

The Judgment of Shomer
or
The Jury Trial of All of Shomer's Novels

Transcribed word for word
by Sholem Aleichem

Translated from the Yiddish and annotated by Justin Cammy

Berdichev
Jacob Sheftil, Publisher
1888

*Strike the capitals so that the thresholds quake.*¹
(Amos 9:1)

Fleece the flock and the lambs tremble.
(Yiddish proverb)

My thanks to Alan Astro and Avraham Novershtern for their assistance on questions of translation. Olga Litvak, Alyssa Quint, Dara Horn, and Ernest Benz were kind enough to read a draft of the translation and to offer their advice. Titles of works mentioned by Sholem Aleichem first appear both in Yiddish transliteration and in my English translation; subsequent mention of the same work appears only in translation. I preserved Sholem Aleichem's editorial decision to have Shomer's name appear in bold throughout the text. [JC]

1. The full verse reads: "I saw my Lord standing by the altar and He said: Strike the capitals so that the thresholds quake, and make an end of the first of them all. And I will slay the last of them with the sword; not one of them shall escape, and not one of them shall survive." (Jewish Publication Society translation)

In a large hall, at the head of a green table, sits the presiding judge, an old man. Two other magistrates are seated on either side. The prosecutor, an irascible young man with fiery eyes, is seated on one side, to the left, at a small table. The defense counsel, a good-natured, spirited young man, is opposite him, to the right, also at a small table. The secretary is a little bit farther away at a large table, upon which are scattered dozens of the “*most interesting novels by Shomer*,” and also various works by Abramovitsh,² Linetski,³ Dik,⁴ Spektor,⁵ Bukhbinder,⁶ Bekerman,⁷ Ulrikh Kalmus,⁸ Tsim-

2. Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (183[6]-1917), widely acknowledged as one of the three classic writers of modern Yiddish fiction and also one of the founders of modern Hebrew fiction. Sholem Aleichem affectionately called him the “grandfather” of modern Yiddish literature. He is often referred to by the name of his most famous literary creation, Mendele Moykher Sforim (Mendele the Bookpeddler).
3. Yitskhok Yoel Linetski (1839-1915), Yiddish novelist, essayist and translator. His picaresque novel *Dos poylishe yingl* (The Polish Boy), which first appeared serially in *Kol-mevaser* (1867), was a popular and biting satire of Hasidism. Along with Avrom Goldfaden (see note 14), he published the weekly *Yisrolik* (1875-76), which included his unfinished novel *Der litvisher bokher* (The Lithuanian Boy). *Der vorem in khreyen* (The Worm in Horseradish), a sequel to *Dos poylishe yingl*, appeared in volumes 1 and 2 of Sholem Aleichem’s *Di yudishe folksbibliotek* (1888-89). Linetski also published several collections of feuilletons.
4. Isaac Meir Dik (1807-93), the first popular writer of Yiddish fiction, and one of its most productive. At the height of his fame, his chapbooks (*mayse-bikhlekh*) sold tens of thousands of copies and were eagerly consumed by ordinary Jewish men and women.
5. Mordecai Spektor (1858-1925), Yiddish novelist, journalist, and editor. His first novel, *A roman on a nomen* (A Novel Without a Title), was published serially in *Yudishes folksblat* in 1883. His second novel, *Der yidisher muzhik* (The Jewish Peasant, 1884) was influenced by the Zionist ideology of Hibat Zion and advocated that the Jews return to productive labor. Later, Spektor became the editor of *Der hoyz-fraynd* (The Family Friend, 1888-89), and edited (along with I.L. Peretz and David Pinski) the first issue of the anthology *Yontev bletlekh* (Holiday Pages, 1894).
6. Avrom Yitskhok Bukhbinder (186?-97), journalist; author of numerous novels in the style of Shomer, and several works on the condition of Jewish pioneers in the Land of Israel, including *Vi geyt es unzer brider in Palestine* (The Condition of Our Brethren in Palestine, 1888).
7. Shimon Bekerman (dates unknown), author of such popular novels such as *Meshiekhs tsaytn oder der freylekher Tishebov* (Messianic Times, or the Happy Day of Mourning, 1887); *Di shreklikhe nakht* (The Terrifying Night, 1887); *Di kortn-varferke oder di opgeshosene hant* (The Tarot Card Reader, or the Chopped-Off Hand, 1888); beginning in 1883, editor of the satirical journal *Der ployder zak* (The Charlatan).
8. Ulrikh Kalmus (dates unknown), Yiddish journalist, author of literary sketches,

bler,⁹ Oyzer Bloshteyn,¹⁰ Marakhovski,¹¹ and others. Next to the lawyer, under arrest, on the bench reserved for the accused, sits the defendant **Shomer**, a man who is not very old or very young, not very dark or very fair, not totally ugly but also not very handsome. Opposite him, on twelve stools, are the twelve jurors, each representing a different segment of society, rich and poor, young and old.

The hall is packed. The audience consists of simple Jews, common people who do not understand any language except Yiddish.¹² It also is full of married women, girls, half-educated young ladies, and schoolboys.

It is so quiet in the room that one can hear the flies buzzing! All eyes are fixed on **Shomer**, the accused, who comports himself smugly, like a man

and dramatist, most productive during the 1870s and 1880s. His writings appeared in such publications as *Kol-mevaser* and *Yisrolik* (edited by Linetski). His play *A zeltener bris un a genarte khasene* (A Rare Circumcision and a Fraudulent Wedding, Odessa, 1871; Warsaw, 1882) was an anti-Hasidic farce composed in the earthy dialect of Polish Jewry.

9. Khayim Bunim Tsimbler (dates unknown), well-known wedding musician and performer, and author of several collections of chapbooks, including *Di generalsh, oder der puster benyokhed* (The General's Wife, or The Only Son, 1887).
10. Oyzer Bloshteyn (1840–98), in his day one of the most popular writers of trashy Yiddish novels. From 1878, he published more than fifty novels and stories. He vigorously defended Yiddish against accusations that it was nothing more than a Jewish jargon. He also published a Russian-Yiddish dictionary, and Russian translations of the weekday and High Holiday prayer books, as well as of the Passover Haggadah.
11. Moyshe Marakhovski (dates unknown), author of several collections of satiric poetry, including *Der elnter yosem* (The Lonely Orphan, 1872); *Hagode in hayntiker tsayt* (The Contemporary Haggadah, 1885), and *Yontevdike lider: a kritik in ferzn fun dem lebn* (Holiday Poems: A Verse-Critique of Life, 1886).
12. Sholem Aleichem uses the term *zhargon*, or “jargon,” throughout *The Judgment of Shomer* to refer to Yiddish. This was an accepted term for Yiddish in his day. However, in certain places where Sholem Aleichem did not intend the pejorative connotations that the term carries with it today, I elected to translate *zhargon* as Yiddish. Dan Miron explains: “...it was only at the end of the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century that the language...had become universally known as Yiddish—the language of the Jews (*Yidn*). In the previous century it had first been called *Yidish-daytsh* (Judeo-German) and, later (until the time of Sholem Aleichem and Peretz), *Zhargon* (“jargon”), the former name designating the language as a corrupt German spoken by Jews and the latter degrading it further to the class of sublanguages, incoherent mechanisms of linguistic communication, gibberation,” *A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (1996), 47. Max Weinreich notes that though *zhargon* was used by proponents of enlightenment (*maskilim*) pejoratively, Yiddish writers such as Sholem Aleichem employed it neutrally until the language wars between Hebrew and Yiddish rendered the term entirely pejorative. See *History of the Yiddish Language* (Chicago 1980), 315–27.

who is aware of his own importance. The secretary rises and begins to read out the indictment:

“It has been nearly twenty years since Yiddish began to show signs of becoming a language, to stretch its limbs and demonstrate some forward movement. Three giants in Poland¹³—Abramovitsh, Linetski, Goldfaden¹⁴—and Isaac Meir Dik in Lithuania boldly stood Yiddish on its own two feet, and carried it over from the language of Bible translations in the *Tsenerene*¹⁵ to a living literature, from the *Bove-mayse*¹⁶ to the novel, from the hasidic hagiography of *Shivhei ha-Besht*¹⁷ to poetry, from the supplicatory prayers of *tkhines*¹⁸ to satire. These four giants, these great individuals, forged a new language and breathed the European spirit into our old jargon. And masses of new readers sprung up! The public took up Yiddish with enthusiasm, with all the passion of the Jewish people. There was barely a Jewish home in which people were not clutching their sides with laughter, reading Linetski’s *Dos poylishe yingl* (The Polish Boy),¹⁹ published in the

13. Sholem Aleichem’s reference to Poland and Lithuania in this line does not refer to the current borders of these countries but to a basic north-south dichotomy in the geography of Jewish Eastern Europe under the Russian tsars. Poland included much of Jewish Ukraine (and was seen to be far more under the influence of Hasidism), while Lithuania included significant parts of Belarus (and was understood to be the territory of Misnagdism, or rationalist tradition).
14. Abraham (Avrom) Goldfaden (1840–1905), Yiddish dramatist, widely acknowledged as the founder of modern Yiddish theater and a celebrated folk poet. In describing the modernization of Yiddish literature Sholem Aleichem deliberately leaves the Yiddish theater unmentioned, a telling sign of his bourgeois literary tastes.
15. *Tsenerene* (lit. “Come and See,” 1622), popular Yiddish adaptation of narrative sections of the Bible. It was the most significant book for generations of Ashkenazic Jewish women.
16. *Bove-mayse*, Yiddish expression for a fantastic or unbelievable tale. Sholem Aleichem is referring here to the Yiddish chivalric romance by Elijah Levita (Elye Bokher), *Bove-bukh* (1507). Several chapbook editions of *Bove-bukh* appeared later under the title *Bove-mayse*. Over time, the proximity of “Bove” to “bobe” (the Yiddish word for grandmother) transformed *Bove-mayse* from the title of a specific work in the pre-modern Yiddish literary canon into a common expression for the types of stories grandmothers tell, or old wives’ tales.
17. *Shivhei ha-Besht* (In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov), hagiographic tales first published in 1814–15 about the life and spiritual achievements of Israel ben Eliezer Ba’al Shem Tov (c.1700–60), the founder of Hasidism.
18. *Tkhines*, Yiddish supplicatory prayers recited mainly by Ashkenazic women. Eastern European varieties of *tkhines* were published in small pamphlets and provide invaluable insight into women’s religious lives. *Tkhines* were among the most widespread publications of Yiddish devotional literature.
19. See note 3. Alyssa Quint has argued that Sholem Aleichem shows his distance from the reading habits of the masses by overstating their interest in such manifesta-

first Yiddish newspaper *Kol-mevaser*, edited by Tsederboym;²⁰ did not sing the immortal sweet songs of Goldfaden; did not ingest, declaim, and perform by heart the wonderful scenes from Abramovitch's *Di takse*.²¹ In short, it was a bright moment in the history of the language, a fortunate slice of time in Jewish life in general²² that Jews still recall with fondness.

"But bright sun brings its own dark shadows. Mushrooms sprout in the same spot as fruit trees, and one can always find thorns next to roses. In every literature, the cripple who has not succeeded in anything follows in the steps of great talent. After the most beautiful hero, after the lion, a small worm creeps in. If a great talent in the form of a genius were to exist forever and protect literature under its wings, a worm would cease to have any reason to live. Although it happens infrequently, a large worm sometimes develops out of a small worm, and its damage is so great that the public starts looking for ways to smoke it out, along with any memory of it. But this doesn't always happen so smoothly. In our case, the famous writers mentioned earlier put down their weapons, and the people gradually began to forget them.²³ At that point, small worms began to emerge from their holes.

tions of "highbrow" Yiddish literature. See "Yiddish Literature for the Masses? A Reconsideration of Who Read What in Jewish Eastern Europe," *AJS Review* 29: 1 (2005) 61–89.

20. *Kol-mevaser* (The Herald), Yiddish supplement to the first Hebrew weekly *Ha-Melits* (The Advocate). *Kol-mevaser* first appeared in 1862; from 1869–72 it was published on its own. As the first modern Yiddish paper in Russia, *Kol-mevaser* played a significant role in raising the prestige of Yiddish by demonstrating that it was more than a popular folk "jargon," and could function as a medium for modern intellectual and literary discussion. Alexander Tsederboym (1816–93), pioneering figure of the Jewish press in Russia, published *Ha-Melits*, beginning in 1860; in 1881 he began to edit the Yiddish newspaper *Yudishes folksblat*.
21. *Di takse, oder der bande shtot baley toyves* (The Meat Tax, or the Band of Community Benefactors, 1869), S.Y. Abramovitch's satiric drama that took aim at the corruption of community leaders in Berdichev.
22. A reference to the liberalization of attitudes toward the Jews during the early reign of Tsar Alexander II (1855–81). Alexander II's ascension to the throne was a moment of great hope for Jewish enlighteners, who felt that their internal efforts at modernization of Jewish society would be reciprocated by their integration into Russian society. A wave of pogroms against Russian Jewry beginning in the 1870s and peaking in 1881–82 following the tsar's assassination destroyed the idealism of the Haskalah and marked the beginning of a chaotic period that witnessed mass Jewish emigration from the Russian empire, the disintegration of the shtetl, rapid urbanization, and the rise of modern Jewish politics.
23. A possible reference to the gap between the publication of S.Y. Abramovitch's *Kitser masoes binyomin hashlishi* (The Abridged Travels of Benjamin the Third, 1878) and a revised version of *Dos kleyne mentshele* (The Little Man, 1879) and his drama *Der priziv* (The Draft, 1884). In that five-year period, Abramovitch did not publish any new works in Yiddish.

They laid eggs and multiplied. All types of cockroaches, one insect after another, crept out of the corners and infected Yiddish with such ugliness that it would need to purify and cleanse itself for quite some time until it managed to return to respectability.

“Yiddish writers, writers of the people,²⁴ fabricators of sentimental romances came pouring forth like sand and garbage, and Yiddish was suddenly overflowing with novels. What kind of novels?! The world was flooded with them, and they dulled the literary taste of the reading public to such an extent that no one dreamt of touching anything else! But that is not the end of it. Every reader became a writer; many young good-for-nothings proclaimed themselves novelists! It was enough for anybody to read a book, a foreign novel, and soon enough he proclaimed himself a novelist. He just changes the names of the heroes, slips in a few Jewish names, and sells this “most interesting novel in four parts with an epilogue” for the price of a bagel to the latest itinerant peddler who happens by. The itinerant peddler publishes it, the young snot becomes a popular writer, a novelist, the masses accept this shoddy merchandise, and there is no stopping things.

“The greatest, the most productive, the richest of all of these cockroaches, centipedes, and worms is the so-called novelist **Shomer**, our accused.

“This fellow took it upon himself, and not as a joke, to inundate Yiddish with his unbelievable, insubstantial novels, with their wild, strange concoctions that are beneath any possible criticism, and that are as dangerous as poison to the reader. He has corrupted the sensibilities of his readers by providing them with dreadful fantasies, wild ideas, and heart-rending scenes that our people would have had no idea about had they not been exposed to them in his works.

“This became problematic for our community representatives, and they named a commission to investigate more than fifty such novels by **Shomer**. The commission came to the following conclusions:

24. Sholem Aleichem’s repeated use of the term “folks-shrayber” (from the Russian *narodnyi*) is particularly challenging to translate. I am uncomfortable rendering it as “popular writer,” if only because Sholem Aleichem did not interpret “popular” in the way we do today, as necessarily low-brow. Rather, I prefer Miron’s suggestion of “writer of the people,” despite its clumsiness in English: “A folks-shrayber writes for the people, about the people, and in order to educate the people while entertaining them.” See *A Traveler Disguised*, 276 (n77). The translator encounters the same problem with Sholem Aleichem’s frequent invocation of the concept “undzer folks-literatur” (“our literature for the people”), which he understood as literature intended for the entire population, not just for a highly educated elite. The Yiddish “folk” cannot be translated into English either as “folk” (which sounds too primitive) or as “national” (because at that time only Hebrew was understood to have the status of a “national” language). Moreover, Russian does not use the term “*narodnaia literatura*” but rather “*narodnoe tvorchestvo*” (literally, “folk creativity”), which is used as a synonym for the internationalism “folklore.”

1. Almost all of his novels are, pardon the expression, stolen from foreign literatures.
2. All his novels are of the same cut.
3. This so-called novelist does not provide a realistic, authentic picture of Jewish life.
4. As a result, his novels have no connection to the Jews whatsoever.
5. These romances ignite the imagination, but provide no ethical direction, no moral.
7. They contain obscenity and cynicism.
8. They are very poorly constructed.
9. The author appears to be an ignoramus.
10. Under no circumstances should such novels be given to our schoolboys or teenage girls.
11. It would be a great act of charity if he and all of his fantastic and uncouth novels were expunged from our literature by means of serious, clear-headed criticism.

“Fifty-some novels by this so-called novelist are strewn before you on this table. They are the best manifestation of this writer’s ignorance, of the ignorance of his readers, and of the silence of our critics who allow such a novelist to exist among the people.”

When the secretary finished reading the indictment, the crowd began to cast glances back and forth. The presiding judge then turned to the accused and asked him if he considered himself guilty according to the terms of the indictment. To this **Shomer** responded:

“Your Honor, the entire indictment is a lie from A to Z, a total fabrication. It is the product of one of my enemies who is undoubtedly jealous of my talent, my achievements in Yiddish, and my books, which the public laps up like hot noodles. I am telling you the plain truth. Your Honor, this is all about envy. I tell you in all sincerity, it is entirely about jealousy!”

The presiding judge winked at the prosecutor, who rose and turned to the court with the following indictment:

“Honored judges and jurors! Before us sits an accused who is neither a thief, nor a bandit, nor a scoundrel. He did not commit any crimes. He did not insult anyone, cheat anyone, or reduce anyone to poverty. Yet now he is on the stand as a true offender, as a defendant. So what is this all about? What is the matter with him? In my opinion, your honors, he is guiltier than a thief, a bandit, or a killer. True, this rascal did not set off to kill with a sword, a spear, or a club. He trampled on our innocent Yiddish literature with nothing more than a pen in his hand. Slowly but surely he murdered it.

