

GLIMPSES
OF
A STRANGE WORLD

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Glimpses of a Strange World

Henry S. Stollnitz

Born in Russian Lomzha in 1865, Henry Sandé Stollnitz served as hazzan (cantor) in Wuerttemberg and subsequently in New York, Maryland, California, and New Jersey. He held rabbinical positions in Hoboken, New Jersey, and Tampa, Florida. Active as a fictionist and a journalist, he enjoyed the regard of several notable exponents of liberal Judaism: Gotthard Deutsch, J. Leonard Levy, and Max Heller were all willing to supply encomia about his publications.¹ A Tampa physician, Dr. William C. Richardson, declared himself impressed with Rabbi Stollnitz's "intelligent and sympathetic insight"² in the collection of vignettes which appeared in 1908 under the title Glimpses of a Strange World.

It is an unutterably sentimental outlook Stollnitz displays in Glimpses. From the remoteness of Tampa, he offers a Panglossian effigy of the goldeneh medineh.

1. See "Dr. Stollnitz and His Work" at the rear of Glimpses.

2. *Ibid.*

Chapter I

“Woe me! Woe is to me! Shall we remain forevermore a prey to such atrocities? How many weary days was I scraping together those two rubles for a pair of new Tefilin!” (phylacteries.)

“Esther Leben! How my heart aches! If I only had the means I would flee to the end of the earth. Surely, there cannot be another spot on God’s earth where the Jew is so oppressed. Woe, woe is me! But there is a God, the same God who hath delivered his people from Egyptian bondage!”

Thus spoke Chatskel Shimanowski to his wife Esther one morning, after being forced into bribing a burly officer of the peace of Ostrolenka, Poland, where they lived.

Malkeh, their little daughter and only child, had gone on an errand for her mother and on the way was assailed by some rude non-Jewish boys. The father, hearing his little girl’s pitiful cries, hurried to her rescue. A crowd had gathered and the policeman, without the least investigation, dragged the Jew to the station. Poor Chatskel, anticipating the consequences, for he knew with what injustice the Jew would be dealt by the magistrate, bought his freedom of the officer with the two rubles above-mentioned.

From that time the Shimanowski family worked more zealously, and lived more economically, than ever before, for they had an aim and that aim was America.

“Well, Esther Leben, with the aid of His blessed Name, we are at last at our destination. Oh, how thankful I am to the Lord of the universe that our tiresome and wearisome trip is over. I thought I would never outlive it. His Name, blessed be it, shall forgive me for uttering such ungrateful words, for naught happens without His design; but very great was the agony I suffered, and chiefly on account of you, my good wife, and of our Malkeh. I did not murmur for fear of aggravating conditions, but when I saw you and the child suffering, and myself lying prostrate, thus not being able to render assistance, my soul rebelled and my heart felt as if it would break.”

These were the first words spoken by Chatskel Shimanowski on landing in New York at an early hour on a Friday morning, after a

most unpleasantly long voyage from Ostrolenka, Poland, not to mention the indescribably annoying ordeals the Shimanowski family was forced to go through on the way from their place of residence to the German frontier, and from thence to Hamburg. They experienced a stormy and disaster-threatening sea journey, which was trying enough to people who are accustomed to traveling and who are provided with all the comforts money can supply; but how much more so to poor people of the kind of Chatskel Shimanowski, of his spouse, Esther, and of their sixteen-year-old daughter, Malkeh, who never in their humble lives were on a railroad train, and a steamer they knew from hearsay only. They had often heard of the woes and tribulations of steerage travel, described in letters by some friends residing in America, but they could never have realized the hardships and deprivations which they went through, particularly Chatskel. He was of a frail constitution, and so pious that he would rather have perished of starvation than indulged in food not prepared in accordance with Jewish rite. It can therefore be easily imagined what they suffered, and how rejoiced they were when they entered Castle Garden [in New York Harbor].

