

Chapter Eighteen

A golden fish lure with a wooden fish pole, and other dodges

The so-called open-sesame root that I got as a present from my above-mentioned two companions looked very much like wood, therefore I shall also call it here a wooden fish pole, and indeed a fish pole because with it I went fishing and caught nigh on to 10,000 ducats; that happened like this.

After I had this fish pole, I tested its effectiveness on nearly all the doors and locks which I encountered, and whenever I touched one with it, it sprang open, so that it never failed me the way my good new rifle had. Because with this root along with my invisibility I found myself so well equipped for thievery I did indeed think to make use of them, mainly because I had in mind anyway to scrape together money to provide for my Esther and her child. But who should more rightly have provided Esther with a dowry than her own father? According to Jewish custom, he would have been obliged to open his generous hand even had I never existed and should he have wished to marry her off to someone as wealthy as himself, which would have without doubt happened had I not got ahead of the Jewish boy who was intended to be her bridegroom and snatched the delicate morsel from under his very nose. Given the just cause which I had, I betook myself invisibly to Eliezar's domicile with a gunny sack and investigated all its nooks and crannies to see where the Golden Fleece—I mean the core of his riches in cash—might be hidden; and to confess the truth, I could not but wonder at the considerable superabundance of not only precious household items and mobilia but also all manner of merchant's wares which he had in supply; for I opened

divers vaults, sometimes by day, sometimes by night, according to when it was appropriate and might be done quietly and secretly, and did not leave a simple chamber unexamined. At last I came to the very innermost vault wherein were stored the very items I was seeking; there was not only a great deal of silver plate and large minted silver of all kinds there, so that I was shocked and astonished at it as well, but there were also there masses of silver cast in the form of bricks, so that I finally imagined that all the Portuguese Jews in the entire city must needs have put their riches there for safekeeping. Iron chests stood piled up there which were so heavy that I was not able to pick one up from on top of the other, and when I opened the one on the very top with my open-sesame root I found it as full of ducats as a bushel-basket full to the brim with fruit which the vendor pours into the customer's sack. I imagined, to be sure, that the lowermost chests might be filled with precious stones, pearls, jewels and other very precious things, since the top one was so rich; but because for the nonce I deemed it impossible to get to them, I made do with what I saw before me and filled my gunnysack with as many ducats as it would hold and as I thought I would be able to carry. Afterwards I locked everything back up again as nice and neat as I had found it so that no one was able to see anyone had been there, unless it happened that someone should have opened the chest with the ducats.

Thereupon I betook myself with my booty back to my chamber just as invisible as I had gone out the day before, and I shall boldly confess that I have never carried anything as heavy in all my days, wherefore Eliezar would have been little grateful to me, even had he known that I was so troubling myself solely and only in order to provide for his daughter.

Now, after I had brought to safety this considerable sum of ducats, which weighed very near one-and-a half hundredweight, I also began to study how I might get the two persons out of Eliezar's house

and power for whose sake I had pinched so much money, but indeed in such fashion that it happened with Esther's willingness and to her full satisfaction, which would require, as I thought at the time, as much artifice and cleverness to do as it would effort and labor. And as far as Erasmus was concerned, with whom I wished to mate the Jewess after she had first agreed to convert to the Christian religion, I did not think it would take much effort, because Esther possessed her excellent beauty and I such considerable fine money as might lure him on, either of which, her beauty or my money, would have been strong enough alone to persuade him to close not merely an eye to it but both eyes. But listen how it went, and you will see that I was closer than I might ever have imagined.

I was often not at home when Erasmus thought I was sitting in my chamber, and on the other hand I was often sitting in the room with him when he himself had seen me go off; for in such fashion I was able to watch his actions and transactions and what he did and did not do and to learn from that what was going on with him, what schemes he had, whether he was loyal or disloyal, etc. And one time he thought I had gone for a walk somewhere to my tit-bit, when an old baggage—I meant to say old Jewess—came to him, and after she had greeted him in an uncommon way, more in the Christian than the Jewish fashion, and especially since there seemed to be a great love and confidence between them, I came upon the thought that she might be a creature to whom Erasmus was giving things he took from me, despite the fact that I had never noticed anything like that in him. They say, "A person who doesn't trust others is not to be trusted." I shall concede that that is true, and I had not the slightest cause either to put any mistrust in Erasmus; but all the same, they say on the other hand, 'tis the man you trust who rides off with your horse. Therefore I pricked up my ears in order to hear all the more acutely what manner of business these two might negotiate with one

