

POTASH &  
PERLMUTTER

---

THEIR COPARTNERSHIP VENTURES  
AND ADVENTURES

BY

MONTAGUE GLASS

---

ILLUSTRATED

---

GROSSET & DUNLAP  
PUBLISHERS " NEW YORK

---

# Potash and Perlmutter

Montague Glass

*Abe Potash is sure that "you can't run a cloak-and-suit business according to the Talmud." And, he might have added, you can't run it without a sense of humor (well, you can, David Levinsky did—but you shouldn't!). Montague Marsden Glass (1877–1934), Abe's creator, had no doubts on this score, nor apparently did the public in those prewar years. Glass's incipient American industrialists won a huge, appreciative following.*

*English-born Glass was thirteen when he came to America. He practiced law in New York City, but it was a writer's career he craved. Of course he drew on his experience as an attorney in imagining Abe Potash and "Mawruss" Perlmutter. Potash & Perlmutter: Their Co-partnership Ventures and Adventures (1911) was followed by Abe and Mawruss: The Adventures of Potash & Perlmutter (1914). A stage version, made in 1913, enjoyed long runs in the United States and England.*

*Glass obviously knew the garment industry first-hand—knew its character, its risk, its opportunity. He allowed his readers to experience it for the Jewish world in miniature it was. Sol Liptzin comments on Glass's use of "a picturesque English behind which a Yiddish substratum peered through, even though the only foreign expressions included by the author were German ones introduced by the German restaurateurs of the East Side."<sup>1</sup>*

1. Liptzin, *The Jew in American Literature* (New York, 1966) p. 117.

## Chapter I

"No, siree, sir," Abe Potash exclaimed as he drew a check to the order of his attorney for a hundred and fifty dollars, "I would positively go it alone from now on till I die, Noblestone. I got my stomach full with Pincus Vesell already, and if Andrew Carnegie would come to me and tell me he wants to go with me as partners together in the cloak and suit business, I would say 'No,' so sick and tired of partners I am."

For the twentieth time he examined the dissolution agreement which had ended the firm of Vesell & Potash, and then he sighed heavily and placed the document in his breast pocket.

"Cost me enough, Noblestone, I could assure you," he said.

"A hundred and fifty ain't much, Potash, for a big lawyer like Feldman," Noblestone commented.

Abe flipped his fingers in a gesture of deprecation.

"That is the least, Noblestone," he rejoined. "First and last I bet you I am out five thousand dollars on Vesell. That feller got an idee that there ain't nothing to the cloak and suit business but auction pinochle and taking out-of-town customers to the theayter. Hard work is something which he don't know nothing about at all. He should of been in the brokering business."

"The brokering business ain't such a cinch neither," Noblestone retorted with some show of indignation. "A feller what's in the brokering business has got his troubles, too, Potash. Here I've been trying to find an opening for a bright young feller with five thousand dollars cash, y'understand, and also there ain't a better designer in the business, y'understand, and I couldn't do a thing with the proposition. Always everybody turns me down. Either they got a partner already or they're like yourself, Potash, they just got through with a partner which done 'em up good."

"If you think Pincus Vesell done me up good, Noblestone," Potash said, "you are mistaken. I got better judgment as to let a lowlife like him get into me, Noblestone. I lost money by him, y'understand, but at the same time he didn't make nothing neither. Vesell is one of them fellers what you hear about which is nobody's enemy but his own."

"The way he talks to me, Potash," Noblestone replied, "he ain't such friends to you neither."

"He hates me worser as poison," Abe declared fervently, "but that

ain't neither here nor there, Noblestone. I'm content he should be my enemy. He's the kind of feller what if we would part friends, he would come back every week and touch me for five dollars yet. The feller ain't got no money and he ain't got no judgment neither."

"But here is a young feller which he got lots of common sense and five thousand dollars cash," Noblestone went on. "Only one thing which he ain't got."

Abe nodded.

"I seen lots of them fellers in my time, Noblestone," he said. "Everything about 'em is all right excepting one thing and that's always a killer."

"Well, this one thing ain't a killer at all," Noblestone rejoined, "he knows the cloak and suit business from A to Z, and he's a first-class A number one feller for the inside, Potash, but he ain't no salesman."

"So long as he's good on the inside, Noblestone," Abe said, "it don't do no harm if he ain't a salesman, because there's lots of fellers in the cloak and suit business which calls themselves drummers, y'understand. Every week regular they turn in an expense account as big as a doctor's bill already, and not only they ain't salesmen, Noblestone, but they don't know enough about the inside work to get a job as assistant shipping clerk."

"Well, Harry Federmann ain't that kind, Potash," Noblestone went on. "He's been a cutter and a designer and everything you could think of in the cloak and suit business. Also the feller's got good backing. He's married to old man Zudrowsky's daughter and certainly them people would give him a whole lot of help."

