



VILLAGE

of

IDIOTS?

8

by
John
Lazarus.

2017 Draft

VILLAGE OF IDIOTS

A play

By John Lazarus

Based on European Jewish folklore

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243 Helen St., Kingston, Ontario, Canada

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Setting:

Chelm – a small shtetl, or Jewish village, in a folkloric version of 19th Century Poland. Crooked wooden houses. A small grove of trees, and the suggestion of a riverbank offstage.

There are two interiors that appear for one scene each: the RABBI's house in Act One, and a Synagogue meeting-room in Act Two. There is also a small handcart, or portable roadside stand, at which ZALMAN and ZLATEH sell their Schnapps.

The play begins just before dawn, goes through morning, afternoon and evening, and ends after midnight. But it also begins in spring, goes through summer, autumn and winter, and ends in spring again. The landscape may be decorated with buds, blossoms, fruit, snow, and finally buds again.

Characters:

With multiple casting, the play can be produced with as few as seven or eight actors.

ZALMAN & ZLATEH
MESHOLEM
YOSEF
SHMENDRICK
ZISYAH
RABBI
REBBETSIN
MIRIAM
FEYVEL
FEIGELA
YOSSEL
ISKA
GITTEL
RUSSIAN OFFICER
PRIVATE BRODSKY
OTHER RUSSIAN SOLDIERS
OTHER CHELMNIKS

Production History:

Village of Idiots was first performed at Young People's Theatre, Toronto, on March 21, 1985. It was directed by Peter Moss, with sets, costumes, and lighting design by Phillip Silver. Stage Manager was S. Tigger Jourard. Assistant to the Director was Andrew McIlroy. Assistant to the Lighting Designer was Heather Sherman. The cast was as follows:

Zalman	Stan Lesk
Zlateh	Theresa Tova
Mesholem.....	Sam Malkin
Yosef.....	Milan Cheylov

(Original cast, continued:)

Schmendrick	Jay Bowen
Zisyah.....	Nicholas Rice
Rabbi.....	Eric Donkin
Rebbetsin.....	Sylvia Lennick
Miriam.....	Terri Cherniack
Feyvel.....	Alec Willows
Feigela.....	Nikki Pascetta
Yossel (called “Ugly Male Chelmnik”).....	Stan Lesk
Iska (called “Pretty Female Chelmnik”).....	Nikki Pascetta
Gittel	Theresa Tova
Russian Officer	Nicholas Rice
Private Brodsky.....	David Cameron
Russian Soldiers, Chelmniks	David Cameron
	Daniel Dion
	Mike Jenkinson
	Nikki Pascetta

The play has also been produced in a staged-reading format by the American Jewish Theatre, New York (spring 1985), and in full productions by Western Canada Theatre Company, Kamloops (December 1985), Alberta Theatre Projects, Calgary (December 1986), the Prairie Theatre Exchange, Winnipeg (December 1988), Studio 58, Vancouver (summer 1989), the National Theatre School of Canada (autumn 1991), Theatre Kingston, Kingston, Ontario (November 2001), Rosebud Theatre, Alberta (summer 2006), and by numerous amateur and school groups. It has been translated into Italian by Dr. Giulio Marra, and produced as “Il Villaggio degli Sciocchi”, in Venice, Italy, in the spring of 2003. Schmendrick’s story in Scene 6 was produced in 2000 as an animated cartoon film for the National Film Board of Canada, under the title “Village of Idiots”. An expanded version of the play, adapted for radio, was produced by the CBC in 2000 as a six-part mini-series. This draft contains rewrites from a production by Domino Theatre, Kingston, Ontario, directed by Gord Love, in March of 2017.

Acknowledgements:

The stories and jokes in this play come from hundreds of anonymous storytellers over the centuries. I tried to use only authentic folklore, as collected in the anthologies of Nathan Ausubel, Rufus Lears, Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, though some of these stories I first discovered in the retellings in Isaac Bashevis Singer’s children’s books and Solomon Simon’s “Wise Men of Helm” books, and in conversation with my late father, Rupert Lazarus.

I would also like to thank Earl Klein and Karen Barnes; Marietta Kozak; Peter Moss, Leslee Silverman, Richard Greenblatt, the participants in the 1984 Young People’s Theatre drama workshop, and the casts of the productions, all of whom contributed much to the script.

Cover illustration by Ken MacDonald, made available by the generosity of the artist.

-J.L.

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ACT ONE

Scene One

(Early spring, buds on the trees, the Schnapps Stand waiting onstage. Before dawn. Throughout the scene the sky will grow gradually brighter, but it begins in darkness, except for light on ZALMAN & ZLATEH, who enter down the aisle, from the back of the theatre. ZLATEH carries a heavy barrel. They ad-lib their way in, whispering and shushing each other. Then ZLATEH stumbles.)

ZALMAN (loud): Careful! Careful!

ZLATEH (sotto voce): Sha, Zalman! You want to wake up God forbid all the Chelmniks? Before sunrise, even?

ZALMAN (sotto voce): I'm sorry, Zlateh, but if you drop that barrel, God forbid, we'll be out of business before we've even started.

ZLATEH: So, you're so nervous I shouldn't drop it? You carry it.

ZALMAN: Oh, I couldn't. Zlateh, you know how clumsy I am. You're always calling me such a klutz. (Aside, to someone on the aisle:) She always says, "My husband Zalman, the klutz." (To ZLATEH:) And you're right. Only you have the strength and grace to be entrusted with this precious barrel! (Aside again:) Such a beautiful wife...

ZLATEH: Zalman, you could give lessons to the Rabbi.

ZALMAN: No, but it is true. I am unfit to shoulder the heavy responsibility –

ZLATEH: Zalman, that's enough! You've made your point.

ZALMAN (seeing that they have arrived at the stage): Ah! So I have.

1
2 (ZLATEH, perceiving that she has done all the work, puts the barrel down onstage with a loud
3 thump.)
4

5
6 ZALMAN: Quiet! You'll wake up God forbid all the Chelmniks! Shh!
7

8
9 (They continue sotto voce:)
10

11
12 ZLATEH: All right; inventory. And shh yourself.
13

14
15 ZALMAN: Inventory. We got stools? We got glasses? (Sets them out.)
16

17
18 ZLATEH: Stools and glasses, right.
19

20
21 ZALMAN (pointing, whispering): How does the sign look?
22

23
24 ZLATEH (looks up at it): It's tilted up a bit.
25

26
27 ZALMAN: Which side is it tilted up on?
28

29
30 ZLATEH: Actually, it's tilted up the same amount on both sides.
31

32
33 ZALMAN: Well, I can't fix *both* sides, but I'll get it so that it's only tilted up on *one* side.
34

35
36 ZLATEH: Shh!
37

38
39 ZALMAN: Shh!
40

41
42 (ZALMAN whips out a hammer and starts pounding one of the supports to the sign, as loudly as
43 can be. ZLATEH watches approvingly. After a moment of this, MESHOLEM's head pops out
44 from behind a house.)
45

46

1 MESHOLEM: Zalman! Zalman! (Rushes on.) Why are you hammering at this hour?

2

3

4 ZALMAN: My dear Mesholem, I am not hammering at this hour, I am hammering at this signpost.

5

6

7 ZLATEH: Mesholem, we've decided to go into business, Zalman and I. We're gonna sell our
8 famous homemade schnapps and make lots of money, God willing! And then we'll be rich!

9

10

11 ZALMAN: Couldn't we get rich first, and make lots of money later?

12

13

14 ZLATEH: That would be good too.

15

16

17 MESHOLEM: *Your schnapps?* You are going to *sell* that stuff which you call *schnapps*?

18

19

20 ZALMAN: And why not?

21

22

23 MESHOLEM: Zalman, live forever and have wonderful grandchildren, but that stuff of yours is
24 hardly worth the name of schnapps! I, Mesholem, have tasted it! And I know what you put *in* it!

25

26

27 ZLATEH: Dear Mesholem, try a glass. At five kopeks, you can't beat the price.

28

29

30 MESHOLEM: Five kopeks isn't a bad price. Very well, I'll taste some.

31

32

33 ZALMAN: Our first customer!

34

35

36 MESHOLEM: Wait a moment. First you pay me the five kopeks, and *then* I drink the schnapps.

37

38

39 (Pause. ZALMAN & ZLATEH do puzzled takes.)

40

41

42 ZALMAN: No, no, no...

43

44

45 ZLATEH: No, no, no. *You pay us.*

46

1
2 MESHOLEM: *I pay you?* Never mind! The deal's off!
3
4
5 ZALMAN & ZLATEH: Oy...
6
7
8 MESHOLEM: Anyway, I'm a busy shammas. I must go knock upon the shutters of all the houses
9 and awaken the Chelmniks. Good day, Zalman and Zlateh. May you sell lots of schnapps to
10 everybody except me. (Exit.)
11
12
13 ZLATEH (mildly): Oy.
14
15
16 ZALMAN (mildly): Gevaldt.
17
18
19 ZLATEH: Well, we can still look forward to our first customer.
20
21
22 (An exhausted FIGURE is coming down the aisle. This is YOSEF, ragged and dusty and on his last
23 legs. He wears a backpack.)
24
25
26 ZLATEH: Oh, and look! Here comes our first customer now!
27
28
29 ZALMAN: Oy, Zlateh, look at him, what a mess. Feh. Couldn't we skip this one, and begin with
30 our second customer?
31
32
33 ZLATEH: Oh, he's just been traveling for a long time and he's hot and dusty and tired. *He'll* want
34 a nice glass of schnapps. (Calls to YOSEF:) Yoo hoo...
35
36 (YOSEF looks up at her.)
37
38 Yoo hoo, hot, dusty, tired stranger who has just arrived in our village... You want maybe a nice
39 glass of schnapps?
40
41
42 ZALMAN: Only five kopeks.
43
44
45 YOSEF (as he steps onto the stage): Sure. Why not?
46

1
2 ZALMAN & ZLATEH: Our first customer! Our first customer!
3
4
5 YOSEF (hunts in his pockets, finds his last five-kopek piece): This is my last five kopeks.
6
7
8 ZALMAN: You couldn't spend it better.
9
10
11 ZLATEH: Don't drink too fast, you'll burn your throat.
12
13
14 ZALMAN: Don't drink too slow, you'll taste it.
15
16
17 YOSEF: L'chaim.
18
19
20 ZALMAN & ZLATEH: L'chaim, l'chaim.
21
22
23 (YOSEF takes a mouthful and nearly chokes on it.)
24
25
26 YOSEF (when he finds his voice): What's *in* this?
27
28
29 ZALMAN & ZLATEH (beaming): Garlic.
30
31
32 YOSEF: Garlic? In peach brandy?
33
34
35 ZALMAN: My Zlateh puts garlic in everything, don't you, dear?
36
37
38 ZLATEH: That's right. Refreshing, isn't it?
39
40
41 YOSEF (regarding the glass with respect): Well, it woke me up. So tell me. Where am I, anyway?
42
43
44 ZALMAN (pointing): You're right there.
45
46

1 YOSEF: No, no –
2
3
4 ZLATEH: Yes, you are! Just look down at your feet and you'll see.
5
6
7 YOSEF: No, I mean – what's the name of this village?
8
9
10 (ZALMAN & ZLATEH look at each other, and burst out laughing.)
11
12
13 ZALMAN & ZLATEH: He doesn't know the name of the village!
14
15
16 ZALMAN: The most famous village in the entire universe!
17
18
19 ZLATEH: There, now you can guess.
20
21
22 YOSEF: It seems like any other Jewish village. Except maybe –
23
24 (Music cue: soft, sweet Klezmer music.)
25
26 The air – there's something about the air here –
27
28
29 ZALMAN & ZLATEH: Aaahhh.
30
31
32 YOSEF: Something so warm, so sweet, it almost makes you dizzy...
33
34
35 ZALMAN: So, now you have another clue.
36
37
38 YOSEF: Babinka?
39
40
41 ZLATEH: Oh, you poor, sweet, helpless man.
42
43
44 ZALMAN: This – is – Chelm.
45
46

1 YOSEF: Chelm? You mean the Village of – forgive me, but isn't Chelm known far and wide as the
2 Village of –

3

4

5 ZALMAN: Yes, my friend. The Village of the Wise.

6

7

8 YOSEF: – Of the *Wise*?

9

10

11 ZALMAN: Some say it's the air in this valley that makes us so wise.

12

13

14 ZLATEH: And some have another story. Tell him the other story, Zalman dear.

15

16

17 ZALMAN: You see that pine tree, up on that mountain? (Points.)

18

19

20 ZLATEH: Well, many years ago, before anybody lived here, an Angel happened to be flying over
21 that mountain.

22

23

24 ZALMAN: Now this Angel was carrying a big sack, full of Jewish souls.

25

26

27 ZLATEH: *Very special* Jewish souls.

28

29

30 ZALMAN: She was supposed to spread these remarkable souls evenly throughout all the
31 villages –

32

33

34 ZLATEH: Nobody should get jealous.

35

36

37 ZALMAN: But then a dreadful and wonderful thing happened.

38

39

40 ZLATEH: The sack caught on that very pine tree –

41

42

43 ZALMAN: – And tore open. And all the special souls –

44

45

46 ZLATEH: – Tumbled down the mountainside and into this valley.

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ZALMAN: And their wise descendants became –

ZLATEH: Us! The Chelmniks!

ZALMAN: And so, friendly stranger: drink to us! It's still half-full and you've paid your five kopeks – finish your schnapps.

YOSEF: No, please. This one's on me. In honour of, uh, Chelm.

ZALMAN: Well, thank you. L'chaim. (Takes the glass, is about to take a sip when ZLATEH leans over him, clearing her throat significantly.) Dear? (Offers her the glass.)

ZLATEH: Thank you, dear. L'chaim. (Empties it.) Some more for you, dear?

ZALMAN: Why, yes, thank you. (Takes the glass.) L'chaim... (But it's empty. Meanwhile ZLATEH has taken the Schnapps stand and is rolling it off.) Dear... Dear... (Exit, in pursuit of ZLATEH.)

YOSEF: The Village of the Wise? That's not how I heard it. I've always heard Chelm was the Village of Idiots. And if those two are anything to judge by, then everybody's right.

(He looks around. The dawn light is coming up. Enter SCHMENDRICK, pulling a long rope by one end.)

SCHMENDRICK: Good morning!

YOSEF: Good morning.

SCHMENDRICK (regards him briefly): An Outsider!

YOSEF: Yes, I just got here.

