

# A BOOK THAT WAS LOST

and Other Stories by  
**S. Y. AGNON**

Edited with Introductions by

**ALAN MINTZ AND ANNE GOLOMB HOFFMAN**

**SCHOCKEN BOOKS**    *New York*



## THE LADY AND THE PEDDLER

A CERTAIN JEWISH peddler was traveling with his stock from town to town and village to village. One day he found himself in a wooded region far from any settlement. He saw a lone house. He approached it and, standing before the door, he cried out his wares. A lady came outside and spoke to him. "What do you want here, Jew?" Bowing, he wished her well and said, "Perhaps you can use something of these lovely things I have?" He took his pack off his back and offered her all sorts of goods. "I have no use for you or your wares," she said to him.

"But look and see, perhaps even so? Here are ribbons and rings and kerchiefs and sheets and soap and fine perfumes that the noblewomen use." She looked at his pack for a few moments, then averted her eyes from him. "There's nothing here. Get out!" Again he bowed before her and took things out of the pack to offer to her. "Just look, my lady, and don't say there's nothing here. Perhaps you might want this, or perhaps this lovely piece of goods pleases you. Please, my lady, look and see." The lady saw a hunting knife. She paid him for it and went back into her house. He put his pack on his shoulders and went on his way.

By that time, the sun had already set and he could no longer make out the road. He walked on, and on again farther, weaving his way in among trees and out and in among them once more. Darkness

covered the earth and no moon shone in the sky. He looked all around and began to be afraid. Then he saw a light shining. He walked toward the light until he arrived at a house. He knocked on the door. The mistress of the house peered out at him and shouted, "Are you here again? What do you want, Jew?"

"Since I left you, I've been wandering in the darkness and I can't find any town."

"And so, what do you want from me?"

"Please, my lady, give me permission to sit here until the moon comes out. Then I'll be able to see where I'm going and I'll be off." She looked at him with an angry eye and granted him permission to spend the night in an old barn in her courtyard. He lay down on the straw and dozed off.

That night it rained heavily. When the peddler rose in the morning, he saw that the entire land was one great swamp. He realized that the lady was a hard person. Let me abandon myself, he thought, to the mercy of Heaven, and I'll ask no favors from ungenerous people. He put his pack on his shoulders and prepared to leave. The lady looked out at him. "It seems to me that the roof needs mending. Can you do anything about it?" The peddler set down his pack. "I'll be glad to jump right up and take care of it." She gave him a ladder and he climbed up to the top of the roof, where he found shingles torn loose by the wind. At once, he set them back in place, paying no heed to himself while all his clothes gushed water and his shoes were like two buckets. What difference does it make to me, he thought, whether I'm on the top of a roof or walking through the forest? There's as much rain in the one place as in the other. And perhaps because I'm helping her out, she'll show some kindness to me and let me stay in her house till the rains stop.

The peddler fixed the shingles, sealed the leaks in the roof, and climbed down. "I'm sure that from now on the rain won't get into your house," he told the lady. "You are a real craftsman," she answered. "Tell me what your fee is and I'll pay you." He put his hand over his heart and said, "God forbid that I should take a single penny from my lady. It is not my practice to accept payment for anything

that is not part of my trade, certainly not from my lady, who has shown me the kindness of allowing me to spend the night in her house." She looked at him with suspicion, for she thought that he spoke in this manner in order to ingratiate himself with her and get more money out of her. Finally she said, "Sit down and I'll bring you some breakfast." He stood up to wring out his clothes, then he emptied the water from his shoes and looked all around. From the many antlers hanging on the walls, it was clear that this was a hunter's house. Or perhaps it wasn't a hunter's house at all, and those antlers were simply hung up for decoration, as is the custom of forest dwellers, who decorate their homes with the horns of wild animals.

While he was still standing and looking, the mistress of the house returned, bringing with her hot liquor and cakes. He drank and ate and drank. After he had eaten and drunk, he said to her, "Perhaps there is something else here that needs to be fixed? I'm ready to do whatever my lady wishes." She cast a glance around the house and told him, "Look and see." The peddler was happy that he had been granted permission to stay in the house until the rains passed. He began to busy himself, fixing one thing and then another, and he asked no payment. In the evening she prepared supper for him and made up a bed for him in a room where she kept old things no longer in use. The peddler thanked the mistress of the house for bestowing such bounties upon him, and he swore that never would he forget her kindness to him.

