

# NEW YORK ON 16 DOLLARS

THE first you see of New York if you arrive by night as we did is a glowing line of coloured lights. As you get nearer you see a big lighted wheel and you know it is Coney Island. Long after 11.0 p.m. on a week-night the place is glowing and flickering, a little hell of worldly sin. About the same time, you hear your first New York sounds—church bells ringing tentatively in the dark, just out of range of the ship's lights. They seem to ring uncertainly; sometimes they miss a stroke you had anticipated. The ship creeps forward in what someone has told you is now Hudson River water, and the church bells turn out to be fixed buoys with red lights. A little further, and you stop and anchor; not a sign of lighted skyscrapers anywhere. The only thing to do is go to bed and try to sleep.

NEXT morning, when the ship gets under way again, you have your second lesson on The Environs of New York. This is an important one; you must get it straight: you are entering America for the first time. The Statue, you observe with your un-American eye, is on the Left. That way, you make note, stands Liberty. But when you have seen the American Way of Life, and are leaving again, your view of the matter has been altered for you. Then, Liberty will be found to the Right. To the Left you see places that resemble prisons. The colour, by the way, of the tall French lady is pale green.

DURING those four impatient hours while immigration men dealt with the disembarking passengers, it seemed ridiculous to look for a familiar face



"You wait for a good big gap in the stream . . ."

among the few people who were on the pier to meet the boat, yet I followed the instinct and saw John Male, once of *The Listener* staff and now working at the UN secretariat. I found him the people he had come to meet and jumped at his invitation to dinner that evening. As we left the pier, hours later, and went down the stairs to street level, I remembered that those were the stairs which emigrants, refugees, and now D.P.'s have walked down with their hearts beating. I reminded myself that my hopes were circumscribed. I might make the best of about 20 waking hours in New York and then I might never see it again. So I wanted to

*This is the first of two articles by a former member of "The Listener" staff who recently travelled to London.*

hurry across the first street and under the Express Highway that runs above it on concrete piles; then we would be on West 14th street, and from there on all of us had directions in the notes we had taken at a witty and helpful lecture given on board by Paul Boesch, the wrestler, who travelled home with us.

But you don't hurry across that cobbled quay, even though the Express Highway has lifted the worst of the traffic off it. There are still countless huge trucks exactly like the ones you see killing people in the pictures. (Everything in New York looks like something you have seen at the pictures.) And it's no use trying to see the driver in the cab, no use looking for that sign of hesitation or the wave of his hand that might give you your chance; there's no sign of him—he's black, and by the time you see the whites of his eyes, it's too late. So you wait for a good big gap in the stream.

WE trudged for blocks along West 14th, feeling that walking was the proper thing to do at first. There was a news stand on the outer side of the footpath at a corner, so I carried out a promise I had made myself, and asked for the current *New Yorker*. The man was a stocky little fellow in his shirt sleeves, comfortable in the open sun on that roasting day.

"Neyorker?" he said. That's ME. Where you from?" (Everyone was as quick as this. I had thought strangers were commonplace in big cities, and no one took any notice of you whatever you wore. But everyone eyed us. I felt just as conspicuous as if I'd landed in Greymouth from Auckland.)

"Noo Zealand?" he said, handing me my *New Yorker*. "Oh, well, wherever we come from, we're all made of the same material."

I mumbled something about One World, in a first attempt to speak the American language. Then I pulled out

a dollar and paid him. He explained all the coins to me, gently and kindly. When he'd finished, he said, "Here, I'll show you something." He held five cents in his hand. "See that nickel. That's five cents, see?" He closed his fist on it, turned it over and blew on it; opened it again, quickly. Gone!

We gave him the grins he wanted to see. He made a silly face and pulled the nickel out of his shirt pocket.

"One World," I said, just as I might have said "Si si" in Spain, or "Ja ja" in Germany. And we made for the bus stop over the road.

To ride in a 7th Avenue bus you just climb in and put a nickel through a

slot into a glass container. The driver, who may be a Negro, only needs to see it go in. You get no ticket and you seem to be able to go as far as you like. That nickel is the only trick in the currency for a beginner. It is bigger than the next coin up in value, which is a dime. At first, because you have no particular reason for disliking it, that nickel doesn't seem inferior to a dime, so you make mistakes. But it's dull to the eye and the ear, and after a time you spurn it just like the next person. It's a big help, in this direction, to read in the *New Yorker* that someone has proved by experiments at Rhode Island that bacteria have a preference for nickels over dimes.

