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THAT'S JUST MY LAUNDRY

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Herschele Ostropolyer is the Jewish equivalent of Nasrudeen and stories about him often contain the same basic format and punchline. Herschele however has a more mischievous element to him than Nasrudeen, as is clearly spelt out in this story. The Jewish tradition of hospitality to the stranger is contained in many such folk stories. For example, at Passover, the festival which commemorates the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, any stranger who is hungry is invited to the ritual supper. How could one celebrate freedom without remembering the hungry and the oppressed?

Apparently the original Herschele Ostropolyer, who came from Ukraine and lived from 1757 to 1811, was a jester at the court of a Hassidic rabbi, Rabbi Boruch Mezbizher. The rabbi found it hard to be as joyful as Hassidic philosophy demanded and hired Herschele to raise his spirits. According to the folk tales, the rabbi often forgot to reward Herschele for his pains, forcing him to wander from village to village, begging. This story comes from the Yiddish folk tradition.

Ukraine once had a large Jewish population and the vibrancy of Jewish religious and cultural life that once existed in that part of the world needs to be remembered. In spite of waves of extreme persecu-

tion culminating in the Nazi extermination plan and subsequent immigrations, there are still Jews in Ukraine. Yiddish folktales from many parts of Eastern Europe have been collected and archived. They appear in various publications and some are still told in Jewish communities or studied and recounted in the original by Yiddish speakers and students.

There was once an old woman who owned an inn. She was rumoured to be lacking in generosity, though she would put it differently. "I run a tight ship," she would say with pride and her customers had to agree. Perhaps they would have liked to decamp to a more generous establishment, but hers was the only guesthouse in the neighbourhood. She would serve wild nettle soup, which cost her next to nothing. But even then, on dishing up the green liquid into earthenware bowls, she would have second thoughts and ladle some back into the pot.

One dark, wet afternoon, when it looked unlikely that she would have any customers, at least until the rain stopped, she was just making her way to her bed for an afternoon nap, when there was a loud knocking on the door. She was expecting a very distinguished guest in the evening, but he certainly wouldn't arrive in the rain. Grumbling, she went downstairs and was most put out to find a beggar on her doorstep. He looked a terrible sight. His soaking wet hair emerged from his dirty torn cap in rats' tails; his greying shirt clung to his bony arms, his trousers were done up with string and his shoes gaped to reveal his big toes protruding through his socks.

“What do you want?” she snapped.

“Just a place by the fire to dry out and perhaps a bowl of soup and a piece of bread, if you can spare it.”

Herschele Ostropolyer, an itinerant well known on his home patch, Mezibisz, made it his business to research the standard of local hospitality by consulting other travelling beggars. He already knew that if his hostess possessed any shred of generosity, it was deeply hidden.

The old woman understood very well that this guest would not be paying for his meal. It occurred to her that the stove was lit and it wouldn't cost her anything to allow him to rest in the kitchen. But as for free food...

“What a shame,” she said, “I've just run out of everything and I won't be going to the market till tomorrow, so no food, I'm afraid. You can sit by the fire for a bit, at least until it stops raining.”

She showed Herschele to the kitchen and waved to a bench by the stove. Herschele put down his pack and heard a noise, a gentle clatter, the noise of a lid happily bouncing on its pot as something simmered, something fragrant. Why, he would recognize that smell anywhere. It was boiled chicken.

“Madam,” he said. “Could you have forgotten that you have some chicken cooking, maybe soup?”

The old woman reddened and snapped:

“That's just my laundry. I'm boiling handkerchiefs. Isn't it strange how boiling laundry often smells like chicken?”

With that she stomped out and upstairs to her bedroom.

Herschele lay down on the hard bench and tried to sleep. The fire was warm but his empty belly refused to be comforted. The heavenly smell reminded him of his



mother's soup. Now what did she put inside it? Chicken wings and carrots, garlic and onions...

“I'll just take a quick peep at this 'laundry'.” He took off the lid and there was the chicken fat melted on the top of the fragrant liquid and, yes, chicken wings and drumsticks. He found a large spoon. “Just a taste...what's this, a wing? Delicious. Shame to leave a chicken with only one wing, might as well have the other one. Oy, whoever heard of a one-legged chicken? Better eat this leg too. A limbless chicken? No, better eat the lot. I'll just chase this slippery onion...”

Soon the only thing left of the dish was the liquid and the bones and Herschele was fast asleep on the bench, dreaming sweetly of his mother in the kitchen, dishing up endless food.



“Wake up, wake up, I’ve got a guest.”

He opened his eyes, murmuring “Mamale” and was shocked to see the hard features of the innkeeper.

“Hurry, hurry, you’ve got to go. It’s stopped raining.”

Herschele picked up his pack and made his way to the entrance hall, where a finely dressed gentleman and his footman were taking off their coats. Before they could greet Herschele, the old woman whisked them away into the kitchen and sat them down at the table.

“You must be very hungry after your journey. Here, I’ve been simmering these chickens all afternoon. Would you like to help yourselves?”

She had put a damask cloth on the table, her best porcelain and the large pot. She gave the gentleman a large silver serving spoon and fork. He took the lid off, dipped the fork in and extracted a sopping grey rag, down which a few bones slithered slowly back into the pot. The landlady screamed and pointed at Herschele, who was just trying to exit quietly.

“It’s that stinking beggar!
He’s eaten the chicken.
Stop, thief!”



“Madam,” said Herschele, “You said you had no food in the house and that you were boiling laundry. I thought you wouldn’t mind if I added my vest.”

The gentleman stared open mouthed for a second and then burst out laughing. He rose from the table and said to his footman: “If there is one thing I can’t stand, it’s meanness. Let’s travel on and see if we can find an inn where they also feed the poor. Herschele, why don’t you come with us?”

The gentleman gave Herschele a lift to the next cross-roads and enjoyed listening to one or two stories of his exploits on the way. When they parted company, he gave him some money to help him on his travels.

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MODERN