

Anzia Yezierska, from Hungry Hearts
(Stories) 1920

How I Found America

PART I

Every breath I drew was a breath of fear, every shadow a stifling shock, every footfall struck on my heart like the heavy boot of the Cossack.

On a low stool in the middle of the only room in our mud hut sat my father—his red beard falling over the Book of Isaiah open before him. On the tile stove, on the benches that were our beds, even on the earthen floor, sat the neighbors' children, learning from him the ancient poetry of the Hebrew race.

As he chanted, the children repeated:

*"The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness,
Prepare ye the way of the Lord.
Make straight in the desert a highway for our God*

*"Every valley shall be exalted,
And every mountain and hill shall be made low,
And the crooked shall be made straight,
And the rough places plain.*

*"And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
And all flesh shall see it together."*

Undisturbed by the swaying and chanting of teacher and pupils, old Kakah, our speckled hen, with her brood of chicks, strutted and pecked at the potato-peelings which fell from my mother's lap, as she prepared our noon meal.

I stood at the window watching the road, lest the Cossack come upon us unawares to enforce the ukaz of the Czar,

which would tear the bread from our mouths: "No Chadir [Hebrew school] shall be held in a room used for cooking and sleeping."

With one eye I watched ravenously my mother cutting chunks of black bread. At last the potatoes were ready. She poured them out of the iron pot into a wooden bowl and placed them in the center of the table.

Instantly the swaying and chanting ceased, the children rushed forward. The fear of the Cossacks was swept away from my heart by the fear that the children would get my potato.

The sentry deserted his post. With a shout of joy I seized my portion and bit a huge mouthful of mealy delight.

At that moment the door was driven open by the blow of an iron heel. The Cossack's whip swished through the air. Screaming, we scattered.

The children ran out—our livelihood gone with them. "Oi weh," wailed my mother, clutching her breast, "is there a God over us—and sees all this?"

With grief-glazed eyes my father muttered a broken prayer as the Cossack thundered the ukaz: "A thousand rubles fine or a year in prison if you are ever found again teaching children where you're eating and sleeping."

"Gottunil!" pleaded my mother, "would you tear the last skin from our bones? Where else can we be eating and sleeping? Or should we keep chadir in the middle of the road? Have we houses with separate rooms like the Czar?"

Ignoring my mother's entreaties the Cossack strode out of the hut. My father sank into a chair, his head bowed in the silent grief of the helpless.

"God, from the world"—my mother wrung her hands—"is there no end to our troubles? When will the earth cover me and my woes?"

I watched the Cossack disappear down the road. All at

once I saw the whole village running toward us. I dragged my mother to the window to see the approaching crowd.

"Gewalt! What more is falling over our heads?" she cried in alarm.

Mashel Mindel, the water-carrier's wife, headed a wild procession. The baker, the butcher, the shoemaker, the tailor, the goat-herd, the workers of the fields, with their wives and children, pressed toward us through a cloud of dust.

Mashel Mindel, almost fainting, fell in front of the doorway. "A letter from America!" she gasped.

"A letter from America!" echoed the crowd, as they snatched the letter from her and thrust it into my father's hands.

"Read! Read!" they shouted tumultuously.

My father looked through the letter, his lips uttering no sound. In breathless suspense the crowd gazed at him. Their eyes shone with wonder and reverence for the only man in the village who could read.

Mashel Mindel crouched at his feet, her neck stretched toward him to catch each precious word of the letter.

"To my worthy wife, Mashel Mindel, and to my loving son, Susha Feifel, and to my precious darling daughter, the apple of my eye, the pride of my life, Tzipkeleh!

"Long years and good luck on you! May the blessings from heaven fall over your beloved heads and save you from all harm!

"First I come to tell you that I am well and in good health. May I hear the same from you.

"Secondly, I am telling you that my sun is beginning to shine in America. I am becoming a person—a business man.

"I have for myself a stand in the most crowded part of America, where people are as thick as flies and every day is like market-day by a fair. My business is from bananas and apples. The day begins with my pushcart full of fruit, and

the day never ends before I count up at least \$2.00 profit—that means four rubles. Stand before your eyes . . . I . . . Gedalyeh Mindel, four rubles a day, twenty-four rubles a week!"

"Gedalyeh Mindel, the water-carrier, twenty-four rubles a week . . ." The words leaped like fire in the air.

We gazed at his wife, Mashel Mindel—a dried-out bone of a woman.

"Mashel Mindel, with a husband in America—Mashel Mindel, the wife of a man earning twenty-four rubles a week!"

We looked at her with new reverence. Already she was a being from another world. The dead, sunken eyes became alive with light. The worry for bread that had tightened the skin of her cheek-bones was gone. The sudden surge of happiness filled out her features, flushing her face as with wine.

The two starved children clinging to her skirts, dazed with excitement, only dimly realized their good fortune by the envious glances of the others.

