



Selma Lagerlöf: A Plea to America

Talare

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Författare

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Omständigheter

Talet hölls direktsänt i radio från en studio i Stockholm.

1 Ladies and Gentlemen:

It feels very strange indeed, standing here in a studio in Stockholm, to send out my voice into the black night and to know what a long way it must travel before it reaches its goal. First of all, it must pass
5 the great pine forests and the snow-clad ranges of the North. Yet all this becomes as nothing, for afterwards it must cross both the treacherous North Sea and the formidable watery desert of the Atlantic. No steamship, no airplane comes to take it aboard. No electric cables offer it the refuge of their dark insides. Instead, free
10 and unrestrained, with massive waves of the ocean rolling beneath, it pursues its course until far toward the west it strikes the elongated coast of America.

And now, with this cross voyage ended, my voice, like any other humble
15 emigrant, must try to identify itself. It must explain that it belongs to an old woman in Sweden who has never been in America but all her life long has learned much and received many gifts from there.

20 Perhaps you will permit me, dear listeners across the Atlantic, to tell you some of my very first impressions of America.

I was still nothing but a child. I was about six years old, and one afternoon I slipped into the farmhands' cottage on my father's estate,
25 Mårbacka, just as the men were eating their sandwiches during the rest hour. I am frank to admit that I was not supposed to be there. But I had found that those working-men often loved to tell a good yarn from the old days, and so I used to steal away to join

30 them. On this occasion luck was against me. It was a rainy day. The men were wet and ill-tempered, and no one spoke a word.

At last one poor fellow, who did not belong to the estate but had come to buy a bushel of rye, began to talk. »I've heard that there's a land called America«, he explained, »and it's said to be a much better
35 country than Sweden. In that land there are no poor people, for the trees have leaves of gold. You can pick as many as you please.«

At first I did not know what to make of all this, but the poor fellow sounded quite serious. None of the men expressed the least
40 doubt but all listened with the deepest interest. What could I do but believe the tale was true? I was greatly impressed by the untold wealth that must exist in a land with forests of gold. It was as if Paradise Lost had been found again.

45 This was my first contact with America. Now for the next.

At Mårbacka we had a cook, a young girl, strong as a bear and always so jolly and kind that she made friends everywhere. Quite suddenly this girl was completely transformed. At first she grew
50 silent and sad, and before long she came and begged to leave. Oh, no, there was no cause for complaint, but it was impossible for her to stay. Mother tried to reason with the girl and find out what was wrong, but all she answered was that she wanted to get away. Finally I heard mother say there was nothing to do but to let the girl
55 go, because the poor soul had caught the America fever. »America fever«? I kept wondering what sort of illness that could be, but no one chose to enlighten me. Then I turned to our nurse-maid.

»Maja«, I said, »what's the America fever? Is it a dangerous sickness?«
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»You see, Selma«, she answered, »it's not a sickness at all. It is merely longing. It gets you when you hear too much about how well off they are out there in America.«

65 »Then it can't be dangerous!« I protested.

»Indeed it is«, she replied. »It is very dangerous. Anyone who has the fever must go to America or else he may die.«

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This, too, was very impressive. I asked at once if dangerous fevers like that came also from other countries. Was there a Germany fever? An England fever? But the nurse-maid comforted me. America was the only country which sent out an illness like that.

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Wasn't this amazing? Was it not overwhelming? A land with such a fever of longing that it made people die?

And now for another experience –

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I was older then – fourteen or fifteen years – and mother and I set out to town by train. As we reached our station, we saw an old woman with a little boy, three years at the most, a very sturdy youngster and as ruddy and healthy as could be. It was the middle
85 of summer, with the weather warm and beautiful, but the boy wore an overcoat of heavy cloth that reached down to his ankles.

