

The Return of Esther.

A Complete Story. By Max Marcin.



LONG rows of pallid men, ranging from beardless youths to grey-haired and whiskered patriarchs, kept the machines humming their depressing monotone from early morn until long after dusk cast its gloomy mantle about the surrounding tenements. Stopped and worn, their faces seared by years of incessant toil, their eyes hollow and red, their complexions of a peculiar, greyish slate colour, they worked almost in the same mechanical fashion as the machines.

Every day except Saturday (it was a Jewish shop) they were at their grinding task. It was always the same—no variation in the sad monotony of their lives. At seven in the morning they lifted the hoods from the tops of the machines, threaded the automatic needles, and began sewing the seams of the strips of cloth that the foreman dropped by the side of each workman. As soon as a garment was finished a new cut of cloth was inserted beneath the drop of the needle, it passed above the groove into which the needle fell, and then was added to the ever-increasing pile of finished work on the floor.

Not even in the pattern was there a suggestion of variety, except in the sizes. The figures were built on the same lines, and cut by mechanical process in the cutting room. Small boys and women, of the same greyish slate complexions, came in and out of the door, huge bundles of cloth on their shoulders.

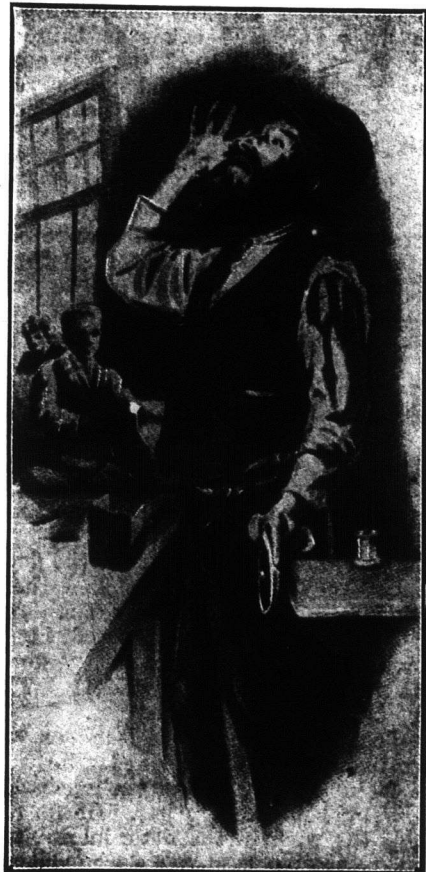
The odour of cigarette-smoke filled the long, oblong loft, divided by rickety partitions into the cutting, sponging, and sewing rooms. Through the open windows gusts of air laden with cinders scraped the faces of the toilers and deposited their loads of soot on flesh, on garments, and on the walls that had lost their original whiteness long ago.

The same tune, always the same, came from the throats through which the needles, like sharp steel tongues, pierced the moving cloth. Sometimes the tempo was a little slower, sometimes a little faster, as the operator's foot treaded the pedal. It was a song of work, unrelenting, unvarying in its cadences; to the melody of which the lives of the human bees in the gloomy

hive of industry were being steadily consumed.

Through the long hours of the day, through the days of the week, through the weeks of the year, and through the years—to the end they guided the strips of cloth across the breadth of the machines—twelve hours a day, every day except Saturday. Occasionally a man dropped out, and a new face took his place—a fresh, youthful face, with lustrous eyes and rosy cheeks, reflecting the health of the farm in the country. And gradually the cheeks lost their bloom, the shoulders became stooped, the head bent, and the eyes faded into dulness, as if the fire of the soul was being smothered in the blanket of work that enfolded it.

When the noon whistle blew in the adjacent factory the song of the machines ended abruptly; but the pause was short, for the men were paid by piecework. Two slices of bread, with a layer of garlic, and a small mug of coffee comprised their lunch. Sometimes the sandwich contained thin cuts of



"Hear Ye, O Israel!"

meat—the leavings of the previous night's supper—but usually it was bread, and garlic, and coffee—the same monotony in food as in toil.

Only on exceptionally clear days were they able to work without gaslight; for the narrow slit between two rows of dilapidated houses, which was misnamed a street, cut off the rays of the sun like a black canopy. And under the glare of the yellow flames by which they worked their eyes grew dimmer and dimmer, until only the most youthful ones were able to follow the stitches without glasses.

Near the window, in the front line of machines, Isaac Moscovitz was following the seams of a half-finished garment, with his thumb, carefully watching each stitch. His eyes were uncertain in the blurring light, the whites of the orbs covered with a network of red veins. He used his thumb as much as his eyes; for a mis-stitch might mean the spoiling of the garment and the consequent docking of his pay. When the last slit of cloth from the pile on his left had passed beneath the needle he didn't call for more work. Instead, he placed the cover over the top of the mechanism, and made his way past the line of workers to the foreman. "It's Esther's Jahzeit," he whispered, his voice husky from the dust that lined his throat; therefore I am going home a little earlier to-day. When one has lost a daughter he should not neglect to burn the little lamp on

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