

Book I

LONDON

The Stock Exchange in Odessa



I

*Menahem-Mendl from Odessa to his wife,
Sheineh-Sheindl, in Kasrilevka*

To my dear, wise, and modest helpmeet, Sheineh-Sheindl, long may she live!

Firstly, I am come to inform you that I am, by the grace of God, well and in good cheer. May the Lord, blessed be His name, grant that we always hear from one another none but the best, the most comforting, and the happiest of tidings—amen.

And Secondly, I want you to know that it is simply not in my power to describe the city of Odessa—how big and how beautiful it is—the people here, so wonderful and good-hearted, and the terrific business one can do here.

Just picture me with my cane walking along Greek Street (that's the name of that Odessa Street where Jews are doing business) and finding twenty thousand little deals awaiting me: If it's wheat that I want, there is wheat for me; if it's bran, there is bran here; if it's wool, that's here, too, as well as flour and salt and feathers and raisins and sacks and herrings—in short, anything the tongue can name may be found in our Odessa City. At first I had my eye on a couple of good little deals, but none was quite after my heart. So I strolled along Greek Street until I finally hit on something really good. And so I am now dealing in London, and I am not doing too badly at it. Once in a while you can pick up twenty-five shekels; at other times, fifty; and if you're

really lucky, even a hundred. In short, London is the kind of business that can change your fortune overnight.

Not so long ago a character arrived here—a beadle or something—and before you could say, "Hear O Israel," he picked up thirty thousand. Today you can't get within a mile of him. I tell you, my dearest wife, gold is simply rolling in the streets; praise God, I do not in the least regret that I stopped off in Odessa. However, you're sure to ask how I managed to wind up in Odessa, considering that I was on my way to Kishinev. Well, it must have been written in the books that I am destined to make a fat pile! Wait and hear how the Almighty guides the steps of man.

When I arrived in Kishinev in order to retrieve from Uncle Menasheh the dowry money I had lent him, he asks me what do I need the dowry money for. So I tell him, I suppose I do need it; if I didn't, I wouldn't be here. Says he that he hasn't got a penny in cash at the moment, but he could, he says, give me a check on Brodsky in Yehupetz. Say I, very well, let it be Yehupetz, so long as there's money in it. Says he, he isn't really sure whether there is any money in Yehupetz at the moment. But he could, says he, give me a check on Bachrach in Warsaw. Say I, let it be Warsaw, so long as there's money in it. Says he, "What good is Warsaw to you? Warsaw is far away." If I want to, he says, he can give me a check on Barbash in Odessa. Say I, let it be Odessa, so long as there's money in it. So again he asks, "What do you need the money for?" And again I tell him that I suppose I do need it—if I didn't, I wouldn't be here.

To make a long story short, he squirms to the left, he squirms to the right, but it does him as much good as cupping to a corpse. Me—when I say money, I mean money! So he goes and makes out a couple of promissory notes, each one for five hundred rubles and good for only five

months. He also gives me a check for three hundred rubles on Barbash in Odessa and the rest in cash—toward my expenses, he says. And since I am pressed for time, I must cut this short. In my next letter, please God, I'll write you everything in detail. Be well, greet the children, long may they live, and remember me kindly to your father and mother, to old and young, to big and small.

From me, your husband,
Menahem-Mendl.

Just remembered! When I came to Barbash with the check, I was told the check wasn't a check at all. So what is it? It's a glimpse into the distant future! First of all, they tell me, your Uncle Menasheh's wagonload of wheat has to arrive; after the wheat comes, it has to be sold for its full price; and only then can I get the money. Short and sweet! So I immediately sent a postcard to Kishinev and wrote him that if he doesn't send the wheat at once, I'll dash off a telegram to him. To make a long story short: a postcard here, a postcard there—I simply didn't know what to do for worry. And only yesterday did I receive from Kishinev one hundred in cash and two hundred in promissory notes. Do you understand now why I haven't written you all this time? I was certain that the three hundred rubles had gone down the drain. But this only shows that you mustn't always expect the worst. There is God in heaven who looks after you. I've put all the cash in London. I bought a whole pack of merchandise—hausses and baisses both—and, praise the Lord, I heard there's a profit already.

As above.

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Sheineh-Sheindl from Kasrilevka to her husband, Menahem-Mendl, in Odessa

To my dear, esteemed, renowned, and honored husband, the wise and learned Menahem-Mendl, may his light shine forever.

In the first place, I want to let you know that we are all, praise the Lord, perfectly well, and may we hear the same from you, please God, and never anything worse.

In the second place, I am writing to say that I've had another attack of my old spasms which I'd be happy to hand over to your Uncle Menasheh who has made such a hash of the fifteen-hundred-ruble dowry, worse luck! As Mother says, God bless her, "It's like sending a cat to deliver the fish. . . ." Catch me taking promissory notes from him! May as well take the plague from him, a five-month fever! Look here, I wish I were telling a lie, but I'm afraid you have as much chance to set your eyes on the rest of that money as on the ears at the sides of your head which you've carried all the way to Odessa. Your luck that Mother doesn't know anything about those promissory notes, or you'd never hear the end of it. And as for the money which you write you are earning, praise the Lord, we are all happy to hear about it, Mendl. There is only one thing—may all my enemies enjoy eighty lean years—if you are already writing to me, why don't you write like a human being? Why don't you describe exactly what

kind of merchandise you are handling? How much does it cost by the yard? Or maybe it is sold by weight? I still cannot make head or tail of it—how do you eat it, with a spoon or with a fork? And there's another thing I cannot understand: You say you bought merchandise, and it's already bringing in a profit. What kind of merchandise have you got hold of that rises like cake on yeast? "Even mushrooms," says Mother, God bless her, "need rain to make them grow. . . ." And if there is already a profit, why don't you sell? Are you waiting for a famine? And why don't you write where you are staying, and what are you feeding on? It's almost as if I were a stranger to you, not your wife till a hundred and twenty years, but some kind of concubine, perish the thought. As Mother says, God bless her, "When a cow leaves the herd, she forgets all her good intentions. . . ." If you listen to me, you'll sell your goods as quickly as possible. Better come and bring a bit of cash home, where you can find a finer business than the one you write about—I don't even know what it's called—I wish I knew as much about sorrow! So be well, which is the heartfelt wish of your really devoted wife,

Sheineh-Sheindl.