

Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto

By Abraham Cahan
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EXCERPTS

3 In the Grip of His Past

Jake had never even vaguely abandoned the idea of supplying his wife and child with the means of coming to join him. He was more or less prompt in remitting her monthly allowance of ten rubles, and the visit to the draft and passage office had become part of the routine of his life. It had the invariable effect of arousing his dormant scruples, and he hardly ever left the office without ascertaining the price of a steerage voyage from Hamburg to New York. But no sooner did he emerge from the dingy basement into the noisy scenes of Essex Street, than he would consciously let his mind wander off to other topics.

Formerly, during the early part of his sojourn in Boston, his landing place, where some of his townfolk resided and where he had passed his first two years in America, he used to mention his Gitl and his Yosselé so frequently and so enthusiastically, that some wags among the Hanover Street tailors would sing "Yekl and wife and the baby" to the tune of "Molly and I and the Baby." In the natural course of things, however, these retrospective effusions gradually became far between, and since he had shifted his abode to New York he carefully avoided all reference to his antecedents. The Jewish quarter of the metropolis, which is a vast and compact city within a city, offers its denizens incomparably fewer chances of contact with the English-speaking portion of the population than any of the three separate Ghettos of Boston. As a consequence, since Jake's advent to New York his passion for American sport had considerably cooled off. And, to make up for this, his enthusiastic nature before long found vent in dancing and in a general life of gallantry. His proved knack with the gentle sex had turned his head and now cost him all his leisure time. Still, he would occasionally attend some variety show in which boxing was the main drawing card, and somehow managed to keep track of the salient events of the sporting world generally. Judging from his unstaid habits and happy-go-lucky abandon to the pleasures of life, his present associates took it for granted that he was single, and instead of twitting him with the feigned assumption that he had deserted a family--a piece of burlesque as old as the Ghetto--they would quiz him as to which of his girls he was "dead struck" on, and as to the day fixed for the wedding. On more than one such occasion he had on the tip of his tongue the seemingly jocular question, "How do you know I am not married already?" But he never let the sentence cross his lips, and would, instead, observe facetiously that he was not "shtruck on nu goil," and that he was dead struck on all of them in "whulshale." "I hate retail beesnesh, shee? Dot'sh a' kin' a man *I* am!" One day, in the course of an intimate conversation with Joe, Jake, dropping into a philosophical mood, remarked:

"It's something like a baker, *ain't it?* The more *cakes* he has the less he likes them. You and I have a *lot* of girls; that's why we don't *care* for any one of them."

But if his attachment for the girls of his acquaintance collectively was not coupled with a quivering of his heart for any individual Mamie, or Fanny, or Sarah, it did not, on the other hand, preclude a certain lingering tenderness for his wife. But then his wife had long since ceased to be what she had been of yore. From a reality she had gradually become transmuted into a fancy. During the three years since he had set foot on the soil, where a "shister [\[note\]](#) becomes a mister and a mister a shister," he had lived so much more than three years--so much more, in fact, than in all the twenty-two years of his previous life--that his Russian past appeared to him a dream and his wife and child, together with his former self, fellow characters in a charming tale, which he was neither willing to banish from his memory nor able to reconcile with the actualities of his American present. The question of how to effect this reconciliation, and of causing Gitl and little Yossee to step out of the thickening haze of reminiscence and to take their stand by his side as living parts of his daily life, was a fretful subject from the consideration of which he cowardly shrank. He wished he could both import his family and continue his present mode of life. At the bottom of his soul he wondered why this should not be feasible. But he knew that it was not, and his heart would sink at the notion of forfeiting the lion's share of attentions for which he came in at the hands of those who lionized him. Moreover, how will he look people in the face in view of the lie he has been acting? He longed for an interminable respite. But as sooner or later the minds of his acquaintances were bound to become disabused, and he would have to face it all out anyway, he was many a time on the point of making a clean breast of it, and failed to do so for a mere lack of nerve, each time letting himself off on the plea that a week or two before his wife's arrival would be a more auspicious occasion for the disclosure.

[\[note\]](#): Yiddish for shoemaker.

