



*The Letters of Menachem Mendl  
and Sheyne Sheyndl*  
(an excerpt)

Written by  
Sholem Aleichem

Illustrated by  
David Labkovski

From Menachem Mendl in Odessa to his wife Sheyne  
Sheyndl in Kasrilevka

I arrived at Uncle Meanshe's in Kishinev and asked for the dowry money.

"How come you need it?" he asks.

"I need it" I say, "because I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

Well, he says, he can't give me cash but he can give me a letter of credit to Brodsky in Yehupetz.

"Let it be Yehupetz," I say. "As long as it's cash."

"That's just it," he says. "He's not sure there is cash in Yehupetz." He can give me a letter of credit to Bachrach in Warsaw.

"Warsaw's fine too," I say. "As long as it's cash."

"But why go all the way to Warsaw? He asks. "Suppose I give you a letter of credit to Barabash in Odessa?"

"Make it Odessa," I say. "As long as it's cash."

"So how come you need so much cash?" he asks.

"If I didn't," I say, "I wouldn't be here."

To make a long story short, he went round and round—it helped like cupping helps a corpse. When I say cash, I mean cash. In the end he gave me two promissory notes for 500 rubles, due in five months, a letter of credit to Barabash for 300, and the rest in banknotes to help cover my expenses.

Because I'm in a hurry, I'll be brief. God willing, I'll write more in my next letter. Be well and give my fond greetings to your parents and the children, each and every one of them.

Your husband,  
Menachem Mendl

P.S. When I brought the letter of credit to Barabash, I was told it was nothing of the sort. What was it? A letter to the tooth-fairy! First, I was told, let Uncle Menashe's wagon of wheat arrive in Odessa and find a buyer—then I can see my money. Short, sweet, and to the point! Right away I sent a postcard to Kishinev threatening to take action and send a telegram if the wheat wasn't shipped at once. In short, a postcard here, a telegram there—I didn't have an easy time of it. But

yesterday I received another 100 rubles from Kishinev and a promissory note for 200. Do you understand now why I've been out of touch? I had written off the 300 for lost. It just goes to show that a man should never give up! There's a God in heaven looking after things. I've put all the cash into Londons, a nice batch of them. Sometimes they're up and sometimes they're down, but so far, thank God, I'm ahead.

Yours, etc.

From Sheyne Sheyndl in Kasrilevka to her husband  
Menachem Mendl in Odessa

## From Menachem Mendl in Odessa to his wife Sheyne Sheyndl in Kasrilveka

To my wise, esteemed, & virtuous wife Sheyne Sheyndl, may you have a long life!

Firstly, rest assured that I am, praised God, in the best of health. God grant that we hear from each other only good and pleasing news, amen.

Secondly, I'm not surprised that you fail to grasp how Londons work. There are businessmen, serious Jews, who can't make head or tails of them either, let alone a woman like you. Allow me to explain. Londons, you should know, are highly perishable. You buy and sell them on a pledge without seeing them. Every minute you have to check if they're up or down—that is, if the ruble has risen or fallen in Berlin. It all depends on Berlin, you see; it's Berlin that has the last word. The rates soar and tumble like crazy, the telegrams fly back and forth, the Jews run around as though at a country fair, and so do I. There's such a racket you can't hear yourself think. Yesterday, for example, I played the market for 50 rubles and by noon today I'd lost them all. But I haven't told you what playing the market is. You can buy futures for 50 R's, or double that, or hedge until closing time. (That's the time between the afternoon and evening prayers in Kasrilevka.) Well, I bought short, the market was up, and there went my 50 smackeroos. That's how you play it—but don't you worry, my dear! Fifty smackers are nothing in Odessa. With God's help my lucky number will come up. And as for Uncle Menashe's promissory notes, you're mistaken. They're as good as gold, a solid investment. I could turn a nice profit on them even now, but I'd rather not. I can always make money from hedging. But I don't want to do that either. I prefer futures. There's nothing like a night spent sleeping on them. And because I'm in a hurry. I'll be brief. God willing. I'll write more in my next letter. Meanwhile, may He grant you health and success.

Your husband,  
Menachem Mendl

P.S. As for where I'm lodging and eating, I can't rightly tell you myself. Odessa is a monstrous big city and everything is very dear. The buildings are sky-high and you climb half-an-hour's worth of iron stairs to get to your room at the top of them. And the window is as tiny as a dungeon's! It's a relief to get out and head for Greek Street, where I take my meals—that is, where I grab what I can. Who has time to sit and eat when you have to keep your eyes on Berlin? But fruit costs next to nothing here. People eat grapes in the street, not just once a year for Rosh Hashana (Jewish New Year) like Kasrilevkans. They're not all embarrassed to do it.

