

AMERIKA (THE MAN WHO DISAPPEARED)

FRANZ KAFKA was born of Jewish parents in Prague in 1883. The family spoke both Czech and German; Franz was sent to German-language schools and to the German University, from which he received his doctorate in law in 1906. He then worked for most of his life as a respected official of a state insurance company (first under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then under the new Republic of Czechoslovakia). Literature, of which he said that his life 'consisted', had to be pursued on the side. His emotional life was dominated by his relationships with his father, a man of overbearing character, and with a series of women: Felice Bauer from Berlin, to whom he was twice engaged; his Czech translator, Milena Jesenská-Pollak, to whom he became attached in 1920; and Dora Diamant, a young Jewish woman from Poland in whom he found a devoted companion during the last year of his life. Meanwhile, his writing had taken a new turn in 1917 with the outbreak of the tuberculosis illness from which he was to die in 1924. Only a small number of Kafka's stories were published during his lifetime, and these are published in Penguin as *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. He asked his friend, Max Brod, to see that all the writings he left should be destroyed. Brod felt unable to comply and undertook their publication instead, beginning with the three unfinished novels, *The Trial* (1925), *The Castle* (1926) and *Amerika* (1927). Other short works appeared posthumously in a more sporadic fashion.

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Amerika

The Man Who Disappeared

Translated with an Introduction by

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2

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[*Introduction*](#)

[*Bibliography*](#)

[*Amerika \(The Man Who Disappeared\)*](#)

INTRODUCTION

Der Verschollene (*The Man Who Disappeared*), is the Cinderella among Kafka's three novels: the earliest begun and earliest abandoned; the last to achieve posthumous publication (with *Amerika*), edited by Max Brod, in 1927; the least read, the least written about and the least talked about by 'Kafka'. That said, I agree with Edwin Muir, whose English translation first came out in 1928, that it is 'the most purely delightful of Kafka's books', and there is a weightier case to be made for it as well – not that delight should be lost sight of in the search for meaning.

It seems that Kafka worked on a version (which is now lost) of *Der Verschollene* from 1911 into the summer of 1912. It went slowly, and he was never happy with it. Then, following the writing of *Das Urteil* (*The Judgement*) in a single night (22–3 September 1912), he embarked on a second version, which went swimmingly. Brod reports on his friend's progress:

I quote from my diary notes of the time. 29 September: 'Kafka in ecstasy, writing all night. Novel set in America.' 1 October: 'Kafka in incredible ecstasy.' 2 October: 'Kafka, continuing very inspired. A chapter finished. I am happy for him.' 3 October: 'Kafka doing well.' On the 6 October he read me *The Judgement* and *The Stoker*.

By 17 November he had completed six chapters and thought he could finish the novel by Christmas, when he had a week off. In the event, things happened differently. For three weeks, he was distracted by *Metamorphosis*, experienced increasing difficulties with the novel and finally put it aside on 24 January 1913. In June, the first chapter, *The Stoker*, was published as 'a fragment' by Kurt Wolff, and there was some talk of putting it out in another volume, along with *The Judgement* and *Metamorphosis*, to be called perhaps *Die Söhne* (*The Sons*) – a suggestion of how Kafka expected to be read. When his copy of *The Stoker* arrived, Kafka read it aloud to his parents and noted:

Exuberance, because I liked *The Stoker* so much. In the evening I read it to my parents, there is no better critic than myself, reading aloud to my most reluctantly listening father. Many shallows, in amongst obviously inaccessible depths.

Kafka didn't take up the manuscript again until October 1914, when he completed the "Up! Up!" cried Robinson' section (from 'This was most unfair'), and worked on the two final fragments before finally giving up, this time for good. Some of his subsequent judgements were spectacularly harsh – as with all his work – but he never actually destroyed *The Man Who Disappeared*, and the time came when he thought his revulsion came from incapacity and it turned on himself: 'strength apparently (already) beyond me today.' In 1920, reading Milena Jesenská's translation of *The Stoker* into Czech, he approved of her rendition of 'in his exuberance, and because he was a strong lad', while suggesting she should leave it out altogether, so little sympathy did he have left for his strikingly young, forthright, cheerful and brave hero. Not only did Kafka expect his writing to reflect himself (and to be better than himself), but to go on doing so.

