

Leonard Tushnet's first appearance in F&SF was in August 1964 with IN THE CALENDAR OF SAINTS, a story about Polish peasantry, politics, and the Devil. Here, he makes a welcome reappearance with a good-humored short about what happens when chelmlins (who are exactly unlike the ill-humored gremlins of American folklore) emigrate from Poland to America.

THE CHELMLINS

by Leonard Tushnet

A CHELMLIN IS JUST LIKE A gremlin, only completely different. A gremlin is the one who makes whatever can go wrong go wrong; a chelmlin keeps a shlemiel (who by nature does things wrong) from becoming a shlimazel. That is, he keeps the dumb ox from the slaughter. You know about Chelm, that wonderful town in Poland where the angel dropped a bag of foolish souls being taken back to Paradise for repair? That was the place where the townspeople dug a pit for the dirt they removed from the foundation for their new synagogue; the place where they stocked the fish pond with salted herring; the place where they built a high brick wall around the town to keep

out the cold in winter.

The people of Chelm were simpletons, notorious for their stupidity wherever Jews lived, although the Chelmites themselves said that it was not that they were foolish, it was just that foolish things happened to them. Of course, such fools could not have long existed had not the Master of the Universe, in pity for these poor specimens of His Chosen People, created the chelmlins to watch over them to keep them from the consequences of their folly. The chelmlins made it possible for them to survive. The chelmlins made their most outrageous enterprises prosper. For instance, if they made bricks and didn't light the ovens because the

summer was too hot, the chelmlins baked the bricks in the sun. The only adobe synagogue in all of Europe was in Chelm. Another example—they made cart wheels out of stone so they would last longer; the neighboring peasants bought them all to use as grindstones.

This was years ago, of course. Hitler (may his name be blotted out!) saw to it that Chelm became a death camp, and out of the two thousand inhabitants of that town only six remained, and in time those six emigrated one by one from various D.P. camps to America, accompanied by the chelmlins, of course. Even in America, the chelmlins looked after them. Meyer Fischer, as a matter of fact, became a very important person in Hollywood. He made \$30,000 a year (which he used, as was befitting, to support the other five) being a consultant, you could call it, in epic pictures. He was in great demand. He was insurance. Every producer knew that without Meyer taking a small role as an extra or a bit player there was sure to be, despite the most careful supervision by script girls and assistant directors, some anachronism. A bored Christian in the catacombs would light a cigarette; a Crusader would look at his wristwatch; a Restoration beauty would zip up her dress. But with Meyer in the picture the producer could be certain that where he was would be the slip-up. All that was necessary was to cut out Meyer's

scene, and the critics would have nothing to carp at.

Meyer lived in luxury beyond his wildest dreams. Every morning he had a fried herring, every noon boiled potatoes and sour cream, every night roast chicken with noodles and gravy. In spite of his exalted position Meyer remained a pious Jew. He wound his phylacteries and said his prayers and gave to charity. His only complaint was that he could not give enough, not (it must be admitted) that he was so philanthropic but rather that he (vainglorious man!) liked to see his name at the top of the donor lists.

He cast about, therefore, for ways to increase his income. He became an investor in inventions, none of which, not being an original Chelmite idea, had any worth. Instead of becoming richer, he became poorer, a fact which he and his countrymen took for granted as their fated destiny.

One thing could be said for the men of Chelm. They were generous; they forgave their fellow creatures their faults. They did not criticize Meyer, although they suffered through his investments; rather, they looked for ways to help him. Edward Everett, the youngest and most Americanized (his name was formerly Ezra Elimelech), had an inspiration. "I have been reading in the papers"—he was the official reader for the group—"about a big corporation here in Califor-

nia, called RAND or SAND or LAND. It makes no difference what, it's a heathen name anyway. The people who work there sit around all day and think up ways to make money. They invent and test and then they sell their ideas to the government or to big manufacturers, and that way they make a good living."

