

The Violinist.—A Fantasy.

By **MARCUS HAFT.**

The Ghetto was in an uproar, a subdued, cautious uproar. In the dark, winding streets, on the dismal, dirty side-walks, in the dingy, badly-ventilated rooms, groups of aged men angrily discussed this latest insult to their nation; beards wagging fiercely, arms gesticulating wildly, they whispered hoarsely of the fate they wished would overtake the heathen swine!

In the streets, the youth, hot-blooded as usual, met at every corner and suggested plan after plan for revenging this latest thrust at their pride.

And yet, for all the hot-blood, for all the excitement, the anger, the ferocity, the people of the Ghetto were careful to speak in whispers, to glance repeatedly over their shoulders, to look quickly round the group they were talking to before they uttered any threats against the high officials, for the spies of the Government were everywhere, even in the homes, and the punishments inflicted upon those who resisted were terrible even to think of.

That was why the plans of the young men in the streets, never became anything more than plans; their words, for all their fiery nature, vanished as words, and did any one but think of deeds, of pursuing the word till it became an action he had but to look around, and the things he saw made him relinquish the idea very speedily.

Only a few months ago they had resisted, and had carried their resistance from the verbal stage to the physical. For a few days unthought of success had met their efforts, and then, one night, while the Ghetto lay bathed in darkness, while it slept, carefree, gloating, victorious, the officials banished, their buildings—hated insignia of oppression—wrecked and burnt, two hundred soldiers had crept quietly into the township.

The silence had been broken by a hoarse death cry as sword cut through flesh and bone. Pandemonium broke loose, flames crackled, houses crashed in smouldering ruins to the ground, burying numbers, killing whole families. The sheer lust of killing grew quickly, fanned by the shrieks, the blood, the sword and the flames. The poor resistance of the Jews was easily broken down; impotent, powerless, the father saw his daughter ravaged, his house pillaged, his children killed, and if he dared to oppose, to move, met the grinning edge of the sword.

Many were those who stood up to say Kaddish the following night. No, it was no use resisting and so they talked!

In his room Rabbi Mertle lay in bed and listened to the angry discourse of those about him. Suddenly he spoke, and at once the turmoil died away; there was a deep silence, and they listened to what he had to say.

"My people," he said slowly, softly speaking with an effort, for his days were num-

bered and already the joyous welcome Jehovah the Almighty had prepared for him, was visible upon his face. "My people, don't be foolish. Remember what happened the last time you resisted, and if that is not sufficient to curb your spirits, think only of what happened to your womenfolk, your children.

"Leave it in the Almighty's hands. He will watch over his chosen people. That we have been insulted I grant you, but Rabbi David was my friend, my companion since we were very small," for a moment he paused, and then, "more than friends and that, which to you is an insult, is something deeper, something far worse to me, They are desecrating his grave, they are allowing a supporter of their plans to build a factory upon his grave, and yet, even though in addition to this, they are also destroying what was to be my last resting-place next to him, I bid you stay your hand, go out now and counsel those who speak of force to stay their hands, for I tell you now that as certain as I am that death is not far distant from my door, so certain am I that God will help us in this, our sorest trial"

For a while they stayed with him, gaining reassurance, courage, from his confident attitude, then one by one they left, and soon the room was empty, save for the wasted, frail figure lying motionless on the bed.

Slowly the Rabbi's eyes closed and yet . . . he was not sleeping. Suddenly his hands . . . those hands which had cured hundreds, which, with the softest of touches, had driven ills from pain-wracked bodies—his hands clenched, his body grew stiff and immobile, little beads of sweat trickled down his forehead and then it was over.

A smile of peace, of understanding drove the strain from his face; his eyes lost their glazed, eerie appearance, and closed to welcome sleep.

On the hill which covered the holy man's grave, the factory, the first advance of progress, was rapidly nearing completion. Its owner was a profiteer who, because of financial support afforded the Government on numerous occasions, had been allowed to choose his own site. He had chosen the hill because of its prominence and despite the sullen objections from the Ghetto, despite the fact that Rabbi David, who, because of his holiness had attained the sanctity of a Saint, lay resting but a few yards away, his choice had been upheld, the foundation had been laid, and building commenced.

In a huge silent ring the people of the Ghetto, young and old, hale and infirm, sat watching the workmen, and because the silent, threatening glare of their eyes, the sullen passiveness of their attitude was reckoned more dangerous than ferocious activity, a close cordon of soldiers protected the employees.

So day had succeeded day. Swiftly, magically, the building rose up, first the first floor, then the second, the third; a few days later and the roof was completed, grey, sombre and strong; until it needed but three days more and the place would be ready for the official opening. This was to be performed by an important official, for the building of the factory marked an epoch, so they said, in the development of the land. Rumour had it that the very man who had sanctioned the choice was to set the machinery in motion for the first time, and that there would be a big crowd of people, important people, to watch him.

All at once, from out of the circle, there stepped a strange fantastic figure. He was clad in a long, dark cloak which fluttered its rags to the gentle breeze; his face was pale, his hair long and unkempt, and in his hand he clutched, reverently, a dusty violin and bow.