The version that Brod published in 1927 differs from the present one in at least one matter of substance, and many of detail – if there is such a thing as a detail with Kafka. The substance is the section "Up! Up," cried Robinson' and the first of the fragments, 'Brunelda's Departure', never previously presented in English. The details range from the title of the book – which, though he may have spoken to Brod about his 'American novel', is only twice referred to in writing, both times as *Der Verschollene* (it is a book about a person, not a place) – to the through-numbering and titles of the later chapters, including 'The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma', which were supplied by Brod. In the text, there are some thousands of differences – most of them merely corrections of such things as spelling and punctuation – from the original: of the hero given in the first sentence ('seventeen' instead of 'sixteen') to the very last – Brod originally ended the book 'Such a carefree journey in America they had never known,' a falsely and quite preposterously un-Kafkaesquely ringing summary, instead of where Kafka actually broke off, 'so close that the chill breath of them made their faces shudder', characteristically menacing, peculiar, physical, ambivalent, something visual becoming palpable, words growing teeth, and an odd resemblance too to Yeats's poem of disenchantment, 'Towards Break of Day':

Nothing that we love over-much
Is ponderable to our touch.

I dreamed towards break of day,
The cold blown spray in my nostril.

It may seem an odd thing to do, to go back to a rough, unedited and error-strewn manuscript version of a book: to reintroduce inconsistencies of spelling in the names of Mack and Rene (not to mention Lobter), to situate San Francisco in the East instead of the West, to have a bridge linking New York with Boston instead of Brooklyn, to talk of ‘quarter pounds’ instead of ‘quarter dollars’, to provide floor numbers that don’t add up and so forth, but for the translator, himself putting out a rough new text, it is pleasing to have a rough old one. Theatre people in particular will understand the importance of freshness of language. Muir’s version of Brod has had years to weather and settle; I like to think there is compatibility, not parity, between the speed and unevenness of Kafka and what I’ve done. Anyway, this is only a partial exercise. I haven’t written ‘Newyork’ or ‘Occidental’ in minuscule letters, there is no way of usefully suggesting ‘Austriacisms’ in English, and so forth. (Nor, incidentally, have I fallen for the obvious temptation – not available to Muir or Kafka – of trying to make my translation sound ‘American’: that would have been to strive for a misleading verisimilitude. I may have meant ‘elevator’, but I enjoyed writing ‘lift’.) Brod’s work is often unarguable and always well-intentioned – and but for him we wouldn’t have had most of Kafka at all – but I am still glad to have been able to slip past it.

The prevailing sense of *Amerika* – Muir’s certainly – is that of a much sunnier book altogether than the other two, full of open space and forward movement and real people and things and a fight against confinement, inertia and allegory. ‘The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma’, with its women on pedestals (where else!) blowing trumpets (what else!) promises to be Kafka’s vision of Heaven, and the happy ending he discussed with Brod has been widely reported:

In enigmatic language Kafka used to hint smilingly, that within this ‘almost limitless’ theatre his young hero was going to find again a profession, a standby, his freedom, even his own home and his parents, as if by some celestial witchery.

As if it were Kansas, not Oklahoma. Muir goes so far as to claim: ‘His story is the story of innocence, as that of the heroes of the other two books is the story of experience,’ but I think the opening sentence establishes Karl’s guilt beyond all doubt. He may feel and sound and act innocent, and think of himself as innocent, but when was that ever any defence in Kafka, or whom, here as elsewhere, guilt is assumed at the outset?

There is an opposing reading of *The Man Who Disappeared*, very effectively advanced by Hartmut Binder’s *Kafka Kommentar*, that, far from being a jolly picaresque or Chaplinade, it

