

65872

# SCRIBNER'S



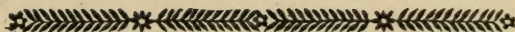
*20149*

# MAGAZINE

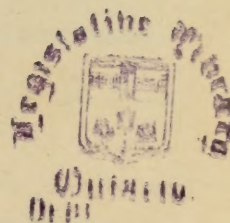


PUBLISHED MONTHLY

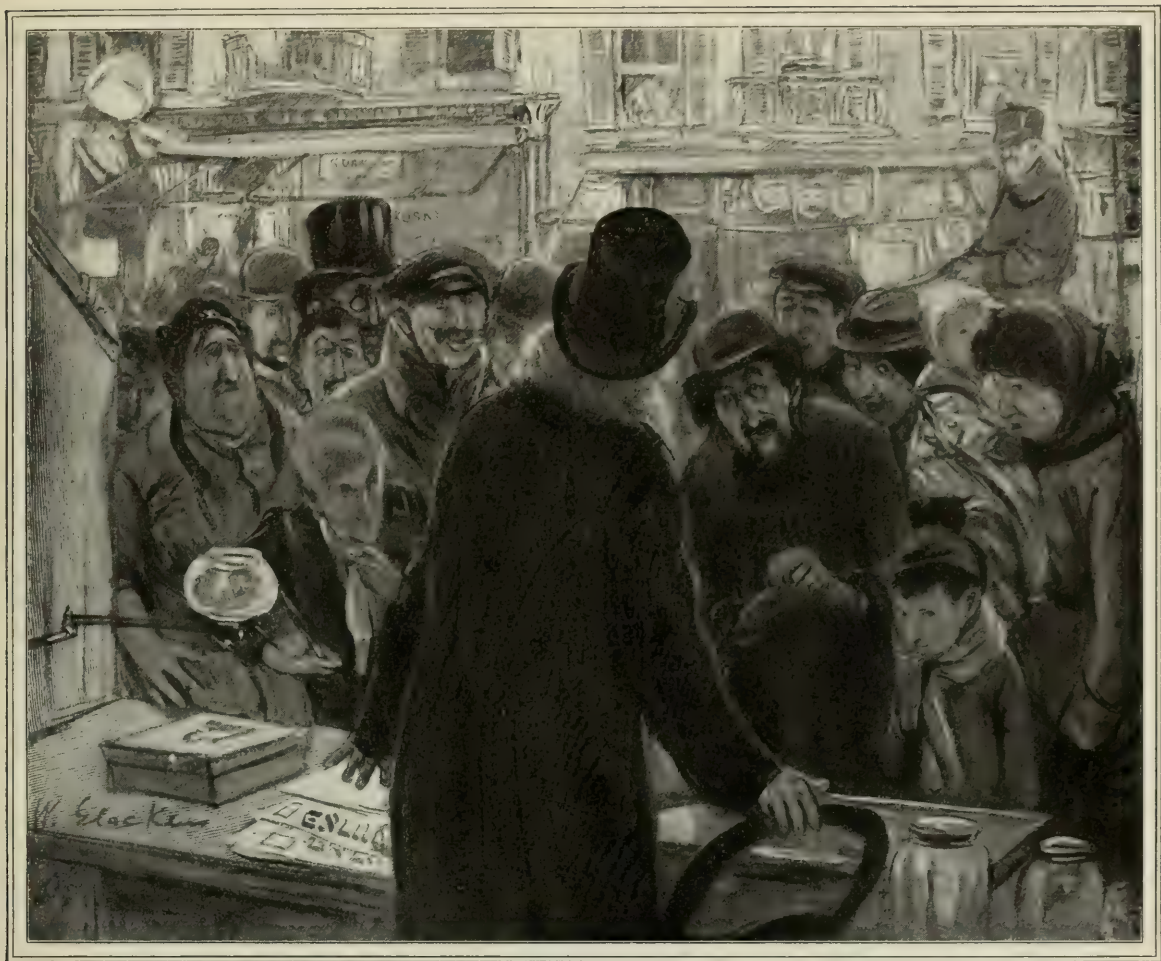
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS



## VOLUME XXVI JULY - DECEMBER



•CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS NEW YORK.  
SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON & Co. LIMITED LONDON



“Why should you be afraid to tell us how much?”—Page 664.