"What people do you mean?" Abe asked.

"Zudrowsky & Cohen," Noblestone answered. "Do you know 'em, Potash?"

Abe laughed raucously.

"Do I know 'em?" he said. "A question! Them people got a reputation among the trade which you wouldn't believe at all. Yes, Noblestone, if I would take it another partner, y'understand, I would as lief get a feller what's got the backing of a couple of them cut-throats up in Sing Sing, so much do I think of Zudrowsky & Cohen."

"All I got to say to that, Potash, is that you don't know them people, otherwise you wouldn't talk that way."

"Maybe I don't know 'em as good as some concerns know 'em,

Noblestone, but that's because I was pretty lucky. Leon Sammet tells me he wouldn't trust 'em with the wrapping paper on a C.O.D. shipment of two dollars."

Noblestone rose to his feet and assumed an attitude of what he believed to be injured dignity.

"I hear enough from you, Potash," he said, "and some day you will be sorry you talk that way about a concern like Zudrowsky & Cohen. If you couldn't say nothing good about 'em, you should shut up your mouth."

"I could say one thing good about 'em, Noblestone," Abe retorted, as the business broker opened the store door. "They ain't ashamed of a couple of good old-time names like Zudrowsky & Cohen."

This was an allusion to the circumstance that Philip Noblestone had once been Pesach Edelstein, and the resounding bang with which the broker closed the door behind him, was gratifying evidence to Abe that his parting shot had found its target.

"Well, Noblestone," Zudrowsky cried, as the broker entered the show room of Zudrowsky & Cohen, "what did he say?"

"He says he wouldn't consider it at all," Noblestone answered. "He ain't in no condition to talk about it anyway, because he feels too sore about his old partner, Pincus Vesell. That feller done him up to the tune of ten thousand dollars."

In Noblestone's scheme of ethics, to multiply a fact by two was to speak the truth unadorned.

"S' enough, Noblestone," Zudrowsky cried. "If Potash lost so much money as all that, I wouldn't consider him at all. One thing you got to remember, Noblestone. Me, I am putting up five thousand dollars for Harry Federmann, and what that feller don't know about business, Noblestone, you could take it from me, would make even *you* a millionaire, if you would only got it in your head."

Noblestone felt keenly the doubtfulness of Zudrowsky's compliment, but for a lack of a suitable rejoinder he contented himself by nodding gravely.

"So I wouldn't want him to tie up with a feller like Potash, what gets done up so easy for ten thousand dollars," Zudrowsky went on. "What I would like, Noblestone, is that Harry should go as partners together with some decent, respectable feller which got it good experience in the cloak business and wouldn't be careless with my five thou-

sand dollars. I needn't to tell you, Noblestone, if I would let Harry get his hands on it, I might as well kiss myself goodbye with that five thousand dollars."

Noblestone waggled his head from side to side and made inarticulate expressions of sympathy through his nose.

"How could you marry off your daughter to a *schafskopf* like Federmann?" he asked.

"It was a love match, Noblestone," Zudrowsky explained. "She falls in love with him, and he falls in love with her. So naturally he ain't no business man, y'understand, because you know as well as I do, Noblestone, a business man ain't got no time to fool away on such nonsense."

"Sure, I know," Noblestone agreed. "But what makes Federmann so dumb? He's been in the cloak and suit business all his life, ain't he?"

"What's that got to do with it?" Zudrowsky exclaimed. "Cohen and me got these here fixtures for fifteen years already, and you could more expect them tables and racks they should know the cloak and suit business as Harry Federmann. They ain't neither of 'em got no brains, Noblestone, and that's what I want you to get for Harry,—some young feller with brains, even though he ain't worth much money."

"Believe me, Mr. Zudrowsky," Noblestone replied. "It ain't such an easy matter these times to find a young feller with brains what ain't got no money, Mr. Zudrowsky, and such young fellers don't need no partners neither. And, anyhow, Mr. Zudrowsky, what is five thousand dollars for an inducement to a business man? When I would go around and tell my clients I got a young feller with five thousand dollars what wants to go in the cloak and suit business, they laugh at me. In the cloak and suit business five thousand dollars goes no ways."

"Five thousand ain't much if you are going to open up as a new beginner, Noblestone," Zudrowsky replied, "but if you got a going concern, y'understand, five thousand dollars is always five thousand dollars. There's lots of business men what is short of money all the time, Noblestone. Couldn't you find it maybe a young feller which is already established in business, y'understand, and what needs *doch* a little money?"

Noblestone slapped his thigh.

"I got it!" he said. "I'll go around and see Sam Feder of the Kosciusko Bank."

