

America ! America !

With poor immigrants to America

Stephen Graham

1914

. In a thunderstorm, with a high gale and showers of blinding hail and snow, with occasional flashing forth of amazing sunshine, to be followed by deepest gloom of threatening cloud, we collected on the quay at Liverpool—English, Russians, Jews, Germans, Swedes, Finns—all staring at one another curiously, and trying to understand languages we had never heard before. Three hundred yards out in the harbour stood the red-funnelled Cunarder which was to bear us to America ; and we waited impatiently for the boat which should take us along-side. We carried baskets and portmanteaus in our strained hands ; most of us were wearing heavy cloaks, and some had sacks upon their backs, so we were all very ready to rush aboard the ferry-boat and dump our burdens on its damp decks. What a stampede there was—people pushing into portmanteaus, baskets pushing into people ! At last we had all crossed the little gangway, and all that remained on shore were the few relatives and friends who had come to see the English off. This pathetic little crowd sang ragtime songs, waved their hats and hand-kerchiefs, and shouted. There was a bandying of farewells :

“ Ta-ta, ta-ta-ta !”

“ Wish you luck !”

“ Ta-ta-a, ole Lloyd George ! No more stamplicking !”

“ Good luck, old boy !”

“ The last of old England !”

The foreign people looked on and smiled non-comprehendingly ; the English and Americans huzzaed and grinned. Then away we went over the water, and thoughts of England passed rapidly away in the interest of coming nearer to civilisation's toy, the great liner. We felt the romance of ocean travel, and also the tremulous fear which the ocean inspires. Then as we lay in the lee of the vast, steep, blood-and soot-coloured liner, each one of us thought of the *Titanic* and the third-class passengers who went down beneath her into the abyss.

The vastness of the liner made our ferry-boat look like a matchbox. A door opened in the great red wall and a little gangway came out of it like a tongue coming out of a mouth. We all picked up our bags and baggage and pushed and squirmed along this narrow footway that led into the mouth of the steamer and away down into its vast, cavernous, hungry stomach : English, Russians, Jews, Germans, Poles, Swedes, Finns, Flemings, Spaniards, Italians, Canadians, passed along and disappeared—among them all, I myself.

There were fifteen hundred of us ; each man and woman, still carrying handbags and baskets, filed past a doctor and two assistants, and was cursorily examined for diseases of the eye or skin.

“ Hats and gloves off !” was our first greeting on the liner. We marched slowly up to the medical trio, and each one as he passed had his eyelid seized by the doctor and turned inside

out with a little instrument. It was a strange liberty to take with one's person ; but doctors are getting their own way nowadays, and they were looking for *trachoma*. For the rest the passing of hands through our hair and examination of our skin for signs of scabies was not so rough, and the cleaner-looking people were not molested.

Still carrying our things we took our medical-inspection cards and had them stamped by a young man on duty for that purpose. Then we were shown our berths.

There was a spring bed for each person, a towel, a bar of soap, and a life-preserver. The berths were arranged, two, four, and six in a cabin. Married couples could have a room to themselves, but for the rest men and women were kept in different sets of cabins. British were put together, Scandinavians together, Russians and Jews together. It was so arranged that the people in the cabins understood one another's language. Notices on the walls warned that all emigrants would be vaccinated on deck, whether they had been vaccinated before or not ; that all couples making love too warmly would be married compulsorily at New York if the authorities deemed it fit, or should be fined or imprisoned ; that in case of fire or smoke being seen anywhere we were to report to chief steward, but not to our fellow-passengers ; that smoking was not allowed except on the upper deck, and so on. The cabins were a glittering, shining white ; they were small and box-like ; they possessed wash-basins and water for the first day of the voyage, but not to be replenished on succeeding days. There were general lavatories where you might wash in hot or cold water, and there were bathrooms which were locked and never used. Each cabin had a little mirror. The cabins were steam-heated, and when the passengers were dirty the air was foul. Fresh air was to be found on the fore and after decks, except in time of storm, when we were barred down. In time of storm the smell below was necessarily worse—atrocious, for most of the people were very sick. We had, however, a great quantity of dark space to ourselves, and could prowl into the most lonesome parts of the vessel. The dark recesses were always occupied by spooning couples who looked as if they had embarked on this journey only to make love to one another. There were parts of the ship wholly given over to dancing, other parts to horse-play and feats of strength. There was an immense dining-room with ante-chambers and there, to the sound of the jangling dinner-bell echoing and wandering far or near over the ship, we assembled to meals.