By the next morning, new rains were falling. The peddler looked first outside and then at the face of the lady: Who was prepared to have pity on him sooner? The mistress of the house sat huddled in silence, and a great feeling of desolation arose from the furniture all around. The animals' horns on the walls were enveloped in mist and they gave off an odor like the odor of living flesh. Perhaps she wanted to relieve that feeling of desolation which gripped the heart, or perhaps she was moved to pity for this fellow who would have to walk through rains and swamps. Whatever the reason, the

lady began to speak to him. About what did she speak and about what didn't she speak! About rains that did not stop and winds that blew without letup, about roads that were becoming impassable and grain that would rot, and much of the same sort. The peddler thanked her in his heart for every word because every word extended his time in the house so that he did not have to drag himself along the ways in rain and cold and storm. And she also was pleased that she had a living creature there. She took up her knitting needles and told him to sit down. He sat before her and began to tell of noblemen and noblewomen, of lords and ladies, of all that he knew and all that was pleasant for her to hear. In the meantime, they had drawn closer together. He said to her, "My lady lives all alone. Has she no husband or friend and companion? Surely there must be here many distinguished gentlemen to seek the company of such a fine lady."

"I had a husband," she said. The peddler sighed, "And he died." "No," she corrected, "he was killed." The peddler sighed over her husband who was killed and asked, "How was he killed?" She answered, "The police don't know, and now you want to know! What difference does it make to you how he was killed, whether an evil beast ate him or whether he was slaughtered with a knife? Don't you yourself sell knives with which it is possible to slaughter a man?"

The peddler saw that the lady was not inclined to discuss her husband, so he kept silent. And she too was silent. After a little while the peddler spoke again. "May the Lord grant that they find the murderers of your husband to exact vengeance from them."

"They won't find them," she said, "they won't find them. Not every murderer is meant to be caught." The peddler lowered his eyes. "I am sorry, my lady, that I have reminded you of your sorrow. If I only knew how I could cheer you up, I'd give half my life to do it." The lady looked at him and smiled a queer smile, perhaps in contempt or perhaps in gratification, or perhaps just an ordinary smile that one person smiles to another and the other interprets as he wishes: if he is naive, then he interprets it in his own favor. The peddler, who was a naive man, interpreted the laughter of that woman in his own favor and for his own benefit. And since he was sorry for this

woman who, to judge by her age and beauty, should have had men courting her, he suddenly looked upon himself as just such a man. He began to speak to her the sort of things that the ear of a young woman loves to hear. God only knows where this simple peddler learned such a style of talking. He soon found courage and began to speak of love, and even though she was a lady and he was a poor peddler, she welcomed his words and showed him affection. And even when the rains had passed and the roads had dried, they did not part.

The peddler stayed with the lady. Not in the old barn and not in the room for old things that were no longer used. No, he stayed in the lady's room and slept in her husband's bed, while she waited upon him as though he were her lord. Every day she prepared him a feast from all that she had, in house and field, every good fowl and every fat fowl. And if she broiled the meat in butter, he did not hold back from it. At first, when he would see her twisting the neck of a bird, he would be shocked. Afterward, he ate and even sucked the bones dry, as is the way of worthless folk: at first they are unwilling to commit a sin and afterward they commit all the sins in the world with a hearty appetite. He had neither wife nor children, he had no one to miss, and so he lived with the lady. He took off his peddler's clothes and put on the garments of aristocracy, and he fell in with the people of the place until he was like one of them. The lady did not allow him to labor, neither in the house nor in the field. On the contrary, she took all the work upon herself while she treated him royally with food and drink, and if she was short-tempered with him in the daytime she was loving to him at night, as it is a woman's nature to be sometimes one way and sometimes the other. And so passed one month and then two months, until he began to forget that he was a poor peddler and she a lady. She on her part forgot that he was a Jew or anything of the sort.