"Thirdly, I come to tell you," the letter went on, "white bread and meat I eat every day just like the millionaires.

"Fourthly, I have to tell you that I am no more Gedalyeh Mindel—*Mister* Mindel they call me in America.

"Fifthly, Mashel Mindel and my dear children, in America there are no mud huts where cows and chickens and people live all together. I have for myself a separate room with a closed door, and before any one can come to me, I can give a say, 'Come in,' or 'Stay out,' like a king in a palace.

"Lastly, my darling family and people of the Village of Sukovoly, there is no Czar in America."

My father paused; the hush was stifling. No Czar—no Czar in America! Even the little babies repeated the chant: "No Czar in America!"

"In America they ask everybody who should be the President, and I, Gedalyeh Mindel, when I take out my Citizens papers, will have as much to say who shall be the next President in America, as Mr. Rockefeller the greatest millionaire.

"Fifty rubles I am sending you for your ship-ticket to America. And may all Jews who suffer in Goluth from ukazes and pogroms live yet to lift up their heads like me, Gedalyeh Mindel, in America."

Fifty rubles! A ship-ticket to America! That so much good luck should fall on one head! A savage envy bit me. Gloomy darts from narrowed eyes stabbed Mashesh Mindel.

Why should not we too have a chance to get away from this dark land? Has not every heart the same hunger for America? The same longing to live and laugh and breathe like a free human being? America is for all. Why should only Mashesh Mindel and her children have a chance to the new world?

Murmuring and gesticulating the crowd dispersed.

Each one knew every one else's thought: How to get to America. What could they pawn? From where could they borrow for a ship-ticket?

Silently we followed my father back into the hut from which the Cossack had driven us a while before.

We children looked from mother to father and from father to mother.

"Gottunui! The Czar himself is pushing us to America by this last ukaz." My mother's face lighted up the hut like a lamp.

"Meshugeneh Yidini!" admonished my father. "Always your head in the air. What—where—America? With what money? Can dead people lift themselves up to dance?"

"Dance?" The samovar and the brass pots rang and echoed with my mother's laughter. "I could dance myself over the waves of the ocean to America."

In amazed delight at my mother's joy we children rippled and chuckled with her.

My father paced the room—his face dark with dread for the morrow.

"Empty hands—empty pockets—yet it dreams itself in you America."

"Who is poor who has hopes on America?" flaunted my mother.

"Sell my red quilted petticoat that grandmother left for my dowry," I urged in excitement.

"Sell the feather beds, sell the samovar," chorused the children.

"Sure we can sell everything—the goat and all the winter things," added my mother; "it must be always summer in America."

I flung my arms around my brother and he seized Bessie by the curls, and we danced about the room crazy with joy.

"Beggars!" laughed my mother, "why are you so happy with yourselves? How will you go to America without a shirt on your back—without shoes on your feet?"

But we ran out into the road, shouting and singing: "We'll sell everything we got—we'll go to America."

"White bread and meat we'll eat every day—in America! In America!"

That very evening we fetched Berel Zalman, the usurer, and showed him all our treasures, piled up in the middle of the hut.

"Look, all these fine feather beds, Berel Zalman," urged

my mother; "this grand fur coat came from Nijny itself. My grandfather bought it at the fair."

I held up my red quilted petticoat, the supreme sacrifice of my ten-year-old life.

Even my father shyly pushed forward the samovar. "It can hold enough tea for the whole village."

"Only a hundred rubles for them all," pleaded my mother; "only enough to lift us to America. Only one hundred little rubles."

"A hundred rubles? Pfui!" sniffed the pawnbroker. "Forty is overpaid. Not even thirty is it worth."

But coaxing and cajoling my mother got a hundred rubles out of him.

Steerage—dirty bundles—foul odors—seasick humanity—but I saw and heard nothing of the foulness and ugliness around me. I floated in showers of sunshine; visions upon visions of the new world opened before me.

From lips to lips flowed the golden legend of the golden country:

"In America you can say what you feel—you can voice your thoughts in the open streets without fear of a Cossack."

"In America is a home for everybody. The land is your land. Not like in Russia where you feel yourself a stranger in the village where you were born and raised—the village in which your father and grandfather lie buried."

"Everybody is with everybody alike, in America. Christians and Jews are brothers together."

"An end to the worry for bread. An end to the fear of the bosses over you. Everybody can do what he wants with his life in America."

"There are no high or low in America. Even the President holds hands with Gedalyeh Mindel."

"Plenty for all. Learning flows free like milk and honey."

"Learning flows free."

The words painted pictures in my mind. I saw before me free schools, free colleges, free libraries, where I could learn and learn and keep on learning.

In our village was a school, but only for Christian children. In the schools of America I'd lift up my head and laugh and dance—a child with other children. Like a bird in the air, from sky to sky, from star to star, I'd soar and soar.

"Land! Land!" came the joyous shout.

"America! We're in America!" cried my mother, almost smothering us in her rapture.