events actually describe a pitiless descent through American society, towards a probable catastrophe every bit as grim and ineluctable as those in *The Trial* or *The Castle*. The chapters are in triads: wandering, adoption and expulsion. The first six chapters that Kafka completed thus comprise two whole such cycles; and there is evidence – in Karl’s arrival at ‘Enterprise No. 25’, in the names ‘Fanny’ and ‘Negro’, in Karl’s reticence about his last place of employment and so forth – that in his novel Kafka was looking at a spiral of descent comprising four complete cycles: a young man with expectations, a lift-boy (what a symbol of forlorn aspirations!), a skivvy, and then, it has been conjectured, a fence and brother attendant. While – especially in Kafka – the book’s plunging onward movement breeds hope, its cyclical organization guarantees doom. Binder points out that this book which – compared to his others – seems everywhere improvised (‘free improvisation without any or without much serious afterthought’, writes Muir), fanciful and airy, is actually extremely tightly and purposefully composed, full of careful echoes; that objects and relationships are not haphazard, but more like deformed replicas of one another. One thinks of the meals at Mr Pollunder’s house, outside the hotel, Robinson’s picnic on the balcony, and the welcome feast at Clayton (each one a last supper); the way the action takes place in what might be one room (one basic stage-set would certainly be enough), high up, balconied, over-furnished with views (and no doubt Kafka would have brought the floor-numbers into conformity with one another!); the washings, Karl’s high-tech shower at his uncle’s, his wash in the Head Cook’s room, Brunelda’s medieval bath; such details as tickets, passports and visiting cards, music, drink and beards.

It seems likely – remember *The Sons* – that far from being free (‘the most worthless condition’ (p. 88), albeit) and in the land of the free (though quite how it deserves the label in the book is unclear), Karl is continually being made to replay his drama of expulsion, now with the Senator and the stoker as his ‘parents’, now with Mr Green and Mr Pollunder, now with the Head Cook and the Head Waiter, the implacable father and the mother who is finally, no defence. There is a possibility that Kafka meant Karl to die at the end of the book – or perhaps already to be dead, with the Oklahoma Theatre a sort of afterlife – and if that sounds far-fetched, one should think about the fact that the lavish and pointless-seeming description of the box in the theatre that so fascinates Karl in Clayton is of the place where Lincoln – also described – was assassinated; that the Oklahoma Theatre was part-based on a large sanatorium called ‘Just’s Jungborn’ where Kafka spent the summer of 1912, though according to him gave its occupants some taste of America, and might not be heaven at all.

but a penal colony by other means, as Kafka loved to subvert expectation; that one of Kafka's sourcebooks had a photograph labelled 'Idyll in Oklahoma' of a lynched black man surrounded by happy white faces (and Karl had just given his name as 'Negro'). Binder suggests that Kafka was either telling the perennial optimist Brod what he wanted to hear, or maybe he was even winding him up. Perhaps the reconvening of the cast would be to witness a horrible judicial murder – as elsewhere in Kafka: why else would Liberty in the opening paragraph carry a sword? Where we leave the book – where the book leaves us – is with a *mélange* of *Schlaraffenland* (Cockaigne), bureaucracy *in excelsis* and – incredibly – *Judentransporte*.

This meaning, typically, seems about as far removed as possible from the experience of reading *The Man Who Disappeared*. 'They are pictures, just pictures,' Kafka remarked to Janouch. The French critic Claude David, quoted in Binder, writes:

Le roman de Kafka est comme construit sur deux plans. D'une part les aventures, une agitation incohérente...Mais, en dessous, règne un strict système de relations, un monde de signes, où rien n'est gratuit, où tout porte un sens, où tout invite à l'exégèse. ('Kafka's novel [*The Man Who Disappeared*] has two levels. On the surface, there is the action, the story, an incoherent agitation... But buried underneath it, an ineluctable network of relationships exists, a world of signs where nothing is casual, where everything carries meaning and demands to be interpreted.')

(Perhaps Kafka was referring to something like this when he wrote about shallows and inaccessible depths.) Nowhere in Kafka is this gulf greater than in *The Man Who Disappeared* with its pantomime vividness and gusto. Although there is quite a bit of the fluid, bewildering and hilariously destabilizing description that one thinks of as Kafkaesque, playing Zeno-like games with space and time and event, more striking is the number of sentences that do nothing but advance the action: "'What's your name?'" he asked, tucking his truncheon under his arm, and slowly pulling out a notepad.' It's an almost parodically meticulous transcription of an action, very nearly as modest as Kingsley Amis's ideal novel sentence, 'He put out his cigarette and left the room,' except for its quotient of joy and its deliberate slowness. A lot of *The Man Who Disappeared* consists of direct speech – and Kafka's characters like to talk, like Seamus Heaney's line, 'like a book of manners in the wilderness' – interspersed with descriptions of gesture. Here, it doesn't resemble epic (the novel) so much as drama, with