And so they lived together in one house under one roof, and he ate and drank and enjoyed himself and slept in a properly made bed—in short, it would seem that he wanted for nothing. But about one thing he was amazed: all that time he had never seen her eat or

drink. At first he thought she might think it degrading to eat with him. After he became used to her and had forgotten that she was a lady and he a Jew, he wondered more and more.

Once he said to her, "How is it, Helen, that I've been living with you several months and I've never seen you eat or drink? You haven't put a feeding trough in your belly, have you?" She said to him, "What difference does it make to you whether I eat or drink? It's enough that you don't want for anything with me and you have plenty to eat always." "It's true," he answered, "that I eat and drink and I lead a more comfortable life now than ever before, but even so I would like to know how you sustain yourself and how you nourish yourself. You don't eat at the same table with me, and I've never seen you eat away from the table either. Is it possible to exist without eating and drinking?" Helen smiled and said, "You want to know what I eat and what I drink? I drink men's blood and I eat human flesh." As she spoke she embraced him with all her might and placed her lips against his and sucked. "I never imagined," she said to him, "that a Jew's flesh would be so sweet. Kiss me, my raven. Kiss me, my eagle. Your kisses are sweeter to me than all the kisses in the world." He kissed her, thinking, This is the kind of poetic language that noblewomen must use when they address their husbands with affection. And she on her part kissed him and said, "Joseph, in the beginning, when you showed yourself here I wanted to set the bitch on you, and now I myself am biting you like a mad bitch, so much that I'm afraid you won't get out of my hands alive. O my own sweet corpse!" And so they would while away their days in love and affection, and there was nothing in the world to upset their affairs.

But that one thing kept gnawing away in the heart of the peddler. They lived together in one house in one room, and her bed was next to his, and everything she had she put in his hands, except for the bread which she did not eat at the same table with him. And she observed this to such a degree that she would not even taste from the dishes she prepared for him. Since this thing was gnawing away in his

heart, he would ask about it again. And she would tell him. "He who delves too deeply digs his own grave. Be happy, my sweet corpse, with everything that is given to you, and don't ask questions that have no answer." The Jew reflected on this. Perhaps she's really right. What difference does it make to me whether she eats and drinks with me or somewhere else? After all, she is healthy and her face looks fine and I want for nothing. He decided to keep quiet. He went on enjoying her board and all the rest of it. He neither pressed her with questions nor bothered her with excessive talk. Rather, he loved her even more than before, whether because he really loved her, or perhaps because of that enigma which had no solution.

Anyone who has to do with women knows that a love that depends upon the physical bond alone will come to an end before long. And even if a man loves a woman as Samson loved Delilah, in the end she will mock him, in the end she will oppress him, until he wishes he were dead. That is the way it was with this peddler. After a while she began to mock him, after a while she began to oppress him, after a while he began to wish he were dead. Nevertheless, he did not leave her. And she on her part did not tell him to get out. He stayed with her month after month: they would quarrel and make up, quarrel and make up, and he not knowing why they were quarreling and why they were making up. But he would reason thus to himself: Here the two of us are intimate with each other, living side by side, never apart from one another, and yet I know no more about her today than I knew yesterday, and yesterday I knew no more than I knew about her the day I came here for the first time when she bought the knife from me. As long as they continued to live together in peace, he didn't ask many questions, and if he asked, she would stop up his mouth with kisses. When the peace between them disappeared, he began to think more and more about it, until he said to himself, I won't let her be until she tells me.

One night he said to her, "Many times now I've asked you about your husband, and you've never said a thing to me."



"About which one did you ask?"

"You mean you had two husbands?"

"What difference does it make to you if there were two or three?"

"So then I'm your fourth husband?"

"My fourth husband?"

"Well, from what you say, that is what it comes to. Doesn't it, Helen?"

"Wait a minute and I'll count them all," she said to him. She held up her right hand and began counting on her fingers, one, two, three, four, five. When she had counted all the fingers on her right hand, she held up her left hand and went on counting. "And where are they?" he said to her.

"Now, didn't I tell you that he who delves too deeply digs his own grave?"

"Tell me anyway." She patted her belly and said, "Some of them perhaps are here."

"What do you mean, 'here'?" he asked. She narrowed her eyes and smiled. She looked at him for a few moments. "And if I told you," she said, "do you think you would understand? Mother of God! Look, see what a face this corpse has."