another. "Where've you been, my dear Jasanna?" said Erasmus to her. "How is that you come to see me again? It seems to me a hundred years since you've been with me." "My friend," answered Josanna, "I came to you before in the hope of bringing it to pass that the amiable Esther, forsaking Judaism, should become your wife and journey by sea to East India with you and me; but now I come to inform you of the opposite; for, by a miracle look you, she not only conceived by Elias and grew big with the messiah, she has in fact already given birth to him, and indeed, in the form of a daughter, so that if the Christians were perchance to learn of his arrival and because he was to be the destroyer of their empire and kingdoms, were to plot against his life during his tender and innocent years before he might perform his miraculous works and complete the work for which purpose he had come into the world, they might be deceived in their folly and let him live because he was a female creature. As soon as she noticed that she had been chosen by the King of the World to be the messiah's mother and had been visited and got with child by Elias, I no longer dared come face to face with her to give her any words or message about you, as had happened heretofore. At that time I could not figure out the reason why she all at once believed herself to be so great and so abruptly scorned both by you and the Christian religion, since she had after all loved and venerated you more than anyone and the Christian religion far more than Judaic law, so that she had even been of a mind to leave behind her parents and their great wealth and go with you to vexatious foreign lands at the end of the earth, for as she had assured me shortly before she became pregnant, she had already packed up precious jewels of rather great value and had decided to go with them to you, if only she might find a good opportunity, in order to escape her father's inquiries by running away with you and sailing with a fleet to distant lands. But what's to be done now, Erasmus? The hope to possess her is already lost, and

should the fruit of her womb be the true messiah, which even the very most learned Jews do not doubt, but rather are convinced, as are the most distinguished sages in Poland, Istanbul, and Jerusalem, that in his thirteenth year of age he will turn into a male and then begin the great work of Israel's salvation. If, my dearest Erasmus, such were in truth the case, we should be acting foolishly, should we forsake God's chosen people and not share in his redemption, which is now so close at hand."

Hereupon Erasmus answered: "As far as the amiable Esther is concerned, I have never been able to imagine or firmly believe that heaven, though generous, would honor me with such a divine beauty; nor that Fortune, though blind, would bestow on me, a man of low estate and slight family, such a wealthy daughter; I have always been fearful that my fate would intervene with an objection, which would destroy again the assured hope which had been aroused in me by you as well as by Esther herself; and therefore 'tis advisable for me not to take too much to heart all that has happened. The loss of that which was never mine is easy to get over. If I hoped for something greater than was due me and than heaven ever decided to give me, then I committed a folly, so that I myself now have more cause to laugh than to grieve at Esther's loss, although I must confess that it is difficult to see oneself robbed of that which one really thought to get into one's possession. Regarding the fruit of her womb, because of which you are wavering in your resolve to become a Christian, because you are persuaded that it is the mosiach, I must truthfully wonder most of all at your blindness, for it is certainly no wonder indeed that the Jewish folk have permitted themselves to be led astray so many times by divers deceivers, who pretend to be the mosiach, if they are even capable of believing that a little girl in the cradle is going to be the messiah. Do you not yourself know that women of your religion dare not come to the holy place, indeed nowadays, dare not

come to the synagogue, so that it seems as if they were excluded from religious services because they are an inferior sex? How, then, can a woman ever become the messiah? But it serves such a folk right, and is no wonder either, if it recognizes a woman as its savior, because heretofore that folk worshiped golden calves instead of God. Believe me, dear Johanna, when I say that I know your mosiach's father, who because of the love he bore for Esther pretended to be the prophet Elias and hung a young daughter on her as a reward for her credulity. And even were it to happen that this fruit, when old enough to take a man, should be changed into a man, that would be nothing new at all, and therefore no miracle, much less a messiah, should be hoped for because of that. For that reason, my dear Josanna, I advise you to put into action the resolve you have long since made and not wait any longer for Esther if she so firmly believes that her daughter is the messiah. Even if you don't have her riches, in which you heretofore placed your hope, to help you, you will nevertheless, when you are converted through holy baptism to God the Almighty, have refuge in Him who will never, ever forsake you."

Josanna listened to this quite indifferently, so that one might well see how confused and doubting her mind was; she was also not able to believe that anyone other than Elias should have got Esther with child, because she knew how closely under the supervision of her parents she was protected from the company of all men. Finally she said to Erasmus that she was going to consider further what she should do or not do, and thereupon went her way and promised Erasmus to come visit him again soon.