Excerpt from Fishke the Lame

Mendele Moykher Sforim
(Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh)

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Fishke the Lame
by Mendele Moykher Sforim (Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh)

Translated by Ken Frieden
Illustrated by Mordicai Gerstein

FISHKE THE LAME (Fishke der krumer, 1869) was S.Y. Abramovitsh's third and best Yiddish novel. He previously published The Little Man (Dos kleyne mentshele, 1864-65) and The Magic Ring (Dos vintshtfingerl, 1865), which introduce the character of Mendele the Book Peddler.

In Fishke the Lame, Abramovitsh gives Mendele a more central role, and this fictional persona was so convincing that it eclipsed the enlightened author's flesh-and-blood identity. Eventually, the author became known by his most famous character's name.

Many readers have admired S. Y. Abramovitsh's novel Fishke the Lame, but only a few have read the original version. In 1888 the author expanded his 45-page story into a full-length novel, and subsequent editions have consigned the original to oblivion. There are, however, reasons to prefer the earlier text on which the present translation is based.

Abramovitsh's novels tend to be short on plot and long on description. In contrast, the style of Fishke the Lame (1869) is leaner and more direct. Reb Mendele digresses, as always, but the overall effect is tighter. Moreover, Abramovitsh was brutally honest in his early social criticism, and he sometimes toned down the critical passages in later editions. After he became director of the Odessa Talmud-Torah in 1881, he felt less free to express his views.

One of the pleasures of Fishke the Lame is its narrative voice, or rather voices. The novel begins with Mendele the Book Peddler traveling on the seventeenth of Tammuz, then shifts to Reb Alter's account of a matchmaking mishap, and later moves to Fishke's story of his misfortunes. Alter's comic mistake sets the scene for Abramovitsh's critique of Jewish marriage practices in the Pale of Settlement. Without explaining the social causes, the novel presents the plight of impoverished Jews like Fishke and his cohorts, wandering Jewish beggars.

According to literary historians, Abramovitsh drew his character Fishke from life, basing him on a beggar named Avreml the Lame. At an early age, Abramovitsh traveled south with Avreml, and along the way he saw the poorest of homeless Jews. This experience provided the necessary background for Fishke's saga. The story is held together, however, by the frame narrative about Mendele and Alter.

Translated here are the first three sections, narrated by Mendele and Alter, which represent about a third of the 1869 text. Literal translation is not always best, even in a bilingual printing. One illustrative phrase occurs in the second paragraph, where the Yiddish reads: "Di tsve af di felder, di beymer in di velders zenen geshtanen shtil...." Literally, this means that the grain in the fields and the trees in the forests stood still, but a definite rhythm and rhyme are part of the literary effect. Hence the less literal version: "From the wheat in the fields to the trees on the hill, nature stood still."

The translator wishes to thank Sheva Zucker and Brooks Haxton for their helpful comments on the text. He also benefited from Ted Gorelick's translation of the longer version of Fishke the Lame, which was published by Schocken Books in Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler.

Last year, in the summer of 1868, after I stocked up some fresh goods and packed my wagon with all sorts of books, I lit out on my travels to those distant places where, thank God, Reb Mendele and his wares are still valued. You’ve got to know those Jews. They like it when the pages of a book are all colors and sizes, the letters are a little blurred, and every page is printed in different type: Rashi script, pica, elite, bold, pearl, italic, you name it. Don’t worry about mistakes, because a Jew has a head on his shoulders and can figure things out. One printer from Obmanov, may he rest in peace, discovered the secret of what Jews like, and his books — even the most insignificant — sold like hotcakes. But I’m getting off the point.

It was afternoon on the seventeenth of Tammuz, a fast day in July, when I turned off the main road a few miles short of Glupsk. The sky was clear and blue without a trace of clouds, the sun scorched and burned the land. There was no air to breathe and no breeze. From the wheat in the fields to the trees on the hill, nature stood still. Last year, in the summer of 1868, after I stocked up some fresh seeds, I began to plant in the fields on the hill, nature stood still. But for the longest time God didn’t want to grant even a single page of Psalms, wailed even the most insignificant, secret letters. It was afternoon on the seventeenth of Tammuz, a fast day in July.able to breathe and no breeze. From the wheat in the fields to the trees on the hill, nature stood still. Last year, in the summer of 1868, after I stocked up some fresh seeds, I began to plant in the fields on the hill, nature stood still. But for the longest time God didn’t want to grant even a single page of Psalms, wailed even the most insignificant, secret letters. It was afternoon on the seventeenth of Tammuz, a fast day in July.able to breathe and no breeze. From the wheat in the fields to the trees on the hill, nature stood still. Last year, in the summer of 1868, after I stocked up some fresh seeds, I began to plant in the fields on the hill, nature stood still. But for the longest time God didn’t want to grant even a single page of Psalms, wailed even the most insignificant, secret letters. It was afternoon on the seventeenth of Tammuz, a fast day in July.
bite, and buzz and hiss in your ears. As if they'd come to whisper a secret and then march on. But I'm getting off the point.

