

I. Zangwill

The King of Schnorrers

GROTESQUES AND FANTASIES

BY

I. ZANGWILL

Author of "Children of the Ghetto," "The Old Maids' Club," "Merely Mary Ann,"
etc.

New York THE MACMILLAN COMPANY LONDON: MACMILLAN &
CO., Ltd. 1909

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Set up and electrotyped January, 1894. Reprinted April, 1894; September,
1895; January, 1897; October, 1898; August, 1899; June, 1909.

Norwood Press J. S. Cushing & Co.—Berwick & Smith Norwood Mass.
U.S.A.

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Foreword to "The King of Schnorrers."

These episodes make no claim to veracity, while the personages are not even sun-myths. I have merely amused myself and attempted to amuse idlers by incarnating the floating tradition of the Jewish Schnorrer, who is as unique among beggars as Israel among nations. The close of the eighteenth century was chosen for a background, because, while the most picturesque period of Anglo-Jewish history, it has never before been exploited in fiction, whether by novelists or historians. To my friend, Mr. Asher I. Myers, I am indebted for access to his unique collection of Jewish prints and caricatures of the period, and I have not been backward in schnorrinG suggestions from him and other private humourists. My indebtedness to my artists is more obvious, from my old friend George Hutchinson to my newer friend Phil May, who has been good enough to allow me to reproduce from his

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Annals the brilliant sketches illustrating two of the shorter stories. Of these shorter stories it only remains to be said there are both tragic and comic, and I will not usurp the critic's prerogative by determining which is which.

I. Z.

*That all men are beggars, 'tis very plain to see,
Though some they are of lowly, and some of high degree:*

*Your ministers of State will say they never will allow
That kings from subjects beg; but that you know is all bow-wow.
Bow-wow-wow! Fol lol, etc.*
Old Play.

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The King of Schnorrers.

CHAPTER I.

SHOWING HOW THE WICKED

PHILANTHROPIST WAS TURNED INTO A FISH-PORTER.

In the days when Lord George Gordon became a Jew, and was suspected of insanity; when, out of respect for the prophecies, England denied her Jews every civic right except that of paying taxes; when the *Gentleman's Magazine* had ill words for the infidel alien; when Jewish marriages were invalid and bequests for Hebrew colleges void; when a prophet prophesying Primrose Day would have been set in the stocks, though Pitt inclined his private ear to Benjamin Goldsmid's views on the foreign loans—in those days, when Tevele Schiff was Rabbi in Israel, and Dr. de Falk, the Master of the Tetragrammaton, saint and Cabbalistic conjuror, flourished in Wellclose Square, and the composer of "The Death of Nelson" was a choir-boy in the Great Synagogue; Joseph Grobstock, pillar of the same, emerged one afternoon into the spring sunshine at the fag-end of the departing stream of worshippers. In his hand was a large canvas bag, and in his eye a twinkle.

There had been a special service of prayer and thanksgiving for the happy restoration of his Majesty's health, and the cantor had interceded tunefully with Providence on behalf of Royal George and "our most amiable Queen,

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Charlotte." The congregation was large and fashionable—far more so than when only a heavenly sovereign was concerned—and so the courtyard was thronged with a string of *Schnorrers* (beggars), awaiting the exit of the audience, much as the vestibule of the opera-house is lined by footmen.

They were a motley crew, with tangled beards and long hair that fell in curls, if not the curls of the period; but the gaberdines of the German Ghettoes had been in most cases exchanged for the knee-

breeches and many-buttoned jacket of the Londoner. When the clothes one has brought from the Continent wear out, one must needs adopt the attire of one's superiors, or be reduced to buying. Many bore staves, and had their loins girded up with coloured handkerchiefs, as though ready at any moment to return from the Captivity. Their woebegone air was achieved almost entirely by not washing—it owed little to nature, to adventitious aids in the shape of deformities. The merest sprinkling boasted of physical afflictions, and none exposed sores like the lazars of Italy or contortions like the cripples of Constantinople. Such crude methods are eschewed in the fine art of *schnorring*. A green shade might denote weakness of sight, but the stone-blind man bore no braggart placard—his infirmity was an old established concern well known to the public, and conferring upon the proprietor a definite status in the community. He was no anonymous atom, such as drifts blindly through Christendom, vagrant and apologetic. Rarest of all sights in this pageantry of Jewish pauperdom was the hollow trouser-leg or the empty sleeve, or the wooden limb fulfilling either and pushing out a proclamatory peg.

