

Beryl the Butcher Boy

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3. Beryl makes a trip around New York

Once Zushe came in and said to my boss: "You are a smart person, give me some advice how I should get rid of this ten-cent piece?"

Zushe took out a dime, Mr. Solomon took it in his hand and said:

"Even a blind man can tell that this is lead. How did a person take this coin?"

"I will tell you the truth," said Zushe, "That was given to me by Mrs. Deich for stretching her new shoes. She never has ever given me anything for such a job. Today was the first time she wanted to please me. Nu, who would have the nerve to tell her that it was a false dime? Ah, I will give away to Berzik. He should have a gift from me. Come her, Berzik."

"What do you want," I said, pretending that I did not hear anything of what they were talking about.

"Take this, a ten-cent piece," said Zushe, "Don't be shocked, Beryl, it is made of lead. It is a gift from a great and wealthy Jewish woman who wanted to honor a poor shoe-maker. Listen, Beryl, I give you this dime with the condition that you don't use it to speculate in Wall Street, and you don't gamble it on horses."

"I will make good use of it," I said to Zushe.

"Don't spend it on actresses," said Zushe to me, "If you do it will come to a bitter end."

You will, perhaps, already know what one does when they have a lead ten-cent piece. A youngster like me can give you an idea.

Sunday, as you know, is my free day, because a Jewish butcher shop is closed on the Sabbath as well as Sunday. Usually, on the Sabbath I sleep nearly all day. But Sunday I divide into two portions. Part of the day I sleep, and the rest of the day I travel a bit around the town.

Nu, if you have a lead dime in your pocket you can make a nice trip around the town. You can travel thirty miles, and the lead dime will stay in your pocket. You want to know how to do this, I will teach you, I am an expert.

I get on a streetcar, sit down, and look in a newspaper that I find in the car. The conductor is not in the aisle to collect. He is in the opposite corner. He is letting passengers off. Once the car begins to fill with a few people, he starts going around saying his phrase, "Fare please!" When he comes to me, I give him the lead dime, he takes one look at it and says to me, "It is no good, Johnny." I think that when he calls me "Johnny" that tells me that he is not a bad gentleman. I say to him, "It's good, sir, it is all I got." He looks at me and says that he is very sorry, and suggests that I search in my pockets, and maybe find a good nickel, or a good dime. I start search and he goes on to the other passengers, and the streetcar keeps moving on. Then the car comes to a stop. New passengers get on. There is one. A lot of people must stand. I see the conductor come back toward me, I stand up and give my seat to a lady, and I go to the platform. "Wait until the car stops," the conductor says to me, and the car

stops a couple of blocks farther on. As I leave the streetcar I see that I have traveled eighteen blocks, and I still have the dime and the newspaper that I found in the car.

I climb into the next streetcar. This car is nearly empty. The conductor came to me right away, and without saying a word, and without looking at me, he sticks out his hand. I was starting to get worried about him. From the start I did not like his face. I hand him the dime. He takes a look at it – he was not happy with it. He put it between his teeth and bit down on it. “No good,” and handed the coin back to me.

Well, when I saw that he was talking to me like a human being, I took courage and said to him, “It is good, it is good.”

He took the dime in his mouth again and bit down on it, then showed me the tooth marks in the lead. He explained to me that a silver dime was hard to make any marks in, and if you can bite into it then it is undoubtedly lead.

A man who was sitting next to me mixed in, and asked to look at the dime. He also tried biting it, and showed me the marks.

“Somebody got you,” the man said with sympathy, “the conductor can't take that.”

I took the dime back and went outside on the platform. I waited until the next stop then I got off.

So far I had traveled thirty blocks, only now my dime was looking chewed up. It would be a shame to show it to another conductor.

On the third streetcar things did not go as well. There the conductor was very fresh. He roughly shoved my dime back into my hand, and gave my ear a sharp tug. I wrested myself out of his grasp and jumped from the car while it was still moving. On this car I only traveled a block and a half.

But afterwards, I had some good luck on the fourth car. The car was packed. The conductor was not in the aisle and he did not see me at first. Three times he walked right past me. We rode and rode on like that until we got to 59th Street. There I got out with all the other passengers, and a man on the corner issued all of us transfers.

(A transfer at 59th Street at that time of day, is worth a treasure. With that transfer you can travel all the way to City Hall, and even farther, to Castle Garden or the Battery.)

