade of grass peeps out. At the foot of the hill the little river murmurs. The calf inhales the soft air through distended nostrils. The cock closes one eye, and is lost in meditation. Everything around and about has come to life again. Everything rejoices. It is the Pass-over eve. Neither Feitel nor Fedoka can be kept indoors. They rush out into God's world which has opened up for them both. They take each other's hands, and fly down the hill that smiles at them—"Come here, children!" They leap towards the sun that greets them and calls them: "Come, children!" When they are tired of running, they sit down on God's earth that knows no Jew and no Gentile, but whispers invitingly: "Children, come to me, to me."

.

They have much to tell each other, not having met throughout the whole winter. Feitel boasts that he knows the whole Hebrew alphabet. Fedoka boasts that he has a whip. Feitel boasts that it is the eve of Passover. They have "*matzos*" for the whole festival and wine. "Do you remember, Fedoka, I gave you a '*matzo*' last year?" "*Matzo*," repeats Fedoka. A smile overspreads his pleasant face. It seems he remembers the taste of the "*matzo*." "Would you like to have some '*matzo*' now, fresh '*matzo*'?" Is it necessary to ask such a question? "Then come with me," says Feitel, pointing up the hill which smiled to them invitingly. They climbed the hill. They gazed at the warm sun through their fingers. They threw themselves on the damp earth which smelled so fresh. Feitel drew out from under his blouse a whole fresh, white "*matzo*," covered with holes on both sides. Fedoka licked his fingers in advance. Feitel broke the "*matzo*" in halves, and gave one half to his friend. "What do you say to the '*matzo*,' Fedoka?" What could Fedoka say when his mouth was stuffed with "*matzo*" that crackled between his teeth, and melted under his tongue like snow? One minute, and there was no more "*matzo*." "All gone?" Fedoka threw his grey eyes at Feitel's blouse as a cat looks at butter. "Want more?" asked Feitel, looking at Fedoka through his sharp black eyes. What a question! "Then wait a while," said Feitel. "Next year you'll get more." They both laughed at the joke. And without a word, as if they had already arranged it, they threw themselves on the ground, and rolled down the hill like balls, quickly, quickly downwards.

.....

At the bottom of the hill they stood up, and looked at the murmuring river that ran away to the left. They turned to the right, going further and further over the broad fields that were not yet green in all places, but showed signs of being green soon—that did not yet smell of grass, but would smell of grass soon. They walked and walked in silence bewitched by the loveliness of the earth, under the bright, smiling sun. They did not walk, but swam. They did not swim, but flew. They flew like birds that sweep in the soft air of the lovely world which the Lord has created for all living things. Hush! They are at the windmill which belongs to the village elder. Once it belonged to Nachman Veribivker. Now it belongs to the village elder whose name is Opanas—a cunning Gentile with one ear-ring, who owns a "*samovar*." Opanas is a rich Epicurean. Along with the mill he has a store—the same store which once belonged to Nachman Veribivker. He took both the mill and the store from the Jew by cunning.

The mill went round in its season, but this day it was still. There was no wind. A curious Passover eve without winds. That the mill was not working was so much the better for Feitel and Fedoka. They could see the mill itself. And there was much to see in the mill. But to them the mill was not so interesting as the sails, and the wheel which turns them whichever way the wind blows. They sat down near the mill, and talked. It was one of those conversations which have no beginning and no end. Feitel told stories of the town to which his father had once taken him. He was at the fair. He saw shops. Not a single shop as in Veribivka, but a lot of shops. And in the evening his father took him to the synagogue. His father had "*Yahrzeit*" after his father. "That means after my grandfather," explained Feitel. "Do you understand, or do you not?"

Fedoka might have understood, but he was not listening. He interrupted with a story that had nothing to do with what Feitel was talking about. He told Feitel that last year he saw a bird's nest in a high tree. He tried to reach it, but could not. He tried to knock it down with a stick, but could not. He threw stones at the nest, until he brought down two tiny, bleeding fledglings.

"You killed them?" asked Feitel, fearfully, and made a wry face.

"Little ones," replied Fedoka.

"But, they were dead?"

"Without feathers, yellow beaks, little fat bellies."

"But killed, but killed!"

.....

It was rather late when Feitel and Fedoka saw by the sun in the heavens that it was time to go home. Feitel had forgotten that it was the Passover eve. He remembered then that his mother had to wash him, and dress him in his new trousers. He jumped up and flew home, Fedoka after him. They both flew home, gladly and joyfully. And in order that one should not be home before the other, they held hands, flying like arrows from bows. When they got to the village, this was the scene which confronted them:—

Nachman Veribivker's house was surrounded by peasants, men and women, boys and girls. The clerk, Kuratchka, and Opanas the village elder and his wife, and the magistrate and the policeman—all were there, talking and shouting together. Nachman and his wife were in the middle of the crowd, arguing and waving their hands. Nachman was bent low and was wiping the perspiration from his face with both hands. By his side stood his older children, gloomy and downcast. Suddenly, the whole picture changed. Some one pointed to the two children. The whole crowd, including the village elder and the magistrate, the policeman and the clerk, stood still, like petrified. Only Nachman looked at the people, straightened out his back, and laughed. His wife threw out her hands and began to weep.

The village elder and the clerk and the magistrate and their wives pounced on the children.

"Where were you, you so-and-so?"

"Where were we? We were down by the mill."

.....

The two friends, Feitel as well as Fedoka, got punished without knowing why.