When the pack of *Schnorrers* caught sight of Joseph Grobstock, they fell upon him full-cry, blessing him. He,

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nothing surprised, brushed pompously through the benedictions, though the twinkle in his eye became a roguish gleam. Outside the iron gates, where the throng was thickest, and where some elegant chariots that had brought worshippers from distant Hackney were preparing to start, he came to a standstill, surrounded by clamouring *Schnorrers*, and dipped his hand slowly and ceremoniously into the bag. There was a moment of breathless expectation among the beggars, and Joseph Grobstock had a moment of exquisite consciousness of importance, as he stood there swelling in the sunshine. There was no middle class to speak of in the eighteenth-century Jewry; the world was divided into rich

and poor, and the rich were very, very rich, and the poor very, very poor, so that everyone knew his station. Joseph Grobstock was satisfied with that in which it had pleased God to place

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him. He was a jovial, heavy-jowled creature, whose clean-shaven chin was doubling, and he was habited like a person of the first respectability in a beautiful blue body-coat with a row of big yellow buttons. The frilled shirt front, high collar of the very newest fashion, and copious white neckerchief showed off the massive fleshiness of the red throat. His hat was of the Quaker pattern, and his head did not fail of the periwig and the pigtail, the latter being heretical in name only.

"DIPPED HIS HAND INTO THE BAG."

What Joseph Grobstock drew from the bag was a small white-paper packet, and his sense of humour led him to place it in the hand furthest from his nose; for it was a broad humour, not a subtle. It enabled him to extract pleasure from seeing a fellow-mortal's hat rollick in the wind, but did little to alleviate the chase for his own. His jokes clapped you on the back, they did not tickle delicately.

Such was the man who now became the complacent cynosure of all eyes, even of those that had no appeal in them, as soon as the principle of his eleemosynary operations had broken on the crowd. The first *Schnorrer*, feverishly tearing open his package, had found a florin, and, as by electricity, all except the blind beggar were aware that Joseph Grobstock was distributing florins. The distributor partook of the general consciousness, and his lips twitched. Silently he dipped again into the bag, and, selecting the hand nearest, put a second white package into it. A wave of joy brightened the grimy face, to change instantly to one of horror.

"You have made a mistake—you have given me a penny!" cried

the beggar.

"Keep it for your honesty," replied Joseph Grobstock imperturbably, and affected not to enjoy the laughter of the rest. The third mendicant ceased laughing when he discovered

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that fold on fold of paper sheltered a tiny sixpence. It was now obvious that the great man was distributing prize-packets, and the excitement of the piebald crowd grew momentarily. Grobstock went on dipping, lynx-eyed against second applications. One of the few pieces of gold in the lucky-bag fell to the solitary lame man, who danced in his joy on his sound leg, while the poor blind man pocketed his halfpenny, unconscious of ill-fortune, and merely wondering why the coin came swathed in paper.

"DANCED ON HIS SOUND LEG."