Yours, etc.

## From Sheyne Sheyndl in Kasrievka to her husband Menachem Mendl in Odessa

To my dear, learned, & illustrious husband Menachem Mendl, may your light shine!

First, we're all well thank God. I hope to hear no worse from you.

Second, you write like a madman. Forgive me for saying so, but I hope to hear no more of your Odessa than I understand about your blasted shorts and hedgerows! You're throwing rubles away like last week's noodles. Money-shmoney, eh? I suppose it grows on trees over there. I'll be blamed, though, if one thing doesn't stump me: what kind of cat in a bag can you trade in but not see? Listen here, Mendl, I don't like it one bit! I wasn't raised in a home where we bought and sold air and God keep me from doing it now. From air you catch cold, my mother says. Who ever heard of a grown man playing in a market? You'd make more sense if you wrote in Turkish. And as for the profit you can turn on Menashe's notes, I hate to be a wet blanket, but the proof of the pudding, my mother says, is in the eating. You know what, Mendl? Listen to your wife, tell Odessa where it can go, and come home to Kasrilevka. We have a place to live in at my father's, you have five hundred rubles, opening a store is no problem—what more could you want? Why must I hear the world telling lies about your throwing me over for Odessa? Don't think you'll live to see the day! You can take your monster houses with their iron steps you climb like a lunatic and give me Kasrilevka any time. Because grapes are cheap there I should have a stomach ache here? Kasrilevka plums aren't sweet enough? There's such a glut this year that they're a kopeck a bucket. But a lot we matter to you! You don't even ask about the children. I suppose you've forgotten you have three of them. God bless them! Out of sight, out of mind, my mother says. I'll be blamed if she isn't right. I wish you all the best from the bottom of my heart.

Your truly faithful wife,  
Sheyne Sheyndl

# From Menachem Mendl in Odessa to his wife Sheyne Sheyndl in Kasrilevka

To my wise, esteemed, & virtuous wife Sheyne Sheyndl, may you have a long life!

Firstly, rest assured that I am, praise God, in the best of health. God grant that we hear from each other only good and pleasing news, amen.

Secondly, the market has been hitting fearsome lows. I've bought another batch of Londons and covered myself with 8 orders for 17 shorts. If I can shave a few points. I'll buy more. If only you understood, my dearest, how business is done on a man's word alone, you would know all there is to know about Odessa. A nod is as good as a signature. I walk down Greek Street, drop into a cafe, sit at a table, order tea or coffee, and wait for the brokers to come by. There's no need for a contract or written agreement. Each broker carries a pad in which he writes, say, that I've bought two shorts. I hand over the cash and that's it—it's a pleasure how easy it is! A few hours go by, the Berlin closings arrive, and back comes the broker with 25 smackers. The next morning the openings arrive and he has 50 more—and don't think God can't make it 100. 300 is no big deal either. Why should it be? We're talking about the markets! It's a game, like roulette. . . And as for your not believing in Uncle Menashe's promissory notes, I have news: I've made a tidy sum from them already. Where else would I get the money to buy so many futures on spot? The market is not, as you seem to think, a place that sells fruit and vegetables. You're only called on futures when they're due. That means, you're a free agent. If you want to buy, you buy, and if you want to sell, you sell. Now do you understand what playing the market is? If God is out to boost Londons, he starts a war scare in the papers, the ruble drops, and Londons shoot up faster than a bean stalks. Just this week there were rumors that the Queen of England was ailing: the ruble plunged again, and whoever bought short made a killing. Now the papers say she's better, so the ruble has rallied and it's time to buy long. In short, my dearest, never fear! Everything will be "tip-top," as they say in Odessa. And because I'm in a hurry, I'll be brief. God willing. I'll write more in my next letter. Meanwhile, may he grant you health and success. Give my greetings to the children and my fondest wishes to everyone.

Your husband,  
Menachem Mendl

P.S. We're all burning up from the heat. At night we go around like melting wax. The streets are deserted. All Odessa goes to the public fountain or the seashore. You can find anything you want there. You can even bathe in the sea or listen to free music—it doesn't cost a blessed kopeck.

Yours etc.



## From Sheyne Sheyndl in Kasrievka to her husband Menachem Mendl in Odessa

To my dear, learned, & illustrious husband Menachem Mendl, may your light shine!

First, we're all well, thank God. I hope to hear no worse from you.

Second, I'm having trouble with my teeth. I wish Odessa and its market had my toothache! It's killing me. So are the children—and his lordship couldn't care less. He lives in Odessa like God, buys seventeen pairs of shorts, and bathes in the sea to music! What more could a body want? Well, you may go around in short pants and half-shaven, but my mother would say you've