

The Measure of the Ghetto

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Illustrations by H. A. MATHES

IT was Maury Green, altruist, champion of the Ghetto and misfortune generally, who asserted that the divine measure of love lay not in doing or giving, but in giving up. And this measure, he persisted, was the measure particularly of the poor and lowly—a measure to be found in its quintessence in the lower East Side of the City of Extremes. In other words, he argued that unless one knew sorrow and poverty and hardship one could never know the sublime reaches of love.

To this conclusion he clung with his usual stubbornness; though, let it be clear, he did not win me to his way of thinking. Indeed he might have argued till the solo of Gabriel, for I was still touched by the glare of bright-light existence; but it happened that Fate's croupier spun his wheel and then—but here is the story of Rosa Eppman and you can decide the matter for yourself.

When she first came to the pension of Mother Rosenberg, Rosa Eppman's story was already half lived. It was one of those trick afternoons of early spring when old Sol, having stretched himself and unsheathed his claws, gives a treacherous smile to lure you outdoors to pneumonia and rheumatism. From the high, battered stoop, we boarders, packed in sardine rows, saw a little group turn the corner and navigate the flood that whirled on the sidewalks.

Leading the way came dear old Mrs. Rosenberg, her portly form poised a la martinet, her silvered head tilted defiantly. Albeit her smile was rather sheepish. She had run our gauntlet before, and this time she knew we had her to rights. In one hand she carried a half-eaten lollipop and a pretzel, in the other a strange something with one leg that originally might have been a wooden horse. Obviously they were the property of the tiny black-haired chap who toddled along clinging to the hand of a strange young woman. Even at a distance we could discern that indefinable something that marked this pair for mother and child.

It was only when the party gained the stoop that we discovered why Mother Rosenberg lugged the ridiculous burdens. The boy tripped and would have fallen had not his mother turned suddenly, anxiously, and caught him. Then we saw that her right hand was gone at the wrist, and that the right side of her face was cruelly scarred and drawn. But more depressing than these was the suggestion of abject weariness that sat upon the drooped, shabby young creature. Somehow, the sight spiked all the witticisms we had improvised for Mother Rosenberg.