The emigrants flocked into the mess-room from the four doors to twenty immense tables spread with knives and forks and toppling platters of bread. Nearly all the men came in in their hats,—in black glistening ringlety sheepskin hats, in fur caps, in bowlers, in sombreros, in felt hats with high crowns, in Austrian cloth hats, in caps so green that the wearer could only be Irish. Most of the young men were curious to see what girls there were on board, and looked eagerly to the daintily clad Swedish women, blonde and auburn-haired beauties in tight-fitting, speckless jerseys. The British girls came in in their poor cotton dresses, or old silk ones, things that had once looked grand for Sunday wear but now bore miserable crippled hooks and eyes, threadbare seams, gaping fastenings—cheerful daughters of John Bull trapesing along in the shabbiest of floppy old boots. Then there were the dark and somewhat forward Jewesses, talking animatedly with little Jew men in queer-shaped trousers and skimpy coats ; there were slatternly looking Italian women with their children, intent on being at home in whatever circumstances. There was a party of shapely and attractive Austrian girls that attracted attention from the others and a regular scramble to try to sit next to them or near them. No one ever saw a greater miscellaneity and promiscuity of peoples brought together by accident. I sat between a sheepskin-wrapped peasant wife from the depths of Russia and a neat Danish engineer, who looked no different from British or American. Opposite me were two cowboys going back to the Far West, a dandified Spanish Jew sat next them on one hand and two Norwegians in voluminous knitted jackets on the other. At the next table was a row of boisterous Flemings, with huge caps and gaudy scarfs. There were Americans, spruce and smart and polite ; there were Italians, swarthy and dirty,

having their black felt hats on their heads all through the meal and resting their elbows on the table as if they'd just come into a public-house in their native land. There were gentle youths in shirts which womenfolk had embroidered in Little Russia ; there were black-bearded Jewish patriarchs in their gaberdines, tall and gaunt.

A strange gathering of seekers, despairers, wanderers, pioneers, criminals, scapegoats. I thought of all the reasons that had brought these various folk together to make a community, that had brought them all together to form a Little America. From Great Britain it is so often the drunkard who is sent. Some young fellow turns out to be wilder than the rest of his family ; he won't settle down to the sober, righteous, and godly life that has been the destiny of the others ; he is likely to disgrace respectability, so parents or friends give him his passage-money and a little capital and send him away across the sea. Henceforth his name is mentioned at home with a 'ssh, or with a tear—till the day that he makes his fortune. With the drunkard go the young forger or embezzler whose shame has been covered up and hidden, but who can get no " character" from his last employer. Then there are the unemployed, and those discontented with their jobs, the out-of-works, the men who have seen no prospect in the old land and felt no freedom. There are the wanderers, the rovers, the wastrels, so called, who have never been able to settle down ; there are also the prudent and thoughtful men who have read of better conditions and go simply to take advantage of them. There are those who are there almost against their will, persuaded by the agents of the shipping companies and the various people interested to keep up the flow of people into America. There are the women who are going out to their sweethearts to be married, and the wives who are going to the husbands who have " made good" ; there are the girls who have got into trouble at home and have slid away to America to hide their shame ; there are girls going to be domestic servants, and girls doomed to walk the streets,—all sitting down together, equals, at a table where no grace is said but the whisper of hope which rises from each heart.

But it is not only just these people whom I have so materially and separately indicated. The cheerful lad who is beginning to flirt with his first girl acquaintance on the boat has only a few hours since dried the tears off his cheeks ; they are nearly all young people on the boat, and they mostly have loving mothers and fathers in the background, and friends and sweethearts, some of them. And there are some lonely ones who have none who care for them in all the world. There are young men who are following a lucky star, and who will never be so poor again in their lives, boys who have guardian angels who will never let them injure their foot on the ground, boys who have in their favour good fairies, boys and girls who have old folk praying for them. And there is the prodigal son, as well as the too-prodigal daughter. There are youngest brothers in plenty, going to win the princess in a way their elder brothers never thought of ; young Hans is there, Aladdin, Norwegian Ashepattle, Ivan Durak—the Angel of Life is there ; there is also the Angel of Death.

We sat down together to our first meal,—the whole company of the emigrant passengers broke bread together and became thereby one body,—a little American nation in ourselves. I am sure that had the rest of the world's people been lost we could have run a civilisation by ourselves. We had peasants to till the soil, colliers to give us fuel, weavers and spinners to make cloth, tailors to sew it into garments, comely girls of all nations to be our wives ; we had clerks and shop-keepers and Jews with which to make cities ; musicians and music-hall artists to divert us, and an author to write about it all.