I sat down in a cross-town car, then with the same transfer I got on the 3rd Avenue car. Now I was feeling a little like the boss of the streetcar because I had a real transfer. I stretched out my feet, leaned my head against the wall, pushed my hat down over my eyes, and dozed off just like somebody who felt right at home. At the People's Theater I got out and stopped to look at all the posters. After I got my fill of looking at the pictures, I started to make my way home, but by another route. I was afraid that if I took the same streetcar line I might run into one of the earlier conductors.

But since the dime was chewed-up, and was looking like a broken pants button, the conductors did not make any ceremonies, and immediately made me get moving. I had to change twenty-four cars in order to get home to Harlem. I still have the dime. I will use it again.

4. With the “400” at the Educational Alliance

Once, on a Wednesday evening, I said to Mr. Solomon, my boss, “I want to go downtown.” Mr. Solomon didn't say anything. I said, “Mr. Solomon! I want to travel a little downtown.” He was silent. That's the kind of person he is! One moment he is just like other people, talks, gossips and laughs, and another time as his elflock takes a turn he is angry with the whole world and will not talk to anyone or answer them.

I said to him a third time, “Mr. Solomon! I'm going downtown for a while.” He looked at me finally and said, “Go! And don't bother my head – who's not letting you go?” I said, “What do you want from me? I have asked you if I can go, can't you say to me yes or no, but yelling – what are you yelling for? Don't I earn my bread from you? Why do you need to yell at me?”

“Go to hell,” screamed out Mr. Solomon, “Look how he has to argue! Just like a Socialist!”

“What do you have with him, ha? Why are you screaming at the boy?” That was the voice of Mrs. Solomon, who had come to take my side. I have, already, the good fortune, that when the butcher yells at me, his wife comes and takes up for me. When the butcher's wife yells at me, the butcher comes and takes up for me.

I left them fighting with each other, and I went out into the street, and took a train to ride downtown.

I got off at Canal and Allen Street because I had heard that on East Broadway there was a candy shop where every evening they gave away chocolate for free and they also showed moving pictures for free. When I got close to that store, I saw that by Jefferson Street there was a big uproar. I gave chase with my little feet and one, two three – I was there, right next to it all. A policeman gave me a shove and said, “Go on, get out!”

Because the policeman drove me away, I went, but came right back a little farther away. I took a look and saw that the uproar was a strange one. All around the big Jewish school on the corner (Beryl means the Educational Alliance) there were carriages and automobiles. Every minute another carriage came by or an automobile, and out of them came ladies and gentlemen, who you could see immediately were great aristocrats.

I thought to myself, what kind of a holiday is this? Apparently, the aristocrats are also coming to East Broadway to enjoy some free chocolate. As I was standing there I overheard someone, a young man with glasses talking to a young woman with glasses: “That is the 'Four Hundred.' They have come to see how poor Jewish children from the East Side perform a theater piece written by Mark Twain.”

It goes without saying that I, Beryl, immediately became enthusiastic about getting inside. And also I wanted to see the Four Hundred. I had often read in the newspapers about the Four Hundred, their elegant balls, their banquets, and their dinners that they given in honor of deer, monkeys, Parisian Marquis and Spanish Counts. I really wanted to be able to sit with them for a while, and see what they do, how they amuse themselves, how they sit, how they stand, and how they look at other people.

But how does the cat get over the water? There stand the cops and the robbers, and they won't let anybody through. If one wants to get by them, they will get caught by a policeman who smells his breath. If his breath is clean, they will let him go to the other side of the street. But if he smells of

onions or radishes, they make him go two blocks farther on through Grand Street. A yidene came along yelling that in Henry Street she left two small children with a pot of milk on the fire and asked to be let through. But the police were hardheaded and told her go by way of another street. I saw that there was no chance for me to get through.

As I stood there in the middle of the street, a carriage drove by next to me, and out of the carriage stepped a young lady with a small package in her hand. I jumped forward and took the package from her hand. She gave me a smile and allowed me to carry the package for her. The policeman saw that I was walking with the lady and carrying her package, he let me go through. The lady smiled at me as she walked and opened her pocketbook looking for a coin for me. "Never mind, lady!" I said to her, "I don't want anything for my trouble." By this time we were right by the door. The lady nudged me through and said to the man at the door, "Let him in, the poor young boy, as my guest. He seems to be a little gentleman." Going through the door we were approached by two ushers at once. One escorted the lady to a seat, and the other wanted to throw me out, but the lady took me by the hand and pulled me after her. She gave the small package to the usher. It was candy for the little actors.