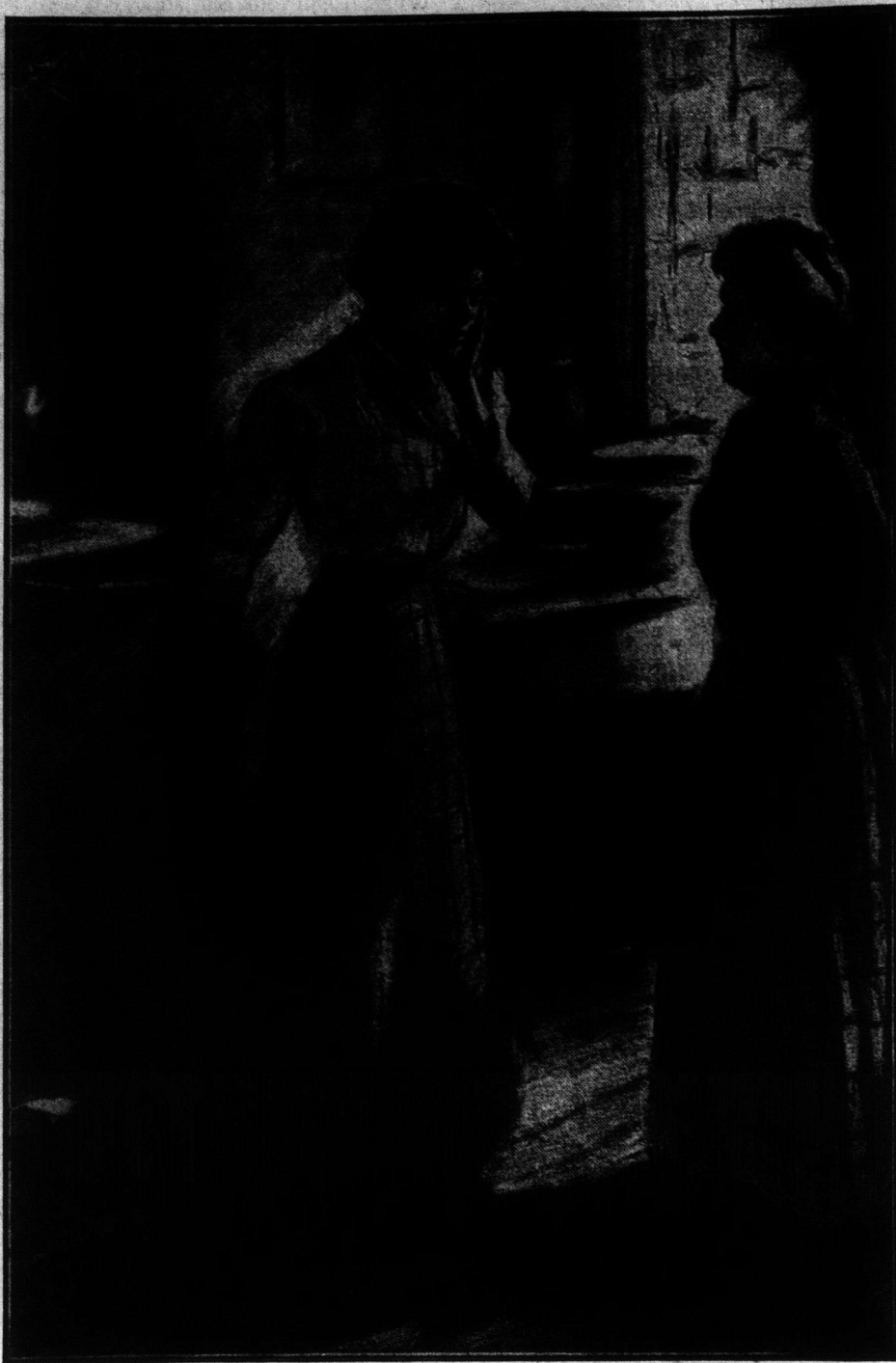
Just how Rosa Eppman and her child happened to our boarding house we never rightly knew. Not a word could we pry from Mother Rosenberg. Which, in a sense, was proof conclusive that she considered her own part in the affair discreditable. Now do not jump at conclusions! Mother Rosenberg hated above all things to be thought easy. Many and many a time I have heard her boast with exaggerated exultation of some cunning victory over a street vendor which dangerously approximated sharp practice; more often have I heard her shamefacedly repudiate some kind act of which we knew she was guilty.

Indeed she carried this inverse reasoning to extremes. When we half dozen or so Gentiles used to ask her why she did not increase our board to a figure which would permit us to feel we had some rights, she was invariably on the trigger with the retort stinging. It was more comfortable, she asserted, to have a little money owing you than to have a whole lot; and, besides, if we owed more we'd think we had a license to complain. Which was unfair. Not one of us ever found fault, barring "Red-top" McManus, who took on airs after he got on the regular staff of *The Item* and thus was enabled never to be more than four or five weeks in arrears. He hated gefiltafisch, which Mother Rosenberg served every other week because she was so inordinately fond of it.

At any rate the new boarders were installed in the basement cubbyhole just off what had been the laundry in the days when the decrepit house and the Ghetto itself had been the habitat of Manhattan swelldom. It was not a bad little room, with one window opening into the areaway. In fact, just the week before, Mother Rosenberg had refused ten dollars a month for it from old Rubinski, the cobbler. Rubinski was known as good pay—which probably went against him with Mother R—, and this wan, young old woman hampered by a tiny toddler certainly looked a hazardous risk. Mother Rosenberg overheard some such comment from McManus. He did not mean it unkindly; but she bristled like a truculent porcupine. Before he fled she informed him, and all of us, that it was a fine thing that her boarders would deny help to an old woman who was getting crippled with the rheumatics. Here was a young girl who could work around and save her a lot, without a cent to pay except a room that was not worth anything. And, further, it was not our business who the girl was or where she came from.

No wonder Mother Rosenberg blushed. Can a one-handed woman wash dishes, or pare potatoes, or make beds? Besides, there were Mother Rosenberg's sister and nieces, who more than managed the work.

