

Embryo Americans by Elizabeth Robins

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and following pages.

Embryo Americans

BY ELIZABETH ROBINS

THE Magdeburger Bahnhof, that dull and usually unremarkable railway station at Leipsic, was transformed—it had become a human ant-hill, where each creature, with ant-like scorn for proportion, seemed to be carrying or dragging a burden of *Gepäck* and progeny bigger than himself.

I am pushed and buffeted. But the raging excitement of the motley gathering rouses too keen an interest to admit of retreat and waiting somewhere else under less revolutionary conditions for my Hanover train. With difficulty I stand my ground, elbows out, awaiting developments.

Many of the outlandishly dressed people have evidently already come some distance on a pilgrimage of supreme and agitating importance. I listen to the confusion of thick dialects, and notice how most of the work-worn women are dressed peasant fashion in fierce colors, stain-

ed and toned by hard weather in the open. No hats or bonnets—three-cornered kerchiefs and shawls on their heads in many cases, which coverings are being mauled and pushed down to the neck by the surging crowd. The German officials “*schimpf*” and rage, the women press on into the already overcrowded station in the wake of their men folk, faces red and steaming, arms full of babies and bundles, little children clinging to their skirts (oh, the small scared faces!), husbands quarrelling, screaming orders, and trying to keep their flocks together; mothers distracted, many crying; young girls with cheeks flushed bright at the adventure and eyes shining, clothes askew and sometimes torn; little people losing their mothers; mothers agonized about their children—it was a picture of stress and strain I have never seen equalled. What was going on? I could not yet force my way to an official to enquire. There seem-



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ed to be a desperate congestion about the exit to the platform. Some of the people were too overburdened with luggage to reach, or at all events to get through, the stile, and stood wedged, till the ticket-takers pulled them through by main force, tearing the travellers' clothes in the process, and even in one or two cases denuding him (oftener her) of some cherished bundle—whereupon an outcry, much "schimpfung," and the property is restored. I have reached a place of refuge behind the ticket-takers at the stile, looking, wondering.

An old woman with a finely marked Hebrew countenance and terribly overburdened with "spoils," had evidently, before getting as far as the Magdeburger Bahnhof, succumbed to the nightmare, and sought to drown her wretchedness in drink. Her eyes alone in all that throng were veiled and vague. She alone was not scuffling and pressing forward. The comforter she had taken unto herself gave to her solitary figure in the midst of the pandemonium a statuesque dignity. There she stood as the people hurried past—she alone unhasting, cured of care; waiting with a dark and scornful patience for what might befall.

The one steadfast point in the flux began to attract the eyes of the multitude. Guttural voices screamed at the old woman to move on. No echo of the din about her seemed to reach her ears. Still the people pushed and struggled past, casting back oburgation as they went. Unheeding, she was jostled and jeered at, till all at once some sense of intolerable woe was roused in her drink-dulled brain. She threw back her head and gave out a hoarse cry like an angry, tormented animal. The children clung closer to their elders. The terrible old woman was given a wider berth, and still at intervals she sounded that awful cry. The ticket-taker fell to berating her at last for an obstruction, but he had been wonderfully forbearing and patient with the strange crew.

A little boy had now got far on in front of his family, with a huge basket. The ticket-taker of course refused to let him through, and the boy, having fought his way that far, stoutly declined to go back and join the family circle. He

stood there in the narrow passage feverishly embracing his great hamper, while the ticket people swore at him, and he cried lustily for his "Mutter!"