"Just for thinking they get paid?" His companions were incredulous, and they fell silent, twisting their earlocks as though they were musing on a difficult passage in the Talmud, for even in America they followed the customs of their forefathers. They were not conspicuous, however; they looked like the local hippies.

After much thinking and more discussion, the five prevailed upon Meyer to join them. They formed a corporation called HEHE, from the initials of the Hebrew words for Brotherhood of Chelm. Then they sat down to think.

They thought and thought, not an easy job for the men of Chelm. Sweat poured down their foreheads, their eyes smarted, their heads ached from so much thinking. They met early in the morning and sat around the pool at Meyer's house (what house in California has no pool?) until late at night when they were driven indoors by the insects swarming around the electric light bulbs.

That was what gave Edward Everett the first idea. "Listen,

brothers," he said, "why don't we make big bubbles out of plastic to fit over the electric light bulbs so bugs won't come to them. Bugs are attracted by the light, everyone knows, so let us make black bubbles and the bugs won't see the light."

"Brilliant! A genius! Another Edison!" Acclaim was general. HEHE pooled the resources of its members, got a manufacturer to make thousands of the black plastic bubbles,—and then discovered that no one wanted insect-free non-illumination. Here the chelmlins took over. A toy merchant bought the entire stock (at a profit for HEHE, it goes without saying), made eye holes in the bubbles, and marketed them as children's space pirate helmets.

HEHE met, looked at the bank-books, and immediately sat down to think up another invention.

In less than a week they had it. Striped paint. That's right. Striped paint. "Why didn't anybody think of that before?" they asked each other. "Just think. A painter dips his brush in a can and without measuring he can paint stripes on a wall." Once the idea was thought of, the technical details were easy. Enthusiastic, Meyer wanted to start with all the colors of the rainbow, but the others, more cautious, voted him down. "Remember," they warned him, "in America they don't do things in such a rush. First you have a pushcart, *then* you open a department store."

They emptied the water out of the pool. It wasn't used for swimming, anyway; the six went regularly to the steam baths. They poured in black paint ("no question black is heavier than white, all you have to do is look at it"), then a thin layer of glass beads suspended in oil ("to keep the layers apart, a plain glass sheet would be better but who would be such a fool as to use that?"), then a layer of white paint; layer by layer the pool was filled. Suddenly Meyer clapped his hand to his head. "Brothers!" he exclaimed. "We have made an error! The pool slopes from one end to the other. The stripes will be uneven!" Edward Everett calmed him down. "Easily corrected," he said. "We'll push the paint from the deep end to the shallow, and then back again so there will be an even distribution of black and white." They did so with heavy paddles, luckily ending their task just as the sun went down, for the next day was Saturday. They went to evening prayers and spent the whole of the Sabbath in the synagogue, as decent people should.

On Sunday morning they met at the pool-side. "Woe is me!" Meyer cried, pointing. "Brothers, see what has happened!" All the oil had floated to the top; it lay there, yellow and redolent. They peered into the pool. Below the oil they made out the paint, but it seemed neither black nor white. Nothing daunts a real Chelmiter. Carefully, they

skimmed off the oil with buckets, like a housewife skimming soup. Prudently, they emptied the oil into barrels; no sense wasting it, it could be used again. Filled with dismay, they saw their finished product—glistening gray paint.

The chelmlins were at hand. The oil was sold back to the wholesaler—at a loss, being second-hand. But the paint, that beautiful gray paint with the millions of glass beads suspended in it, they sold to the county for painting the guard rails on the freeways. At night the headlights of the cars were reflected in the tiny beads and were an effective safety device.

Flushed with success, HEHE held a meeting. "Now what?" asked Meyer. "Let's get started."