1
2 SCHMENDRICK: So if you're an Outsider, you must be acquainted with my old friend Gimpel
3 Lekisch. How is he doing?
4
5
6 YOSEF: Uh – What was the name?
7
8
9 SCHMENDRICK: Of who?
10
11
12 YOSEF: Of, uh, Gimpel Lekisch.
13
14
15 SCHMENDRICK: Never heard of the fellow. (Starts to exit.)
16
17
18 YOSEF: Excuse me? Why are you pulling that rope?
19
20
21 SCHMENDRICK: And have you ever tried pushing one?
22
23
24 (Exit. Enter ZISYAH, on his hands and knees, peering along the ground.)
25
26
27 ZISYAH: Good morning.
28
29
30 YOSEF: Good morning, and what are you up to?
31
32
33 ZISYAH: I am looking for money.
34
35
36 YOSEF: So? Who isn't?
37
38
39 ZISYAH: This is no time for philosophy. I lost a ruble last night, an entire ruble.
40
41
42 YOSEF: Oy, what a shame, where did you lose it?
43
44
45 ZISYAH: In my house.
46

1
2 YOSEF: So why aren't you looking in your house?
3
4
5 ZISYAH: In my house, it's dark! Out here, it's light! (Exit, peering along the ground.)
6
7
8 YOSEF: If it *is* the air, maybe I shouldn't stick around too long.
9
10
11 (MESHOLEM now comes out of his house again, upstage. He knocks with his fists on a pile of
12 colourful wooden boards stacked beside his house. He calls, quietly, almost in a whisper:)
13
14
15 MESHOLEM: Rabbi... Rebbetsin... Feyvel... Miriam...
16
17
18 YOSEF: Uh – Excuse me? (MESHOLEM gives him a look.) You're not going to find anybody in
19 that pile of boards!
20
21
22 MESHOLEM: Of course not! What's the matter with you? (Peers at him.) Ah, an Outsider... Look.
23 I am knocking upon the shutters of all the citizens, they should wake up and begin the –
24
25
26 YOSEF: You're knocking on their shutters?
27
28
29 MESHOLEM: Yes, but I'm an old man, praise God, and lame in one leg. So we've taken all the
30 shutters off of all the houses, and piled them beside *my* house, so that I can knock on them all
31 without having to walk all over the village. Simple, no? (Resumes knocking.)
32
33
34 YOSEF: Shallow breathing. Until I get out of this valley. Shallow breathing. (To MESHOLEM:)
35 Forgive me, but you can't wake them up like that! It won't work! See? Nobody's up!
36
37
38 (Enter, on cue, a surging horde of CHELMNIKS, ad-libbing cheerfully, who nearly knock YOSEF
39 over. By now it is full daylight.)
40
41
42 CHELMNIKS (ad-lib): Look, A stranger... an Outsider... He looks tired... He looks awful... (Etc.
43 The ad-libs run down, with one comment emerging solo at the end:)
44
45
46 RABBI: ...as though he'd been through a pogrom, poor fellow.

1
2
3 YOSEF (alert at this): As though I'd been through a what? A pogrom?
4
5
6 RABBI (gently): I only meant you look a little tired. Good morning.
7
8
9 YOSEF: Good morning.
10
11
12 CHELMNIKS (in chorus:) Good morning!
13
14
15 RABBI: I, young man, am the Chief Rabbi of Chelm. You've heard other Outsiders speak of
16 Chelm, of course. They talk of nothing else; they're obsessed. Well, they're lying. Don't believe a
17 word they say. They're all jealous.
18
19
20 CHELMNIKS: It's true! They're all jealous!
21
22
23 RABBI: My son, people come in two varieties: Chelmniks, and the less fortunate: the Outsiders.
24 Outsiders console themselves by calling Chelmniks a bunch of idiots.
25
26
27 YOSEF: I see.
28
29
30 RABBI: So, now: do *you* think we're idiots?
31
32
33 YOSEF: I have no opinions. I don't know anything.
34
35
36 RABBI (amused): Ah! What's your name?
37
38
39 YOSEF: Yosef.
40
41
42 RABBI: And where are you from, Yosef?
43
44
45 YOSEF: Various places.
46

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SCHMENDRICK: Oh, I've been there.

RABBI: Yosef, tell me, how would you like a home-cooked breakfast?

YOSEF: Breakfast?

RABBI: At my home. With me and my wife and young Miriam. An apple, a couple boiled eggs, a potato, some rye bread with cream cheese, and a nice glass of tea, hm?

CHELMNIKS: Oohh.

YOSEF (aside): For that I'll risk breathing. (To RABBI:) Thank you, I accept!

RABBI: I thought you would. You see, such idiots we're not. (Claps hands.) Chelmniks! Another day begins! It is time for everyone to go about everyone else's business!

(He exits. The CHELMNIKS disperse, ad-libbing.)

(During some of the scene changes there will be a Walk-Across: an old staple of vaudeville, consisting of a quick exchange between two actors, crossing the stage. In this first Walk-Across, FEYVEL and SCHMENDRICK enter from opposite sides, SCHMENDRICK with his umbrella up, FEYVEL with his down. They pass each other, surreptitiously notice each other, do a take to the audience, and look up at the sky. Then the Up umbrella comes down, the Down umbrella goes up, and, both satisfied, they go on their way.)

Scene Two

(The interior of the RABBI's house rolls on. It is wood, like all Chelm buildings. The RABBI, the REBBETSIN and YOSEF are seated at a dining table: REBBETSIN sipping a glass of tea, YOSEF shovelling away at breakfast, and the RABBI holding forth, his glass of tea in hand.)

RABBI: Why we're like this, only God knows for sure. But Chelmniks and other great thinkers have devised theories. One being that there's a magical perfume in the air of the valley –

1
2 REBBETSIN: Yes, Yosef, you notice the divine aroma?
3
4
5 YOSEF (mouth full): 'S beautiful.
6
7
8 RABBI: Some say that's what makes us wise.
9
10
11 YOSEF: Yes, I've heard that.
12
13
14 REBBETSIN: So stick around and keep breathing, dear, and soon you'll be wise like us.
15
16
17 YOSEF: God help me.
18
19
20 REBBETSIN (placidly): Omeyn.
21
22
23 (Enter MIRIAM.)
24
25
26 YOSEF: Oh, hello again. And how are you, Miss Miriam?
27
28
29 MIRIAM (serving): I'm just as I was five minutes ago, Mr. Yosef.
30
31
32 YOSEF: Oh, please. For you, I am simply Yosef.
33
34
35 MIRIAM (smiles): Thank you. And for you, I'm still Miss Miriam. (Crosses to the sideboard.)
36
37
38 RABBI: Now then, the other major theory as to the source of our wisdom is the famous Angel-
39 Getting-Snagged-On-The-Pine-Tree Theory.
40
41
42 YOSEF: Yes, this theory I also heard from Zalman and Zlateh.
43
44
45 REBBETSIN: You see, this angel gets snagged on this pine tree –
46

1
2 MIRIAM (gently): Rebbetsin, Yosef just told you, he already knows the story.
3
4
5 RABBI (without sarcasm): Oh! Well! Why doesn't he tell it? Tell us the story, Yosef.
6
7
8 REBBETSIN: Oh, do tell us, I love a good story.
9
10
11 YOSEF: Uh –
12
13
14 MIRIAM: Why don't you let him finish his breakfast first?
15
16
17 RABBI: That would be good too.
18
19
20 MIRIAM: And then maybe he has a story to tell us of where he comes from.
21
22
23 REBBETSIN: Ah yes, the faraway climes...
24
25
26 RABBI: Even that, too, would be good.
27
28
29 YOSEF: I have no story. I don't come from anywhere.
30
31
32 REBBETSIN: Oh, come now, everybody has a story!
33
34
35 MIRIAM: Some more potato, Mr. Yosef?
36
37
38 YOSEF: Please, Miss Miriam.
39
40
41 MIRIAM (serves him): And forgive me, dear Rabbi and Rebbetsin, but maybe not everybody has a
42 story?
43
44
45 (She exits. YOSEF, already half in love, gazes after her.)
46

1
2 REBBETSIN (observing YOSEF's gaze): Yes, spirited girl, our Miriam. Pretty, too, no?
3
4
5 RABBI: So! Yosef! You have no story – and you have no opinions? Eh?
6
7
8 YOSEF: No, not me. Me, I keep an open mind. (He is buttering a piece of bread.)
9
10
11 RABBI (to REBBETSIN): Yes, Yosef here knows nothing, he says.
12
13
14 REBBETSIN: Really? Where did you learn that?
15
16
17 YOSEF: I used to think I knew the difference between right and wrong. Now I know I don't even
18 know that.
19
20
21 RABBI: Interesting, no?
22
23
24 REBBETSIN: All right, Mister Know-Nothing, try this one: if you drop that piece of bread, which
25 side will it fall on?
26
27
28 YOSEF: Either side, I suppose.
29
30
31 REBBETSIN: Aha. Well, all Chelmniks know that it always falls with the buttered side down.
32
33
34 RABBI: A lesson in life.
35
36
37 (YOSEF drops the bread. ALL look.)
38
39
40 YOSEF: But it landed buttered side up.
41
42
43 REBBETSIN: So it did. That just proves that you don't know what you're talking about: you
44 buttered the wrong side of the bread!
45
46

1 YOSEF (staring at the bread): This I would never have thought of.
2
3
4 RABBI: There, you're getting wiser already.
5
6
7 REBBETSIN: Deep breaths, darling.
8
9
10 (Enter MIRIAM, to clean up.)
11
12
13 YOSEF: And, uh, how are you this time, Miss Miriam?
14
15
16 MIRIAM (laughs): Still the same, Mr. Yosef.
17
18
19 RABBI: So tell me, Yosef, what sort of work do you do?
20
21
22 YOSEF (distracted): Hm? Oh, any kind of odd job, to pay my way. Mostly I've worked as a
23 builder.
24
25
26 RABBI & REBBETSIN: A builder!
27
28
29 YOSEF: Uh, yes, I've built houses, and shops – barns –
30
31
32 RABBI: You're a Godsend! Just what we need!
33
34
35 YOSEF: I am?
36
37
38 RABBI: We're trying to build a new synagogue.
39
40
41 REBBETSIN: We tore the old one down. The roof leaked.
42
43
44 RABBI: But we haven't had a decent builder in Chelm since old Pincus the Nearsighted.
45
46

1 YOSEF: Pincus the Nearsighted?

2

3

4

5 REBBETSIN: He was working on the roof of the watermill.

6

7

8 RABBI: So we put up a sign: "Dear Pincus the Nearsighted: If you can read this sign, you're too
9 close to the edge of the roof." Fell off and broke his neck.

10

11

12 REBBETSIN: A tragedy. But unavoidable.

13

14

15 RABBI: And now we need a builder, to help us build our synagogue.

16

17

18 YOSEF: But – you don't know me – where I've been – what I've done –

19

20

21 REBBETSIN (reassuringly): I'm sure you've never done anything important in your life.

22

23

24 RABBI: And if you have, we don't want to know about it.

25

26

27 YOSEF: But – what about the air?

28

29

30 REBBETSIN: What about it? There's plenty.

31

32

33 YOSEF: Yes, but, uh – doesn't it – *change* people?

34

35

36 RABBI (to REBBETSIN): Well, you know, I've been wondering lately whether it really is the air,
37 dear. I'm tending more towards the Angel Theory these days. After all, look at Miriam.

38

39

40 YOSEF: What about her?

41

42

43 RABBI: She's been breathing the air of Chelm, what, three or four years now, and she never seems
44 to get any the wiser. No offense.

45

46

1 REBBETSIN: That's true, but consider: Miriam was almost as wise as we are to begin with. Not
2 much room for improvement.

3

4

5 MIRIAM: Why, thank you, Rebbetsin.

6

7

8 YOSEF: But – wait a moment – I thought she was your daughter.

9

10

11 REBBETSIN: Oh, I only wish she were. She's the help! She isn't even a Chelmnik, poor thing.

12

13

14 YOSEF (wonderful news): Not a Chelmnik! Where are you from?

15

16

17 MIRIAM: Warsaw. I was passing through here one winter and got snowed in. I've never left.

18

19

20 YOSEF: I'll stay.

21

22

23 RABBI: Wonderful! Wonderful!

24

25

26 (Ad-lib celebration for a moment.)

27

28

29 YOSEF: Now, about this synagogue. Do you have any drawings of it?

30

31

32 REBBETSIN: How can we draw it when we haven't built it yet?

33

34

35 YOSEF: No, I mean *plans*.

36

37

38 RABBI: Oh, we got plans, all right. Mesholem had a vision of the new synagogue. It came at him
39 in a dream.

40

41

42 REBBETSIN: He woke up screaming. Ugliest thing he'd ever seen.

43

44

45 RABBI: So that one, we're not going to build.

46

1
2 YOSEF: Have you started building yet?

3
4
5 RABBI: No, first we raise the money.

6
7
8 YOSEF: And how will you do that?

9
10
11 REBBETSIN (as ALL start to exit): No problem. Next month's pickled herring harvest will take
12 care of that.

13
14
15 YOSEF (starting after them): All right, good; then, after you – (Double take: stops. Aside:) Pickled
16 herring harvest?

17
18
19 (Blackout.)

20
21
22 **Scene Three**

23
24
25 (The street. Midmorning, early summer. ZALMAN & ZLATEH roll their Schnapps stand on. They
26 sit idle. ZALMAN flips his five-kopek piece.)

27
28
29 ZLATEH: What a morning. God protect us from mornings like this one.

30
31
32 ZALMAN: Why? We should give thanks for such a beautiful summer's day.

33
34
35 ZLATEH: Oh, the weather is a gift from the Lord. It's the business that shouldn't happen to a
36 Cossack. We've been here since before dawn, and how many glasses have we sold? One. And how
37 much have we made? Five kopeks.

38
39
40 ZALMAN: This is true. (Regards the coin in his hand, then the barrel.) Dear wife, I am as hot and
41 thirsty as the next man, am I not?

42
43
44 ZLATEH (looking around): I don't know. Where's the next man?

45
46

1 ZALMAN: And my five kopeks are as good as anybody else's, aren't they?

2

3

4 ZLATEH: Of course they are.

5

6

7 ZALMAN: Well, in that case I wish to purchase one glass of schnapps. (Lays down his coin.)

8

9

10 ZLATEH: Of course! Why not! Here you are, my dear Zalman.

11

12

13 (She draws a glassful, plunks it down onto the counter.)

14

15

16 ZALMAN: L'chaim.

17

18

19 ZLATEH: L'chaim.

20

21

22 ZALMAN (drinks half of it, then): That's much better already.

23

24

25 ZLATEH: Of course it is! Instead of selling one glass, we've now sold two! Not only do you get a
26 nice glass of schnapps, but we've doubled our sales in only two minutes!

27

28

29 ZALMAN: Right! And they say Chelmniks don't have a head for business! L'chaim!

30

31

32 ZLATEH: L'chaim!

33

34

35 (He drinks the rest as they begin to roll the Schnapps stand off. They are nearly overrun by
36 numerous CHELMNIKS, coming the other way, with fishing nets, ad-libbing happily as they head
37 towards the riverbank.)

38

39

40 MESHOLEM: It's pickled herring day!

41

42

43 (They cross Right, and with cries of "One – two – three!" they cast their nets offstage, into the
44 river. FEYVEL and ZISYAH are a bit off the rhythm, and come in after everyone else with:

45 "Fourteen!" They lose their net on the backswing; it flies into YOSEF's hands; without noticing,

1 they run off. The REBBETSIN and YOSEF are left onstage, YOSEF curiously looking at the net
2 he holds.)

3

4

5 YOSEF: Now, how does this pickled herring harvest work?

6

7

8 (FEYVEL re-enters, takes the net from YOSEF, and exits, annoyed.)

9

10

11 REBBETSIN: Well, the best way for us to raise money is by selling a shipment of pickled herring
12 to the neighbouring village: Shedlitz.