All crowded and pushed on deck. They strained and stretched to get the first glimpse of the "golden country," lifting their children on their shoulders that they might see beyond them.

Men fell on their knees to pray. Women hugged their babies and wept. Children danced. Strangers embraced and kissed like old friends. Old men and women had in their eyes a look of young people in love.

Age-old visions sang themselves in me—songs of freedom of an oppressed people.

America!—America!

PART II

Between buildings that loomed like mountains, we struggled with our bundles, spreading around us the smell of the steerage. Up Broadway, under the bridge, and through the swarming streets of the ghetto, we followed Gedalyeh Mindel.

I looked about the narrow streets of squeezed-in stores and houses, ragged clothes, dirty bedding oozing out of the windows, ash-cans and garbage-cans clattering the side-

walks. A vague sadness pressed down my heart—the first doubt of America.

"Where are the green fields and open spaces in America?" cried my heart. "Where is the golden country of my dreams?"

A loneliness for the fragrant silence of the woods that lay beyond our mud hut welled up in my heart, a longing for the soft, responsive earth of our village streets. All about me was the hardness of brick and stone, the stinking smells of crowded poverty.

"Here's your house with separate rooms like in a palace."

Gedalyeh Mindel flung open the door of a dingy, airless flat.

"*Oi weh!*" my mother cried in dismay. "Where's the sunshine in America?"

She went to the window and looked out at the blank wall of the next house. "Gottunui! Like in a grave so dark . . ."

"It ain't so dark, it's only a little shady." Gedalyeh Mindel lighted the gas. "Look only"—he pointed with pride to the dim gaslight. "No candles, no kerosene lamps in America, you turn on a screw and put to it a match and you got it light like with sunshine."

Again the shadow fell over me, again the doubt of America!

In America were rooms without sunlight, rooms to sleep in, to eat in, to cook in, but without sunshine. And Gedalyeh Mindel was happy. Could I be satisfied with just a place to sleep and eat in, and a door to shut people out—to take the place of sunlight? Or would I always need the sunlight to be happy?

And where was there a place in America for me to play? I looked out into the alley below and saw pale-faced children scrambling in the gutter. "Where is America?" cried my heart.

My eyes were shutting themselves with sleep. Blindly, I felt for the buttons on my dress, and buttoning I sank back in sleep again—the deadweight sleep of utter exhaustion.

"Heart of mine!" my mother's voice moaned above me. "Father is already gone an hour. You know how they'll squeeze from you a nickel for every minute you're late. Quick only!"

I seized my bread and herring and tumbled down the stairs and out into the street. I ate running, blindly pressing through the hurrying throngs of workers—my haste and fear choking each mouthful.

I felt a strangling in my throat as I neared the sweatshop prison; all my nerves screwed together into iron hardness to endure the day's torture.

For an instant I hesitated as I faced the grated window of the old dilapidated building—dirt and decay cried out from every crumbling brick.

In the maw of the shop, raging around me the roar and the clatter, the clatter and the roar, the merciless grind of the pounding machines. Half maddened, half deadened, I struggled to think, to feel, to remember—what am I—who am I—why was I here?

I struggled in vain—bewildered and lost in a whirlpool of noise.

"America—America—where was America?" it cried in my heart.

The factory whistle—the slowing-down of the machines—the shout of release hailing the noon hour.

I woke as from a tense nightmare—a weary waking to pain.

In the dark chaos of my brain reason began to dawn. In my stifled heart feelings began to pulse. The wound of my wasted life began to throb and ache. My childhood choked with drudgery—must my youth too die—unlived!

The odor of herring and garlic—the ravenous munching of food—laughter and loud, vulgar jokes. Was it only I who was so wretched? I looked at those around me. Were they happy or only insensible to their slavery? How could they laugh and joke? Why were they not torn with rebellion against this galling grind—the crushing, deadening movements of the body, where only hands live and hearts and brains must die?

A touch on my shoulder. I looked up. It was Yetta Solomon from the machine next to mine.

"Here's your tea."

I stared at her, half hearing.

"Ain't you going to eat nothing?"

"Oi weh! Yetta! I can't stand it!" The cry broke from me. "I did n't come to America to turn into a machine. I came to America to make from myself a person. Does America want only my hands—only the strength of my body—not my heart—not my feelings—my thoughts?"

"Our heads ain't smart enough," said Yetta, practically. "We ain't been to school like the American-born."

"What for did I come to America but to go to school—to learn—to think—to make something beautiful from my life. . . ."

"Sh-sh! Sh-sh! The boss—the boss!" came the warning whisper.

A sudden hush fell over the shop as the boss entered. He raised his hand.

Breathless silence.

The hard, red face with pig's eyes held us under its sickening spell. Again I saw the Cossack and heard him thunder the ukaz.

Prepared for disaster, the girls paled as they cast at each other sidelong, frightened glances.