In the intense heat I sat stretched out on my wagon, stripped down - if you'll excuse my saying so - to my undershirt and fringed garment. A stitched plush cap was pushed back on my head and woolen stockings from Bratslav were rolled down to my heels. I wear them even in the summer, to atone for my sins, and I sweated heavily. Actually, if the sun hadn't been full in my face I might have enjoyed this, because I like to sweat and can lie for hours on the upper benches of the bathhouse at the hottest time of year. My father, may he rest in peace, was a hot, burning, fiery Jew who got me used to the heat since childhood. He so liked to steam up and sweat that he was famous for it. Sweating is, after all, a Jewish business, and who in this world sweats more than a Jew? But I'm getting off the point. My wretched horse also worked up quite a sweat. I should tell you that he hasn't changed a bit except that now he limps around with a swollen back foot wrapped in rags. One of his eyes oozes pus and there's a nasty cut where the bridle rubs against his neck. What difference does it make if a Jew's horse isn't pretty, so long as it can walk? I took pity on him and tied long strips of paper to his chewed up tail - let me tell you, this is a great trick to drive away flies and mosquitoes. But I'm getting off the point again. Behind me followed a second wagon made of old, torn straw mats. It bounced along on four uneven, squeaky wheels, pulled by an old nag that was tall, thin, with a bruised and scratched back, and big ears. Its knotted mane was tangled in hay and straw that stuck out of the fraying bridle. Leaning his head on his hands, high up on the wagon lay a heavyset Jew with a fat belly, red as a beet, sunburned, dripping sweat from his hairy chest, and it broke my heart to look at him. It was wine 'n candles Alter, my good friend, a book peddler from Tuneyadevke. We had met up along the way a few minutes earlier.

At about one o'clock we came to the woods at the foot of Green
Mountain outside Glupsk. Green Mountain is known almost the world over from an old song about it. Everywhere children sing this song: nurses and nannies sing it to suckling babies. My mother, may her soul rest in Paradise, when she wanted to distract me so that I wouldn't cry, used to sing these words:

High up on Green Mountain,
Tall grass brushing their hips,
Stand two stylish Prussians
Brandishing whips. . . .

I always liked the song, and it amused me more than any other lullaby. From a distance, Green Mountain seemed so beautiful that I imagined it was made of something other than earth. Green Mountain brought to mind the hills of Lebanon and the Holy Land. Not to mention those Prussians, who seemed, begging their pardon, like oven, wild beasts, mythical creatures grazing on the tall grass of Green Mountain. But I'm getting off the point.

We unhitched our horses, which were ready to drop, and let them drag themselves off to graze on Green Mountain. Then we lay down under a tree.

TWO

Reb Alter could scarcely breathe in the heat, and troubles weighed on him. He moaned and groaned, cackled like a hen; and hearing him pierced me to the heart.

"Hot enough for you, Reb Alter?" I said, trying to make conversation.

"Bah!" he answered and moved deeper into the shade.

"I reckon the fast has got you feeling really lousy," I said.
“Bah!” said Reb Alter again.

But I couldn’t leave it at that. I was getting bored and wanted to talk a bit, so I tried again.

“From what you’ve said, Reb Alter, I gather you’re coming back from Yarmelinetz. Do any good business at the town fair?”

“Bah!” said Reb Alter once more and twisted his lips.

“Bah, what?” I asked, getting annoyed. “Why can’t you just answer my question?”

“Don’t ask, don’t ask,” Reb Alter finally said with a sigh. “I got what was coming to me at the fair. It serves me right, and I should give up the business.”

I kept bothering Alter, long and hard, until he told me all about his mishap at the fair.
“When I arrived at the fair,” he began and groaned again, “I tied up my wagon as usual and laid out my wares on the main square. I had great hopes for the Yarmelinetz fair, you should know, because I’m in a bad way. The printer wants me to pay up or he won’t send another book. My eldest daughter is getting on in years and needs to be married off. My wife bore us another child not long back and so, praise God, I’m raising a brood of kids without a penny in my pocket.”

“Excuse me for interrupting, Reb Alter,” I said, “but why, at your age, did you go and marry a young wife who’d bear you so many kids?”

“God help you,” Reb Alter answered. “I needed someone to keep house. Why else does a Jew get married?”

“So why,” I said, “did you divorce your first wife? She was a good housekeeper, wasn’t she?”

“Bah!” said Reb Alter with a grimace.