Half an hour later Noblestone sat in the first vice-president's office at the Kosciusko Bank, and requested that executive officer to favor him with the names of a few good business men, who would appreciate a partner with five thousand dollars.

"I'll tell you the truth, Noblestone," Mr. Feder said, "we turn down so many people here every day, that it's a pretty hard thing for me to remember any particular name. Most of 'em is good for nothing, either for your purpose or for ours, Noblestone. The idee they got about business is that they should sell goods at any price. In figuring the cost of the output, they reckon labor, so much; material, so much; and they don't take no account of rent, light, power, insurance and so forth. The consequence is, they lose money all the time; and they put their competitors in bad too, because they make 'em meet their fool prices. The whole trade is cut up by them fellers and sooner as recommend one for a partner for your client, I'd advise him to take his money and play the ponies with it."

At this juncture a boy entered and handed Mr. Feder a card.

"Tell him to come right in," Feder said, and then he turned to Noblestone. "You got to excuse me for a few minutes, Noblestone, and I'll see you just as soon as I get through."

As Noblestone left the first vice-president's office, he encountered Feder's visitor, who wore an air of furtive apprehension characteristic of a man making his initial visit to a pawn shop. Noblestone waited on the bench outside for perhaps ten minutes, when Mr. Feder's visitor emerged, a trifle red in the face.

"That's my terms, Mr. Perlmutter," Feder said.

"Well, if I would got to accept such a proposition like that, Mr. Feder," the visitor declared, "I would sooner bust up first. That's all I got to say."

He jammed his hat down on his head and made for the door.

"Now, Mr. Noblestone, I am ready for you," Feder cried, but his summons fell on deaf ears, for Noblestone was in quick pursuit of the vanishing Perlmutter. Noblestone overtook him at the corner and touched his elbow.

"How do you do, Mr. Perlmutter?" he exclaimed.

Perlmutter stopped short and wheeled around.

"Huh?" he said.

"This is Mr. Sol Perlmutter, ain't it?" Noblestone asked.

"No, it ain't," Perlmutter replied. "My name is Morris Perlmutter, and the pair of real gold eye-glasses which you just picked up and would let me have as a bargain for fifty cents, ain't no use to me neither."

"I ain't picked up no eye-glasses." Noblestone said.

"No?" Morris Perlmutter rejoined. "Well, I don't want to buy no blue white diamond ring neither, y'understand, so if it's all the same to you I got business to attend to."

"So do I," Noblestone went on, "and this is what it is. Also my name is there too."

He showed Morris a [business] card: . . .

"Don't discount them good accounts, Mr. Perlmutter," he added, "it ain't necessary."

"Who told you I want to discount some accounts?" Morris asked.

"If I see a feller in a dentist's chair," Noblestone answered, "I don't need to be told he's got the toothache already."

After this Morris was easily persuaded to accept Noblestone's invitation to drink a cup of coffee, and they retired immediately to a neighboring bakery and lunch room.

"Yes, Mr. Noblestone," Morris said, consulting the card. "I give you right about Feder. That feller is worsen as a dentist. He's a bloodsucker. Fifteen hundred dollars gilt-edged accounts I offer him as security for twelve hundred, and when I get through with paying DeWitt C. Feinholtz, his son-in-law, what is the bank's lawyer, there wouldn't be enough left from that twelve hundred dollars to pay off my operators."

"That's the way it is when a feller's short of money," Noblestone said. "Now, if you would got it a partner with backing, y'understand, you wouldn't never got to be short again."

With this introductory sentence, Noblestone launched out upon a series of persuasive arguments, which only ended when Morris Perlmutter had promised to lunch with Zudrowsky, Harry Federmann and Noblestone at Wasserbauer's Café and Restaurant the following afternoon at one o'clock.

For the remainder of the day, Philip Noblestone interviewed as much of the cloak and suit trade as he could cover, with respect to Morris Perlmutter's antecedents, and the result was entirely satisfactory. He ascertained that Morris had worked his way up from ship-

ping clerk, through the various grades, until he had reached the comparative eminence of head cutter, and his only failing was that he had embarked in business with less capital than experience. At first he had met with moderate success, but a dull season in the cloak trade had temporarily embarrassed him, and the consensus of opinion among his competitors was that he had a growing business but was over-extended.

Thus when Noblestone repaired to the office of Zudrowsky & Cohen at closing time that afternoon, he fairly outdid himself extolling Morris Perlmutter's merits, and he presented so high colored a picture that Zudrowsky deprecated the business broker's enthusiasm.

"Say, looky here, Noblestone," he said, "enough's enough. All I want is a partner for my son-in-law which would got common sense and a little judgment. That's all. I don't expect no miracles, y'understand, and the way I understand it from you, this feller Morris Perlmutter is got a business head like Andrew Carnegie already and a shape like John Drew."