"Hands," he addressed us, fingering the gold watch-chain

that spread across his fat belly, "it's slack in the other trades and I can get plenty girls begging themselves to work for half what you're getting—only I ain't a skinner. I always give my hands a show to earn their bread. From now on, I'll give you fifty cents a dozen shirts instead of seventy-five, but I'll give you night-work, so you need n't lose nothing." And he was gone.

The stillness of death filled the shop. Each one felt the heart of the other bleed with her own helplessness.

A sudden sound broke the silence. A woman sobbed chokingly. It was Balah Rifkin, a widow with three children.

"Oi weh!" She tore at her scrawny neck. "The blood-sucker—the thief! How will I give them to eat—my babies—my babies—my hungry little lambs!"

"Why do we let him choke us?"

"Twenty-five cents less on a dozen—how will we be able to live?"

"He tears the last skin from our bones!"

"Why did n't nobody speak up to him?"

"Tell him he could n't crush us down to worse than we had in Russia?"

"Can we help ourselves? Our life lies in his hands."

Something in me forced me forward. Rage at the bitter greed tore me. Our desperate helplessness drove me to strength.

"I'll go to the boss!" I cried, my nerves quivering with fierce excitement. "I'll tell him Balah Rifkin has three hungry mouths to feed."

Pale, hungry faces thrust themselves toward me, thin, knotted hands reached out, starved bodies pressed close about me.

"Long years on you!" cried Balah Rifkin, drying her eyes with a corner of her shawl.

"Tell him about my old father and me, his only bread-

giver," came from Bessie Sopolsky, a gaunt-faced girl with a hacking cough.

"And I got no father or mother and four of them younger than me hanging on my neck." Jennie Feist's beautiful young face was already scarred with the gray worries of age. America, as the oppressed of all lands have dreamed America to be, and America *as it is*, flashed before me—a banner of fire! Behind me I felt masses pressing—thousands of immigrants—thousands upon thousands crushed by injustice, lifted me as on wings.

I entered the boss's office without a shadow of fear. I was not I—the wrongs of my people burned through me till I felt the very flesh of my body a living flame of rebellion.

I faced the boss.

"We can't stand it!" I cried. "Even as it is we're hungry. Fifty cents a dozen would starve us. Can you, a Jew, tear the bread from another Jew's mouth?"

"You, fresh mouth, you! Who are you to learn me my business?"

"Were n't you yourself once a machine slave—your life in the hands of your boss?"

"You—loafin—money for nothing you want! The minute they begin to talk English they get flies in their nose. . . . A black year on you—trouble-maker! I'll have no smart heads in my shop! Such freshness! Out you get . . . out from my shop!"

Stunned and hopeless, the wings of my courage broken, I groped my way back to them—back to the eager, waiting faces—back to the crushed hearts aching with mine.

As I opened the door they read our defeat in my face.

"Girls!" I held out my hands. "He's fired me."

My voice died in the silence. Not a girl stirred. Their heads only bent closer over their machines.

"Here, you! Get yourself out of here!" The boss thun-

dered at me. "Bessie Sopolsky and you, Balah Rifkin, take out her machine into the hall. . . . I want no big-mouthed Americanisms in my shop."

Bessie Sopolsky and Balah Rifkin, their eyes black with tragedy, carried out my machine.

Not a hand was held out to me, not a face met mine. I felt them shrink from me as I passed them on my way out.

In the street I found I was crying. The new hope that had flowed in me so strong bled out of my veins. A moment before, our togetherness had made me believe us so strong—and now I saw each alone—crushed—broken. What were they all but crawling worms, servile grubbers for bread?

I wept not so much because the girls had deserted me, but because I saw for the first time how mean, how vile, were the creatures with whom I had to work. How the fear for bread had dehumanized their last shred of humanity! I felt I had not been working among human beings, but in a jungle of savages who had to eat one another alive in order to survive.

And then, in the very bitterness of my resentment, the hardness broke in me. I saw the girls through their own eyes as if I were inside of them. What else could they have done? Was not an immediate crust of bread for Balah Rifkin's children more urgent than truth—more vital than honor?

Could it be that they ever had dreamed of America as I had dreamed? Had their faith in America wholly died in them? Could my faith be killed as theirs had been?

Gasping from running, Yetta Solomon flung her arms around me.

"You golden heart! I sneaked myself out from the shop—only to tell you I'll come to see you to-night. I'd give the blood from under my nails for you—only I got to run back—I got to hold my job—my mother—"

I hardly saw or heard her—my senses stunned with my

defeat. I walked on in a blind daze—feeling that any moment I would drop in the middle of the street from sheer exhaustion.

Every hope I had clung to—every human stay—every reality was torn from under me. I sank in bottomless blackness. I had only one wish left—to die.

Was it then only a dream—a mirage of the hungry-hearted people in the desert lands of oppression—this age-old faith in America—the beloved, the prayed-for “golden country”?