I really felt good in my heart. Tell me, have you ever had a beautiful lady take you by the hand? How did it make you feel? That act made me forget the whole world. It made me want to dance, to jump and act foolish. And as the lady sat me down next to her, I wanted to take both her hands and press them to my heart. How I would have loved to do that if I were not so shy! I would have asked her not to look at me like that. It reminded me of the looks my mother used to give me, may she rest in peace. I don't remember anything more about her than her eyes – I was still a baby when she died.

Little by little I came back around to being myself and began to look at the people around me. So that's the Four Hundred? I thought to myself and started counting them. I counted and counted and found that there were only eighty or ninety people. Where are the Four Hundred tonight?

On the platform was a honorable, elderly gentleman with gray hair who was speaking. "That is Mark Twain! Mark Twain!" You could hear from all sides. When the Four Hundred heard that it was Mark Twain they began to laugh at every word he uttered.

Afterwards they began to perform the theatrical piece. The actors were little Jewish children. One of them, a little Jewish boy, I recognized right away. His name is Artsik, but he made his name over to Archibald. His mother runs a soda water stand in Delaney Street. A little later I recognized a girl on the stage. Her name is Hiene, but she calls herself Teresa and her mother has a pickle stand on Allen Street.

The aristocrats watched the little actors with their opera glasses, and the aristocrats were quite charmed. "The children are very clean," I heard a lady say, "Even though people say that the East Side children are never washed."

"Yes," called out another lady, "It is remarkable! The children are clean and look very respectable, and they speak English no worse than American children. I don't know why people clamor so about the unfortunate East Side children!"

The play ended around half past ten, and the Four Hundred, I mean the eighty or ninety, headed toward the door, slowly, little by little. Not shoving like people leaving a Yiddish theater. The lady that I came with, once again took me by the hand, and looking into my eyes like before. I wanted to ask her something, but it stuck in my throat. Oy, if only she did not look into my eyes like that, and if those

eyes did not remind me of my mother!

“What's your name?” she asked as we were leaving.

“Beryl,” I answered, “Beryl the Butcher Boy.”

The lady chuckled a bit.

“And you?” I asked. I really wanted to know who she was.

“I am a housemaid by a rich lady, one of the Four Hundred,” she answered me. “My mistress received an invitation to this performance. She gave the invitation to me so that I could come and donate the little package of candy for the children.”

“You are not one of the Four Hundred?” I asked a little disappointed.

“No,” she answered, “There are very few here from the Four Hundred. You see that lady, the blond, is also a maid. And that one, the brunette, is also a maid. And that gentleman with the little beard, he is a valet. They all work for the aristocrats of the Four Hundred, and the aristocrats who did not want to come all gave their invitations to their servants.”

“And the carriages and automobiles?” I asked.

Ah, every so often we give the coachmen and chauffeurs a chance to take a promenade.

On the other side of the street, peddlers with pushcarts appeared, with biscuits, with ovens on wheels. The peddlers hoped to get some proceeds from the big crowd. The peddlers were crying out and yelling to the customers.

“Wursts, hot ones! Two cents with bun and mustard!”

“Baked potatoes: big and hot! A penny a piece.”

“Blintzes with cheese and potatoes! Hot and ready! A penny a piece, a treat for your soul!”

“Hot coco, to drink! A penny for a cup, a full one!”

“Turkish candy! Health in your bones. Sweet as manna!”

“Carob, fine carob, Jews! A penny a bag!”

“Cooked peas! Jews, give to help a poor widow! A penny a portion for cooked peas!”

“Jews! Give to help a poor orphan! Two portions of peas for a penny!”

Leaving the theater, everyone went over to the peddlers to get something from them. Some ate the wursts, with the blintzes, the Turkish candy, and the cooked peas. Others had the things packed in

paper and took them home as souvenirs.

Afterwards, everyone went home. The lady who was so friendly to me the whole evening said 'goodbye' and gave me a quarter for candy.

It was a good quarter, not one made of lead.