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Two Famous Soviet Humourists Survey the United States

Ilya Ilf and Eugene Petrov

Routledge Revivals

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PART I

FROM A TWENTY-SEVENTH-STORY WINDOW

I

The *Normandie*

AT NINE o'clock a special train leaves Paris for Le Havre with passengers for the *Normandie.* This train makes no stops. Three hours after its departure it rolls into the large structure which is in the Havre maritime station. Here the passengers descend to a shut-in platform, are lifted by escalators to the upper floor of the station, walk through halls and along passageways, all completely enclosed, and finally find themselves in a large vestibule where they take their places in elevators and depart for their various decks. At last they are on the *Normandie.* They have not the slightest idea what it looks like, for throughout this journey they had not even caught a glimpse of its outer contours.

We, too, walked into an elevator. A lad in a red tunic with gold buttons gracefully lifted his arm and pressed a knob. The shining new elevator rose a little, stopped and suddenly moved down, paying no heed whatever to the uniformed operator who desperately continued to press the knob. After falling three floors instead of rising two, we heard the painfully familiar phrase—on this occasion pronounced in impeccable French: "The elevator is out of order!"

We took the stairway to our cabin, a stairway covered throughout with a non-inflammable rubber carpet of bright green. The corridors and vestibules of the ship were covered with the same carpeting, which makes each footfall soft and soundless. But one does not fully appreciate the merits of rubber carpeting until the ship begins to roll in earnest. Then the carpeting seems to grip the soles. True, that does not save one from being seasick, but it does keep one from falling.

The stairway was not at all of the steamship type. It was broad, slanting, with runs and landings of dimensions generous enough for a mansion.

The cabin was likewise quite unsteamerlike. A spacious room with two ample windows, two broad wooden beds, easy-chairs, wall closets, tables, mirrors—in fact, all the blessings of a communal dwelling, even unto a telephone.

Only in a storm does the *Normandie* resemble a ship. But in good

weather it is a large hotel, with a sweeping view of the ocean, which, having suddenly torn loose from its moorings in a modern seaside health resort, is floating away at the rate of thirty-odd knots an hour.

Down below, from the platforms of the various floors of the station people who were seeing the passengers off shouted their final good wishes and farewells. They shouted in French, in English, in Spanish. They also shouted in Russian. A strange chap in a black seafaring uniform with a silver anchor and a shield of David on one sleeve, a beret on his head and a sad little beard on his chin, was shouting something in Jewish. Later we learned that he was the ship's rabbi; the General Transatlantic Company had engaged him to minister to the spiritual needs of a certain portion of its passengers. Other passengers had at their disposal Catholic and Protestant priests. Moslems, fire worshippers, and Soviet engineers travelled without benefit of clergy; on that score the General Transatlantic Company left them entirely to their own devices.

The *Normandie* has a spacious church with dim electric lights; it is designed primarily for Catholic services, but may be adjusted to suit other denominational needs. Thus, the altar and the icons may be covered with special shields designed for that purpose and the Catholic church converted automatically into a Protestant house of worship. As for the rabbi of the sad little beard, there being no available room for him, the children's nursery was assigned for the performance of his rites. Whereupon the company provided him with a *tallith* and even with special drapery for covering temporarily the mundane representations of bunnies and kittens.

The ship left the harbour. On the pier, at the mole, everywhere were crowds of people. The *Normandie* was still a novelty to the citizens of Le Havre. They forgathered from all corners of the city to greet the transatlantic titan and bid it *bon voyage*.

But the French shore was finally lost in the smoky mists of the murky day. Toward evening we saw the lights of Southampton. For an hour and a half the *Normandie* stood in its roadstead there, taking on passengers from England, surrounded on three sides by the distant and mysterious lights of a strange city. Then again she put out to sea, and again began the seething tumult of unseen waves aroused by tempestuous winds.

In the stern, where we were located, everything trembled. The deck and the walls and the lights and the easy-chairs and the glasses on the washstand and the washstand itself trembled. The ship's vibration was so pronounced that even objects from which one did not expect any sound made a noise. For the first time we heard the sound of towels, soap, the carpet on the floor, the paper on the table, the electric bulb, the curtain, the collar thrown on the bed. Everything in the cabin resounded, and some things even thundered. If a passenger became thoughtful for a moment and relaxed his facial muscles, his teeth at

once began to chatter of their own free will. All through the night it seemed to us that someone was trying to break down the door of our cabin and someone else was constantly rapping at our window-pane and laughing ominously. We discovered no less than a hundred different sounds inside our cabin.

The *Normandie* was on its tenth voyage between Europe and America. It was scheduled to go into dry dock after its eleventh trip, when its stern would be taken apart and the structural deficiencies that caused vibration eliminated.

In the morning a sailor came into our cabin and closed its windows with metal shutters. A storm was rising. A small freighter was having a difficult time making its way to the French shore. At times it disappeared in the waves, only the tips of its masts remaining visible.

We had always expected to find the ocean roadway between the Old and New Worlds quite lively with traffic. Now and then, we imagined, we would come across ships blaring music and waving flags. But we found the ocean a grandiosely deserted expanse. The little boat that we saw bucking the storm four hundred miles from Europe was the only ship we passed during the entire *five* days of our crossing. The *Normandie* rolled with slow and dignified deliberateness. It steamed ahead, never decreasing its accustomed speed, nonchalantly flinging aside the high waves that attacked it on all sides. Rarely would it dip—and then in even tenor with the ocean. Here was no unequal struggle between some miserable contraption fashioned by man's hand and the unbridled forces of nature. It was rather a contest between well-matched titans.

In a semicircular smoking saloon three famous wrestlers with cauliflower ears were sitting with their coats off, playing cards. Shirts bulged out from under their vests. They were in the throes of painful thinking. Huge cigars dangled from their mouths. At another table two men played chess, every minute adjusting the chessmen that kept sliding off the board. Two others, their chins cupped in the palms of their hands, watched the chess game. Who but Soviet folk would ever think of playing the queen's gambit in such weather? We guessed it: the charming Botvinniks proved to be Soviet engineers.