He corrupted the taste of the public. He harmed our simple readers, poor things, who are not expert enough to know the difference between good and bad literature, who lose themselves in the dark without a critic to guide them, and who cannot yet differentiate between the value of works by Abramovitch and the garbage peddled by our accused **Shomer**. Fooling someone, stealing his money, and killing him are, in my opinion, lesser crimes than tricking an entire people, murdering an entire literature, and ruining the literary taste of thousands of readers. Because in the first case, only a single individual is harmed. But this is about the suffering of the public, of the masses, of a whole society.

“Consider what this fabricator of novels brought to our community. **Shomer** corrupted the feelings and taste of our ordinary readers to such a degree that our working men, housewives, and young women are so taken with his empty, wild, nutty novels that their minds are pulsating with his crazy fantasies. They will no longer even pick up a decent book, an ethical tract, a work with some moral direction. All they want are the kind of entanglements and intrigues, the moving and heart-stirring scenes found in **Shomer’s** “most interesting novels,” in which people steal, loot in broad daylight, dig up bodies from the grave, fight, battle to the death over a beautiful brunette or over a fine blond fellow, and other such wild fantasies imported from various vapid Russian, German, or French novels by Xavier de Montépin,²⁵ Paul de Kock...”²⁶

“Your Honor!,” the accused interjected, jumping up from the bench, “Your Honor! It is a lie! All lies! My enemies have trumped up the charges because of their great jealousy, their envy of me...”

“Mr. Accused!,” the chief judge interrupted, “you must not forget that in a court-room one must sit with respect. If you are not being questioned, you must remain silent and seated!”

The prosecutor continued without even casting a glance at **Shomer**.

“Paul de Kock, Dumas,²⁷ Ponson du Terrail,²⁸ and others like them... our accused steals material from these worthless writers for his clumsy novels.

25. Xavier de Montépin (1823–1902) authored more than twenty popular French serial novels and feuilletons; collaborated with Alexandre Dumas on *Tour de Saint-Jacques*; his novel *Simon y Maria* appeared in translation in Ladino in 1889.

26. Charles Paul de Kock (1793–1871), writer of French popular novels, many dealing with middle- to lower-class Parisian life.

27. Alexandre Dumas (1802–70), one of the most important nineteenth-century French novelists. Among his famous works are *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Three Musketeers*, and *The Man in the Iron Mask*.

28. Pierre Alexis, vicomte Ponson du Terrail (1829–71), a popular author of serialized fiction who began publishing in the French press in the 1850s. His nine books in the Rocambole series marked the transition between the Gothic novel and the rise of the French mystery and adventure novel.

He serves up these wretched works to the reading public who swallows them without any discretion. The people ingest this rotten food and do harm to their innards for years to come.

“I trust, honored jurors, that you are aware of the sacred purpose of literature. As every reader knows, fine literature—for instance, a decent novel drawn from real life—employs various shades to portray the positive and negative qualities of a character with the purpose of providing the reader some intimacy with man’s spiritual nature. Since this kind of writing can sometimes be boring, like an ethical tract that tires the reader, writers created sublime poetry, they invented the novel, they made things up, a kind of theater in which the writer introduces his artificial heroes who speak, travel about, walk, sit, laugh, sing, cry, and so on. In order to keep the attention and interest of the reader, the writer’s imagination fabricates different tales, coincidences, stories (and sometimes even very complicated ones), miracles and wonders, moving scenes that are either happy or sad and over which we pour out our tears.

“But when do the writer and his work realize their purpose? When he provides us with scenes that are recognizable to us, to which we have a connection, and that can more or less occur in real life. But when, for example, a writer tells us a story about a poker that fell in love with a shovel that then upset the jealous feather-duster, so that the latter roused all the geese and turkeys... I ask you, what benefit, what moral value, what lesson does such a tale provide? Whose heart will it touch? Who will understand it? Who will draw pleasure from it, and to whom will it cause pain? Our novelist **Shomer** indulges in fantasy to such a degree that in his universe an ordinary teacher, a *melamed*, becomes a lord; a chimney-sweep becomes a count; death becomes life and life becomes death. In his works, millions in diamonds lie around like garbage. Servant-boys and girls play out love affairs (or, as **Shomer** prefers, their “flirtations”) over which they drown themselves, shoot themselves, hang themselves, and so on. In the same way that we have become accustomed to the cheerfulness of French novels, so too if you were to read one of **Shomer**’s novels would you think that Berdichev had been carried over to Paris, and that Chaim, Yosl, and Avreml are strangers to worldly affairs. They have never heard of business, a ruble, a broker, a nobleman, or rates of interest; they just wander about in search of “love.” Never in their lives have Hannah, Mira, and Brayndl been made aware that in this world there are such things as a store, a shop, a tavern, Yiddish translations of the Bible—no! Hannah, Mira and Brayndl recline on soft velvet divans, with little white dogs in their arms, singing sweet, sentimental songs about “love”... But people are always fond of hearing a tall tale, and when there is no fish people will eat potatoes, and when there is nothing better they will chew on straw...That explains why the common people chew straw. That explains why ordinary Jews and simple Jewesses pick up a novel by **Shomer**. On the Sabbath

day after the tsholent,²⁹ when one can cast aside momentarily the burden of worrying about a living, when it is possible to forget that there are such things as a shop or a store to run, a broker to whom one owes money, or a nobleman and his little lady to whom one owes homage...at that moment women, teenage boys and young girls gather round to hear one of **Shomer's** wild, bizarre, awkward stories about the miracles and wonders of the *melamed* who is now a lord, the chimney-sweep who has become a count, the love between Yankl the blond student and Rokhl the brunette with cheeks as red as roses, and the pretty songs they sing and the passionate tears they pour out under the pale light of the moon. They experience the sighs and the moans of the unhappy lovers whose hearts are united but who suffer at the hands of their murderous parents who want to separate them, make their lives miserable, and drive them from this world.”

The accused cried out again: “This is hearsay, your Honor! Pure jealousy and hatred!”

The presiding judge requested that he sit down and conduct himself with respect, and the prosecutor continued with his indictment.

“Love, honored jurors, love is an old story in literature, an ancient song! Every writer and reader understands that the best material for a novel is love, especially love among youth. It is a sacred feeling, a tender feeling, a gift from God, and without Him, without this sacred, tender feeling, we human beings would not be any better than animals. But there are many different modes and varieties of love. For instance, the love of parents for a child, and vice versa, of a child for his parents; love between brothers, sisters, and friends; love between best friends; love for all of humanity, for nature, for enlightenment, for things that are known to be good or bad. However, the love between a young man and a young woman is known to be the type of love that novelists from around the world take up. Thousands upon thousands of books have already been written about this type of love. A boy and a girl, a young man and a young woman—these are the fundamental elements in almost every novel. The young man is in love with the young woman. She is in love with him. They are in love with each other. Their hearts are united. Their souls are close. But they are torn apart, they are physically separated. Still, they seek the means through which they can quickly and easily realize their only goal in life, their only wish—to be reunited, to come together in the strongest of eternal bonds. The disputes, the struggles, the fights, the sufferings and the pleasures of this battle in pursuit of their ideal become the canvas upon which the writer designs the scenes of his novel. Just as no two places are alike, the same is true of love. Love comes into contact with all kinds of obstacles, occurs for different reasons,

29. Traditional hearty stew, prepared prior to the Sabbath and slowly simmered, eaten by Ashkenazic Jews on the Sabbath day after synagogue.

unfolds in miserable or happy circumstances. Here the parents are for it and there they are against it; here the groom is liked and the bride is not liked; here they encounter a plague of an uncle, a relative, a gossip neighbor, and the whole story is turned around. Usually they cannot achieve their ultimate goal. They become full of anger and fury, tears begin to flow, disasters unfold, God help us. The groom hangs himself, the bride drowns herself, howling and grief, confusion ensues...Or, just the opposite. Everything is overcome, thank God. The bride and groom marry—Mazl tov! Congratulations!—This is how many writers conclude their novels.

“One has to be naive, like a young child, to believe that the plot of a novel is its most essential element, that the only thing that matters is whether the guy gets the girl. I told you earlier, honored jurors, that the entire purpose of literature is to illustrate the positive and negative aspects of human nature. Aside from providing us with pleasure through the plausibility of their descriptions, works by real writers and by educated novelists also provide a lesson—to each reader according to his comprehension and his abilities. In this way they ennoble our emotions, answer some of our fundamental questions regarding life, show us how it can be lived well or badly, and develop for us the finest feelings of mercy, sympathy, and humanity, and so on.

“This is relevant when speaking about the educated writer, the upstanding novelist. But we do not experience this in the works of our own accused, Mr. **Shomer**. There, on the table before you, in the novel *Der blutiger adieu*³⁰ (The Bloody Adieu) this so-called novelist takes the liberty to state the following: “*In writing my novel, I did not aim for you to derive a pretty lesson from my words, as other novelists do. No, I swear on my beard and sidelocks*³¹ (What do you make of such a witticism!) *that I did not intend anything of the sort...I wrote the novel with the sole purpose of entertaining you...*”

“We shall soon examine the type of entertainment provided to us by **Shomer**’s pretty, wonderful stories. But at this point I am still focused on the ethical aspect of our so-called novelist who has the audacity to express himself openly with the decorative phrase “*on my beard and sidelocks*,” admitting that he has no moral objective; his sole goal is to entertain.

30. *Der blutiger adieu!, oder gift in gliksbekher: eyn vunderlikher rirender roman, velkher verdet dem lezer fil fargenigen farshafen* (The Bloody Adieu, or Poison in the Goblet of Happiness), Vilna 1879, 1883.

31. A reference to the beard and sidelocks (*peyes* or *pey’ot*) worn by traditional Jewish men in observance of the biblical commandment (Lev 19:27): “Do not round off the hair on the corners of your head...” In English, the translation should more appropriately read: “I swear on all that is holy.” I decided on a literal translation because Sholem Aleichem takes offense at Shomer’s expression.

“Elsewhere, such as in the novel *Dos antikl, oder di koshere metsie* (The Precious Find, or A Heck of a Bargain)³² **Shomer** expresses himself in the pretty language of a court servant: “*Dear readers, purchase this exquisite merchandise. You will derive great pleasure from it, and it will teach you a great deal regarding how much you owe your family...*”

“This preface made me quite happy, and in order to discover how it teaches “a great deal regarding how much we owe our family,” I read the book from cover to cover. And what did I discover? Listen up!

“A young man, Izak Windman,³³ witnesses the beautiful actress, Zinaida, on the theater stage. A wild desire overcomes him. He makes her acquaintance and falls in love immediately, just like the rest of **Shomer**’s heroes whenever they see a woman. He gets rid of his wife and spends night and day with this singer Zinaida. He buys her presents, brings her bouquets, sings her songs, and kisses her red lips until his wealth is reduced by some two thousand rubles. Who is this Zinaida, what is this Zinaida? A Jew or a Christian? Who is Izak? What was he before, and what is he now? We never know: the author does not want to disclose matters. All he tells us is that she made Izak buy her a bracelet for her birthday—something exquisite, engraved with two letters: S W—for which the jeweler Marcus at first wanted five thousand rubles, but which our hero Izak, who was a good bargainer, managed to haggle down to two thousand rubles. The bargaining itself occupies such a good chunk of the novel that it makes you sick to the stomach....In the end, when Izak obtains *the most sparkling of the best diamonds*³⁴ (to quote the author verbatim), and wants to run to his beloved Zinaida to buy her passionate love, suddenly (this is the manner in which every idea occurs in **Shomer**), suddenly another thought occurs to him: he has a wife who is *twenty times more beautiful than Zinaida, and if she put on rouge and powder—says Shomer—just like Zinaida put on rouge and powder, she would be a hundred times more beautiful. As for my money? Let her suffer as much as she wants. I am not going to give her a dime!* All of a sudden our fine Izak becomes a penitent. Since God helps penitents, the following miracle occurs to him: the two letters on the bracelet with the sparkling diamonds, Z and W, correspond precisely to his wife’s initials, “Zelda Windman”!

“There is no end to God’s wonders! As he approached his wife Zelda, she was in the middle of singing a pretty song by “that” Jewish poet:

32. *Dos antikl oder di koshere metsie: a moderner roman*, Vilna 1888.

33. Windman: windbag.

34. The original (“di burlianten fun di tayere dimanten”) is purposely satiric due to its circular locution and its mistaken spelling. I render it below, for the sake of clarity, as “sparkling diamonds.”

*Als shpigl kent ir mikh meydlekh hobn,
Kukt zikh nor gut in mir ayn,
Beser zolt ir zikh bagrobn,
Eyder hayratn mit a sharlatn!*

Use me for a mirror, girls
Gaze into me deeply,
Better to dig yourself a grave
Than to marry a charlatan!

“I don’t know the identity of the poet who composed this special song. Perhaps “that” poet is **Shomer** himself, because almost all of his novels begin with a poem in our holy language, Hebrew. But our hero Izak is so moved that he throws himself around his wife’s neck and with tears in his eyes he gives Zelda the precious find, the bracelet with the sparkling diamonds.

“But the greatest miracle of all consists of the fact that the precious find, the bracelet with the sparkling diamonds for which Izak paid two thousand rubles, was in truth worth five thousand rubles! So our hero earned three thousand rubles off the entire deal! You can conclude from this that God should only be so kind as to bless all Jews and all young people in love with such bargains...

“This is the moral provided by this fabricator of novels. Such a novel is read by the common people, by ordinary folks, by simple readers who have no ability to read between the lines. **Shomer** calls this vile product a novel, and a novel with a moral to boot! I ask you, honored jurors, is this not a desecration? Is it not heartbreaking that for the sake of the two gulden **Shomer** will earn from this work, an entire literature, a young literature, will be corrupted? In my opinion, our accused deserves the strongest punishment, the harshest penalty for this “precious find.”

“But let us continue. Here is another of **Shomer**’s novels, entitled *Gvald, vu iz mayn bord*³⁵ (Help! Where’s My Beard). On the front cover there is an illustration of a drunken Gentile lass wearing a top hat and a Russian holding a big pair of scissors. It turns out that the Gentile lass with the top-hat is not a lass at all but rather a Hasid, whose beard and side-curls have been shorn. In the novel, **Shomer** goes on to explain “*that the pious Reb Todres who has a liking for pretty young women always took great pride in his beard, just as a fashionable modern woman prides herself on her wide behind* (that’s how **Shomer** puts it), *and his side-curls were like two mouse tails...*”

“Our talented novelist considers this satire. Our people are raised on this nice satire to laugh at a Jew with a beard. If one can laugh at a Jewish beard, it is a sign that one is already educated, sophisticated, Westernized, as the saying goes.

35. *Gvald vu iz mayn bord!*: *eyn roman*, Vilna 1886, 1888.

“In retelling you the entire story of “the beard,” which actually is an adaptation of a Russian vaudeville sketch by Solovyov³⁶ entitled “Gospoda Sobachkiny”³⁷ (The Sobachkins), no one can imagine that even when **Shomer** is serious and thinks that he is being earnest he is tolerable; but when he falls into satire and begins to crack jokes, when he tries to be funny like a young rascal who is a bit tipsy, then he is really insufferable. No matter how many times I tossed the book aside, no matter how much it repelled me, no matter how much it nauseated me, despite all my pain and suffering I still had to read it and all these other novels through to the end. It would take a weak person more than half a year to return to himself after the exquisite marvels of **Shomer**’s novels. Nor would I wish on any friend of mine the punishment of reading fifty-some books by **Shomer**.

“One can better understand how **Shomer** interprets the meaning and purpose of satire from what he says in his small satirical work *A sheyne reyne kapore*³⁸ (It Serves Him Right). “*These days, satire is in vogue: for instance, mocking a good friend to his face, laughing at a beggar—in one word, laughter, people should let it all out.*” But at the same time that **Shomer** is being satiric, he requests that he should not be made fun of...Now that’s satire!

“In order for you to have some concept of **Shomer**’s satiric talents and jokes I will relate several of his witticisms from his novel about “The Beard.” For example: “*He is full, excuse the expression, with learning*”... “*Ha, ha, ha, right in the kisser*”... “*Hanele’s bris, Amen congratulations*”... “*Even old men like a young woman*”... “*Jews today, because of our many sins, only love young girls*”... “*He whose hand I did not wash (What is our **Shomer** thinking here?) should with His righteous hand preserve all Jewish beards from such a misfortune as befell poor Todres’ beard. Amen to that!*”³⁹

“I do not believe that shopkeepers in the marketplace jabber among themselves in this way, let alone cobblers’ apprentices. Such chatter can only be the product of a talented humorist, a cheerful satirist like **Shomer**, who offers up these obscenities to the world so that it can laugh and be merry!

“I will have the honor more than once of returning to the unique satirical talents of our accused **Shomer**. But I cannot hold myself back and stay silent, having experienced with my very own eyes such a masterwork as *Der tayvl khapt dem melamed: a vare sheyne ertseylung*⁴⁰ (Devil Kidnaps the Teacher: A Pleasant True Story) by **Shomer**.

36. Vsevolod Solovyov (1849–1903), a Russian historical novelist.

37. All Russian quotations appear in the Cyrillic alphabet in Sholem Aleichem’s original.

38. *A sheyne reyne kapore*, Vilna 1886.

39. Sholem Aleichem here quotes these lines out of context to provide examples of what he considers Shomer’s failed attempts at humor.

40. *Tayvl khapt dem melamed: a vare sheyne ertseylung*, Vilna 1886.