But from the moment she had begun to count on her fingers, he no longer had his wits about him. Now he lost the power of speech as well. He sat in silence. She said to him, "Darling, do you believe in God?" He sighed and answered, "And is it possible not to believe in God?"

"You're a Jew, aren't you?" He sighed. "Yes, I'm a Jew."

"Well, the Jews don't believe in God, for if they believed in Him they wouldn't have murdered Him. But if you do believe in God, pray to Him that you won't end up the way they did."

"The way who did?"

"The way those you asked about ended up."

"You mean your husbands."

"Yes, my husbands."

"And how did they end up?"

"If you don't understand," Helen answered, "it doesn't pay to talk to you." As she said this she looked at his throat, and her blue eyes glittered like the blade of a new knife. He took a look at her and shuddered. She also looked at him and said, "Why did you turn so pale?" He touched his face and asked, "Did I turn pale?"

"And the hair on your head," she continued, "is standing up like pig bristles." He felt his hair. "My hair is standing up?"

"And the strands of your beard," she said, "are clotted together in patches like goose feathers. Pfui, how ugly the face of a coward is!" She spat in his face and left him. As she was walking away she turned her head back toward him and called out, "Take good care of your Adam's apple. Mother of God! It's trembling as though it saw the knife. Don't worry, my little sweetheart, I haven't bitten you yet."

The peddler was left sitting by himself. One moment he would feel his face with his hand and the next moment his beard. The hair on his head had already settled and was lying in place as before, half on one side and half on the other, with a part going down the middle that was as cold as though ice had been laid on it. From the next room he could hear Helen's footsteps. At that moment he neither loved her nor hated her. His limbs began to grow numb, as though he had lost control over them. His thoughts, on the other hand, became more and more active. I'll get up and take my pack and be on my way, he said to himself. But when he tried to leave, his limbs became even weaker. Again he heard Helen's footsteps. Then her feet were still and he heard the clattering of utensils and the smell of cooking. The peddler began to consider again. I have to get out of here. If not now, then tomorrow morning. How glad he was when he had been permitted to spend the night in the old barn. Now even the bed made up for him shrieked, "Pick up your feet and run!" By that time it had already grown dark. Despite himself, he decided to spend the night in that house. Not, however, in his wife's room, in the bed of her murdered husbands, but in the old barn or in some other room. When day broke, he would be on his way.

Helen came in and said, "You look as if I had already swallowed you." She took him by the arm and brought him into the dining

room, sat him down at the table, and told him, "Eat." He lifted up his eyes and looked at her. Again she said, "Eat." He broke off a piece of bread and swallowed it whole. "I see you need to have your bread chewed for you," Helen said. He wiped the remnants of bread from his hands and got up to leave. "Wait, and I'll go with you," Helen said. She put on a sheepskin coat and went outside with him.

Walking along, they spoke nothing either good or bad, but they just talked, like people who have quarreled and want to take their minds off themselves. As they were walking, they came upon a stone image. Helen stopped, crossed herself, stood and recited a brief prayer. Afterward she took Joseph by the arm and returned with him to their house.

During the night Joseph awoke from his sleep in terror and screamed with all his might. It seemed to him that a knife had been thrust into his heart, and not into his heart but into that stone image, and not into the stone image, but into another image made of ice, the kind the Christians make on the river during their holidays. And though the knife had not struck him, even so he felt pain in his heart. He turned over and sighed. Sleep fell upon him and he dozed off. He heard a clinking sound and saw that the bitch was pulling off the chain around her neck. He closed his eyes and did not look at her. She leaped up on him and sank her teeth into his throat. His throat began to spurt and she licked up his blood. He screamed with all his might and thrashed about in the bed. Helen awoke and shouted, "What are you doing, raising the house with your noise and not letting me sleep!" He shrank under his covers and pillows, and lay motionless until daybreak.

In the morning Joseph said to Helen, "I disturbed your sleep."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Why, you shouted at me that I wasn't letting you sleep."

"I shouted?"

"Then you must have been talking in your sleep." Helen's face paled and she asked, "What are you saying?"