In time people met one another and formed congenial groups. A printed list of passengers was distributed. There we found a very amusing surname: Sandwich—a whole family of Sandwiches, Mr. Sandwich, Mrs. Sandwich, and young Master Sandwich.

We entered the Gulf Stream. A warm rain drizzled. In the oppressive hothouse atmosphere hung the heavy sediment of the oily smoke that the *Normandie's* smokestacks belched forth.

We set out to inspect the ship. A third-class passenger does not see much of the boat on which he travels. He is not allowed either into the first or into the tourist class. Nor does the tourist-class passenger see much more of the *Normandie*, for he likewise is not permitted to trespass certain limits. But the first-class passenger *is* the *Normandie*.

He occupies no less than nine-tenths of the entire ship. Everything is immense in the first class—the promenade decks, the lounges, the saloons for smoking and the saloons for playing cards, and the saloons especially for ladies, and a hothouse where fat little French swallows swing on glass branches and hundreds of orchids hang from the ceiling, and the theatre with its four hundred seats, and the swimming-pool full of water illuminated through its bottom with green electric lights, and the marketing square with its department store, and the saloons for sport where elderly bald-headed gentlemen, flat on their backs, play ball with their feet, and other saloons where the same bald-headed men, tired of tossing balls and jumping up and down on a cinder-path platform, dream in embroidered easy-chairs; above all immense is the carpet that covers the main saloon, for surely it weighs more than half a ton.

Even the smokestacks of the *Normandie*, which one might think would belong to the entire ship, are reserved exclusively for the first class. In one of them the dogs of the first-class passengers are kept. Beautiful pedigree dogs, bored to the verge of madness, stand in their cages. Most of the time they are rocked to dizziness. Now and then they are led out on a leash for a walk on a special deck reserved for them. Then they bark uncertainly and regard the tossing ocean sadly.

We went into the galley. Scores of chefs were at work around a huge electric stove. Scores of others were dressing fowl, carving fish, baking bread, rearing tortes. In a special department kosher food was being prepared. Occasionally the steamship's rabbi would come down here to make sure that the gay French chefs did not throw bits of the unorthodox *trefa* into this sequestered food.

The *Normandie* is reputed to be a masterpiece of French technique and art. Its technique is indeed splendid. Admirable are its speed, its fire-fighting system, the bold and elegant lines of its body, its radio station. But as for art, surely the French have known better days. There were, of course, the faultlessly executed paintings on the glass walls; but the paintings themselves were not in any way distinguished. The same might be said of the bas-relief, the mosaic, the sculpture, the furniture. There was a profusion of gold, of coloured leather, of beautiful metals, silks, expensive wood, fine glass. There was much wealth but little real art. As a whole, it was what French artists, helplessly shrugging their shoulders, called "stile triomphe." Not long ago in Paris, on the Champs-Elysées, was opened a Café Triomphe, sumptuously upholstered in the boudoir manner. A pity! We should like to have seen as partners of the remarkable French engineers who created the *Normandie* equally remarkable French artists and architects. All the more is the pity since France has such people.

Certain defects in technique—for example, the vibration in the stern, which threw the elevator out of commission for half an hour—and other annoying trifles must be charged not against the engineers who built

this first-rate ship, but rather against the impatient orders of their clients who were in a hurry to begin exploiting the ship under any circumstances in order to secure a blue ribbon for record speed.

On the eve of the ship's arrival in New York there was a gala banquet and an evening of amateur entertainment managed by the passengers themselves. The dinner was the same as ever, except that a spoonful of Russian caviare was added. Besides that, the passengers were given pirate hats of paper, rattles, badges with blue ribbons on which "Normandie" was inscribed, and wallets of artificial leather, also with the trade-mark of the company. Gifts are distributed to prevent pilfering of the ship's property. The point is, the majority of travellers are victims of the psychosis of collecting souvenirs. During the *Normandie's* first voyage the passengers stole as mementoes a huge quantity of knives, forks, and spoons. Some even carried away plates, ash-trays, and pitchers. So, it proved more convenient to make a gift of a badge for a buttonhole rather than lose a spoon needed in the ménage. The passengers were overjoyed with these toys. A fat lady, who throughout the five days of the journey had sat in a corner of the dining saloon all alone, suddenly in a most businesslike manner put the pirate hat on her head, discharged her popgun, and attached the badge to her bosom Evidently she regarded it as her duty to take advantage conscientiously of all the blessings she was entitled to by virtue of her ticket.

The petty-bourgeois amateur entertainment began in the evening. The passengers gathered in the saloon. The lights were put out, and a spotlight was trained on a small stage. There, her entire body trembling, appeared a haggard young woman in a silver dress. The orchestra, made up of professional musicians, regarded her with pity. The audience applauded encouragingly. The young lady opened her mouth convulsively and shut it at once. The orchestra patiently repeated the introduction. Sensing forebodings of something frightful, the audience tried not to look at each other. Suddenly the young lady trembled and began to sing. She sang that famous song, "Parlez-moi d'amour," but she sang it so quietly and so badly that her tender call was not heard by anyone. In the middle of the song she quite unexpectedly ran off the stage, hiding her face in her hand. Another young lady appeared, and she was even more haggard. She was in an all-black dress, yet bare-footed. Sheer fright was written all over her face. She was a bare-foot amateur dancer. The audience began to glide out of the hall stealthily. None of this was at all like our buoyant, talented, vociferous amateur entertainments.