“**Shomer** declares piously: “*We must thank and praise God who gives our hand the strength to write, our eyes the power to observe, and our what’s-it-called...to sit on...*”

“Do you understand, honored jurors? This is how an author, a novelist who writes books for the people chooses to express himself! Understand me well: **Shomer** thanks and praises the One whose name he is not worthy of pronouncing for bestowing upon him a “what’s-it-called” to sit on!!! Such a desecration of God’s name, such blasphemy is not even permitted in a tavern among drunks and hooligans. The use of such ugly words deserves to be punished with great severity. In our Yiddish literature people read such jokes and obscenities and they are delighted. This great **Shomer** is not only a novelist, he is a jokester, a prankster, a humorist, a type of Heine,⁴¹ Börne,⁴² and Shchedrin,⁴³ pardon the comparison.

“*Devil Kidnaps the Teacher*, that pleasant little work, is full of such satiric pearls. For example, in this novel the cantor prays like a cat, the women jabber through the heart of the Rosh Hashanah service, and the teacher Tsadok Zerakh butchers his German...As to the depth of **Shomer**’s own knowledge of German we will return a bit later...But do you understand the salt of the satire? The teacher Tsadok Zerakh wrote “chamapagnerie” instead of champagne, and instead of “you should send me some port wine” the teacher wrote “you should do to send me port-whine,” which is as realistic as the rest of **Shomer**’s scenes.

“Near the beginning of this satiric work, **Shomer** provides us with the following scene of pure comedy:

The door opened and Hannah-Beyle entered.

-“Good morning, Leybele! Have you already become a tailor?”

-“Yes, auntie! Perhaps you would like me to sew you a shroud?”

-“Go to hell! You have a special way of making fun of everyone.”

-“Who’s making fun? He who laughs first is punished first. How old are you? Sixty? What about our matriarch Sarah who celebrated the circumcision of her son at the age of ninety?”

-“Go to hell!”

-“Auntie, you are angry...Treat me to a slice of bread and a sour pickle.”

41. Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), one of the most important German Romantic poets, known for his acid satire. Heine converted to Lutheranism in 1825. His Jewish background prompted him to take up Jewish themes in several important works, including *Almansor* (about Catholic persecution of Jews and Muslims in medieval Grenada), *Der Rabbi von Bacherach*; *Hebraeische Melodien*; and *Jehuda ben Halevy*.

42. Ludwig Börne (Juda Löb Baruch, 1786–1837), German-Jewish humorist and political commentator who converted to Christianity and lived in exile in Paris.

43. M.E. Saltykov-Shchedrin (1826–89), a leading Russian nineteenth-century satirist.

-“Enough of your jokes...”

-“Just like that? Perhaps your goat died or the cow gave birth? Congratulations!”

-“Chatterbox, just shut up! Anyhow, all jokes aside...”

“This is what passes for witty dialogue in **Shomer!**

“Later, we overhear the following conversation between Leybke the jokester, what a devil, and David, a rabbinic judge:

-“Welcome! A visit from Reb Leyb!”

-“Yes, rabbi. I came to ask you a question... I was sewing, you should pardon my expression, my pants. I was holding the needle in my mouth and I swallowed it suddenly. Now it is stuck in my stomach. I want to know, am I kosher or unkosher?”

-“Such an animal as you is always unkosher.”

-“Very well put, rabbi, indeed. You understand why I like you so much...An ox like you is an expert in cows...”

“The rabbi tells Leybele that he is a cow, and Leybele replies that the rabbi is an ox... Where does a rabbi, a judge, a pious Jew speak in such a manner? In **Shomer's** novels, which our people read! **Shomer** calls this a joke. **Shomer** is a happy-go-lucky fellow. You can see the white of his teeth while he laughs, and he wants the reader to laugh along with him. But it is not funny, honored jurors. It is no laughing matter. It would be more appropriate to cry and to weep than to laugh! Cry because among Jews a rabbi is treated with more disrespect than any servant; any tailor can insult him. Weep because in a literature for the people like our Yiddish literature, one can find such simple lowlifes who call themselves “novelists,” who corrupt any decent feeling within the general public, damage its taste, and destroy the language itself.

“So, shall I continue with the interesting contents of this so-called novel by **Shomer**? Shall I provide you with its juicy details, like how the teacher Tsadok Zerakh flirted with the servant girl Tsipe-Krayne (all of **Shomer's** heroes flirt); how he pulled her to his chest, kissed her, and embraced her; how they spoke about going into the fields in the morning where there is a barn, this teacher and this servant girl....Do you follow?

“No! It is no longer possible for me to speak calmly about **Shomer's** satire, humor and moral lessons! I am putting an end to the discussion and turning our attention now to the matter of his fantasy, to his serious, earnest, great, important writings, to his *most interesting novels*, because those that we have mentioned thus far are only “pretty and happy stories, moralistic and satirical works, nice simple stories for the people...” And now we will consider his “*most interesting novels in two parts*” where the talent of our great novelist generously unfurls itself in all its greatness. It occurs to me that I do not see before me **Shomer** but rather the famous French pseudo-novelists Xavier de Montépin, Ponson di Terrail, Paul de

Kock, and others. The difference between them is that these fantasists used their own imaginations to invent their unbelievable heroes and wild stories, whereas **Shomer**, our fabricator of novels, picked it all up from them and transported their heroes from Paris to Nyesvizh,⁴⁴ from Marseilles to Berdichev,⁴⁵ and from Bordeaux to Eyshishok!⁴⁶ Indeed, **Shomer's** heroes have as much connection to Jewish life as Marseilles has to Berdichev. Consequently, **Shomer's** most interesting novels stick to us in the same way that a pea sticks to the wall. Let us select one of **Shomer's** best novels from the table: *Der oremer milyoner*⁴⁷ (The Poor Millionaire), a most interesting novel in two parts.

“Honored jurors, this most interesting novel is a reworking, a reformulation, an imitation, a mimicry of the famous novel *Mystères de Paris* by the well-known French novelist Eugène Sue.⁴⁸ * Whether or not Eugène Sue's

44. Nyesvizh: Shomer's hometown, a Belorussian shtetl in the region between Vilna and Minsk.

45. Berdichev: The quintessential Jewish city of the Ukraine; Jews constituted the majority of its inhabitants in the late nineteenth century.

46. Eyshishok: Lithuanian shtetl famous for its level of observance of Jewish tradition.

47. *Der oremer milyoner: eyn hekhst interesanter roman in tsvey teyln*, Warsaw 1883 or 1884.

48. Eugène Sue (1804–57), sensationalist French novelist, best remembered for his serialized novels *Les Mystères de Paris* (Mysteries of Paris, 1842–43) and *Le Juif Errant* (The Wandering Jew, 1844–45). *Les Mystères de Paris* was a bestselling French melodramatic novel that focused on intrigues among the lowest strata of Parisian society.

* It seems as if the prosecutor was unfamiliar with Alexandre Dumas' work *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Had he read it, he would have seen that *The Poor Millionaire* was a precise reworking of Dumas' work, with only the French names of the characters put into Yiddish. It is incredible that the stenographer, Mr. Sholem Aleichem, did not notice this! Or perhaps he was so grateful to the prosecutor for his defense of Yiddish that he did not want to interrupt his presentation. What does it matter to the reader what it is an imitation of, as long as it is not original...

The Typesetter

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

Khatati, aviti, pashati, I transgressed, I offended, I sinned! I am guilty, guilty, guilty! I believe the typesetter—who has expertise in these matters—when he says that in *The Poor Millionaire* Shomer patched over the wrong side of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Ahhh. I would trade a sack of beets and all fifty of Shomer's most interesting novels to get a hold of *The Count of Monte Cristo* at this moment! But who is guilty, if not Shomer alone? Who is responsible for tracing and controlling his works? The author himself should be responsible for pointing out the source of his fine pelts. For example, here before our eyes are three “historical” novels by Shomer:

novel is good or bad is not my concern at this time. A well-known Hebraist, Kalmen Shulman,⁴⁹ loved the novel. He took it upon himself to translate it into our holy tongue, and it was a solid translation. Had **Shomer** done the same—translate *Mystères de Paris* into Yiddish—that would have been enough! But no, our accused does not just want to be a simple translator. That does not suit him. So what did he do? He “made” his own novel with Eugène Sue’s heroes and gave it the title *The Poor Millionaire*. Whereas in Eugène Sue’s work the lead character is Prince Rudolf, the same role here is played by the Jew Glazvald, a millionaire. Glazvald who? Glazvald what? It is none of our business. Just as Prince Rudolf travels around Paris incognito in search of his lost family, so does Glazvald wander about the city of Nyesvizh in search of his lost family. As you well know, in the end Prince Rudolf finds his lost daughter Maria, and Mr. Glazvald finds his lost son Naftali the watchmaker. Just as there is a terrifying bandit, Jacques Ferrand,⁵⁰ in Eugène Sue, so too in **Shomer** do we find the usurer Hertsnshiteyn,⁵¹ the murderous thief Shpin,⁵² a viper by the name of Gilon from Paris, an Elizabeth, and many other heroes. Since there is a poor miserable family Morel in Eugène Sue’s Paris, why shouldn’t **Shomer** include the same poor miserable family of

-
- (1) *Der gemakhter yoyresh* (The Would-Be Heir), a historical novel;
 - (2) *Khosen damim* (Bridegroom of Blood), a historical novel [ed. The phrase *Khosen damim* appears in Exodus 4:25–26; Zipporah, wife of Moses, uses these enigmatic words to refer to the circumcision of her son at a moment when Moses seems to be in grave danger.];
 - (3) *Der falsher hertsog* (The Fake Duke), a historical story.

On all three books we find the printed statement: “written by Shomer” (not translated?). I was astonished: Where does Shomer get off writing a historical novel? In order to create a historical novel one must first know something about history, and in order to know history one must know a thing or two...So I was doubtful about their connection to history, since they were not, God forbid, revamped like the rest of Shomer’s novels...In the end, I put aside these three “historical” novels, several other pearls by Shomer, and those fifty other devils who dance after Shomer and imitate his style—works that my good friends sent me—long may they live... Until the next time, God willing, soon and with happy hearts. Amen.

Sholem Aleichem

49. Kalmen Shulman (1819–99), Hebrew maskilic writer and translator. His abridged Hebrew translation of *Mystères de Paris* (1857–60) proved extremely popular and went through several editions. The translation introduced contemporary French fiction to Hebrew readers and helped to demonstrate that Hebrew could function as a modern literary language.
50. Jacques Ferrand, the evil notary of *Mystères de Paris* who betrays the novel’s heroine, Fleur-de-Marie.
51. Hertsnshiteyn: “heart of stone.”
52. Shpin: “spider.”

Tsipe and Leah in Nyesvizh? Whereas Rudolf comes and rescues the family from its poverty, here Glazvald comes and sits over Leah's bed. What's the difference?

"I repeat: had **Shomer** wanted to translate that confusing story in its entirety into Yiddish, he would have been able to preserve his good name. We would not have had any right to comment on it. We would have only spoken about Eugène Sue, not about our accused. But as soon as **Shomer** slapped a new name on the work and published it as if it were his own creation, then we are obliged to abandon Eugène Sue and discuss the merits of *The Poor Millionaire* as a Jewish work, as a novel by **Shomer**.

"Unfortunately, there is not a single Jewish type, not a single Jewish scene, not a grain of Jewishness in the entire novel. The author conducts himself like a performer: he parades before us an entire series of mannequins, artificial characters who wander about, run, sit, speak. This one loves that one; that one is in love with this one. This one is an angel, something extraordinary, a benevolent man; that one is a rogue, a bandit, a killer. This one is wise; that one is an idiot. This one is a beautiful caring woman with long blond hair; that one is ugly, disgusting, like death incarnate. **Shomer** orders this or that hero to fall on his knees and declare: "I love you, my angel!" So he falls on his knees and declares: "I love you, my angel!"

"No, this is not quite a novel. It is more like an organ belonging to a street performer. **Shomer** cranks the handle and out comes: "Love!" Everyone is in love in his world, and they all love in the same way. Elizabeth falls unconscious, the seamstress swoons...everyone is constantly fainting and they are all equally deceived by their love, they are all equally despondent, they are all equally trusting. The heroes are so alike that if it were not for their different names we would not be able to perceive any differences between the wealthy Elizabeth and the poor Leah; between the millionaire Glazvald and the watch-maker Naftali; between Hertsnshteyn the usurer and Shpin-Hekht-Fayerfan the bandits. According to **Shomer**, a bandit is someone who kills people, robs people in broad daylight, disinters bodies from their graves, or disguises himself with various aliases. That's how it is with Shpin the bandit, Hekht the shady businessman, and Fayerfan the seamstress's husband. Wherever he goes, he finds a rich bride with a substantial dowry and piles of money. According to **Shomer**, money is as common as garbage—millions pile up in every corner!

"In **Shomer**'s universe, an evil character must be a bandit. He does not understand that a bad character can be a good Jew, a respected householder, not someone hiding behind three different names. He does not understand that someone can be evil even if he does not poison, kill, rob in the dark of night, drag bodies from the grave—things that do not even occur among Jews! I cannot imagine that there are still readers among us who are such fools that they would accept this as it is and continue to have faith in this writer.

“As soon as a novel does not relate to real life, it is no longer a novel but rather a *Bove-mayse*, a tall-tale, a story about a prince and a princess, a rabbi and his wife, about twelve brothers and twelve castles, about an Old English sheep-hound and a werewolf, and so on.

“**Shomer**’s novels would not be such a great disaster were they just empty and useless to our readers, like his tale about the sheep-dog and the werewolf. But as I demonstrated earlier and I will point out to you, God willing, in a few moments, apart from these shortcomings they also are harmful from a moral perspective.

“As long as we are on the subject of fantasy, let us continue and open another of **Shomer**’s “most interesting” novels, *Di agune*⁵³ (The Abandoned Wife). I was delighted by its introduction, in which **Shomer** writes: “*I can tell you with complete confidence that all of my characters are taken from real life...*” It gave me tremendous pleasure to learn that **Shomer** at least recognizes that characters in a novel must have a connection to real life. But a man is his own worst enemy, and **Shomer**’s tongue does him in. In the same prologue he later says with self-praise: “*I know that if you read this novel you will applaud just as thunderously as you did in response to my earlier novels (?). And whoever does not enjoy my novel is not going to ruin things for me by reporting me to the religious authorities in an attempt to prevent me from being showered with synagogue honors...*”

“After reading this comment about “thunderous applause” and “showered with synagogue honors,” I immediately lost my trust and any regard for this “most interesting” novel in two parts.

“Let us consider what kinds of real-life characters **Shomer** crafts for us here. He wants to persuade us that such rogues exist in Lithuania among the Jews (He swears this in *The Abandoned Wife*). But promises do not matter, and no one is obliged to believe **Shomer**. So I began to search the entire novel for a single living person who is not just some mannequin, but a familiar type, for one true scene of Jewish life. But what did I find? Another angel; another ideal-type; a saint, poor thing, who pays for other people’s sins; another thief, bandit, and rogue (you only find rogues in **Shomer**!); a barbarian who steals, plunders, rakes in money, lives it up, and who is unexpectedly defeated in the end to the pleasure of the author and the reader, who know that all evil characters in **Shomer** come to a bad end and that the righteous will recover, with God’s help, in good time— Amen... That is how it is in **Shomer**’s *The Abandoned Wife*, *Di khalitse*⁵⁴ (The Levirate Marriage), *Di*

53. *Di agune: a hekhst interesanter roman*, Vilna 1881, 1887.

54. *Di khalitse: eyn interesanter roman*, Vilna 1883, 1884. *Halizah* (Hebrew) refers to the ceremony associated with biblical laws of levirate marriage in which a brother who normally would be obliged to marry his sister-in-law after his brother’s death is released from his duties, allowing the woman to remarry according to her desires.

*yerushe*⁵⁵ (The Inheritance), *Der tiranisher bruder*⁵⁶ (The Tyrannical Brother), *Der baal tshuve*⁵⁷ (The Penitent), *Der oremmer milyoner*, (The Poor Millionaire), *Der raykher betler*⁵⁸ (The Rich Beggar), *Der oytser*⁵⁹ (The Treasure), *Di hayntmodishe kale*⁶⁰ (The Stylish Bride), and *Di farkoyfte kale*⁶¹ (The Sold-Off Bride). That is how it is with all the characters in **Shomer's** "most interesting" novels, which are all, in truth, one grand unending novel in which only the names and locales are switched around; here the villain is called Hertsnshiteyn whereas there he is Feldboym; here he is Perets while there he is Velvl Vokhernik⁶² or Daniel Pintl—but they are all rogues, they are all thieves, brigands, greedy bloodsuckers, vampires, hypocrites. They are all involved in intrigues. They defraud everyone they come across. They have all been married several times and have buried several beautiful innocent demoiselles. They are pals with the underworld and consort with the Jewish gravediggers, who rob the graves of the dead (Have you ever heard of such a thing among Jews?). In a word, **Shomer's** heroes—those rogues—are not heroes, not real people, not even wild beasts; rather they are vipers, half fish and half men, werewolves, royal couriers, eight-legged horses, and other such strange, wild, terrifying creatures intended to frighten young children, adapted from fairy tales and *A Thousand and One Nights*.

"That is how it is with all of his villains, and that is how it is with every one of his heroes—the angels, the righteous ones—each a variant of the same prototype, the same character with different names. They are all good, honest, decent, pure, handsome, refined, unblemished, brave, courageous young men, educated children, faithful and devoted to the end. They all write passionate letters with the same words. They all speak about holy love in the same style, in the same tone, as if coached by a book to recite by heart: "Oh! I love you, my angel!" "Oh, I love you, my darling!" **Shomer** stands at the back and prompts his hero: "Say, 'Oh, I love you my angel,'" and the hero says, "Oh, I love you my angel!" But they are words without any soul, without any feeling. They seem automatic, as if sputtered from a machine.

55. *Di raykhe yerushe, oder a mayse on a sof*, Vilna 1886.

56. *Der tiranisher bruder oder der opekun*, Warsaw 1883.

57. *Der baal tshuve: roman*, Vilna 1880.

58. *Der raykher betler: a roman in tsvey teyln*, Vilna 1884(?), 1886 .