Neither Jake nor his wife nor his parents could write even Yiddish, although both he and his old father read fluently the punctuated Hebrew of the Old Testament or the Prayer Book. Their correspondence had therefore to be carried on by proxy, and, as a consequence, at longer intervals than would have been the case otherwise. The missives which he received differed materially in length, style, and degree of illiteracy as well as in point of penmanship; but they all agreed in containing glowing encomiums of little Yossee exhorting Yekl not to stray from the path of righteousness, and reproachfully asking whether he ever meant to send the ticket. The latter point had an exasperating effect on Jake. There were times, however, when it would touch his heart and elicit from him his threadbare vow to send the ticket at once. But then he never had money enough to redeem it. And, to tell the truth, at the bottom of his heart he was at such moments rather glad of his poverty. At all events, the man who wrote Jake's letters had a standing order to reply in the sharpest terms at his command that Yekl did not spend his money on drink; that America was not the land they took it for, where one could "scoop gold by the skirtful"; that Gitl need not fear lest he meant to desert her, and that as soon as he had saved enough to pay her way and to set up a decent establishment she would be sure to get the ticket.

Jake's scribe was an old Jew who kept a little stand on Pitt Street, which is one of the thoroughfares and market places of the Galician quarter of the Ghetto, and where Jake was unlikely to come upon any people of his acquaintance. The old man scraped together his livelihood by selling Yiddish newspapers and cigarettes, and writing letters for a charge varying, according to the length of the epistle, from five to ten cents. Each time Jake received a letter he would take it to the Galician, who would first read it to him (for an extra remuneration of one

cent) and then proceed to pen five cents' worth of rhetoric, which might have been printed and forwarded one copy at a time for all the additions or alterations Jake ever caused to be made in it.

"What else shall I write?" the old man would ask his patron, after having written and read aloud the first dozen lines, which Jake had come to know by heart.

"How do I know?" Jake would respond. "It is you who can write; so you ought to understand what else to write."

And the scribe would go on to write what he had written on almost every previous occasion. Jake would keep the letter in his pocket until he had spare United States money enough to convert into ten rubles, and then he would betake himself to the draft office and have the amount, together with the well-crumpled epistle, forwarded to Povodye.

And so it went month in and month out.

The first letter which reached Jake after the scene at Joe Peltner's dancing academy came so unusually close upon its predecessor that he received it from his landlady's hand with a throb of misgiving. He had always labored under the presentiment that some unknown enemies--for he had none that he could name--would some day discover his wife's address and anonymously represent him to her as contemplating another marriage, in order to bring Gitl down upon him unawares. His first thought accordingly was that this letter was the outcome of such a conspiracy. "Or maybe there is some death in the family?" he next reflected, half with terror and half with a feeling almost amounting to reassurance.

When the cigarette vender unfolded the letter he found it to be of such unusual length that he stipulated an additional cent for the reading of it.

"*Alla right*, hurry up now!" Jake said, grinding his teeth on a mumbled English oath.

"*Righd evay! Righd evay!*" the old fellow returned jubilantly, as he hastily adjusted his spectacles and addressed himself to his task.

The letter had evidently been penned by some one laying claim to Hebrew scholarship and ambitious to impress the New World with it; for it was quite replete with poetic digressions, strained and twisted to suit some quotation from the Bible. And what with this unstinted verbosity, which was Greek to Jake, one or two interruptions by the old man's customers, and interpretations necessitated by difference of dialect, a quarter of an hour had elapsed before the scribe realized the trend of what he was reading.

Then he suddenly gave a start, as if shocked.

"Vot'sh a madder? Vot'sh a madder?"

"*Vot's der madder?* What should be the *madder*? Wait--a--I don't know what I can do"--he halted in perplexity.

"Any bad news?" Jake inquired, turning pale. "Speak out!"

"Speak out! It is all very well for you to say 'speak out.' You forget that one is a piece of Jew," he faltered, hinting at the orthodox custom which enjoins a child of Israel from being the messenger of sad tidings.

"Don't *bodder* a head!" Jake shouted savagely. "I have paid you, haven't I?"