Who he was, where he had come from, no one knew, but there was that about him which forbade any questioning.

Slowly he stepped out of the circle of peasants, and then, when he was but a few yards from the cordon of soldiers, he stopped and lifted his violin to his chin. A moment he paused, and then drew the bow softly over the strings. A weird note sounded, such a note as none of his listeners had ever heard before; he stopped, his head bent towards the building as though listening for something, for an answer, and then he played again.

So he went on for over an hour, playing a note, a single note always, listening, then playing again. One of the soldiers made as though to stop him, but their officer, fearing lest the incident prove the spark to the smouldering anger of the peasants, bade him let the minstrel be. The people of the Ghetto, on the other hand, watched the man in amazement. Such music it had never been their misfortune to hear. Harsh, discordant, terrible, the notes sounded like the tune of a mad man and why did he listen thus after every touch of the bow?

The workmen, after watching for a few moments, turned quickly to their work again. They had no time to listen to a maniac. The building had to be finished within two days otherwise their master would have to pay a penalty, and then their backs would feel his anger, and their pockets his wrath.

The violinist rested for a few minutes, and then once more drew the bow across the strings. Again there sounded a harsh bitter note, but this time those watching him saw his figure tense as he bent towards the building, and those nearest him saw his face light with a queer smile. One or two there were who swore they heard an answering call, an echo, but at any event, no sooner

had the musician lifted his bow than a loud cry of fright, of fear rose from within the factory, and the workmen came tumbling hastily out babbling that the foundations had cracked suddenly, deeply, dangerously.

Tremor of excitement thrilled through the crowd, and in the succeeding bustle and uproar, the violinist departed unnoticed.

When later, they told Rabbi Mertle of the strange incident, he smiled deeply to himself. He knew, he knew, and before he slept, he murmured a short prayer of thanks, of praise, to the Almighty, the All-Watchful.

The factory was finished; it was the day of the opening ceremony. Held back in an orderly block by the armed soldiers the people of the Ghetto watched the officials enter the factory, saw them appear on the roof, and take their seats one by one, before the flat raised dais on which the owner and his friend were to sit.

Silent, sullen, they saw the high official rise and make his speech, heard the clapping as he sat down, saw the guests stand up and follow the two men out of sight . . . and then, with a gasp of excitement, saw the violinist step quickly round the wall of the building, watched him lift his instrument to his chin, his bow to the strings, and then heard amazed the same strange, wild sound

A sob of fear, of terror rose from those around him, for at the note, an answering call had come back from the building and two long gashes had appeared miraculously in the wall nearest him.

The soldiers stood petrified, unable to move; again he played, again the echo, and now those inside the building cried their terror aloud, for a huge cloud of dust rose from the foundation to meet them as they climbed down the stairs.

Even as the soldiers, shaking off the spell, rushed forward to grip the madman, he played again, sharply, determinedly, and this time, the answer from the factory was loud and triumphant . . . there was a sharp crackle . . . a terrible crash . . . and then, amidst the shouts and screams of the on-lookers, the vain cries of those inside, the whole building caved in and fell in a hopeless ruin to the ground, burying all within it

When the dust had settled the violinist was gone

Rabbi Mertle smiled gently when they told him of the terrible happenings, for he knew, he alone of all those living, knew that the hill which guarded the grave of his friend Rabbi David, also enclosed the last resting place of a wandering minstrel . . . who, in his last days, had found solace and comfort in the house of the dead Rabbi.

THREE MILLION JEWS LOST.

(Continued from Page 303).

Objective students of the Jewish situation in Poland find themselves at a loss as to the future of the 3,000,000 Jews there. The palliatives they are suggesting include the forcing of Jews into industry and agriculture. In the meantime, even if that is accomplished, it would bring no actual results, in view of the depressed state of Polish farms and factories. Another means of relieving the pressure on the Jews would be for the Government to be more liberal in employing them in public monopolies and in State offices. A reorganization of the fiscal scheme would relieve Jewish merchants of the crushing burden of disproportionate taxes and excises. With all these Utopian measures effected, Poland's resources do not seem sufficient to provide a living for the millions who would not fit into agriculture and industry. It is an ironic commentary on the validity of the law of the survival of the fittest that it is the Jews least capable of being productive units, who manage to survive for a rather desolate existence.

If the Jewish problem in Poland is to be solved at all it will not be through the long-distance diplomacy of American Jews. Even the Jews in Poland itself seem incapable of coping with the situation, for they are hopelessly divided among themselves, one faction, the ultra-orthodox, fighting the Jewish nationalists. The latter feel that the minority rights of the Jews will be recognized only as a result of pressure brought to bear by a strong national Jewish community. The pious Jews, opposing Zionism because of their hope for a personal Messiah and God's personal intervention, consistently vote for any Government that the nationalist Jews oppose. It is this factionalism which has long provided a pretext to indifferent Polish officials.

To a world disturbed by the need for adjusting the individual to his environment there is bequeathed the problem of adjusting three million Polish Jews who, for all intents and purposes, are lost. Will the historic tenacity of the Jews be sufficient to resist the hostile influences which prevail in Poland to-day? Only the future can answer this question.

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