

# A SIMPLE STORY

S. Y. AGNON

A NEWLY REVISED TRANSLATION  
FROM THE HEBREW  
AND AFTERWORD BY

Hillel Halkin

INCLUDING A NEW PREFACE  
AND AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY BY  
JEFFREY SAKS

*The Toby Press*

## *Afterword by Hillel Halkin*

How simple is *A Simple Story*? Or, to ask the same thing differently: How ironic is its title? How we read it depends on our answer to this question.

For on the face of it, the story *is* a simple one—or rather, a simple one with a twist, since it differs in one important respect from other simple stories that it resembles. That is, in its opening chapters Agnon's novel appears to have all the makings of a conventional romance: boy meets girl, boy and girl fall in love, boy and girl's love meets an obstacle. As experienced readers, we know that the story can now go one of two ways. In the first of these, which might be called the "Rapunzel variation," the lovers are cruelly separated, yet after many trials demanding great steadfastness on their part they are happily reunited. Such is the stuff of fairy tales, stage comedies, Hollywood movies, fictional potboilers, women's comic books, and not a few serious novels from *Pamela* to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. The second variation might be named after Tristram and Isolde and ends as shatteringly as the first ends triumphantly: here the separation of the lovers proves insuperable and concludes with final heartbreak and often death. We encounter it in mythology (as in the story of Orpheus),

in dramatic tragedy (*Romeo and Juliet*), and once again, starting with *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, in more than one modern novel.

Now, until we are fairly near the end of *A Simple Story* Agnon does nothing to disabuse us of our illusion that it will turn out to be yet another tale of victorious or tragic romantic love. In fact, stringing us along, he does everything to encourage this belief. At first we are inclined to think the novel will follow the Rapunzel variation: most likely Hirshl will elope with Blume before his planned wedding with Mina, and the rest of the story will relate the lovers' struggle to overcome the hardship and opprobrium to which this exposes them. By the middle of the book, once Hirshl and Mina are unhappily married, we have begun to suspect that the Tristram and Isolde variation is being brought into play: either Hirshl will leave Mina and run away with Blume, in which case the disgrace may prove so great that it drags them both down with it, or else—a possibility that looms larger as Blume rejects Hirshl's advances and Hirshl teeters on the edge of madness and plunges into it—he will lose his sanity forever, or even his life, because he cannot take such a step. The one thing that we are not prepared for—the one thing indeed that must not happen in a romance, because it violates every canon of romantic love—is that Hirshl, the pining lover, will be restored to full health, forget about Blume, his true love, and live happily ever after with Mina, the woman forced on him by his parents. Though Agnon makes us laugh often in *A Simple Story*, which has some marvelously funny passages, the last laugh, it must be conceded, is his—and it comes at our expense.

In a word, much to our surprise, *A Simple Story* turns out to be an anti-romance. A careful rereading of it makes one wonder whether, in writing it, Agnon was not surprised by this too. Though we have no way of knowing how it was originally conceived, not only is there a curious shrinking of Blume's role in the course of the book, prompting its author to bid us adieu with the implied promise—one that he never kept—to write a sequel about her, there is also, coinciding with her vanishing, a perceptible shift from the romantic, almost sentimental tone of the novel's beginning to the comic (though by no means untender) one of its middle and end. Each of these registers had been used before by Agnon in a novel set in Szybusz, the town that

serves as the locale for several of his books: the romantic-sentimental in *In the Prime of Her Life* (1923), which tells the story of Akavia and Tirza Mazal, who appear again as minor characters in *A Simple Story*, and the comic-burlesque in the as yet untranslated social satire *Young and Old Together* (1920). In *A Simple Story*, published in 1935, when he was at the height of his creative powers, Agnon begins on the former note and then veers increasingly toward the latter, though it is one of the strengths of the novel that the two are played off against each other until the very end. Certainly, though, the more the story progresses, the more broadly humorous it becomes.