"*Say*, young man, you need not be so angry," the other said, resentfully. "Half of the letter I have read, have I not? so I shall refund you one cent and leave me in peace." He took to fumbling in his pockets for the coin, with apparent reluctance.

"Tell me what is the matter," Jake entreated, with clinched fists. "Is anybody dead? Do tell me now."

"*Vell*, since you know it already, I may as well tell you, said the scribe cunningly, glad to retain the cent and Jake's patronage. "It is your father who has been freed; may he have a bright paradise."

"Ha?" Jake asked aghast, with a wide gape.

The Galician resumed the reading in solemn, doleful accents. The melancholy passage was followed by a jeremiade upon the penniless condition of the family and Jake's duty to send the ticket without further procrastination. As to his mother, she preferred the Povodye graveyard to a watery sepulcher, and hoped that her beloved and only son, the apple of her eye, whom she had been awake nights to bring up to manhood, and so forth, would not forget her.

"So now they will be here for sure, and there can be no more delay!" was Jake's first distinct thought. "Poor father!" he inwardly exclaimed the next moment, with deep anguish. His native home came back to him with a vividness which it had not had in his mind for a long time.

"Was he an old man?" the scribe queried sympathetically.

"About seventy," Jake answered, bursting into tears.

"Seventy? Then he had lived to a good old age. May no one depart younger," the old man observed, by way of "consoling the bereaved."

As Jake's tears instantly ran dry he fell to wringing his hands and moaning.

"Good-night!" he presently said, taking leave. "I'll see you tomorrow, if God be pleased."

"Good-night!" the scribe returned with heartfelt condolence. As he was directing his steps to his lodgings Jake wondered why he did not weep. He felt that this was the proper thing for a man in his situation to do, and he endeavored to inspire himself with emotions befitting the occasion. But his thoughts teasingly gambolled about among the people and things of the street. By-and-

by, however, he became sensible of his mental eye being fixed upon the big fleshy mole on his father's scantily bearded face. He recalled the old man's carriage, the melancholy nod of his head, his deep sigh upon taking snuff from the time-honored birch bark which Jake had known as long as himself; and his heart writhed with pity and with the acutest pangs of homesickness. "And it was evening and it was morning, the sixth day. And the heavens and the earth were finished." As the Hebrew words of the Sanctification of the Sabbath resounded in Jake's ears, in his father's senile treble, he could see his gaunt figure swaying over a pair of Sabbath loaves. It is Friday night. The little room, made tidy for the day of rest and faintly illuminated by the mysterious light of two tallow candles rising from freshly burnished candlesticks, is pervaded by a benign, reposeful warmth and a general air of peace and solemnity. There, seated by the side of the head of the little family and within easy reach of the huge brick oven, is his old mother, flushed with fatigue, and with an effort keeping her drowsy eyes open to attend, with a devout mien, her husband's prayer. Opposite to her, by the window, is Yekl, the present Jake, awaiting his turn to chant the same words in the holy tongue, and impatiently thinking of the repast to come after it. Besides the three of them there is no one else in the chamber, for Jake visioned the fascinating scene as he had known it for almost twenty years, and not as it had appeared during the short period since the family had been joined by Gitl and subsequently by Yosselé.

Suddenly he felt himself a child, the only and pampered son of a doting mother. He was overcome with a heart-wringing consciousness of being an orphan, and his soul was filled with a keen sense of desolation and self-pity. And thereupon every thing around him--the rows of gigantic tenement houses, the hum and buzz of the scurrying pedestrians, the jingling horse cars--all suddenly grew alien and incomprehensible to Jake. Ah, if he could return to his old home and old days, and have his father recite Sanctification again, and sit by his side, opposite to mother, and receive from her hand a plate of reeking *tzimess*, [\[note\]](#) as of yore! Poor mother! He *will* not forget her-- But what is the Italian playing on that organ, anyhow? Ah, it is the new waltz! By the way, this is Monday and they are dancing at Joe's now and he is not there. "I shall not go there tonight, nor any other night," he commiserated himself, his reveries for the first time since he had left the Pitt Street cigarette stand passing to his wife and child. Her image now stood out in high relief with the multitudinous noisy scene at Joe's academy for a discordant, disquieting background, amid which there vaguely defined itself the reproachful saintlike visage of the deceased. "I will begin a new life!" he vowed to himself.