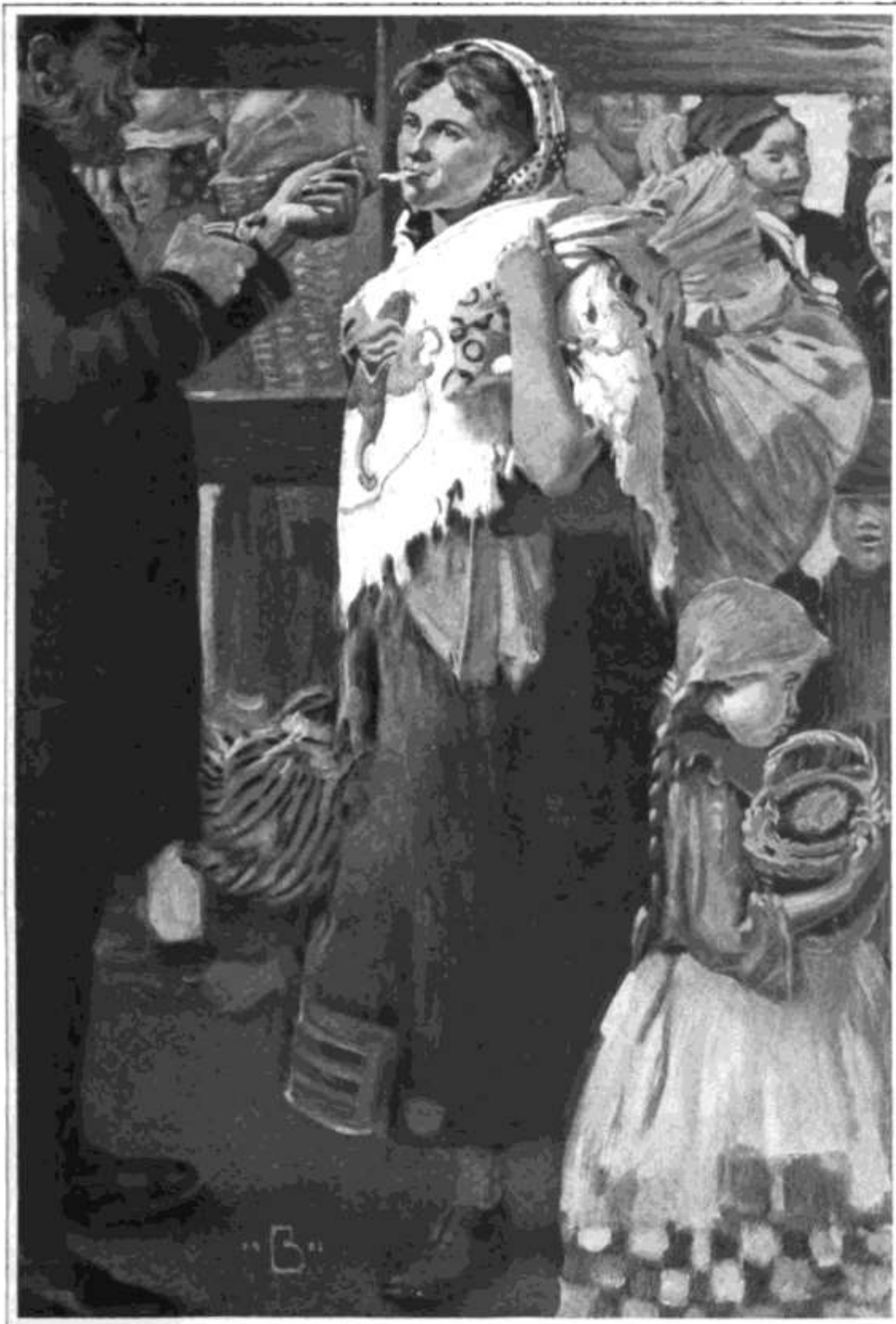
"Where are all these people going?" I asked the ticket-taker.

"*Nach Nord America*," he answered, dragging the boy and the hamper to one side.

"Poor America!" I said, involuntarily, looking at the hardened faces. Yet there were some . . . there was a young mother struggling past the boy who had the wicker thing; *she* had a deal of simple, tender humanity in her anxious face. A baby on one arm, another child and a bundle dragged behind her by the other hand. The problem (as I had been for some moments observing) is, how to hold on to your infants and your *Gepäck*, and yet present and take again the precious ticket. The young mother solved it by momentarily releasing the bundle and the child behind her, and producing the ticket out of the sock of the infant in her arms. After it was punched, the ticket was safely tucked into the sock again, bundle and other child clutched, and all landed safely on the platform.

A young girl presently, arms full, flushed, pretty, smiling, not a finger free, held her ticket tightly between her white teeth, and so, with a little upward tilt of chin, was it offered to the guard at the gate. When he had punched it, she opened her mouth, and he replaced the ticket as calmly as if all well-conducted tourists carried theirs as a dog carries a bone. Others, seeing this plan succeed so well, adopted it, for it was evident it "fetched" the ticket-taker in spite of his official calmness, and he took to making quick, laughing speeches when the girls who presented their *Fahrkarten* so were pretty and good-humored.

As I stood watching this little gleam of youth and geniality lighting up the squalid scene, I was startled again by the animal-like cry of the old Mother in Israel, for whom it seemed "the world and its kingdoms" were "incredibly faded." She had not drowned, but only partly deadened, her disgust, and was moved to raise at intervals this unearthly, impersonal howl, for no reason that was apparent (the crowd was thinned), but just a dim sense of the awfulness of



Drawn by E. L. Blumenschein

HER TICKET BETWEEN HER WHITE TEETH

things in general. She was evidently like to lose her train, so she was cursed at with renewed vigor, and pulled out on the platform. In some odd way her dark and finely marked face never lost dignity; she looked a moment's scorn on the people who laid hands upon her, and then, as though she had far graver accounts to settle with the Everlasting, she lifted up that melancholy, awful cry. As she disappeared into the mob on the platform, "Mutter! Mutter!" screamed the small boy with the big basket, "we shall lose the train for America," and he began to weep. Just then, among a lot of Poles or Hungarians, appeared his "Mutter," and the boy with the basket ceased to be an obstruction in Germany. In America—who can tell?—he may take up the office afresh.

No wonder that we over there have our problems! I looked with unwelcoming eyes upon those future compatriots

of mine, and I wondered which among that dirty, ill-smelling horde were to be the future millionaires, governors, masters, mothers of duchesses yet to be, and future vice-queens of India.

The sense of the modern miracle that America is moved me more than ever it did before. What a power is hers, what a *digestion*, when she can take such material into her great maw and not die of it! . . . when of such raw stuff as this sweating and ignorant, cattlelike crowd she can fashion overlords and potentates!

As I passed out (guiltless of *Gepäck*, and not offering my ticket in my teeth), threading my way behind the mob to a *Zweite Klasse* carriage, I felt with a kind of uneasy amusement that we were all Americans together—only I belonged to the people who had been of account, and they belonged to those who were to be.

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Illustrations by E. L. Blumenschein