Had the starved villagers of Sukovoly lifted above their sorrows a mere rainbow vision that led them—where—where? To the stifling submission of the sweatshop or the desperation of the streets!

“O God! What is there beyond this hell?” my soul cried in me. “Why can’t I make a quick end to myself?”

A thousand voices within me and about me answered:

“My faith is dead, but in my blood their faith still clamors and aches for fulfillment—*dead generations whose faith though beaten back still presses on—a resistless, deathless force!*”

“In this America that crushes and kills me, their spirit drives me on—to struggle—to suffer—but never to submit.”

In my desperate darkness their lost lives loomed—a living flame of light. Again I saw the mob of dusty villagers crowding around my father as he read the letter from America—their eager faces thrust out—their eyes blazing with the same hope, the same age-old faith that drove me on—

A sudden crash against my back. Dizzy with pain I fell—then all was darkness and quiet.

I opened my eyes. A white-clad figure bent over me. Had I died? Was I in the heaven of the new world—in America? My eyes closed again. A misty happiness filled my being.

“Learning flows free like milk and honey,” it dreamed itself in me.

I was in my heaven—in the schools of America—in open, sunny fields—a child with other children. Our lesson-books were singing birds and whispering trees—chanting brooks and beckoning skies. We breathed in learning and wisdom as naturally as flowers breathe in sunlight.

After our lessons were over, we all joined hands skipping about like a picture of dancing fairies I had once seen in a shop-window.

I was so full of the joy of togetherness—the great wonder of the new world; it pressed on my heart like sorrow. Slowly, I stole away from the other children into silent solitude, wrestling and praying to give out what surged in me into some form of beauty. And out of my struggle to shape my thoughts beautifully, a great song filled the world.

“Soon she’s all right to come back to the shop—yes, nurse?” The voice of Yetta Solomon broke into my dreaming.

Wearily I opened my eyes. I saw I was still on earth.

Yetta’s broad, generous face smiled anxiously at me. “Lucky yet the car that run you over did n’t break your hands or your feet. So long you got yet good hands you’ll soon be back by the machine.”

“Machine?” I shuddered. “I can’t go back to the shop again. I got so used to sunlight and quiet in the hospital I’ll not be able to stand the hell again.”

“Shah!—Shah!” soothed Yetta. “Why don’t you learn yourself to take life like it is? What’s got to be, got to be. In Russia, you could hope to run away from your troubles to America. But from America where can you go?”

“Yes,” I sighed. “In the blackest days of Russia, there was always the hope from America. In Russia we had only a mud hut; not enough to eat and always the fear from the

Cossack, but still we managed to look up to the sky, to dream, to think of the new world where we'll have a chance to be people, not slaves."

"What's the use to think so much? It only eats up the flesh from your bones. Better rest . . ."

"How can I rest when my choked-in thoughts tear me to pieces? I need school more than a starving man needs bread."

Yetta's eyes brooded over me. Suddenly a light broke. "I got an idea. There's a new school for greenhorns where they learn them anything they want . . ."

"What—where?" I raised myself quickly, hot with eagerness. "How do you know from it—tell me only—quick—since when—"

"The girl next door by my house—she used to work by cigars—and now she learns there."

"What does she learn?"

"Don't get yourself so excited. Your eyes are jumping out from your head."

I fell back weakly: "Oi weh! Tell me!" I begged.

"All I know is that she likes what she learns better than rolling cigars. And it's called 'School for Immigrant Girls.'"

"Your time is up. Another visitor is waiting to come in," said the nurse.

As Yetta walked out, my mother, with the shawl over her head, rushed in and fell on my bed kissing me.

"Oi weh! Oi weh! Half my life is out from me from fright. How did all happen?"

"Don't worry yourself so. I'm nearly well already and will go back to work soon."

"Talk not work. Get only a little flesh on your bones. They say they send from the hospital people to the country. Maybe they'll send you."

"But how will you live without my wages?"

"Davy is already peddling with papers and Bessie is selling lolly-pops after school in the park. Yesterday she brought home already twenty-eight cents."

For all her efforts to be cheerful, I looked at her pinched face and wondered if she had eaten that day.

Released from the hospital, I started home. As I neared Allen Street, the terror of the dark rooms swept over me.

"No—no—I can't yet go back to the darkness and the stinking smells," I said to myself. "So long they're getting along without my wages, let them think I went to the country and let me try out that school for immigrants that Yetta told me about."

So I went to the Immigrant School.

A tall, gracious woman received me, not an employee, but a benefactress.

The love that had rushed from my heart toward the Statue in the Bay, rushed out to Mrs. Olney. She seemed to me the living spirit of America. All that I had ever dreamed America to be shone to me out of the kindness of her brown eyes. She would save me from the sordidness that was crushing me I felt the moment I looked at her. Sympathy and understanding seemed to breathe from her serene presence.

I longed to open my heart to her, but I was so excited I did n't know where to begin.