"Sha!" Edward Everett replied. "Not so fast. We have just begun. Now we move into big business." The others looked at him inquiringly. He ticked off the points on his fingers as though he were explaining a passage from the Torah. "What's always being advertised on television? Soap. And what do they say about soap? It's pure. And what does pure mean? Made from the finest ingredients. For such programs the soap companies must be paying a lot of money, which means that they are making a lot of money, and if they can do it, why can't we? Let us make the purest soap of all, and all America will buy it." Applause. "But first we must read books on how to make

soap. Otherwise we'd be fools."

Unfortunately reading books did not help much. Only Jeremiah mentioned soap, and he gave no directions on how to make it; neither did the exegetists. The Chelmites had to rely on Gentile information as relayed by Edward Everett. "Soap," he declaimed, "is made from boiling caustic soda with fats, separating out the glycerin, and refining what's left. Now, caustic soda is caustic soda. It's a plain chemical and there's no problem about its being pure. But the fats—there's the problem. What is the best and purest fat there is?"

"Schmaltz! Chicken fat!" Everyone looked with admiration at Meyer. "What could be purer than chicken fat?" Memories of the golden ambrosia made their mouths water.

They wasted no time. They bought enormous aluminum pots, gallons of chicken fat, drums of caustic soda. They built a fire in the unused barbecue pit and set the pots over it. They heated the chicken fat until it was a transparent liquid, and then added the caustic soda slowly. They stirred the mixture and kept it boiling. The stench was abominable, but Chelmites are used to foul odors, and they didn't mind it. They stirred and poured and boiled until the mixture got as thick as second-day barley soup and as brown as kasha porridge. The result was not what they had expected.

By this time so many complaints had come in from the neighbors that a city inspector came to investigate. He heard what they had done, lifted some of the sticky mess out on a paddle, and roared with laughter. "My good fellows," he said (seeing that they had acted not out of cupidity but out of ignorance, he was polite), "you have indeed made a soap, but the caustic soda has reacted with the aluminum of the pots, and you have made a non-soluble soap, worthless for washing." He went away chuckling.

Again the chelmlins stepped in. The inspector told the story to his colleagues; one of them told it to his brother-in-law, who worked for a government procurement agency; he told it in turn to his superior. In short, the HEHE corporation sold the mixture to the United States Navy as a waterproof lubricating grease, certified 100% pure. In celebration they had a great feast, with stuffed derma, chicken soup, potted brisket, potato pudding, honey-sweetened carrots, sponge cake, and sweet red wine.

Triumph followed triumph, each disaster being turned into a brilliant coup by the chelmlins, who found a use and buyers for indestructible disposable napkins, for totally unopenable burglar-proof safes, for leak-proof fishing nets. The corporation's capital grew by leaps and bounds, as did its contributions to charity. But the con-

tributions were all deductible from the income tax, so that Chelmites were free to indulge themselves in malted milks, silk prayer shawls, and embroidered skull-caps. As a matter of fact, they were well on the way to becoming smug all-rightniks.

Now the chelmlins, although not human, had associated with humans for so long that they had taken on some of their attributes. They were annoyed that the Chelmites took all the credit for being astute businessmen, if not such sharp inventors. They appeared before the Throne with a complaint. "O Master of the Universe! For hundreds of years we have done Your bidding and guarded the men of Chelm as You ordered. But now they have grown fat and slick. They have become proud and find themselves good in their own sight. Release us, Lord, from our obligations, we petition You."

Not without reason is it called the Mercy Seat. The chelmlins were assigned to other duties of the same nature, there being no shortage of wise fools in this world. They now work in the Chancelleries and State Departments and Foreign Ministries of the nations, seeing that ultimatums are lost and that warlike speeches are mistranslated.

But the men of Chelm were not completely dropped from the protection of the Almighty. It was seen to that the HEHE Corporation, on the basis of its successful operations, was absorbed by one of the West Coast technologic giants. The latter lost nothing; a little judicious leaking of the news that it had made another acquisition sent its stock soaring. Meyer and Edward Everett and the other four are now executives with fine offices and private secretaries almost as good as chelmlins. Praised be the Lord, for His mercy endureth forever!

