

Zelig

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Old Zelig was eyed askance by his brethren. No one deigned to call him "Reb" Zelig, nor to prefix to his name the American equivalent--"Mr." "The old one is a barrel with a stave missing," knowingly declared his neighbors. "He never spends a cent; and he belongs nowhere." For "to belong," on New York's East Side, is of no slight importance. It means being a member in one of the numberless congregations. Every decent Jew must join "A Society for Burying Its Members," to be provided at least with a narrow cell at the end of the long road. Zelig was not even a member of one of these. "Alone, like a stone," his wife often sighed.

In the cloakshop where Zelig worked he stood daily, brandishing his heavy iron on the sizzling cloth, hardly ever glancing about him. The workmen despised him, for during a strike he returned to work after two days' absence. He could not be idle, and thought with dread of the Saturday that would bring him no pay envelope.

His very appearance seemed alien to his brethren. His figure was tall, and of cast-iron mold. When he stared stupidly at something, he looked like a blind Samson. His gray hair was long, and it fell in disheveled curls on gigantic shoulders somewhat inclined to stoop. His shabby clothes hung loosely on him; and, both summer and winter, the same old cap covered his massive head.

He had spent most of his life in a sequestered village in Little Russia, where he tilled the soil and even wore the national peasant costume.

When his son and only child, a poor widower with a boy of twelve on his hands, emigrated to America, the father's heart bled. Yet he chose to stay in his native village at all hazards, and to die there. One day, however, a letter arrived from the son that he was sick; this sad news was followed by words of a more cheerful nature--"and your grandson Moses goes to public school. He is almost an American; and he is not forced to forget the God of Israel. He will soon be confirmed. His Bar Mitsva is near." Zelig's wife wept three days and nights upon the receipt of this letter. The old man said little; but he began to sell his few possessions.

To face the world outside his village spelled agony to the poor rustic. Still he thought he would get used to the new home which his son had chosen. But the strange journey with locomotive and steamship bewildered him dreadfully; and the clamor of the metropolis, into which he was flung pell-mell, altogether stupefied him. With a vacant air he regarded the Pandemonium, and a petrification of his inner being seemed to take place. He became "a barrel with a stave missing." No spark of animation visited his eye. Only one thought survived in his brain, and one desire pulsed in his heart: to save money enough for himself and family to hurry back to his native village. Blind and dead to everything, he moved about with a dumb, lacerating pain in his heart,--he longed for home. Before he found steady employment, he walked daily with titanic strides through the entire length of Manhattan, while children and even adults often slunk into byways to let him pass. Like a huge monster he seemed, with an arrow in his vitals.

In the shop where he found a job at last, the workmen feared him at first; but, ultimately finding him a harmless giant, they more than once hurled their sarcasms at his head. Of the many men and women employed there, only one person had the distinction of getting fellowship from old Zelig. That person was the Gentile watchman or janitor of the shop, a little blond Pole with an open mouth and frightened eyes. And many were the witticisms aimed at this uncouth

pair. "The big one looks like an elephant," the joker of the shop would say; "only he likes to be fed on pennies instead of peanuts."

"Oi, oi, his nose would betray him," the "philosopher" of the shop chimed in; and during the dinner hour he would expatiate thus: "You see, money is his blood. He starves himself to have enough dollars to go back to his home: the Pole told me all about it. And why should he stay here? Freedom of religion means nothing to him, he never goes to synagogue; and freedom of the press? Bah--he never even reads the conservative Tageblatt!"

Old Zelig met such gibes with stoicism. Only rarely would he turn up the whites of his eyes, as if in the act of ejaculation; but he would soon contract his heavy brows into a scowl and emphasize the last with a heavy thump of his sizzling iron.

When the frightful cry of the massacred Jews in Russia rang across the Atlantic, and the Ghetto of Manhattan paraded one day through the narrow streets draped in black, through the erstwhile clamorous thoroughfares steeped in silence, stores and shops bolted, a wail of anguish issuing from every door and window--the only one remaining in his shop that day was old Zelig. His fellow-workmen did not call upon him to join the procession. They felt the incongruity of "this brute" in line with mourners in muffled tread. And the Gentile watchman reported the next day that the moment the funeral dirge of the music echoed from a distant street, Zelig snatched off the greasy cap he always wore, and in confusion instantly put it on again. "All the rest of the day," the Pole related with awe, "he looked wilder than ever, and so thumped with his iron on the cloth that I feared the building would come down."

But Zelig paid little heed to what was said about him. He dedicated his existence to the saving of his earnings, and only feared that he might be compelled to spend some of them. More than once his wife would be appalled in the dark of night by the silhouette of old Zelig in

nightdress, sitting up in bed and counting a bundle of bank notes which he always replaced under his pillow. She frequently upbraided him for his niggardly nature, for his warding off all requests outside the pittance for household expense. She pleaded, exhorted, wailed. He invariably answered: "I haven't a cent by my soul." She pointed to the bare walls, the broken furniture, their beggarly attire.

"Our son is ill," she moaned. "He needs special food and rest; and our grandson is no more a baby; he'll soon need money for his studies. Dark is my world; you are killing both of them."

Zelig's color vanished; his old hands shook with emotion. The poor woman thought herself successful, but the next moment he would gasp: "Not a cent by my soul."