speech and action (Kafka was going to the Yiddish theatre a lot in 1912). Almost more than action and gesture is the emphasis on blocking, grouping, distance, movement, positioning. It's thus less like a playscript (one in which the dialogue, admittedly, is half-concealed in endless paragraphs – another thing Brod did was break up these prose blocks, exactly as a British editor would have done) than a director's notes. Often the effect is absurd: the movements – and one's awareness of them – are as artificial and elaborate as the speech itself, and quite often at variance with it: Karl 'repeatedly pushing down a little pair of scales for sheer delight', Robinson and Delamarche 'clinking glasses and keeping them touching in mid-air awhile'. In addition to its dramatic aspect, there is lyricism in the way the prose works, sometimes strike an almost random note that reverberates powerfully in the reader's mind. Cruelty, sex and homesickness are most often sounded, but there are also moments of dense, almost inexplicable peace:

In the empty lanes one occasionally saw a policeman on a horse, motionless, or the carriage of flags and banners spanning the whole street, or a workers' leader surrounded by colleagues and shop stewards or an electric tramcar, which hadn't managed to flee in time, and was now standing there dark and empty, with the driver and conductor sitting on the platform.

America, when Kafka wrote about it, was a mythical place, a promised land to European Jews. Joseph Roth has a character called Zwonimir in his early novel, *Hotel Savoy* (1924): 'He loved America. When a billet was good he said "America". When a position had been well fortified he said "America". Of a "fine" lieutenant he would say "America", and because I was a good shot he would say "America" when I scored bullseyes.' Karl May's tremendously popular cowboy stories of the 1880s were written without his having been there (his Wild West, peopled by Indians and Saxons is oddly like Kafka's America, an exploded Bohemia). The youthful Brecht's frontier ballads likewise. *The Man Who Disappeared* was written at the height of the immigration from Eastern Europe. Some of Kafka's relatives had gone to the new world – one had helped build the Panama Canal – and had gone into family lore (see Anthony Northey's book, *Kafka's Relatives: Their Lives and His Writing*). The cult of American speed, scale, novelty, machinery and brutality had entered European consciousness. But even beyond that, Kafka tried to make his book up to the minute, with its telephones and gramophones, electric bells and electric torches, lifts, the Brooklyn Bridge (now misnamed again, but only completed in 1910), an early reference to Coca-Cola perhaps (available

Europe since 1892). But then Kafka already had to his credit the first description of aeroplanes in German literature in 'Aeroplane in Brescia' in 1907.

One of the harmless incidental sidelines of translating the book was doing much of it in America. To be thinking of Kafka in a jumbo jet banking over Ellis Island, or while watching ten tiny aeroplanes flying round and round a 100,000 seater sports stadium in the middle of nowhere, all towing banners for pizzas, for judges or for true love; to be spiralled round the immigration hall at La Guardia with an Italian delegation already in cowboy boots, string ties and ten-gallon hats, or visiting Dean and DeLuca on Broadway with its pressed tin ceiling, wires, strings and pipes; or be listening to an NPR report on the case of a 340 lb. Louisiana woman who used to bring her own chair into the local cinema because she couldn't fit into a cinema chair, bursting into tears when the manager told her it was a fire hazard. I mention these things not because there is any distinction in them, but precisely the opposite, because there is none.

MICHAEL HOFMAN

London, July 1999

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THE MAN WHO DISAPPEARED (AMERIKA)

1

THE STOKER

As the seventeen-year-old Karl Rossmann, who had been sent to America by his unfortunate parents because a maid had seduced him and had a child by him, sailed slowly into New York harbour, he suddenly saw the Statue of Liberty, which had already been in view for some time, as though in an intenser sunlight. The sword in her hand seemed only just to have been raised aloft, and the unchained winds blew about her form.

‘So high,’ he said to himself, and quite forgetting to disembark, he found himself gradually pushed up against the railing by the massing throng of porters.

