

The Voice in the Dimness

A Pathetic Incident of the Underworld

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Illustrated by Beatrice McDowell

in plain clothes what *Grossvater* don't know. He asks it some questions and *Grossvater* talks wrong, so he makes him arrested and takes him along by the station *haus*. The judge will ask it off him yet more moneys for a fine, but he ain't got it; so they will put him in prison and we shall starve."

"No, we shan't, mommer. I can work yet more." She caught him to her and smoothed back the hair from his brow. "*Mein* leedle boy what is already a man! Only for you I should soon go. But you are hungry."

Over his *matzoths* and water Abie thought soberly.

"Who was that man and what did he mean it about *Grossvater*?"

"He works by the place where *Grossvater* stands in the doorway with his shoe-strings. He saw them take him by the station *haus*. He was sorry. He is going to look out for *Grossvater* by the court. Only for him, we wouldn't know it what had become of *Grossvater*."

"*Oi, tzuris!* Why did we ever come by Canada? *Russland*—your *Vater*—" Mrs. Zuskin buried her face in her hands and kept her bitter reflections to herself.

When Abie had finished his *matzoths* he turned his pockets inside out. There was thirty-seven cents in the little heap. He put it into his mother's hand and led her back to the couch, where she spent so many hours; sitting down beside her.

"Don't you care, mommer. Montreal is *besser* as *Russland*. Soon I shall be big. I'll earn lots *mazumen* and you shall go by the country and get well."

"Mommer, please don't cry. That man will take it care of *Grossvater*, and even if they do send him to the Island, he will maybe get there a rest—"

"*Jah, jah, Abie lieben, Gott* won't forgets us. Sing to me."

So Abie sang. Sitting there on a soap box by the side of his mother's couch he sang the love songs his father had once sung to her. Then it was of green fields and May flowers and birds, again the folk songs of their native village.

He took her far away from pain and sorrow and poverty and let her wander in the rosy land of fond remembrance until she forgot even *Grossvater*, languishing in prison for no fault of his own, but that he was old and poor and friendless and therefore easy prey for the petty police grafter of Fourteenth Street. Even hunger was forgotten, for Abie was singing. At last he drifted into a lullaby. "*Mein gold angel*." She whispered and slept.

Abie held his breath and scanned her face. There was a look there: a look such as he had seen on his father's face just before they took him away forever.

He had tried to ignore the look, but now—it was like a knife in his heart. Oh, he must get money and take her to the country—*must*. *MUST!*

He left the room, fled through the dim hall and into the street and reached the avenue.

"I wisht it I was old enough to get it my working papers. I hate to go to school when mommer—" He quickened his steps into a run to get away from that terrible thought.

"Maybe somebody has got it a sign out, 'Boy Wanted'." He enquired at every likely-looking store. "Do you want it a boy? I'm a good worker. Gimme a trial!"

Everywhere he was laughed at. There seemed to be something funny in the spectacle of an under-sized, under-fed youngster of ten, all eyes and ears and patches, begging for work.

"*Raus mit youse!*" said a fat German. "You don't look strong enough to carry a bag of pretzels, let alone a heavy basket. Run home and don't let der kob ketch you without your working paper or he will binch you and the Society—"

But Abie lingered for no more. The Society! If it took him, what would become of mommer?

HE turned down a quiet side street to think and trudged on and on wondering why the stranger had put himself to the trouble to notify them of his grandfather's fate and why he had left the money. No one had ever troubled about them before.

He was grateful, but it did not occur to him to expect any further aid from that source. Abie had seen too much of the casual charity extended to the other families in the basement to place any dependence upon it.

"Anyhow, we don't got to be dispossessed for a week yet," he thought, trying to be cheerful.

He was approaching a church; he knew it well, for he

had often lingered to listen to the organ. So often that he knew the masses by heart.

There was a glow behind the

big coloured windows.

"Friday night, choir-practice, music!" Abie looked around the deserted street to make sure no one was watching and then stole up the steps and huddled into a corner near the door to listen.