One day old Zelig was called from his shop, because his son had a sudden severe attack; and, as he ascended the stairs of his home, a neighbor shouted: "Run for a doctor; the patient cannot be revived." A voice as if from a tomb suddenly sounded in reply, "I haven't a cent by my soul."

The hallway was crowded with the ragged tenants of the house, mostly women and children; from far off were heard the rhythmic cries of the mother. The old man stood for a moment as if chilled from the roots of his hair to the tips of his fingers. Then the neighbors heard his sepulchral mumble: "I'll have to borrow somewheres, beg some one," as he retreated down the stairs. He brought a physician; and when the grandson asked for money to go for the medicine, Zelig snatched the prescription and hurried away, still murmuring: "I'll have to borrow, I'll have to beg."

Late that night, the neighbors heard a wail issuing from old Zelig's apartment; and they understood that the son was no more.

Zelig's purse was considerably thinned. He drew from it with palsied fingers for all burial expenses, looking about him in a dazed way. Mechanically he performed the Hebrew rites for the dead, which his neighbors taught him. He took a knife and made a deep gash in his shabby coat; then he removed his shoes, seated himself on the floor, and bowed his poor old head, tearless, benumbed.

The shop stared when the old man appeared after the prescribed three days' absence. Even the Pole dared not come near him. A film seemed to coat his glaring eye; deep wrinkles contracted his features, and his muscular frame appeared to shrink even as one looked. From that day on, he began to starve himself more than ever. The passion for sailing back to Russia, "to die at home at last," lost but little of its original intensity. Yet there was something now which by a feeble thread bound him to the New World.

In a little mound on the Base Achaim, the "House of Life," under a tombstone engraved with old Hebrew script, a part of himself lay buried. But he kept his thoughts away from that mound. How long and untiringly he kept on saving! Age gained on him with rapid strides. He had little strength left for work, but his dream of home seemed nearing its realization. Only a few more weeks, a few more months! And the thought sent a glow of warmth to his frozen frame. He would even condescend now to speak to his wife concerning the plans he had formed for their future welfare, more especially when she revived her pecuniary complaints.

"See what you have made of us, of the poor child," she often argued, pointing to the almost grown grandson. "Since he left school, he works for you, and what will be the end?"

At this, Zelig's heart would suddenly clutch, as if conscious of some indistinct, remote fear. His answers touching the grandson were abrupt, incoherent, as of one who replies to a question unintelligible to him and is in constant dread lest his interlocutor should detect it.

Bitter misgivings concerning the boy began to mingle with the reveries of the old man. At first, he hardly gave a thought to him. The boy grew noiselessly. The ever-surging tide of secular studies that runs so high on the East Side caught this boy in its wave. He was quietly preparing himself for college. In his eagerness to accumulate the required sum, Zelig paid little heed to what was going on around him; and now, on the point of victory, he became aware with growing dread of something abrewing out of the common. He sniffed suspiciously; and one evening he overheard the boy talking to grandma about his hatred of Russian despotism, about his determination to remain in the States. He ended by entreating her to plead with grandpa to promise him the money necessary for a college education.

Old Zelig swooped down upon them with wild eyes. "Much you need it, you stupid," he thundered at the youngster in unrestrained fury. "You will continue your studies in Russia, durak, stupid." His timid wife, however, seemed suddenly to gather courage and she exploded: "Yes, you should give your savings for the child's education here. Woe is me, in the Russian universities no Jewish children are taken."

Old Zelig's face grew purple. He rose and abruptly seated himself again. Then he rushed madly, with a raised, menacing arm, at the boy in whom he saw the formidable foe--the foe he had so long been dreading.

But the old woman was quick to interpose with a piercing shriek: "You madman, look at the sick child; you forget from what our son died, going out like a flickering candle."

That night Zelig tossed feverishly on his bed. He could not sleep. For the first time, it dawned upon him what his wife meant by pointing to the sickly appearance of the child. When the boy's father died, the physician declared that the cause was tuberculosis.

He rose to his feet. Beads of cold sweat glistened on his forehead, trickled down his cheeks, his beard. He stood pale and panting. Like a startling sound, the thought entered his mind--the boy, what should be done with the boy?

The dim, blue night gleamed in through the windows. All was shrouded in the city silence, which yet has a peculiar, monotonous ring in it. Somewhere, an infant awoke with a sickly cry which ended in a suffocating cough. The grizzled old man bestirred himself, and with hasty steps he tiptoed to the place where the boy lay. For a time he stood gazing on the pinched features, the under-sized body of the lad; then he raised one hand, passed it lightly over the boy's hair, stroking his cheeks and chin. The boy opened his eyes, looked for a moment at the shriveled form bending over him, then he petulantly closed them again.

"You hate to look at granpa, he is your enemy, eh?" The aged man's voice shook, and sounded like that of the child's awaking in the night. The boy made no answer; but the old man noticed how the frail body shook, how the tears rolled, washing the sunken cheeks.

For some moments he stood mute, then his form literally shrank to that of a child's as he bent over the ear of the boy and whispered hoarsely: "You are weeping, eh? Granpa is your enemy, you stupid! To-morrow I will give you the money for the college. You hate to look at granpa; he is your enemy, eh?"