A young man with whom he had struck up a slight acquaintance during the crossing said to him in passing: ‘Well, don’t you want to get off yet?’ ‘I’m all ready,’ said Karl laughing to him, and in his exuberance and because he was a strong lad, he raised his suitcase on to his shoulder. But as he watched his acquaintance disappearing along with the others, swinging his cane, he realized that he had left his umbrella down in the ship. So he hurriedly asked his acquaintance, who seemed less than overjoyed about it, to be so good as to wait by his suitcase for a moment, took a quick look around for his subsequent orientation, and hurried off. Below deck, he found to his annoyance that a passage that would have considerably shortened the way for him was for the first time barred, probably something to do with the fact that all the passengers were disembarking, and so he was forced instead to make his way through numerous little rooms, along continually curving passages and down tiny flights of stairs, one after the other, and then through an empty room with an abandoned desk in it until, eventually, only ever having gone this way once or twice previously, and then in the company of others, he found that he was totally and utterly lost. Not knowing what to do, not seeing anyone, and hearing only the scraping of thousands of human feet overhead and the last, faraway wheezings of the engine, which had already been turned off, he began without thinking to knock at the little door to which he had come on his wanderings. ‘I

open!' came a voice from within, and Karl felt real relief as he opened the door. 'Why are you banging about on the door like a madman?' asked an enormous man, barely looking at Karl. Through some kind of overhead light-shaft, a dim light, long since used up in the high reaches of the ship, fell into the wretched cabin, in which a bed, a wardrobe, a chair and the man were all standing close together, as though in storage. 'I've lost my way,' said Karl. 'I never quite realized on the crossing what a terribly big ship this is.' 'Well, you're right about that,' said the man with some pride, and carried on tinkering with the lock of a small suitcase, repeatedly shutting it with both hands to listen to the sound of the lock as it snapped shut. 'Why don't you come in,' the man went on, 'don't stand around outside.' 'Aren't you bothering me?' asked Karl. 'Pah, how could you bother me?' 'Are you German?' Karl asked to reassure himself, as he'd heard a lot about the dangers for new arrivals in America, especially coming from Irishmen. 'Yes, yes,' said the man. Still Karl hesitated. Then the man abruptly grabbed the door handle, and pulling it to, swept Karl into the room with him. 'I hate it when people stand in the corridor and watch me,' said the man, going back to work on his suitcase, 'the world and his wife go by outside peering in, it's quite intolerable.' 'But the passage outside is completely deserted,' said Karl, who was standing squeezed uncomfortably against the bedpost. 'Yes, now,' said the man. 'But now is what matters,' thought Karl. 'He is an unreasonable man.' 'Lie down on the bed, you'll have more room that way,' said the man. Karl awkwardly clambered on to the bed, and had to laugh out loud about his first vain attempt to mount it. No sooner was he on it, though, than he cried: 'Oh God, I've quite forgotten all about my suitcase!' 'Where is it?' 'Up on deck, an acquaintance is keeping an eye on it for me. What was his name now?' And from a secret pocket that his mother had sewed into the lining of his jacket for the crossing, he pulled a calling-card: 'Butterbaum, Franz Butterbaum.' 'Is the suitcase important to you?' 'Of course.' 'Well then, so why did you give it to a stranger?' 'I forgot my umbrella down below and went to get it, but I didn't want to leave my suitcase down with me. And now I've gone and gotten completely lost' 'Are you on your own? There's no one with you?' 'Yes, I'm on my own.' 'I should stay by this man, though, Karl, I may not find a better friend in a hurry. 'And now you've lost your suitcase. Not to mention the umbrella,' and the man sat down on the chair, as though Karl's predicament was beginning to interest him. 'I don't think the suitcase is lost yet.' 'Think all you like,' said the man, and scratched vigorously at his short, thick, black hair. 'But you should know that different ports have different morals. In Hamburg your man Butterbaum might have minded

your suitcase for you, but over here, there's probably no trace of either of them any more