On the fifth day the decks of the steamer were filled with suitcases and trunks unloaded out of the cabins. The passengers moved to the right side, and, holding on to their hats, avidly peered into the horizon. The shore was not yet visible, but New York's skyscrapers were already rising out of the water like calm pillars of smoke. An astounding contrast, this—after the vacant ocean, suddenly the largest city in the

world. In the sunny smoke dimly gleamed the steel extremities of the hundred-and-two-storied Empire State Building. Beyond the stern of the *Normandie* seagulls swirled. Four powerful little tugboats began to turn the enormous body of the ship, pulling it up and pushing it toward the pier. On the left side was the small green statue of liberty. Then suddenly it was on the right side. We were being turned around, and the city turned around us, showing us first one and then another of its sides. Finally, it stopped in its tracks, impossibly huge, thunderous, and quite incomprehensible as yet.

The passengers walked down covered passageways into the customs shed, went through all the formalities, and emerged into the streets of the city, without having once seen the ship on which they had come.

2

The First Evening in New York

THE CUSTOMS shed at the docks of the French Line is immense. Under the ceiling hang large iron letters of the Latin alphabet. Each passenger stops under the letter with which his surname begins. Here his luggage will be brought to him from the ship and here it will be examined.

The voices of the arrivals and of those meeting them, laughter and kisses, resounded hollowly throughout the shed, the bare structural parts of which made it seem rather like a shop where turbines were being manufactured.

We had not informed anyone of our impending arrival, and no one met us. We waited under our letters for the customs clerk. Finally he came. He was a calm and unhurried man. He was in no way affected by our having just crossed an ocean in order to show him our suitcases. He politely touched the upper layer of our belongings and did not look any further. Then he stuck out his tongue, a most ordinary, moist tongue, a tongue devoid of all gadgets whatsoever, wetted the huge labels with it and pasted them on our travelling-bags.

When we finally freed ourselves it was already evening. A white taxi-cab with three gleaming lanterns on its roof, looking like an old-fashioned carriage, took us to the hotel. At first we were tormented by the thought that because of our inexperience we had got into the wrong taxi, into some antiquated vehicle, and that we were funny and provincial. But, having fearfully looked out the window, we saw that automobiles with just as silly little lamps as ours were going in all directions back and forth. We quieted down a little. Later we were told that these little lamps are placed on the roof, so that the taxi may be more noticeable among a million other automobiles. For the same

reason taxis in America are painted in the most garish colours—orange, canary, white.

Our attempt to take a look at New York from an automobile failed. We drove through quite dark and dreary streets. From time to time something rumbled hellishly under our feet or something else thundered overhead. Whenever we stopped before the traffic lights the sides of the automobiles that stood beside us hid everything from view. The chauffeur turned back several times and asked again for the address. It seemed that he was somewhat anxious about our English. Now and then he would look at us patronizingly, and his face seemed to say: "Never mind, you won't get lost! Nobody ever got lost in New York."

The thirty-two brick stories of our hotel merged with the rufous nocturnal sky.

While we were filling up short registration cards, two men of the hotel service stood lovingly over our baggage. On the neck of one of them hung a shining ring with the key of the room we had selected. The elevator lifted us up to the twenty-seventh story. This was the commodious and calm elevator of a hotel that was not very old and not very new, not very expensive and, to our regret, not very cheap.

We liked the room, but we did not pause to explore it. Hurry into the street, the city, the tumult! The curtains of the windows crackled under the fresh sea wind. We threw our overcoats on the couch, ran out into the narrow corridor covered with a patterned carpet, stepped into the elevator, and the elevator, clicking softly, flew down. We looked at each other significantly. After all, this really was a great event! For the first time in our lives we were about to walk in New York.

A thin, almost transparent national flag with stars and stripes hung over the entrance to our hotel. Only a short distance away stood the polished cube of the Hotel Waldorf-Astoria. In prospectuses it is called the best hotel in the world. The windows of the "best hotel in the world" sparkled blindingly, and over its entrance hung two national flags. Right on the sidewalk, by the wall of the building, lay tomorrow's newspapers. Passers-by bent down, took a New York *Times* or *Herald Tribune* and placed two cents on the ground beside the newspapers. The newsdealer had gone somewhere. The newspapers were held down with a broken piece of brick, quite as it is done in Moscow by our old women newsvendors as they sit in their plywood kiosks. Cylindrical garbage cans stood at each corner of the street crossings. A considerable flame spouted out of one of the cans. Someone had evidently thrown a lighted cigarette-end there, and so the New York refuse, which consists mostly of newspapers, caught fire. An alarming red light illumined the polished walls of the Waldorf-Astoria. Passers-by smiled and dropped remarks as they walked by. A policeman, his face set, was already moving toward the eventful spot. Having decided that our hotel was in no danger of catching fire, we went on.

At once a slight misfortune befell us. We thought we would walk

slowly, looking around attentively in order to study, to observe, to take in, and so forth. But New York is not one of those cities where people move slowly. The people who passed us did not walk, they ran. And so we, too, ran. From that moment on we could not stop. We spent a whole month in New York, and throughout that time we were constantly racing somewhere at top-speed. Simultaneously, we acquired such a businesslike and preoccupied air that John Pierpont Morgan, Jr., himself might have envied us. At our rate of speed *he* would have earned approximately sixty million dollars during that month. *We* earned somewhat less.

In a word, we started off at a trot. We sped by signs on which in lights were outlined the words: "Cafeteria" or "United Cigars" or "Drugs—Soda" or something else equally enticing yet so far utterly incomprehensible. Thus we ran to Forty-second Street, and there we stopped.

In the store windows of Forty-second Street winter was in full swing. In one window stood seven elegant wax ladies with silver faces. They all wore wonderful astrakhan fur coats, and regarded each other quizzically. In another window stood twelve ladies in sports costumes, leaning on ski poles. Their eyes were blue, their lips red, their ears pink. In other windows stood young mannikins with grey hair, or dapper gentlemen in inexpensive, and hence suspiciously resplendent, suits. But we were really not impressed by all this store munificence. It was something else that astonished us.

In all the large cities of the world one can always find a place where people look at the moon through a telescope. Here, on Forty-second Street, we also found a telescope. But it was mounted on an automobile.