No matter how gruesome a feeling we experience when passing through a long tunnel, the moment the smiling sun greets us this feeling entirely vanishes. So it is with a wearisome sea voyage: the moment we leave the ship and behold the spot of our destination, our thoughts are occupied with the surrounding present, with the future, and we are not over desirous of looking back to the past when its pictures are not of an agreeable nature.

This was the case of Mrs. Esther Shimanowski. She was of robust physique and of a philosophical turn of mind, and after her husband had relieved his aching mind by his thanksgivings, she pettingly put her hand on his shoulder and consolingly replied: "Oh, Chatskel Leben, it was of no use to worry about me or Malkeh. The One above hath looked and will look after us, and He sendeth not burdens heavier than we can bear. I thank thee for thy consideration and let us be grateful to His blessed Name, who hath sent us such redeeming angels as Mrs. and Mr. Wilhelm. Thanks to their heart's nobility that our condition was not still worse. How kind those people were to us in spite of being non-Jews. May they be blessed!"

"Yes, may the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob bless them eternally," Chatskel added.

They bought five cents' worth of bananas, the first they had ever seen, and with bread consumed them with great relish. To make the meal complete they each drank a cup of the fresh fountain water in the park, and after enjoying a two hours' rest on one of the benches, they divided their belongings into three packets, although Malkeh begged her father, but without avail, to let her carry his bundle, too, and thus proceeded to hunt for Ludlow Street.

To their dismay Shmool Jacobowski, a distant relative of theirs, whose address Chatskel had guarded like a treasure for the last two years, had moved to quarters unknown. They were terror-stricken and more than ever aware what it meant to be poor and homeless in a strange land whose language was more wonderful to them than the fine structures, twenty-eight stories high. But the consciousness that Jehovah was on Ludlow Street as well as in Ostrolenka filled their souls with new hopes.

It did not escape Esther's notice how pale and haggard her Chatskel looked. She asked him to sit down on his "peckel" (packet) while she went off to look for a place of lodging. But a short time elapsed before she returned with a mien of triumph and commanded: 'Come, Chatskel Leben! Malkeh Leben, take my peckel, please, and I'll carry father's and yours.'

Chatskel was bewildered: he knew not if he should admire Esther's pluck, think of his exhausted purse or his own condition, or follow with eyes and mind the doings of the American loafers who surrounded them and vied with each other in trying to terrorize the new arrivals. He looked undecided, then said to his Esther: "I thought there were idlers in Ostrolenka only, but it seems they have plenty of them in America, too."

"Come, come Chatskel Leben," Esther coaxingly replied, "erevra'v (riffraff) you'll find even in Jerusalem."

Chatskel threw on their tormentors a look of deep contempt, gathered together his aching limbs and musingly followed his Esther, assisted by his devoted daughter Malkeh. They entered a tenement house, an edifice of extensive dimensions. On the first landing of the stairway Chatskel halted and earnestly spoke: "Esther Leben, I fear we do not possess the means to take up quarters in such a palace. You could put entire Ostrolenka in it." Whereupon Esther pacifyingly remarked: "The God who giveth life provideth with life's necessities."

They climbed one flight, two, three, finally the fourth, breathless to be sure, especially poor Chatskel, who hastily seated himself on the top step to regain his breath, remarking after he was somewhat restored: "I do not now wonder why the Americans have such a queer language, because they build such Babylonian edifices."

Meanwhile the sub-landlady came out, opened the door of the scantily furnished room they were to occupy and bade them welcome.

The very first thing Esther did was to unpack and light the "Samovar" (tea-machine). She found a little Russian tea tied in a corner of a handkerchief, and in a very few minutes the affectionate trio sipped out of the tumblers. (Seldom do they drink out of any other vessel—to see the tea is essential to the enjoyment thereof.) They smacked their lips and Chatskel exclaimed: "Ah, Esther Leben, that was a treat! Long live my Esther! Mayest thou make tea in Jerusalem." Whereupon mother and daughter responded "Amen."