59. *Der oytser oder der kalter gazlen: roman in tsvey teyln*, Vilna 1884.

60. *Di hayntmodishe kale oder ver iz shuldik: roman*, Warsaw 1881 or 1882, 1887.

61. *Di farkoyfte kale: roman*, Warsaw 1886.

62. Vokhernik: a usurer.

“Though **Shomer**’s heroines conduct themselves differently, they all act in the same way too, according to the same program, according to the same instructions. They all cast their eyes upward, searching for their ideal floating in the distant heavens, and in every novel they sing sweet, sentimental songs, a variety of which I now present to you from different novels by **Shomer**.⁶³

“In the novel *The Poor Millionaire* Elizabeth sits at the piano and sings

Ikh vil shoyn mer do nit lebn
Keyn zakh iz mir zis
Ikh vil tsu mayn libn shvebn
Ahin in paradiz!

I no longer want to live here
 Nothing is sweet to me
 I want to soar to my love
 There in paradise!

“In the same novel, Leah the seamstress sits and sings in the same vein:

Dort in himl tsvishn di shtern
Shpatsirt mayn engel lustik fray
Er zet shoyn nit mayne trena
Er iz mir shoyn umgetray!...

There in the heavens, among the stars
 My angel strolls happily and free
 He no longer sees my tears
 He is no longer faithful to me!

“In *The Penitent* Dina goes so far as to sing in “pure” German.⁶⁴

Ich steh am einsamen Hugel
Und schaue noch dir zurück
Es schenkt die senkende Sonne
Dir eben den letzten Glück.

“In *The Treasure* Itke sings the following:

In der stiller Abendstunde
Wenn der blasser Mond strallt herab, usw.

“In *The Tyrannical Brother* the hero Perets begins to write poetry to his bride (do you understand the meaning of “writing poetry?”):

63. One of the reasons Sholem Aleichem cites these songs is to showcase their lack of artistry and sophistication. For this reason I provide the original Yiddish along with my literal (non-rhyming) translations.

64. German readers will discover several mistakes in the German cited below. Sholem Aleichem sought out such examples as part of his struggle against daytshmerish (Germanisms) in literary Yiddish. See note 105.

*Di schone Sonne mit ire shtraln
Darfn tsu dayne fis faln
Zey darfn ziftsn shrayen (Ver?) oy vey!
Den du bist fil schöner fun zey!...(Fun vemen?)*

The beautiful sun and its rays
Ought to fall at your feet
They (*whom does he mean?*) should sigh and cry: Woe is me!
Because you are more beautiful than they (*than who?*)...

“In *The Rich Beggar* Helena Flantsberg sings:

*Er iz eyn engel fun got geshikt
Dos werde ikh zogn biz mayn toyt
Mayn fershmakhtes herts hot er derkvikt
Geretet hot er mikh fun mayn noyt.*

He is my angel sent by God
I will say this to the day I die
He revived my faint heart
He rescued me from my dire condition.

“In *Der kosherer yid*⁶⁵ (The Pious Jew) Lize’s servant-girl sings:

*Mayn liber iz vayt fun danen
Ikh bin geblibn aleytn,
Ale meydlekh hobn manen
Nor ikh, nebekh, zits un veyn.*

My love is far away
I remain behind alone,
Other girls have fiancés
But I, poor thing, sit and cry...

“In *Der kheyrem*⁶⁶ (The Excommunication) Rivke sits under a tree and sings:

*Mayn Brust iz mit leydn voll
Du must libender verlassen mikh
Vielleicht iz haynt dos letste mol
Vos ikh ze mayn lebn dikh...*

My heart is full of suffering
You, my love, must leave me
Perhaps today is the last time
That I ever see you, my darling.

65. *Der kosherer yid, oder tsvey kets in eyn zak*, date of first publication unknown. There was a reprint published in Vilna in 1891.

66. A later edition of this novel was published in Warsaw in 1897. I have not been able to locate the edition to which Sholem Aleichem is referring.

“In *Tsvishn tsvey flamen* (Between Two Flames)⁶⁷ Perele sings the following:

*Af mayne lipn fil ikh zayn kus
Ikh her zayn zisn kol
Dos iz geven vi tsuker-zis
Akh! Vu nem ikh im nokh a moll...*

I feel his kiss on my lips
I hear his sweet voice
It was as sweet as sugar
Oh! Where can I find him again! ...

“In *Di blinde yesoyme*⁶⁸ (The Blind Orphan Girl) Lisette sings to Itsik melancholically:

*Oder in libe shtekt dayn shmerts
Zi hot dikh tiranish antzogt
Iz dos di urzakhe fun dayn shmerts
Bist darum farveynt, ferklogt...*

Or perhaps your sorrow comes from love
She rejected you tyrannically
And that is the source of your suffering
That is why you cry and mourn...

“Honored jurors, from these cultured pearls you understand that our accused **Shomer** is not only a great novelist, moralist, and satirist but also a wonderful poet for old maids, for grown-up brides, for foolish boys—perhaps even a prominent poet. One cannot say that he is a poet like Goldfaden. He is more like Moyshe Marakhovski from Boslov⁶⁹ who modeled himself on Goldfaden’s style and reworked Goldfaden’s songs from “Yudele”⁷⁰ so artfully that it enlivens the soul:

*Mayn vayb vigt mikh in vigl
Far dem shtikl kigl...
Zi shrayt gvald
Ikh zol ir geben bald...*

My wife is rocking me in the cradle
For a piece of kugel...
She cries out, “Help!”
So that I will give her some soon...”

(*Contemporary Poems* by Moyshe Marakhovski from Boslov)

67. *Tsvishn tsvey flamen, oder der hefker-yung: roman in tsvey teyln*, Vilna, 1887–88.

68. *Di blinde yesoyme oder tsvishn tigrin: eyn roman*, Vilna 1880.

69. Boslov (or Boguslav), town south of Kiev in the Ukraine. See note 11 for more on Marakhovski.

70. *Dos yudele* (The Little Jew, 1866), anthology of Yiddish poetry and songs edited by Goldfaden.

“Mr. Prosecutor!,” the Chief Justice cried out, “I ask you to stay on point. You began by discussing **Shomer**’s novel *The Abandoned Wife* and you have digressed to Moyshe Marakhovski’s poetry...”

“Yes, jurors, in all honesty the poetic talents of our accused so mesmerized me, so enchanted me that I forget entirely about **Shomer**’s *The Abandoned Wife*...”

“Our talented novelist, who had already written many novels in his lifetime, achieved something new in *The Abandoned Wife* in order to interest the public. **Shomer**’s innovation was: Scandal. This is nothing new in other literatures. For example, the Parisian penny novels that are published almost daily in impressive quantities are lapped up like hot noodles because the French audience loves a good scandal. But among Jews, in Yiddish literature, this an important innovation, and this innovation is due to **Shomer** alone.

“Consider the following pretty story:

“*Ish hoyo be-kitnevits*, there was a Jew in Kitnevits, and his name was Benjamin. He was nothing more than a dealer in wagons, a pauper, God save us. But suddenly—that’s how it always is with **Shomer**, all of a sudden, miracles and wonders around every corner!—suddenly this Benjamin the pauper becomes enormously wealthy off real estate and precious metals. This Benjamin had a son, Aaron Feldboym. Aaron Feldboym, as is usually the case, was a knave, a thief, a scoundrel—in a word, a complete rogue! He made many women miserable...His first victim was a married woman, Hannah-Rachel, who was left an *agune*, an abandoned wife, because of him. Aaron Feldboym also burned her father’s house to the ground. This same Aaron Feldboym also robbed a church (can you believe these terrible deeds?). A little later, this rich bandit married, but he quickly did away with his unfortunate wife, and then he...What do you think? Poisoned her? Slaughtered her? Burned her? God forbid! He just threw a loaf of bread at her head and she went out of her mind...you get it? Such tragedies can occur only in **Shomer**. Aaron Feldboym went on to have three more wives.

“Do you think that was the end of it? Absolutely not! Aaron Feldboym cast his eye upon the beautiful Malke. But this Malke loved Hannah-Rachel’s son, Avrom. The progress of this wonderful relationship is worth considering. Avrom taught Malke all about “love.” He engaged her in long conversations, in philosophical discussions, and concluded with the statement from the holy Torah “Thou shalt not covet another man’s wife.” But just to have a good time with her, without “meaning any harm”...**Shomer** persuades us that this is permissible. If it is a question of a woman who does not even have a husband, it is 100% kosher! The long and the short of it is that Malke ended up turning her eyes to the heavens:

*...tsvishn di shtern
Shpatsirt ir engel lustik fray,
Er zet shoy n mer nit ire treyn
Er iz ir shoy n ungetray*

...among the stars
 Her angel strolls happily and free,
 He no longer sees her tears
 He is no longer faithful to her!

“Now let us leave these two lovebirds behind, leave Malke and her “angel,” and return to the villain Aaron Feldboym. This little devil, you may recall, had already cast his eye on his next victim, Reb Hershl’s beautiful daughter Yente, whom the bastard quickly trapped in his net. **Shomer** relates how Yente began to visit Aaron secretly at night...one thing led to another, until she began to feel that she soon ought to ...in a word, the accursed lout got her into trouble and even accused her of fooling around with David the musician... But you haven’t heard anything yet! In Kitnevit there was a barber-surgeon, Leybke, who was an expert at abortions. Aaron ordered a “potion” from him for Yente, from which she ultimately died...

“But since the powers that be have decided that **Shomer**’s rogues must suffer their hell in *this* world, Aaron began to have terrifying nightmares with hallucinations. It did not occur to him to repent. Just the opposite: his roguish instincts burned even stronger, and he went off to war in Romania, where he managed to finagle millions by the shovelful, and made even more people miserable. **Shomer** brings the remaining characters in the novel to Bucharest, where the author shows us “the source whence all had gotten their money,” and “the veritable paradise that was the cafe in the magnificent Grand Hotel...”

“Such details led me to believe that **Shomer** himself was probably in Bucharest at that time, together with his novels, and I might have hoped that the author would have provided us with true scenes and interesting stories of our brothers in Bucharest.⁷¹ At the time, there was a lot of material about Jewish life that might have been depicted from many different angles and illuminated from all possible sides. We could have anticipated this from a real writer, from a writer of the people like Spektor, for example, who loves to observe Jewish life and faithfully depict its scenes and types, to the extent that his talent permits. But we could not demand such things from one who churns out novels like **Shomer**. **Shomer** is preoccupied with bandits and intrigues, with vipers and werewolves, so how could Mr. Khaykl or Spektor’s Mr. Traytl⁷² be of any value to him? Where Spektor would have

71. Sholem Aleichem is being coy here in that he knows that Shomer was in Bucharest as a contractor for the Russian army during the Russo-Turkish war (1876–77) and that these contractors (most of whom were Jews) were living large at a hotel similar to the one he describes. Sholem Aleichem may also be hinting at the early Yiddish theater, whose early productions took place in Bucharest.

72. M. Spektor, *Reb Traytl: ertseylung in tsvey teyln* (Warsaw 1889); another revised version of the novel was published in *Der hoyz-fraynd* 4 (1895), 1–148. It is likely that Sholem Aleichem is referring to an excerpt from the novel that appeared prior to its publication in book form in 1889, though I have not been able to find the

taken the time to describe the coachman with his two horses, **Shomer** creates ten bandits, seven angels, five innocent souls, three disinterred bodies, a Jewish teacher engaged in an affair with a Gentile lass under the moonlight, a duel between Yakelzon and Khatsklzon, a vial of poison, a noose, impassioned letters, sugary songs, eyes beseeching the heavens, terrifying dreams, buckets of tears, and a lot of blood!...Where Spektor would have said a few sincere, heartfelt words to take pity on the people—the suffering and poverty of the Jewish masses that includes millions of “*paupers and beggars*”⁷³ and a few wealthy ones...in place of Spektor’s touching words that come from the heart and affect the reader deeply, **Shomer** would have churned out countless puffed-up, empty ringing phrases sweetened by his own philosophical insights.

“In the second part of *The Abandoned Wife*, **Shomer** states: “*Were we to consider the world and all creation with an open critical mind, we would see that life is always bound to death, and that luck is always connected to misfortune...Of that, we do not need to adduce any particular proof; it is already a well-known fact. That is why the old sages* said: It is a wheel of fortune, where one wins, and then another... We see the same in the Crimean war...*”

What a parable!

“Once upon a time there were two brothers, one was wise, studious, learned in Torah, and the other was called Benjamin and had a yellow beard—and that’s the way it is...”

“I am so accustomed to **Shomer**’s “philosophy” that I almost know it by heart. Almost every one of his chapters begins with an elevated philosophical statement in which the author gets so excited that he speaks with the echoing authority of a barrel-maker. It is not for nothing that **Shomer** writes the following in *The Levirate Marriage*:

“I have already entangled myself enough in these tangential subjects. Readers would surely hold it against me if I were to drive them crazy with my somber philosophizing. Poor things, they pay good money for the story itself. So I have to make them happy and return to the story...”

“But **Shomer** does not do what the reader wants. On almost every page he offers up—as he calls it—his “somber” philosophizing, and he often says

source. The wordplay with the names Khaykl and Traytl also may be a nod to two works by Isaac Meir Dik: “Reb Traytl der kleynshtetisher noged,” *Varshoyer yudishe tsaytung* (1867–68); *Khaytsikl aleyn: a sheyne un vare geshikhte, vi azoy eltern zoln zeyere kinder ertsien* (Vilna, 1887).

73. M. Spektor, *Aniyim ve’evyoynim, oder gliklikhe un umgliklikhe* (Petersburg, 1885).

* Which old sages? Where is this written?—It is a total fabrication.

these things with such conviction, with such open insolence, that one wants to burst with frustration. *“Practice teaches us that...poor parents love their children with greater warmth and tenderness than the rich...”* (*The Abandoned Wife*)

“I will not explicate every one of **Shomer’s** philosophical thoughts, but rather provide you with a full page of his words of wisdom that are based on history, astronomy, psychology, anthropology, phrenology, and so on. That which **Shomer** refers to as his “somber philosophizing” was called “*krantsefolye*” or folderol by a big ignoramus who is an acquaintance of mine...⁷⁴

“Listen to some of his pearls of wisdom:

“Just as the honest man has no concept of how a robber comes to steal...so too does the thief not understand how the honest man can live peacefully and survive through business alone...” (*The Blind Orphan Girl*)

“When a person has a lot of worries and he does not know which one he should deal with first, at that moment he finds himself face to face with the greatest worry of all...And as the second worry passes, the third and fourth worries come along, and so on, until he has been confronted with all his worries. At that instant it is possible for us to say that he stands before the final worry in the same state of despair as he stood before his very first worry...” (*The Rich Beggar*)

“Just as the sea has no bottom, so is **Shomer’s** philosophy groundless. Even if I had the opportunity to speak to you for three days and three nights, I still could only provide you with a tenth of what our accused has written in his hundred-some novels. Nothing to sneeze at—a full hundred novels!!! There are thirty to forty characters in every one of **Shomer’s** novels (there is never a shortage of characters with **Shomer**). That is to say, there is a total of some four thousand heroes, four thousand different characters with different souls, personalities, perceptions, thoughts, talents, inclinations, habits, qualities and deficiencies, all derived from nature and from their education. In short, it is not an easy task. One must have a special talent in order for each and every book to be carefully chiseled. It requires a lot of blood, sweat and tears, not to mention the fact that you also need that God-given gift called talent. Before the author publishes each book, he must first go through it carefully, think about it ten times over, improve it, correct it, freshen it up and rework it so that it reaches the level of a work of literature,

74. I elected to translate “*krantsefolye*” (crowning folly) as “folderol.” In Sholem Aleichem’s early novella *Taybele* (1884), the wealthy ignoramus Gershon Shpringer employed this word to refer dismissively to the Haskalah (the Jewish Enlightenment). Sholem Aleichem playfully explained to his readers in that novella: “We searched for the meaning of *krantsefolye* in all of the new and old dictionaries but we could not find such a word. Therefore we ask our readers to memorize the word *krantsefolye* so that it will remain for generations to come” (*Ale verk fun Sholem Aleykhem*, vol. 20 [Vilna and Warsaw: Kletskin, 1926], 35).

so that it is gleams and sparkles, so that it seems alive, so that its words speak both to the mind and to the heart.

“Our accused **Shomer** does not understand his responsibilities in this way. He began to treat Yiddish—our literature for the people—as a game, as if churning out a new novel* every day was some kind of business transaction through which he could become an entrepreneur, a supplier of novels to Yiddish publishers. The public looked upon this with indifference, and the critics took notice and remained silent: “Whatever... it is only for the people, for the masses, for common folk who are perfectly willing to chew on straw... What does it matter?!” This is how the masses are exploited. They hand over their money and are given grass in return, and nobody dares to say a word. “But you are talking about **Shomer..Shomer!** He has already written a hundred novels, and the public reads them, so there must be something to them!” When the well-known critic in *Voskhod*,⁷⁵ Mr. Criticus,⁷⁶ attempted to comment on and appraise the value of one little book by **Shomer**,⁷⁷ the great novelist responded with an article of his own in the *Yudishes folksblat*⁷⁸ in which **Shomer** proved that he is **Shomer**...⁷⁹

Honored jurors, I cannot be satisfied with the novels we have enumerated up to now, because they are all older works, sins of youth.⁸⁰ Who knows,

* Shomer takes pride in the fact that he can finish a large novel in two nights.