The telescope pointed at the sky. In charge of it was an ordinary mortal, just like the men at the telescopes in Athens, in Naples, or in Odessa. And his was the joyless manner peculiar to all exploiters of street telescopes throughout the world.

The moon showed itself in the interstice between two sixty-storied buildings. However, the curious onlooker, applying himself to the tube, gazed not at the moon but considerably higher: he looked at the top of the Empire State Building and its hundred and two stories. In the light of the moon, the steel eminence of the Empire State seemed to be covered with snow. The heart turned cold at the sight of this chaste and noble building glistening like a sliver of artificial ice. We stood there long, silently gazing up. The skyscrapers of New York make one proud of all the people of science and of labour who build these splendid edifices.

The newsvendors roared hoarsely. The earth trembled underfoot, and through the grates in the sidewalk came a sudden gust of heat as if from an engine-room. That was because down there passed a train of the New York métro—the subway, as it is called here.

Through vents, placed in the pavement and covered with round

metallic covers, steam broke out. For a long time we could not understand where that steam came from. The red lights of the advertisements cast an operatic light upon it. Almost at any moment one expected the vents to open, Mephistopheles spring out of one of them, and, after clearing his throat, begin to sing in deep bass, right out of *Faust*: "A sword at my side, on my hat a gay feather; a cloak o'er my shoulder —and altogether, why, got up quite in the fashion!"

We again rushed forward, deafened by the cries of the newsvendors. They shout with such desperation that, to use Leskov's expression, it is afterwards necessary for a whole week to dig the voice out with a shovel.

It cannot be said that the lighting of Forty-second Street was mediocre. And yet Broadway, lighted by millions and perhaps even by billions of electric lamps, filled with swirling and jumping advertisements constructed out of kilometres of coloured neon tubes, appeared before us just as unexpectedly as New York itself rears up out of the limitless vacancy of the Atlantic Ocean.

We stood at the most popular corner in the States, at the corner of Forty-second and Broadway. The "Great White Way," as Americans call Broadway, stretched before us.

Here electricity has been brought down (or brought up, if you like) to the level of a trained circus animal. Here it has been forced to make faces, to hurdle over obstacles, to wink, to dance. Edison's sedate electricity has been converted into Durov's [1] trained seal. It catches balls with its nose. It does sleight-of-hand tricks, plays dead, comes to life, does anything it is ordered to do. The electric parade never stops. The lights of the advertisements flare up, whirl around, go out, and then again light up: letters, large and small, white, red, and green, endlessly run away somewhere, only to return a second later and renew their frantic race.

On Broadway are concentrated the theatres, cinemas, and dance halls of the city. Tens of thousands of people move along the pavements. New York is one of the few cities of the world where the population promenades on a definite street. The approaches to the cinemas are so brightly lighted that, it seems, if anyone were to add one more little lamp the whole thing would blow up from excessive light, all of it would go to the devil. But it would be impossible to squeeze in another little lamp; there is no room for it. The newsvendors raise such a howl that digging the voice out of it would require more than

[1] Vladimir Leonidovich Durov (1863-1934), scion of a Russian family of circus clowns and animal trainers, was primarily an animal trainer himself who claimed to have established a unique method of training circus animals, based on the principles of conditioning reflexes (Professor Pavlov) and "establishing mutual confidence." This mélange of science and sentimentality Durov called "zoopsychology." Since some of his clowning acts had been suppressed by tsarist censorship because of their allegedly dangerous political satire, Durov was regarded as a "revolutionary" circus performer—and in 1919 was granted a subsidy by the Soviet government for a Zoopsychological Laboratory, which he founded in Moscow. He published several books on zoopsychology and animal tales for children, by whom he was affectionately known as "Grandpa Durov."—C. M.

a week, more likely years of persistent toil. High in the sky, on some uncounted story of the Paramount Building, flared the face of an electric clock. Neither star nor moon was visible. The light of the advertisements eclipsed everything else. In the display windows, among simple crisscross neckties, small illuminated price tags turn around and go into a balancing act. These are the micro-organisms in the cosmos of Broadway's electricity. In the tumultuous uproar a calm beggar plays his saxophone. A gentleman in a top-hat walks into a theatre, and with him is the inevitable lady, whose evening-gown has a train. A blind man led by a dog moves like a sleep-walker. Certain young men walk without hats. That is fashionable. Their neatly combed hair glistens under the street lamps. The odour of cigars, nasty ones and expensive ones.

At that very moment, when it occurred to us that we were so far from Moscow, before us floated the lights of the Cameo motion-picture theatre. The Soviet film, *The New Gulliver*, was being exhibited there.

The surge of Broadway carried us several times back and forth, and flung us into a side street.

We knew nothing yet about the city. Therefore, we cannot mention the streets here. We remember only that we stood under the trestle of an elevated railway. An autobus passed, and without much ado we boarded it.

Even several days later, when we began to orient ourselves in the New York whirlpool, we could not remember where the autobus took us that first evening. It seems to us that it was the Chinese section, but it is quite possible that it was an Italian or a Jewish section.

We walked along narrow, smelly streets. No, the electricity here was ordinary, not like a trained animal. It shone rather dimly, and it did not indulge in any hurdles. A large policeman stood against the wall of a house. On the cap over his broad, imperious face gleamed the silver shield of the City of New York. Having noticed the uncertainty with which we walked down the street, he came to us; but, receiving no inquiry, again returned to his vantage-point at the wall, ever the stiff and stately minion of the law.

From one shabby little house came dull singing. The man who stood at the entrance to the house told us that this was the night lodging of the Salvation Army.

"Who may sleep here?"

"Anyone. No one is asked his name. No one is asked about his occupation or his past. Here night lodgers receive bed, coffee, and bread free of charge. In the morning they also get coffee and bread. Then they are free to go away. The sole condition is that they must take part in the evening and morning prayers."

The singing that reached us from the house gave evidence of the fact that at this very moment this sole condition was being fulfilled. We went in.

