

## A FLASH OF RED • 1

**S**NOW LAY OVER THE forest like a billowy quilt. Thick oak trees with white-streaked trunks, their branches bare of leaves but laden with clumps of frost, stood shoulder to shoulder by the roadside. The road was little more than a memory, a pallid path through the wilderness marked only by the rutted wagon tracks of the most recent traffic. Faint flurries still fell in a light mist that filtered out the afternoon sunlight.

The creak of carriage wheels and the soft crunch of plodding hooves disturbed the snowy stillness of the forest. The Polish driver, exposed to the elements but wrapped in blankets and mufflers, held the reins loosely in his hands. Inside the carriage, Rav Shloime Strasbourg, the rabbi of Pulichev, and his twelve-year-old son Mendel were somewhat warmer, but they still shivered with the cold.

Mendel suddenly stiffened. He pressed his face to the window and stared intently into the forest.

“What is it, Mendel?” asked Rav Shloime.

“I think I saw something.”

“What?”

“I’m not sure. Wait a minute. Look! Over there. I see something in the forest. Do you see it?”

Rav Shloime closed the Chumash he was holding and peered through the window in the direction that Mendel was pointing.

"I don't see anything," he said.

"Off through the trees," said the boy. "It's a patch of red, like a man's coat. Don't you see it?"

Rav Shloime shook his head. "My eyes are not as sharp as yours."

"Please, we have to stop," the boy pleaded. "It looks like ... maybe someone is hurt."

Rav Shloime hesitated for a moment, then he nodded. He rapped his knuckles on the sliding window that separated the driver from the passenger compartment. The driver slid open the partition.

"Yeah, what do you want, rabbi?" he said.

"We have to stop, Jacek. Right now."

"But why?" the driver protested. "We're smack in the middle of nowhere. You can rest when we get to Trymbak. In the meantime, we have to move if we expect to get to the village before nightfall."

"There's no time for discussion, Jacek. Stop right now. This second!"

Grumbling and muttering under his breath, the driver pulled gently on the reins, and the carriage came to a halt. Rav Shloime and Mendel climbed down.

"Quick, Jacek," said Rav Shloime. "Tie the reins tight, and come with us. Mendel thinks he saw something back there in the forest."

"Saw something? What?"

"I don't know. We'll soon find out." He started after Mendel, who was already plowing back through the snowdrifts toward the spot he had indicated. Jacek, still grumbling and muttering, lumbered along behind them.

Mendel plunged into the woods and disappeared from sight.

"Mendel!" cried Rav Shloime. "Where are you?"

"I'm right here, Father. Follow my voice. I see it. I'm

almost there.”

Rav Shloime and Jacek stepped through the trees and immediately saw Mendel. He was standing near an old oak tree, staring down at the ground.

“It’s a soldier, Father,” he shouted. “A cavalry officer. He looks half-frozen. I don’t know if he’s alive or dead.”

Rav Shloime hurried to his son’s side and bent over the inert body of the officer, whose eyes were sealed tight with crusted ice. He slid one hand into the officer’s red coat and placed it over his chest.

“Looks like a captain,” said Jacek. “A real big fellow. Fancy uniform. Must have cost a pretty penny, but a lot of good that’ll do him if he’s dead.”

“He’s not dead,” said Rav Shloime. “There’s a faint heart-beat. Very faint. He’s just barely alive. We need to make a fire and warm him right away. Jacek, you grab his feet, and I’ll grab his shoulders. Let’s get him to the carriage and wrap him in blankets.”

“I think his left arm is broken,” said Jacek. “It looks bent more than natural.”

“Give me that branch over there,” said Rav Shloime, and he unwrapped his long scarf from around his neck.

When Jacek brought him the branch, he placed it against the officer’s arm, wrapped the scarf tightly around it and looped the rest around his neck, forming an improvised splint and sling.

Together, Rav Shloime and Jacek dragged the officer to the carriage and laid him on the ground. As Jacek built a fire, Rav Shloime and Mendel swathed the officer in blankets and extra clothing and rubbed his hands and face to bring back the circulation. Once the fire was crackling, they moved the officer close to the fireside and allowed the heat to thaw his body. The icicles on his eyelashes melted, and his lips moved almost imperceptibly. Meanwhile, Jacek filled a shallow pan

with snow, and after he brought it to a quick simmer, he poured the warm water into a bottle and dribbled a few drops through the officer's lips. The officer sputtered and stirred.

"That's a good sign," said Rav Shloime. "Let's get him into the carriage and head for the village. Is it still far from here?"

"Not very," said Jacek. "We should get there in a couple of hours if we don't find any more bodies along the way."

Rav Shloime frowned at him but made no comment. The three of them hoisted the officer into the carriage and propped him up on the seat. Rav Shloime and Mendel climbed in after him, and Jacek returned to the driver's bench. He loosened the reins, snapped them once, and they were on their way.

"Do you think he'll die, Father?" said Mendel.

Rav Shloime shook his head. "I think we got to him in time. He's a big, strong fellow. With the Almighty's help, he'll be all right. In fact, he's already showing signs of recovery. Look, a bit of color is returning to his face."

Even as he spoke, the officer opened his eyes and looked around in bewilderment. He saw the unfamiliar faces and struggled to sit upright.

"Please, sir," said Rav Shloime. "Just sit back and relax. You're safe now. Soon, you'll be feeling much better. Would you like a little Slivovitz? It'll warm you up."