Among us Jews, “bah” is a very useful word. It seems no other people or language has such a word that answers every question. “Bah” comes in handy at any time and will always serve. Even Reb Yosl, who gives advice to all the people of Glupsk, waits until a person has talked himself blue in the face, puts on a serious look, and says, “Bah!” Though Reb Yosl hasn’t been listening to a single word, it comes out like a pearl of wisdom and everyone is satisfied. Or when some hapless man chances upon Reb Nisl, the town arbitrator, and says, “How can it be that I put myself at your mercy, gave you a fortune, and yet you sold me cheap like a sheep for slaughter? Come on, speak up!” Then our Reb Nisl calmly answers with a simple “Bah!” And he stays in the right. People take this as a valid explanation and the very next day another loser entrusts his fate to Reb Nisl. Or when a Jew puts a ruble in front of Reb Abba, our rabbinical judge, for a legal decision, and asks if it is enough, Reb Abba makes a face and says, “Bah!” The Jew catches his drift and, with a heavy heart, adds a few

פּוּקַּשַּׁנְדָּלָמְו מְזָמְרוּ בְּדֶדָּה, וּיִדְוַּעְו שָוָאָל, אוֹרַיֵּד פְּלַטֵּנְדָּה, אוֹ נַעֲקָבֵּפִּיטִּים מִבֵּלְּסַל סִּמְהָדְהָה. וַיִּמְסַּחְפִּיטָהּ בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה בְּאֶלְּכָּה...
Standing beside my wagon,” Reb Alter began, “I watched the town fair. The crowd was thick as molasses, and Jews were busy making a good profit. Among the other merchants I saw Berl Teletse, once a mere teacher’s assistant, then a servant, and now the owner of a big shop, favored by fortune and wealth. Over there I saw a Jew running and working himself into a sweat, wearing a cap on his head and raking in money. Then some other people ran by, out of breath – agents, matchmakers, ragtag tailors, hucksters, henwives, all of them with flaming red faces and apparently all on the verge of success.

“Deep down I envied everyone who was making out so well, mining gold – while I, like a shlimmael, stood idly beside my broken-down wagon with my arms folded. Some of my wares, charms and four-cornered fringed garments, were hanging over the sides of the cart. Inside were a few packages of books – Passover Haggadas, prayer books for Shavuot – that were out of season and no one wanted to touch. I was also selling a bit of old brassware, some shofars, yarmulkes spun from yarn for children, and some rags. Silently I cursed myself, the wagon, the printer, my broken-down nag – all of us would be better off dead. I saved the best curses for the printer. If not for him, I
wouldn't have known from any wagon, nag, or the rest of my troubles.

“Suddenly, driven by envy and desire, it occurred to me to try my luck at a new trade – making a match between the children of two wealthy merchants, who had brought their goods to the fair. You must know them, one is Reb Elyakim Sharograder, and the other is Reb Getzl Gredinger. I neglected my book trade and spent the next day and night going back and forth between the families like an utter madman, running from one father to the other. I worked at it, nose to the ground, determined to make a match then and there. What more suitable place could there be? God helped out by bringing together the in-laws, who luckily agreed to the dowry and other expenses. Overjoyed, I thought I had the world in my pocket, not to mention the matchmaker's fee. I even started to think how much I would give my poor daughter as a dowry, and I haggled over some fabric for a featherbed.

“But listen to what can happen if luck is against you. When they started to write the marriage contract and needed the names of the bride and groom, it turned out – I can hardly bear to tell you – that it was all a pipe dream. Listen to what can go wrong: both of the families had boys! You can imagine the reward I got from both sides, vey iz mir, and how I felt as I left the fair without a penny in my pocket.”

I couldn’t help it – I burst out laughing and said:

“How’s it possible, Reb Alter, that you got mixed up in such an idiotic plan? I don’t want to insult you any more than I would my own mother, but how could you make a match before you were sure that one family had a girl and the other had a boy?”

“Of course, don’t I know it!!” answered Reb Alter with feeling. “I haven’t totally lost my marbles. I knew very well that Reb Elyakim had an unmarried daughter, and once I even saw her with my own eyes. But nothing in the world can help if luck is against you. It was just my
luck that Reb Elyakim's girl decided to get married in a hurry last year. I hadn't heard anything of it. So when I planned a match between Reb Elyakim and Reb Getzl, I was thinking of Elyakim's girl and Getzl's boy. No need to spell it out — it seemed so simple there was nothing more to say. Two boys don't get hitched up, obviously it would be a boy and a girl, the way of the world. I think I acted as befits the trade, and I swear no one could have done it better. I went straight to the heart of the matter: dowry, wedding gifts, and other expenses. Don't forget that at a fair there's no time to mince words, you keep it brief and to the point. Reb Elyakim himself must have assumed that, if there was going to be a match, it had to be with his son. How could it be any other way? He knew that Reb Getzl would be his in-law, but how could that be? Neither of them had a girl to marry off. Now you and to the point. Reb Elyakim himself must have assumed that, if there was going to be a match, it had to be with his son.

Poor Reb Alter lay there quietly, licking his wounds and beset by cares. His story brought to mind many things about arranged marriages among Jews. I decided to talk with Reb Alter and draw him out of his gloom.

"Yes, Reb Alter, yes," I said, "anything can happen in this world. I want to tell you a fine tale about what goes on among Jews."

Reb Alter wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve. Then he stretched himself out under the tree, smoking his small pipe. I coughed a few times, drove away some mosquitoes,  and started to tell the following story....

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