Previously, about twenty-five years ago, there was a Chinese opium smoking den in this dwelling. It had been a dirty and dismal den of iniquity. Since then it had become cleaner, but, while losing its erstwhile exoticism, it did not become less dismal. The upper part of the former den of iniquity was devoted to prayer meetings, while below, the sleeping quarters consisted of bare walls, a bare stone floor, and canvas folding cots. That odour of coffee and dampness, which is always a part of hospital and charity cleanliness, permeated all. In a word, this was an American staging of Gorky's *Lower Depths*.

In this bedraggled hall the night lodgers sat stiffly on benches that came down in an amphitheatre toward a small stage. As soon as the singing stopped, the next number on the programme began.

Between an American national flag, which stood on the stage, and Biblical texts, which hung all over the walls, a pinkish old man in a black suit jumped like a clown. He talked and gesticulated with such passion that he gave the impression of selling something. Yet he was merely telling the instructive history of his life, telling about the beneficent crisis when he turned his heart back to God.

He had been a tramp ("as frightful a tramp as you, old devils!"), he had carried on horribly, had used profane language ("remember your own habits, my friends"), he stole—yes, all of that happened, too, alas! But now it was all done with. Now he owned his own home and lived like a decent man ("Hasn't God created us in his own image, in his own manner?"). Not long ago he had even bought himself a radio receiving set. And all this he had received directly with the help of God.

The old man talked with extraordinary facility; it seemed therefore that he was now appearing for at least the thousandth time. He clicked his fingers, laughed hoarsely, sang religious ditties, and ended up with great enthusiasm, shouting:

"Let's sing, brothers!"

Again the dull, humdrum singing began.

The night lodgers were appalling. Almost all of them were no longer young. Unshaven, with lustreless eyes, they swayed on their crude benches. They sang submissively and lazily. Some of them could not overcome the fatigue of the day, and slept.

We vividly imagined to ourselves the wanderings through the frightful places of New York, the days passed at bridges and warehouses, in the midst of garbage, in the everlasting nebulousness of human degeneration. To sit after that in a night lodging and sing hymns was sheer torture.

Then before the audience appeared a fellow as hale and healthy as a policeman. He had a lilac-coloured vaudevillian nose and the voice of a skipper. He was as bold and jaunty as anyone could possibly be. Again began a tale about the benefits of turning to God. The skipper, it seemed, had also been quite a sinner at one time. His fantasy was not great, however, and he soon ended up with the declaration that now, thanks to God's help, he, too, had a radio receiving set.

Again they sang. The skipper waved his arms, displaying considerable experience as an orchestra leader. Two hundred men ground to powder by life again listened to this conscienceless twaddle. These poor people were not offered work, they were offered only God—a God as spiteful and exacting as the Devil.

The night lodgers did not object. Any god with a cup of coffee and a slice of bread was fairly acceptable. Let us sing then, brothers, to the glory of the coffee god!

And the throats, which for half a century had belched forth only horrible oaths, drowsily began to blare now the glory of the Lord.

We again walked through some slums and again did not know where we were. With thunder and lightning, trains raced overhead along the railroad stockades of the elevated railway. Young men in light-coloured hats crowded around drug-stores, exchanging curt phrases. Their manner was exactly like that of the young men who in Warsaw populate Krakhmalnaya Street. In Warsaw a gentleman from Krakhmalnaya is not considered exactly God's precious little ewe lamb. It is sheer luck if he turns out to be merely a thief, for he might be something much worse than that.

Late at night we returned to our hotel, not yet disappointed with New York nor elated over it, but rather disturbed by its hugeness, its wealth, and its poverty.

3
What Can Be Seen From a Hotel Window

OUR FIRST hours in New York—the walk through the city at night and then the return to the hotel—will always remain with us as a memorable event.

Yet, as a matter of fact, nothing unusual had occurred.

We walked into the very ordinary marble vestibule of the hotel. To the right, behind a smooth wooden railing, worked two young clerks. Both of them had pale, smoothly shaven cheeks and black little narrow moustaches. Beyond them sat a girl cashier at a calculating machine. On the left was located the tobacco stand. In its glass case open wooden boxes of cigars stood next to each other. On the white gleaming surface of the inside covers of the boxes were displayed old-fashioned handsome men with thick moustaches and pink cheeks, gold and silver medals, scutcheons, green palms and Negresses gathering tobacco. In the corners stood the prices: 5, 10, or 15 cents apiece, or 15 cents for two, or 10 cents for three. Even more tightly than the cigars lay small packages of cigarettes in soft covers, also wrapped in cellophane. Americans seem to smoke mostly "Lucky Strike," a dark green package with a red circle in the middle; "Chesterfield," a white

package with a gold inscription; and "Camel," a yellowish package bearing the picture of a brown camel.

The entire wall opposite the entrance to the vestibule was occupied by spacious elevators with gilded doors. The doors opened on the right, on the left, or in the middle, disclosing inside the elevator the Negro who held on with his hand to the iron steering-gear and who was dressed in bright coloured trousers with gold braid and in a green jacket with ornate twisted shoulder straps. Just as at the Northern Railway Station in Moscow the train announcer loudly informs people going to summer resorts that the next train is bound without stops for Mytishchi, but beyond that will make all the stops, so here the Negroes announced that the elevator was going to the sixteenth floor, or to the thirty-second floor, with the first stop likewise at the sixteenth floor. Eventually we fathomed this little ruse of the management's—on the sixteenth floor was located its restaurant and cafeteria.

We walked into the elevator, and it rushed up. On the way the elevator stopped, the Negro opened the door, cried "Up!" and the passengers called out the numbers of their floors. A woman entered. All the men removed their hats and travelled on without hats. We followed suit. That was the first American custom we learned. But acquaintance with the customs of a foreign country is not so easy and is almost always accompanied by confusion. Several days later we were going up in an elevator to our publishers. A woman entered, and with the expeditiousness of old experienced New Yorkers we took off our hats. The other men did not follow our knightly example, however, and even regarded us with curiosity. We learned that hats should be taken off only in private and hotel elevators; whereas, in buildings where people transact business one may keep one's hat on.