13

14

15 YOSEF: Shedlitz?

16

17

18 REBBETSIN: Yes –

19

20

21 YOSEF: Shedlitz is the neighbouring village?

22

23

24 REBBETSIN: That's right, dear. So. The Shedlitzniks just love pickled herring, as who doesn't?
25 But where do we get enough pickled herring to sell to them? So what we did – a year ago, we took
26 a dozen jars of pickled herring – and we stocked the river with them.

27

28

29 YOSEF: But pickled herring –

30

31

32 REBBETSIN: Look: I'll explain: you want lots of chickens, what do you do, you put boy chickens
33 and girl chickens together and you let nature take its course, right?

34

35

36 YOSEF: Well, yes, but –

37

38

39 REBBETSIN: The same with herring, no?

40

41

42 YOSEF: Well – but before a herring can be pickled, it unfortunately has to be –

43

44

45 (He is interrupted by a shout from offstage.)

46

1
2 REBBETSIN: Look, here comes Feyvel. (Enter FEYVEL.) Hello, Feyvel, God willing we pull in
3 lots of baby pickled herring!
4
5
6 FEYVEL: We're hauling in the nets! We're hauling in the nets! (Nudges REBBETSIN.) Hey
7 Rebbetsin, you know what that means, don't you?
8
9
10 REBBETSIN: What, Feyvel?
11
12
13 FEYVEL: It means something is fishy! (Convulsed with mirth.)
14
15
16 REBBETSIN (to YOSEF): Feyvel is the town wit.
17
18
19 YOSEF: Oh, good.
20
21
22 (The CHELMNIKS enter with their nets, which are empty. Much ad-lib disappointment and
23 consultation. The last net is brought in, and there is a large, red crayfish in it.)
24
25
26 RABBI: Aha! There is your culprit!
27
28
29 CHELMNIKS: Huh?
30
31
32 RABBI: Look how big and fat this crayfish is! Our children should be so healthy! And see how
33 red! May the blood of our enemies the Cossacks run so red! And see the smile on its face?
34
35
36 CHELMNIKS: Huh?
37
38
39 RABBI: My dear dead mother, may her memory be a blessing, should have such a smile on her
40 face! It's obvious: this crayfish has eaten all our pickled herring!
41
42
43 CHELMNIKS: Yes! Yes! Vengeance! Vengeance!
44
45
46 RABBI: Yes, my friends, vengeance! How shall we punish this fiendish fish?

1
2
3 (ALL ponder.)
4
5
6 REBBETSIN: Hang the beast by the neck until dead!
7
8
9 RABBI: Alas, my dear, it does not have a neck to hang it by.
10
11
12 (ALL ponder.)
13
14
15 FEYVEL: *Eat* it to death!
16
17
18 CHELMNIKS: Feyvel!
19
20
21 RABBI (sternly): But of course, Feyvel, it is not kosher.
22
23
24 FEYVEL (admonished): Yes, Rabbi. Just adding some humour to the solemn proceedings of
25 Justice.
26
27
28 (ALL ponder.)
29
30
31 RABBI: I have it! Oh, bless the Lord for giving me such an intellect!
32
33 (The CHELMNIKS look to him with hope.)
34
35 How did the Lord punish the sinners in the days of Noah?
36
37
38 CHELMNIKS: He drowned them!
39
40
41 RABBI: How did he punish the Pharaoh's armies that pursued the Children of Israel?
42
43
44 CHELMNIKS: He drowned them!
45
46

1 RABBI: Let us likewise condemn this beast to death by drowning!

2

3

4 CHELMNIKS: Drown the crayfish! Drown the crayfish!

5

6

7 (With joy and celebration, they carry the crayfish off to be drowned, leaving YOSEF onstage and
8 MIRIAM happily exiting the other way.)

9

10

11 YOSEF (to audience): What *idiots!*

12

13 (MIRIAM stops, listens.)

14

15 I mean they're kind, warm, delightful people, but oy, what idiots! Why, they're so crazy they're
16 almost sane!

17

18

19 MIRIAM: Mazel tov, Yosef. After only a month, you're beginning to understand the Chelmniks. It
20 took me a little longer.

21

22

23 YOSEF: Miriam, you're a smart person. Why would you want to live here?

24

25

26 MIRIAM: Let me tell you the story.

27

28

29 YOSEF: Good, I love stories.

30

31

32 MIRIAM: Well, then, you've come to the right village. Three years ago, I was passing through
33 Chelm at Chanukah time, and a very heavy snow came down on us, so I had to stay a month. And I
34 liked it, but of course, I was still planning to leave in the spring. Then one day Mesholem came
35 around with an announcement. The Town Council had just learned that they were running out of
36 burial ground. The cemetery was getting overcrowded. So they decided to fence off a new burial
37 ground next to the old one. But they had a problem: what size should they make it? How big, how
38 many people? The Sages of Chelm pondered for seven days over how big to make the new
39 cemetery.

40

41

42 YOSEF: But it's simple: you take the village population, you figure so much burial space per
43 person –

44

45

1 MIRIAM: No, Yosef, you're thinking like an Outsider, as I was. The Sages of Chelm chose the
2 direct approach. Every man, woman and child in the village bundled up nice and warm, they all
3 trooped out to the land next to the old cemetery – and they lay down. The entire village lay in its
4 final resting-place. They shifted around in the snow, testing for comfort. They craned about,
5 checking the view. At first there was conversation: people comparing plots and arguing about
6 whose was more liveable. But then it fell silent. Everybody just lay there, lost in thought: dozens of
7 people on their backs in the snow, staring sightlessly at the white sky for I don't know how long.
8 And then, after what seemed an eternity, they all got up – shook off the snow, stretched, scratched,
9 yawned, and looked at each other with blinking eyes. And Mesholem hobbled around marking off
10 the new cemetery, and everyone started chatting and joking and arguing again. And then we all
11 went over to the old synagogue, for wine and blintzes. And Yosef, the next day I went back out
12 there myself – found myself a nice, comfortable, unclaimed spot – and lay down.

13

14

15 YOSEF (pause): I'm not sure I understand your story.

16

17

18 MIRIAM: I know. Maybe you have to be here for a while. Maybe there is something about the air.
19 But it doesn't take anything away. It only gives.

20

21

22 YOSEF: But you were full of gifts before you got here. (Beat.) Forgive me. That was bold of me.

23

24

25 MIRIAM (pleased): Yes, it was, wasn't it.

26

27 (A group cry of triumph, off in the distance.)

28

29 Well, they've sent the crayfish to his watery grave. Shall we go join them?

30

31

32 (They go off together.)

33

34

35 (Walk-across: Enter FEYVEL. FEIGELA opens a window and yells at him from their house.)

36

37

38 FEIGELA: Feyvel! I send you to market with four kopeks and you come back with nothing! And
39 you can't even remember what you wasted the four kopeks on!

40

41

42 FEYVEL: Of course I can remember what I wasted them on! A kopek for this, a kopek for that...

43

44

45 FEIGELA: All right, so that's two.

46

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FEYVEL: And a kopek here, and a kopek there.

FEIGELA: All right, then, that's four. As long as we know where the money goes.

FEYVEL: I *try* to be careful...

FEIGELA: Yes, yes, I know, my dear, I'm sorry I got angry.

(Exeunt.)

Scene Four

(Hot weather. Late morning, in midsummer. Enter numerous CHELMNIKS, including FEYVEL, all on their hands and knees, peering about on the ground, frequently bumping heads. YOSEF enters, carrying his knapsack, out of which stick rolled diagrams, drafting tools, etc.)

YOSEF: Feyvel! What's going on?

FEYVEL: It isn't obvious? Oy, Outsiders. All the Chelmniks are out looking for money, Yosef. The pickled herring harvest has failed, so we need some other way to find money to build the synagogue. So – we're looking.

YOSEF: On the ground? On the ground you're looking?

FEYVEL: We figure if we find enough coins – you know how it is, a kopek here, a kopek there –

YOSEF: I see. And you're out here looking in the streets because the light is better than it is at home. Am I right?

FEYVEL: Huh. This I never even thought of. Good reason.

(Enter MESHOLEM, carrying a battered trumpet and a bag of money.)

1
2
3 MESHOLEM: Chelmniks! I bring wonderful news! I have raised a hundred rubles towards the
4 building of our new synagogue!
5
6
7 (The CHELMNIKS and YOSEF cheer.)
8
9
10 YOSEF: How did you do it, Mesholem?
11
12
13 MESHOLEM: I sold our fire engine to a fellow from Krakow!
14
15
16 (CHELMNIKS cheer, this time without YOSEF.)
17
18
19 FEYVEL: A perfect solution! Mazel tov, Mesholem! Come, fellow Chelmniks, there's not a
20 moment to waste! Let's get to work!
21
22
23 (CHELMNIKS rush off in all directions, colliding frequently. MESHOLEM too is about to rush
24 off, but YOSEF stops him.)
25
26
27 YOSEF: Mesholem, wait. You sold your only fire engine? What happens if, God forbid, you have a
28 fire?
29
30
31 MESHOLEM: Oh, Yosef, we haven't needed that old fire engine for years. As I was showing that
32 fellow from Krakow, we have our magic fire trumpet. (Produces the trumpet.)
33
34
35 YOSEF: A magic fire trumpet.
36
37
38 MESHOLEM: That's right. You see, Yosef, several years
39 ago –
40
41
42 YOSEF: Oy...
43
44
45 MESHOLEM: Chelm had the one fire engine, and it didn't work. We could never get any water out
46 of the water barrel.

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YOSEF: Did you have any water *in* the water barrel?

MESHOLEM: No, we stored turnips in the water barrel. Anyway, for some reason, our fire engine didn't work. So I, the shammas, personally travelled to the City of Lublin to see how they fight fires there. They showed me their big fire tower, where a man stands all day watching for smoke. Suddenly, we got lucky: we saw smoke. A house was on fire. The man took this very trumpet and blew it. And after a few minutes the smoke stopped! The fire had gone out!

YOSEF: Mesholem, this trumpet was their signal, for their fire engines to go out and –

MESHOLEM: No no no no no: oy, Outsiders. It is a magic fire trumpet! The fireman explained it to me: fires hear the sound of this magic trumpet, and they become frightened and extinguish themselves!

YOSEF: Mesholem, that fireman, he knew you were from Chelm?

MESHOLEM: But of course.

YOSEF: I see.

MESHOLEM: And he had such respect for the wisdom of Chelmniks, that he sold us this trumpet for only five hundred rubles.

YOSEF: Five hundred rubles!? Have you ever tried this trumpet? On Chelm fires?

MESHOLEM (sighs): Frequently.

YOSEF: And what happens?

MESHOLEM: Watch.

(He blows the trumpet. CHELMNIK WOMEN rush onstage, carrying buckets of water. They include the REBBETSIN, FEIGELA, and MIRIAM.)

1
2 Yosef, meet the Chelmnik Women's Auxiliary Volunteer Fire Department.
3
4
5 WOMEN: Where's the fire, Mesholem?
6
7
8 YOSEF (seeing MIRIAM): You're in this too?
9
10
11 MIRIAM: And how else would the fires get put out?
12
13
14 YOSEF: Good point.
15
16
17 WOMEN: Mesholem, there better be a fire.
18
19
20 MESHOLEM: Merely a demonstration, ladies. I was demonstrating our magic fire trumpet to
21 Yosef.
22
23
24 REBBETSIN: Oh, good for you, Mesholem.
25
26
27 FEIGELA: Yes, thank you for the excitement. We had nothing better to do with our time.
28
29
30 MIRIAM: Ladies, why don't we follow Mesholem's demonstration with one of our own?
31
32
33 WOMEN: Right!
34
35
36 (They approach MESHOLEM, their buckets at the ready.)
37
38
39 MESHOLEM (backing up): Ladies – No, no, ladies, no –
40
41
42 (They drench MESHOLEM with water, and exeunt.)
43
44
45 YOSEF: There. Do you see? Do you begin to understand now? The Chelmnik way of doing things
46 does *not always work!*

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MESHOLEM: Of course not! What do you think we are, perfect?

YOSEF: Oy...

MESHOLEM: It must be that F sharp, you know? I haven't quite got that F sharp yet...

(He exits, working on his F sharp. YOSEF is left onstage, pondering. Enter FEYVEL & ZISYAH, with shovels.)

ZISYAH: Yosef? You're supposed to be the architect and chief builder around here? Feyvel has a problem.

YOSEF: Yes, Feyvel.

FEYVEL: Am I to understand that to build this synagogue we have to start by digging a hole in the ground? With these big soup spoons?

YOSEF: Of course. It's for the basement, the foundations.

FEYVEL (shrugs): So, to build upwards, you start by digging downwards, this is the Outsider way of doing things, I don't pretend to understand, I'll give it a try – But my question is: When we finish digging this basement thing – where do we put all the earth we've dug up?

YOSEF: Uh –

ZISYAH: Feyvel, it's simple. We dig a great big pit, and in it we dump all the earth we dug up for the basement.

FEYVEL: But of course! Thank you, Yosef! (Starts to exit.)

ZISYAH: Oy! Wait! It won't work! Where do we put all the earth we dig up from the pit?

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(ALL THREE ponder.)

FEYVEL: Got it! We dig a *second* pit – *twice* as big as the first pit – and into *that* one we dump all the earth from *both* pits!

ZISYAH: A Chelmnik solution, Feyvel! And thank you for your contributions, Yosef.

FEYVEL: Yes, Yosef's advice is indispensable.

YOSEF (as they go): My pleasure, gentlemen, that's what I'm here for.

(FEYVEL & ZISYAH exeunt with their shovels. SCHMENDRICK and some CHELMNIKS enter on their way to cut down some trees. Much talk and kafuffle.)

SCHMENDRICK: Yosef, tell me, what have we been doing wrong?

YOSEF: Show me.

(SCHMENDRICK holds the saw against the tree, while the other CHELMNIKS strain to push the tree back and forth.)

YOSEF: Schmendrick: the saw moves. The tree stands still.

(Ad-lib realization, hitting of hands on foreheads, thanks to YOSEF. They go off Stage Right to try again. MESHOLEM re-enters, more or less dry.)

MESHOLEM: I'm back, Yosef. As official shammes, I was saying goodbye to old widow Gittel. She's off to visit her cow.

YOSEF (preoccupied with diagram): Really? Where?

MESHOLEM: Her cow lives with her in-laws. In Shedlitz.