The Typesetter

75. *Voskhod*, Jewish periodical for the intelligentsia, published in Russian in St. Petersburg (1881–1906).
76. *Criticus*, pseudonym used by the historian Shimon Dubnov (1860–1941) in his critical writings about Yiddish literature.
77. Criticus’s article, “Literaturnaia Letopis” (Literary Chronicles: The Poverty of Contemporary Jewish Belles-Lettre), *Voskhod*, May 1887, was a critique of both Shomer’s *Der raykher betler* and his Hebrew work *Ha-nidahat*. Excerpts (in Yiddish translation) from Criticus’s article later appeared in *Yudishes folksblat* 27–28 (1887). Criticus anticipated many of the criticisms that Sholem Aleichem would incorporate into *The Judgment of Shomer*. For instance, he asserted that since Shomer’s work lacked authenticity, both in terms of its description of Jewish life and in its portrayal of Jewish characters, “there is nothing one can really say about it artistically.” He challenged Shomer: “Is Jewish life so impoverished that there is not enough material in it for true creativity?” He also called attention to the grammatical flaws in Shomer’s Germanized Yiddish.
78. *Yudishes folksblat*, Yiddish weekly, published in Petersburg beginning in 1881 and edited by Alexander Tsederboym.
79. A reference to Shomer’s article “A patsh far a patsh” (A blow for a blow), *Yudishes folksblat* 30 (1887), 483–88, in which Shomer responded to Criticus and other critics by commenting: “He must have written these words out of jealousy, hatred, or perhaps simply because he is a little out of his mind—it shouldn’t happen to us.”
80. The term Sholem Aleichem employs for sins of youth, *Hate’ot Ne’urim*, was also

perhaps we will find a different **Shomer** in the later works? Frequently, talented writers retreat, whereas those who begin as invalids improve and make such great strides forward that it is difficult to recognize them. So now let us open one of his latest works, a novel with the fine title *Paltiel Ox*, published in Vilna in 1887—it is fresh and right out of the hopper, something that enlivens the soul.

“In the preface to this fine novel, **Shomer** writes: “*The many plaudits I receive every day from readers...*” In simple Yiddish, he might as well just say: “Come on, buyers! Over here, buddy! It’s good here! Get a deal here! It’s fresh here! Neighbor, come on over!”

“...my novel contains everything that the Jewish audience demands: moving scenes, great intrigues, secret romances, surprise encounters...”

“Buttons, sticks, raisins, whips,
Shirts, ties, cookies, material,
Bagels, pins, thread, and soap!...”⁸¹

“In a word, **Shomer** knows what the public demands. **Shomer** knows that the masses love razzle-dazzle and hocus-pocus, so he gives it to them. The audience loves scandals, so he gives them scandals, each more spectacular than the next. But we will return to this matter shortly. I want to get back to his “introduction”:

“Tonce again ask my readers that when they pick up one of my works they check on the first page to ensure that my real name appears on the cover, because people have begun to exploit my name and slap it on various rags in order to confuse readers...”

“As they say in Russian: *Osteregaites’ poddelki!*, or watch out for thieves!...A poor lot has fallen upon our young Yiddish literature if indeed there are writers and publishers who aspire to imitate **Shomer**! We can console him with the words of a Russian poet:⁸²

the title of the autobiography (1873–76) of the Hebrew writer, critic, and journalist Moses Leib Lilienblum (1843–1910), in which he described the struggles of his youth, his sexual awakening, and the development of his beliefs. The reference would have been obvious to sophisticated readers.

81. Sholem Aleichem is mocking Shomer’s self-promotion as something more appropriate for a street hawker shouting out his wares than for a writer.
82. A reference to I.M. Dmitriev. The first line cited by Sholem Aleichem is somewhat different in Dmitriev’s version, and words are reordered for the sake of rhyme:

ЭПИГРАММА

-«Я разорился от воров!»
-«Жалею о твоём я горе».
-«Украл пук моих стихов!»
-«Жалею я об воре»

-Uvy! Menia obobrali.
 -Zhaleiu o tvoem ia gore.
 -Puk moikh stikhov ukrali!
 -Zhaleiu ia o vore...

“which translates into Yiddish as:

-“Alas! Robbers have fleeced me.”
 -“I’m sorry, that’s terrible.”
 -“They’ve stolen a bunch of my poems!”
 -“Pity the thief...”

“Too bad for the thief, too bad for Yiddish, too bad for our people!

“How about this for a scandal: Benjamin Fridfish was the only son of Levi Fridfish, a wealthy man from the city of Bobruisk.⁸³ When Benjamin turned nineteen, **Shomer** told him that it was time for him to fall in love. So he went off and fell in love with the beautiful Maria, the only daughter of the police inspector Samuel Bergtal (almost every hero in **Shomer** is an only son and almost every heroine is an only daughter). Benjamin began to pay frequent visits to the beautiful Maria. Her parents, who knew that Benjamin’s family was well-off, took notice and helped matters along a little so that their “love would ignite.” Indeed, their love was sparked, until shortly thereafter the beautiful Maria joyfully informed our fine Benjamin that, with God’s help, he soon would be a father...

“Of course, this good news was not at all pleasant to our Benjamin. To fall in love, to fool around with a girl... that’s one thing, why not? But to be a father at the age of nineteen, yuck! That is the way it is, explains **Shomer** in his somber philosophy, or folderol: *...Love is the most sacred thing until one partakes of her fruits... But when the lovers allow themselves to enjoy her fruits...*”

“You get it?”

“*Beys ho-hi*, by the time Benjamin was enjoying the fruits of love, a teacher had already got there before him, and he was followed by a small-time accountant, a lout, a yeshiva student who ran away from his wife, a scholar, a recluse, a beggar, a good-for-nothing, a robber, a rogue, a butcher, a werewolf, a viper, a rascal from **Shomer**’s cast of rascals—and his blessed name was Paltiel Ox.

“Our fine Benjamin revealed his secret to Paltiel Ox: he had already tasted the fruits of love and he had gotten himself into a nasty bit of business, God save us, such that soon he was going to be a father...”

-“Ha, ha, ha! You’re such a child!” - Paltiel Ox answered him - “What a joke on Samuel, his wife, and his daughter...”

-“What type of advice have you got for me, Reb Paltiel?”

83. Bobruisk, large Belorussian shtetl.

-“My advice is simple. Spit into his clean-shaven face! ...What do you have to worry about? For five rubles I can find you a guy who will swear that Maria is pregnant with his child...”

-“You can do that?”—Benjamin asked, delighted.

-“It’s nothing!”—Paltiel responded.

-“Oh! You are my savior, my best friend in the entire world!” —Benjamin cried, embracing Paltiel and kissing him through his tears.

“The next day Paltiel Ox came to Samuel the Inspector General and talked with him about his daughter Maria, who had for all intents and purposes got herself married without a ceremony...And he let it be known that Benjamin could not be of any assistance, except to help *“wipe away the stain on the family honor”*...

-“Let your daughter go to Warsaw, and let her remain there quietly until she gives birth...That is the beginning of all wisdom.⁸⁴ In addition, you will not be destroying a living creature because the child, poor thing, isn’t guilty of anything...”

-“Aren’t you forgetting how much money one must have for all of this?”...- Samuel answered dispassionately.

-“You are entirely correct,” Paltiel answered him, “I reckon that 500 rubles would cover things?”

-“Not nearly enough,” Samuel shot back. “My daughter is only in her fourth month...with today’s expenses...”

-“A thousand rubles will surely be enough?”

-“Yes, a thousand rubles should cover things...”

-“So, in the meantime, good night!...”

“Honored justices and jurors, what can one say about such a scene? What can one say about this denunciation of an entire people? A Jew wrote this, a Jewish author, a Jewish belletrist, one of our writers of the people, and he portrays for us how a Jewish parent first sells his only daughter into prostitution, and then assuages his wounds with a thousand rubles. There no longer remains any feeling among them except for money. What happened to the family life that had been the pride of Jews among all nations? There is no love, no loyalty, no compassion—nothing at all except for money, nothing except for a thousand rubles!...Only a Jew-baiter, a Judeo-phobe, only the Jews’ worst enemy could offer up such a scene! Such an incident has never even been heard of among Jews. Listen to how the immortal Turgenev writes about this in his story *“Zhid.”*⁸⁵ It is worthwhile

84. An ironic reference to the biblical verse “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.” (Ps 111:10) Also, *Reishit hohmah* (The Beginning of Wisdom) was a classical tract of Jewish mysticism, ethics, and morality written by the sixteenth-century scholar Rabbi Elijah de Vidas.

85. Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev (1818-83), one of the most important nineteenth-

to consider how a Christian portrays almost the same scene that **Shomer** offered up in his *Paltiel Ox*.

“Who among us does not remember Red Hirshl, the middleman?⁸⁶ Turgenev tells us that this Hirshl was nothing more than a spy who permitted the officer to look at his pretty daughter Sara, but just to look at her, nothing more, for a fistful of golden coins!

“When the officer ordered him to leave and his daughter to remain behind in the tent, Hirshl responded: “Oh, no, no. It is strictly forbidden, not permitted. I’ll stay outside, around the corner, it is forbidden!...”

“And this is how Hirshl the agent managed the officer for a while. He squeezed a small fortune out of him, promised him mounds of gold—and the officer could only look at the beautiful Sara, gaze into her big black eyes, admire her pretty shining face—and nothing more...

“The great artist Turgenev showed us through the use of his talented pen how the worst and most corrupt father possesses a love for his child that is

century Russian realists; author of the classic novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862). Turgenev’s early story “Zhid” (Kike) first appeared in 1846.

86. Turgenev introduces the protagonist of his story as follows: “This Jew, whose name was Hirshl, was continually hanging about our camp, offering his services as an agent, getting us wine, provisions, and other such trifles. He was a thinish, red-haired little man, marked with smallpox; he blinked incessantly with his diminutive little eyes, which were reddish too; he had a long crooked nose, and was always coughing.” In Turgenev’s narrative, the Jew tempts the Russian officer with the promise of providing him with services, including tempting him with an attractive young woman. He carefully manages their interactions, ensuring that the officer’s desire for her intensifies (thereby increasing his reliance on the Jew) while not allowing for the sexual consummation of that desire. Only at the end of the story, when Hirshl is about to be hanged as a spy, is it revealed that the woman is his daughter Sara. Sholem Aleichem’s reading of Turgenev’s story is problematic in that he emphasizes Turgenev’s sensitivity to the primacy of the Jewish family and to the value of female modesty, while leaving out the fact that, in the end, Hirshl does offer to trade sex for clemency:

“Your honor,” he began muttering, “look, your honor, look . . . she, this girl, see—you know—she’s my daughter.”

“I know,” I answered, and turned away again.

“Your honor,” he shrieked, “I never went away from the tent! I wouldn’t for anything . . .”

He stopped, and closed his eyes for an instant. . . . “I wanted your money, your honor, I must own . . . but not for anything . . .”

“But now, if you save me,” the Jew articulated in a whisper, “I’ll command her . . . I . . . do you understand? . . . everything . . . I’ll go to every length . . .”

See “The Jew” in Ivan Turgenev, *The Jew and Other Stories*, translated from the Russian by Constance Black Garonett (London: William Heinemann, 1899).

greater than any other emotion, even for such a greedy lowlife as Hirshl the spy who lost his life over a few coins (he was caught with a sketch of the Russian camp and he was hanged). Turgenev's great genius allowed him to recognize that Jewish respect for family life was so great, and that the innocence of a Jewish daughter was so strongly protected, so sacred, that...

"Now let us compare: Turgenev's story was written by a Russian author for the Russian people, whereas **Shomer's** was written by a Jewish writer for the Jewish people! How can that be? Because Turgenev is a real writer, a genius, an artist, a poet, and on top of it a humanist with an aesthetic sensibility, with a sensitive spirit, with good taste. In short, he has all those important attributes with which God blesses only the chosen few from among His servants.

"This is true in Turgenev's case, as well as in the case of other writers among other peoples, including the Jews, but not in the case of **Shomer**. By contrast, the decency and honor of a Jewish woman is masterfully portrayed by the Jewish poet Gordon.⁸⁷ Consider Gordon's "The Tip of the Yud."⁸⁸ Admire the way the poem describes the piety, honesty, and innocence of the beautiful Bat-Shu'a who has never been fortunate enough to experience a single lucky day in her entire life. Her husband Hillel abandons her in his search to earn a living. Suddenly, in an instant, the bright sun shines down upon the unfortunate Bat-Shu'a and a passion ignites in her heart, a fire of love for the widower Fayvish, who notices her in the store and attracts her with tenderness, without any of the scandals or "tasting the fruits of love" that are a staple in **Shomer's** works. Even when their entire blissful plan is destroyed over the tip of the letter yud—over a missing point on a letter in one of the names on the writ of divorce, thereby rendering it invalid—even then when the unfortunate Bat-Shu'a realizes that she will remain a grass widow, and a shopkeeper in Ayalon⁸⁹ exposed to suffering, poverty, and disaster...even then this Bat-Shu'a remains a daughter of Israel, a decent, innocent Jewish woman until the day of her death, until the grave! Gordon understands this, but not **Shomer**.

"To be a writer of the people one must be both talented and patriotic. One must be a humanist and a lover of one's people, and whether in reproof

87. Judah Leib Gordon (1831–92), Hebrew poet, critic, journalist, social advocate, and outstanding exponent of the Jewish enlightenment. His poem "Hakitsah 'ami" (Awake, My People) was the motto of a generation of maskilim, while his "Le-mi ani 'amel" (For Whom Do I Toil, 1871) despaired of the future of Hebrew culture: "Perhaps I am the last of Zion's poets / and you the last readers."

88. "Kotso shel yod" (The Tip of the Yud, 1876), famous poem by Gordon in which he champions the rights of women. The poem criticizes extremist exponents of tradition who would deny a woman happiness by leaving her "chained" to her husband based on a minute technicality in the writ of divorce.

89. Ayalon: an anagram, based on its Hebrew letters, for the city of Vilna.

or in laughter, one must have faith in the people, one must be devoted to them and love them, just like Abramovitsh whose heart, whether he is laughing or mocking, bleeds for them.

“When I write about my unfortunate people,” confesses Abramovitsh in a private letter to an acquaintance, “my heart bleeds for them. I laugh for the sake of appearances, but it is a bitter laughter mixed with bile, and a feverish form of writing in which I am consumed until I extinguish like a candle...”

“This may be how Abramovitsh writes, but not **Shomer**. **Shomer** looks only for filthy scandals that he hopes will prompt his audience to break out in thunderous “Bravos”! If they don’t, it does not bother him one way or the other whether he is showered with honors in the synagogue.

“The other great Yiddish writer Linetski, who toils, outdoes himself, and expends his rare satiric talent on entertaining little fragments that the public loves in order to earn himself some bread—this Linetski who laughs and contorts himself like a clown before his audience, at great pain to himself, bleeds for our poor Jewish people whenever he speaks, writes, or thinks of them. There is nothing sadder in the world than one who must bring himself to laugh when he really wants to cry, and who must climb walls while a fire rages in his heart, while his head is who knows where, and all along, behind his back, the angel of death lies constantly in wait...”

“But this has to do with Linetski, not **Shomer**, who confesses in his novel *The Penitent* that “because I am so soft-headed, I do not remember how I got from here to there.”

“I will take him at his word. One can also become soft-headed after experiencing some fifty so-called novels by **Shomer**, which I read with such trembling that to this day I still dream of werewolves, vipers, rogues, angels, old maids with their eyes turned to the heavens, their sentimental, cloying songs, **Shomer**’s “somber philosophy,” or “folderol”...”

“Let us move from that most interesting novel *Paltiel Ox* to an even finer one: *A sheyne mayse nor a kurtse*⁹⁰ (A Story, Short but Sweet) written by **Shomer** in 1887.

“A few weeks ago,” writes **Shomer** in the introduction, “I was in Warsaw, and I was staying in Hotel Danzig located at Nalewki 18. Since I come to Warsaw quite often, I am as familiar to the hotel employees as a plugged nickel, and I know them...”

“Thanks to the fact that **Shomer** knows all of the clerks at Warsaw’s Nalewki 18, we now have the privilege of reading *A Story, Short but Sweet*. If **Shomer** were not notorious, God forbid, among the servants and clerks at Warsaw’s Nalewki 18, then Yakub, the chief valet of Hotel Danzig, would not have been able to tell him the following fine tale, **Shomer** would not

90. *A sheyne mayse nor a kurtse*, Vilna 1887.

have printed it, and we would not be privileged to read it...The story is truly short but sweet, though it should have been a bit shorter! Here it is:

“First, Yakub the valet recounts a merry tale about a couple from Lodz, who were staying in room 52, and a couple from Kovne, who were staying in room 62. The guest from Kovne had an old wife and the guest from Lodz had a young wife. The guest from Kovne, who left his room on some other matter... was led astray and visited the younger woman in 52. So, you understand...in short, punches, cries for help, tears...

“This is simply a merry little story, a satiric scene. The real stew follows.

“Yakub, our fine young hotel valet, arrived in the town of Mezeritsh after nightfall, and could not find a single soul. As if he did not already have enough problems, he fell down, could not get up, and cried out: “Help me!” Suddenly...suddenly a Jew appeared out of nowhere... You are probably thinking it was just some ordinary Jew? No, it was a Jew with a lantern! This Jew with the lantern rescued him. He saved his life! But Yakub the valet was destined to suffer, because the old man, whose name was Isaac Dreykop,⁹¹ and his wife mistakenly identified Yakub as their son-in-law Yankl, who had long ago cast away their daughter Sheyne-Feygl...

“One way or another, they did not let Yakub the valet return to his wife and children! They watched his every step. He was given a separate room with Sheyne-Feygl, the wife foisted upon him, and his new mother-in-law lavished him with gold⁹² (that’s what **Shomer** writes, literally). Her long-lost son-in-law now had to live “on proper footing” with her daughter. And he, Yakub the valet, was forced to remain there, without any residence permit to boot, until the real Yankl turned up. Only then was Yakub the valet able to return home to his little lady, to his wonderful guests at Hotel Danzig 18, where **Shomer** stays whenever he visits Warsaw.

“Of course, you probably think that this is the core of the novel? You are mistaken. It would have been better had the whole story ended with that. But this entire narrative about Yakub’s mistaken identity is only a canvas for **Shomer**, a prelude, an introduction. The real affair is just getting started!