AFTER the bus-ride we loitered on 7th at 42nd to take bearings. The corner drugstore had halved oranges in a conspicuous place and a gadget for squeezing them into dixies (the conical paper cups they use for soft drinks and then throw away). I asked how much the orange drinks were. The man was an Italian, I think. His only answer was to start preparing two dixies, eyeing us from under his brows and muttering "Two orange, hm?" I asked again, "How much?" Still no answer, so I began to turn, saying for his benefit, "Come on, he won't say how much, we'll go somewhere else."

"TWO ORANGE. Thaity cents," he shouted. "Doan get excited. Thaity cents. Fifteen each," he cried. "Only doan get excited, dat's all, just doan get excited."

We let him make them up, and he looked us over pretty thoroughly. Another man came and had a look at us over his shoulder. Our friend was simmering down again, and wiping his hands on a towel. He muttered again, "Just — doan get excited." We began to drink, and he asked: "Well, is Hitler dead yet, do they know?"

"Where do you think we're from?" I said.

He tried England, and Scandinavia, so I told him.

"Noo Zealand?" he said. "What kinda money they use down there? Merican money?"

So I showed him my last New Zealand penny. He took it in his hand just to please me; he didn't really want to see it, but he thought he'd better humour me.

"That's a pretty solid coin. What kinda birds you got down there? Canaries or sump'n?"

And he laughed loud. So did the man over his shoulder.

WHEN I looked up and down the street I found I was only a step from the *New York Times*. A Negro elevator man took me to the editorial floor, and a receptionist looked at my *Listener* card, and said, "And you'd like to see over the office?" He sent for Jack. Jack, the official guide, is about 4ft 6in, or a bit more. Say five feet. He was in a white shirt and braces. He bounced ahead like Brer Rabbit and threw scraps of information over his shoulder. In a vast room full of desks he stopped solemnly. "We got eighty-five re-podders," said Jack. He pointed to one particular desk. "Da ciddy desk," he said. I nodded gravely, and we went on, to a complete semi-circle of desks with about 20 work-spaces laid



out for the night's work—blotters, 'phones and pads. "Da cable desk," said Jack, watching for signs of astonishment and wonder. Further over, grey-haired men in bow ties were typing, in their shirt sleeves. "Da real estate section," said Jack. We went into the library and saw shelves of dusty files. In a corner was a sort of dormant television set (most television sets you see in New York are flickering with baseball games). "Da microfilm pajector," said Jack. "We got every page of the *Times* on microfilm, way back. I can't work it for ya, dough." We were near the outer door again, where we came in. I muttered something about the linotypes. "I only do dis floor," said Jack.

EVEN in New York, you meet people you know on the street. Walking along West 43rd street later on I was conscious of a smile ahead. If I had been a New Yorker, I would not have known about it, because the inhabitants of large cities, never expecting to see a familiar face, don't look at the faces approaching them. But as a New Zealander accustomed to meeting friends from both islands on Lambton Quay between Willis and Woodward Streets, I was aware of someone recognising me on West 43rd. It was Colin Horsley, who left our boat at Panama to fly to New York for concert engagements. We passed each other by, automatically, with faint smiles.

THERE was time to do Macy's ("The largest Store in the World. . . . Where 94 cents act like a buck") before meeting John Male for dinner. Macy's has 70 escalators and 29 passenger elevators. But next to no buttons, except the kind you push. I asked for funny buttons or coloured buttons or animal buttons and all they had on the button counter was a set of cards, each as big as a *Listener* opened out, with rows of buttons in about eight rather ordinary patterns, and graded in several sizes. They were expensive, too, or I thought so, and the colours were dull. Yet I see by one of their recent ads that "Macy's tireless buying scouts are forever funneling thousands of novel and significant wares onto our insatiable shelves and counters to keep our public hopelessly infatuated." Beneath that bargain basement, I believe, Macy's keep feet of clay in stock.

DESCRIBING dinners eaten in New York is sheer masochism for passengers on ships bound for London who have heard since they set sail of the latest ration cuts in Britain, so I forbear. From the "China Clipper,"

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