

THE SPOTTED PONY

By Eric A. Kimmel

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THERE was a wedding in Kolomea. Bronya, the daughter of Reb Yudel, the timber merchant, married the son of the rabbi of Belz. What a wedding it was! No one could recall its like in the history of the town. Reb Itzik, the wagon driver, spent the week bringing in guests from the surrounding villages. A klezmer band played throughout the night. What music! What musicians! A fiddler played with them, a tiny man in a worn coat so full of patches it seemed all speckled and spotted. His fiddle sang as if it were alive. "He has magic in his fingers, that one," everyone agreed.

The party lasted three days. When it ended, Reb Itzik drove the musicians on to the next town. Along the way the fiddler suddenly became ill. Reb Itzik and the other musicians laid him down in the back of the wagon. The fiddler's clothes were soaked with sweat, as if he had been pulled from the river, but his skin felt burning hot, like the top of a stove.

"We must call a doctor. This man is too sick to go on," Reb Itzik told the musicians.

"What can we do?" they cried. "We are poor musicians. We have no money for doctors. We hardly know where we will sleep tonight ourselves."

"The fiddler can stay with me until he recovers," Reb Itzik said. So while the other musicians continued on foot, Reb Itzik turned his wagon around and brought the fiddler back to Kolomea. He sent for the doctor as soon as he arrived. The doctor listened to the fiddler's heart and took his pulse. Then he told Reb Itzik, "This man is beyond help."

"Can nothing be done?"

"Make him comfortable. Do whatever you can to ease his last moments."

After the doctor left, the fiddler said to Reb Itzik, "I know I am dying. My soul is heavy because I cannot repay your kindness. You have taken me into your house,

nursed me in your own bed, called a doctor at your expense. In a few days you will have to bury me, and I have no way of repaying you.”

“You do not have to repay me,” Reb Itzik told him. “Good deeds are their own reward. I will pray for your recovery. God will work a miracle.” The fiddler shook his head. “There will be no miracles. But you can ease my soul by doing what I ask. Write an account of what my illness has cost you. Make it out to the last penny. When I am dead, take my fiddle and sell it. It will bring enough money to repay you. Do this for me. Promise you will sell the fiddle.”

Reb Itzik promised. He wrote out an account for all his expenses. The fiddler folded the paper and wove it between the fiddle’s strings. Three days later he died. The whole town came to his funeral. He didn’t lie in a pauper’s grave. Reb Itzik saw to that. But he never sold the fiddle. He set it on a high shelf and forgot about it.

One year passed. One bright day, as Reb Itzik drove along the river, he came upon a speckled pony standing in the road. The pony wore neither saddle nor bridle. There was no way to identify his owner.

“Don’t worry, little pony, I’ll find out where you belong.” Reb Itzik tied the pony to the back of his wagon and drove on to the next village. He asked if anyone recognized the pony. No one had ever seen the animal before. It was the same in the next town, and the next. When Reb Itzik reached home, he put the mysterious pony in a stall.

“I can care for him till his owner turns up,” Reb Itzik decided. But weeks passed and no owner appeared. The speckled pony remained in his stall.

Summer turned to autumn. Early one morning Reb Itzik went out to harness his horses. He found Lozhik, his best horse, lame. His second horse, Ferdka, looked ill. What now? Sick and lame horses cannot pull a wagon. Just then, the speckled pony whinnied, as if to say, “What about me?”

Why not? thought Reb Itzik. A pony can pull a light load. That’s better than none at all. He hitched the speckled pony to the wagon and started off. Soon he exclaimed in surprise, “Why, this pony is as strong as Lozhik! And quick, like Ferdka. He does the work of two horses!” Reb Itzik never had to touch the reins. The speckled pony knew exactly where to go.

From then on he worked the three horses in turn. He still cherished Lozhik and Ferdka, but the speckled pony became his favorite.

Now Reb Itzik was a disciple of that great and holy man, Rabbi Israel of the Good Name. Rabbi Israel traveled around the countryside visiting his followers, helping with their troubles. Sometimes he worked miracles.