Indeed, whether *A Simple Story* changes course because Blume fades into the background or whether she fades into the background because Agnon wished to change course, it is evidently her disappearance that released his great comic talents, for she is one of two characters in this many-charactered book who is not at least a partly comic figure. The other is Dr. Langsam, the old neurologist who cures Hirshl of his madness, and he and Blume represent the two poles between which Szybusz exists. Blume is all Innocence; though far from naive (she is much less so in fact than Hirshl, having received her share of hard blows in her life and having learned the lesson of each), she mysteriously retains a charmed virginity, as though she really were the princess in the fairy tale to whom she is more than once compared. Langsam, on the other hand, is the embodiment of Experience; he cannot be treated ironically because he is a master ironist himself, although a most compassionate one. But the people of Szybusz are neither innocent nor experienced. They are too worldly-wise to be the first and too narrow-minded to be the second, and, well aware of the hypocrisies of others but largely unconscious of their own, they are easily poked fun at. *A Simple Story* makes the most of the opportunity.

Yet is the world of Szybusz merely a comic one? Once again we have reached a crossroads in our reading of the novel. For if the life of the town has nothing serious to recommend it, then Hirshl's reconciliation with it as expressed by his final accommodation to his arranged marriage is a pitiful surrender, a sacrifice of his manhood on the altar of a ludicrous social respectability. This would be one

kind of anti-romance, in which the fault lies not with romantic love but with the cowardly failure to assert it. Suppose, however, that the values of Szybuszian society are ultimately meant to be taken by us as positive, and that the comedy of *A Simple Story*, while aimed at its characters' foibles, comes to point out to us their real virtues as well? We would then have a different story, one whose moral might be that the rejection of romantic love in favor of social convention, though exacting a heavy price, is part of putting one's adolescence behind one and becoming, rather than failing to become, a man. One way or another, before we can make up our minds about Hirshl we must make up our minds about Szybusz.

The town of Buczacz, in which Agnon was born in 1888 (in his fiction he playfully changed its name to Szybusz, the word *shibush* in Hebrew meaning "error" or "muddle"), was situated at the extreme eastern end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, about one hundred miles east of Stanislaw (Stanislawow) and two hundred southeast of the provincial capital of Lemberg, today the Ukrainian city of Lvov. The region of Galicia to which it belonged had been annexed by Austria-Hungary in the first partition of Poland in 1772 and was inhabited by peoples speaking four different languages—German, Polish, Ukrainian, and Yiddish. In eastern Galicia the Germans were the least numerous of these elements and consisted mainly of the imperial bureaucrats entrusted with administering the area. The Poles and the Ukrainians, who had a long history of national enmity between them, were the two largest groups, the Ukrainians comprising the peasantry, whereas the Poles were concentrated in the towns and cities, like the Jews. Indeed, although the Jews constituted perhaps a tenth of the population of Galicia as a whole, they were a far higher percentage—in some places even a majority—of its urban inhabitants. Small shopkeepers, artisans, and petty traders, their economic situation was none too good, especially in the far east of the province, which was among the empire's most remote and backward corners.

Yet if they were often poor and commonly despised by their Polish and Ukrainian neighbors, the Jews of Galicia were considerably better off than their millions of brethren in Czarist Russia and

Poland, whose Eastern-European Jewish culture they shared. Indeed, in the same years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that saw the Jews of the Russian Empire subjected to ever worsening pogroms, residential restrictions, and a host of other anti-Semitic acts and policies, Galician Jewry was enjoying an unprecedented epoch of security and equality under the lengthy and benevolent reign of the Kaiser Franz Josef. Such had not always been the case. Although as far back as 1782 the emperor Josef II had issued a Toleration Act removing a number of disabilities imposed on them, the Jews of Galicia were still the frequent victims of government discrimination in the first half of the nineteenth century. Beginning with the accession of Franz Josef in 1848, however, conditions improved steadily, especially after 1868, when the last anti-Jewish legislation was repealed and a series of sweeping constitutional reforms was instituted in the empire as a whole. From now on Jews paid no special taxes, could live and travel where they pleased, were free to engage in any business or profession, had the right to educate their children in their own schools, and could even vote and stand for office in local and municipal elections. Above all, they could live without the fear of violence or persecution, feeling safe in the confidence that they were protected from hostile or arbitrary forces by a powerful, enlightened, and law-abiding regime.