'Then I'd better go back up right away,' said Karl and tried to see how he might leave. 'You're staying put,' said the man, and gave him a push in the chest, that sent him sprawling back on the bed. 'But why?' asked Karl angrily. 'There's no point,' said the man, 'in a little while I'll be going up myself, and we can go together. Either your suitcase will have been stolen and that's too bad and you can mourn its loss till the end of your days, or else the fellow's still minding it, in which case he's a fool and he might as well go on minding it, or he's an honest man and just left it there, and we'll find it more easily when the ship's emptied. Same thing with your umbrella.' 'Do you know your way around the ship?' asked Karl suspiciously, and it seemed to him that the otherwise attractive idea that his belongings would be more easily found on the empty ship had some kind of hidden catch. 'I'm the ship's stoker,' said the man. 'You're the ship's stoker,' cried Karl joyfully, as though that surpassed all expectations, and propped himself up on his elbow to take a closer look at the man. 'Just outside the room where I slept with the Slovak there was a little porthole, and through it we could see into the engine-room.' 'Yes, that's where I was working,' said the stoker. 'I've always been terribly interested in machinery,' said Karl, still following a particular line of thought, 'and I'm sure I would have become an engineer if I hadn't had to go to America.' 'Why did you have to go to America?' 'Ah, never mind!' said Karl, dismissing the whole story with a wave of his hand. And he smiled at the stoker, as though asking him to take a lenient view of whatever it was he hadn't told him. 'I expect there's a good reason,' said the stoker, and it was hard to tell whether he still wanted to hear it or not. 'And now I might as well become a stoker,' said Karl. 'My parents don't care what becomes of me.' 'My job will be going,' said the stoker, and coolly thrust his hands into his pockets and kicked out his legs, which were clad in rumpled leather-like iron-grey trousers, on to the bed to stretch them. Karl was forced to move nearer to the wall. 'You're leaving the ship?' 'Yup, we're off this very day.' 'But what for? Don't you like it?' 'Well, it's circumstances really, it's not always whether you like something or not that matters. Anyway you're right, I don't like it. You're probably not serious about saying you could become a stoker, but that's precisely how you get to be one. I'd strongly advise you against it myself. If you were intending to study in Europe, why not study here? Universities in America are incomparably better.' 'That may be,' said Karl, 'but I can hardly afford to study. I did once read about someone who spent his days working in a business and his nights studying, and in the end he became a doctor and I think a burgomaster, but you

need a lot of stamina for that, don't you? I'm afraid I don't have that. Besides, I was never especially good at school, and wasn't at all sorry when I had to leave. Schools here are supposed to be even stricter. I hardly know any English. And there's a lot of bias against foreigners here too, I believe.' 'Have you had experience of that too? That's good. Then you're the man for me. You see, this is a German ship, it belongs to the Hamburg American Line, everyone who works on it should be German. So then why is the senior engineer Rumanian? Schubal, his name is. It's incredible. And that bastard bossing Germans around on a German ship. Don't get the idea' – he was out of breath, and his hands flapped – 'don't you believe that I'm complaining for the hell of it. I know you don't have any influence, and you're just a poor fellow yourself. But it's intolerable.' And he beat the table with his fist several times, not taking his eyes off it as he did so. 'I've served on so many ships in my time – and here he reeled off a list of twenty names as if it was a single word, Karl felt quite giddy – 'and with distinction, I was praised, I was a worker of the kind my captains liked, I even served on the same clipper for several years' – he rose, as if that had been the high point of his life – 'and here on this bathtub, where everything is done by rote, where they've no use for imagination – here I'm suddenly no good, here I'm always getting in Schubal's way, I'm lazy, I deserve to get kicked out, they only pay me my wages out of the kindness of the hearts. Does that make any sense to you? Not me.' 'You mustn't stand for that,' said Karl in agitation. He had almost forgotten he was in the uncertain hold of a ship moored to the coast of an unknown continent, that's how much he felt at home on the stoker's bed. 'Have you been to see the captain? Have you taken your case to him?' 'Ah leave off, forget it. I don't want you here. You don't listen to what I say, and then you start giving me advice. How can I go to the captain.' And the stoker sat down again, exhausted, and buried his face in his hands. 'But it's the best advice I know,' Karl said to himself. And it seemed to him that he would have done better to fetch his suitcase, instead of offering advice which was only ignored anyway. When his father had given the suitcase into his possession, he had mused in jest: 'wonder how long you'll manage to hang on to it for? And now that expensive suitcase might already be lost in earnest. His only consolation was the fact that his father couldn't possibly learn about his present fix, even if he tried to make inquiries. The shipping company would only be able to confirm that he had reached New York safely. But Karl felt sad that there were things in the suitcase that he had hardly used, although he should have done, he should have changed his shirt for example, some time ago. He had tried to make false economies