[\[note\]](#): A kind of dessert made of carrots or turnips.

He strove to remember the child's features, but could only muster the faintest recollection--scarcely anything beyond a general symbol--a red little thing smiling, as he, Jake, tickles it under its tiny chin. Yet Jake's finger at this moment seemed to feel the soft touch of that little chin, and it sent through him a thrill of fatherly affection to which he had long been a stranger. Gitl, on the other hand, loomed up in all the individual sweetness of her rustic face. He beheld her kindly mouth opening wide--rather too wide, but all the lovelier for it--as she spoke; her prominent red gums, her little black eyes. He could distinctly hear her voice with her peculiar lisp, as one summer morning she had burst into the house and, clapping her hands in despair, she had cried, "A weeping to me! The yellow rooster is gone!" or, as coming into the smithy she would say: "Father--in-law, mother-in-law calls you to dinner. Hurry up, Yekl, dinner is ready." And although this was all he could recall her saying, Jake thought himself retentive of every word she

had ever uttered in his presence. His heart went out to Gitl and her environment, and he was seized with a yearning tenderness that made him feel like crying. "I would not exchange her little finger for all the American *ladas*," he soliloquized, comparing Gitl in his mind with the dancing-school girls of his circle. It now filled him with disgust to think of the morals of some of them, although it was from his own sinful experience that he knew them to be of a rather loose character.

He reached his lodgings in a devout mood, and before going to bed he was about to say his prayers. Not having said them for nearly three years, however, he found, to his dismay, that he could no longer do it by heart. His landlady had a prayer book, but, unfortunately, she kept it locked in the bureau, and she was now asleep, as was everybody else in the house. Jake reluctantly undressed and went to bed on the kitchen lounge, where he usually slept.

When a boy his mother had taught him to believe that to go to sleep at night without having recited the bed prayer rendered one liable to be visited and choked in bed by some ghost. Later, when he had grown up, and yet before he had left his birthplace, he had come to set down this earnest belief of his good old mother as a piece of womanish superstition, while since he had settled in America he had hardly ever had an occasion to so much as think of bed prayers. Nevertheless, as he now lay vaguely listening to the weird ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece over the stove, and at the same time desultorily brooding upon his father's death, the old belief suddenly uprose in his mind and filled him with mortal terror. He tried to persuade himself that it was a silly notion worthy of womenfolk, and even affected to laugh at it audibly. But all in vain. "Cho-king! Cho-king! Cho-king!" went the clock, and the form of a man in white burial clothes never ceased gleaming in his face. He resolutely turned to the wall, and, pulling the blanket over his head, he huddled himself snugly up for instantaneous sleep. But presently he felt the cold grip of a pair of hands about his throat, and he even mentally stuck out his tongue, as one does while being strangled.

With a fast-beating heart Jake finally jumped off the lounge, and gently knocked at the door of his landlady's bedroom.

"*Eshcoosh me, mishesh*, be so kind as to lend me your prayer book. I want to say the night prayer," he addressed her imploringly.

The old woman took it for a cruel practical joke, and flew into a passion.

"Are you crazy or drunk? A nice time to make fun!"

And it was not until he had said with suppliant vehemence, "May I as surely be alive as my father is dead!" and she had subjected him to a cross-examination, that she expressed sympathy and went to produce the keys.

4 The Meeting

A few weeks later, on a Saturday morning, Jake, with an unfolded telegram in his hand, stood in front of one of the desks at the Immigration Bureau of Ellis Island. He was freshly shaven and clipped, smartly dressed in his best clothes and ball shoes, and, in spite of the sickly expression of shamefacedness and anxiety which distorted his features, he looked younger than usual.