"I'm crazy to learn!" I gasped breathlessly, and then the very pressure of the things I had to say choked me.

An encouraging smile warned the fine features.

"What trade would you like to learn—sewing-machine operating?"

"Sewing-machine operating?" I cried. "Oi weh!" I shuddered. "Only the thought 'machine' kills me. Even when I only look on clothes, it weeps in me when I think how the seams from everything people wear is sweated in the shop."

"Well, then"—putting a kind hand on my shoulder—

"how would you like to learn to cook? There's a great need for trained servants and you'd get good wages and a pleasant home."

"Me—a servant?" I flung back her hand. "Did I come to America to make from myself a cook?"

Mrs. Olney stood abashed a moment. "Well, my dear," she said deliberately, "what would you like to take up?"

"I got ideas how to make America better, only I don't know how to say it out. Ain't there a place I can learn?"

A startled woman stared at me. For a moment not a word came. Then she proceeded with the same kind smile. "It's nice of you to want to help America, but I think the best way would be for you to learn a trade. That's what this school is for, to help girls find themselves, and the best way to do is to learn something useful."

"Ain't thoughts useful? Does America want only the work from my body, my hands? Ain't it thoughts that turn over the world?"

"Ah! But we don't want to turn over the world." Her voice cooled.

"But there's got to be a change in America!" I cried. "Us immigrants want to be people—not 'hands'—not slaves of the belly! And it's the chance to think out thoughts that makes people."

"My child, thought requires leisure. The time will come for that. First you must learn to earn a good living."

"Did I come to America for a living?"

"What did you come for?"

"I came to give out all the fine things that was choked in me in Russia. I came to help America make the new world. . . . They said, in America I could open up my heart and fly free in the air—to sing—to dance—to live—to love. . . . Here I got all those grand things in me, and America won't let me give nothing."

"Perhaps you made a mistake in coming to this country. Your own land might appreciate you more." A quick glance took me in from head to foot. "I'm afraid that you have come to the wrong place. We only teach trades here."

She turned to her papers and spoke over her shoulder. "I think you will have to go elsewhere if you want to set the world on fire."

PART III

Blind passion swayed me as I walked out of the Immigrant School, not knowing where I was going, not caring. One moment I was swept with the fury of indignation, the next moment bent under the burden of despair. But out of this surging conflict one thought—one truth gradually grew clearer and clearer to me: Without comprehension, the immigrant would forever remain shut out—a stranger in America. Until America can release the heart as well as train the hand of the immigrant, he would forever remain driven back upon himself, corroded by the very richness of the unused gifts within his soul.

I longed for a friend—a real American friend—some one different from Mrs. Olney, some one who would understand this vague, blind hunger for release that consumed me. But how, where could I find such a friend?

As I neared the house we lived in, I paused terror-stricken. On the sidewalk stood a jumbled pile of ragged house-furnishings that looked familiar—chairs, dishes, kitchen pans. Amidst bundles of bedding and broken furniture stood my mother. Oblivious of the curious crowd, she lit the Sabbath candles and prayed over them.

In a flash I understood it all. Because of the loss of my wages while I was in the hospital, we had been evicted for unpaid rent. It was Sabbath eve. My father was in the syn-

agogue praying and my mother, defiant of disgrace, had gone on with the ceremony of the Sabbath.

All the romance of our race was in the light of those Sabbath candles. Homeless, abandoned by God and man, yet in the very desolation of the streets my mother's faith burned—a challenge to all America.

"Mammeh!" I cried, pushing through the crowd. Bessie and Dave darted forward. In a moment the four of us stood clinging to one another, amid the ruins of our broken home.

A neighbor invited us into her house for supper. No sooner had we sat down at the table than there was a knock at the door and a square-figured young woman entered, asking to see my mother.

"I am from the Social Betterment Society," she said. "I hear you've been dispossessed. What's the trouble here?"

"Oi weh! My bitter heart!" I yet see before me the anguish of my mother's face as she turned her head away from the charity lady.

My father's eyes sank to the floor. I could feel him shrink in upon himself like one condemned.

The bite of food turned to gall in my throat.

"How long have you been in America? Where were you born?" She questioned by rote, taking out pad and pencil.

The silence of the room was terrible. The woman who had invited us for supper slunk into the bedroom, unable to bear our shame.

"How long have you been in America?" repeated the charity lady.

Choked silence.

"Is there any one here who can speak?" She translated her question into Yiddish.

"A black year on Gedalyeh Mindel, the liar!" my mother burst out at last. "Why did we leave our home? We were

among our own. We were people there. But what are we here? Nobodies—nobodies! Cats and dogs at home ain't thrown in the street. Such things could only happen in America—the land without a heart—the land without a God!"

"For goodness' sakes! Is there any one here intelligent enough to answer a straight question?" The charity lady turned with disgusted impatience from my mother to me. "Can you tell me how long you have been in this country? Where were you born?"

"None of your business!" I struck out blindly, not aware of what I was saying.