now, at the beginning of his career, when he most needed to be in clean clothes, he would have to appear in a dirty shirt. Those were fine prospects. Apart from that, the loss of his suitcase wasn't so serious, because the suit he was wearing was better than the one in the suitcase, which was really nothing better than a sort of emergency suit, which his mother had even had to mend just before his departure. Then he remembered there was a piece of Verona salami in the suitcase as well, which his mother had given him as a last-minute gift but of which he had only been able to eat a tiny portion, since for the whole crossing he had had very little appetite and the soup that was doled out in the steerage had been plenty for him. Now, though, he would have liked to have had the salami handy, to make a present of it to the stoker, because his sort are easily won over by some small present or other. Karl knew that from the example of his father who won over all the junior employees he had to deal with by handing out cigars to them. Now the only thing Karl had left to give was his money, and if he had indeed already lost his suitcase, he wanted to leave that untouched for the moment. His thoughts returned to the suitcase, and now he really couldn't understand why, having watched it so carefully for the whole crossing that his watchfulness had almost cost him his sleep, he had now permitted that same suitcase to be taken from him so simply. He recalled the five nights during which he had incessantly suspected the little Slovak, who was sleeping a couple of places to his left, of having intentions on his suitcase. That Slovak had just been waiting for Karl, finally, sapped by exhaustion, to drop off for one instant, so that he could pull the suitcase over to himself by means of a long rod which he spent his days endlessly playing or practising with. That Slovak looked innocent enough by day, but no sooner did night fall than he would get up time and again from his bed and cast sad looks across at Karl's suitcase. Karl saw this quite clearly, someone, with the natural apprehensiveness of the emigrant, was forever lighting a little lamp somewhere, even though that was against the ship's regulations, and trying by its light to decipher the incomprehensible pamphlets of the emigration agencies. If there happened to be one such light close by, then Karl would be able to snooze a little, but if it was some way off, or even more if it was dark, then he had to keep his eyes open. His efforts had exhausted him, and now it seemed they might have been in vain. That Butterbaum had better look out, if he should ever run into him somewhere.

At that moment, the complete silence that had so far prevailed was broken by the distant sound of the pattering of children's feet, that grew louder as it approached, and then became the firm strides of men. They were obviously walking in single file, in the narrow passageway

and a jangling as of weapons became audible. Karl, who was almost on the point of stretching out on the bed and falling into a sleep freed of all worries about suitcase and Slovaks, was startled up and nudged the stoker to get his attention at last, because the head of the column seemed to have reached the door. 'That's the ship's band,' said the stoker, 'they've been playing up on deck, and now they're packing up. That means everything's done, and we can go. Come on.' He took Karl by the hand, at the last moment removed a picture of the Virgin from the wall over the bed, crammed it into his top pocket, picked up his suitcase and hurriedly left the cabin with Karl.

'Now I'm going to the purser's office to give those gents a piece of my mind. There's not one left, no point in hanging back any more.' This the stoker repeated with variations in various ways and he also attempted to crush a rat that crossed their path with a sideways swipe of his boot, but he only succeeded in propelling it into its hole which it had reached just in time. He was generally slow in his movements, for if his legs were long they were also heavy.

They came to a part of the Kitchen where a few girls in dirty aprons – which they were spattering on purpose – were cleaning crockery in large vats. The stoker called out to one Lina, put his arm around her hip, and walked with her for a few steps, as she pressed herself flirtatiously against him. 'We're just off to get paid, do you want to come?' he asked. 'Why should I bother, just bring me the money yourself,' she replied, slipped round his arm and ran off. 'Where did you get the good-looking boy from?' she added, not really expecting an answer. The other girls, who had stopped their work to listen, all laughed.

They for their part carried on and reached a door that had a little pediment above it supported on little gilded caryatids. For something on a ship, it looked distinctly lavish. Karl realized he had never been to this part of the ship, which had probably been reserved for the use of first and second class passengers during the crossing, but now the separating doors had been thrown open prior to the great ship's cleaning. They had in fact encountered a few men carrying brooms over their shoulders who greeted the stoker. Karl was amazed at all the bustle, between decks where he had been he had had no sense of it at all. Along the passages ran electrical wires, and one continually heard the ringing of a little bell.

The stoker knocked respectfully on the door, and when there was a shout of 'Come in' he motioned Karl to step in and not be afraid. Karl did so too, but remained standing in the doorway. Through the three windows of the room he could see the waves outside and his heart pounded as he watched their joyful movement, as though he hadn't just spent the last

five days doing nothing else. Great ships kept crossing paths, and yielded to the motion of the
waves only insofar as their bulk allowed. If you narrowed your eyes, the ships seemed to be
staggering under their own weight. On their masts were long, but very narrow flags, which
were pulled tight by their speed through the air, but still managed to be quite fidgety.
Greeting shots rang out, probably from warships, the guns of one such ship not too far away
and quite dazzling with the sun on its armour, seemed soothed by the safe and smooth, if not
entirely horizontal movement. The smaller ships and boats could only be seen if they were
some distance away, at least from the doorway, multitudes of them running into the gap
between the big ships. And behind it all stood New York, looking at Karl with the hundred
thousand windows of its skyscrapers. Yes, you knew where you were in this room.