## RABBI ELIEZER'S CHRISTMAS

By A. Cahan

ILLUSTRATIONS BY W. J. GLACKENS

**O**NE of the two well-dressed strangers who were picking their way through the Ghetto—a frail, sharp-featured little Gentile woman with grayish hair—brought herself and her tall companion to a sudden halt.

“Look at that man!” she said, with a little gasp of ecstasy, as she pointed out an elderly Jew who sat whispering over an open book behind a cigarette-stand. “Don’t you think there is a lion effect in his face? Only he is so pathetic.”

The other agreed, phlegmatically, that the man was perfectly delightful, but this was not enough.

“You say it as if the woods were full of such faces,” the nervous little woman protested. “A more exquisite head I never saw. Why, it’s classic, it’s a per-

fect—tragedy. His eyes alone would make the fortune of a beginning artist. I must telegraph Harold about him.”

“Yes, there is pathos in his eyes,” the Head Worker of the College Settlement assented, with dawning interest.

“Pathos! Why, they are full of martyrdom. Just look at the way his waxen face shapes itself out of that sea of white hair and beard, Miss Colton. And those eyes of his—doesn’t it seem as if they were looking out of a tomb half a mile away? We must go up and speak to him. He looks like a lion in distress.”

Miss Bemis was out with her list of “deserving cases,” mostly Irish, which Miss Colton had prepared for her as she had done the year before. This time, however, her effervescent enthusiasm was not exclusively philanthropic. She had

recently become infatuated with a literary family and had been hunting after types ever since.

When the two came up to the old man's stand they found that besides cigarettes it was piled with candy and Yiddish newspapers, and that part of the brick wall back of it was occupied by an improvised little bookcase filled with poorly bound volumes.

Miss Colton, who spoke German and had taken special pains to learn the dialect of the Ghetto, acted as her friend's interpreter.

"How much are these cigarettes?" she asked, for a beginning, as she took up a package decorated with a picture of Captain Dreyfus.

"Cigarettes?" the old man asked, with

a perplexed smile which made his sallow face sadder than ever.

"Yes, these cigarettes."

"How many? One, two, three, or the whole package?" he inquired, timidly.

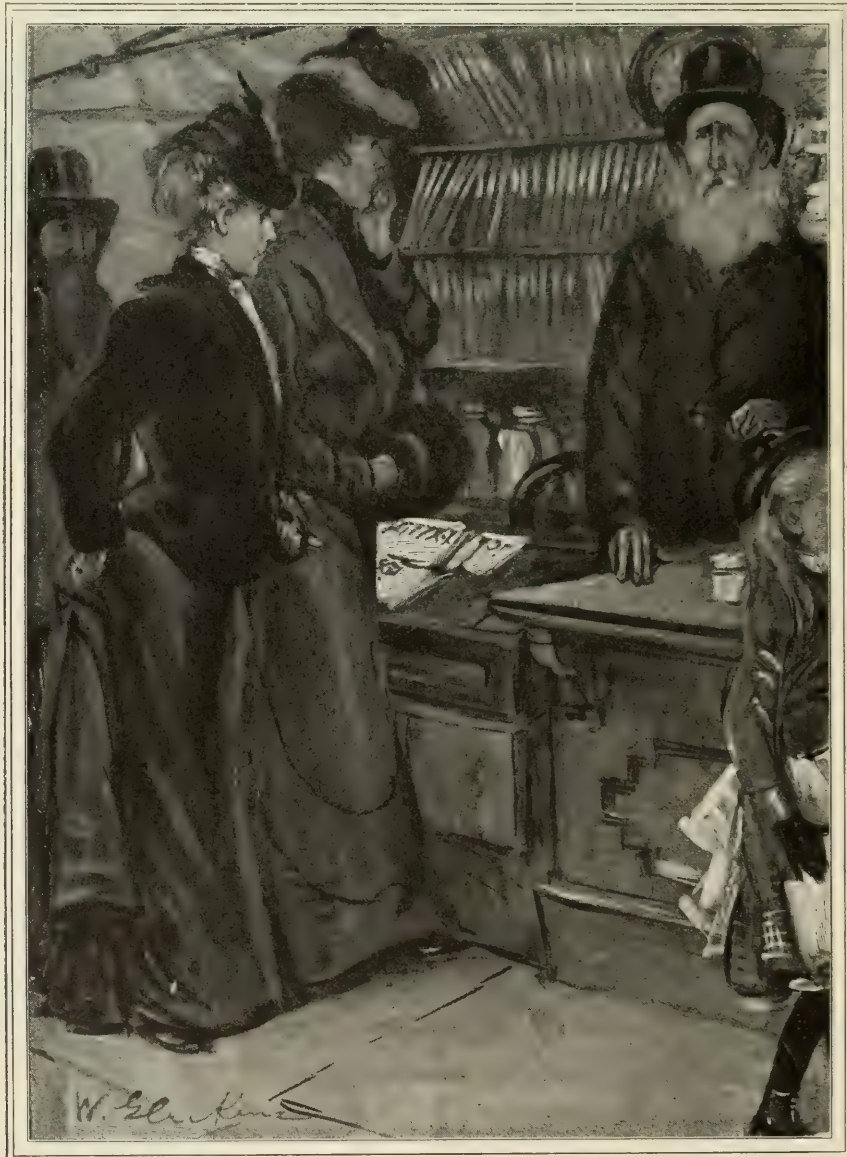
"Of course, the whole package. Why, do you find it strange for women to buy cigarettes?"

