Cinderella and other stories

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New York, 1896

An Assisted Emigrant

urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-66125

AN ASSISTED EMIGRANT

GUIDO stood on the curb-stone in Fourteenth Street, between Fifth Avenue and Sixth Avenue, with a row of plaster figures drawn up on the sidewalk in front of him. It was snowing, and they looked cold in consequence, especially the Night and Morning. A line of men and boys stretched on either side of Guido all along the curb-stone, with toys and dolls, and guns that shot corks into the air with a loud report, and glittering dressings for the Christmas trees. It was the day before Christmas. The man who stood next in line to Guido had hideous black monkeys that danced from the end of a rubber string. The man danced up and down too, very much, so Guido thought, as the monkeys did, and stamped his feet on the icy pavement, and shouted: "Here yer are, lady, for five cents. Take them home to the children." There were hundreds and hundreds of ladies and little girls crowding by all of the

time; some of them were a little cross and a little tired, as if Christmas shopping had told on their nerves, but the greater number were happy-looking and warm, and some stopped and laughed at the monkeys dancing on the rubber strings, and at the man with the frost on his mustache, who jumped too, and cried, "Only five cents, lady — nice Christmas presents for the children."

Sometimes the ladies bought the monkeys, but no one looked at the cold plaster figures of St. Joseph, and Diana, and Night and Morning, nor at the heads of Mars and Minerva — not even at the figure of the Virgin, with her two hands held out, which Guido pressed in his arms against his breast.

Guido had been in New York city just one month. He was very young — so young that he had never done anything at home but sit on the wharves and watch the ships come in and out of the great harbor of Genoa. He never had wished to depart with these ships when they sailed away, nor wondered greatly as to where they went. He was content with the wharves and with the narrow streets near by, and to look up from the bulkheads at the sailors working in the rigging, and the 'long-

shoremen rolling the casks on board, or lowering great square boxes into the holds.

He would have liked, could he have had his way, to live so for the rest of his life; but they would not let him have his way, and coaxed him on a ship to go to the New World to meet his uncle. He was not a real uncle, but only a make-believe one, to satisfy those who objected to assisted immigrants, and who wished to be assured against having to support Guido, and others like him. But they were not half so anxious to keep Guido at home as he himself was to stay there.

The new uncle met him at Ellis Island, and embraced him affectionately, and put him in an express wagon, and drove him with a great many more of his countrymen to where Mulberry Street makes a bend and joins Hester. And in the Bend Guido found thousands of his fellows sleeping twenty in a room and over-crowded into the street: some who had but just arrived, and others who had already learned to swear in English, and had their street-cleaning badges and their peddler's licenses, to show that they had not been overlooked by the kindly society of Tammany, which sees that no free and independent voter shall go unrewarded.

New York affected Guido like a bad dream. It was cold and muddy, and the snow when it fell turned to mud so quickly that Guido believed they were one and the same. He did not dare to think of the place he knew as home. And the sight of the colored advertisements of the steamship lines that hung in the windows of the Italian bankers hurt him as the sound of traffic on the street cuts to the heart of a prisoner in the Tombs. Many of his countrymen bade good-by to Mulberry Street and sailed away; but they had grown rich through obeying the padrones, and working night and morning sweeping the Avenue uptown, and by living on the refuse from the scows at Canal Street. Guido never hoped to grow rich, and no one stopped to buy his uncle's wares.

The electric lights came out, and still the crowd passed and thronged before him, and the snow fell and left no mark on the white figures. Guido was growing cold, and the bustle of the hurrying hundreds which had entertained him earlier in the day had ceased to interest him, and his amusement had given place to the fear that no one of them would ever stop, and that he would return to his uncle empty-handed. He was hungry now, as

well as cold, and though there was not much rich food in the Bend at any time, to-day he had had nothing of any quality to eat since early morning. The man with the monkeys turned his head from time to time, and spoke to him in a language that he could not understand; although he saw that it was something amusing and well meant that the man said, and so smiled back and nodded. He felt it to be quite a loss when the man moved away.