It was Maury Green who unearthed for us the story of Rosa Eppman as far as



"It's because I love him that I'm giving him up."

it had run to this point. And, lest it seem tedious to hark back over the misfortune of others, please to remember that one can never appreciate the finish of a story unless one has at least seen the beginning.

Rosa Eppman's married life, beyond which we are not concerned, had started off with flying colors and the braying of triumphal brass. And though her life had come to smash, the most cynical could scarce hold that she had made a mistake in taking Morris Eppman. There had been the call of love and it glowed in her just as fervently now that there was nothing visible left but the cheap photo button of Morris, and their child, little Morris. A softened, baby-boy replica of the photo was that youngster.

To say that none questioned Rosa's choice would be trifling with fact. There was her brother Hermann. He had objected on the ground that Morris Eppman was a run-around who drank a little. And this, he argued, was the sure way to misfortune. The brother and sister had never made up the quarrel. It had been the one mote in Rosa's two years of honeymoon. And though the brother's prophecy was fulfilled, it was in no manner the fault of Morris Eppman. After the marriage there had been no more running about or drinking.

Paradoxically, it was out of his very industry and thrift that Morris Eppman was undone. When times were slack in the clothing business he did not loaf about union headquarters reviling Fate and the bosses; instead, he took whatever job was to be found, no matter how laborious it was or how small the pay. Thus it happened that the blast that went off prematurely in the East River tunnel not only tore away the safety bulkhead and the life of Morris, but reaching back into the Ghetto it had toppled Rosa from Elysium and eventually had wrecked the nest they had been feathering against the coming of a fledgling.

By the time Rosa had taken a wavering hold on life—and this only because of a pink squalling thing at her side—most of the hoarded money was gone. Then, it developed, the benevolent insurance company, headed by well-advertised philanthropists, would pay only one quarter of the policy on Morris's life. In fact the tender-hearted adjuster explained that they need not pay anything. There was that cunningly worded clause of forfeiture if the insured engaged in extra hazardous work. Surely, none might contend that tunnel burrowing is safe!

Began then for Rosa the life of a Ghetto widow. None noticed her especially—sorrow and poverty and self-sacrifice are too common-places. Not that the strugglers are unsympathetic. But each is so sore beset balancing his own burden that he cannot pause to notice other burden bearers, unless their load becomes so heavy that his own is light in comparison.

At first this was not the case with Rosa Eppman. Indeed there were many who envied her. Her old boss had given her a place at a sewing machine when so many robust widows were clamoring for an opportunity to make shirt-waists. Then came the great fire, and though Rosa saved her life, she lost her hand and marred her face in the doing of it. And so, months after, when the wounds were healed and the balance of her savings was gone, and there was no work to be had, Rosa Eppman drifted to Mother Rosenberg's to live the second part of her story.

A strange mixture of pride and humility she was, as we soon discovered, and a certain indefinable air of dignity sat upon her despite the unpleasantness of her appearance. She did not want our pity—that she made evident. There was the same response to attempted friendliness. Whatever form our overtures took they were blocked by a barrier of reserve. There is no doubt that she had believed Mother Rosenberg's sophistries; but before long she must have seen that the pretense of her earning her way was a farce. We were watching her now with strange interest and we saw a deepening of the puzzle marks on her brow, and her eyes, big and brown, seemed filled with an eternal question.

Then we learned that Rosa Eppman insisted on finding work outside. And then Maury Green became bloated with philanthropic plans. Which was absurd on the part of Maury. True, he was now part owner of the *Jewish Morning Herald*, which, however, was a distinction with clay underpinning. In the irresponsible past as a reporter he had usually gotten half his salary. And then, to economize, they had given him an interest. So that now, instead of wondering whether he was going to get his own pay, he was perpetually figuring how he was to raise the pay for the union printers and workmen. Clearly, giving Rosa employment was out of the question.

But he tried to help in other ways. First he offered to give his hall room to Rosa and the child because it was bright and airy. And Rosa repulsed the offer. She did it gratefully but firmly. Then Maury, blundering, as usual, gunned every soul in the house and managed to raise a purse of ten dollars. But when it was proffered by Mother Rosenberg, who declared it was a *douceur* for efforts in our rooms, the girl pushed it back and turned away with a burst of tears. She would

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