By this time Grobstock could control his face no longer, and the last episodes of the lottery were played to the accompaniment of a broad grin. Keen and complex was his enjoyment. There was not only the general surprise at this novel feat of alms; there were the special surprises of detail written on face after face, as it flashed or fell or frowned in congruity with the contents of the envelope, and for undercurrent a delicious hubbub of interjections and benedictions, a stretching and withdrawing of palms, and a swift shifting of figures, that made the scene a farrago of excitements. So

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that the broad grin was one of gratification as well as of amusement, and part of the gratification sprang from a real kindness of heart—for Grobstock was an easy-going man with whom the world had gone easy. The *Schnorrers* were exhausted before the packets, but the philanthropist was in no anxiety to be

rid of the remnant. Closing the mouth of the considerably lightened bag and clutching it tightly by the throat, and recomposing his face to gravity, he moved slowly down the street like a stately treasure-ship flecked by the sunlight. His way led towards Goodman's Fields, where his mansion was situate, and he knew that the fine weather would bring out *Schnorrers* enough. And, indeed, he had not gone many paces before he met a figure he did not remember having seen before.

Leaning against a post at the head of the narrow passage which led to Bevis Marks was a tall, black-bearded, turbaned personage, a first glance at whom showed him of the true tribe. Mechanically Joseph Grobstock's hand went to the lucky-bag, and he drew out a neatly-folded packet and tendered it to the stranger.

The stranger received the gift graciously, and opened it gravely, the philanthropist loitering awkwardly to mark the issue. Suddenly the dark face became a thunder-cloud, the eyes flashed lightning.

"An evil spirit in your ancestors' bones!" hissed the stranger, from between his flashing teeth. "Did you come here to insult me?"

"Pardon, a thousand pardons!" stammered the magnate, wholly taken aback. "I fancied you were a—a—a—poor man."

"And, therefore, you came to insult me!"

"No, no, I thought to help you," murmured Grobstock, turning from red to scarlet. Was it possible he had foisted

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his charity upon an undeserving millionaire? No! Through all the clouds of his own confusion and the recipient's anger, the figure of a *Schnorrer* loomed too plain for mistake. None but a *Schnorrer* would wear a home-made turban, issue of a black cap crossed with a white kerchief; none but a *Schnorrer* would unbutton the first nine buttons of his waistcoat, or, if this relaxation were due to the

warmth of the weather, counteract it by wearing an over-garment, especially one as heavy as a blanket, with buttons the size of compasses and flaps reaching nearly to his shoe-buckles, even though its length were only congruous with that of his undercoat, which already reached the bottoms of his knee-breeches. Finally, who but a *Schnorrer* would wear this overcoat cloak-wise, with dangling sleeves, full of armless suggestion from a side view? Quite apart from the shabbiness of the snuff-coloured fabric, it was amply evident that the wearer did not dress by rule or measure. Yet the disproportions of his attire did but enhance the picturesqueness of a personality that would be striking even in a bath, though it was not likely to be seen there. The beard was jet black, sweeping and unkempt, and ran up his cheeks to meet the raven hair, so that the vivid face was framed in black; it was a long, tapering face with sanguine lips gleaming at the heart of a black bush; the eyes were large and lambent, set in deep sockets under black arching eyebrows; the nose was long and Coptic; the brow low but broad, with straggling wisps of hair protruding from beneath the turban. His right hand grasped a plain ashen staff.

Worthy Joseph Grobstock found the figure of the mendicant only too impressive; he shrank uneasily before the indignant eyes.

"I meant to help you," he repeated.

"And this is how one helps a brother in Israel?" said the

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Schnorrer, throwing the paper contemptuously into the philanthropist's face. It struck him on the bridge of the nose, but impinged so mildly that he felt at once what was the matter. The packet was empty—the *Schnorrer* had drawn a blank; the only one the good-natured man had put into the bag.

"IT STRUCK HIM ON THE BRIDGE OF THE NOSE."

The *Schnorrer's* audacity sobered Joseph Grobstock completely; it might have angered him to chastise the fellow, but it did not. His better nature prevailed; he began to feel shamefaced, fumbled sheepishly in his pocket for a crown; then hesitated, as fearing this peace-offering would not altogether suffice with so rare a spirit, and that he owed the stranger more than silver—an apology to wit. He proceeded honestly to pay it, but with a maladroit manner, as one unaccustomed to the currency.