Seated at a round table were three men, one a ship's officer in a blue marine uniform, the
two others were port officials dressed in black American uniforms. On the table lay a pile of
various documents, which were perused first by the officer with his pen in hand and then
passed on to the other two, who would read, copy and file them away in their briefcases
whenever one of them, making an almost incessant clicking noise with his teeth, was
dictating something in protocol to his colleague.

At a desk by the window, his back to the door, sat a smaller man who was doing
something with great ledgers that were lined up in front of him, at eye level, on a stone
bookshelf. Beside him was an open cash till, which at first glance anyway appeared to be
empty.

The second window was untenanted and afforded the best views. But in the proximity of
the third stood two gentlemen, conducting a muffled conversation. One of them was leaning
beside the window, he too in ship's uniform, toying with the handle of a sabre. His colloquy
was facing the window and by occasional movements revealed some part of a row of medals
on the other's chest. He was in a civilian suit and had a thin bamboo cane, which, as he had
both hands on his hips, stood out like a sabre as well.

Karl had little time to take in all of this, because a servant soon approached the stoker
and, frowning, as though he didn't belong there, asked him what he was doing. The stoker
replied, as quietly as he could, that he wanted a word with the chief cashier. The servant
declined this wish with a movement of his hand but, nevertheless, on the tips of his toes, and
giving the round table a wide berth, went up to the man with the ledgers. The man – it was
quite evident – froze at the servant's words, then finally turned to face the man who wanted
to speak to him, but only in order to make a vehement gesture of refusal to the stoker, and

then, to be on the safe side, to the servant as well. Whereupon the servant went back to the stoker and in a confiding sort of tone said: 'Now get the hell out of here!'

On hearing this reply the stoker looked down at Karl, as if he were his own heart, whom he was making silent plaint. Without any more ado, Karl broke away, ran right across the room, actually brushing the officer's chair on his way, the servant swooped after him with arms outspread, like a rat-catcher, but Karl was first to the chief cashier's table, and gripped it with both hands in case the servant should attempt to haul him away.

Naturally, with that the whole room suddenly sprang to life. The ship's officer leapt up from the table, the men from the port authority looked on calmly and watchfully, the two men by the window drew together, while the servant, who believed it was not his place to carry on when his superiors were themselves taking an interest, withdrew. Standing by the door, the stoker waited nervously for the moment at which his assistance might become necessary. Finally the chief cashier swung round to the right in his swivel chair.

Karl reached into his secret pocket, which he had no fear of revealing to the eyes of the gentlemen, and pulled out his passport which he opened and laid out on the table, by way of an introduction. The chief cashier seemed unimpressed by the document, flicking it aside with two fingers, whereupon Karl, as though this formality had been satisfactorily concluded, pocketed his passport once more. 'I should like to say' he began, 'that in my opinion the stoker here has been the victim of an injustice. There is a certain Schubal who oppresses him. He himself has served, to complete satisfaction, on many ships, which he is able to name to you. He is industrious, good at his work and it's really hard to understand why, on this of all ships, where the work isn't excessively onerous, the way it is for instance on clipper ships, he should let anyone down. There can only be some slander that is in the way of his advancement, and is robbing him of the recognition he should otherwise certainly not lack for. I have kept my remarks general, let him voice his particular complaints himself.' Karl had addressed all the men in the office, because they were all listening, and the odds that one of their number should prove just were much better, than that the chief cashier should be the man. Cunningly, Karl had failed to say that he had only known the stoker for such a short time. He would have spoken far better if he hadn't been confused by the red face of the man with the cane, whom he could see properly, really for the first time, from his new position.

'Every word he says is true,' said the stoker before anyone could ask, even before anyone looked at him. Such precipitateness on the stoker's part might have cost him dear, had not the man with the medals, who, as it dawned on Karl, must be the captain, already decided for

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