Teeth chattering, the officer nodded, and Rav Shloime handed him a flask of amber liquid. The officer took a deep swig of the fiery liquor and shook his head from side to side. He smacked his lips and wiped them with the back of his hand.

"Ah, that was good," he said in a hoarse whisper. "I'm beginning to feel a little better. Just as you said."

He looked down at the splint on his left arm. "Broken, huh?"

"I don't know," said Rav Shloime. "It may just be a bad sprain."

“Well, it sure hurts like it’s broken. But right now, I don’t mind the pain. If it hurts, it means that I’m alive. Believe me, I thought I was a dead man.”

“What happened to you, sir?” asked Mendel in a diffident voice.

“I was riding along this road through the forest this morning,” said the officer, his voice a little stronger, “and something spooked my horse. I don’t know what it was. Maybe a block of snow falling off a branch or some forest animal or maybe a snake. The horse just reared up and ran straight at the trees. Then he pulled up short right before he got there, and I went sailing over his head into the trees. The horse ran away and left me lying there in pain. I couldn’t move. The road was far away, and I didn’t think any travelers could see me. I remember thinking that my only hope was to gather my strength and drag myself to the roadside. Otherwise, I would die right where I lay. Then I blacked out, and the next thing I knew, I’m here with you people. I must have been lying there in the freezing cold for hours. I feel like death warmed over. Who are you people, and how did I get here?”

“My name is Shloime Strasbourg. I’m the rabbi of Pulichev, and this is my son Mendel. We were on our way to Prague, and my son just happened to notice a flash of red in the trees and insisted we stop. I couldn’t see it, but with his young eyes, he saw it. We found you, warmed you up, and here you are.”

The officer nodded. “Yes, here I am, and I owe you my life. Especially you, young man.” He reached for Mendel’s hand and shook it. “Uh ... Mendel, right?”

Mendel smiled. “Exactly.”

“Where were you heading, sir?” asked Rav Shloime.

“To Krakow.”

“Well, we’ll be passing through Krakow on our way to Prague. You’re welcome to travel with us. We should be there

by tomorrow. And an extra person in the carriage just makes it warmer for all of us.”

The officer chuckled. “That’s true, I suppose. Thank you for your kind offer. I’ll take you up on it. My horse is probably halfway to Germany by now. I doubt if I’ll ever see him again. By the way, let me introduce myself. My name is Boguslaw Wielopolski. I’m a captain in the Royal Hussars. I was on my way to visit my family in Krakow when this unfortunate ... accident ... happened. Where are you two heading? You’re a long way from Pulichev.”

“Yes, we are,” said Rav Shloime. “My son is twelve years old, and according to Jewish law, a boy becomes a responsible adult at thirteen. So we’re on our way to Prague in Bohemia to get a blessing from the illustrious Rabbi Yehudah Loewe.<sup>1</sup> I studied under him for many years, and now I want my son to meet him and get his blessing.”

“I’ve heard of this Rabbi Loewe,” said the captain. “They say he’s a bit of a genius. They say that he knows everything, not only the Jewish things, you know, but also astronomy and philosophy and things like that. They say that King Rudolph II of Bohemia, who now also holds the meaningless title of Holy Roman Emperor, seeks out his company.”

Rav Shloime smiled. “I’ve heard similar rumors.”

The captain suddenly noticed that Mendel was holding a small valise close to his chest. “What’s in the valise?” he asked curiously.

“Just my things,” said Mendel.

“You’re holding onto that valise as if it contained the crown jewels. It can’t be just your socks and an extra shirt or two. What’s in it? Is it a secret?”

Mendel grinned sheepishly. “Not really,” he said. “My *tefillin* are in there.”

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1. Known to history as the Maharal of Prague.

“What’s that?” said the captain.

“They’re religious articles,” explained Rav Shloime. “Every Jewish man age thirteen and up straps black boxes containing small holy scrolls onto his head and arm when he prays in the morning. Mendel has just received a new pair, and we’re traveling to Prague so that Rabbi Loewe can assist him in putting them on for the first time and give him a blessing.”

“Are these things expensive?”

“Very. They have to be written by an expert scribe, and the process of making the boxes is intricate and precise. These are our most precious possessions, not only because of the cost but because these holy scrolls that touch our brains and our hearts bring us close to the Almighty.”

“I see,” said the captain. “No wonder Mendel is holding on to them for dear life. You can relax, Mendel. I won’t touch them, and there isn’t anyone else here. So you might as well put down your little valise.”

“I suppose,” said Mendel. He placed the valise on the floor and leaned his leg against it.

The captain grinned and turned to Rav Shloime. “Are you going to spend the Passover holiday in Prague?”

“We were hoping to get home in time for the holiday. Mendel’s thirteenth birthday is a week before the holiday. But this late snowstorm has slowed us down.” Rav Shloime cleared his throat. “What do you know about Passover?”

The captain smiled. “You want to know if I believe the blood libels? Of course not. These are modern times. This is the year 1592. In a few years, we’ll be entering the seventeenth century. The light of reason is spreading across the world. Blood libels are a thing of the past. An embarrassment, a disgrace, if you ask me.”

“Well, it would be wonderful if all Polish people thought as you do.”

“Patience, rabbi. Patience. The day will come. King Rudolph is extending religious toleration to the people of Bohemia, including the Jews, and there are reports that he is going to make peace with Poland. Times are changing. The persecution of the Jewish people in Poland will soon be a thing of the past.”