1
2
3 YOSEF (alarmed): Shedlitz! She's gone there? Now? In the middle of summer?
4
5
6 MESHOLEM: And why not? Nice, broiling weather.
7
8
9 YOSEF: Mesholem, we've got to stop her!
10
11
12 MESHOLEM: We can't stop her. She's on the Express Coach from Krakow. No Chelmnik horse
13 would bother to catch up with it. The Chelmnik horse is a proud and independent creature.
14
15
16 YOSEF: Oy. Poor old Gittel.
17
18
19 MESHOLEM: What's wrong, Yosef?
20
21
22 YOSEF: Nothing, nothing. What can I do anyway, I'm not involved, it's not my problem, nothing
23 to do with me.
24
25
26 MESHOLEM: You know, you Outsiders are crazy.
27
28
29 YOSEF: I know.
30
31
32 MESHOLEM: So nu, what's this job you had for me? On the synagogue. (YOSEF is still staring
33 out towards Shedlitz.) Yosef?
34
35
36 YOSEF: Yes. Right. Well. We've got some Chelmniks cutting down trees at the top of that hill.
37 (Points off Right.) That'll be our lumber. Your job is to go up there and supervise them bringing
38 the logs down. Oh, uh – can you climb that hill?
39
40
41 MESHOLEM: Yosef, I know what I can do. Ten years, my leg has been like this.
42
43
44 YOSEF: Mesholem, this is none of my business, but what kind of Chelmnik craziness made your
45 leg like that?
46

1
2 MESHOLEM: Yosef, it was Cossack craziness. And it was in Babinka.
3
4
5 YOSEF: Mesholem. Forgive me. You were in the pogrom – at Babinka –
6
7
8 MESHOLEM: What happened was, some Cossack was running down the street with his sabre
9 drawn, waving it at this poor little man whom everybody in Babinka called the village idiot. Why
10 the soldier chose him –
11
12
13 YOSEF: The village idiot!
14
15
16 MESHOLEM: So they called him. By me, he always made more sense than –
17
18
19 YOSEF: Mesholem, this Cossack was an Officer? Moustache? Tall fur hat?
20
21
22 MESHOLEM: Who noticed? He’s chasing this old schlemiel, the poor fellow is running,
23 screaming, crying – oy. So me, like a fool, I run after him and I yell at him: “Leave that old man
24 alone!” And the Cossack gave me such a slice across my leg, I’m lame to this day, praise God.
25
26
27 YOSEF: And the idiot?
28
29
30 MESHOLEM: Some idiot, he got away! Quick on his feet, that one!
31
32
33 YOSEF: Mesholem, I apologize.
34
35
36 MESHOLEM: Don’t be ridiculous. I accept.
37
38
39 YOSEF: This was a brave deed you did. This was heroic.
40
41
42 MESHOLEM: Ah, heroic, schmoic. I risk you should forgive the expression my tuchus to save one
43 person, and for what? For all I know, that Cossack went and killed five more, and I wind up
44 crippled for life. Who would have thought a Chelmnik could be such a fool, eh?
45
46

1 YOSEF: Oy, Mesholem. No.

2

3

4 MESHOLEM: No, of course not. I'd do the same thing again. What choice did I have? But you
5 know what haunts me? If I'd just had enough time – I could have come up with such a – such a
6 *solution* to that old gentleman's problem – such a *Chelmnik solution* – that that Cossack wouldn't
7 have known what hit him.

8

9

10 YOSEF: What? Tell me the Chelmnik solution. Tell me, Mesholem!

11

12

13 MESHOLEM: Like I said, I haven't had enough time. It's only been ten years. But I'm working on
14 it! All the Sages of Chelm are working on it. Anyway, God in His mercy has left me enough
15 strength to climb that hill today. Which is what I will now proceed to do.

16

17

18 (Exit. Pause.)

19

20

21 YOSEF: I laugh at them. I take it for granted I'm better than they are. And then this little schlemiel
22 tells me this. Tells me he had more courage in the massacre at Babinka than I ever showed – at
23 Radomsk. "What choice did I have," he says. Like any Jew would have tried to stop that Cossack.
24 Well, so what am I supposed to do now? Leap onto one of those feebleminded Chelmnik horses
25 and lumber off to Shedlitz? And even if I got to Shedlitz, what then? Take old Gittel back to
26 Chelm, and leave the others to their fate? Or warn all of Shedlitz that there's going to be a pogrom?
27 And what if I warn them, and they burn their own village and scatter into the hills to starve – and it
28 turns out I was wrong, there was no danger? And what if I'm right, and I get myself stuck in the
29 middle of it all – again? (He reaches into his bag.) And if I told them – then I'd have to tell them
30 how I come to know Russian Army secrets.

31

32 (He takes out a large, black, ominous revolver. He stares out at the audience as the lights fade.)

33

34

35 (Walk-across: YOSSEL, an ugly male Chelmnik, pursues ISKA, a pretty female Chelmnik.)

36

37

38 YOSSEL: Please don't let this face frighten you! I'm not what you think I am!

39

40

41 ISKA: I'm sorry, but it's as plain as the nose on your face: you're too ugly for me!

42

43

44 YOSSEL: But I'm not really this ugly!

45

46

1 ISKA: You're not?
2
3

4 YOSSEL: No! When I was a baby I was very beautiful! But I was cared for by a nurse who had a
5 very ugly baby of her own. She got so jealous of my beauty – that she switched babies!
6
7

8 ISKA: Oh! Well, that's different!
9

10
11 (They exit together, arm in arm.)
12
13

14 **Scene Five**
15
16

17 (Very hot weather. CHELMNIKS carry logs across the stage, from the forest Off Right to the
18 Synagogue site Off Left. A TALL CHELMNIK carries one end of a log up high over his head; at
19 the other end, a SHORT CHELMNIK is hopping up and down, trying to reach his end, which
20 simply hangs in the air. YOSEF has re-entered. ZISYAH & FEYVEL stagger in with a large log.)
21
22

23 FEYVEL: Oy, Yosef!
24
25

26 YOSEF: Feyvel?
27
28

29 ZISYAH: I want to go home.
30
31

32 FEYVEL: Such a job you've given us! Forgive me, Yosef, but it's like working for the Pharaoh,
33 only the pay's not as good. Just kidding, ha ha.
34
35

36 ZISYAH: I want to go home.
37
38

39 FEYVEL: Let my people go, Yosef! Frogs, blood and locusts on your head! Little joke there, ha
40 ha.
41
42

43 YOSEF: What's the problem, Feyvel?
44
45

1 FEYVEL: Well, we've cut down the trees and trimmed the logs, way at the top of that hill. (Points
2 off Right.) And then we've picked them up and carried them, one at a time, all the way down the
3 hill and through here. Personally I'm about to plotz. And Zisyah –

4
5

6 ZISYAH: I want to go home.

7
8

9 FEYVEL: – Has expressed a desire to go home.

10
11

12 YOSEF: But Feyvel, that hill is broad and grassy and even. Why didn't you roll the logs down?

13
14

15
16 ZISYAH & FEYVEL (do a take to each other, and to YOSEF): *Roll* the logs down?

17
18

19 YOSEF: You could have rolled them down the hill, and they would have come to rest safely in that
20 flat part at the bottom.

21
22

23 ZISYAH & FEYVEL (look at the hill, slap their foreheads): *Roll* the logs down!

24
25

26 FEYVEL: The Outsider's right!

27
28

29 ZISYAH: Oy, the work we've wasted!

30
31

32 FEYVEL: That's all right! Now, we can pick up all the logs we already brought down – carry them
33 back up the hill – and *roll* them down!

34
35

36 YOSEF: What? No, wait, you don't have to –

37
38

39 FEYVEL: Chelmniks!

40
41

42 (CHELMNIKS re-enter.)

43 Yosef points out – *now* – that we can save ourselves labour by rolling the logs downhill instead of
44 carrying them!

45
46

1 CHELMNIKS: Of course! (They slap themselves on the forehead.)

2

3

4 FEYVEL: So let's go! Haul them all back up the hill and roll them down! And hurry up, we have
5 lots of work to save ourselves!

6

7

8 (The CHELMNIKS happily pick up the logs and exit with them Stage Right.)

9

10

11 YOSEF: But – but – but –

12

13

14 ZISYAH: God give you joy, Yosef!

15

16

17 YOSEF: Three more days this'll take you!

18

19

20 FEYVEL: True, but think of all the work we'll save! A brilliant solution, Yosef!

21

22

23 ZISYAH: Practically Chelmnik!

24

25

26 (He and FEYVEL exit with their log. Exit YOSEF, defeated.)

27

28

29

Scene Six

30

31

32 (The beginning of autumn. Noon. Enter YOSEF & MIRIAM with a picnic basket. They choose a
33 spot in front of the little group of trees.)

34

35

36 MIRIAM: Right at this spot. Right here is perfect.

37

38

39 YOSEF: Whatever you say, Miriam. (Puts down basket, kneels; picnic biz through the following.)
40 Anywhere you choose is perfect for me. Your wish is my command.

41

42

43 MIRIAM: Have you already started on the wine, Yosef?

44

45

1 YOSEF: This is not the wine speaking. You want our picnic here, we'll have it here. You want it in
2 a tree, I'll start climbing.

3
4
5 MIRIAM (laughing): I hate to be the one to tell you this, but you know what they're calling you
6 around town?

7
8
9 YOSEF: What?

10
11
12 MIRIAM: "That Yosef," they say, "he's finally provided Chelm with the one thing it lacked: a
13 Village Idiot."

14
15
16 (Brief pause.)

17
18
19 YOSEF: Always glad to be of service. Whatever makes you happy. Whither thou goest I shall go.
20 As the man says in the Scriptures.

21
22
23 MIRIAM: It's a woman who says that, silly. Ruth says it to Naomi.

24
25
26 YOSEF: Oh, right. Well, it's still a beautiful line of scripture. And then she says something else –
27 how does it go? And where thou lodgest I will – (Brief pause. Unnerved, he rummages in the picnic
28 basket:) Uh, didn't we bring some potato salad? I was sure we packed some of that potato salad the
29 Rebbetsin made...

30
31
32 MIRIAM (amused): Oh, keep digging, you'll find it.

33
34
35 (Enter SCHMENDRICK.)

36
37
38 SCHMENDRICK: Do I smell food? Ah! A picnic!

39
40
41 YOSEF: Hello, Schmendrick.

42
43
44 SCHMENDRICK: Hello! Good Shabbos!

45
46

1 YOSEF & MIRIAM: Good Shabbos.
2
3

4 SCHMENDRICK: I see it's lunchtime. I see that the other two Outsiders in Chelm are having a
5 Sabbath picnic. I don't suppose you'd care for the company of the town's third Outsider?
6
7

8 YOSEF: You're an Outsider, Schmendrick? (To MIRIAM:) I thought he was a Chelmnik.
9
10

11 MIRIAM: Depends on your point of view. Certainly, Schmendrick, join us.
12
13

14 SCHMENDRICK: Bless you both, bless you both. (Sits, sighs with weariness.) If only the Lord
15 had seen fit to put the Sabbath at the beginning of the week. By the end of the week I'm always too
16 tired to enjoy it properly. (As YOSEF tries to sort this out, SCHMENDRICK opens the wine.) So,
17 fellow Outsiders, you hear the latest gossip? Old widow Gittel is due back in a couple of days.
18 From Shedlitz.
19
20

21 MIRIAM: Oh, yes, that's right.
22
23

24 YOSEF: Yes...Shedlitz...
25
26

27 SCHMENDRICK (having poured): L'chaim! (Drinks.)
28
29

30 YOSEF (preoccupied): L'chaim...
31
32

33 MIRIAM (observing him): Yosef?
34
35

36 YOSEF: What?
37
38

39 MIRIAM: Something wrong?
40
41

42 YOSEF: Oh, my mind's just wandering.
43
44

45 SCHMENDRICK (munching on a chicken leg): I too have been a wanderer, you know. Originally,
46 I hail from Chelm. Not this Chelm: the other Chelm.

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YOSEF: What are you talking about, Schmendrick?

SCHMENDRICK: Living in the other Chelm, you see, wasn't good enough for Schmendrick, oh no. So one morning I got up before my wife and children – health and joy to them, wherever they are now. And I started out to see the world. In the middle of the afternoon, I got sleepy, so I decided to take a nap by the roadside. But in case I forgot which way I was going, I took off my boots and put them beside the road – one pointing in the direction I was going, and one in the direction I came from. After a while, I woke up, I stepped into my boots, laced them up where they stood, and went on my way. And wonder of wonders, I soon came to a village that looked – a *great deal like Chelm*. And the closer I got, the more like Chelm it looked!

YOSEF: Well, Schmendrick –

MIRIAM: Sha. Yosef. Let him tell the story.

SCHMENDRICK: Tree for tree! House for house! Every blade of grass looked familiar. You ever have that strange feeling that everything has happened, just like this, a long time ago?

YOSEF & MIRIAM: Yes. (They look at each other, pleased.)

SCHMENDRICK: Well, it was the strangest thing. I walked down the streets as if in a dream. It was Chelm all over again. The people I saw – each one looked exactly like someone I knew back home in Chelm! There was a Rabbi like ours! Here was a Zisyah, there a Mesholem! I turned up a lane just like my lane. On it was a house that was board for board like my house: even the paint was peeling in the same places. The chickens in the yard had familiar feathers, reminiscent clucks. This was becoming frightening. What if I walked in the door, and saw myself, Schmendrick, sitting there in the kitchen? What would we say to each other? So I hesitated on the front stoop – and out the door came a woman who looked exactly like my wife, Shayna! Wart for wart! And she screamed at me, hitting notes I used to think only my own dear Shayna could reach! And the children were brat for brat like my own children – kvetching and snivelling and squabbling just like my own children! The only thing missing in this astonishing household was – Schmendrick. Their Schmendrick was nowhere to be seen. He had left *his* house and *his* Chelm that same morning!

YOSEF: What a coincidence.

MIRIAM: Yosef.

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YOSEF: Sorry.

SCHMENDRICK: Yosef, I believe it was more than a coincidence: I believe that the hand of God was in this – or maybe the elbow, who understands these things – because, you see – the other Schmendrick *never came back*. And so, my friends – (Shrugs.) I moved in. At first I missed my own wife and children – but soon these children started calling me “Daddy”. I guess I reminded them of their father. And soon this other Shayna – well, you don’t want I should go into details.

MIRIAM: No.

SCHMENDRICK: No. But I worry, you know. If the other Schmendrick ever comes home, it could get very complicated. But you know – my personal theory is that he wound up just like me. He arrived in my Chelm, and is presently living with my wife – the adulterous dog, may he contract the Czar’s Disease – and worrying that I might some day return.

YOSEF: And why don’t you?

MIRIAM: Yosef!

YOSEF: I’m just asking.

SCHMENDRICK: A good question. To which my answer is, Why should I? I am a practical man, Yosef. If this Chelm is exactly the same as the Chelm I come from, why should I walk my feet off to get to where I practically already am? The Talmud tells us that the world is everywhere the same, does it not? So maybe every village is exactly like this one, eh? Cow for cow, flower for flower? Who can say? Perhaps the entire world is simply one enormous Chelm. No?

(He resumes eating. Silence. YOSEF is staring into space, his face very sad. MIRIAM watches him. SCHMENDRICK continues eating. The lights fade.)

Scene Seven

(Early afternoon, well into autumn. ZALMAN & ZLATEH are at their stand. ZLATEH is contemplating a five-kopek piece in her hand.)