"You are an impertinent rascal," he said, "but I daresay you feel hurt. Let me assure you I did not know there was nothing in the packet. I did not, indeed."

"Then your steward has robbed me!" exclaimed the *Schnorrer* excitedly. "You let him make up the packets, and he has stolen my money—the thief, the transgressor, thrice-cursed who robs the poor."

"You don't understand," interrupted the magnate meekly. "I made up the packets myself."

"Then, why do you say you did not know what was in them? Go, you mock my misery!"

"Nay, hear me out!" urged Grobstock desperately. "In some I placed gold, in the greater number silver, in a few copper, in one alone—nothing. That is the one you have drawn. It is your misfortune."

"*My* misfortune!" echoed the *Schnorrer* scornfully. "It is *your* misfortune—I did not even draw it. The Holy One, blessed be He, has punished you for your heartless

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jesting with the poor—making a sport for yourself of their

misfortunes, even as the Philistines sported with Samson. The good deed you might have put to your account by a gratuity to me, God has taken from you. He has declared you unworthy of achieving righteousness through me. Go your way, murderer!"

"Murderer!" repeated the philanthropist, bewildered by this harsh view of his action.

"Yes, murderer! Stands it not in the Talmud that he who shames another is as one who spills his blood? And have you not put me to shame—if anyone had witnessed your almsgiving, would he not have laughed in my beard?"

The pillar of the Synagogue felt as if his paunch were shrinking.

"But the others—" he murmured deprecatingly. "I have not shed their blood—have I not given freely of my hard-earned gold?"

"For your own diversion," retorted the *Schnorrer* implacably. "But what says the Midrash? There is a wheel rolling in the world—not he who is rich to-day is rich to-morrow, but this one He brings up, and this one He brings down, as is said in the seventy-fifth Psalm. Therefore, lift not up your horn on high, nor speak with a stiff neck."

He towered above the unhappy capitalist, like an ancient prophet denouncing a swollen monarch. The poor man put his hand involuntarily to his high collar as if to explain away his apparent arrogance, but in reality because he was not breathing easily under the *Schnorrer's* attack.

"You are an uncharitable man," he panted hotly, driven to a line of defence he had not anticipated. "I did it not from wantonness, but from faith in Heaven. I know well that God sits turning a wheel—therefore I did not presume

to turn it myself. Did I not let Providence select who should have the silver and who the gold, who the copper and who the emptiness? Besides, God alone knows who really needs my assistance—I have made Him my almoner; I have cast my burden on the Lord."

"Epicurean!" shrieked the *Schnorrer*. "Blasphemer! Is it thus you would palter with the sacred texts? Do you forget what the next verse says: 'Bloodthirsty and deceitful men shall not live out half their days'? Shame on you—you a *Gabbai* (treasurer) of the Great Synagogue. You see I know you, Joseph Grobstock. Has not the beadle of your Synagogue boasted to me that you have given him a guinea for brushing your spatterdashes? Would you think of offering *him* a packet? Nay, it is the poor that are trodden on—they whose merits are in excess of those of beadles. But the Lord will find others to take up his loans—for he who hath pity on the poor lendeth to the Lord. You are no true son of Israel."

The *Schnorrer's* tirade was long enough to allow Grobstock to recover his dignity and his breath.

"If you really knew me, you would know that the Lord is considerably in my debt," he rejoined quietly. "When next you would discuss me, speak with the Psalms-men, not the beadle. Never have I neglected the needy. Even now, though you have been insolent and uncharitable, I am ready to befriend you if you are in want."

"If I am in want!" repeated the *Schnorrer* scornfully. "Is there anything I do not want?"

"You are married?"

"You correct me—wife and children are the only things I do *not* lack."

"No pauper does," quoth Grobstock, with a twinkle of restored

humour.