Mugs half-full of celery soup were whisked along the tables ; not a chunk of bread on the platters was less than an inch thick ; the hash of gristly beef and warm potato was what would not have been tolerated in the poorest restaurant, but we set ourselves to eat it, knowing that trials in plenty awaited us and that the time might come when we should have worse things

than these to bear. The Swedes and the British were finicky ; the Russians and the Jews ate voraciously as if they'd never seen anything so good in their lives.

The peasant woman next to me crossed herself before and after the meal ; her Russian compatriots removed their hats, and some of them said grace in a whisper to themselves. But most ate even with their hats on, and most with their hands dirty. You would not say we ate as if in the presence of God and with the memories, in the mind, of prayers for the future and heart-break at parting with home ; yet this meal was for the seeing eye a wonderful religious ceremony, a very real first communion service. The rough food so roughly dispensed was the bread and wine, making them all of one body and of one spirit in America. Henceforth all these people will come nearer and nearer to one another, and drift farther and farther from the old nations to which they belonged. They will marry one another, British and Jewish, Swedish and Irish, Russian and German ; they will be always eating at America's board ; they will be speaking the one language, their children will learn America's ideals in America's school. Even from the most aboriginal, illiterate peasant on board, there must come one day a little child, his grandson or great-grandson, who will have forgotten the old country and the old customs, whose heart will thrill to America's idea as if he had himself begotten it.

On Sunday morning when we came upstairs from our stuffy little cabin we were gliding past the green coast of Ireland, and shortly after breakfast-time we entered the beautiful harbour of Queenstown, blue-green, gleaming, and perfect under a bright spring sun. Hawkers came aboard with apples, knotted sticks, and green favours—the day following would be St. Patrick's. And we shipped a score of Irish passengers.

Outside Queenstown a different weather raged over the Atlantic, and as we steamed out of the lagoon it came forward to meet us. The clouds came drifting toward us, and the wind rattled in the masts. The ocean was full of glorious life and wash of wave and sea. A crowd of emigrants stood in the aft and watched the surf thundering away behind us ; the great hillsides of green water rose into being and then fell out of being in grand prodigality. Gulls hung over us as we rushed forward and poised themselves with gentle feet outstretched, or flew about us, skirling and crying, or went forward and overtook us. Meanwhile Ireland and Britain passed out of view, and we were left alone with the wide ocean. We knew that for a week we should not see land again, and when we did see land that land would be America.

Then we all began to know one another, to talk, to dance, to sing, to play together. All the cabins were a-buzz with chatter, and along the decks young couples began to find one another out and to walk arm and arm. Two dreamy Norwegians produced concertinas, and without persuasion sat down in dark corners and played dance music for hours, for days. Rough men danced with one another, and the more fortunate danced with the girls, dance after dance, endlessly. The buffets were crowded with navvies clamouring for beer ; the smoking-rooms were full of excited gamblers thumbing filthy cards. The first deck was wholly in electric light, you mounted to the second and it was all in shadow, you went higher still and you came to daylight. You could spend your waking hours on any of these levels, but the lower you went the warmer it was. On the electric-light deck were to be found the cleaner and more respectable passengers ; they sat and talked in the mess-room, played the piano, sang songs. Up above them all the hooligans rushed about, and there also, in the shadow, in the many recesses and dark empty corners young men and women were making love, looking moonily at one another, kissing furtively and giving by suggestion an unwonted atmosphere to the ship. It was also on this deck that the wild couples danced and the card-players shuffled and dealt. Up on the open deck were the sad people, and those who loved to pace to and fro to the march music of the racing steamer and the breaking waves.

I wandered from deck to deck, everywhere ; opened many doors, peered into many faces, sat at the card-table, crushed my way into the bar, entered into the mob of dancers, found a Russian girl and talked to her. But I was soon much sought for. When the Russian-speaking people found out I had their language they followed me everywhere, asking elementary questions about life and work and wages in America. Even after I had gone to bed and was fast asleep my cabin door would open and some woolly-faced Little Russian would cry out, “Gospodin Graham, forgive me, please, I have a little prayer to make you ; write me also a letter to a farmer.”

I had written for several of them notes which they might present at their journey’s end.

All day long I was in converse with Russians, Poles, Jews, Georgians, Lithuanians, Finns.

“ Look at these Russian fatheads (*duraki*)” said a young Jew. “ Why do they go to America ? Why do they leave their native land to go to a country where they will be exploited by every one ?”

“ Why do you leave it, then ?” asked a Russian.