It was about two o'clock, the May sun shone brightly, and a refreshing breeze was blowing. Esther begged Chatskel to lie down and take a nap, and bade Malkeh to stay and respond to the desires of her father while she herself would try to make preparations for the Sabbath.

Chatskel drew forth his pocket-book and all three counted: two dollars and ninety-seven cents, which sum, after the deduction of one dollar for a week's lodging, was reduced to one dollar and ninety-seven cents.

"Ah," exclaimed Chatskel, "not so bad yet! I am rich, for I am contented! Money, a lodging, and above all, though last, an Esther, a virtuous woman! And my Malkeh! How many millions is she worth? Is she not a real queen? May she live till one hundred years!

"With the entry of the Sabbath cometh the bliss of rest. I am happy and rejoice that we arrived in time to celebrate Sabbath according to our rites. Yes, Esther Leben, I'll lie down for awhile whilst you prepare for Sabbath, and then I'll go to 'Shool' (synagogue) and pour out my heart to our Lord, our Maker. I shall pray for your welfare, my beloved ones, for mine and for that of the entire human race. Oh, Esther Leben, is it the tea, or the pure love with which it was scented? I feel a new soul in me. Oh, I am so infinitely happy!"

He then arose and threw himself on the bed and within a few moments slept the sleep of the righteous. He dreamed, and in his dream he saw the sweetest visions of a paradise, reserved for the perfectly right-

eous only; he beheld a deputation of seraphim, ophanim, and holy beings surrounding him, the angel Michael to his right, Gabriel to his left, and at his head the resplendence of the mighty God. He heard a voice of God addressing him: "Fear thee not, Chatskel ben Shimon, the God of thy forefathers is with thee, thou shalt not stumble. Follow in the path of the God of thy father Israel and thou shalt experience and enjoy all the glory he hath promised on Mount Moriah." Here the gates of the vaults opened themselves and lo, the treasures and luxuries stored up therein well-nigh blinded him. He was overwhelmed with a joy which knew no bounds and he cried out: "Hineni!" (Here I am, thy servant!) in a voice so ringing and powerful that Esther and Malkeh, who were busily engaged in cleaning fish in the hallway, in order not to disturb the one they loved from his sleep, became frightened and ran to his bedside.

"Masoltov! Masoltov!" he cried. "A Baskol! A Baskol!" (Good luck! Good luck! A voice of God! A voice of God!)

The poor wife feared a derangement of his reason. He continued: "See ye not the resplendence of God with us? Hear ye them not, the host of angels filling this space and in sweet chorus singing: 'Holy-holy-holy-Lord of hosts'? Oh, how happy am I! I am filled with joy! The Great, the Mighty, and the Tremendous is with all of us and we fear not!"

Mother and daughter soon understood the situation, and when Chatskel concluded with: "The name of the Lord be blessed eternally," they responded aloud "Amen."

It was four o'clock. Chatskel had learned from the landlady before he lay down, that they go to the synagogue on Allen Street at six, and she promised to send her little boy Simche with him as a guide. He jumped up quickly. How he longed to take his accustomed bath in honor of the Sabbath, but the expenditure it would involve, his being strange, and, above all, fearing that he might be late for the reception of the Sabbath, were factors weighty enough to dissuade him, and he contented himself with washing his face and hands. Esther had prepared warm water for a foot bath, but wishing to be early in the synagogue so as to be able to indulge in the pentateuch, the abstract for the week and its commentary before the "Chazan" (cantor) began, he thankfully declined to use it.

Chapter II

What a mighty factor is song! We find even Spiegelberg in Schiller's "Robbers" indulging in singing. Some of the wildest animals are tamed by sweet strains of music and song. For ages song has been, and still is, the constant and inseparable companion of the Jew. When his heart is cast down he pours it out in song and finds solace in the soft minor keys. When he feasts or celebrates he gives vent to his happy feelings through song, and song constitutes the bulk of his religious services. It is easy to judge a nation's degree of culture by its musical standard. A Jew will frequently travel many miles to hear a good "Chazan."