"Why so bold? We are only trying to help you and you are so resentful."

"To the Devil with your help! I'm sick no longer. I can take care of my mother—without your charity!"

The next day I went back to the shop—to the same long hours—to the same low wages—to the same pig-eyed, fat-bellied boss. But I was no longer the same. For the first time in my life I bent to the inevitable. I accepted my defeat. But something in me, stronger than I, rose triumphant even in my surrender.

"Yes, I must submit to the shop," I thought. "But the shop shall not crush me. Only my body I must sell into slavery—not my heart—not my soul.

"To any one who sees me from without, I am only a dirt-eating worm, a grub in the ground, but I know that above this dark earth-place in which I am sunk is the green grass—and beyond the green grass, the sun and sky. Alone, unaided, I must dig my way up to the light!"

Lunch-hour at the factory. My book of Shelley's poems before me and I was soon millions of miles beyond the raucous voices of the hungry eaters.

"Did you already hear the last news?" Yetta tore my book from me in her excitement.

"What news?" I scowled at her for waking me from my dreams.

"We're going to have electricity by the machines. And the forelady says that the new boss will give us ten cents more on a dozen waists!"

"God from the world! How did it happen—electricity—better pay?" I asked in amazement. For that was the first I had heard of improved conditions of work.

But little by little, step by step, the sanitation improved. Open windows, swept floors, clean wash-rooms, individual drinking-cups introduced a new era of factory hygiene. Our shop was caught up in the general movement for social betterment that stirred the country.

It was not all done in a day. Weary years of struggle passed before the workers emerged from the each-for-himself existence into an organized togetherness for mutual improvement.

At last, with the shortened hours of work, I had enough vitality left at the end of the day to join the night-school. Again my dream flamed. Again America beckoned. In the school there would be education—air, life for my cramped-in spirit. I would learn to form the thoughts that surged formless in me. I would find the teacher that would make me articulate.

Shelley was English literature.

So I joined the literature class. The course began with the "De Coverley Papers." Filled with insatiate thirst, I drank in every line with the feeling that any minute I would get to the fountain-heart of revelation.

Night after night I read with tireless devotion. But of what? The manners and customs of the eighteenth century, of people two hundred years dead.

One evening after a month's attendance, when the class had dwindled from fifty to four and the teacher began scolding us who were left for those who were absent, my bitterness broke.

"Do you know why all the girls are dropping away from the class? It's because they have too much sense to waste themselves on the 'De Coverley Papers.' Us four girls are four fools. We could learn more in the streets. It's dirty and wrong, but it's life. What are the 'De Coverley Papers'? Dry dust fit for the ash can."

"Perhaps you had better tell the board of education your ideas of the standard classics," she scoffed, white with rage.

"Classics? If all the classics are as dead as the 'De Coverley Papers,' I'd rather read the ads in the papers. How can I learn from this old man that's dead two hundred years how to live my life?"

That was the first of many schools I had tried. And they were all the same. A dull course of study and the lifeless, tired teachers—no more interested in their pupils than in the wooden benches before them—chilled all my faith in the American schools.

More and more the all-consuming need for a friend possessed me. In the street, in the cars, in the subways, I was always seeking, ceaselessly seeking, for eyes, a face, the flash of a smile that would be light in my darkness.

I felt sometimes that I was only burning out my heart for a shadow, an echo, a wild dream. But I could n't help it. Nothing was real to me but my hope of finding a friend.

One day my sister Bessie came home much excited over her new high-school teacher. "Miss Latham makes it so interesting!" she exclaimed. "She stops in the middle of the lesson and tells us things. She ain't like a teacher. She's like a real person."

At supper next evening, Bessie related more wonder sto-

ries of her beloved teacher. "She's so different! She's friends with us. . . . To-day, when she gave us out our composition, Mamie Cohen asked from what book we should read up and she said, 'Just take it out of your heart and say it.'"

"Just take it out of your heart and say it." The simple words lingered in my mind, stirring a whirl of hidden thoughts and feelings. It seemed as if they had been said directly to me.

A few days later Bessie ran in from school, her cheeks flushed, her eyes dancing with excitement. "Give a look at the new poem teacher gave me to learn!" It was a quotation from Kipling:

*"Then only the Master shall praise us,
And only the Master shall blame,
And no one shall work for money,
And no one shall work for fame;
But each for the joy of the working,
And each in his separate Star,
Shall draw the thing as he sees it
For the God of things as they are."*

Only a few brief lines, but in their music the pulses of my being leaped into life. And so it was from day to day. Miss Latham's sayings kept turning themselves in my mind like a lingering melody that could not be shaken off. Something irresistible seemed to draw me to her. She beckoned to me almost as strongly as America had on the way over in the boat. I wondered, "Should I go to see her and talk myself out from my heart to her?"

"Meshugeneh! Where—what? How come you to her? What will you say for your reason?"

