





A Deal's a Deal

Solomon Simon

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Born Shloyme Shimonovitsh in the town of Kalinkovitsh near Minsk in Byelorussia (Belarus), Simon was the fourth of eight children born to a father who was a cobbler and a mother who helped support the impoverished family by baking. A case of rickets left him unable to walk until he was nearly six, and this disability contributed to his developing a rich inner life. He was educated in traditional fashion at *kheyder* and then selected to attend a yeshiva in Kremenchug, at some distance from his home. His education continued at other Polish yeshivas until it was interrupted by conscription into the tsar's army.

He escaped by fleeing to America, arriving in New York in 1913 without knowing any English, and set about studying in the evenings, while working at various trades including the garment industry, laundering, housepainting, and driving a wagon. He Anglicized his name to "Simon." He served in the US Army beginning in 1918 and then taught Hebrew in New York and New Jersey. He studied dentistry at New York University, graduating in 1924, but he practiced only as much as he needed to in order to support his wife and three children, preferring to devote his time to writing and Yiddish educational and cultural activities.

Deeply involved with the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute, he helped to found and lead one of its schools and its summer camp, Boiberik. Simon also devoted himself to various communal extracurricular activities, including a leading role in the Jewish Ethical Society in New York and a society for Bible study in Brooklyn. He began to write for children in Hebrew in 1912 and then published his first Yiddish story in 1915. He went on to publish in several periodicals for adults and children, assuming the assistant editorship of the *Kinder-zhurnal* from 1948 to

1951. His journalism, fiction, and criticism appeared in prestigious journals based in New York, Warsaw, Buenos Aires, Paris, and Montreal.

Simon was committed to secularist Yiddish culture and especially to the preservation of folktales and legends. Two volumes of his Chelm stories were translated into English, along with his storybook *Shmerl Nar* (translated as *The Wandering Beggar*). Later in life, he devoted his efforts to writing for adults, and he spent his final years working on an English-language series about the Hebrew Bible. He died in Miami Beach.

He often wrote in a comic vein, as with “A Deal’s a Deal,” which shares the stubbornly perverse logic of the Chelm tales.



It was a cold, rainy autumn night in Chelm. The wind had torn open door and shutters. In the middle of the night, Avrohom heard the door banging. So he woke up his wife, Mirtl, and said to her, “Wifey dear, did you lock the door?”

Mirtl replied, “Hubby dear, I thought that *you* had locked it.”

“I didn’t,” said Avrohom. “Go and lock it.”

“*You* go and lock it,” said Mirtl.

Said Avrohom, “No, I’m not going downstairs in this cold, and surely you know that when I say ‘no,’ it’s ‘no.’”

Said Mirtl, “The whole world knows that when a man is a rabbi, his wife is called a *rebbetzin*; when a man is Mr. Shoemaker, then his wife is Mrs. Shoemaker. You’re Mr. Stubborn, my husband, so that makes me Mrs. Stubborn. I too am staying in bed and not moving a muscle.”

Said Avrohom, “What you say makes sense. You know what? Let’s make a deal with each other that whichever one of us is the first to speak will lock the door.”

Said Mirtl, “Deal.”

So they lay there in silence. The wind blew, and the open door banged and banged until the house shuddered; but both of them kept quiet, and neither moved a muscle.

The rain poured, the wind blew, inside the house it was wet and cold enough to drive away wolves, but Avrohom and Mirtl didn’t budge.

Just before dawn, husband and wife heard footsteps and human voices.

Thieves were talking. One thief said, “Just look at that open door! Let’s go inside and see what we can lift.”

Said the second thief, “Don’t talk so loud! Maybe the owners are home, but they’re sleeping!”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” answered the first one. “You hear how the door’s banging? That would wake the dead. Chances are nobody’s home. Come on.”

Husband and wife heard the thieves come into the house and start to empty out all the rooms. But husband and wife didn’t move a muscle.

The thieves did their work and packed up everything they could get their hands on. Husband and wife knew their home would be left naked and bare, but they didn’t let out a peep.

The thieves gathered everything together and took off. They left the door open, as they’d found it.



Night passed, and morning came. Husband and wife got up and looked around. The house was empty. The thieves didn’t leave even so much as a saucepan to cook up a bit of porridge for breakfast. Husband and wife exchanged glances but remained silent.

Mirtl went out to a neighbor’s to borrow something for breakfast. But as for closing the door? That Mrs. Stubborn didn’t do. She got to the neighbor’s and lingered there for a long while chatting, as women will.

Meanwhile, a barber was passing by the house with the open door. In those days, barbers would go from door to door asking who wanted a haircut and clipping the hair of both children and adults right at home.

The barber saw Avrohom sitting silently on a chair in the middle of the house, lost in thought. So he said, “Perhaps you’d like a trim, Reb Avrohom?”

Avrohom kept quiet and didn’t answer. Well, when you don’t say “no,” that obviously means “yes.” So the barber laid out his towel, his scissors, his bowl, his soap, and his razor and went about the job. He snipped and snipped, and then he asked, “Enough, Reb Avrohom?”

Avrohom was silent. So the barber went on clipping. Avrohom began to look like a shorn sheep. The barber asked, “Enough?”

Avrohom was silent. So the barber thought, “What kind of a hard case is this? Well, so be it; there’s only one thing to do!”

So he took the soap, lathered up Avrohom's head, and shaved it. Having done so, the barber said, "Such a long beard doesn't go with such a bare pate. Trim it a bit?"

Avrohom was silent: Mr. Stubborn through and through. The barber started in on his beard, cutting and cutting, and Avrohom was silent. The barber spared no effort in shaving off Avrohom's beautiful beard. Avrohom kept silent through it all.



The barber gathered his towel, his scissors, his bowl, and his soap and said to Avrohom, "Well, Reb Avrohom, I've trimmed and shaved you, so pay me."

Avrohom seethed and boiled inside. Who had asked the barber to cut and shave his hair? And what's more, he wanted to be paid for his lovely work! Some nice new look he'd gotten! A Jew without a beard and sidelocks—how could he show himself in public?"

Thus reasoned Reb Avrohom, but he kept silent. He surely wouldn't be the first to speak. The barber complained, "I'm a Jew, a poor man. I've worked. Now pay me!"

The barber talked and talked, but Avrohom said nothing. Eventually the barber got angry and said, "Is that how it is? You're stubborn? You don't want to answer? I'll teach you a lesson!"

And the barber didn't hold back: he went out into the street, picked up large handfuls of mud, and began to smear it all over Avrohom's shaved head and face, and then he left the house without even shutting the door.



No sooner did the barber leave than Mirtl, Avrohom's wife, came in. She took one look at Avrohom and clapped her hands together, saying, "Woe is me! Alas and alack! What did they do to you? You look just like a demon!"

Avrohom got up from his chair and said very calmly, "You were the first to speak. So please go and close the door!"

Mirtl went and closed the door. After all, a deal's a deal!