“Since Yakub the valet remained with Sheyne-Feygl alone in a room and began to philosophize with her about the bitter circumstances in which he now found himself (poor thing!), Sheyne-Feygl also had an opportunity to pour out her bitter heart and to tell Yakub the valet about her most interesting biography.

“Sheyne-Feygl—are you following?—was in love with the bookkeeper David Fridvald, a rare personage who dressed in the latest Western fashion.

91. Dreykop: someone who wheels and deals in business, thought usually not with great success.

92. A more idiomatic version of this ironic expression would be “showered him with kindness.”

The romance between them had been going on for some time. She wrote passionate letters, sang sweet songs, and carried on until the lovers settled on a rendezvous, a place where they could meet face-to-face. That place was Trokhim's garden. And so the lovers met every day in Trokhim's garden... until her parents were warned... Her parents had intended to marry her off to the Rebbe's grandson, whose face radiated a divine countenance and who dressed according to the latest styles published in the rabbinical journals (word for word). But Sheyne-Feygl put her foot down and said that she would rather die than marry this other man. She only would agree to marry David the bookkeeper!

"Or so Sheyne-Feygl believed. David the bookkeeper apparently thought differently. This character was involved simultaneously with two beauties—with Sheyne-Feygl and with Khavele (and perhaps with Trokhim's daughter too, though I am only guessing...). He wrote the same poems for both of them, he led them on and he tasted the fruits of love with both of them...

"So what did they do? The betrayal led them to establish a bond with one another, and they agreed to play a prank on him. Sheyne-Feygl promised him that if he dressed up like a woman, she would go with him to the village of Flaruntshik where they could enjoy the fruits of their love...

"The plan went off without a hitch. David dressed up like a noblewoman, excuse the comparison, and waited by the church for his beloved Sheyne-Feygl. The young demoiselles he had deceived then appeared. They informed the town gentiles that there was a horse-thief dressed as a woman hanging around behind the church. The gentiles caught him and threw him in jail.

"But David was soon released. He left the town safely and over the course of six years married three times (he remarried every two years). Yes, David the bookkeeper is one of **Shomer's** rogues, the type of person who leads people astray, like all of **Shomer's** heroes.

"In the end, Sheyne-Feygl married the Rebbe's grandson, the precious Yankele, who cast her off, as we already know...

"What a procedure it is to trudge one's way through **Shomer's** novel! Couldn't he have just told the story of this rascal, this knave David and his affairs with Sheyne-Feygl, Khavele, Trokhim's daughter (that gentile lass), and the many other unfortunate women whom he asphyxiated like a polecat strangles chickens? No, instead he led us in and out of the forest, over hills and through valleys. First he had to tell us some story about a guest from Kovne in room 62 who happened to stray with the young wife of the guest from Lodz in room 52... And after that, we were told about Yakub the poor valet who fainted, who was "lavished with gold," and who had a strange woman foisted upon him (not that ugly, mind you, even if she was another man's wife)... And why is the story about Yakub necessary? Because Sheyne-Feygl needs a character to appear suddenly to whom she can reveal her most interesting life story, from which one can derive a moral exemplum.

“In my opinion, this nice story, like the rest of **Shomer**’s most interesting novels, could have been a bit shorter, in this way:

Once upon a time there was a hen and a rooster-
The story begins;
Once there was a cow and a calf -
The story is half done!
Once there was a cat and a mouse -
The story concludes...⁹³

“One story ends, and another begins, a brand new one...but it is actually an old one—rearranged inside-out, haphazardly stitched, hurriedly patched, and mixed together from scraps and bits—so long as the end product is a big book, a novel in two parts with an epilogue.

“This is precisely what the famous Hebrew critic David Frishman⁹⁴ remarked in the Jewish newspaper *Hayom*⁹⁵ when he said that the narratives in **Shomer**’s novels are not well-connected and that they do not relate to one another. Rather, he added, they are threaded together like beads on a string or apples on a piece of twine; they have no real relationship to one another. But does our fabricator of novels care what a Frishman or a Criticus or anyone else says about him? **Shomer** responds that any criticism is the result of jealousy and hatred, and that he will not allow himself to be discouraged.⁹⁶

93. Sholem Aleichem bases this on a popular Russian folk rhyme:

Zhili-byli dve mochely
Vot i skazochke nachalo
Zhili-byli dva pingvina
Vot i skazke seredina
Zhili-byli dva gusia
Vot i skazochka ivsia.

94. David Frishman (1859–1922), one of the major writers and critics of the renaissance of modern Hebrew literature, and a champion of art for art’s sake.

95. *Hayom* (The Day), first Hebrew daily newspaper published in Russia (1886–88). Frishman’s review of Shomer’s novel *Hanidahat* appeared as Letter III of “Mihtavim al davar ha-sifrut,” *Hayom*, 257–258 (1887), 2–3; 2–4. See also David Frishman, *Mihtavim al sifrut: Kol kitvei David Frishman* (Jerusalem: M. Neuman, 1968), 21–37.

96. Shomer was not shy in defending himself against his critics during this period. A vigorous debate among his critics and defenders occurred in 1887–88 in the pages of *Yudishes folksblat* (for a list of the relevant articles and essays, see note 126). In a letter to the editor of the *Yudishes folksblat* 10 (1887) he asserted: “One must provide a child with something sweet, even when one wants to give him bitter medicine. I know that if I had just provided my readers with moralistic writings they would not have picked up a single book.” In his feuilleton “A patsh af a patsh,” *Yudishes folksblat* 30 (1887), he attacked the new generation of critics: “I am not

“I nearly forgot to tell you that the novel *A Story, Short but Sweet* also includes a saccharine-sweet song that the two heroines sing with their eyes rolled to the heavens (sweet David wrote the song):

*Nobody knows how miserable I am,
How my heart desires you,
Fly quickly, my beautiful angel,
Come quickly. Oh, revive me...and so on.*

“This is just the place for such a song by Goldfaden:⁹⁷

I am Jacob the valet
To live without a drink is useless,
I know the Pentateuch and the Bible too:
The Righteous Haman had a good head,
And Korah was a first-class drunk,
Whereas Lot, for whom alcohol had no value,
was swallowed by the earth
Pharaoh put on a banquet for Haman
And Abraham our Patriarch was there too,
And Jethro stood on the other side of the door
And Esther was hanged,
Woe is me!

“These are the types of songs, in fact, that would have been written by such heroes as David and the rest of the servants who figure so prominently in **Shomer**’s works, rather than the inflated, sentimental and philosophical poems we encounter in almost every one of his novels.

“Yes, **Shomer** “knows the Pentateuch and the Bible too”... This is quite evident from the citations he borrows from Ecclesiastes and from Hebrew poetry to begin his novels...

“Honored jurors! A writer of the people—a true artist and poet—is a mirror in which the rays of his epoch and generation are reflected. He portrays and reflects life in the same way that a pool of pure water reflects the rays of the sun. That is why vision is first born in the soul of a talented writer who is a leader of the human community. That is why whenever some disaster occurs, some punishment from God, some misfortune, the refined sensibility of the poet, the veritable conscience of the people, is the first to feel it.

interested in the criticism of freshly-baked little writers. They cannot destroy me in any way.” In the foreword to his historical novel *Der letster yudisher kenig* (which appeared in 1888 prior to *The Judgment of Shomer*) he singled out Sholem Aleichem by taking to task the editorial staff of the *Folksblat* for providing space for his “clownish pranks....Is there nothing better than Sholem Aleichem’s prattling?”

97. Sholem Aleichem is being ironic here. To the best of my knowledge, this is not a song from Goldfaden’s repertoire.

Similarly, at a redemptive moment or when a piece of good news or celebration comes to pass, the first to announce it is the inspired writer who is blessed by God with a rich spirit, with elevated comprehension, with refined understanding, with a soft, warm heart. This is why there is a strong, eternal bond between a writer and his people. This is why the writer is a servant of God, a priest, a prophet, and an advocate, and every people loves such a servant who comforts it through its misfortunes, celebrates its joys, and guides it through its various ideas, thoughts, strivings, hopes, and so on. This is why, I submit, not a single event can come to pass within the life of a people, neither a celebration nor a disaster, that the writer does not address fully down to its very essence.

“Lately, Jews have been through bitter times. There have been many occurrences, changes, difficulties, and much suffering. This bitter period has affected every writer, and prompted them to be among the first to respond. And respond they did. Open any Jewish book or newspaper—either in Hebrew, Yiddish or Russian—and in it you will find a trace of the times, you will discover that the Jewish world did not doze off: we debated, conversed, took action, planned gatherings, raised money, built colonies in the Land of Israel, emigrated to America, whispered about Spain... in general we went for it! Whether it did any good or not, that’s a different question. What matters is that everyone got worked up. Most active of all was that small group who grabbed for the pen, picked up on all the nuances, worried about the masses, and remained interested in the fate of their poor brothers who had been left behind.

“Though **Shomer** is a cripple and a bad writer, he is a writer nevertheless. He, too, holds a pen in hand, consumes impressive quantities of ink, and ruins a lot of paper. Is it possible that the last few years have not had any impact on him? Is it possible that no Jewish matter affected him apart from werewolves, vipers, uninhibited Cecilians with their “sparkling diamonds,” “Lisettes,” usurers, and rogues? No! In his last novel (or should I say, in the most recent of his latest novels, in case he writes some more!) I read the following words with great delight: “Palestine,” “patriotism,” “Jewish Question,” “pioneer.” I devoured the novel right down to the bones. But it came back up on me, it poisoned my head, damaged my stomach, caused me heartache, and destroyed my appetite.

“This nice novel full of national sentiment has the lovely title *Di goldene kelber*⁹⁸ (The Golden Calves). It passes itself off as a novel of Kiev, as a reflection of the holy city of Kiev. But it is related to Kiev to the same degree that the rest of **Shomer**’s novels are related to Jewish life. If it were not for the fact that in the novel there was mention of the Podol and Hotel Belle-

98. *Di goldene kelber oder der katsav in salon: roman in tsvey teyln*, Vilna 1887.

vue, it could have taken place in Krisielevke,⁹⁹ Shepetivke,¹⁰⁰ Lahishin,¹⁰¹ Jerusalem, Philadelphia, or even on the other side of the Sambatyon, behind the mountains of darkness, among the so-called red Jews.¹⁰² That is how natural its scenes are. That is how believably the characters come across... But why don't we turn to the novel itself?

"In this latest novel, **Shomer** made great strides forward, a major achievement. In short, there are no rogues. Instead of a rogue, there is a tyrant. The worst of all tyrants in *The Golden Calves* is the speculator Yoyné Faygsh-teyn. Like the rest of **Shomer's** heroes, Yoyné Faygsh-teyn was a yeshiva student, a nobody, a little snot before he became filthy rich. Of course, he made the life of his first wife so miserable that she died of consumption, and after her death he flirted with some fifty girls (how's that for a scoundrel?). He courted all the available young misses in Kiev, but he set his sights on the most beautiful Helena, daughter of Abraham Risfeld. Perhaps you are wondering why he desired her more than any of the other girls in Kiev? This is how **Shomer** explains it to us in his folderol:

We accept that one is willing to spend a lot of money on a diamond. If you were to ask someone: why do you love that diamond so much? Is it because of its luster? And why is it worth a thousand rubles? – Why? Because everyone likes a diamond!...In the same way, one does not get engaged because the bride-to-be pleases him, but rather because she is desired by everyone else. The opposite is also true. One takes an aversion to a woman if she does not appeal to others. In a word, in the practical world we have thousands of examples that tell us that... and so forth.

"What a foolish lesson. Why does one want a diamond? Because it is desired by everyone else too. Why did Yoyné set his eyes on Helena?

-
99. Close in sound to Krasilovka, a town near Kiev where Sholem Aleichem resided during the composition of *The Judgment of Shomer*. The name later became the inspiration for his fictional shtetl of Kasrilevke.
100. Shepetivke (also Shepetovka): shtetl in the Western Ukraine, burial place of the hasidic rebbe Pinhas of Koretz.
101. Lahishin (also Lohiszyn): small shtetl located in several kilometers northwest of Pinsk, in Belarus.
102. The Sambatyon is part of Jewish mythical geography. It is believed to be the river beyond which the ten Lost Tribes of Israel were exiled by the Assyrians. The Talmud describes how the river rages during the week and is calm only on the Sabbath; this has prevented the lost tribes from crossing it to return from their exile. Over the centuries, the Sambatyon has captured the imagination of Jewish mystics, messianists, and travellers. The "red Jews" (natives) refer to those peoples, both in Asia and in the New World, whom various Jewish travellers have believed to be descendants of the Lost Tribes. S.Y. Abramovitch's *The Abridged Travels of Benjamin the Third* (1878), one of the most important satiric novels of classic Yiddish fiction, is a mock epic about a *luftmentsh* who sets out from his shtetl in search of the red Jews across the Sambatyon.

Because she was the desire of Zisblum, the attorney. If Zisblum had not been attracted to Helena, then Yoyné would not been attracted to her either. In that case, Helena would have married, Yoyné would have done whatever he wanted, Zisblum would still be an attorney, and **Shomer** would have been left, God forbid, without a novel!

“Who is this Helena? Helena is a girl, pretty as a picture, like a rose in the month of May... She is exactly like Lisette, Elizabeth, Zinaida and all of the other pretty girls in **Shomer’s** novels. **Shomer** writes: “She was well-educated and smart but she did not like Jews. She always read anti-Semitic newspapers such as *Kievljanin*¹⁰³ and *Novoe vremia*¹⁰⁴ But suddenly (always suddenly?!) something changed in Helena. She was transformed from being a self-hating Jew who wanted to be baptized into a passionate Jewish nationalist, all thanks to the attorney Zisblum who opened her eyes to the fact that the *Kievljanin* was a big lie (may its name be blotted out!). Together with her native pride, there sparked within her a sacred love for the upstanding lawyer. It burned so passionately that soon enough she found herself at the piano singing sweet songs... This hero Zisblum was so good and so honest that he did not allow himself, like some of **Shomer’s** other heroes, to partake of the fruits of love. As he states: “I have never been an idealist. I have always been a realist...” However, in order for you to understand the nature of Zisblum’s realism, I am obliged to read you an entire scene from *The Golden Calves*:

103. *Kievljanin* (1864–1918), a semi-official Russian anti-Semitic periodical, edited by V. Ia. Shulgin (until 1878) and then his student D.I. Pikhno. Initially founded to promote Russification, the journal quickly concerned itself with the so-called “Jewish Question.” It regularly published critical articles on aspects of Jewish education, culture, economics, and political power. In 1873, its pages published “The Jewish Cemetery in Prague” (a translation from the German novel *Biarritz*), which later inspired the famous anti-Semitic forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

104. *Novoe Vremia* (New Times, 1868–1917) one of the most influential conservative newspapers in the Russian empire. It increasingly adopted an anti-Semitic course after it was purchased by A.S. Suvorin in 1876, who transformed it into a mass-market nationalist publication. It was a leading proponent of the Blood Libel and blamed Jewish economic practices for the pogroms launched against them in 1881. The year before Sholem Aleichem published *The Judgment of Shomer*, the newspaper characterized the “Jew” as follows: “He directs all his inner strength toward disturbing that foundation of religious, political, and civil life upon which are based the contemporary states that give him equal rights... The Jew remains the same enemy of the rest of the world that he has been from the time of the exodus from Egypt. With political and civil rights, he possesses additional means and resources to harm his enemy, to trample on him and to seek his destruction” (August 26, 1887, quoted in J. Klier *Imperial Russia’s Jewish Question* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 447–48).

Yoyne Faygshteyn knocked at room 6, Hotel Bellevue, Kiev.

-“Ah! Mr. Faygshteyn,” Zisblum called out warmly. “I came to see your accommodations and to inquire about your well-being.”

-“I have a wonderful room and, thank God, I am healthy.”

-“Have you had a chance to see our Kiev?”

-“Yes, Kiev is a fine city, but it does not compare to Warsaw.”

-“Have you visited anyone?”

-“Yes, I have already been to Mr. Risfeld’s...”

-“Really? So you have already caught a glimpse of your future bride?”

-“I had the pleasure of speaking with her.”

-“So what is your opinion of her?”

-“She is a rare beauty, and intelligent to boot; one can make a lady of her.”

-“It seems to me that it would be appropriate then to wish you congratulations?”

-“From my perspective, yes. But I don’t know whether the other side is going to agree.”

-“Oh! Don’t worry about it!” - Yoyne said - “She will consider herself fortunate if she marries you because she has already been around the block...”

-“What do you mean by that?”

-“You ought to know that...today she likes this man and tomorrow she prefers that one. She promises one that she is going to be his wife, and then becomes his wife... You get it? And the next day she goes for someone different, falls in love with him, and also becomes his wife, and so forth...”

-“What are you talking about?”

-“Exactly what you hear!”

-“This is totally disgusting,” Zisblum shouted and spit. “You are a true friend. I am indebted to you! You saved me...”

Zisblum remained seated, absorbed in his thoughts. Suddenly... another knock on the door! Risfeld’s servant entered and brought with him a note-card.

-“Forgive me, Sir. I have something to ask you.”

-“Ask.”

-“Was Mr. Faygshteyn here?”

-“Yes, he was.”

-“And he must have told you who-knows-what about Fräulein Helena, because moments before her arrival here she drove him from her home.”

-“Why did she throw him out?,” Zisblum asked surprised.

-“Because he is a dishonest, vile man... No doubt he spoke ill of Helena... she had just thrown him out... I can promise you that this golden lass has no equal. I swear, she is a girl with all the best virtues.”

-“This is the first time I have ever heard a servant speaking well about his employer.”

-“Not all servants are the same. Just as there are fine and abject people, so are there many servants, *“feine Charaktere und niederträchtige”* (the servant speaks philosophically in in-your-face German).”¹⁰⁵

-“If that is the case, I will pay a visit to Fräulein Helena later today...”