1
2
3 ZLATEH: You know, Zalman, this is almost getting interesting. Here we are, summer's come to an
4 end, it's autumn, and still, all we have managed to make is five kopeks. Only this time, it is *my* five
5 kopeks. And as you said before, my money is as good as anybody else's, is it not?
6

7
8 ZALMAN: I suppose so.
9

10
11 ZLATEH: So hokay, Zalman, give me a glass of schnapps! (Gives him the coin. ZALMAN pours
12 and serves.) L'chaim. (Drinks.)
13

14
15 ZALMAN (preoccupied with the coin): L'chaim. (Stares at the coin as ZLATEH finishes her drink
16 and begins to roll the Schnapps stand off.) You know, Zlateh, this *is* almost becoming interesting...
17 (Sees that she's exiting with the stand.) Wait! (Chases her off.)
18

19
20 (YOSEF is checking his diagrams. A CHELMNIK enters with a small wooden alms-box.)
21

22
23 CHELMNIK: The poor-box, Yosef, where do we install the poor-box?
24

25
26 YOSEF: You nail it up inside the front door, of course, so people should put money in as they
27 leave.
28

29
30 (He turns his attention back to the diagrams. The CHELMNIK nods and starts to exit Stage Left
31 towards the Synagogue; MESHOLEM limps busily on from Left, smoothly intercepting the poor-
32 box from the CHELMNIK, who continues off. MESHOLEM brings the poor-box to YOSEF.)
33

34
35 MESHOLEM: Yes, but as official shammes, I can tell you that if we put the poor-box by the door,
36 thieves will steal from it! However, I have already thought of a solution. *Hokay, Feyvel!*
37

38
39 (Enter FEYVEL, carrying a very Chelmnik-looking ladder.)
40

41
42 YOSEF: What's your solution?
43

44
45 MESHOLEM: My solution is, we hang the poor-box from the ceiling, where thieves can't reach it!
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YOSEF: But –

FEYVEL: You know what we call that? *High finance!* (He and MESHOLEM share a guffaw over this and exit towards the Synagogue.)

YOSEF (left along onstage, gazing at the audience): But –

(ZISYAH, entering from the Synagogue, intercepts the ladder and takes it to YOSEF.)

ZISYAH: But! If thieves cannot reach it to take the money out, then likewise, nobody else can reach it to put the money in!

YOSEF: Exactly what I was –

ZISYAH: No no no, we're way ahead of you, Yosef. We leave the ladder there, firmly attached to floor and ceiling, so that people can climb up and put in the money!

(Exit with the ladder, passing MESHOLEM, who enters with a sign lettered in Hebrew.)

MESHOLEM: *However!* How do we prevent thieves from climbing the ladder and stealing the money? By putting this sign at the top of the ladder: (Reads:) "This ladder is for the use of people giving money to the poor. If thieves try to steal this money, take heed!"

BOTH (YOSEF resignedly): "It's against the law."

MESHOLEM: Problem solved. (Exit towards the Synagogue. Silence: a breather at the end of all this activity.)

YOSEF: Well, the Synagogue's almost finished. I wonder if it's time for me to move on now. Maybe even ask Miriam to come with me.

(A crowd of CHELMNIKS tiptoe in behind him, bearing garlands of flowers and holding glasses of wine in their hands. Much stifled giggling and mutual shushing.)

1 But – well, here I’ve done all this work on building the synagogue, because I thought I was needed.
2 But half the time they do it their way anyhow – and now that the synagogue is finished, I suppose
3 everybody is off somewhere celebrating –
4
5

6 CHELMNIKS: *Hurrah for Yosef!*
7
8

9 (They hoist him to their shoulders and cover him with flowers. Much cheering and singing as they
10 carry him around on their shoulders. They may sing a specific Yiddish folk-song.
11

12 (As they sing, a FIGURE comes limping down the aisle of the theatre, at first unnoticed. She is
13 GITTEL, an old woman in bloody rags, with a staff, and grieving, ad-lib. As at first the RABBI and
14 then the other CHELMNIKS notice this apparition, they fall silent.)
15
16

17 GITTEL: Oy, Chelmniks! Chelmniks! On their horses they came. On their great, rearing stallions.
18 With their clubs and their sabres and their guns. The soldiers were drunk on vodka, and the horses
19 were crazy with excitement and panic. They pulled up their horses with their backs to the shops and
20 houses, and they shot their guns, the horses should kick the walls in. They stole things – cloths and
21 silverware and what little bit of gold there was – and the rest they set on fire.
22

23 (By now she has reached the stage. The CHELMNIKS onstage are grieving, ad-lib:
24 “Oy...Gittel...Shedlitz...Our friends...” etc.)
25

26 They burned the synagogue to the ground. Even the Holy Scriptures they burned. They fired their
27 bullets into the crowd. They swung their sabres. Nine people they killed. Nine Jews they killed in
28 the streets.
29

30 (Much grief.)
31

32 But for us, my friends, the worst news is yet to come. For as the Cossacks were leaving on their
33 great horses, their Officer turned and shouted at us: “The only thing I hate worse than Jews is –”
34
35

36 YOSEF: Is madness and folly.
37
38

39 GITTEL (does a take on this, stares at YOSEF, repeats quietly): That’s right. “Is madness and
40 folly,” says that Officer. “So this is nothing!” he shouts. “We’ll do twice this much to that village
41 of *idiot* Jews! On the Jewish Passover!” he shouted. “Early in spring, when the Jews celebrate their
42 freedom! That’s when we’ll visit the Village of Idiots! And what we did to you, to them we’ll do
43 twice! Once because they’re Jews – and once because they’re idiots!” Dear Rabbi, I should have
44 come back to warn you right away. But also I wanted to stay there and help them...
45
46

1 RABBI: Dear Gittel, you did the right thing. Look: we have the rest of the autumn and all winter in
2 which to prepare for their coming. So, my friends, let us weep and pray for our friends and fellow
3 Jews in Shedlitz. But let's have no tears for Chelm! Instead, let us prepare! I will call a series of
4 meetings with the Sages of Chelm. And when those Cossacks come, we'll give them a Passover
5 they'll never forget! For after all, what can a mere battalion of Cossacks do against the combined
6 wisdom of the Chelmniks with half a year to prepare? Am I right? Rhetorical question.

7

8

9 CHELMNIKS: Right as always, Rabbi!

10

11

12 RABBI: But of course. Now, all of you, come to my house, where the Rebbetsin has prepared a
13 feast to celebrate the completion of our Synagogue!

14

15

16 GITTEL (looks off Left): Oh... You've built such a beautiful Synagogue...

17

18

19 RABBI: That's right! And today, we are called upon to mourn on the one hand and rejoice on the
20 other. So what else is new. To my house, everybody!

21

22

23 (The CHELMNIKS exit, but YOSEF grabs and detains the RABBI.)

24

25

26 YOSEF: Rabbi! Please listen to me! I have something terrible to tell you!

27

28

29 RABBI: Heh? More bad news, Yosef?

30

31

32 YOSEF: I knew! I knew all along! I knew that the Cossacks were planning to attack Shedlitz! I
33 could have gone there to warn them! And I didn't! I did nothing! (Pause.) Of course, I wasn't
34 absolutely sure – and I don't know how much good I could have done even if I'd gone –

35

36

37 RABBI: Yes, yes, Yosef, fear is a terrible thing, isn't it.

38

39

40 YOSEF (admonished): Yes, Rabbi.

41

42

43 RABBI (pause): So is anger. Hokay, you make a confession, I make a confession: I confess I am
44 angry. I find it difficult to tell you – that what's done is done – and that you have done us, and God,
45 a great service here in Chelm: you have built a house of worship. So maybe this was God's will for
46 you.

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YOSEF: Thank you, Rabbi –

RABBI: Don't thank me!

YOSEF: But listen. I didn't warn Shedlitz, but maybe I can warn you.

RABBI: We've just been warned, thank you.

YOSEF: Yes, but you're Chelm! Maybe – maybe somehow I can convince you – that your quaint, charming little Chelmnik ways are going to be useless against the Cossacks.

RABBI: Ah. So now your true opinion comes out.

YOSEF: Look. If you people want to hang the poor-box where nobody can reach it, that's your business. If you want to put out fires by blowing on magic trumpets, this is entirely up to you. But you have no idea what you're up against here. You don't know what a pogrom *is*. Especially one by this Officer, especially against a village of – I've seen a pogrom! I've been there! I've looked down at the blood and the – You just don't know, Rabbi.

RABBI: Mesholem knows. And Gittel knows. We know what pogroms are. We just don't know *why* pogroms are. Can any Jew say why the Czar and his soldiers hate us so much? But yes, Yosef, we know what guns and sabres and fists and hooves are.

YOSEF: So how can you even talk about defending yourselves? The Czar's Cossacks are the fiercest, best-trained, most dangerous soldiers in the world – and there's nothing they like better than killing Jews! And this one Officer – he has some sort of obsession with fools and idiots, he wants to wipe out them all, and he thinks Chelm is – you know. And Rabbi, what do you have to fight them with? There probably aren't two guns in the entire village!

RABBI: There isn't *one* gun in the entire village.

YOSEF: Well.

1 RABBI: Yosef, I know you've been around, and you don't think like a Chelmnik, but – forgive me,
2 my friend – right now you're not even thinking like a Jew! What did Daniel use against the lions?
3 What did Esther use against Ahasueras, Moses against the Pharaoh? Two things, Yosef: faith in the
4 Lord – and smarts, Yosef. Brains. Those pathetic, musclebound Cossacks, with their dumb horses
5 and their moronic sabres and their idiot guns – Hah! How can they prevail against the combined,
6 massive, pulsating intellectual power of the great thinkers of Chelm? Yosef, my heart *bleeds* for
7 those Cossacks. They have no idea what they're in for! (Beat.) Even *I* have no idea what they're in
8 for. So. A little trust, Yosef. A little faith. Bless you. Come on home and have a knish.

9

10

11 (Exit, leaving YOSEF alone as the lights fade.)

12

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INTERMISSION

1
2 **ACT TWO**
3

4
5 **Scene One**
6

7
8 (Main Street, an afternoon in early winter. Enter ZALMAN & ZLATEH, now fairly soused.)
9

10
11 ZALMAN (gives ZLATEH the coin.) One schnapps, please, my dear Zlateh.
12

13
14 ZLATEH: Certainly, my dear Zalman. (Hands him the glass.)
15

16
17 ZALMAN: You see, my dear, the way I figure it, the rich, who always have cash, always get
18 credit; while the poor, who never have cash, always have to pay cash. It should be the other way
19 round: the rich should pay cash, and the poor should get the credit, l'chaim. (Drinks. There can be a
20 sleight-of-hand switch.)
21

22
23 ZLATEH: L'chaim. Interesting. One schnapps, please, Zalman. (Slaps down the coin.)
24

25
26 ZALMAN (taking coin): One schnapps coming up. (Draws a glass.)
27

28
29 ZLATEH: L'chaim! (Drinks.)
30

31
32 ZALMAN: L'chaim.
33

34
35 ZLATEH: But if all the merchants gave credit to the poor, well, they would soon be poor
36 themselves.
37

38
39 ZALMAN: And so what if they were? Then they'd be able to get credit!
40

41
42 ZLATEH: Brilliant! Chelmnikally brilliant! That calls for another schnapps! (Holds out her empty
43 glass.)
44
45

1 ZALMAN: With pleasure, my dear, that'll be five kopeks. (Holds out his palm – and finds the coin
2 already in it.)
3
4
5 ZLATEH: But wait, I don't seem to have five kopeks this time. (Sees the coin.) But you do! Hah!
6 Gimme a schnapps on credit, Zalman!
7
8
9 ZALMAN: Er – wait a minute, Zlateh – (Begins to exit, pushing the Schnapps stand before him.)
10
11
12 ZLATEH (chasing him): Now *you just said* –
13
14
15 ZALMAN: I *know* what I *said* –
16
17
18 (Exeunt. Enter RABBI, MESHOLEM & ZISYAH, carrying books and discussing philosophy.)
19
20
21 MESHOLEM: Now, then, Rabbi, Zisyah has another philosophical question.
22
23
24 ZISYAH: Yes: philosophical question: which is more important, the sun or the moon?
25
26
27 RABBI: The moon, Zisyah, is much more important. The sun shines in the daytime, when it's light
28 and we can see perfectly well. But the *moon* shines at *night*, when we need all the light we can get,
29 so it's an absolute necessity!
30
31
32 (ZISYAH & MESHOLEM ad-lib their admiration of the RABBI's wisdom. Enter the
33 REBBETSIN, upset, carrying an extra babushka.)
34
35
36 REBBETSIN: Rabbi! Oy, my dear Rabbi, what have I found, what have I found!
37
38
39 RABBI, ZISYAH & MESHOLEM: We give up, Rebbetsin, what have you found?
40
41
42 REBBETSIN: I was cleaning Yosef's room – and I happened to be searching through his bag, you
43 know, just in case of – er – badgers –
44
45
46 RABBI, ZISYAH & MESHOLEM: Yes, yes –

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REBBETSIN: And look what I found in his bag.

(Out of her babushka she takes the revolver. She holds it out in a gingerly fashion, by two fingers. Shocked silence.)

ZISYAH: Rabbi – What do you think?

RABBI: I think this must be a gun.

MESHOLEM & ZISYAH: Ooohhh... (As in: “So that’s a gun.”)

RABBI: Is it loaded?

(In response, REBBETSIN fires it into the air; ALL jump. Please note that the detonation is not loud. The main reason for this early detonation is so that children won’t sit in the audience dreading the noise.)

RABBI: So: What is a nice Jewish boy like Yosef doing with a gun? Even if he is a Village Idiot?

(ALL ponder.)

MESHOLEM: It is true that Jews – even Jewish Village Idiots – do not normally carry guns.

ZISYAH: Only Cossacks normally carry guns – may they all shoot themselves in the Urals.

RABBI: And *why* do Cossacks carry guns?

ZISYAH: Why else? To kill Jews.

MESHOLEM: Well, then, Yosef must be planning to kill a Jew.

1
2 REBBETSIN: But Yosef isn't a Cossack! Yosef is a Jew! An idiot, maybe, but a good Jew!
3
4
5 RABBI: Besides, why would he want to kill any of us? We've taken him into our homes, given him
6 a good job –
7
8
9 REBBETSIN: Fed him, God knows –
10
11
12 MESHOLEM: Very true. Therefore at least we know that he cannot be planning to kill a Chelmnik.
13
14
15 RABBI: So who else is there?
16
17
18 ZISYAH: The only other Outsiders are Miriam and Schmendrick.
19
20
21 REBBETSIN: But Schmendrick is practically a Chelmnik, and Miriam – anybody can see that
22 Yosef's in love with Miriam.
23
24
25 RABBI: That leaves only one other Outsider. Yosef himself, the poor idiot, still feeling guilty over
26 the business in Shedlitz. Typical of Outsiders. They go on feeling guilty long after their guilt has
27 ceased to bring pleasure to anyone.
28
29
30 ALL (slapping themselves on the forehead): He's planning to kill himself!
31
32
33 REBBETSIN: We've got to stop him!
34
35
36 ALL (jumping up and down): We must stop him! We must stop him!
37
38
39 MIRIAM (running on from Off Right): What's the matter?
40
41
42 YOSEF (running on from Off Left): I heard a gun! Did you hear a gun? It sounded like a Russian
43 Army rev – (Sees his gun.)
44
45
46 REBBETSIN: Yosef, dear Yosef, please don't shoot yourself!