“ Because I have no rights there,” replied the Jew.

“ Have we rights ?” the Russian retorted.

“ If I had your rights in Russia I’d never leave that country. I’d find something to do that would make me richer than I could ever be in America.”

There were three or four peasants around, and another rejoined. “ But you could have our rights if you wished.”

Whereupon I broke in :

“ But only by renouncing the Jewish faith.”

“ That is exactly the truth,” said the Jew.

“ Yes,” said a Russian called Alexy Mitrophanovitch, “ he can have all our rights if he renounces his faith.”

“ If I am baptized to get your rights what use is that to you ? Why do Christians ask for such an empty thing ?”

“ All the same,” said another Russian, “ in going to America you will break your faith, and so will we. I have heard how it happens. They don’t keep the Saints’ days there.”

Alexy Mitrophanovitch was a fine, tall, healthy-looking peasant workman in a black sheepskin. With him, and as an inseparable, walked a broad-faced Gorky-like tramp in a dusty peak-hat. The latter was called Yoosha.

“ You see, all I’ve got,” said Alexy to me, “ is just what I stand up in. Not a copeck of my own in my pocket, and not a basket of clothes. My friend Yoosha is lending me eighty roubles so as to pass the officials at New York, but of course I give it back to him when we pass the barrier. We worked together at Astrakhan.”

“ Have you a bride in Russia ?”

No, he was alone. He did not think to marry ; but he had a father and a mother. At Astrakhan he had been three thousand versts away from his village home, so he wouldn't be so much farther away in America.

He was going to a village in Wisconsin. A mate of his had written that work was good there, and he and Yoosha had decided to go. They would seek the same farmer, a German, Mr. Joseph Stamb—would I perhaps write a letter in English to Mr. Stamb ? . . .

Both he and Yoosha took communion before leaving Astrakhan. I asked Alexy whether he thought he was going to break his faith as the other Russians had said to the Jew. How was he going to live without his Tsar and his Church ?

He struck his breast and said, “ There, that is where my Church is ! However far away I go I am no farther from God !”

Would he go back to Russia ?

He would like to go back to die there.

“ Tell me,” said he, “ do they burn dead bodies in America ? I would not like my body to be burned. It was made of earth, and should return to the earth.”

The man who slept parallel with me in my cabin was an English collier from the North Country. He had been a bad boy in the old country, and his father had helped him off to America. Whenever he had a chance to talk to me, it was of whippet-racing and ledgers and prizes and his pet dog.

“ As soon as a get tha monny a'll enter that dawg aht Sheffield. A took er to Durby ; they wawn't look at 'er there. There is no dawg's can stan' agin her. At Durby they run the rabbits in the dusk, an' the little dawg as 'ad the start could see 'em, but ourn moight a been at Bradford fur all she could see. A'll bet yer that dawg's either dead or run away. She fair lived fer me. Every night she slep in my bed. Ef ah locked 'er aht, she kick up such a ra. Then I open the door an' she'd come straight an' jump into bed an' snuggle 'erself up an fall asleep.”

The dirtiest cabins in the ship were allotted to the Russians and the Jews, and down there at nine at night the Slavs were saying their prayers whilst just above them we British were singing comic songs or listening to them. Most of us, I reckon, also said our prayers later on, quietly, under our sheets ; for we were, below the surface, very solitary, very apprehensive, very child-like, very much in need of the comfort of an all-seeing Father.

The weather was stormy, and the boat lost thirty-six hours on the way over. The skies were mostly grey, the wind swept the vessel, and the sea deluged her. The storm on the third night considerably reduced the gaiety of the ship ; all night long we rolled to and fro, listening to the crash of the waves and the chorus of the spring-mattresses creaking in all the cabins. My boy who had left the “ dawg” behind him got badly “ queered up.” He said it was “ mackerel as done it,” a certain warm, evil-looking mackerel that had been served him for tea on the Tuesday evening. Indeed the food served us was not of a sort calculated to prepare us for an Atlantic storm—roast corned beef, sausage and mash, dubious eggs, tea that tasted strongly of soda, promiscuously poked melting butter, ice cream. On tumultuous Tuesday the last thing we ate was ice cream ! We all felt pretty abject on Wednesday morning.

Our sickness was the stewards' opportunity. They interviewed us, sold us bovril and hawked plates of decent ham and eggs, obtained from the second-class table or their own mess. The British found the journey hard to bear, though they didn't suffer so much as the Poles and the Austrians and the Russians. I found the whole journey comparatively comfortable, stormy weather having no effect on me, and this being neither my first nor worst voyage. Any one who has travelled with the Russian pilgrims from Constantinople to Jaffa in bad weather has nothing to fear from any shipboard horror on a Cunarder on the Atlantic.