Guido thought very slowly, but he at last began to feel a certain contempt for the stiff statues and busts which no one wanted, and buttoned the figure of the one of the woman with her arms held out, inside of his jacket, and tucked his scarf in around it, so that it might not be broken, and also that it might not bear the ignominy with the others of being overlooked. Guido was a gentle, slow-thinking boy, and could not have told you why he did this, but he knew that this figure was of different clay from the others. He had seen it placed high in the cathedrals at home, and he had been told that if you ask certain things of it it will listen to you.

The women and children began to disappear

from the crowd, and the necessity of selling some of his wares impressed itself more urgently upon him as the night grew darker and possible customers fewer. He decided that he had taken up a bad position, and that instead of waiting for customers to come to him, he ought to go seek for them. With this purpose in his mind he gathered the figures together upon his tray, and resting it upon his shoulder, moved further along the street, to Broadway, where the crowd was greater and the shops more brilliantly lighted. He had good cause to be watchful, for the sidewalks were slippery with ice, and the people rushed and hurried and brushed past him without noticing the burden he carried on one shoulder. He wished now that he knew some words of this new language, that he might call his wares and challenge the notice of the passers-by, as did the other men who shouted so continually and vehemently at the hurrying crowds. He did not know what might happen if he failed to sell one of his statues; it was a possibility so awful that he did not dare conceive of its punishment. But he could do nothing, and so stood silent, dumbly presenting his tray to the people near him.

His wanderings brought him to the corner of a street, and he started to cross it, in the hope of better fortune in untried territory. There was no need of his hurrying to do this, although a car was coming towards him, so he stepped carefully but surely. But as he reached the middle of the track a man came towards him from the opposite pavement; they met and hesitated, and then both jumped to the same side, and the man's shoulder struck the tray and threw the white figures flying to the track, where the horses tramped over them on their way. Guido fell backwards, frightened and shaken, and the car stopped, and the driver and the conductor leaned out anxiously from each end.

There seemed to be hundreds of people all around Guido, and some of them picked him up and asked him questions in a very loud voice, as though that would make the language they spoke more intelligible. Two men took him by each arm and talked with him in earnest tones, and punctuated their questions by shaking him gently. He could not answer them, but only sobbed, and beat his hands softly together, and looked about him for a chance to escape. The conductor of the car jerked the

strap violently, and the car went on its way. Guido watched the conductor, as he stood with his hands in his pockets looking back at him. Guido had a confused idea that the people on the car might pay him for the plaster figures which had been scattered in the slush and snow, so that the heads and arms and legs lay on every side or were ground into heaps of white powder. But when the car disappeared into the night he gave up this hope, and pulling himself free from his captor, slipped through the crowd and ran off into a side street. A man who had seen the accident had been trying to take up a collection in the crowd, which had grown less sympathetic and less numerous in consequence, and had gathered more than the plaster casts were worth; but Guido did not know this, and when they came to look for him he was gone, and the bareheaded gentleman, with his hat full of coppers and dimes, was left in much embarrassment.

Guido walked to Washington Square, and sat down on a bench to rest, and then curled over quickly, and stretching himself out at full length, wept bitterly. When any one passed he held his breath and pretended to

be asleep. He did not know what he was to do or where he was to go. Such a calamity as this had never entered into his calculations of the evils which might overtake him, and it overwhelmed him utterly. A policeman touched him with his night-stick, and spoke to him kindly enough, but the boy only backed away from the man until he was out of his reach, and then ran on again, slipping and stumbling on the ice and snow. He ran to Christopher Street, through Greenwich Village, and on to the wharves.

It was quite late, and he had recovered from his hunger, and only felt a sick tired ache at his heart. His feet were heavy and numb, and he was very sleepy. People passed him continually, and doors opened into churches and into noisy glaring saloons and crowded shops, but it did not seem possible to him that there could be any relief from any source for the sorrow that had befallen him. It seemed too awful, and as impossible to mend as it would be to bring the crushed plaster into shape again. He considered dully that his uncle would miss him and wait for him, and that his anger would increase with every moment of his

delay. He felt that he could never return to his uncle again.