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"No," assented the *Schnorrer* sternly. "The poor man has the fear of Heaven. He obeys the Law and the Commandments. He marries while he is young—and his spouse is not cursed with barrenness. It is the rich man who transgresses the Judgment, who delays to come under the Canopy."

"Ah! well, here is a guinea—in the name of my wife," broke in Grobstock laughingly. "Or stay—since you do not brush spatterdashes—here is another."

"In the name of my wife," rejoined the *Schnorrer* with dignity, "I thank you."

"Thank me in your own name," said Grobstock. "I mean tell it me."

"I am Manasseh Bueno Barzillai Azevedo da Costa," he answered simply.

"A Sephardi!" exclaimed the philanthropist.

"Is it not written on my face, even as it is written on yours that you are a Tedesco? It is the first time that I have taken gold from one of your lineage."

"Oh, indeed!" murmured Grobstock, beginning to feel small again.

"Yes—are we not far richer than your community? What need have I to take the good deeds away from my own people—they have too few opportunities for beneficence as it is, being so many of them wealthy; brokers and West India merchants, and—"

"But I, too, am a financier, and an East India Director," Grobstock reminded him.

"Maybe; but your community is yet young and struggling—your rich men are as the good men in Sodom for multitude. You are the

immigrants of yesterday—refugees from the Ghettoes of Russia and Poland and Germany. But we, as you are aware, have been established here for generations;

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in the Peninsula our ancestors graced the courts of kings, and controlled the purse-strings of princes; in Holland we held the empery of trade. Ours have been the poets and scholars in Israel. You cannot expect that we should recognise your rabble, which prejudices us in the eyes of England. We made the name of Jew honourable; you degrade it. You are as the mixed multitude which came up with our forefathers out of Egypt."

"Nonsense!" said Grobstock sharply. "All Israel are brethren."

"Esau was the brother of Israel," answered Manasseh sententiously. "But you will excuse me if I go a-marketing, it is such a pleasure to handle gold." There was a note of wistful pathos in the latter remark which took off the edge of the former, and touched Joseph with compunction for bandying words with a hungry man whose loved ones were probably starving patiently at home.

"Certainly, haste away," he said kindly.

"I shall see you again," said Manasseh, with a valedictory wave of his hand, and digging his staff into the cobblestones he journeyed forwards without bestowing a single backward glance upon his benefactor.

Grobstock's road took him to Petticoat Lane in the wake of Manasseh. He had no intention of following him, but did not see why he should change his route for fear of the *Schnorrer*, more especially as Manasseh did not look back. By this time he had become conscious again of the bag he carried, but he had no heart to proceed with the fun. He felt conscience stricken, and had recourse to his pockets instead in his progress through the narrow

jostling market-street, where he scarcely ever bought anything personally save fish and good deeds. He was a connoisseur in both. To-day he picked up many a good deed cheap, paying

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pennies for articles he did not take away—shoe-latchets and cane-strings, barley-sugar and butter-cakes. Suddenly, through a chink in an opaque mass of human beings, he caught sight of a small attractive salmon on a fishmonger's slab. His eye glittered, his chops watered. He elbowed his way to the vendor, whose eye caught a corresponding gleam, and whose finger went to his hat in respectful greeting.

"Good afternoon, Jonathan," said Grobstock jovially, "I'll take that salmon there—how much?"

"Pardon me," said a voice in the crowd, "I am just bargaining for it."

Grobstock started. It was the voice of Manasseh.

"Stop that nonsense, da Costa," responded the fishmonger. "You know you won't give me my price. It is the only one I have left," he added, half for the benefit of Grobstock. "I couldn't let it go under a couple of guineas."

"Here's your money," cried Manasseh with passionate contempt, and sent two golden coins spinning musically upon the slab.

In the crowd sensation, in Grobstock's breast astonishment, indignation, and bitterness. He was struck momentarily dumb. His face purpled. The scales of the salmon shone like a celestial vision that was fading from him by his own stupidity.

"I'll take that salmon, Jonathan," he repeated, spluttering. "Three guineas."

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