That night he moved his bedding to the room where old things were kept that were no longer in use. Helen saw and said noth-

ing. When it was time to go to sleep, he said to her, "I haven't been sleeping well and I keep turning and tossing in bed, so I'm afraid that I'll disturb your sleep. That's why I've moved my bed into another room." Helen nodded in agreement. "Do whatever you think is best for you."

"That's what I've done."

"Then good."

From then on they spoke no more of the matter. Joseph forgot that he was only a guest and continued according to his practice. Every day he thought of leaving her house, of abandoning all her favors. A day passed, a week passed, and he did not leave her house. And she on her part did not tell him to get out.

One night he was sitting at the dinner table and Helen brought in a dish. Her mouth gave off an odor like the smell of a hungry person. He grimaced. She noticed and said to him, "Why are you twisting your mouth?"

"I didn't twist my mouth." She smiled a queer smile. "Maybe you're bothered by the way my mouth smells?"

"Take a piece of bread and eat," he entreated her. "Don't worry about me, I won't go hungry," Helen answered. And again a queer smile played over her face, worse than the first one.

After eating and drinking, he went off to his room and made his bed ready. It occurred to him suddenly to recite the bedtime Shema. Since there was a crucifix hanging on the wall, he got up and went outside to recite the Shema.

That night was a winter night. The earth was covered with snow and the sky was congealed and turbid. He looked up to the sky and saw no spark of light; he looked to the ground and he could not make out his own feet. Suddenly he saw himself as though imprisoned in a forest in the midst of the snow around him that was being covered over by new snow. And he himself was also being covered over. He uprooted his feet and began to run. He bumped into a stone image that stood in the snow. "Father in heaven," Joseph shouted,

"how far away I have gone! If I don't return at once, I am lost." He looked one way and then another until he got his bearings. He directed himself toward the house and went back to it.

A tranquil stillness prevailed. No sound could be heard except for a muffled sound like snow falling on piles of snow. And from that arose another sound of his feet sinking in the snow and struggling to get out. His shoulders grew very heavy, as though he were carrying his heavy pack. After a while he reached the house.

The house was shrouded in darkness. There was no light in any of the rooms. "She's sleeping," Joseph whispered and stood still, his teeth clenched in hatred. He closed his eyes and entered his room.

When he came in he sensed that Helen was in the room. He put aside his hatred for her. Hurriedly, he took off his clothes and began to grope among the covers and pillows. He called out in a whisper, "Helen," but received no answer. Again he called and received no answer. He got up and lit a candle. He saw his bedding filled with holes. What's this? What's this? When he had left his room, his bedding had been undamaged, and now it was filled with holes. There could be no doubt that these holes were made by human hands, but for what reason were they made? He looked and saw a blood spot. He stared at the blood in wonder.

Meanwhile, he heard the sound of a sigh. He looked and saw Helen sprawled on the floor with a knife in her hand. It was the hunting knife that she had bought from him the day he came there. He took the knife out of her hand, lifted her from the floor, and stretched her out on his bed. Helen opened her eyes and looked at him. As she looked at him, she opened her mouth wide until her teeth glittered.

Joseph asked Helen, "Do you want to say something?" And she said not a word. He bent down toward her. She pulled herself up all at once, sank her teeth into his throat, and began to bite and suck. Then she pushed him away and shouted, "Pfui, how cold you are! Your blood isn't blood. It's ice water."

The peddler took care of the lady a day, and two days, and another day. He bound her wounds, for on the night that she came in to slaughter him, she wounded herself. He also prepared food for her.

But whatever food she tried to eat she would throw up, for she had already forgotten the science of eating ordinary human food, as it was her practice to eat the flesh of her husbands whom she slaughtered and to drink their blood, just as she wanted to do with the peddler.

On the fifth day she gave up the ghost and died. Joseph went to look for a priest but found none. He made her a coffin and a shroud, and dug in the snow to bury her. Since all the land was frozen over, he could not manage to dig her a grave. He took her carcass, placed it in the coffin, and climbed up to the roof where he buried the coffin in the snow. The birds smelled her carcass. They came and pecked away at the coffin till they broke into it, and then they divided among them the carcass of the lady. And that peddler took up his pack and traveled on from place to place, traveling and crying out his wares.

TRANSLATED BY ROBERT ALTER