Chatskel's joyful anticipation of hearing the enchanting melodies of the "Chazan," who had been described to him as a great singer with a voice pleasing and sweet, would beggar all descriptions. After he had completed his toilet by arranging himself in his Sabbath surtout, he looked in the eyes of his Esther and Malkeh as the living picture of the Lord's creation, and their approving smile expressed more than words could say. Wife and daughter insisted he should partake of a bun and a little broth, for they feared he might get too weak were he to wait until after "Shool" and, *nolens volens*, he had to submit.

Light hearted and with refreshed body and mind, Chatskel Shimanowski, accompanied by little Simche, proceeded to the house of worship. On their way a fruit peddler passed and Simche asked his charge for a penny with which to purchase some huckleberries, the first of the season. Not complying with the demand, for Chatskel never carried money with him on the Sabbath, the guide avenged himself by leaving the perplexed stranger to his fate. But, thanks to Jehovah, many of those faithful ones who receive the Sabbath early and dismiss it late were already on their way to "Shool" whom Chatskel joined.

In the mean time Esther, assisted by Malkeh, put forth strenuous efforts to "make Sabbath" by not only using remarkable discretion in her purchases (for, all told, including five cents which she dropped in the charity-box for the poor of Jerusalem, and three cents she gave to a poor man who knocked at the door, she spent fifty-seven cents), but in devising to replace some missing kitchen utensils. For instance, not having a rolling-pin to make noodles she used a bottle instead; for

candle-sticks she used two big potatoes, and so on. Before sunset all was complete to receive the holy Sabbath. She dressed herself in her queenly attire, consisting of a brand new calico dress, an apron and a bonnet with broad ribbons, said the prayer over the candles, and awaited her Chatskel—her “Balbos” (head of the house)—her lord—her king. Holy Sabbath reigned as I. G. Asher sings in his “Friday Night,”

“The air is still, the lamp is lit,
 With blessings for this hallowed eve,
 All cares are hushed, and shadows flit
 In every grateful prayer we weave,
 And over all is shed the light
 Of love, to welcome Friday night.”

At the vestibule to the first holy edifice in America which Chatskel visited his heart throbbed, he was bewildered and saw in his fantasy the gates of the heavens through which the prayers and wishes of his people went up to the King of kings, and he prayed:

“How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob! thy tabernacles, O Israel! And in the greatness of thy benevolence, will I enter thy house, in reverence of thee will I bow down towards the temple of thy holiness, O Lord! I love the habitation of thy house and the dwelling place of thy glory. I therefore will prostrate myself, bow down, and bend the knee before the Lord, my Maker. And I will offer my prayer unto thee, O Lord, in an acceptable time, in thy abundant mercy, O God, answer me in the truth of thy salvation.”

With great reverence he then entered the temple, read all prayers preparatory to the reception of the holy Sabbath, and the “Chazan” sang:

“Come let us proceed to meet the Sabbath, for it is the source of blessing appointed of old, even at the creation, though last in execution, it was first in design.” Chatskel eagerly and with mighty voice joined the congregation in the refrain: “Come, my beloved, to meet the bride.” (The poet has compared the Sabbath to a bride, bringing joy and happiness to Israel, to whom she has been united by the Eternal.) “Let us welcome the presence of the Sabbath.” To praise the name of the Lord as it is written: “All my bones shall say, O Lord, who is like unto thee? Who deliverest the poor from him that is too strong for

him, the poor and the needy from the oppressor?" Chatskel not only sang, but jumped and swayed his whole body as the wind does the branches of a willow-tree. His enthusiasm grew stronger and mightier with every verse, so that he was in a sort of catalepsy from which he did not awaken until the "Chazan" ended with: "The Lord is with me and I fear not!"