At the twenty-seventh story we left the elevator and walked along a narrow corridor to our rooms. The large second-rate New York hotels in the centre of the city are built very economically. Their corridors are narrow, their rooms, although expensive, are small, and their ceilings are of standard height—that is, rather low. The client poses before the builder the problem of squeezing into a skyscraper as many rooms as possible. These small rooms, however, are clean and comfortable. They always have hot and cold water, a shower, stationery, telegraph blanks, postcards with views of the hotel, laundry bags, and printed laundry blanks on which you merely place figures indicating the number of pieces of soiled laundry being sent out. Laundering is done quickly and unusually well in America. The ironed shirts look better than new ones on display in a store window. And each one of them is placed in a paper pocket, around which is a paper ribbon with the trade-mark of the laundry, and all of it is neatly pinned together, with pins even around the sleeves. Moreover, the laundry is brought back mended and the socks darned. In America such comforts are not at all a sign of luxury. They are standardized and accessible.

Upon entering the room we began to look for the switch, and for a long time could not understand how electricity is turned on here. At first we wandered through the rooms in the dark, then we struck matches, felt our way along the walls, investigated the doors and windows, but there was no switch anywhere. Several times in sheer desperation we would sit down to rest in the darkness. At last we found it. Near every lamp hung a short thin chain with a little ball on the end. A pull on the little chain and the electricity is lighted. Another pull and it is out. The beds had not been made up for the night, so we began to look for the button of the bell to summon the maid. But there was no button. We looked everywhere. We pulled all the likely strings, but that did us no good. Then we understood that the servants must be called by telephone. We rang for the porter and called for the maid.

In the room was furniture which subsequently we saw in all the hotels of America without exception—in the East, the West, and the South. We did not visit the North. But there is every reason to suppose that even there we would have found exactly the same furniture as in New York: a brown commode with a mirror, metal bedsteads trickily painted to look like wood, several soft easy-chairs, a rocking-chair, portable plug lamps (bridge lamps), on high thin legs with large cardboard lampshades.

On the commode we found a fat little book in a black cover. On the book was the gold trade-mark of the hotel. The book proved to be a Bible. This ancient composition had been adapted for business people whose time is limited. On the first page was a table of contents especially composed by the solicitous management of the hotel:

"For allaying spiritual doubts—page so-and-so, text so-and-so.

"For family troubles—page so-and-so, text so-and-so.

"For financial troubles—page . . ., text . . .

"For success in business—page . . ., text . . ."

That page was somewhat greasy.

We opened the windows. They had to be opened in a peculiar American way, not at all as in Europe. They had to be raised, like windows in a railway carriage.

The windows of our little rooms looked out on three sides. Below lay New York at night.

What can be more alluring than a strange city's lights thickly sown throughout that immense and foreign world which had gone to sleep on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean! From over there, from the side of the ocean, a warm wind wafted. Quite close rose several skyscrapers. It seemed as though one could touch them with one's hand. Their lighted windows could be counted. Farther away the lights became more and more dense. Among them were especially bright ones, which stretched out in straight and in bent chains (these must have been street lamps). Beyond gleamed a sheer gold dust of tiny lights, and then a dark unlighted swath. (The Hudson? Or was that the East River?) And

again the gold mists of boroughs, constellations of unknown streets and squares. In that world of lights, which at first seemed stationary, one could note a certain movement. Now down the river slowly floated the red light of a cutter. A tiny automobile passed down the street. At times, suddenly, somewhere on the other shore of the river, a light as little as a tiny particle of dust would flash and go out. Surely one of the seven million denizens of New York had turned off the light and gone to bed! Who was he? A clerk? An employee of the elevated railroad? Perhaps a lonely girl had gone to sleep—some salesgirl (there are so many of them in New York). And at this very moment, lying under two thin blankets, stirred by the steamer whistles of the Hudson, was she seeing in her dreams a million dollars?

New York was asleep, and a million Edison lamps were guarding its slumber. Immigrants from Scotland, from Ireland, from Hamburg and Vienna, from Kovno and Bialystok, from Naples and Madrid, from Texas, Dakota, and Arizona, were asleep. Asleep were also immigrants from Latin America, from Australia, from Africa and China. Black, white, and yellow people were asleep. Looking at the scarcely trembling lights, we wanted to find out as soon as possible how these people work, how they amuse themselves, what they dream of, what they hope for, what they eat.

Finally, utterly exhausted, we, too, went to bed. We had had altogether too many impressions for the first day. New York cannot be taken in such large doses. It is a frightful, yet at the same time pleasant, experience to have one's body lie in a comfortable American bed, in a state of complete rest, while the mind continues to rock on the *Normandie*, to ride in a wedding-carriage taxi, to run along Broadway, to travel.

In the morning, having awakened on our twenty-seventh story and having looked out of the window, we saw New York in a pellucid morning mist.

We beheld what might be called a peaceful pastoral scene. A few white threads of smoke rose to the sky, while to the spire of a small twenty-story hut was even attached an idyllic and all-metal cockerel. Sixty-storied skyscrapers, which yesterday evening seemed so close, were separated from us by at least ten red iron roofs and a hundred high stacks and skylights, among which laundry hung and the most ordinary cats wandered about. On the walls could be seen advertisements. The walls of the skyscrapers were full of brick dullness. Most of the buildings in New York are made of red brick.