Only two of the Russians went through the storm happily, Alexy and Yoosha. They had worked for nights and months on the Caspian Sea in a little boat, almost capsizing each moment as they strained at their draughts of salmon and sturgeon ; one moment deep down among the seas, the next plunging upward, shooting over the waves, stopping short, slithering round—as they graphically described it to me.

When the storm subsided the pale and convalescent emigrants came upstairs to get sea air and save themselves from further illness. Corpse-like women lay on the park seats, on the coiled rope, on the stairs, uttering not a word, scarcely interested to exist. Other women were being walked up and down by their young men. A patriarchal Jew, very tall and gaunt, hauled along a small, fat woman of his race, and made her walk up and down with him for her health—a funny pair they looked. On Wednesday afternoon, about the time the sun came out, one of the boisterous Flemings tied a long string to a tape that was hanging under a pretty French girl's skirts, and he pulled a little and watched her face, pulled a little more and watched the trouble, pulled a little more and was found out. Then several of the corpse-like ones smiled, and interest in life was seen to be reviving.

Next morning when I was up forward with my kodak, one of the young ladies who had been so ill was being tossed in a blanket with a young Irish lad of whom she was fond, struggling and scratching and rolling with a young fellow who was kissing her, whilst four companions were dangerously hoisting them shoulder high, laughing and bandying Irish remarks. Life only hides itself when these folk are ill ; they will survive more than sea-sickness.

The white dawn is haggard behind us over the black waves, and our great strong boat goes thundering away ahead of the sun. It is mid-Atlantic, and we stare into the same great circle of hungry emptiness, as did Columbus and his mariners. Our gaze yearns for land, but finds none ; it rests sadly on the solitary places of the ocean, on the forlorn waves lifting themselves far away, falling into nothingness, and then wandering to rebirth.

Nothing is happening in the wide ocean. The minutes add themselves and become hours. We know ourselves far from home, and we cannot say how far from the goal, but still very far, and there is no turning back. " Would there were," says the foolish heart. " Would I had never come away from the warm home, the mother's love, the friends who care for me, the woman who loves me, the girl who has such a lot of empty time on her hands now that I have gone away, her lover." How lonely it is on the steerage deck in the crowd of a thousand strangers, hearing a score of unknown tongues about your ears, hearing your own language so pronounced you scarce recognise it !

The mirth of others is almost unpardonable, the romping of Flemish boys, pushing people right and left in a breakneck game of touch ; the excitement of a group of Russians doing feats of strength ; the sweet happiness of dainty Swedish girls dancing with their rough partners to the strains of an accordion. How good to escape from it all and trespass on the steward's promenade at the very extremity of the after-deck, where the emigrants may not go, and where they are out of sight and out of hearing.

The ocean is retreating behind us with storm-scud and smoke of foam threshed out from our riven road. Vast theatres of waves are falling away behind us and slipping out of our ken backward into the homeward horizon. Above us the sky is grey, and the sea also is grey, waving now and then a miserable flag of green.

What an empty ocean ! There is nothing happening in it but our ship. And for me, that ship is just part of my own purpose : there is nothing happening but what I willed. The slanting red funnels are full of purpose, and the volumes of smoke that fly backward are like our sighs, regrets, hopes, despairs, the outward sign of the fire that is driving us on.

•

The weather had changed, and the electric lights of the ship were blazing through the rain, the decks were wet and windswept, and the black smoke our funnels were belching forth went hurrying back into the murky evening sky. The vessel, however, went on.

Downstairs some were dancing, some singing, some writing home laboriously, others gossiping, others lying down to sleep in the little white cabins. There was a satisfaction in hearing the throbbing of the engines and feeling the pulse of the ship. We were idle, we passed the time, but we knew that the ship went on.

Going above once more at nine, I found the rain had passed, the sky was clear and the night full of stars. In the sea rested dim reflections of the stars, like the sad faces we see reflected in our memory several days after we have gone from home. I stood at the vessel's edge and looked far over the glimmering waves to the horizon where the stars were walking on the sea. "What will it be like in America?" whispered the foolish heart. "What will it be like for him?" Then sadness came—the long, long thoughts of a boy. I whispered the Russian verse :

"There is a road to happiness,
But the way is afar."