1
2
3 RABBI, MESHOLEM & ZISYAH: Please, please don't shoot yourself!
4
5
6 YOSEF: Shoot myself?
7
8
9 ZISYAH: Over being responsible for the pogrom in Shedlitz!
10
11
12 MIRIAM: Zisyah, how can you say such a thing! You apologize!
13
14
15 ZISYAH: I apologize instantly he only shouldn't shoot himself!
16
17
18 REBBETSIN (presenting YOSEF the revolver with shaking hands): Here's your gun back, please
19 don't blow your head off!
20
21
22 RABBI: Life can be beautiful!
23
24
25 ZISYAH (aside): Sporadically.
26
27
28 YOSEF (coldly, as he takes the gun): This is how you treat a guest, Rebbetsin, you look through
29 his bags?
30
31
32 REBBETSIN: Oh, Yosef, you're absolutely right. I'm so ashamed, I wish I had never been born!
33
34
35 RABBI: There, there, dearest. Many people have occasion to wish they had never been born. But
36 how many of us achieve this goal? Maybe one in a thousand.
37
38
39 REBBETSIN: Oy, Yosef, please, I'm so sorry.
40
41
42 YOSEF (calming): All right.
43
44
45 RABBI: So, then, why do you keep a gun with you, Yosef?
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ALL (except MIRIAM): Yes, Yosef! Why do you keep a gun with you?

(Pause.)

YOSEF: I keep a gun with me – so that – if I start to snore – I can fire the gun – to wake myself up – because I can't sleep when I'm snoring.

(Pause.)

ALL: *Ooohhh!* Well, *that* explains *everything!*

RABBI: Of course! I should have guessed that.

REBBETSIN: Oy, what a relief, thanks be to God.

MESHOLEM: We're sorry to have troubled you, Yosef...

(They exit, ad-libbing about how reasonable it is when you think about it. YOSEF & MIRIAM remain.)

YOSEF (aside): Oy. I'm beginning to talk like a Chelmnik.

MIRIAM: Well, then, Yosef. *Without* talking like a Chelmnik, now – why do you keep a Russian Army revolver in your bag? (No answer.) It's rare for Jews to join the Army. But it happens, I know.

YOSEF: My mother was Jewish. She told me my father'd been a Cossack soldier. I guess that makes me half-Jewish –

MIRIAM: No, Yosef, if your mother was a Jew, you're a Jew. It's inherited through the women, that's the Law, you know that.

1 YOSEF: Well, maybe I'm outside the Law, then. I'm half and half.

2

3

4 MIRIAM (getting angry): So? Divided how? Top and bottom? Left and right? Front and back? –

5

6

7 YOSEF: I thought we weren't talking like Chelmniks now.

8

9

10 MIRIAM: – Or inside and outside, Yosef?

11

12

13 (Pause.)

14

15

16 YOSEF: Well, it bothered me for years. Who was I, what was my other half? So finally, a little
17 over a year ago, I joined the Army. Maybe because my father had. And maybe a little bit because I
18 – hoped to find him, something like that – I was so stupid! I had no idea, no idea at all! Thank God
19 I had at least enough brains not to tell them what I was. But even so, on the morning of our first day
20 on manoeuvres, we're all lined up in the field, and out of all of us the Officer chooses me to look at
21 – straight in the eye – as he announces, "Today, we pay a visit to our Hebraic brethren."

22

23

24 MIRIAM: Oy, Yosef. What village?

25

26

27 YOSEF: Radomsk.

28

29

30 MIRIAM: Go on.

31

32

33 YOSEF: As we rode into the village, the other soldiers all started shooting their guns and swinging
34 their sabres. And the Officer shouted, "The village idiots – are mine." At first I couldn't believe
35 what I was seeing. Then I started yelling at them to stop. I grabbed another soldier's arm, he gave
36 me a good punch, I fell off my horse. I saw the Officer, on horseback, chasing a young woman –
37 deliberately chasing her right towards me! And looking me in the eye again, watching to see what I
38 would do. And so was the young woman. And just for an instant, everything became still, and my
39 whole life came to a point. And then I turned and ran. I heard the Officer behind me, yelling over
40 the screams and the noise – "Stop him! That soldier's deserting! Stop him!" And other soldiers
41 took up the cry. But I kept running. For a year, now, I've kept running. Even this past summer –
42 not going to Shedlitz – that, too, was running.

43

44

45 MIRIAM: How did you know about Shedlitz ahead of time?

46

1
2 YOSEF: There had been rumours.
3
4
5 MIRIAM: Ah. And there were no rumours about Chelm?
6
7
8 YOSEF (bitter): You think I would have come here?
9
10
11 (Pause.)
12
13
14 MIRIAM: So what are you going to do now?
15
16
17 YOSEF: What are *you* going to do?
18
19
20 MIRIAM: Me? I'm going to stay here and help defend my village.
21
22
23 YOSEF: Miriam! I know you love them, but these people can't defend a village! These people
24 don't have the brains God gave to gefilte fish!
25
26
27 MIRIAM: You still don't understand them.
28
29
30 YOSEF: Them I understand. You I don't understand.
31
32
33 MIRIAM: What are you going to do, Yosef?
34
35
36 YOSEF: I want to leave. Oh, God, do I want to get out of here before that army comes.
37
38
39 MIRIAM: So. You're going to keep running.
40
41
42 YOSEF: I didn't say I'm going to. I only said I want to. (Beat.) Come with me.
43
44
45 MIRIAM: I can't.
46

1 YOSEF: Marry me. Marry me and come with me.

2

3

4 (Pause.)

5

6

7 MIRIAM: I've caught myself hoping you'd ask. I love everybody in Chelm, and the Rebbetsin's
8 often tried to make a match for me, but none of the men quite managed to sweep me off my feet. I
9 was happy just to watch the children grow up, and listen to the Chelmniks argue and gossip and go
10 about their business – but then *you* have to show up!

11

12

13 YOSEF: Marry me and run away with me.

14

15

16 MIRIAM: If you're going to run away I can't marry you.

17

18

19 YOSEF: I don't understand this! What is it with you and this place? These people are *idiots*!

20

21

22 MIRIAM: Yes, but those other ones out there are crazy.

23

24

25 YOSEF: That's right, and if we stay here, the crazy ones will kill us along with the idiots.

26

27

28 MIRIAM: Why don't you try to help! Help your neighbours! Maybe you have something to teach
29 them!

30

31

32 YOSEF: But it's hopeless! Don't you understand? There is no hope!

33

34

35 MIRIAM: Pardon me, I had it backwards. Maybe they have something to teach you.

36

37

38 (She exits. He exits the other way.)

39

40

41

Scene Two

42

43

44 (More or less the same: afternoon, early winter. ZALMAN & ZLATEH roll on the Schnapps
45 stand.)

46

1
2 ZALMAN: That's it! That's it! No more credit!
3
4
5 ZLATEH: But why!
6
7
8 ZALMAN: Are you joking? You're running up an account of millions of rubles here.
9
10
11 ZLATEH: So? Look who's talking! You've been matching me glass for glass, kopek for kopek!
12
13
14 ZALMAN (sadly): I know. No more credit for me either.
15
16
17 ZLATEH: Well, that's no fun all round.
18
19
20 ZALMAN: Dearest, if you'd listen, maybe I have something to teach you. Business is business. We
21 have to run this on a cash basis, or the schnorrers will put us under!
22
23
24 ZLATEH: Now I have something to teach you, Zalman. We're not talking schnorrers here, we're
25 talking husband and wife. And if we can't give each other credit, who can we give? Do you know
26 what credit is, Zalman? Credit is trust, Zalman. Trust in each other. Trust in our future. Trust in this
27 thriving trade we're building here. As long as those five-kopek coins keep coming in like they have
28 been, what's to worry about?
29
30
31 ZALMAN: This is very true. But Zlateh, as long as the money's coming in anyway like you say –
32 why not pay cash?
33
34
35 ZLATEH: You know, I never thought of it like that. You are absolutely right. And since you have
36 the five kopeks, you can start.
37
38
39 ZALMAN: With pleasure! (Slaps down coin.) One glass of schnapps, Zlateh!
40
41
42 ZLATEH: One glass coming up! (Serves him.)
43
44
45 ZALMAN: L'chaim!
46

1 (And they roll the Schnapps stand off.)
2
3

4 **Scene Three**
5
6

7 (The Synagogue. An interior wall, a table and some benches are brought on, for a meeting-room.
8 The SAGES OF CHELM – RABBI, ZISYAH, FEYVEL, SCHMENDRICK, MESHOLEM, who is
9 keeping the minutes – and YOSEF.)
10

11
12 RABBI: Now then, fellow sages of Chelm – write this down, Mesholem – *Why* do the Cossacks
13 desecrate our synagogues, murder us, steal from us, burn our crops, slaughter our livestock and
14 abduct our wives?
15

16
17 MESHOLEM: Because they hate Jews, of course.
18

19
20 RABBI: And why do they hate Jews? Yosef, our expert in defence against Cossacks?
21

22
23 YOSEF: Well, they believe Jews have black magic, and cast the Evil Eye.
24

25
26 SCHMENDRICK: That's right! They wish to make Jews rage and weep!
27

28
29 ZISYAH: May they all die from wearing tight boots, those Cossacks.
30

31
32 RABBI: Indeed. So: How can we frustrate them in their desire to see us rage and weep? Do what
33 you do best, Sages of Chelm: *Think!*
34

35
36 (ALL ponder – which is a painful, noisy process for the SAGES.)
37

38
39 FEYVEL: I have it! We will refrain from raging and weeping! Instead we will laugh and joke and
40 welcome the Cossacks with open arms, thus confounding them!
41

42
43 SCHMENDRICK: You know, that's not bad.
44

45
46 RABBI: It has possibilities.

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ZISYAH: Write it down, Mesholem.

YOSEF: Gentlemen, you forget! This is no ordinary Cossack patrol! This is the Officer who hates and fears madness, who always kills the village idiots personally! If he sees you all acting foolishly – well, it’s suicidal.

ZISYAH: Suicidal! Wait a moment, that’s not bad either! We can keep the Cossacks from doing these terrible things to us – by doing them to ourselves!

RABBI: How so?

ZISYAH: We’ll desecrate our own synagogue, kill ourselves, steal from ourselves, burn our own crops and houses, kill off our own livestock and run off with our own wives!

FEYVEL: Oh, what fun!

ZISYAH: And that way we’ll frustrate them and foil them!

SCHMENDRICK: Brilliant, Zisyah! Write it down, Mesholem!

RABBI: Now just a moment, Zisyah, you’re suggesting a couple of sins there. (ALL are subdued and attentive.) First, the synagogue doesn’t belong to us, it’s the House of the Lord. We may not desecrate the Lord’s House.

ZISYAH: You’re right as always, Rabbi. Forgive me.

RABBI: And for similar reasons, killing ourselves is also a sin.

ZISYAH: So true, so true. Such a fool I am.

RABBI: Well, even Chelmniks make mistakes. I too made a mistake once. I thought I was wrong about something, but I wasn’t.

1
2
3 SCHMENDRICK: Don't feel bad, there's plenty of things left we can do to ourselves.
4
5
6 RABBI: What do we have left, Mesholem?
7
8
9 MESHOLEM (checking his list): We can still welcome them with celebration, steal from
10 ourselves, burn our own crops and houses, kill our own cattle and chickens, and run off with our
11 own wives. Hey, I don't have a wife.
12
13
14 FEYVEL: Mazel tov.
15
16
17 SCHMENDRICK: I have a suggestion. We couldn't maybe run off with each *other's* wives?
18
19
20 SAGES: Schmendrick!
21
22
23 SCHMENDRICK: Merely an innocent suggestion, fellow Sages!
24
25
26 RABBI: Your wife Shayna would be shocked to hear you.
27
28
29 SCHMENDRICK: Rabbi, it's my wife Shayna's innocent suggestion.
30
31
32 FEYVEL: It is?
33
34
35 SCHMENDRICK: She's always saying, "Schmendrick," she says, "why can't you be a little more
36 different from that other Schmendrick?" And I answer her, I say –
37
38
39 YOSEF: Excuse me, gentlemen, I know I'm just an Outsider, but this whole thing is crazy!
40
41
42 RABBI (sighs): Oy... (Losing patience, gazes out the window.)
43
44
45 YOSEF: Look. The soldiers come to Chelm, with their horses and sabres and guns. And what do
46 they find you doing? (Reads off MESHOLEM's list:) You're stealing money from one pocket to

1 another, flirting with either your own or each other's wives, and destroying your own property.
2 You think that'll stop them? They'll feel right at home!
3
4
5 ZISYAH: So, you have such a profound understanding of the Cossack mind, such as it is, *you* tell
6 us.
7
8
9 YOSEF: We could arm ourselves. We have one gun already – and we could get swords.
10
11
12 MESHOLEM: From where, and with what funds?
13
14
15 YOSEF: We could make them!
16
17
18 RABBI: Out of ploughshares, maybe.
19
20
21 MESHOLEM: So? Any other ideas from our expert?
22
23
24 YOSEF: One of Zisyah's ideas was excellent.
25
26
27 ZISYAH: Only one?
28
29
30 YOSEF: The one about burning the crops and houses.
31
32
33 MESHOLEM: Of course he picks the most expensive one.
34
35
36 YOSEF: It's a very good tactic! We can burn the entire village to the ground!
37
38
39 SCHMENDRICK: Poor fellow, I always said he was the Village Idiot.
40
41
42 FEYVEL: What do you expect from an Outsider? No offense, Shmendrick.
43
44
45 SCHMENDRICK: None taken, none taken.
46

1
2 YOSEF: It's what the Russians themselves did to the French general Napoleon. They burned their
3 villages, took away their valuables, retreated into the hills, and left him nothing but snow and
4 ashes.

5
6
7 MESHOLEM: That's ridiculous. Why did they let him have the snow and ashes?

8
9
10 YOSEF (boggles): What?

11
12
13 MESHOLEM: He was the enemy! What are they giving him presents for? Snow! Ashes! I'm
14 surprised they didn't leave him a bottle of wine and some chopped liver.

15
16
17 SCHMENDRICK: That's what I like. White wine and chopped liver, that's for me.

18
19
20 MESHOLEM: *Red* wine, you're supposed to have *red* wine with chopped liver.

21
22
23 ZISYAH: Who says? My mother always served us white.

24
25
26 FEYVEL: But of course! Your dear mother, may her memory be a blessing, she was colourblind!

27
28
29 (ALL the SAGES begin arguing ad-lib about chopped liver. Meanwhile, upstage, a snow begins to
30 fall.)

31
32
33 RABBI: Fellow Sages – forgive me for interrupting such a stimulating exchange of views, but I see
34 that we have an emergency. Come look.

35
36
37 (ALL go look out the window.)

38
39
40 YOSEF: What is it?

41
42
43 SCHMENDRICK: Yes. There's a magnificent invasion taking place right now.

44
45
46 YOSEF: Where!

1
2
3 FEYVEL: Far more important than a pogrom that isn't going to happen until Passover anyway.
4
5
6 YOSEF: What are you all talking about?
7
8 MESHOLEM: The first snowfall – of the winter.
9
10
11 (The SAGES cross to a downstage window [perhaps imaginary], and stand staring out at the snow.
12 Awestruck silence.)
13
14
15 RABBI (hushed): Look at this. This is a treasure.
16
17
18 FEYVEL: This is diamonds and pearls.
19
20
21 MESHOLEM: So delicate. So magical, this first snow – and so quick to melt.
22
23
24 ZISYAH: Yeah... Too bad we're all gonna schlep through it and shmeer it into slush.
25
26
27 SCHMENDRICK: True. Ah, it's the way of the world.
28
29
30 RABBI (hushed, excited): No! Wait! The way of the world is not the way of Chelm! We will pass a
31 by-law. We will forbid our fellow Chelmniks to walk on the first snow of the year. We will allow it
32 to melt, unshmeered!
33
34
35 MESHOLEM: The Rabbi is a genius!
36
37
38 SCHMENDRICK: A sage among sages.
39
40
41 ZISYAH: Of course, Yosef thinks it's stupid. No?
42
43
44 YOSEF: No, actually, Yosef has to admit, it's a charming idea.
45
46

1 FEYVEL: Hah! Even Yosef likes it! Write it down, Mesholem!

2

3

4 MESHOLEM: I'm writing, I'm writing!

5

6

7 RABBI: Mesholem, go forth with this proclamation. Knock on all the doors and tell the Chelmniks
8 not to walk on the snow.