All the way to the island he had been in a flurry of joyous anticipation. The prospect of meeting his dear wife and child, and, incidentally, of showing off his swell attire to her, had thrown him into a fever of impatience. But on entering the big shed he had caught a distant glimpse of Gitl and Yosselé through the railing separating the detained immigrants from their visitors, and his heart had sunk at the sight of his wife's uncouth and un-American appearance. She was slovenly dressed in a brown jacket and skirt of grotesque cut, and her hair was concealed under a voluminous wig of a pitch-black hue. This she had put on just before leaving the steamer, both "in honor of the Sabbath" and by way of sprucing herself up for the great event. Since Yekl had left home she had gained considerably in the measurement of her waist. The wig, however, made her seem stouter and shorter than she would have appeared without it. It also added at least five years to her looks. But she was aware neither of this nor of the fact that in New York even a Jewess of her station and orthodox breeding is accustomed to blink at the wickedness of displaying her natural hair, and that none but an elderly matron may wear a wig without being the occasional target for snowballs or stones. She was naturally dark of complexion, and the nine or ten days spent at sea had covered her face with a deep bronze, which combined with her prominent cheek bones, inky little eyes, and, above all, the smooth black wig, to lend her resemblance to a squaw.

Jake had no sooner caught sight of her than he had averted his face, as if loth to rest his eyes on her, in the presence of the surging crowd around him, before it was inevitable. He dared not even survey that crowd to see whether it contained any acquaintance of his, and he vaguely wished that her release were delayed indefinitely.

Presently the officer behind the desk took the telegram from him, and in another little while Gitl, hugging Yosselé with one arm and a bulging parcel with the other, emerged from a side door.

"Yekl!" she screamed out in a piteous high key, as if crying for mercy.

"Dot'sh alla right!" he returned in English, with a wan smile and unconscious of what he was saying. His wandering eyes and dazed mind were striving to fix themselves upon the stern functionary and the questions he bethought himself of asking before finally releasing his prisoners. The contrast between Gitl and Jake was so striking that the officer wanted to make sure--partly as a matter of official duty and partly for the fun of the thing--that the two were actually man and wife.

"*Oi* a lamentation upon me! He shaves his beard!" Giti ejaculated to herself as she scrutinized her husband. "Yosselé, look! Here is *taté!*"

But Yosselé did not care to look at taté. Instead, he turned his frightened little eyes--precise copies of Jake's--and buried them in his mother's cheek.

When Gitl was finally discharged she made to fling herself on Jake. But he checked her by seizing both loads from her arms. He started for a distant and deserted corner of the room, bidding her follow. For a moment the boy looked stunned, then he burst out crying and fell to kicking his father's chest with might and main, his reddened little face appealingly turned to Gitl. Jake continuing his way tried to kiss his son into toleration, but the little fellow proved too nimble for him. It was in vain that Gitl, scurrying behind, kept expostulating with Yossele: "Why, it is taté!" Taté was forced to capitulate before the march was brought to its end.

At length, when the secluded corner had been reached, and Jake and Gitl had set down their burdens, husband and wife flew into mutual embrace and fell to kissing each other. The performance had an effect of something done to order, which, it must be owned, was far from being belied by the state of their minds at the moment. Their kisses imparted the taste of mutual estrangement to both. In Jake's case the sensation was quickened by the strong steerage odors which were emitted by Gitl's person, and he involuntarily recoiled.

"You look like a poritz," [\[note\]](#) she said shyly.

[\[note\] poritz](#): Yiddish for nobleman.

"How are you? How is mother?"

"How should she be? So, so. She sends you her love," Gitl mumbled out.

"How long was father ill?"

"Maybe a month. He cost us health enough."

He proceeded to make advances to Yosselé, she appealing to the child in his behalf. For a moment the sight of her, as they were both crouching before the boy, precipitated a wave of thrilling memories on Jake and made him feel in his own environment. Presently, however, the illusion took wing and here he was, Jake the Yankee, with this bonnetless, wigged, dowdyish little greenhorn by his side! That she was his wife, nay, that he was a married man at all, seemed incredible to him. The sturdy, thriving urchin had at first inspired him with pride; but as he now cast another side glance at Gitl's wig he lost all interest in him, and began to regard him, together with his mother, as one great obstacle dropped from heaven, as it were, in his way.