It was perhaps this fundamental sense of security, so at variance with the Eastern-European Jewish experience elsewhere, that provoked the Jews of Russia and Poland into their use of the term *a galitsianer yid*, “a Galician Jew,” to denote a person rather smugly self-satisfied with himself and his condition. The expression suggests more than just that, though, for a genuine *galitsianer* must have other qualities too: a highly practical turn of mind, commercial craftiness, a gift for haggling and outsmarting, native intelligence coupled with a profound lack of intellectual curiosity, religiosity without deep religious feelings, and, not least of all, a sly sense of humor that is not averse to taking pleasure in the misfortunes of others. Like all ethnic stereotypes—and there was not a region of Eastern Europe whose Jews did not have their sobriquets, not always complimentary, for other Jews—that of the *galitsianer* contained much exaggeration; like all such stereotypes

too, however, it contained a measure of truth. Thus, while sharing the deep respect for religious learning that was universal among Eastern-European Jewry, the Jews of Galicia were far removed from the great centers of Talmudic study in Lithuania and from the highly intellectual approach to religion and its texts that prevailed there; swept in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by the Hasidic revival (indeed the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, began his career in Galicia), their long-entrenched Hasidic dynasties inculcated a conservative pietism less theologically daring and emotionally soulful than that practiced in parts of Poland or Russia; scarcely touched by the cultural influence of such Jewishly sophisticated large cities as Warsaw or Vilna to the north, or Odessa to the east, their highly mercantiled life also lacked the almost peasantlike rusticity that could be found among the Jews of the even more remote Carpathian Mountains to the south; while at the same time, though they inhabited a provincial backwater, their Austrian citizenship and the liberal monarchy of Franz Josef gave them a superior sense of being more Western and advanced than their co-religionists living under Czarist rule. In a word, though ultimately not very different from the other Jews of Eastern Europe, they formed a distinct subculture of their own.

This subculture is that of Szybusz, and not a few of the characters in *A Simple Story*, above all Hirshl's parents, Boruch Meir and Tsirl, are *galitsianers* to the core. Shrewd but simple, careful to render to both God and Caesar, liking a good laugh yet laughable themselves, they are pillars of their community and its ideal types. Indeed, honest, hardworking, and financially successful on the one hand, yet tolerant, sociable, and mindful of their public obligations on the other, they came close to realizing the ideal of European bourgeois society, of which the Jewish community of Szybusz—admixed in whose indigenous value system is not a little of the Austrian *Gemütlichkeit*—is a poor but undeniable cousin. Despite the pervasive small-town Jewishness of Hirshl's environment, therefore, the collision between him and the world of his parents is more than just a parochial one pitting a quaint religious tradition with its anachronistic custom of matchmaking against a young man who has fallen in love with the

wrong person. On the contrary: it is part of the same conflict between bourgeois civilization and Eros that plays such a prominent role in the novels of Mann, Proust, and other modern European writers, and—with a suitable change of scenery—it would be as credible in the Vienna or Paris of the early 1900s as it is in the Szybusz of those years. (Although no dates are mentioned in *A Simple Story*, several historical references in the novel, especially one to the Russo-Japanese War, establish that the story takes place in the first decade of the twentieth century.)