New York opened at once on several planes. The upper plane was occupied by the tops of those skyscrapers which were higher than ours. They were crowned with spires—glass or gold cupolas gleaming in the sun, or towers with large clocks. The towers themselves were the height of a four-story house. On the next plane, open in its entirety to our gaze, in addition to stacks, skylights, and tomcats one could see flat roofs on which were small one-storied houses with gardens, skimpy

trees, little brick paths, a small fountain, and even rattan chairs. Here one could pass the time of day to perfection, almost as at Klyazma, inhaling the petrol perfume of flowers, and listening to the melodic baying of the elevated railway. That monstrosity was on the next plane of New York City. The railway lines of the elevated rest on iron poles and pass on the level of the second and third stories, and only in certain parts of the city do they rise to the fifth or sixth story. This antiquated structure discharges from time to time a horrible clatter that numbs the brain. It causes healthy people to become nervous and the nervous to lose their minds, while the insane jump at the sound in their padded cells and roar like lions. In order to see the last and fundamental plane, the plane of the street, one had to bend out of the window and look down at a right angle. There, as in reversed binoculars, one could see a tiny crossing with tiny automobiles, pedestrians, newspapers strewn on the pavement, and even two rows of shining buttons attached to the lanes where pedestrians are allowed to cross the street.

From the other window one could see the Hudson River, which separates the State of New York from the State of New Jersey. The houses that go down to the Hudson are in New York, while the houses on the other side of the river are in Jersey City. We were told that what at first glance seems a strange administrative division has its compensations. One can, for example, live in one State and work in another. One could also indulge in speculations in New York while paying taxes in Jersey. There, by the way, the taxes are not so high. This seems to add colour to the grey monotonous life of a stockbroker. Or one can get married in New York and get divorced in New Jersey, or the other way around. It all depends upon where the divorce laws are easier and where the marriage-breaking process is cheaper. We, for example, when buying the automobile for our journey through the country, insured it in New Jersey, which charges a few dollars less than New York.

4

Appetite Departs While Eating

THE NEWCOMER need have no fear about leaving his hotel and plunging into the New York jungle. Despite the amazing sameness of its streets, it is well-nigh impossible to get lost there.

Yet the secret is simple. The thoroughfares are divided into two types: the perpendicular ones, or avenues; and the horizontal, or streets. Thus the island of Manhattan has been laid out. Parallel to each other are First, Second, and Third avenues. Then parallel to them is Lexington Avenue, Fourth Avenue, a continuation of which from the central

railway station bears the name of Park Avenue (that is the street of the wealthy), Madison Avenue, beautiful (shopping district) Fifth Avenue, Sixth, Seventh, and so forth. Fifth Avenue divides the city into two parts, the East and West. All these avenues (and they are many) are crossed by streets, of which there are several hundred. And if the avenues have certain distinguishing attributes (some are wider, others are narrower; there is an elevated over Second, Third, Sixth, and Ninth; in the middle of Park Avenue is a grass plot; on Fifth Avenue tower the Empire State Building and Radio City), the streets are quite indistinguishable, and even old New Yorkers cannot tell one street from another by any outward signs. The geometry of New York is violated only by meandering Broadway, which crosses the city diagonally on its run of a score of miles.

The main shoals of pedestrians and automobiles advance along the wide avenues. Under them like coal-mines lie the black and damp, four-track tunnels of subways. Over them is the iron thunder of the elevated. Here are all the types of transport—even several old-fashioned, double-deck autobuses and street-cars. Doubtless, in Kiev, where street-car traffic has been removed from the main street, people would be amazed to hear that down Broadway, the liveliest street in the world, a street-car still hobbles along. Woe to the man who must cross the city, not lengthwise but crosswise, and who would be stricken with the insane idea of taking a taxi-cab for that purpose! His taxi will turn into a street and head straight into a chronic cul-de-sac. While policemen drive the snorting automobile flocks down the length of the avenues, hordes of indignant *schlemiehls* and maniacs congregate in the dirty narrow lanes that cut the city—no, not lengthwise but crosswise. The queues stretch for several blocks, chauffeurs fidget in their seats, passengers impatiently stick their heads out of windows and, falling back in anguish, open their newspapers.

It is hard to believe, yet it is a fact that some seventy years ago on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street, on the very spot where more automobiles can flock together in five minutes than there are in all of Poland, stood a wooden inn which had the following two significant notices posted for the benefit of American travellers:

IT IS FORBIDDEN TO GO TO BED IN BOOTS

and

IT IS FORBIDDEN FOR MORE THAN SIX GUESTS TO SLEEP IN ONE BED

We left the hotel to lunch somewhere, and soon found ourselves on Forty-second Street. During our first days in New York, no matter where we were bound for, we invariably landed on Forty-second Street.

In the crowd, which carried us along, we heard shreds of that quick New York speech which surely must be as strange to the ear of a Londoner as it is to the ear of a Muscovite. Along the walls sat boys—bootblacks, who drummed their brushes on their crudely fashioned wooden boxes, touting for customers. Street photographers aimed their cameras at the passers-by, choosing usually ladies with escorts or tourists from the sticks. After clicking his camera, the photographer would approach the object of his attack and press on him the printed address of his studio. For twenty-five cents the photographed pedestrian may have a candid photograph of himself, a splendid photograph, in the uninhibited act of raising his leg.

Under the sooty spans of a bridge, in the shadow of which gleamed mud left over from last night's rain, a man with hat aslant and an open shirt was delivering a speech. About a score of the curious gathered around him. He was a propagandist for the ideas of the recently assassinated United States senator from Louisiana, Huey P. Long. He spoke on distribution of wealth. His listeners asked him questions. He replied. His chief task seemed to be to amuse his audience. Not far from him, on the sunflecked sidewalk, stopped a fat Negress of the Salvation Army. She wore an old-fashioned bonnet and run-down shoes. She took a bell out of her suitcase and rang it loudly. The suitcase she placed on the sidewalk at her feet. After waiting for a few disciples of the late-lamented senator to desert to her side, squinting against the sun, she began to bellow something, rolling her eyes and banging her own fat bosom. We went several blocks, but the shouting of the Negress was still distinctly heard in the component noise of this restless city.