"Not at all. Who says it is strange?" he answered, with apologetic vehemence. "Quite a few of my customers are ladies."

"Do they smoke?"

"They? What business has a woman to smoke? But then she may have a husband or a sweetheart who smokes."

Miss Bemis bought the Dreyfus package and one bearing a likeness of Karl Marx. By this time the old man's bashfulness had worn off, and he said, in an-



"I was a *sopher*. I was poor, but I never went hungry."—Page 663.

swer to questions, that his name was Eliezer (Rabbi Eliezer people called him, out of respect for his voluminous gray beard and piety); that he had been in America two years and that he was all alone in the world.

"And how much does your stand bring you?"

For an answer he drew a deep sigh and

like nonsense. Yet, I must keep this kind of trash. Ah, this is not what I came to America for. Was I not happy at home? Did I want for anything? Birds' milk, perhaps. I was a *sopher*.\* I was poor, but I never went hungry, and people showed me respect. And so I lived in peace until the black year brought to our town a man who advised me to go to



"If I had received the money yesterday or to-morrow it would be another matter, but to-day——"—Page 668.

made a gesture of despair. After a short silence he said:

"I sit freezing like a dog from six in the morning to eleven in the night, as you see. And what do I get for my pains? When I make five dollars I call it an extra good week. If I had a larger stock I might make a little more. It's America, not Russia. If one would do business one must have all kinds of goods. But then it's a sin to grumble. I am not starving—praised be the All High for that."

Speaking of his bookcase, he explained that it was a circulating library.

"Silly stuff, that," he said with contempt. "Nothing but lies—yarns about how a lad fell in love with a girl and such-

America. He saw me make a *Misrach*—a kind of picture which pious Jews keep on the east wall of their best room. I fitted it up with beautiful pillars, two lions supporting the tables of the Law and all kinds of trappings, you know. Well, all this lots of people could do, but what nobody could do and I can is to crowd the whole of Deuteronomy into a circle the size of a tea-glass." A sparkle came into his dark brown eyes; an exalted smile played about his lips; but, this only deepened the gloom of his face. "I would just take a glass, stand it on the paper upside down, trace the brim and—

\* A writer of parchment scrolls of the Pentateuch, or some other section of the Old Testament.

set to work. People could hardly read it—so tiny were the letters; but I let everybody look at them through a magnifying glass and they saw every word. And how well written! Just like print. 'Well,' says that man, 'Rabbi Eliezer,' says he, 'you have hands of gold, but sense you have none. Why throw yourself away upon a sleepy town like this? Just you go to America, and pearls will be showered on you.'” After a little pause Rabbi Eliezer waved his hand at his wares and said, with a bitter smile: “Well, here they are, the pearls.”

“And what became of your pictures?” asked Miss Colton.

“My pictures? Better don't ask about them, good lady,” the old man answered, with a sigh. “I sat up nights to make one, and when it was finished I got one dollar for it, and that was a favor. My lions looked like potatoes, they said. ‘As to your Deuteronomy—it isn't bad, but this is America, and such things are made by machine and sold five cents apiece.’ The merchant showed me some such pictures. Well, the lions were rather better than mine, and the letters even smaller—that I won't deny—but do you know how they were made? By hand? Not a bit. They write big words and have them photographed by a tricky sort of thing which makes them a hundred times smaller than they are—do you understand? ‘Ah, but that's machine-work—a swindle,’ says I, ‘while I make every letter with my own hands, and my words are full of life.’ ‘Bother your hands and your words!’ said the merchant. ‘This isn't Russia,’ says he. ‘It's America, the land of machines and of ‘hurry up!’ says he, and there you are!’” The old man's voice fell. “Making letters smaller, indeed!” he said, brokenly. “Me, too, they have made a hundred times smaller than I was. A pile of ashes they have made of me. A fine old age! Freezing like a dog, with no one to say a kind word to you,” he concluded, trying to blink away his tears and to suppress the childlike quiver of his lips.