9

10

11 MESHOLEM: Right away, Rabbi! (He is about to step out into the snow, when YOSEF grabs him
12 by the neck and pulls him back.) Careful! I'm a disabled person!

13

14

15 YOSEF: Rabbi, you're forgetting something!

16

17

18 RABBI: Wha?

19

20

21 YOSEF: Mesholem will walk on the snow and mess it up himself!

22

23

24 SAGES (clapping hands to foreheads): *Oy...*

25

26

27 RABBI: Another meeting! Quickly, Sages of Chelm, let us consult!

28

29

30 (The SAGES return to the table and consult, showing each other Scriptural passages. YOSEF
31 addresses the audience.)

32

33

34 YOSEF: One evening last week? The Rabbi asks Miriam to wake him up before dawn. So the next
35 morning she tiptoes into the Rabbi and Rebbetsin's bedroom, taps the Rabbi on the shoulder, and
36 whispers, "Rabbi: time to get up." And then she goes down to the kitchen to start breakfast. The
37 Rabbi gets up, he stumbles around in the dark, and by mistake he happens to put on the Rebbetsin's
38 dress. He comes into the kitchen – sees that he's wearing his wife's dress – and starts yelling at
39 Miriam: "You fool, you Outsider you! I ask you to wake *me*, and instead you go and wake up my
40 wife, the Rebbetsin!" And then he goes back to bed. (Beat.) These people against the Cossacks.

41

42

43 (The SAGES have hit upon a plan. MESHOLEM kneels on the table and the other SAGES each
44 grab a leg.)

45

46

1 SAGES: One – two – three – At azoi! (“Just like that”/”There we go.” They lift the table and push
2 past YOSEF.) Out of the way, Yosef! Out of the way!

3

4

5 (The SAGES begin to make their way offstage.)

6

7

8 MESHOLEM (proclaiming): A proclamation! To all citizens of Chelm! It is forbidden for any
9 Chelmnik to tread upon the first new snowfall of the year! The snow will be left to melt, untouched
10 by human foot!

11

12

13 (Exeunt.)

14

15

16 YOSEF: Of course when they see what this does to the snow, then next year they’ll have four more
17 Chelmniks carrying a table supporting the first four Chelmniks carrying the table supporting –
18 (Beat.) Next year. What next year?

19

20

21 (The lights fade as he exits. (Walk-Across: A CHELMNIK crosses, walking on his hands or rolling
22 across the ground. Another CHELMNIK crosses the other way, carrying a 3rd CHELMNIK who
23 lies horizontal, sweeping the snow on the ground.)

24

25

26 CHELMNIK BEING CARRIED (to CHELMNIK WALKING ON HIS HANDS): Ah! You’re not
27 setting foot on the snow either! Very good!

28

29

30 (Exeunt.)

31

32

33

Scene Four

34

35

36 (Deep winter: snow covers the land. Sunset: the rays are almost horizontal. Enter YOSEF, bundled
37 against the cold.)

38

39

40 YOSEF: Passover is practically here, and they still have nothing even remotely like a plan. Maybe
41 it is the air here that does it. Maybe it’s got to Miriam, maybe that’s why she has faith in them. Me,
42 I’m paralyzed. It’s like I was frozen. I can’t leave, and I can’t come up with anything better than
43 burning the village themselves.

44

45

46 (Enter FEIGELA and FEYVEL; they may appear in two windows of their house.)

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FEIGELA: Yosef! I appeal to you! Because you're a world traveller! And because nobody else is crazy enough to be out in this weather. Let me tell you about this one here, my husband Feyvel! I need your advice. Your opinion, as a man of the world.

YOSEF: This is all right with you, Feyvel?

FEYVEL: I'm just happy to be alive.

FEIGELA: I had to do some Passover shopping. So I left this yold alone in the house, to look after the baby. This was my first mistake.

YOSEF: Did you think of maybe sending him shopping, and staying with the baby yourself?

FEIGELA: That's what I did last time. The time he went to market to buy a box of matches and then lit every single one on the way home to make sure they worked.

FEYVEL: But they did, dearest! Every single one.

YOSEF: So this time you did the shopping yourself.

FEIGELA: And left him with the baby, God forgive me. I told him three things: he shouldn't wake the baby –

FEYVEL: It's true, "Don't wake the baby," she says to me –

FEIGELA: He shouldn't let the rooster out of the house –

FEYVEL: "Whatever you do," she says, "don't let the rooster out" –

FEIGELA: And he shouldn't eat my fresh-made potful of Passover jam.

1 FEYVEL (blissfully remembering): Aaahhh.
2
3
4 YOSEF: All this is over a pot of jam?
5
6
7 FEIGELA: But! To make sure he would stay away from the Passover jam, I told him it was rat
8 poison.
9
10
11 YOSEF: So what happened?
12
13
14 FEIGELA: First thing after I leave the house, he falls asleep. Then the rooster happens to crow.
15
16
17 FEYVEL: I'm half asleep, I figure it's sunrise.
18
19
20 FEIGELA: His eyes aren't even open yet, he goes and opens the window!
21
22
23 FEYVEL: I wanted some early-morning fresh air!
24
25
26 FEIGELA: The rooster flies out the window! Feyvel makes a dive after the rooster! Instead of the
27 rooster he grabs the baby's crib and wrestles it to the floor with a crash! And the baby wakes up
28 screaming her head off, the poor darling. So what do you think he does next?
29
30
31 FEYVEL: What else could an honourable man do in such a situation? I decided to end it all.
32
33
34 FEIGELA: And end it all he did. Down to the last spoonful, he ended it all.
35
36
37 FEYVEL: I wanted to do a thorough job.
38
39
40 FEIGELA: Feyvel, you want a thorough job, *I'll* do a thorough job...
41
42
43 YOSEF: And that is your story?
44
45
46 FEIGELA: That is my story. So: as a man of the world, Yosef: what is your opinion?

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YOSEF: Feyvel, Feigela, my opinion is that the Russian Army is about to arrive in Chelm. Very soon now. Very big men. With guns that go bang. Mean, nasty soldiers, Feyvel and Feigela.

FEYVEL & FEIGELA: We know that!

YOSEF: And my opinion is that it's crazy to be getting yourselves all worked up over a rooster, a pot of jam, and a baby's nap!

FEYVEL: Yes, but Yosef, *my* opinion is that if you can't get worked up over the sleep of a baby, what can you get worked up over?

FEIGELA: Yosef, what I want to know, really, is, are husbands in the rest of the world like the husbands of Chelm?

YOSEF: *No*, Feigela! If Chelmniks were like other men, we would all be preparing to *defend* ourselves!

FEYVEL: But Yosef, if other men were like Chelmniks, we wouldn't have to defend ourselves in the first place.

(Pause.)

FEIGELA: Feyvel, I hadn't looked at it that way. This is a good opinion, Feyvel. Come on in, I'll make a glass of tea.

FEYVEL: Whatever you say, dear. (Shrugs to YOSEF. Exeunt.)

Scene Five

(ZALMAN and ZLATEH roll the Schnapps stand across, singing a Yiddish drinking song.)

1 (Late winter. Night has fallen, and yellow lights glow from the windows. Faintly, behind us, we
2 can hear drums, hoofbeats, the sound of horses. From inside the Synagogue we can hear
3 CHELMNIKS fussing and arguing, punctuated by the sound of blows – each blow followed by a
4 chorus of approval. Enter YOSEF with gun in hand.)
5
6

7 YOSEF: I know just what they're doing up on that hillside. Four or five soldiers, laughing and
8 joking, cleaning their guns, sharpening their swords and drinking plenty of vodka – getting ready
9 for a night of fun. And the opposing forces? The Chelmnik battalions? They're gathered in the
10 Synagogue, practising hitting themselves on the head.
11
12

13 MESHOLEM (off): Oooww! Vey's mir!
14
15

16 RABBI (off): Very good, Mesholem! Again!
17
18

19 (Another thud, off, other ad-lib cries of pain and encouragement. Enter the REBBETSIN from the
20 Synagogue, holding her head.)
21
22

23 REBBETSIN: Oy, such a headache I have this evening. I wonder why. Yosef! How come you're
24 not in the Synagogue, hitting yourself on the head like the others?
25
26

27 (A resonant metallic collision, off.)
28
29

30 FEYVEL (off): Oy, gottenu!
31
32

33 SCHMENDRICK (off): Good one, Feyvel!
34
35

36 YOSEF: I'm going to greet this Cossack Officer personally, Rebbetsin. He wants the Village Idiot,
37 I'll give him the Village Idiot.
38
39

40 REBBETSIN: Ah. The Village Idiot with his little gun.
41
42

43 YOSEF: That's right. I'm not running away any more, Rebbetsin. I've finally stopped and turned
44 around.
45
46

1 REBBETSIN: Mazel tov. I should tell you, Yosef, I nearly stole your bullets this morning.
2 (Alarmed, YOSEF checks the gun magazine; it's loaded.) But then, you see, I figured, this is not up
3 to me, this is between God and the Village Idiot.

4
5

6 YOSEF: That's right, Rebbetsin.

7
8

9 REBBETSIN: He wants to lower himself to their level, to behave like a barbarian, like an animal,
10 like a Cossack, this is between him and his Creator.

11
12

13 YOSEF: Exactly.

14
15

16 REBBETSIN: He's a grown man! I can't make his decisions for him! Just because he's the Village
17 Idiot!

18
19

20 (The noise of horses, etc. grows louder.)

21
22

23 YOSEF: Very wise. Here they come, Rebbetsin.

24
25

26 REBBETSIN: Yes, that's what I says to myself, I says, "If that's the kind of attitude he chooses to
27 adopt –"

28
29

30 YOSEF: Rebbetsin! This is it! Here they come!

31
32

33 REBBETSIN: Yyyaaahhh! Here they come!

34
35

36 (Confusion onstage and off: there is noise from around the auditorium, and divers CHELMNIKS
37 run on, frightened. Suddenly, perhaps in a spotlight in a balcony or loge of the auditorium, there
38 appears the OFFICER: tall, in moustache and fur hat. As the CHELMNIKS gaze up at him from
39 the stage, horrified, he waves his sabre.)

40
41

42 OFFICER (Russian accent): Village of Idiot Jews! Hear me, the Cossack Officer! Today we attack
43 you, not once, but twice at same time! One pogrom because you are Jews, and thus a blot on face
44 of Mother Russia – and one pogrom because you are idiots, and idiocy is plague in Russia, a plague
45 attacking us all, from the Czar Himself on down – a plague I am sworn to wipe out if it means to
46 kill every fool in land! So Chelm receives a double attack! Every blow to land a second time!

1 Every fire to blaze up twice as high! Every treasure to be stolen and stolen again! Every drop of
2 blood to flow two times! *We will kill you twice!*

3
4
5 (Four or five RUSSIAN SOLDIERS come tearing down the aisles, bellowing and screaming and
6 waving their sabres. YOSEF aims his revolver at one aisle, then the other – but he is surrounded by
7 CHELMNIKS pounding themselves on the head, and he dare not fire. The SOLDIERS pour onto
8 the stage. Shots are fired; lights go out. All is chaos, noise and darkness. The action continues
9 offstage, where we continue to hear shouting, gunshots, glass breaking, etc. throughout.)

10
11
12 (Now begins a series of quasi-Shakespearian battle scenes: run-acrosses at a fever pitch,
13 illuminated briefly in the surrounding darkness. These scenes may be mixed and matched and
14 rearranged. In one production, the sequence with BRODSKY was broken down into instalments
15 which were interspersed among the other scenes. Among and around these scenes there may be
16 other, less well-defined chases-across, some perhaps in the aisles.)

17
18
19 (A CHELMNIK and a SOLDIER run on screaming from opposite sides, the SOLDIER brandishing
20 a sabre over his head and the CHELMNIK brandishing a club over his head. They meet in the
21 middle. The CHELMNIK clubs himself on the head and collapses. The SOLDIER stops. He circles
22 the CHELMNIK. He picks up the mysterious club. He experimentally clubs himself on the head
23 and collapses.)

24
25
26 (A CHELMNIK, carrying a burning candle, runs up to a SOLDIER. In some productions this
27 CHELMNIK has been MIRIAM.)

28
29
30 CHELMNIK: Here! Burn my house! Set fire to my house! That one over there!

31
32
33 SOLDIER (Russian accent, like all the SOLDIERS): Is trap! Is cunning Jewish trap! You have
34 gunpowder in there, nyet? Blow all to many pieces!

35
36
37 CHELMNIK: I knew it, you have no courage, you Russians!

38
39
40 SOLDIER: I have much courage! However, I am not idiot like you is!

41
42
43 CHELMNIK (shoves the candle into his hand): Come on, you brave man, burn the place!

44
45
46 (MESHOLEM has run on, carrying the magic fire trumpet. He sees the candle.)