"What's the difference what I'll say! I only want to give a look on her. . . ."

And so I kept on restlessly debating. Should I follow my heart and go to her, or should I have a little sense?

Finally the desire to see her became so strong that I could no longer reason about it. I left the factory in the middle of the day to seek her out.

All the way to her school I prayed: "God—God! If I could only find one human soul that cared. . . ."

I found her bending over her desk. Her hair was gray, but she did not look tired like the other teachers. She was correcting papers and was absorbed in her task. I watched her, not daring to interrupt. Presently she threw back her head and gave a little laugh.

Then she saw me. "Why, how do you do?" She rose. "Come and sit down."

I felt she was as glad to see me as though she had expected me:

"I feel you can help me," I groped toward her.

"I hope I can." She grasped my outstretched hands and led me to a chair which seemed to be waiting for me.

A strange gladness filled me.

"Bessie showed me the poem you told her to learn. . . ."

I paused bewildered.

"Yes?" Her friendly eyes urged me to speak.

"From what Bessie told me I felt I could talk myself out to you what's bothering me." I stopped again.

She leaned forward with an inviting interest. "Go on! Tell me all."

"I'm an immigrant many years already here, but I'm still seeking America. My dream America is more far from me than it was in the old country. Always something comes between the immigrant and the American," I went on blindly. "They see only his skin, his outside—not what's in his heart. They don't care if he has a heart. . . . I wanted to

find some one that would look on me—myself . . . I thought you'd know yourself on a person first off."

Abashed at my boldness I lowered my eyes to the floor.

"Do go on . . . I want to hear."

With renewed courage I continued my confessional.

"Life is too big for me. I'm lost in this each-for-himself world. I feel shut out from everything that's going on. . . . I'm always fighting—fighting—with myself and everything around me. . . . I hate when I want to love and I make people hate me when I want to make them love me."

She gave me a quick nod. "I know—I know what you mean. Go on."

"I don't know what is with me the matter. I'm so choked. . . . Sundays and holidays when the other girls go out to enjoy themselves, I walk around by myself—thinking—thinking. . . . My thoughts tear in me and I can't tell them to no one! I want to do something with my life and I don't know what."

"I'm glad you came," she said. And after a pause, "You can help me."

"Help you?" I cried. It was the first time that an American suggested that I could help her.

"Yes, indeed! I have always wanted to know more of that mysterious vibrant life—the immigrant. You can help me know my girls."

The repression of centuries seemed to rush out of my heart. I told her everything—of the mud hut in Sukovoly where I was born, of the Czar's pogroms, of the constant fear of the Cossack, of Gedalyeh Mindel's letter and of our hopes in coming to America.

After I had talked myself out, I felt suddenly ashamed for having exposed so much, and I cried out to her: "Do you think like the others that I'm all wrapped up in self?"

For some minutes she studied me, and her serenity

seemed to project itself into me. And then she said, as if she too were groping, "No—no—but too intense."

"I hate to be so all the time intense. But how can I help it? Everything always drives me back in myself. How can I get myself out into the free air?"

"Don't fight yourself." Her calm, gray eyes penetrated to the very soul in me. "You are burning up too much vitality. . . ."

"You know some of us," she went on—"not many, unfortunately—have a sort of divine fire which if it does not find expression turns into smoke. This egoism and self-centeredness which troubles you is only the smoke of repression."

She put her hand over mine. "You have had no one to talk to—no one to share your thoughts."

I marveled at the simplicity with which she explained me to myself. I could n't speak. I just looked at her.

"But now," she said, gently, "you have some one. Come to me whenever you wish."

"I have a friend," it sang itself in me. "I have a friend."

"And you are a born American?" I asked. There was none of that sure, all-right look of the Americans about her.

"Yes, indeed! My mother, like so many mothers,"—and her eyebrows lifted humorously whimsical,—"claims we're descendants of the Pilgrim fathers. And that one of our lineal ancestors came over in the Mayflower."

"For all your mother's pride in the Pilgrim fathers, you yourself are as plain from the heart as an immigrant."

"Were n't the Pilgrim fathers immigrants two hundred years ago?"

She took from her desk a book called "Our America," by Waldo Frank, and read to me: "We go forth all to seek America. And in the seeking we create her. In the quality

of our search shall be the nature of the America that we create."

"Ach, friend! Your words are life to me! You make it light for my eyes!"

She opened her arms to me and breathlessly I felt myself drawn to her. Bonds seemed to burst. A suffusion of light filled my being. Great choirings lifted me in space.

I walked out unseeing.

All the way home the words she read flamed before me:

"We go forth all to seek America. And in the seeking we create her. In the quality of our search shall be the nature of the America that we create."

So all those lonely years of seeking and praying were not in vain! How glad I was that I had not stopped at the husk—a good job—a good living—but pressed on, through the barriers of materialism.

Through my inarticulate groping and reaching-out I had found the soul—the spirit—of America!

THE END