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Mother could not resist chatting with the old woman, and we soon learned that the child was her grandson and that he was about
90 to set out for America. Her son, with his wife, had gone two years before, leaving their boy with her. Now they had prospered so much that they were sending for their child. Oh, no, the grandmother was not to go along with the boy. The train that was coming was to bring a married couple who knew her son and daughter-in-
95 law, and they had promised to take the child with them. They were said to be decent people but – after all – only the man was Swedish. His wife was American ...

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That moment the train pulled in, and the two who were to take
100 the boy in charge stepped out and ran up to the grandmother.

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But then, in saying farewell, the old woman started to weep. The boy threw his arms around her neck and he, too, wept and cried aloud. Tears, big and clear, rolled down his plump cheeks. But the
105 American woman was undismayed. She bent down over the boy

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and said with kindly voice: »Don't cry! Remember that you are going to America. There you may some day become president or governor.»

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She said all this with such deep conviction that I have never been able to forget it. She believed her own words. It was charming to hear how deep her faith was in just the good fortune to be able to come to her homeland.

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I was indeed greatly impressed, and I said to myself that America must be a land of wonders. It had immense riches, it could make people die from longing, and when little Swedish country boys came there they could grow up to be mighty as kings.

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After all this, ladies and gentlemen, America for me has stood as a land apart from all others. I have always expected great things from it. Oh, the most glorious things that you could ever think! Nor have I waited in vain. During my lifetime alone, recall all the marvels that have come to us from your country. Humble toil of the working-day has been made easier by such inventions as the typewriter, the mowing-machine, the selfbinder. Electricity lights our streets, our factories, our homes. The telephone brings people into a great communion. Inexpensive motor cars penetrate even to the far wastes of our land. Phonographs and cinemas offer amusement, practical aid, instruction.

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In the attempt to enlighten mankind, we have received help from two of your movements: the emancipation of women and the temperance movement.

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In closing I might add that if we here in Sweden until recent years have escaped much of the scourge of unemployment, we have the United States to thank for giving our emigrants soil to till, chances to earn their living, the rights of citizenship.

The effects of all this have been far-reaching, because the opportunities have not come to the few alone. The whole standard of living has been changed. No one realizes this better than a person

who has lived as long as I have.

There are gifts still greater than these material ones which
America has given to the whole world. Human disease and the
150 terrors of plague-stricken districts have been stamped out in part,
thanks to American princely generosity and thanks to its practical
idealism. Millions of starving human wrecks have been fed and
clothed by you. Great new thoughts, messages of hopefulness and
joy of life, have echoed across the Atlantic from your shores.

155 Let me say, however, that I had expected even more. Doubtless
that is due to my old dream of the land with forests of gold, the
Paradise Regained, from which I had awaited still greater gifts.
Let me say this now. From this land, a land so rich in gold and
160 inventions, where all were so happy and successful, I looked for a
new humanity, a nobler humanity, a more beneficent humanity, a
humanity of friends alone.

And my expectation was not entirely foolhardy. For, see – at least
165 once there came from America a little beginning, a faint dawning
of the new day I have looked for.

It came just at the time the long and terrifying World War had at
last drawn to a close. Then there came messages from America that
170 filled all of suffering Europe with joy. We thought we heard bells
ringing in the millennium of kindness and love – bells pealing out
from across the Atlantic. They were ringing in the end of this one
war, the end of all wars. Now there was to be no more revenge and
punishment but atonement and mercy. A great good will was to
175 spread out among the people. All old darkness was to end. A new
day was approaching.

Before long this hope was snuffed out again. Why? Was it because
the world was not yet ready to heed the call? I cannot say.
180 Still I am glad to have seen the hope kindled and to have felt the
ecstasy it aroused.

Now the darkness has returned and settled again more heavily

185 than ever over us all. But I am still waiting for and hoping for the
good will, the spontaneous joy, the proud faith in human goodness,
the expanding sense of solidarity, to come back once more.

And I expect to see all this come to us from the United States
190 of America. I believe that it is in the great daughter country to the
west where the most radiant dream of old mother Europe will be
fulfilled.

Källa

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