

## On the threshold of a new world

1 IN the galleries above, I was taken from room  
to room and looked over rather carelessly. After  
lifting my eyelids with a button hook<sup>1</sup>, a young  
man with a military bearing saw that I had no  
5 trachoma<sup>2</sup>. Someone else made me cough and  
breathe. I had to take off my clothes and turn  
around several times. In another room, a big  
fat man asked if I could bend over. "Why?"  
I asked in turn, thinking that the only reason he  
10 wanted to know was because he himself would  
never be able to do such a thing. "Is it that  
everyone who comes to America has to be able  
to bend over?"

"Yes," he said.

15 "What for?"

"Because when we sing our national anthem, we bend over. Now do it  
or I'll send you back to Serbia."

"I don't come from Serbia," I protested.

20 "Exactly," he said. "But if I want to, I can ship you there, so you'd bet-  
ter do as I tell you."

I bent over and was passed on to the next room.

There, a pretty woman with cold eyes asked me if I knew how to read  
and write.

"Of course," I said.

25 "What languages?" she asked.

When I replied, "Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, German, and French — and  
English, as you can see," she got very suspicious and asked me what I did  
for a living.

30 "I write books," I said. Little did I know that in America no one ever  
believes this. She looked at me the way one looks at a madman.

"What kind of books?" she asked sharply, closing one eye and squint-  
ing with the other.

"Stories," I replied pompously, "essays, dissertations on Biblical poetry,  
political science, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera."

35 "How can you make a living by doing this?" she inquired, with evident  
disgust.

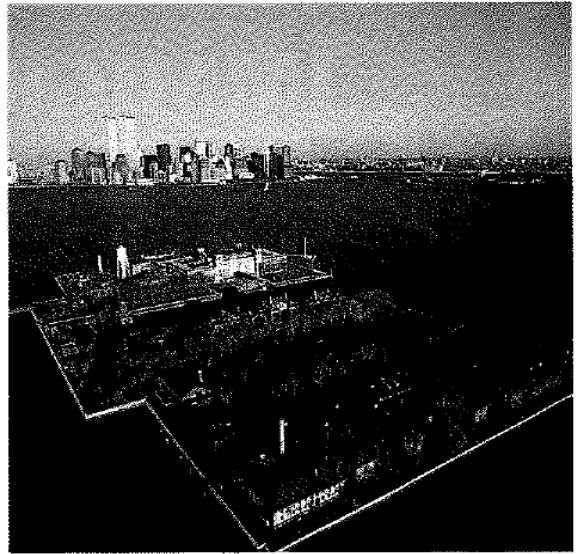
"That's very perceptive of you," I said with a broad smile. "I can't."

"Turn around," she commanded. She made a letter on my back with a  
piece of chalk and motioned for me to leave. "Next!" she shouted.

40 "What's that for?" I asked, trying to see what she had written.

"Nothing," she said, and pushed me into the hall.

By this time I was elated. I imagined myself in a dressing gown, living  
in a palace overlooking the forests of Manhattan (which I thought would  
look like a cross between the Tyrol and the *Berner Oberland*<sup>3</sup>), married to  
45 the Norwegian woman, after whom I was chasing as best I could. We would  
be on the same ferry, I thought. The ferry would burst through the fog, and  
there, in front of us, would be a magnificent island of fjords, meadows, and  
castles...



1. button hook : tire-  
bouton
2. trachoma : trachome  
(maladie des yeux)
3. Berner Oberland:  
Oberland bernois (région  
montagnaise de Suisse)

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