He was in a fine frame of mind. His soft heart expanded by the great love he cherished for the entire human brotherhood. He therefore greeted every one within his reach with extended hand and a cordial "Good Shabbas," while they returned a "Good year," and a "Peace be with you" to boot, and at the portals he planted himself to wait for the "Chazan" to present him with the extra "Good Sabbath" he had reserved for him. He told him how he admired and was touched by his excellent voice and fine melodies, and declared him the best "Chazan" he had ever heard. The prayer-master was highly flattered and promised to excel himself the next morning.

With a great treat behind and a still greater one ahead, Chatskel Shimanowski hurried homeward in the mood of one who had won the highest prize in a lottery, and could not reach home quickly enough to impart the good news to his beloved ones. The four flights which had previously so exhausted him, he now flew up with ease. Malkeh awaited him at the door, while her mother was deeply interested in the jargon [Yiddish] translation of the Pentateuch. Chatskel put his hands on his daughter's head and blessed her: "God make thee like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah." Proceeding to his wife he said: "Good Sabbath, Esther Leben. May it be the will of His Name, blessed be it, that all turn to good luck." Whereupon she and her Malkeh called out: "Amen! Amen! Father, Merciful God!"

With a look of astonishment he surveyed the room and knew not over which creation of Esther's ingenuity he should marvel first, for there was naught missing of Sabbath comfort which they were wont to have in Ostrolenka. Tears of joy filled his eyes and with emotion he cited from the Proverbs, Chap. XXXI, verse *x ad fin*: "Who can find a virtuous woman? Her value is far above gems. The heart of her husband trusteth in her and he shall never lack gain. She dispenseth good to him and not evil, all the days of her life, . . ."

After the sanctification of the wine, he washed his hands and said the prescribed prayer for that function, and then they seated them-

selves at the table, Esther to the right and Malkeh to his left. At that moment a feeling overcame the happy Chatskel which, if it ever can, may be described by the following verses:

“Not the choicest of wines at a banqueting board
 Can ever such exquisite pleasure afford
 As the Friday night meal when prepared with due zest
 To honor thee, Sabbath, thou day of sweet rest.
 With thy angels attending thee, one at each side,
 Come on Friday betimes in pure homes to abide,
 In the homes of the faithful that shine in their bliss
 Like souls from a world that is better than this.”

He spoke the prayer over the “Chalos” (shewbread), and the repast progressed amid joy and the expressions of mutual appreciation and encouragement, Chatskel remarking that such a broth would be good enough for even the richest man. But when the “gefillte” fish were put on the table, accompanied by freshly grated horse-radish, Chatskel’s eulogies for his Esther Leben were beyond limit, and he said if paradise was reserved for the most righteous, he was sure his Esther was destined to become one of its heaviest stockholders, and next to her his Malkeh. It is needless to state how highly flattered and happy the two devotees were.

Chatskel had undertaxed the power of the freshly grated horse-radish, and indulging in an undue quantity thereof he began to cough and sneeze, the tears running down his cheeks, and he jumped up from his chair like one possessed. Mother and daughter feared he had swallowed a fish bone, and Esther, in her remarkable presence of mind, grasped the “gefillte kishke” (filled intestine) and thrust it into the throat of her beloved Chatskel, which process would surely have suffocated the agonized man had it not been for Esther’s presence of mind quickly to pull it out again.

Once more happiness reigned and Chatskel tuned his voice for “Zemiros” (the table hymns). Kind nature had provided Shimanowski with a pleasant tenor voice of lyric quality, and although he had not the remotest knowledge of music, nevertheless he sang the traditional melodies very acceptably.

The orator, the preacher, the pleading one, and the singer will rarely fail to effect the desired impression when the utterings come from the depth of an honest, pure, and feeling heart, for “what cometh from the

heart penetrateth the heart," is the Hebrew adage.

Chatskel sang, that evening particularly, with such inspiration and pathos that one could feel his whole soul melting, and his mellow voice sounded sweeter than ever, even to his loved ones.