“This is the type of character that **Shomer** calls a “realist.” This is one of the best heroes in his repertoire. For him such a character is an angel, a wise man, an ideal, and this incarnation of the ideal is embodied by Zisblum the realist with whom **Shomer** sympathizes so strongly. This idiot takes it upon himself to educate and improve Fräulein Helena, who has grown up on a diet of the *Kievlianin* and the *Novoe Vremia*, and he begins to converse with her about Palestine and colonization, and expresses himself not as a lawyer but like a talmudic bench-warmer, jumping from Bismarck to the Turks and back to the Ishmaelites.

-“As I see it,” Helena said to him, “you have already become an idealist.”

-“No, I am speaking very realistically!” Zisblum responded, “I tell you, I have firmly decided to become a settler in Palestine.”

-“But how will you work the land, when you have to sit hovering over books?”

-“I will get accustomed to working the land the same way I have gotten used to hovering over books.”

-“And how can you be sure that you will not be driven from Palestine?”

-“First, the Turks do not drive people from their territories. Second, if there was an attempt to get rid of us, the European governments would stand up for us...”

At that moment a servant arrived...

“Whenever **Shomer** finds himself in strange territory, confused, stuck, and he cannot find his way out of it, he falls back on the strategy (crafty lad!) of sending in a servant, or a servant girl, or a policeman to get him out of the

105. The term employed in the original is *mekhteyse daytsh*. For the sake of readability in English, I opt to translate it throughout the text as “in-your-face German.” Other possible translations might have included “there’s German for you,” “pompous German,” or “German with pleasure.” Throughout *The Judgment of Shomer*, Sholem Aleichem criticizes Shomer’s decision to employ *daytshmerish* (a conscious imitation of German) in his writing. Sholem Aleichem had both artistic and national reasons for opposing the *daytshmerish* influence in modern Yiddish letters. Shomer’s Germanisms seemed overly inflated and constructed, obscuring Sholem Aleichem’s own interest in creating a natural-sounding Yiddish that reflected the everyday vernacular of ordinary Jews. However, as linguist Max Weinreich explains, Sholem Aleichem’s antipathy toward *daytshmerish* was a relatively recent phenomenon: “The concept of daytshmerish...came into being gradually only in the nineteenth century. Up to that time the attitude toward the German determinant was neutral. Utilizing more German-component elements was a question of style *within the boundary* of Yiddish” (*History of the Yiddish Language*, 418).

thicket... Thanks to this servant who interrupts the action, we never really know how familiar **Shomer** is with the question of Palestine, about which many other writers have already poured out substantial quantities of ink, broken many pencils, and consumed heaps of paper... **Shomer** saw or heard that the world was speaking of Palestine and colonization, so he also tossed in a word about Palestine and colonization, and he doesn't come back to it again. At the end of the novel he informs us that Zisblum is in a settlement in Palestine and that he and all the colonists are living there happily, as in the days of King Solomon (literally), each one sitting in his vineyard and under his fig tree (that's what he writes, word for word). And that is all. With those few words, he has acquitted himself of the matter. And now we know that **Shomer** is also a nationalist and an admirer of Palestine. So what do people have against him?

"It would have been fine had **Shomer** actually provided us with flesh-and-blood characters, with real-life Jews, whether in Palestine or America, as long as they are flesh-and-blood and not just broomsticks, fireplace pokers, and shovels, not a cast of puppets performing for little children who dance, jump, fight among themselves, spin, and fall apart to the audience's delight.

"In this novel there is only one contemporary figure—Mr. Zisblum. Another character, Miss Zina, is also an interesting type. It is worth getting acquainted with her...

"**Shomer** heard that one should laugh at the assimilated—that is, at those who say that Jews ought to mix in with all other peoples. So he went and inserted into *The Golden Calves* a strange kind of creature, the Jewish girl Zina who was half man and half woman (that's how **Shomer** refers to her). Her *idée-fixe*, her obsession, was female emancipation. That is to say, she wanted to educate women and give them all the same rights as their husbands. In one word, she was a kind of androgyne—half male and half female, with short hair, always talking about books, emancipation, and so forth.

"But since this androgyne Zina still had the delicate heart of a woman, she fell in love with one of **Shomer's** tyrants, Judah Krum, an aristocrat from Kiev. This Krum asked her to rob her father, the rich usurer Pleyter. He persuaded her that they should then flee Kiev together and live it up elsewhere. Of course, this rogue Judah Krum tricked Zina out of her few rubles and never really loved her. They tasted the fruits of love and Zina got...you get it?

"But do you think that this is the end of Zina's epic? No, **Shomer** wants to take revenge on this educated woman Zina and on all women who dare to speak about education, emancipation, freedom, and so on. So he sent her another miserable pest: a gambler, a drunk, a pickpocket by the name of Brandvelt,¹⁰⁶ who began to court our beautiful Zina. Here is an episode from their strange courtship:

106. Brandvelt: a variation on *brent a velt* ("burn the world").

-“Good morning! You know, my darling Zina,” Brandvelt said to her once Judah had left, “I am ready for our journey. I want to run away with you tonight, my love...”

Zina was silent.

-“Why aren’t you answering me, my angel? As long as we are not together, my life is not a life. You know how passionate my love is for you. You are my very soul. So what do you say, shall we take off tonight...?”

““Good morning! Here’s a groschen, give me a candle! Are you going to give it to me or not?” It is with such enthusiasm that these lovers, the viper Brandvelt and the androgyne Zina, converse. Their passionate love ends with their robbing the tyrant Judah Krum and escaping. This is when Zina’s sad tale really begins, full of troubles, disasters, and blows of misfortune. For the gambler Brandvelt is an even greater rogue (still more rogues?) than Judah Krum. He is prepared to kill both the miserable Zina and the child fathered by her first lover Judah Krum... Suddenly... suddenly a police officer appears and brings with him the usurer Pleyter, who is now going by the new name Kopelberg and who recognizes his miserable daughter. Tears flow by the river-full... In short, a big deal, a tumult, a din, money flying around, a policeman, someone going to jail, a rogue, werewolves, vipers, dragons!!!...

“But this novel is not exactly my main point.¹⁰⁷ It is like the rest of **Shomer**’s novels: the villain meets his downfall and the good guy is saved... I only wanted to show you the degree to which **Shomer** pursued the latest fashion and took it upon himself to produce a “contemporary” novel about how Jews live today. **Shomer** attempted to portray figures from both categories: a patriot and an assimilated woman, a lover of Palestine and a... what? Even he does not know! **Shomer** hears the tune but he can’t sing on key...

“In the story “*Aheym*” (Homeward), published in *Der veker*¹⁰⁸ in 1887, the new Yiddish writer Marie Lerner¹⁰⁹ also tried to portray one of these Jewish women whose education took her so far afield that she almost forgot that she was a daughter of Israel, and, boy, did she get burned because of it.

107. Sholem Aleichem here is playfully acknowledging the influence of S.Y. Abramovitch, whose character Mendele the Book Peddler frequently employed the expression “nishto bin ikh oysn” (“but that’s not what I’m getting at”) as an ironic rhetorical strategy.

108. *Der yudisher veker*, Yiddish miscellany published in Odessa, politically allied with the Zionist Hovevei Zion.

109. Marie Lerner (nee Miriam Rabinovitch, 1860–1927), Yiddish short story writer and playwright. During the 1880s her stories appeared in such publications as *Der veker* and *Yudishes folksblat*. Her play *Di agune* appeared in the second volume of Spektor’s *Hoyz-fraynd*. Before World War II, several of her plays (in manuscript) from the early 1880s were found in the YIVO archives in Vilna.

“Now is not the proper time to discuss whether this woman was a realistic character or how “Homeward” stands up to criticism. But at the very least Marie Lerner offered us a portrait of a Jewish girl, a flesh-and-blood person, and we now understand with whom we are dealing. We have some concept of such a person. We can say whether such a character is good or bad. But what can one say about **Shomer’s** androgyne? What kind of creature did he dream up? What kind of comedy is it?! *The Golden Calves* is not comedy, it is a vaudeville sketch, a type of Purim play, even worse than vaudeville! But **Shomer** loves vaudeville. Here on the table is another of **Shomer’s** vaudevillian numbers, a true story taken from his consumptive portfolio: *A khasene on a kale*¹¹⁰ (A Wedding Without a Bride). It tells the important story of how a rabbi attempted to marry his “precious” son to an attractive girl, and only after the ceremony did it become clear that the bride was not a girl but rather Moshke the servant! A satire? Why aren’t you laughing?

“It is amazing that when **Shomer** wants us to laugh, we do not laugh; and when he is trying to be earnest, sober, or tragic, then we want to explode with laughter. For example, in the novel *It Serves Him Right*, **Shomer** says that the names of the characters are a good clue for the reader that they will have something to laugh about. I was not lazy and I read the entire book about Hantsi Dreyze the tavern keeper, Shmaye Fayfer and Berke Tsimbler the musicians, Mr. Eplkvas,¹¹¹ and many others. I was not moved to crack a smile.

“So now you are familiar with **Shomer’s** satiric talent, here in *The Golden Calves* and in his other serious novels that he fiercely prevents from being reprinted (God forbid) without his permission. However, I insist that there *is* actually something to laugh about, seeing how **Shomer** imitates the French novelists Dumas, Paul de Kock, and others. He is raving mad, he gets lost in strange happenings, he jams the locks full of wax, he brings dead characters back to life, people are poisoned along the way, children are abandoned in broad daylight, millions are withdrawn from banks under false pretenses, letters are stolen from the post office, little children are kidnapped, there are duels, arson, spilt blood... This all takes place where? In Kiev, in Odessa, in Bobruisk, in Nyesvizh, all before our very eyes. We remain silent! I ask you: isn’t this something to laugh about? Could we demand any greater satire than this from **Shomer**?

“Honored jurors, now that we have familiarized ourselves with our accused from various angles, now that we know, thank God, that **Shomer** is a moralist, a satirist, a poet, a philosopher, a belletrist and a psychologist, let

110. *A khasene on a kale: a vare geshikhte, aroysgenumen fun tshakhatker pinkes*, Vilna 1884 or 1885.

111. Fayfer: one who blows (on a musical instrument); Tsimbler: one who bangs on cymbals or other percussion instruments; Eplkvas: apple cider.

us now consider him from an aesthetic perspective too. I mean by this his style, his language. If the bride is neither smart nor educated, neither pious nor rich, at least let her be pretty! In every literature one finds uselessness, nonsense, empty chatter. If the rhetoric itself is beautiful, then perhaps it might be beneficial to the reader in that sense. But this quality is also absent from **Shomer**, who has his own language, his own variety of Yiddish that one must refer to by the name: in-your-face German. His jargon is neither Yiddish nor Russian nor German, but rather “half German and half *goyish*.” I doubt if ten percent of his readers understand his in-your-face German, with its “*Bräutigame, Kamaraden, Frauenemanzipation...*,” “*Immer erworben Respekt*” ... “*duftenhayt*,” “*Richard hat sich bewaffent mit sein künftigen Ehrennamen...*” “*Sogar schön diktiert die Reden vos er wird tragen...*” “*Jemanden beschuldigen ohne zu wenden...*” “*Sie hot feind gehat seine Physionomie mit die Manieren...*” “*Sympathieren*” (sympathize?). To extract all such in-your-face German words from all of **Shomer**’s novels is an impossible task. He also often uses Russian, and translates skillfully. For example: “*Benjamin and Aaron robbed a church and both smelled of hard labor.*” (Oni oba pakhli katorzhnymi rabotami?) “The ordinary Ulman was lying on the edge of the abyss... (Ulman nakhodilsya vozlye dynki propasti?)... “Daniel softened him with his tears...” “The clock struck midnight...” “... the root cause of the terrible situation...” “The convict...” “The understudy...,” and so on.

“All of **Shomer**’s male heroes are cut from the same cloth as regards beauty: a picture-perfect blond, tall, blue eyes, and so on. This is how all his heroines are portrayed: “*She was eighteen years old, a beauty in the full sense of the word; her alabaster white face, her long black hair like black sparkling velvet cascaded down over her shoulders, and her black fiery eyes reminded one of Venus.*” (from *The Pious Jew*)

“Nature in **Shomer** is also described implausibly and with in-your-face German. For example: “*Das war in Monat Mai. Die ganze Natur war geschmuckt wie a schöne Kalleh in Rojsen, es war a prächtige Landschaft...die Sonne strahlt so prächtig, so meistetisch, so lieblich, punkt wie dos engelisches Gesicht ihr geliebten Tanzenwald...*”¹¹²

“I have in my hands a different Yiddish novel by Spektor, *Der yudisher muzhik* (The Jewish Peasant).¹¹³ Let us compare how this writer describes nature in simple Yiddish, without resorting to **Shomer**’s in-your-face German:

112. “It was the month of May. All of nature was bejeweled like a beautiful bride in roses, it was a splendid landscape... the sun shone magnificently, so majestically, so lovely, just as her angelic face shone toward her beloved Tanzenwald.” In the citation above, Sholem Aleichem is drawing attention not only to Shomer’s overblown rhetoric and mangled German diction, but also to specific mistakes. For instance, there is no such word in German as *meistetisch* (*meisterisch* and *majestätisch* do exist).

113. See note 5.

It was a very hot day in the month of Tamuz, one of those burning hot days about which schoolkids say: "God revealed the celestial orb." Humans and other creatures find such days hard to bear. They look forward to the cool night. Small children splash in the river like ducks, but the annoying flies and nasty bugs thank and praise God for such a warm day—they crawl over man and beast and every living thing, sucking out their warm blood. It is impossible to escape the annoyance. In the marketplace in the middle of the city of N-v, people were moving about slowly and quickly, here and there... Merchants, shop-wives, peddlers, and hawkers were all sitting on the earth frying in the sun, looking for customers... Everyone was consumed by his own affairs: the salesperson was running to purchase a bushel of wheat or a measure of millet from the peasant, with the hope that he could earn a groschen for bread. The porter carefully transported his cargo in order to receive ten groschens for food. The pauper wandered around begging for a tiny morsel... Small children ran home from school to eat lunch. The teacher's assistant carried a basketful of greasy meat and milk pots to the house mistress for which he would probably receive his monthly payment... It was steaming, sweat flowed, but people wiped the sweat with their sleeves and carried on...

"In a word, you have before you a familiar scene from actual Jewish life. The shopkeepers in search of buyers, the hungry school kids, the teacher's assistant with the dishes... It is familiar, we recognize it, we remember it—it is as true as truth itself. It is clear as day. And everything is the way it should be. This is what aesthetics, poetry, art demand. This is how one should compose descriptive scenes. All authors should be required to provide these types of descriptions—only what is possible, only that which can be found in real life. Not like **Shomer's** marvelous paradise: Jewish counts, girls named Elizabeth, angels or rogues of whom we can't even imagine because they have nothing to do with our lives, they have no relationship to us whatsoever. Since everything is borrowed from Paris, it comes across as strange in Kiev, Odessa, Bobruisk, Eyshishok, like a monkey in a tuxedo with a top-hat, as natural as a clown with Queen Esther among Purim players who yell and shriek and confuse to such an extent that one is glad to be rid of them at last. **Shomer's** rogues, angels, old maids, werewolves, vipers, and remaining cast of characters also yell and shriek and confuse us, and we are also delighted when we can finally be rid of them.

"I still have something to say about a few remaining points, about several special nuggets contained in these fifty novels by **Shomer** that are spread on the table before us. Only God knows whether I will be able to mention all of the wonders that prove that **Shomer** is an expert in the Trivium and the Quadrivium, in all seventy tongues¹¹⁴—all knowledge is on the tip of his tongue—Talmud, history, mythology, law, medicine, philosophy, and so on.

114. A reference to a talmudic tradition according to which there are seventy primary nations and languages in the world, derived from the list of Noah's grandsons. A midrash teaches that Moses taught the Torah in seventy languages.

“In the novel *Di ayzerne froy*¹¹⁵ (The Iron Lady), he translates the Hebrew “*ayelet ohavim*” as the goddess of beauty—Aurora. But it seems to me that every schoolchild who has glanced at a book of ancient mythology knows that the goddess of beauty is Venus, and that Aurora is the morning star, or “*ayelet ha-shahar*,” and that the God of love is Amour, not Aurora...

“In the novel *Di umgliklike libe*¹¹⁶ (Unhappy Love) he translates the Hebrew word “vanity” as fanaticism. So how would he translate the verse from Ecclesiastes: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity?”—Fanaticism of fanaticism, everyone is a fanatic?

“In the novel *The Rich Beggar* **Shomer** says: “*Even a génie like the poet Luzatto...*” The reader asks himself, what kind of species is that, a génie? But **Shomer** is a Frenchman. We read in his “*Di tsidkones*”¹¹⁷ (Pious Woman): “*bonjour and bonsoir*,” good morning and good evening.

“*Le-mi ani ’amel? For whom do I toil?*”¹¹⁸ *This is a talmudic question*,” says **Shomer** in his novel *The Treasure*. But where does such a citation appear among our sages? Who said it? History is silent in this regard...

“**Shomer** is a great Talmudist, but he is an even better Hebrew poet. His Hebrew poems, which he provides at the beginning of every novel, are a beautiful gift, a type of bonus to the novel itself, and today people are really wild for bonuses! But the majority of such Hebrew bonuses from **Shomer** are... since it’s not connected to Yiddish, I’ll hold my tongue.

“In the novel *Der shlimazldiger hoz*¹¹⁹ (The Unlucky Hare), **Shomer** writes offhandedly: “*It was prophesied about Reb Bereniu from Koretz that he must be the messiah because you would have to look far and wide to find such an idiot, such a golem.*” Quite a notion of the messiah! We should show it to our most talented, nationalist Jewish writers—what would they have to say about it?

“In the novel *Between Two Flames*, **Shomer** says that Nathan was brought up in “*milk and in honey*”—have you every heard a metaphor like this?

“In one of his most interesting novels (I’ve already forgotten which one) **Shomer** writes that “*the heroine was ruined because she could not get married before the age of twenty. It was forbidden, according to Russian*

115. *Di ayzerne froy oder dos farkoyfte kind: eyn vunder-sheyner roman*, 1882.