Nor should we be too quick to assume, as some of Agnon's critics have been, that Agnon's sympathies in this conflict are essentially on the side of Eros. Granted, the world that Hirshl makes his peace with has little room in it for strong passion; true too, it is often shallow, petty, grasping, and two-faced; yet to say of it, as does the critic Baruch Hochman, in his excellent study *The Fiction of S.Y. Agnon*, that it is "a milieu which has been shown to be inimical to every value of youth, life, love, or for that matter, authentic tradition," so that, in settling for an existence like his parents', Hirshl is in for a "dreadful" future, involves, I believe, a misreading of *A Simple Story* that comes from projecting our own modernist—that is to say, anti-bourgeois—biases onto it. Indeed, the fact of the matter is that, if we set our cultural prejudices aside and read the book as it is written, not only does Agnon clearly *like* the characters he has created, he writes about them with a buoyancy and affection that compel us to like them too. They may not be *our* ideals; however great their limitations, though, we can hardly deny them their attractive qualities. They are generally quick-witted and good-natured; they are, though often insensitive, rarely deliberately unkind; they have an admirable sense of social and family solidarity; and, far from being "inimical to life," they enjoy its simple pleasures with great gusto. Even the most potentially disagreeable of them are by no means negatively portrayed. Thus, for example, Mina, after striking us at first as an empty-headed shtetl debutante, turns out to be a young woman of considerable mettle and resourcefulness, while Tsirl, who—clever, enterprising, amiable, lively, selfish, complacent, controlling, and sometimes cruel—embodies all the good and bad that can be found

in Szybuszian society, probably has as much of Agnon himself in her as any other character in the novel.

If this seems a questionable assertion, I might back it up with a story told me by the Israeli author Amos Oz. Once, when he was a young university student in Jerusalem, Oz went to pay an admirer's call on Agnon, who was then a venerable figure in his seventies. Agnon received him graciously and chatted about his work for a while, after which he inquired—unfortunately I cannot reproduce here how Oz, an excellent mimic, imitated the antiquated East-European Hebrew that Agnon insisted on talking to the end of his life—what other Hebrew authors his visitor liked. Oz mentioned Hayyim Hazzaz, Agnon's contemporary and chief rival for the doyenship of Hebrew literature, and was astonished to be answered, "Hazzaz? Who is that? I never heard of him." Thinking he had not been heard properly, Oz repeated the name—only for Agnon to reiterate that it was unfamiliar, rise from his chair, go over to a bookcase, take down a heavy directory of Hebrew writers, leaf through it to the letter "H," and show the bewildered student of literature that there was no Hazzaz in it. The conversation passed on to other things until, when Agnon left the room for a minute, Oz went to have a look at the book in question—and discovered that it was a nineteenth-century volume published before either Agnon or Hazzaz was born! Is not this episode an almost exact replica of the scene in *A Simple Story* in which Tsirl expresses her opinion of Kurtz and his unwanted appearance by pretending not to realize that he is there?

I relate this story to point out not only that Agnon, the Nobel Prize laureate translated into dozens of languages, was a *galitsianer* himself with a penchant for pulling legs, but also that often in *A Simple Story*, when he appears to be laughing with us at his characters, he is at the same time laughing with his characters at us. You, my readers, he is saying, may find the people that I write about comic, and perhaps they are; but can you be sure that in finding them so you have not become comic yourselves, since your judgments of them reveal your own twentieth-century standards, which may be as ludicrous as, or even more so than, theirs? Indeed, though Agnon is a great leg puller, it is not always apparent in his work whose leg is being pulled.

Take the case of the narrator of *A Simple Story*, with his pious homilies and ritually obeisant “God in heaven.” Are the latter really so empty sentimental, as Hochman claims, that they “can only undercut any faith in [God’s] relevance to the ongoing business of life,” with the result that “Agnon’s irony is directed as much against the narrator as against the burgher world of the novel”? Or is it possible that it is we who are having our noses tweaked for reacting this way—that is, for no longer casually being able to see divine providence everywhere, as did our less sophisticated ancestors, so that we must impatiently dismiss any reference to it as hollow twaddle? If *épater les bourgeois*, shocking the conventional-minded, was one of the slogans of modernism in the arts, it is a favorite game of Agnon’s to invert the injunction and scandalize the modernist in his reader. His folksy narrators, who remind one of the stock figure of the country bumpkin in the jokes who outslicks the city slicker in the end, often do just that.