I was much in demand among the Russians on Friday and Saturday, for they wanted to take the English language by storm at the week-end. I taught Alexy by writing out words for him, and six or seven peasants had copied from him and were busy conning "man," "woman," "farm," "work," "give me," "please," "bread," "meat," "is," "Mister," "show," "and," "how much," "like," "more," "half," "good," "bad," the numbers, and so on. They pronounced these words with willing gusto, and made phrases for themselves, calling out to me :

"Show me worrk, pleez."

"Wer is Meester Stamb?"

"Khao match eez bread?"

"Give mee haaf."

Alexy tried his English on one of the waiters at dinner time.

"Littel meet, *littel*, give mee more meet."

The steward grinned appreciatively, and told him to lie down and be quiet.

Maxim and his sister were accompanied by a grizzled peasant of sixty or so, wearing a high sugar-loaf hat sloping back from an aged, wrinkled brow. This was Satiron Federovitch, the only old man on deck. His black cloak, deep lined with wadding, was buttoned up to his throat, and the simplicity of his attire and the elemental lines of his face gave him a look of imperturbable calm. Asked why he was going to America, he said that almost every one else in the village had gone before him. A Russian village had as it were vanished from the Russian countryside and from the Russian map and had transplanted itself to Dakota. Poor old greybeard, he didn't want to go at all, but all his friends and relatives had gone, and he felt he must follow.

Holost told every one how at Libau the officials doubted the genuineness of his passport, and he had to telegraph to his village police, at his own expense, to verify his age and appearance. The authorities didn't relish the idea of such a fine young man being lost by any chance to the army. If only they had as much care for the villages as they have for their legions !

I was up betimes on Saturday morning and watched the vessel glide out of the darkness of night into the dusk of the dawn. The electric light up in the main-mast, the eye of the mast, squinted lividly in the half-light, and the great phantom-like ship seemed as if cut out of shiny-white and blood-red cardboard as it moved forward toward the west. The smoke from the funnels lay in two long streamers to the horizon, and the rising sun made a sooty shadow under it on the gleaming waves. As the night-cloud vanished a great wind sprang up, blowing off America. Old Satiron was coming laboriously upstairs, and he slipped out on to the deck incautiously.

“ Gee whizz !” The mocking American wind caught his astrakhan hat and gave it to the sea. Poor old Satiron, he'll turn up in Dakota with a derby on, perhaps.

Saturday was a day of preparation. We packed our things, we wrote letters to catch the mail, we were medically inspected—some of us were vaccinated. All the girls had to take off their blouses and the young men their coats, and we filed past a doctor and two assistants. One man washed each bare arm with a brush and some acid. The doctor looked and examined. The other assistant stood with lymph and lancet and rapidly jabbed us. The operation was performed at an amazing pace, and was only an unpleasant formality. Many of those who were thus vaccinated got their neighbours to suck out the vaccine directly they returned to their cabins. This was what the boy who had left the dog behind him did. He didn't want blood-poisoning, he said. Nearly all the Russians had been vaccinated five or six times already. In Russia there is much disease and much faith in medicine. In England good drainage, many people not vaccinated, little smallpox ; in Russia, no drains, much vaccination, and much of the dread disease.

On Saturday night there was a concert, at which all the steerage were present, and in which any one who liked took part. But English music-hall songs had all the platform—no foreign musicians participated.

Sunday was Easter Day, and I was up in the dark hours of the morning and saw the dawn. Sunrise showed the clouds in the east, but in north and south and west the other clouds still lay asleep. Up on the after-deck of the great tireless steamer little groups of cloaked and muffled emigrants stood gazing over the now familiar ocean. We knew it was our last day on the ship, and that before the dawn on the morrow we should be at the American shore. How fittingly was it Easter, first day of resurrection, festive day of spring, day of promise and hope, the anniversary of happy days, of first communions !

In the wan east the shadowy wings of gulls were flickering. The blood-red sun was just coming into view, streaked and segmented with blackest cloud. He was striving with night, fighting, and at last gaining the victory. High above the east and the wide circle of glory stood hundreds of attendant cloudlets, arrayed by the sun in robes of lovely tinting, and they fled before him with messages for us. Then, astonishing thing, the sun disappeared entirely into shadow. Night seemed to have gotten the victory. But we knew night could not win.

The sun reappeared almost at once, in resplendent silver, now a rim, in a moment a perfect shield. The shield had for a sign a maiden, and from her bosom a lovely light flooded forth upon the world. We felt that we ourselves, looking at it, were growing in stature in the morning. The light enveloped us—it was divine.