Rabbi Israel arrived in Kolomea on Hanukkah eve. He stopped at Reb Itzik's house. Knowing how much Rabbi Israel loved horses, Reb Itzik told him about the spotted pony.

"Show me this animal," Rabbi Israel said. Together they went out to the stable. Lozhik and Ferdka lowered their heads so the rabbi could scratch their ears, but the spotted pony positively pranced for joy. Rabbi Israel turned to Reb Itzik and said, "Give me this pony as a Hanukkah gift."

Reb Itzik replied, "The pony is not mine to give. Even if he were, I could not do it. I would miss him too much."

Rabbi Israel shrugged. "It is no great matter."

When they returned to the house, Rabbi Israel noticed a fiddle resting on a shelf above the clothes chest.

"Since when do you play the fiddle?"

"I don't," Reb Itzik replied.

"Then why is this fiddle in your house?"

Reb Itzik told him the sad story of the fiddler. "I did what I could for that poor soul."

"But you never sold the fiddle," Rabbi Israel said.

"No," Reb Itzik admitted, "I never got around to doing it."

Rabbi Israel took the fiddle down from the shelf. A piece of paper fell out. A long column of numbers was written on it. "What is this?" Rabbi Israel asked.

Reb Itzik shrugged. "The fiddler insisted on writing out his debt as a loan to be repaid. I did not take it seriously. He slipped the paper into the fiddle before he died. I forgot it was there."

Rabbi Israel turned to Reb Itzik. "Tonight is the first night of Hanukkah. Give me this paper as a gift."

"Rabbi, it is a worthless piece of paper! The man is long dead."

"Do as I say. Drop the paper into my hands and repeat after me: 'I, Reb Itzik, of my own free will, hereby transfer this debt to Rabbi Israel of the Good Name.'"

Reb Itzik repeated the words. Rabbi Israel held up the paper.

“And I, Rabbi Israel of the Good Name, hereby declare the fiddler’s debt paid in full.” He tore the paper into seven pieces and threw them in the stove. They vanished in the flames. He turned to Reb Itzik. “Show me your horses.”

A bewildered Reb Itzik led the way back to the stable. Lozhik and Ferdka stamped their hooves. The spotted pony’s stall stood empty.

“My pony is gone!” Reb Itzik cried.

“Your pony has returned home,” Rabbi Israel said. “Miracles fill this night. Reb Itzik, know that your pony was none but the poor fiddler, returned from the grave. Unable to rest, he took a pony’s form so he could work for you.”

“Why should he do that? I asked nothing of him.”

“He demanded it of himself. Throughout his life this fiddler always paid his debts. What pained him most as he lay dying was knowing he could not repay you. So he gave you his fiddle. Once you sold it, he could rest in peace. But you did not sell it. The debt remained unpaid. And so the fiddler returned as the spotted pony to work for you until he paid his debt. He worked willingly, because the harder he worked, the sooner he would be free. He might have gone on working for years.”

“How did you know?” Reb Itzik asked.

“I could see it in his face,” Rabbi Israel answered. “I could not leave that soul in distress. I had to set him free. Since you would not give me the pony, I canceled the debt. Do not grieve for him. His soul is where it belongs. He is at peace.”

Reb Itzik shuddered, but not from the cold. Rabbi Israel wiped the mud from his boots. “Let us go back inside. It is time to light the Hanukkah candles.”

“In a moment, Rabbi. I would like to sit here awhile.”

“As you wish.”

Reb Itzik sat alone in the darkness, thinking about the fiddler and the spotted pony. Finally he rose, shut the empty stall, and started back to the house. He saw the menorah standing in the window, waiting to be lit.

Bright stars twinkled in the sky overhead, each one a candle in the menorah of heaven. Reb Itzik stopped. He heard music. The bright strains of a klezmer’s fiddle lifted his heart. Each note hung in the night air like a shining star.

Reb Itzik paused on the doorstep, drinking in the joyous melody. He entered the house as the last note faded. “Rabbi Israel, you play so well! Take the fiddle as a Hanukkah gift.”

Rabbi Israel’s eyes turned to the klezmer’s fiddle resting in its old place above the clothes chest.

“Reb Itzik, surely you know me better than that. What would I do with a fiddle? I cannot play a note.”