A mock naive antimodernism is in fact Agnon’s preferred fictional stance, so much so that he sometimes doubles it backward in time, first twitting our own age with an earlier one and then teasing that with an even more distant past. (Thus, in *A Simple Story*, while satirizing modern medicine, the Knabenhuts and Getzel Steins who wish to change the world, or the Gildenhorns and Schleiens who actually are changing it, the narrator often implies that this world itself has deteriorated sadly from that of its forebears, who were in all respects more stalwart and serious men.) “Older is better” could be his motto, and though Agnon writes about the world of his Galician youth and childhood with a nostalgia that is unusual in modern East-European Hebrew literature, where this period of life is more often remembered with the threatening shadow of a hostile environment lying heavily over it, his work repeatedly harks back to a vaguely situated Golden Age whose loss it thematically laments. Whether this is a mere literary posture or an accurate representation of his historical beliefs is difficult to say; there can be little doubt, however, that he himself, an observant Jew all his life except for a brief period in early adulthood, was of a deeply conservative turn of mind. Politics as such never seem to have interested him much; he rarely wrote about them directly, and his sense of them could probably be summed up in the words of

the first-century rabbi Hanina S'gan HaKohanim, who is quoted in *The Ethics of the Fathers* (3:2) as saying, "Pray for the welfare of the State, because the fear of it alone keeps each man from swallowing his neighbor alive." Agnon's own profound fear of anarchy was above all moral and cultural, and it is the implicit message of nearly all his work that without both the social system and the individual discipline that enable men to keep a tight rein on themselves—a system and discipline that are admirably provided by the commandments of Judaism—the human self and its relationships with the world are in perpetual danger of reverting to chaos. Indeed, modern life is for Agnon practically synonymous with chaos, and, in one form or another, his fiction is a persistent rejection of it. (Although this aspect of his writing is all but untranslatable, Agnon's repudiation of modernity is even reflected in his Hebrew prose style, which, based on his own inventive and immensely erudite adaptation of classical rabbinic diction, stubbornly—one might almost say defiantly—refused to make any concessions to the enormous changes that took place in the Hebrew language in the course of its twentieth-century revival.)

And because romantic love too, with its strong irrational component, is a potentially chaotic and lawless force, a pre-modern Szybusz must strive to neutralize or contain it in self-defense. (The fact that we and Agnon know what the Hurvitzes and the Ziemlichs do not, though they too have an inkling of it, namely, that Szybusz and all that it stands for are a historically doomed cause, may add another ironical dimension to the novel, but it is hardly the central issue in it.) It should be noted, though, that the enemy in Szybusz is by no means sexuality itself. Szybuszian society is not particularly puritanical, and neither, despite the rather Victorian themes of the novel, is Agnon in writing about it. On the contrary, just as the narrator of *A Simple Story* is not embarrassed to attribute the survival of Hirshl and Mina's marriage in its early stages to the attractions of sex alone, so the love they finally come to feel for each other is born in a supremely sexual moment that is described with both great power and delicacy. The enemy is social disorder. The world of Szybusz would not come to an end if Hirshl married Blume, but it is a world that rests on parental authority, family alliances, and the transmission of

accepted tradition, all of which would be challenged if he did. Marriage is its most sacred institution because it stands at the intersection of these factors, and the moment it ceases to be such, social stability commences to vanish. Besides which, as Boruch Meir and Tsirl know from their own experience, even if one does not marry because of love, one may still end by loving because of marriage.

Is *A Simple Story* then an antiromantic comedy in which the adolescent folly of a young man's love is nipped in the nick of time and the social order happily preserved? Not necessarily. There is nothing foolish about Hirshl's love for Blume, nor is it described as anything but genuine, heartfelt, and pure. In fact, Hirshl *can* marry Blume without ultimate ruination if he insists on it—everything we know about his parents tells us that, if he were to fight for his love for her, they would acquiesce, however unhappily, in the end. Why does he not? The narrator of *A Simple Story* offers us no less than four different explanations, which can be taken singly or together. One is that Hirshl stumbles into his engagement to Mina through an inadvertent comedy of errors from which he is simply unable to extricate himself. Another is weakness of character: if he were not such a mother's boy he would break off the engagement—or, what is more likely, would never allow it to take place. A third reason is the deep unconscious identification that he feels with his father: just as Boruch Meir jilted *his* cousin, Blume's mother, Mirl, in order to marry Tsirl, so Hirshl, in the mysterious way that children often have of recapitulating their parents' lives even as they are rebelling against them, does the same thing. And finally, we are offered the explanation of fate—or, if one wills, of Providence: Hirshl marries Mina because it has been decided in Heaven that he must, and the rest is simply the working out of the divine plan for him. Though falling in love with Blume may jeopardize that plan, it is hardly blameworthy in itself.