Gitl, on her part, was overcome with a feeling akin to awe. She, too, could not get herself to realize that this stylish young man--shaved and dressed as in Povodye is only some young nobleman--was Yekl, her own Yekl, who had all these three years never been absent from her mind. And while she was once more examining Jake's blue diagonal cutaway, glossy stand-up collar, the white four-in-hand necktie, coquettishly tucked away in the bosom of his starched shirt, and, above all, his patent leather shoes, she was at the same time mentally scanning the

Yekl of three years before. The latter alone was hers, and she felt like crying to the image to come back to her and let her be *his* wife.

Presently, when they had got up and Jake was plying her with perfunctory questions, she chanced to recognize a certain movement of his upper lip--an old trick of his. It was as if she had suddenly discovered her own Yekl in an apparent stranger, and, with another pitiful outcry, she fell on his breast.

"Don't!" he said, with patient gentleness, pushing away her arms. "Here everything is so different."

She colored deeply.

"They don't wear wigs here," he ventured to add.

"What then?" she asked, perplexedly.

"You will see. It is quite another world."

"Shall I take it off, then? I have a nice Saturday kerchief," she faltered. "It is of silk--I bought it at Kalmen's for a bargain. It is still brand new."

"Here one does not wear even a kerchief."

"How then? Do they go about with their own hair?" she queried in ill-disguised bewilderment.

"*Vell, alla right*, put it on, quick!"

As she set about undoing her parcel, she bade him face about and screen her, so that neither he nor any stranger could see her bareheaded while she was replacing the wig by the kerchief. He obeyed. All the while the operation lasted he stood with his gaze on the floor, gnashing his teeth with disgust and shame, or hissing some Bowery oath.

"Is this better?" she asked bashfully, when her hair and part of her forehead were hidden under a kerchief of flaming blue and yellow, whose end dangled down her back.

The kerchief had a rejuvenating effect. But Jake thought that it made her look like an Italian woman of Mulberry Street on Sunday.

"*Alla right*, leave it be for the present," he said in despair, reflecting that the wig would have been the lesser evil of the two.

When they reached the city Gitl was shocked to see him lead the way to a horse car.

"*Oi* woe is me! Why, it is Sabbath!" she gasped.

He irately essayed to explain that a car, being an uncommon sort of vehicle, riding in it implied no violation of the holy day. But this she sturdily met by reference to railroads. Besides, she had seen horse cars while stopping in Hamburg, and knew that no orthodox Jew would use them on the seventh day. At length Jake, losing all self-control, fiercely commanded her not to make him the laughingstock of the people on the street and to get in without further ado. As to the sin of the matter he was willing to take it all upon himself. Completely dismayed by his stern manner, amid the strange, uproarious, forbidding surroundings, Gitl yielded.

As the horses started she uttered a groan of consternation and remained looking aghast and with a violently throbbing heart. If she had been a culprit on the way to the gallows she could not have been more terrified than she was now at this her first ride on the day of rest.

The conductor came up for their fares. Jake handed him a ten-cent piece, and raising two fingers, he roared out: "Two! He am' no maur as tree years, de liddle feller!" And so great was the impression which his dashing manner and his English produced on Gitl, that for some time it relieved her mind and she even forgot to be shocked by the sight of her husband handling coin on the Sabbath.

Having thus paraded himself before his wife, Jake all at once grew kindly disposed toward her.

"You must be hungry?" he asked.

"Not at all! Where do you eat your varimess?" [\[note\]](#)

"Don't say varimess," he corrected her complaisantly; "here it is called *dinner*."

"Dinner? [\[note\]](#) And what if one becomes fatter?" she confusedly ventured an irresistible pun.

This was the way in which Gitl came to receive her first lesson in the five or six score English words and phrases which the omnivorous Jewish jargon has absorbed in the Ghettos of English-speaking countries.

[\[note\]](#) *varimess* : Yiddish for dinner.

[\[note\]](#) *dinner*: Yiddish for thinner.

Complete text is online: <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/cahan/yekla.htm>