Miss Bemis was tingling with compassion and with something very like the sensation of an entomologist come upon a rare insect.

“Ask him how much money it would

take to bring his stock up to the stand-ard,” she said, peremptorily.

Rabbi Eliezer's cadaverous face turned red, as he answered, bashfully:

“How much! Fifteen dollars, perhaps! I wish I had ten.”

As Miss Bemis opened her handbag, the old scroll-writer's countenance changed colors and he looked as if he did not know what to do with his eyes.

The two Gentile women had no sooner left the cigarette-stand than the market-people came crowding about Rabbi Eliezer.

“How much did she give you?” they inquired, eagerly.

“How much! It is not quite a hundred dollars—you may be sure of that,” he replied, all flushed with excitement.

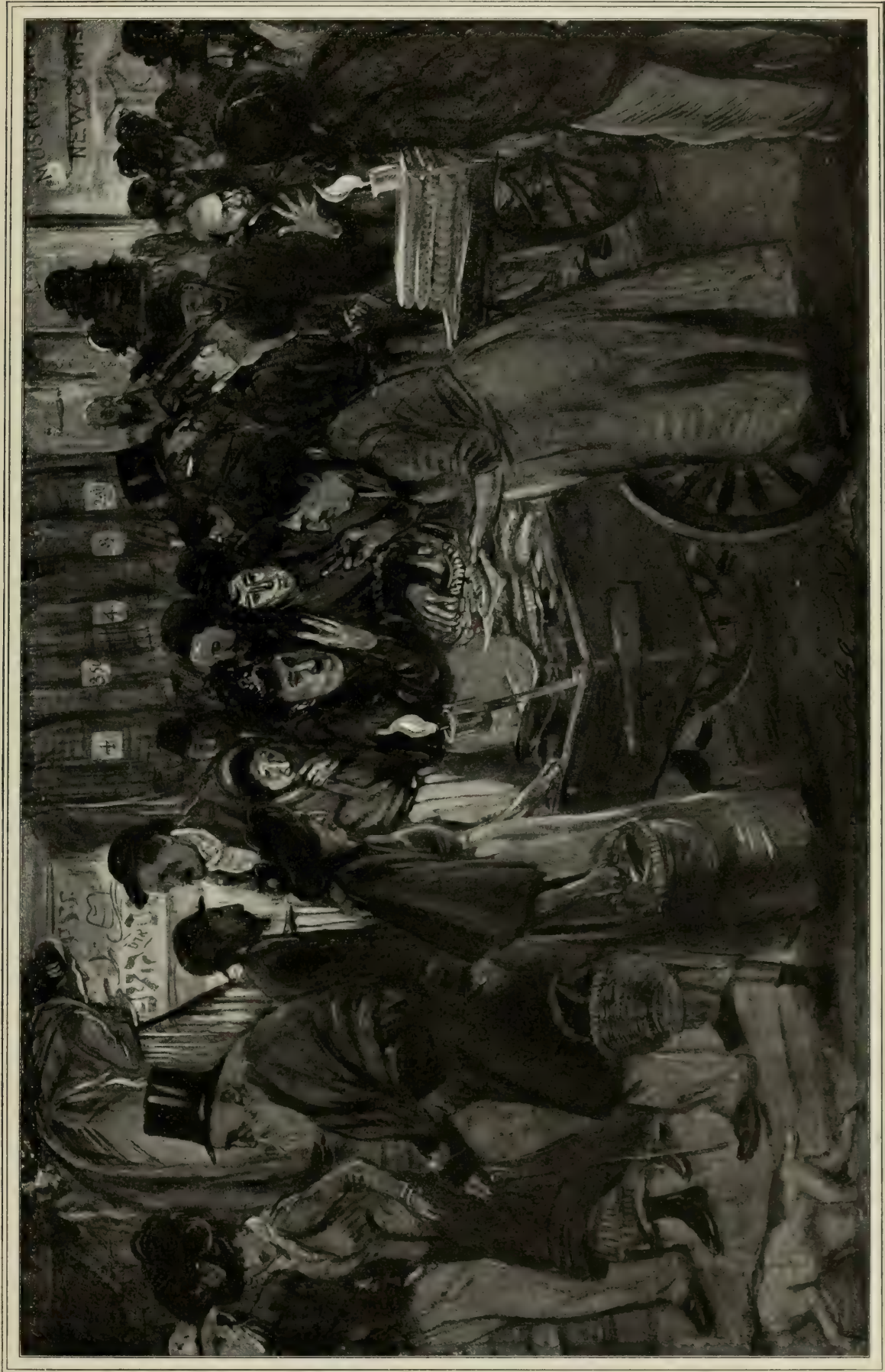
“Why should you be afraid to tell us how much? We aren't going to take it away from you, are we?”