In front of a ready-to-wear store a man walked calmly back and forth. On his back and on his chest he carried two identical placards: "This Place Is On Strike." In the next street were a few more pickets. Over the large show window of a corner store, despite the sunny morning, gleamed the blue letters "Cafeteria" in electric lights. The cafeteria was large, bright, and clean. Along the walls were glass cases filled with beautiful, appetizing edibles. To the left of the entrance was the cashier's booth. On the right was a metal stand with small slot athwart as in a coin bank. From the opening emerged the end of a blue pasteboard stub. Those who entered tugged at this end. We also tugged. The melodic clang of a bell resounded. One stub was in our hand, and through the slot of the coin bank another blue stub popped out. Then we did what all New Yorkers do when they dash into a cafeteria for a hurried bite. From a special table we each took a light brown tray, placed on it forks, spoons, knives, and paper napkins; and, feeling extremely awkward in our heavy overcoats and hats, went to the right end of a glass-enclosed counter. Down the entire length of this counter ran three rows of nickelled pipes on which we conveniently placed our trays and slid them along after placing each dish upon them. The counter itself was a tremendous camouflaged electric plate. Soups,

chunks of roast, sausages of various lengths and thicknesses, legs of pork and lamb, meat loaves and roulades, mashed, fried, baked, and boiled potatoes and potatoes curiously shaped in pellets, globules of Brussels sprouts, spinach, carrots, and numerous other side dishes were kept warm here. White chefs in starched nightcaps, aided by neat but heavily rouged and marcelled girls in pink headdresses, were busy placing on the glass cover of the counter plates of food and punching that figure on the stub which indicated the cost of each dish. Then came salads and vinaigrettes, various hors d'œuvres, fish in cream sauces and fish in jellied sauces. Then came bread, rolls, and traditional round pies with apple, strawberry, and pineapple fillings. Here coffee and milk were issued. We moved down the counter, pushing our trays. On the thick layer of chipped ice were plates of compotes and ice-cream, oranges and grapefruit cut in half, large and small glasses with various juices. Persistent advertising has taught Americans to drink juices before breakfast and lunch. In the juices are vitamins which are presumably beneficial to the customers, while the sale of juices is indubitably of benefit to fruit merchants. We soon succumbed to this American custom. At first we drank the thick yellow orange juice. Then we passed to the translucent green juice of the grapefruit. Then before eating we began to take the grapefruit itself (it is covered with sugar and is eaten with a spoon; its taste reminds one somewhat of the taste of an orange with a dash of lemon in it, although it is juicier than both these fruits). Finally, with some trepidation and not all at once, we began to imbibe the mundane tomato juice, peppering it a bit beforehand. That proved to be the tastiest of all and the most refreshing, and it best suited our South Russian stomachs. The one thing we did not learn to do in America was to eat melon before dinner. Yet that takes the place of honour among American hors d'œuvres.

In the middle of the cafeteria stood polished wooden tables without tablecloths, and beside them coat-racks. Those who wished could put their hats under their chairs, where there was a special shelf for that purpose. On the tables were stands with bottles of oil, vinegar, catsup, and various other condiments. There was also granulated sugar in a glass flagon wrought in the manner of a pepper-shaker with holes in its metal stopper.

The settling of accounts with the customers was simple. No one could leave the cafeteria without sooner or later passing the cashier's booth and presenting the stub with the total punched in it. Here also cigarettes were sold and one was free to take a toothpick.

The process of eating was just as superbly rationalized as the production of automobiles or of typewriters.

The automats have progressed farther along this road than the cafeterias. Although they have approximately the same outward appearance as the cafeterias, they differ from the latter in that they have carried the process of pushing food into American stomachs to the point of

virtuosity. The walls of the automats are occupied throughout with little glass closets. Near each one of them is a slit for dropping a "nickel" (a five-cent coin). Behind the glass stands a dour sandwich or a glass of juice or a piece of pie. Despite the shining glass and metal, the sausages and cutlets deprived of liberty somehow produce a strange impression. One pities them, like cats at a show. A man drops a nickel, acquires the right to open the little door, takes out his sandwich, carries it to his table and there eats it, again putting his hat under his chair on the special shelf. Then the man goes up to a tap, drops his "nickel," and out of the tap into the glass drips exactly as much coffee and milk as is supposed to drip. One feels something humiliating, something insulting to man in that. One begins to suspect that the owner of the automat has outfitted his establishment, not in order to present society with a pleasant surprise, but in order to discharge from service poor marcelled girls with pink headdresses and thereby earn a few more dollars.

But automats are not over popular in America. Evidently the bosses themselves feel that there must be some limit to rationalization. Hence, the normal little restaurants, for people of modest means, belonging to mighty trusts are always full. The most popular of these—Childs—has become in America a standard for inexpensive food of good quality. "He dines at Childs": that means that the man earns $30 a week. In any part of New York one can say: "Let's have dinner at Childs," and it would not take him more than ten minutes to reach Childs. At Childs one receives the same clean handsome food as in a cafeteria or an automat. Only there one is not deprived of the small satisfaction of looking at a menu, saying "H'm," asking the waitress whether the veal is good, and receiving the answer: "Yes, sir!"

Generally speaking, New York is remarkable because it has everything. There you can find the representatives of any nation, secure any dish, any object from an embroidered Ukrainian shirt to a Chinese stick with a bone handle in the shape of a hand, which is used for back-scratching, from Russian caviare and vodka to Chilean soup and Italian macaroni. There are no delicacies in the world that New York cannot offer. But for all of it one must pay in dollars. And we want to talk about the preponderant majority of Americans who can pay only cents and for whom exist Childs, cafeterias, and automats. When describing the latter establishments, we can boldly declare that this is how the average American is fed. Under this concept of the average American is presupposed a man who has a decent job and a decent salary and who from the point of view of capitalism is an example of the healthy prospering American, happy and optimistic, who receives all the blessings of life at a comparatively low price.

The splendid organization of the restaurant business seems to confirm that. Model cleanliness, good quality of produce, an extensive choice of dishes, a minimum of time lost in dining. All that is so. But here is the trouble. All this beautifully prepared food is quite tasteless—