Softly at first, and then louder and louder swelled the music. The voices of the finest choir in the city took up the air and Abie followed, humming softly, his soul soaring.

There was a pause, and he came back to earth.

The entry was deserted. Surely no one would mind if he stepped in out of the cold. Inside, he peeped through the doors and saw that the church was very dimly lighted.

The music was beginning again, and drawn by it, Abie entered and crept up the aisle. A few candles glimmered upon the altar, giving light enough for him to see that the church was deserted.

HE slipped into a pew and sat down on the prayer bench, fixing his eyes upon the choir-loft, his hungry soul drinking in the music oblivious to everything but the exquisite melody and the ache in his heart.

The mass was sweeping to the solo, which is its climax.

Abie sprang to his feet. "Now, *now!* the best part!" he thought, excitedly. But the tenor was not paying attention and missed the first note.

Down in the dim church Abie, forgetful of everything, opened his mouth and sang Haydn's matchless music.

Not in Latin, no, just the natural sounds of a child—"la la la mommer—mom—mer."

The choir was struck dumb, but the organist played on, sure that one of the angels had found voice.

On and on sang Abie, pouring his soul into the music. There was grief unutterable in his simple la la, but his voice did not falter. Up, up! it soared to the dome, birdlike, clear and beautiful from out of the incense-laden dimness.

The finale was intensely dramatic with its wild appeal. Then the last pure note lingered, faded and died.

Suddenly a pew-door slammed, a voice called, "Wait, my boy!" There were quick pattering

foot-steps followed by heavier ones, and when the stupefied choir singers reached the door they saw a small boy running down the street pursued by a man who was calling, "Stop! Don't be afraid!"

They saw Abie captured and brought



"Soon I shall be big."

ABIE sold the last one of his evening papers and scurried home. He was only ten, but life had already taught him many things and laid a heavy burden of responsibility upon his shoulders.

He was naturally cheerful and it took a great deal to dampen his spirits, but now as he reached his destination and ran along the basement hall which led to the room he called home, he was oppressed with a feeling of apprehension and the sound of a stranger's voice did not reassure him.

He opened the door and fairly flung himself in. "Mommer!"

Yes, everything was all right, she was listening to the stranger who was saying, "And so, I came to tell you that you need not worry, everything—"

"*Oi!* Abie! Come in and close the door."

He obeyed with a little sigh of relief and went to his mother's side. She slipped her arm around him and he drew closer, searching her face to discover how she felt.

"*Mein* leedle boy, *mein* all, sinct his *Grossvater* is—is—" Her lips trembled.

"Never mind, it isn't his fault. Don't feel badly about it." The visitor seemed distressed. He rose and started for the door, then he stopped and after an awkward pause he said, "Excuse me, Mrs. Zuskin, I don't want to hurt your feelings but—You seem to be alone."

Abie saw her face assume the frozen mask it always wore when strangers asked questions.

The man noticed it, too, and he hesitated, again glancing around the cheerless room. Then he put his hand in his pocket.

"Now, Mrs. Zuskin, don't worry. Everything will come out all right. I will be at the court in the morning and I will see that he gets fair treatment. The whole business is a shame and an outrage. Perhaps, until he comes home, you can use this." He put a bill on the table and was gone.

"Gee! Look! It's five dollars!" screamed Abie, dancing up and down.

Mrs. Zuskin turned it over and over. "That gentleman is an *eng l*, Abie. From the street he has kept us."

"The street? Didn't we have it the money for the rent?"

"*Nein*. We got it nothings for the rent what we already owe lots, nothings for the doctair—medicine—nothings. *Oi*. Why don't I die quicker?" She sank into a chair, sobbing.

Abie stood watching her in amazed silence. She did not often cry.

"Mommer, why must you got to want to die?"

She sat up and dried her eyes. "Shamed I should be; but *Grossvater* he has not been to make much. The people laugh at the man with the beard, and the cops make him move on all the time so that he can't sell his shoe-strings, poor *Grossvater*."

"To-day by noontime comes along a new feller



"Oblivious of everything but the exquisite music and the ache in his heart."