But the victory still waited. All the wavelets of the eastern sea were living in the morning, dancing and mingling, bewildering, baffling, delighting, but the west lay all unconquered, a great black ocean of waves, each edged with signs of foam, as if docketed and numbered. All seemed fixed and rigid in death. The sun disappeared again and reappeared anew, and this time he threw into the world ochre and fire. The wide half-circle of the east steamed an ochreous radiance to the zenith. The sun was pallid against the beauty he had shed ; the lenses of the eye fainted upon the unearthly whiteness. It was hard to look upon the splendid one, but only at that moment might he be seen with the traces of his mystery upon him. Now he was in his grave-clothes, all glistening white, but at noon he would be sitting on the right hand of God. Easter !

“ Will there be any service in the steerage to-day ?”

“ No, there will only be service for first and second-class passengers.”

“ Is that because they need it more than we ?”

There was no answer to that impolite remark. Still it was rather amusing to find that the Church’s office was part of the luxury of the first and second class.

The third class played cards and danced and sang and flirted much as usual. They had need of blessing. So at night a Baptist preacher organised a prayer-meeting on his own account, and the English-speaking people sang “ Onward, Christian soldiers,” in a rather half-hearted way at eight o’clock, and “ Jesus, lover of my soul, let me to Thy Bosom fly,” at nine ; and there was a prayer and a sermon.

A few hours after I had lain down to sleep Maxim Holost put his head in at my cabin and cried out : “ America ! Come up and see the lights of America.”

And without waiting for me to follow, he rushed away to say the same thing to others, “ America ! America !”

II

The Arrival of The Immigrant

THE day of the emigrants’ arrival in New York was the nearest earthly likeness to the final Day of Judgment, when we have to prove our fitness to enter Heaven. Our trial might well have been prefaced by a few edifying reminders from a priest.

It was the hardest day since leaving Europe and home. From 5 A.M., when we had breakfast, to three in the afternoon, when we landed at the Battery, we were driven in herds from one place to another, ranged into single files, passed in review before doctors, poked in the eyes by the eye-inspectors, cross-questioned by the pocket-inspectors, vice detectives, and blue-book compilers.

Nobody had slept the night before. Those who approached America for the first time stood on the open deck and stared at the lights of Long Island. Others packed their trunks. Lovers took long adieus and promised to write one another letters. There was a hum of talking in the cabins, a continual pattering of feet in the gangways, a splashing of water in the lavatories where cleanly emigrants were trying to wash their whole bodies at hand-basins. At last the bell rang for breakfast : we made that meal before dawn. When it was finished we all went up on the forward deck to see what America looked like by morning light. A little after six we were all chased to the after-deck and made to file past two detectives and an officer. The detectives eyed us ; the officer counted to see that no one was hiding.

At seven o'clock our boat lifted anchor and we glided up the still waters of the harbour. The whole prow was a black mass of passengers staring at the ferry-boats, the distant factories, and sky-scrappers. Every point of vantage was seized, and some scores of emigrants were clinging to the rigging. At length we came into sight of the green-grey statue of Liberty, far away and diminutive at first, but later on, a celestial figure in a blaze of sunlight. An American waved a starry flag in greeting, and some emigrants were disposed to cheer, some shed silent tears. Many, however, did not know what the statue was. I heard one Russian telling another that it was the tombstone of Columbus.

We carried our luggage out at eight, and in a pushing crowd prepared to disembark. At 8.30 we were quick-marched out of the ship to the Customs Wharf and there ranged in six or seven long lines. All the officials were running and hustling, shouting out, " Come on ! " " Hurry ! " " Move along ! " and clapping their hands. Our trunks were examined and chalk-marked on the run—no delving for diamonds—and then we were quick-marched further to a waiting ferry-boat. Here for the time being hustle ended. We waited three-quarters of an hour in the seatless ferry, and every one was anxiously speculating on the coming ordeal of medical and pocket examination.

At a quarter to ten we steamed for Ellis Island. We were then marched to another ferry-boat, and expected to be transported somewhere else, but this second vessel was simply a floating waiting-room. We were crushed and almost suffocated upon it. A hot sun beat upon its wooden roof ; the windows in the sides were fixed ; we could not move an inch from the places where we were awkwardly standing, for the boxes and baskets were so thick about our feet ; babies kept crying sadly, and irritated emigrants swore at the sound of them. All were thinking—" Shall I get through ? " " Have I enough money ? " " Shall I pass the doctor ? " and for a whole hour, in the heat and noise and discomfort, we were kept thinking thus. At a quarter-past eleven we were released in detachments. Every twenty minutes each and every passenger picked up his luggage and tried to stampede through with the party, a lucky few would bolt past the officer in charge, and the rest would flood back with heart-broken desperate looks on their faces. Every time they failed to get included in the outgoing party the emigrants seemed to feel that they had lost their chance of a job, or that America was a failure, or their coming there a great mistake. At last, at a quarter-past twelve, it was my turn to rush out and find what Fate and America had in store for me.