“Afraid! What reason have I to be afraid? But then—what matters it how much she gave me?”

One of the fishwives said she knew the taller of the two ladies.

“She belongs in that Gentile house on the next block where they fuss around with children and teach them to be ladies, you know,” she explained. “They are all Gentiles over there, but good as diamonds. How much did she give you, Rabbi Eliezer?” she concluded, confidentially.

Rabbi Eliezer made no reply. He was struggling to look calm, but he could not. The twenty-dollar bill in his bosom-pocket was the largest sum he had ever handled. Every time a passer-by stopped at his stand he would leap to his feet, all in a flutter, and wait upon him with feverish eagerness; and at the same time he was so absent-minded that he often offered his customer the wrong article. Again and again he put his hand to his breast, to make sure that the twenty dollars were safe. Now it occurred to him that there might be a hole in his pocket; now he asked himself if he was positive that he had put the precious piece of paper into his purse. He distinctly remembered having done so, yet at moments his mind seemed to be a blank. “With these begrudging creatures around,



*Drawn by W. J. Glackens.*

“Fish, fish, living fish—buy fish, dear little housewives!”—Page 668.

one might truly lose one's mind," he complained to himself.

He pictured the increased stock and library, and the display he would make of it. All this would only take about fifteen dollars, so that he could well afford a new praying-shawl for himself. His old one was all patches, and how could he expect any attention at the synagogue? Wouldn't his fellow-worshippers be surprised! "I see you are doing good business, Rabbi Eliezer," they would say. Yes, he would get himself a new praying-shawl and a new hat. His skull-cap in which he worshipped at the synagogue was also rather rusty, but a new one cost only twenty-five cents, and this was now a trifle. Suddenly it became clear to him that he had no recollection of putting the twenty-dollar bill into his purse. His heart sank. Under the pretence of rearranging some books he hastily took out his dilapidated purse. The twenty-dollar bill was there—green on one side and brown on the other.

"Been counting the money the Gentile woman gave you?" asked a market-woman, archly.

"Not at all," he murmured, coloring.

"Foolish man that you are, does anybody begrudge you?" a carrot-pedler put in. "Out with it—how much?"

This time Rabbi Eliezer somehow felt hurt.

"What do you want of me? Do I owe anything?" he flamed out.

"You need not be excited, nor stuck up, either, even if a Gentile woman did make you a Christmas present—in honor of her God's birth," snapped the other.

"That's what it was—a present in honor of their God," seconded a remnant-pedler.

Rabbi Eliezer was in a rage.

"You say it all because your eyes are creeping out of your heads with envy," he said, with flashing eyes. "Well, she gave me twenty dollars. There now!"

The quarrel blew over, but Rabbi Eliezer was left with a wound in his heart. The green-and-brown piece of paper now seemed to smell of the incense and to have something to do with the organ-sounds which came from the Polish church in his birthplace. He was horrified. Nestling in his bosom-pocket right against his heart, was something *treife* (impure), unholy,





He went on whispering and nodding his beautiful old head.—Page 668.

loathsome. And this loathsome thing was so dear to that heart of his—woe to him! . . . What a misfortune that it should all have happened on Christmas of all other days! Had the good-hearted Gentile woman only come one day sooner, all would have gone well. Or, had there been nobody around to see him receive the Christmas present. . . . Anyhow, she never said it was a Christmas present, did she? Rabbi Eliezer also reminded himself of the Christmas gifts which thousands of American Jews exchanged with their Christian friends, and even among themselves; but the thought had no comfort to offer him. What if so-called Jews who shave their beards and smoke on the Sabbath do exchange Christmas presents? Shall he, an old man with one foot in his grave, follow their godless example? Woe is him, has it come to that? He was firmly determined to return the Gentile woman her money, and felt much relieved. He knew all the while that he would not do it, however, and little by little his heart grew heavy again. “Ah, it was the black year which brought me the Gentile ladies and their twenty dollars!” he exclaimed in despair.