"I never mentioned his name because I don't know that feller at all," Noblestone protested. "But Perlmutter is a fine business man, Mr. Zudrowsky, and he's a swell dresser, too."

"A feller what goes to a bank looking for accommodation," Zudrowsky replied, "naturally don't put on his oldest clothes, y'understand, but anyhow, Noblestone, if you would be around here at half past twelve to-morrow, I will see that Harry gets here too, and we will go down to Wasserbauer's and meet the feller."

It was precisely one o'clock the following day when Morris Perlmutter seated himself at a table in the rear of Wasserbauer's Café and Restaurant.

"Yes, sir, right away!" Louis, the waiter, cried, as he deposited a plate of dill pickles on the adjoining table, at which sat a stout middle-aged person with a napkin tucked in his neck.

"*Koenigsberger Klops* is good to-day, Mr. Potash," Louis announced.

"Pushing the stickers, Louis, ain't it?" the man at the next table said. "You couldn't get me to eat no chopped meat which customers left on their plates last week already. I never believe in buying seconds, Louis. Give me a piece of roast beef, well done, and a baked potato."

"Right away, Mr. Potash," Louis said, as he passed on to Perlmutter.

ter's table. "Now, sir, what could I do for you?"

"Me, I am waiting here for somebody," Morris replied. "Bring me a glass of water and we will give our order later."

"Right away!" said Louis, and hustled off to fill Abe Potash's order, whereas Abe selected a dill pickle to beguile the tedium of waiting. He grasped it firmly between his thumb and finger, and neatly bisected it with his teeth. Simultaneously the pickle squirted, and about a quarter of a pint of the acid juice struck Morris Perlmutter in the right eye.

"Excuse *me*," Abe cried. "Excuse *me*."

"S'all right," Morris replied. "I seen what you was doing and I should of ordered an umbrella instead of a glass of water already."

Abe laughed uproariously.

"Dill pickles is uncertain like Paris fashions," he commented. "You could never tell what they would do next."

"I bet yer," Morris replied. "Last year people was buying silks like they was crazy, y'understand, and this year you would think silks was poison. A buyer wouldn't touch 'em at all, and that's the way it goes."

Abe rose with the napkin tucked in his neck, and carrying the dish of dill pickles with him, he sat down at Morris' table, to which Louis brought the roast beef a moment later.

"I seen you was in the cloak and suit business as soon as I looked at you," Abe said. "I guess I'll eat here till your friends come."

"Go ahead," Morris replied. "It's already quarter past one, and if them fellers don't come soon, I'm going to eat, too."

"What's the use waiting?" Abe said. "Eat anyhow. This roast beef is fine. Try some of it on me."

"Why should I stick you for my lunch?" Morris rejoined. "I see them suckers ain't going to show up at all, so I guess I'll take a sandwich and a cup of coffee."

He motioned to Louis.

"Right away!" Louis cried. "Yes, sir, we got some nice *Koenigsberger Klops* to-day *mit Kartoffel Kloes*."

"What d'ye take this gentleman for, anyway, Louis?" Abe asked. "A garbage can? Give him a nice slice of roast beef well done and a baked potato. Also bring two cups of coffee and give it the checks to me."

By a quarter to two Abe and Morris had passed from business matters to family affairs, and after they had exchanged cigars and the conversation had reached a stage where Morris had just accepted an

invitation to dine at Abe's house, Noblestone and Zudrowsky entered, with Harry Federmann bringing up in the rear. Harry was evidently in disfavor, and his weak, blond face wore the crestfallen look of a whipped child, for he had been so occupied with his billing and cooing up town, that he had forgotten his business engagement.

"Hallo, Mr. Perlmutter," Noblestone cried, and then he caught sight of Morris' companion and the remains of their generous meal. "I thought you was going to take lunch with us."

"Do I got to starve, Mr. Who's-this—I lost your card—just because I was fool enough to take up your proposition yesterday? I should of known better in the first place."

"But this here young feller, Mr. Federmann, got detained uptown," Zudrowsky explained. "His wife got took suddenly sick."

"Why, she may have to have an operation," Noblestone said in a sudden burst of imaginative enthusiasm.

"You should tell your troubles to a doctor," Abe said, rising from the table. "And besides, Noblestone, Mr. Perlmutter don't want no partner just now."

"But," Perlmutter began, "but, Mr. Potash—"

"That is to say, Abe interrupted, "he don't want a partner with no business experience. Me, I got business experience, as you know, Mr. Noblestone, and so we fixed it up we would go as partners together, provided after we look each other up everything is all right."

He looked inquiringly at Perlmutter, who nodded in reply.

"And if everything *is* all right," Perlmutter said, "we will start up next week."

"Under the firm name," Abe added, "of Potash & Perlmutter."