Then he came to another park, opening into a square, with lighted saloons on one side, and on the other great sheds, with ships lying beside them, and the electric lights showing their spars and masts against the sky. It had ceased snowing, but the air from the river was piercing and cold, and swept through the wires overhead with a ceaseless moaning. The numbness had crept from his feet up over the whole extent of his little body, and he dropped upon a flight of steps back of a sailors' boarding-house, and shoved his hands inside of his jacket for possible warmth. His fingers touched the figure he had hidden there and closed upon it lightly, and then his head dropped back against the wall, and he fell into a heavy sleep. The night passed on and grew colder, and the wind came across the ice-blocked river with shriller, sharper blasts, but Guido did not hear it.

"Chuckey" Martin, who blacked boots in front of the corner saloon in summer and swept out the bar-room in winter, came out through the family entrance and dumped a pan of hot ashes into the snow-bank, and

then turned into the house with a shiver. He saw a mass of something lying curled up on the steps of the next house, and remembered it after he had closed the door of the family entrance behind him and shoved the pan under the stove. He decided at last that it might be one of the saloon's customers, or a stray sailor with loose change in his pockets, which he would not miss when he awoke. So he went out again, and picking Guido up, brought him in in his arms and laid him out on the floor.

There were over thirty men in the place; they had been celebrating the coming of Christmas; and three of them pushed each other out of the way in their eagerness to pour very bad brandy between Guido's teeth. "Chuckey" Martin felt a sense of proprietorship in Guido, by the right of discovery, and resented this, pushing them away, and protesting that the thing to do was to rub his feet with snow.

A fat oily chief engineer of an Italian tramp steamer dropped on his knees beside Guido and beat the boy's hands, and with unsteady fingers tore open his scarf and jacket, and as he did this the figure of the plaster Virgin

with her hands stretched out looked up at him from its bed on Guido's chest.

Some of the sailors drew their hands quickly across their breasts, and others swore in some alarm, and the bar-keeper drank the glass of whiskey he had brought for Guido at a gulp, and then readjusted his apron to show that nothing had disturbed his equanimity. Guido sat up, with his head against the chief engineer's knees, and opened his eyes, and his ears were greeted with words in his own tongue. They gave him hot coffee and hot soup and more brandy, and he told his story in a burst of words that flowed like a torrent of tears — how he had been stolen from his home at Genoa, where he used to watch the boats from the stone pier in front of the custom-house, at which the sailors nodded, and how the padrone, who was not his uncle, finding he could not black boots nor sell papers, had given him these plaster casts to sell, and how he had whipped him when people would not buy them, and how at last he had tripped, and broken them all except this one hidden in his breast, and how he had gone to sleep, and he asked now why had they wakened him, for he had no place to go.

Guido remembered telling them this, and following them by their gestures as they retold it to the others in a strange language, and then the lights began to spin, and the faces grew distant, and he reached out his hand for the fat chief engineer, and felt his arms tightening around him.

A cold wind woke Guido, and the sound of something throbbing and beating like a great clock. He was very warm and tired and lazy, and when he raised his head he touched the ceiling close above him, and when he opened his eyes he found himself in a little room with a square table covered with oil-cloth in the centre, and rows of beds like shelves around the walls. The room rose and fell as the streets did when he had had nothing to eat, and he scrambled out of the warm blankets and crawled fearfully up a flight of narrow stairs. There was water on either side of him, beyond and behind him — water blue and white and dancing in the sun, with great blocks of dirty ice tossing on its surface.

And behind him lay the odious city of New York, with its great bridge and high buildings, and before him the open sea. The

chief engineer crawled up from the engine-room and came towards him, rubbing the perspiration from his face with a dirty towel.

"Good-morning," he called out. "You are feeling pretty well?"

"Yes."

"It is Christmas day. Do you know where you are going? You are going to Italy, to Genoa. It is over there," he said, pointing with his finger. "Go back to your bed and keep warm."

He picked Guido up in his arms, and ran with him down the companion-way, and tossed him back into his berth. Then he pointed to the shelf at one end of the little room, above the sheet-iron stove. The plaster figure that Guido had wrapped in his breast had been put there and lashed to its place.

"That will bring us good luck and a quick voyage," said the chief engineer.

Guido lay quite still until the fat engineer had climbed up the companion-way again and permitted the sunlight to once more enter the cabin. Then he crawled out of his berth and dropped on his knees, and raised up his hands to the plaster figure which no one would buy.