Similarly, we are given our choice of reasons for Hirshl's mental breakdown. It may be the result of a hereditary illness that has afflicted his uncle, his grandfather, and his great-great-grandfather before him. It may be brought on by a combination of emotional tension, worry, lack of sleep, physical exhaustion, and too many barbiturates. It may

be the only way out of the insoluble conflict in his life between his unappeasable desire for Blume and the social and marital roles he is forced to play. And it may be the expression of a severe oedipal complex with its attendant castration fears, as a result of which Hirshl both identifies with his own masculinity, as symbolized by the rooster or cock (several times archaically referred to in the Hebrew as *gever*, a word whose common meaning is “man”), and is convinced that he must sacrifice or “slaughter” it. Such overdetermination is psychologically true to life; it is also one of Agnon’s typical ways of baiting his readers and forcing them to reveal their own proclivities by choosing the level of meaning that they feel most comfortable with.

Deep within himself Hirshl is perhaps even afraid of Blume and of the desire she arouses in him, for she is not only beauty incarnate in his eyes but mystery incarnate too. Her very name, as has been pointed out, underlines this duality, Blume in Yiddish meaning “flower” and Nacht meaning “night.” She is indeed a “night flower” for Hirshl, the plucking of which depends on his venturing into unknown realms, sexual, emotional, and social, of life and self—and by the time he feels brave or desperate enough to do this on his nocturnal walks to the Mazals’ house, Blume feels compelled to reject him. Although we are left to speculate about what might have happened if she did not, or if Hirshl had proposed to her in time, there are two sets of minor characters in *A Simple Story* who serve as markers here. One is Akavia and Tirza Mazal, about whose marriage we know—although their history is only hinted at in the novel—that it is an essentially happy consummation of an unconventional romantic relationship.\*

\* Tirza and Akavia’s story is told fully in the novella *In the Prime of Her Life*, which relates how Akavia, a middle-aged bachelor who was in love with Tirza’s dead mother, is fallen in love with by Tirza, whose father he is old enough to be. Though the match is opposed at first not only by Tirza’s father but by Akavia too, Tirza’s love wins out in the end and she and Akavia are wed. While some critics have taken the novella’s ending to be an ironic statement on the folly of romantic emotions, which lead Tirza, psychologically over-identified with her mother, to entrap an older man in a marriage that will be bad for both, I do not share this view. It comes, I believe, from imposing a preconception of Agnon as an unvarying ironist on a story in which he is not being one.

(It also, however—either because they are so engrossed in each other or because they no longer fit into any accepted social mold—has removed them from the life of the town, on whose secluded outskirts they live by themselves.) The other pair is Mottshi Shaynbart and Dr. Langsam's wife, who has killed herself, a careful reading reveals, after an unhappy love affair with him. In a word, we are given a glimpse of the two romantic variations that the plot of *A Simple Story* turns its back on—and whether Agnon is saying that the innocent romance may end happily like Rapunzel's but the adulterous one must end tragically like Isolde's, or whether he is simply reminding us that both possibilities exist, we are being told in either case that romantic love can be a gamble with one's position in society, and even with one's life, that Hirshl at one point, and Blume at another, are not willing to take. Does *A Simple Story* suggest that they should be? Or that, on the contrary, they are wise not to be? It does neither. This too is a question whose answer is left entirely up to us.