1
2
3 MESHOLEM: I thought so! *Fire!* (Blows his trumpet. The WOMEN run on with their buckets,
4 drench the SOLDIER and pile the buckets on his head. MESHOLEM chases him off, blowing the
5 trumpet at him.)
6
7
8 (ZALMAN & ZLATEH roll their Schnapps stand merrily through the chaos, carousing away while
9 the Holocaust rages around them. A SOLDIER staggers on with an axe.)
10
11
12 SOLDIER: You Chelm peoples is crazy! Is madness here, madness!
13
14
15 (He smashes his axe into the barrel. ALL flinch away from it, but the expected torrent does not
16 pour forth.)
17
18
19 ZALMAN: So, big deal, the barrel's empty anyway.
20
21
22 SOLDIER: Drink! I need good stiff drink!
23
24
25 (He grabs the glass from ZALMAN's or ZLATEH's hand, drinks, chokes on the stuff, and
26 collapses at their feet.)
27
28
29 ZLATEH (as the Schnapps stand rolls off): Russians, they drink vodka, what do they know?
30
31
32
33 (A SOLDIER chases a CHELMNIK who runs across the stage on his hands. The SOLDIER does
34 not know where to strike.)
35
36
37 (MESHOLEM intercepts a SOLDIER who is running across the stage, and slams him over the head
38 with one of his shutters.)
39
40
41 MESHOLEM: That's for Babinka! (The SOLDIER collapses. Aside:) So, it's not the Chelmnik
42 solution I been looking for. But, it's a solution. (Exit.)
43
44

1 (SCHMENDRICK runs on, pursued by PVT. BRODSKY, one of the SOLDIERS. BRODSKY is
2 swinging wildly at SCHMENDRICK, who is hitting himself on the head. SCHMENDRICK stops
3 suddenly, turns; they collide.)
4
5

6 SCHMENDRICK: Wait! Oy, I just realized! You're attacking the wrong man!
7
8

9 BRODSKY: What you say?
10
11

12 SCHMENDRICK (rapidly): In fact, you're attacking the wrong village. This isn't the original
13 Chelm, and I'm not even really me. I mean, I used to be me, but then I left Chelm and came here,
14 and the me who was here has gone back to Chelm, which makes me my own replacement. I haven't
15 been myself lately.
16
17

18 (YOSSEL comes running by.)
19
20

21 BRODSKY: Wait a moment. (Grabs YOSSEL, points to SCHMENDRICK:.) Who is this man?
22
23

24 YOSSEL: You're asking me?
25
26

27 BRODSKY: Da!
28
29

30 YOSSEL: No, no, no. You're not asking me. This isn't me.
31
32

33 BRODSKY (slaps himself on the forehead): Another such!
34
35

36 YOSSEL: When I was a baby I was me, but my nurse switched me with somebody else, and that's
37 who I am now.
38
39

40 BRODSKY: So you're not you – and he's not he –
41
42

43 SCHMENDRICK: And maybe you're not even you.
44
45

46 BRODSKY: I am so me! I am, I tell you! I am Private Brodsky!

1
2
3 SCHMENDRICK: And who says?
4
5
6 BRODSKY: I say!
7
8
9 SCHMENDRICK: My point exactly. Who are you to talk?
10
11
12 (BRODSKY is boggled.)
13
14
15 YOSSEL: So maybe he's you, and you're him.
16
17
18 SCHMENDRICK: Highly plausible. I could be Brodsky, he could be Schmendrick –
19
20
21 YOSSEL: So he, Schmendrick, should have the club – (Takes SCHMENDRICK's club and hands
22 it to BRODSKY.)
23
24
25 SCHMENDRICK: And I, Brodsky, get the sabre – (Takes the sabre.)
26
27
28 YOSSEL (to BRODSKY): And you, Schmendrick –
29
30
31 SCHMENDRICK: As a good Chelmnik defending your village –
32
33
34 BOTH: Hit yourself on the head!
35
36
37 (Hypnotized, BRODSKY does so, punctuating the line like a rim-shot. He collapses to the floor.
38 SCHMENDRICK and YOSSEL look at each other.)
39
40
41 YOSSEL: So, now, if you're Brodsky, shouldn't you and I be fighting?
42
43
44 SCHMENDRICK: Except that if you're not you, then who am I fighting with?
45
46

1 YOSSEL: What do you care who you're fighting with? You're attacking all of Chelm!

2

3

4 SCHMENDRICK: But like I told Schmendrick back there, this isn't Chelm!

5

6

7 YOSSEL: Or did Schmendrick tell you?

8

9

10 SCHMENDRICK: Ah. Intriguing question.

11

12

13 (Exeunt.)

14

15

16

17 (RUSSIAN OFFICER pursues a CHELMNIK who repeatedly hits himself on the head.)

18

19

20 CHELMNIK: It's not working! It's not working! On me it's working, on him it's not working.

21

22

23 (Enter YOSEF, pointing his gun at the OFFICER. The CHELMNIK runs off.)

24

25

26 YOSEF: Halt or I fire! Halt in the name of Chelm! (OFFICER stops, turns. Noise of battle, off, may fade down.) Throw down your sabre.

27

28

29

30 OFFICER: Ah. Is you, is it. The halfbreed Jew who ran. No – In honour of your cowardice, I will

31 hold on to my sabre.

32

33

34 YOSEF: I've changed. I'm your Village Idiot now. And I'm ready to kill you.

35

36

37 OFFICER: Or to die trying, nyet?

38

39

40 YOSEF: That would be good too.

41

42

43 OFFICER: So it is the air after all, nyet?

44

45

46 YOSEF: The air?

1
2
3 OFFICER: In this idiot village. It is the air that has driven you so mad that even you show a little
4 courage.

5
6
7 MIRIAM (has entered): That's right, Officer. You see what it's doing to your men?

8
9
10 OFFICER: What of my men? My men are of the best.

11
12
13 MIRIAM: Well, maybe, but one of them's passed out on peach-and-garlic brandy and the others
14 have knocked themselves unconscious with sticks.

15
16
17 BRODSKY (rises, looking threatening): It is a parcel of lies! For you see – I am unconscious no
18 longer.

19
20
21 OFFICER: Ah, Private Brodsky.

22
23
24 BRODSKY: Who?

25
26
27 OFFICER: Ten-shun!

28
29
30 BRODSKY: You have got wrong man. My name is Schmendrick.

31
32
33 OFFICER: You are Brodsky, Dmitri Ivanovitch! Private First Class in Imperial Russian Army!

34
35
36 BRODSKY: Nyet, nyet, you are wanting Jewish-looking fellow, went off that way. I am Chelmnik,
37 defending village like so. (Hits himself on the head.) Oy, that is hurting. Oy – gedalf?

38
39
40 MIRIAM: Gevaldt.

41
42
43 BRODSKY: Gevaldt. Thank you.

44
45
46 (BRODSKY wanders offstage, as MIRIAM continues to laugh. YOSEF, laughing, lowers his gun.)

1
2
3 OFFICER: It is the air. It is the air! Is madness and folly! Is idiocy! Is going to infect us all! Is
4 going to infect – even – *me!* *I must retreat! We must all to retreat! Retreeeat!*

5
6
7 (The other SOLDIERS enter or get up, frightened and in pain.)

8
9
10 YOSEF (laughing): No – Do stay – Just don't breathe –

11
12
13 OFFICER: *Retreeeat!*

14
15
16 (With ad-lib cries of terror and moans of pain, all the SOLDIERS except BRODSKY stagger into
17 the aisles. The OFFICER ad-libs to them, and to the audience, not to breathe – as they lurch up the
18 aisles with kerchiefs over their faces. SCHMENDRICK enters onstage.)

19
20
21 SCHMENDRICK: Wait for me! Wait for your comrade, Private Brodsky! (Takes the gun from
22 YOSEF, and pursues the SOLDIERS, firing the gun into the air.) Wait! Wait for me, Brodsky!

23
24
25 (He chases them off. YOSEF & MIRIAM watch, laughing. As they calm down, and quiet returns to
26 Chelm, we call this another scene.)

27
28
29 **Scene Six**

30
31
32 YOSEF: What could have come over me? I had him sitting up there right in front of my gun. I
33 could have killed him at last. And instead – I laughed. And they became afraid of us and ran away.
34 And so the Officer lives.

35
36
37 MIRIAM: And you live, and Chelm lives.

38
39
40 (Enter the RABBI and other CHELMNIKS. The CHELMNIKS begin removing dropped props and
41 weapons, sweeping up, etc. Stars come out, and a fat full moon, which shines on the blossoms that
42 now bedeck the trees. The scent of blossoms fills the theatre. Lights are re-lit in the Chelmnik
43 homes.)

44
45

1 YOSEF: True. But you know – enemy soldiers never *really* hit themselves on the head – and forget
2 their names – and run away from the laughter of fools –

3

4

5 MIRIAM: Enemy soldiers only do these things in stories.

6

7

8 YOSEF: In stories. And this, Rabbi – this I do not pretend to understand.

9

10

11 RABBI: Yosef – Listen well to me, my son.

12

13

14 YOSEF: Yes, Rabbi?

15

16

17 RABBI: A Chelmnik and an Outsider come into a tavern. They are served two cheese blintzes: a
18 big blintz and a little blintz. Without a word, the Chelmnik grabs the big blintz and chomps it
19 down. “What chutzpah!” says the Outsider: “some nerve, to take the big one for yourself!” And the
20 Chelmnik answers, “And what would you have done?” The Outsider says, “If you’d given me a
21 chance, I would have been polite: I would have taken the small one and left the big one for you!”
22 “Nu,” says the Chelmnik, “you got the blintz you wanted, what are you kvetching about?”

23

24

25 YOSEF: Rabbi, that is profound.

26

27

28 RABBI: Yosef, thank you for noticing.

29

30

31 BRODSKY (enters): Good evening, Comrade Chelmniks.

32

33

34 YOSEF: Good evening, Schmendrick.

35

36

37 RABBI: Schmendrick?

38

39

40 BRODSKY: It is myself. Good evening, Comrade Rabbi.

41

42

43 RABBI: Good evening. You’re looking better than usual.

44

45

46 BRODSKY: Da. Big and strong. Used to be soldier in Russian army, you know.

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46

RABBI: No, I never knew that about you, Schmendrick.

YOSEF: And now he's living proof that you don't have to be born in Chelm to be a Chelmnik.

BRODSKY: Da!

MIRIAM: That's right. Some people just take to it naturally.

YOSEF (to her): And some have to learn it the hard way.

BRODSKY: Such beautiful full moon is, this evening, nyet? And can you smell the blossoms of apple and of peach? Is Spring once more, Comrade Chelmniks. Is lovely night, is night of perfume and of moonlight, of mist and of roses – of beautiful, silent, delicate splendiforousness –

MESHOLEM (entering at the top of his lungs): *Hokay Chelmniks, bring on the borscht!*

(Enter several CHELMNIKS, ad-libbing busily as they carry an enormous vat full of borscht.)

Careful you shouldn't spill any!

YOSEF: Mesholem, let me guess. Now that Chelm has defended itself against our pogrom, we're going to raise money for Shedlitz –

MESHOLEM: Very good, Yosef.

YOSEF: – By selling borscht? You're selling beet soup to the other nearby villages. Is that it?

MESHOLEM: Very intelligent. Yes, we're selling beet soup to the other villages downriver from here. But can you guess how we're going to deliver it?

YOSEF: Yes, yes, by pouring it into the river, of course, and letting the river carry it to them, but –

1 MESHOLEM: Spoken like a Chelmnik!
2
3
4 YOSEF: But listen, fellow Chelmniks, I have an alternative suggestion. You see that full moon in
5 the sky?
6
7
8 BRODSKY: Is beautiful.
9
10
11 YOSEF: As Schmendrick says: is beautiful. And when you look into the vat of borscht – you can
12 see that moon, round and full, floating there in the borscht – captured.
13
14
15 CHELMNIKS (looking): Ooohhh...
16
17
18 YOSEF: Now: throw a tarpaulin over it, tie the whole thing up with ropes –
19
20
21 MIRIAM: And Chelm will own the moon.
22
23
24 YOSEF: And Chelm, as Miriam says, will own the moon. Take the whole package to Shedlitz, and
25 let the Shedlitzniks have a choice: they can rent out the moon and keep the money, or – if they still
26 have that lack of imagination that they're famous for in Shedlitz – they can just drink the borscht.
27
28
29 MESHOLEM: But – but Yosef, then what will Chelm do for a moon?
30
31
32 YOSEF: It's all right, Mesholem. Every month there's a new moon.
33
34
35 CHELMNIKS (slapping themselves on the forehead): Of course! Chelmnik! Absolutely, positively
36 Chelmnik!
37
38
39 MESHOLEM: Come on, fellow Chelmniks! Back we go for rope and canvas!
40
41
42 (The CHELMNIKS, with BRODSKY, exit the way they came, singing softly in the moonlight.
43 YOSEF and MIRIAM remain.)
44
45
46 YOSEF: So?

1
2
3 MIRIAM: So?
4
5
6 YOSEF: Now will you marry me?
7
8
9 MIRIAM: Of course I'll marry you.
10
11
12 YOSEF: Oh! (Overcome, he has an impulse to embrace her; checks it.) So, uh – so do we go now
13 and tell the Rabbi?
14
15
16 MIRIAM: No. It can wait until morning.
17
18
19 YOSEF: Oh? And what do we do tonight?
20
21
22 MIRIAM: Tonight we go help our fellow Chelmniks tie up the moon.
23
24
25 YOSEF: Oh. Of course.
26
27
28 MIRIAM: But now that we are betrothed, you may hold my hand.
29
30
31 (He takes her hand. They start off together. They pass ZALMAN & ZLATEH staggering on with
32 the empty barrel. The barrel is smashed; so are ZALMAN & ZLATEH.)
33
34
35 YOSEF & MIRIAM: Good evening, Zalman! Good evening, Zlateh!
36
37
38 ZALMAN & ZLATEH: Good evening, good evening...
39
40
41 (YOSEF & MIRIAM exit, holding hands, gazing at each other, in love. ZALMAN & ZLATEH
42 come onstage and collapse.)
43
44
45 ZALMAN: I don' understand it.
46

1
2 ZLATEH: The barrel's been emptied and broken –
3
4
5 ZALMAN: We've sold dozens and dozens of glasses of
6 schnapps –
7
8
9 ZLATEH: At five kopeks a glass!
10
11
12 ZALMAN: Cash on the line!
13
14
15 ZLATEH: Not to mention all the stuff we sold on credit!
16
17
18 ZALMAN: We ought to be rich!
19
20
21 ZLATEH: But instead –
22
23
24 ZALMAN: We are drunk!
25
26
27 ZLATEH: An' all we have to show for all our sales –
28
29
30 ZALMAN: Is five lousy kopeks!
31
32
33 ZLATEH: Five lousy kopeks. In your pocket.
34
35
36 ZALMAN: Right here in my pocket.
37
38
39 (He reaches into his pocket; his hand comes out the hole in the bottom. They register this and both
40 start frantically digging through their own, and then each other's, clothes. In the midst of this,
41 SCHMENDRICK enters from the rear of the auditorium and comes back down the aisle, ecstatic.)
42
43
44 SCHMENDRICK: Zalman! Zlateh! I'm back! It's me, Schmendrick, remember? The one who left
45 to see the world one day, years ago, and – I have such stories to tell you! It is as if I had awakened
46 from a fabulous dream! I came to another village just like Chelm, and for a while there I thought I

1 was a Russian soldier – but I’m back now! (By now he is onstage, looking around.) And just look
2 at the dear old place! It’s like I never really left! Wait til my darling Shayna sees me, she’ll be so
3 happy... She’ll probably start yelling and screaming... (Exit.)
4
5

6 ZLATEH (pauses to watch him go): Wait til he finds his darling Shayna in bed with that
7 Schmendrick who looks like a Russian.
8
9

10 ZALMAN: Zlateh, darling – we’ve lost our five kopeks.
11
12

13 ZLATEH: We’ve lost our fortune! A full year’s income!
14
15

16 ZALMAN: We must retrace our steps!
17
18

19 ZLATEH: But it’s so late at night. It’s dark.
20
21

22 ZALMAN: Let’s go look for it, dark or not.
23
24

25 ZLATEH: I have a better idea. Look, Zalman: it’s a beautiful night. The moon is full. The place
26 stinks of apple blossoms.
27
28

29 ZALMAN: Yes – Springtime has returned to the Village of Chelm.
30
31

32 ZLATEH: And you and I are full of schnapps. So I tell you what we do, my darling Zalman.
33 (Snuggles closer.) We go home – we light a nice, low lamp – and that’ll give us a much better light,
34 won’t it?
35
36

37 ZALMAN: I suppose it will.
38
39

40 (They continue up the aisle, leaving the barrel behind in a spotlight.)
41
42

43 ZLATEH: And then, you and I – slip under the covers, my dear husband – and *then*, well, we’ll see
44 what we can find, eh? We’ll see what we can find.
45
46

1 ZALMAN: That idea is worthy of a Chelmnik, my dear Zlateh. Yes, indeed. Worthy of a
2 Chelmnik.

3

4

5 (The light remains on the broken, empty barrel for a moment, and then fades out.)

6

7

8

THE END

9

10