At last, after hours of agony, he hit upon a plan. He would call at the Gentile House, as he described the College Settlement to himself, and ask whether the money had been given to him in honor of Christmas. He would not say: “Was it a Christmas present?” for that would be too dangerous a question to ask. Instead he would put it like this: “I am a poor man, but I am a Jew, and a Jew must not accept any presents in honor of a Gentile faith. I took the money because the kindly lady gave me it. It wasn’t meant for a Christmas present, was it?” To be sure, the good woman would understand his trouble and whether it was a Christmas present or not, she would say that it was not.

It seemed such a trifling thing to do, and yet when he found himself in front of the little two-story building—the only exception in a block of towering tenement-houses—his heart sank with fear lest the well-dressed lady should say, Yes, it was a Christmas present.

“Why should I bother them, anyhow? Is it not enough that they gave me such a pile of money?” he said to himself, with an insincere sense of decency, and

turned back. He had not gone many blocks when he retraced his steps. When he came in sight of the brown-stone stoop he slackened his pace. Never in his life had he called at the house of *pritzim* (noble folk), and he now felt, with a rush of joy, that he had not the courage to ring the door-bell. Finally when he had nerved himself up to the feat, his heart beat so violently that he was afraid he could not speak.

A minute later he was in the presence of Miss Colton. He recognized her, yet she seemed much younger and taller.

"Well, what can I do for you, Rabbi Eliezer?" she asked, with a friendly radiance which did his heart good.

"I come to ask you something, lady," he said, with a freedom of manner which was a surprise to himself. "People tell me it was a Christmas present that lady gave me. I am a Jew, you know, and I must not take any Christmas presents. I don't care if other Jews do or not."

He could not go on. He felt that it was not the speech he had prepared, and that it might cost him the twenty dollars. He was dying to correct it, but he could not speak. After a pause he blurted out:

"If I had received the money yesterday or to-morrow it would be another matter, but to-day——"

Miss Colton burst into laughter.

"Of course, it wasn't a Christmas present," she said. "The good lady never meant it for one, for didn't she know you were a Jew, and a pious one? But since you are worried about it let me have the twenty dollars and you call to-morrow morning, and I shall give them to you in the lady's name as a fresh present. Will that mend the matter?"

Rabbi Eliezer said it would, and left the College Settlement with his heart in his throat.

The next thing he did was to inquire of the Jews in the neighborhood whether Miss Colton was good pay. Everybody said she was good in every way, and Rabbi Eliezer went to the evening services at

his synagogue in high spirits. Still, during the Eighteen Blessings he caught himself thinking of the twenty dollars and the Gentile God, and had to say it all over again.

By the time he got back to his stand the markets were in full blast. The sidewalks and the pavement were bubbling with men and women and torches. Hundreds of quivering lights stretched east and west, north and south—two restless bands of fire crossing each other in a blaze and losing themselves in a medley of flames, smoke, fish, vegetables, Sabbath-loaves, muslin and faces.

"Fish, fish, living fish—buy fish, dear little housewives! Dancing, tumbling, wriggling, screaming fish in honor of the Sabbath! Potatoes as big as your fist! A bargain in muslin! Buy a calico remnant—calico as good as silk, sweet little housewives!"

Rabbi Eliezer, whose place of business was in the heart of this babel, sat behind his stand, musing. He was broken in body and spirit. That he should have been in a fever of anxiety, humiliating himself and deceiving his God—and all because he was so poor that twenty dollars appeared like a fortune to him—suddenly seemed a cruel insult to his old age. He burst out muttering a psalm, and whatever the meaning of the Hebrew words his lips uttered, his shaking voice and doleful intonation prayed Heaven to forgive him and to take pity on his last years on earth.

The reddish torch-light fell upon his waxen cheeks and white beard. His eyes shone with a dull, disconsolate lustre. As he went on whispering and nodding his beautiful old head, amid the hubbub of the market, a pensive smile overspread his face. His heart was praying for tears. "I am so unhappy, so unhappy!" he said to himself in an ecstasy of woe. And at the same time he felt that hanging somewhere far away in the background was a disagreeable little question: Will the Gentile lady pay him the twenty dollars?