116. *Di umgliklike libe oder der kosherer mamzer: roman in tsvey teyln*, Warsaw 1882.

117. *Di tsidkones oder gut shabes Yakhne: a vare hekhst interesante ertseylung*, Vilna 1884 or 1885.

118. Title of a famous poem (1871) by the Hebrew enlightenment poet Judah Leib Gordon in which he laments the lack of a Hebrew readership and critiques Russification among segments of the Jewish intellectual elite.

119. *Der shlimazldiker hoz: a varer hekhst interesanter roman*, Vilna 1886.

law...” Who does not know that according to Russian law a man cannot marry before the age of eighteen, and a woman before the age of sixteen?

“In *Der spekulant*¹²⁰ (The Speculator) **Shomer** writes: “*Today’s ordinary Jews who have reached the summit of happiness have taken an aversion to their religion. Who gave them their horns?—The speculator did!*” This is already related to psychology and to the political economy with which **Shomer** is entirely at home... Is it possible to catch all such precious finds which are scattered throughout **Shomer’s** novels? You can demand such insights from a true writer, but in the case of a scribbler like **Shomer**...

“Honored jurors, now that I have proven the degree to which our accused is a manufacturer of novels, now that I have shown you what kind of “writer of the people” **Shomer** really is, I hope that your good judgment, your taste and your pure conscience will point you to the conclusion that you need to deal with him sternly, that you should not spare him, because that is what is rightfully earned by such a harmful writer, such a murderer of the people. Therefore you can do two good deeds: you can condemn a literary huckster, and you can protect our poor young Yiddish from other such parasites. I am not saying this for my own sake, honored jurors. I am telling you this in the name of literature, in the name of readers, in the name of our entire people!”

* * *

The prosecutor took his seat and **Shomer’s** attorney rose, cleared his throat, and began his defense in the following words:

“Honored judges and jurors! My talented opponent, the prosecutor, certainly painted you a pretty picture. He presented my client, Mr. **Shomer**, as a terrible parasite, as a murderer of the people, as a butcher, as a thief. But that is simply not true. His interpretation is completely tendentious. He is the type of prosecutor who snoops around and seeks out only the worst. In my opinion, it is no great achievement to besmirch even the purest man. If we look hard enough we can find plenty of faults and imperfections in anyone. Everything must have its boundary, its limits. It is no great art to toss an entire mountain of shortcomings at someone, to search, rummage, and dig around, all in order to ruin the reputation of an author who has written so much for his people. To be honest, I will not tell you that my client is a great, highly praised belletrist. But neither will I pronounce that he is not a writer at all, or that he does not have a speck of talent. A hundred novels, honored jurors, a hundred novels are no small thing. It is not so easy to create plots for several thousand heroes! The prosecutor says that they are all hackneyed versions of French novels. Even if this were the case, it is more difficult to adapt a hundred novels than to be a prosecutor! Especially since

120. *Der spekulant oder tsvey meysim geyen tantsn: a vare geshikhte*, Vilna 1886.

not all of them are adapted. The majority are the product of **Shomer's** own imagination. The prosecutor cannot deny this. Even if they have little connection to Jewish life, this does not mean that **Shomer** is guilty. The public, the uneducated class of readers, demands his type of merchandise, and the booksellers, the itinerant salesmen, seek out his variety of novels, nothing better—the only criterion is that they be cheap and plentiful! Sirs, I ask you, how is **Shomer** guilty if people come to him and pay him by the sheet to write such-and-such a work by such-and-such a title? It is purchased by the warehouse-full, the public reads it—people probably need it! If it were not needed, people would not buy it. But since people are willing to hand over their hard-earned money for it, why should they not be able to have it? There is a saying among the gentiles: “A fool gives, and the clever one takes”...

“The prosecutor makes a comparison between my client and Abramovitch, Linetski, Goldfaden, and so forth. Woe is me! Who said that **Shomer** should be compared to them? Even **Shomer** himself would never say such a thing! He is not such an idiot as to persuade himself of such a pile of rubbish. The prosecutor calls him a murderer, a butcher, a robber. Honored jurors, take a look at my client. Does he have the face of a murderer, a butcher, a robber? What kind of evil, God forbid, could **Shomer** have intended with his novels? He does not mean any harm, God forbid, to anyone. He does not want to provoke anyone or to ruin anyone's livelihood. If a businessman wants to earn a ruble, why shouldn't he? Have you imagined what is possible for a Jewish writer to earn from his writing? I would not wish it on any of my enemies. I am certain that were my client to have something of a decent income—a store, a commission, a position—he would gladly forfeit his name, his reputation, his literary career, along with everything else.* But what is he supposed to do, honored jurors? He has to live, he has to eat! A Jewish writer also has a stomach. The prosecutor demonstrates that **Shomer** is not a moralist, not a satirist, not a poet, not a belletrist, not a psychologist, not a philosopher, and not an aesthete. Very well, I agree. I concede that to him. But I would be interested to know who that writer is who contains within him all of these aforementioned virtues? One must be a serious pedant to demand all of this from a single person. So what is this really all about? Is there not among the fifty or so novels that the prosecutor has mentioned a single work that has some value, a chapter, or even a single page? It cannot be! It cannot be! On the contrary, I know from my own experience that

* In the novel *The Treasure*, **Shomer** explicitly says that he would do business with the fools who would have erected an iron monument in his honor after his death; in his lifetime he would take from them a third of what the monument should cost... Shomer has desires! Napoleon once said: “A man is not a soldier if he never has the ambition of becoming a general.”

many young ladies who read **Shomer's** most interesting novels have cried countless tears. No doubt, if they weep over his work, it must be worth something! We have further proof that his works have something of value to them: there are many imitators who make use of **Shomer's** name on their creations. I have here in my portfolio a nice rag, a novel with the title *Di aristokratke*¹²¹ (The Aristocrat) by Abraham Isaac Bukhbinder from Odessa. The name of the real author appears in small letters, and above it, printed in big letters, we read: composed in the style of **Shomer** (in really big letters!).

“The second treasure is *Di hadase*,¹²² a drama in four acts by Shimon Bekerman, also from Odessa, and also written in the style of **Shomer** (printed in big letters). In order for it to seem precisely like one of **Shomer's** works, on which there always appears the statement “reprint strictly forbidden,” Shimon Bekerman added the following statement at the bottom, though it came out a little differently: “Re print strict for bidden!”

“Not long ago, a new type of writer, some fellow with the name Ulrikh Kalmus (perhaps from Odessa also?) reworked **Shomer's** novel *A patsh fun zayn libn nomen*¹²³ (A Slap from the Lord) about the householder who married the cook after winning the lottery. But this Ulrikh Kalmus published it as a drama (a real treat!) under the title *Der groyser trefer*¹²⁴ (The Great Fortune Teller), and with such beautiful language that he is welcome to warm himself by **Shomer's** hearth. The content itself is also very interesting in that all of Ulrikh Kalmus's heroes drink only coffee. It seems that Ulrikh Kalmus enjoys coffee, and coffee is the kind of drink that does not spoil...”

“Mr. Defense Counsel!,” the presiding judge suddenly broke in, “I must ask you to speak to the issue at hand and not wander so far off course!”

“Pardon me! Honored jurors, it should be as clear as day to you that **Shomer's** novels do contain something of worth, even though the prosecutor absolutely denies it. I can provide you with further proof in the fact that the public reads more of **Shomer's** novels than Abramovitsh's or other similar works. For what reason? Why, I ask you? It is probably not an accident.

121. I was unable to find the date of this novel. See note 6 for additional information on Bukhbinder.

122. A reference to *Hadase di khalutse: a drame in 4 aktn, ferfast af dem ort fun Shomer*, Odessa 1884.

123. A possible reference to *A gebentshter patsh: a vare ertseylung*, Berdichev, 1887. A novel by the same title as the one cited by Sholem Aleichem above was republished in Warsaw in 1897.

124. Sholem Aleichem is referring here to Kalmus's *Der groyser trefer oder der gevins fun di 200,000 rubl* (The Great Fortune-Teller, or the 200,000 Ruble Windfall, a Yiddish drama in four acts), *Yudishes folksblat* 6–12 (1888). Sholem Aleichem found the vulgarity of Kalmus' Yiddish unacceptable.

Perhaps there is something to them. I assert that there is a kind of bond between **Shomer** and his readership, something that makes their feelings coincide with his works. It would appear that **Shomer** understands what the public likes. How can **Shomer** be guilty if the public does not understand? What should **Shomer** do if the masses prefer such fairy tales—as the prosecutor refers to them—full of rogues, vipers, and werewolves? The masses, the ordinary folk, are like small children who cannot fall asleep without such a fairy tale. They adore such stories. They get frightened at the sound of “Boo,” and they demand precisely to get frightened!

“**Shomer** understands this very well, and you can see how he acquired great fame as a result. Wherever you happen to be in a Jewish town, drop in on the shop attendant, the servant girl, the artisan, the female cook, the woman who sells fruit... You will hear the delight with which they respond to your inquiries about **Shomer**. Ask the same cooks or fruit-sellers or servants about Abramovitsh or Linetski and their mouths will open and their ears will prick up. They will not understand what an Abramovitsh or a Linetski even is... So what is the story with them? The story is the following: Abramovitsh, Linetski and others like them are writers for the intelligentsia, for the chosen few, for the educated or partly educated classes, whereas **Shomer** is a writer for everyone, a novelist for shopkeepers, servant girls, cooks, coachmen, and women who peddle goods at the market. Yes, honored jurors, for such an audience **Shomer** is a nice writer, a fine belletrist, just as Moshe Marakhovski from Boslov is a decent poet, and Ulrikh Kalmus is a decent playwright who crafts dramas and comedies, and Ozer Bloshteyn and Bekerman, and Khayim Bunim Tsimbler and Fishzon the jester, and all the other hacks are considered major writers by the ordinary folk... I see that the prosecutor is looking at me askance, as if I am offending the masses and casting aspersions on the people. What am I to do? I am also eager for the masses to take up the kinds of Yiddish works that the intellectuals are reading. I also want to see what the scullery maid has to say about Abramovitsh, Linetski, and other such authors. I also want to hear what the servant girl has to say about one of Spektor’s novels. I also would like to live so long as to experience a time when this audience chases after a real book, seeks out a Jewish newspaper, a journal, understands what a critic is all about and why critics are necessary... Only God knows whether I and the prosecutor and you will live to see such a day. Only God knows whether something will be learned from today’s proceedings that are being taken down by our stenographer Sholem Aleichem and will probably be reprinted in a separate pamphlet—God knows whether anyone will know of it!... No, honored jurors, you must not be so severe with my client, because it is not **Shomer** who is guilty for being a **Shomer**. The public is guilty that there is such a thing as a **Shomer**. A certain man of science once said that everything is a product of its time, of its circumstances. Whatever we see, whatever we find in the world must be the way it is; it cannot be otherwise because then

it would not be....Therefore, we must conclude, we must be reconciled to the fact that writers such as **Shomer**, Bekerman, Ulrikh Kalmus, Moshe Markhovski from Boslov, Oyzer Bloshteyn, Khayim Bunim Tsimbler and others must be part of our literature, and the more we persecute them, the more we want to hound them, the more they will breed, be fruitful and multiply, sprout like green grass and grow like toadstools. Let them be, and they will probably cease to exist on their own. Leave the public alone to choose what material it wants to read. The audience, I repeat, is like a little child. It will grow up, it will get smarter. You will not be holding back anyone in the least, and true talents, important writers will not be harmed. God's world is vast. Beautiful nature and human intelligence co-exist with scoundrels and insects, worms and cockroaches, frogs and lice, darkness and plague... and they do not destroy God's world.

"Therefore, honored jurors, I hope that your intelligence and your conscience will not permit you to deal too harshly with my client, Mr. **Shomer**, who is now in your hands and who begs you to judge him fairly and with compassion, as a man equal to others. I rest my case."

* * *

"What is your response?," the presiding justice turned to the prosecutor.

"After such a statement, after such a "defense" presented by my opponent, the counsel for the plaintiff, I have nothing further to add."

This is what the prosecutor said and he sat down.

"The Accused! You may now put in a last word."

Thus the presiding justice turned to **Shomer**, who rose and began to speak in a trembling voice:

"Honored judges and jurors. I am supposed to react both to the prosecutor as well as to my own lawyer, but my health does not allow it. I will not assert that I am a major belletrist. But I can tell you that in my place and time I play an important enough role... A new generation has arisen. New Yiddish writers have appeared: educated men who possess a good knowledge of Hebrew and have advanced degrees... All of them have taken to writing in our homey language. It has become the rage to criticize Yiddish works. It was never like this before. Nobody ever said a single bad word about my writing. Just the opposite: I was praised, I was thanked, I was paid—so long as I continued to write novels. Now that a Yiddish newspaper has been established, now that there is criticism, everyone is suddenly concerned with me, everyone is piling on... "Mr. Criticus" is on my case; the "Yudisher gazlen"¹²⁵ in the *Yudishes folksblat* is against me, Frishman and Sholem

125. *Der yudisher gazlen* (The Jewish Thief) pseudonym of Yisroel Levi (1842–1905). Levi's St. Petersburg press put out *Yudishes folksblat* from 1881–90. Though the

Alechem are no better inclined towards me.¹²⁶ Everyone is getting in on the action. Why me and not others? Because they are jealous of me, they begrudge my success. Honored jurors, in my life I have written close to a hundred novels. It was not easy. The prosecutor says that I adapted them from French. I swear to you, I do not know French! What kind of reward will I live to see from the common people? Long ago I wrote in one of my novels that I will spare them the trouble of erecting me a cast-iron monument after my death. I have toiled so much and in the end they will ruin me. Honored jurors, have pity!”

At this point **Shomer**'s voice broke and a sobbing cry could be heard in the hall. Two scullery maids and a servant girl were crying. The rest of the audience also sat sadly and several among them had red, damp eyes.

“So, honored jurors,” the presiding justice said, “now you must go to your deliberation room. You must determine your judgment of our accused, which consists of three possibilities:

1. If you find according to the prosecutor's accusation that **Shomer** is entirely guilty, you will indicate: “Yes, he is guilty.”
2. If you find according to the defense that **Shomer** is entirely innocent, you will indicate: “Not guilty.”
3. And if you determine that **Shomer** is guilty but with extenuating circumstances, and you want to treat him with mercy, compassion, and pity, you will indicate: “He is guilty, but he deserves leniency.”

* * *

paper published some of the best contemporary writers (for instance, Sholem Aleichem, Spektor, and Yankev Dinezon), in Levi's own articles he often defamed Yiddish, to the chagrin of those writers and intellectuals who were struggling to establish respect for it as a competitive literature.

126. A reference to the heated exchanges that took place in the pages of *Yudishes folksblat* (hereafter *YF*) among Shomer, his critics, and his defenders. See Sh. Berdichevski, “Erinerungen un gedanken vegn ertsung un literatur,” *YF* 1 (1887), 3–9; 3 (1887), 35–38; Y.M. Volfson, “Der shlimazldiker hoz,” *YF* 2 (1887), 24–26; Shomer, “Korespondentsyes: A briv tsu der redaktsye,” *YF* 10 (1887), 150–51; Der yudisher gazlen, “Kritik,” *YF* 27 (1887), 419–22; 28 (1887), 435–40; Shomer, “A patsh far a patsh,” *YF* 30 (1887), 483–88; Pri ets ha-hayim (Y.M. Volfson), “Kritik af kritik,” *YF* 32 (1887), 541–42; Sholem Aleichem, “Fun vayte medines,” *YF* 33 (1887), 547–52; Der yudisher gazlen, “Der yudisher gazlen iz eysh-lehove,” *YF* 34 (1887), 563–68; Rav-kotsn (Y.Kh. Ravnitski), “An eysek mit shmates,” *YF*, supplement to issue 4 (1888), 13–15; 5 (1888), 32–33; Anonymous, “Retzenzye,” *YF*, supplement to issues 11–12 (1888), 355–61; Eyner fun di mitarbeter, “Retzenzye: Di goldene kelber,” *YF* 16 (1888), 455–67; Shomer, “Di shlimazldike knish-iklekh,” *YF* 16 (1888), 449–55; 17 (1888), 481–88; 18 (1887), 525–37.

A half-hour later the twelve jurors came back with their verdict: "Yes, he is guilty, but he deserves leniency."

The prosecutor and the defense counsel exchanged a few more words, during which time the prosecutor demanded that **Shomer** be driven from the literary world and that he be forbidden from writing any more novels for the common people. The defense argued that this was somewhat excessive, that to forbid someone from writing was too harsh, and that the verdict itself was already punishment enough for **Shomer**.

The presiding judge and the two magistrates rose and left to consider the verdict, and there was a significant commotion and tumult in the hall. People conversed, complained, grumbled. This one said that they were going to send him to hard labor, and that one determined that it smelled more like Siberia. The women spoke more than anyone, all at once, like geese. Several were on **Shomer's** side, and some on the opposite. Several old maids gazed at **Shomer** with pity, compassion, and love.

Finally, the presiding judge and the justices came out and read the following decision, consisting of five points:

1. The court determines that **Shomer** is not truly a Yiddish writer.
2. Following the careful deliberation of twelve individuals whose responsibility it was to judge him, we proclaim that **Shomer** is not a belletrist, a poet, an artist, a moralist, a philosopher, a satirist, or an aesthete.
3. Every new work that is published by **Shomer** immediately must be submitted to the critics who will go over it in great detail.
4. A request that **Shomer** should have compassion on our poor Yiddish language and should, at the very least, refrain from reprinting any of his old rags, so that his "most interesting" novels should go off to the same place where our beloved holy Sabbath goes at sunset.
5. This verdict, which is being copied word for word by our stenographer Sholem Aleichem, should be printed quickly and without delay in several thousand copies and distributed among Yiddish readers at the cheapest possible price.