Dr. Langsam, the only character in *A Simple Story* who is not only clever but wise, does not even bother to ask it. Perhaps Hirshl would have been a happier and more fully alive person with Blume than he can ever be with Mina; perhaps a romance between the cousins would have had a disastrous end, like that of the doctor's own wife. Since as a physician he must work with what it is and not with what might have been, none of this matters very much. And what *is* that, willingly or not, Hirshl has thrown in his lot with Szybusz rather than with Blume and must be helped to make his peace with the fact. To accomplish this the old doctor assumes a cunningly indirect strategy. On the one hand, by means of his seemingly aimless stories, he builds up in his patient a positive image of small-town Jewish life, thus getting him to accept that the conventional society of the Galician shtetl in which he is condemned to live has a dignity and a value of its own and that there is no need to feel shame or anger at belonging to it. On the other hand, by recreating a semblance of the maternal warmth and care that Hirshl never received as a child, he encourages a transference that frees Hirshl of the unconscious rage felt toward his parents and especially toward his mother. Like Agnon the novelist, Langsam the psychologist, with his dislike of modern

ways, is not as simple as he at first appears to be; there is a great deal of sophistication in his outwardly artless methods, which succeed precisely because Hirshl fails to see them for what they are.

The result of Dr. Langsam's treatment, with all the painful renunciation and acceptance that it involves, is strikingly borne out in the little scene of the blind musician that occurs in the novel's last pages. At first Hirshl is entranced by the lyric sweetness of the beggar's music; yet quickly it becomes unbearable for him, because, although he may not be consciously aware of it, its haunting beauty reminds him of his love for Blume that is forever lost. The harshness of his voice as he urges Mina away from the scene has both rejection and grief in it, for he is saying goodbye for the last time to a part of himself that he knows will never be realized. (Indeed, a few lines further on we are told that even the piano music rotely played by Mina would be more than he could stand.) A moment later, however, he turns around and throws the beggar a large coin. This is not just a perfunctory act; it is, the narrative informs us, a generous gift and no doubt a precedent for the future. Though Hirshl will never be all that he might have been, he will be like his father an active and responsible member of a humane if often trivial society, one of whose major precepts is the giving of charity and the caring for the less fortunate. As in Dr. Langsam's musings about "passing on" good in the world, Hirshl, having been helped by the doctor whom he has proceeded to forget, now helps someone else himself. It may not seem like much in the ultimate scale of things, but it is not such a trifle either.

Comedy, which labors to convince us during its brief hour on stage that despite life's many pratfalls all things turn out for the best, often concludes by gaily pairing off its characters so that everyone has someone in the end. *A Simple Story* is no exception to this rule. As the novel draws to its close Hirshl and Mina have each other and their new baby; the Ziemlichs have Meshulam; Yona Toyber has Getzel Stein's hunchbacked sister; Kurtz has the Hurvitzes' ex-maid; Dr. Knabenhut has a rich wife to support him; Arnold Ziemlich has his long-lost family in Malikrowik; and Boruch Meir is already dreaming of a Ziemlich-Hurvitz wedding, that is, of the royal marriage of cousins that has eluded him and his son. Only Getzel Stein and

## *A Simple Story*

Blume are left out in the cold. About Getzel we hardly need worry: he is a practical and assiduous young man who undoubtedly will get over his disappointment in love and find himself a suitable partner. Blume is another story, though. A charmed mystery to us as she is to Hirshl—indeed, we hardly know her any better at the end of *A Simple Story* than we do at the outset—we leave her feeling uncertain what the future holds in store for her. Perhaps, having refused to surrender that bright kernel of herself that Hirshl has relinquished, she will continue to grow and will someday meet her equal, which Hirshl has proven not to be. Perhaps she will withdraw even more deeply into the protective armor of pride and self-reliance that already surrounds her. In either case, it is easy to imagine her seeking her destiny elsewhere, for, homeless as she is, the world must be her home as Szybusz is the Szybuszian's. The novel ends with her as it began with her, and so reminds us that there is more suffering, loneliness, and possibility in life than the comic stage can accommodate. It is a tribute to the evocative powers of this not so simple story that, thinking of Blume, though we know that she exists only in its pages, we cannot help wishing her well.