Once more it was " Quick march ! " and hurrying about with bags and baskets in our hands, we were put into lines. Then we slowly filed up to a doctor who turned our eyelids inside out with a metal instrument. Another doctor scanned faces and hands for skin diseases,

and then we carried our ship-inspection cards to an official who stamped them. We passed into the vast hall of judgment, and were classified and put into lines again, this time according to our nationality. It was interesting to observe at the very threshold of the United States the mechanical obsession of the American people. This ranging and guiding and hurrying and sifting was like nothing so much as the screening of coal in a great breaker tower.

It is not good to be like a hurrying, bumping, wandering piece of coal being mechanically guided to the sacks of its type and size, but such is the lot of the immigrant at Ellis Island.

But we had now reached a point in the examination when we could rest. In our new lines we were marched into stalls, and were allowed to sit and look about us, and in comparative ease await the pleasure of officials. The hall of judgment was crowned by two immense American flags. The centre, and indeed the great body of the hall, was filled with immigrants in their stalls, a long series of classified third-class men and women. The walls of the hall were booking-offices, bank counters, inspectors' tables, stools of statisticians. Up above was a visitors' gallery where journalists and the curious might promenade and talk about the melting-pot, and America, "the refuge of the oppressed." Down below, among the clerks' offices, were exits; one gate led to Freedom and New York, another to quarantine, a third to the railway ferry, a fourth to the hospital and dining-room, to the place where unsuitable emigrants are imprisoned until there is a ship to take them back to their native land.

Somewhere also there was a place where marriages were solemnised. Engaged couples were there made man and wife before landing in New York. I was helping a girl who struggled with a huge basket, and a detective asked me if she were my sweetheart. If I could have said "Yes," as like as not we'd have been married off before we landed. America is extremely solicitous about the welfare of women, especially of poor unmarried women who come to her shores. So many women fall into the clutches of evil directly they land in the New World. The authorities generally refuse to admit a poor friendless girl, though there is a great demand for female labour all over the United States, and it is easy to get a place and earn an honest living.

It was a pathetic sight to see the doubtful men and women pass into the chamber where examination is prolonged, pathetic also to see the Russians and Poles empty their purses, exhibiting to men with good clothes and lasting "jobs" all the money they had in the world.

At half-past two I gave particulars of myself and showed the coin I had, and was passed.

"Have you ever been arrested?" asked the inspector.

Well, yes, I had. I was not disposed to lie. I had been arrested four or five times. In Russia you can't escape that.

"For a crime involving moral turpitude?" he went on.

"No, no."

"Have you got a job in America?" (This is a dangerous question; if you say 'Yes' you probably get sent back home; it is against American law to contract for foreign labour.)

I explained that I was a tramp.

This did not at all please the inspector. He would not accept that definition of my occupation, so he put me down as author.

“ Are you an anarchist ?”

“ No.”

“ Are you willing to live in subordination to the laws of the United States ?”

“ Yes.”

“ Are you a polygamist ?”

“ What does that mean ?” I asked.

“ Do you believe a man may possess more than one wife at a time ?”

“ Certainly not.”

“ Have you any friends in New York ?”

“ Acquaintances, yes.”

“ Give me the address.”

I gave him an address.

“ How much money have you got ?” . . . “ Show me, please !” . . . And so on. I was let go.

At three in the afternoon I stood in another ferryboat, and with a crowd of approved immigrants passed the City of New York. Success had melted most of us, and though we were terribly hungry, we had words and confidences for one another on that ferry-boat. We were ready to help one another to any extent in our power. That is what it feels like to have passed the Last Day and still believe in Heaven, to pass Ellis Island and still believe in America.

With poor immigrants to America; (1914)

Author : Graham, Stephen, 1884-

Subject : United States — Social life and customs 1865-1918 ; United States — Emigration and immigration ; United States — Description and travel

Publisher : New York, The Macmillan Company

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Book contributor : University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Collection : americana

Notes : Very+narrow+margins.++Tight%2C+repaired+binding.

Source : Internet Archive

<http://archive.org/details/withpoorimmigran00grah>

Edited and uploaded to www.augty.org

December 13 2013