

## CHAPTER XV

### Flight to Russia

IN THE INTEREST of science fiction, I offer herewith, free gratis, and with no strings attached, the makings of a novel, one that could well make the best seller list and might even be a good book. The fictioneer would have to bring to my idea a reasonable knowledge of the social, rather than the natural, sciences; that is, he must know something about economics, political science and what makes the human tick. If he can dip his imaginative brush into these pigments he could come up with a canvas rivaling Orwell's famous "1984."

The plot, which I will suggest later on, is not startling; just the usual ingredients of romance and adventure. It is the background hypothesis of the story that is so startling as to be almost bizarre—a necessary quality of science fiction—and thus gives promise of attracting attention. The genius of the fictioneer would be demonstrated by his ability to make this hypothesis believable: that America, the land that for over three centuries was the land of the immigrant, had become the land from which the sons of that immigrant were fleeing, and that the point of attraction for them had become, of all places, Russia.

If he has a sound grasp of the social sciences, he could

## FLIGHT TO RUSSIA

turn this hypothesis into a plausible theory, and thus assure his product of success. However, I would suggest that he put his prognostication far enough into the future, say 2084, so that if he should go wrong in his estimates he will not be around to suffer the brickbats.

Somewhere in the development of his story he must explain what it was about America that attracted immigrants for so many years, so that the reader will understand why the offspring of these immigrants have turned sour on the land. He must point out, for instance, that the principal magnet of America in the beginning was the absence of governmental restraints; what else did the wilderness have to offer superior to the places they left behind? Those who suffered disabilities imposed on them by their respective governments, or by legally encrusted traditions, picked up sticks and went west. America was the refuge for those who had run afoul of the law, for hounded religious dissidents, for disinherited second sons, for debt-ridden prisoners, for all who had lost hope of rising above the station to which law and custom consigned them. The fact that they "took a chance" is proof sufficient that they had freedom in their hearts.

There was another promise that America held forth during most of its first century of unorganized existence. Except for the indentured, assuming they held to the terms of servitude, these immigrants knew they could keep all they produced; there was no tax-gatherer to claim a share of their earnings. This assurance of complete ownership induced industry and thrift. The immigrants therefore applied themselves to their tasks with vigor and in short order came up with an excess over consumption, a profit, which

they invested in what we call capital: ships and shops and all sorts of devices to improve their output. Unfortunately, when their opulence became evident, the inevitable tax-gatherer showed up, and though his demands were modest they resented his presence and shortly threw him into the Atlantic Ocean. This took some doing—in fact, seven years of war—but, being men of freedom, they thought the effort worthwhile.

However, the immigrants, being wise in the ways of mankind, knew that they could not do without the tax-gatherer forever. Taking a good look in the mirror they detected unmistakable traces of Adam's sin: the desire for something for nothing. Knowing that they could not prosper if they did not set up some external constraint on their larcenous inclinations, they hired, by compact, a policeman to keep the peace. That is, they instituted government. Since this government was, by the terms of its employment, incapable of producing its keep, they agreed to support it out of their wages.

But, they kept that government poor. Their own experience and their understanding of history taught them that built into government is an overweening urge to grasp power, at the expense of the people it is supposed to serve, and that the amount of power it gets hold of is in direct proportion to what it can collect in taxes. Therefore, in establishing their new government they took care to limit its taxing powers; it was permitted to collect import duties and to levy some excise taxes; nothing more. The government's proclivity to do mischief was thus held in restraint.

Besides keeping their government poor, the immigrants wrote into its charter a device for keeping it off-balance

## FLIGHT TO RUSSIA

and weak; they were taking no chances. And though this government did from time to time manage to circumvent some of these limitations, it was, on the whole, kept in leash during most of the nineteenth century. There was freedom and men thrived. Security of property released an inordinate amount of energy for the improvement of their horizons, so that before the end of that century—the first under the new government—there sprang up in the erstwhile wilderness a capital structure the like of which the world had never known.

And America continued to be the magnet of the oppressed and the dispossessed of other countries. They came and they built. The Poles came to work in the coal mines so that their sons could go to college and play football; the Irish to build railroads and to help the Sinn Fein movement in the old country; the Swedes, tired of trying to dig a living out of rocks, to farm fertile farm land and to build cities on the prairie; the Germans, fleeing from their Prussian overlords, to open tailoring establishments and banks; the Jews to peddle pots and pans and with their profits to build department stores; the Syrians to sell carpets; the Italians to dig ditches and spread their love of music; and so on. They all came to make their way in life under their own steam, without let or hindrance, which is the condition of freedom.

So things were until the early part of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, the character of the early immigrants gradually lost value because of the constantly increasing abundances enjoyed by their progeny. The human urgency for something for nothing began asserting itself with force; it seemed, in the light of this great productive evidence, that enjoyment without effort was more than a dream, it would

actually be realized. Men being what they are, some had more of the good things of life than others, and cupidity read injustice in the disparity. If only some method of distributing the multiplying wealth could be devised, the inequity would be righted and all would have plenty. Leaders, particularly those with pretensions to intellectuality, not only phrased the thought born of covetousness, but also devised a grandiose scheme of redistribution. That was the Sixteenth Amendment.

This change in the charter of government, as later events showed, really revised the whole thing. By giving the government a first lien on the earnings of the people it undermined the sanctity of private property, which was the keystone of the liberty the immigrants cherished. It was a transference of economic power from the producers to politicians. Those who framed the Constitution had been fully aware of the consequence, that political power is determined by economic power, and were careful to guard against it; but their great-grandsons, overcome by the something-for-nothing mirage, lost sight of the danger.

The shift in power in time undermined the moral fiber of the producers. For, as the inherent avidity of government asserted itself in constantly increasing levies on income, the producers as a matter of necessity began looking to it for succor and for the solution of all life's problems. Self-reliance was submerged in the demand, as a "right," for economic security, for government support and management of the economy by way of subsidies, loans, contracts and jobs. Dependence on the State became a virtue; dependence on oneself was derided as "rugged individualism."

## FLIGHT TO RUSSIA

Nevertheless, the tradition of freedom was preserved in the songs and adages of the past, and memory kept the illusion alive. For a long time Americans continued to strive for improvement in their circumstances and, in spite of the government, succeeded; the momentum of custom and tradition dies down slowly, imperceptibly. In large part, the momentum was aided by the ingenuity of the people in evading or avoiding the payment of income taxes; the great preoccupation for many years was to find or make loopholes in the laws, or to devise plausible falsification of income returns. The idea that morality is a relative matter, particularly in dealing with the impersonal State, took hold; for instance, it was considered sagacious and proper to trade one's vote for a promised subvention.

Moral decadence shows itself only in retrospect, long after the corrosion has taken place. And so, Americans drifted along for many years, oblivious of the fact that their country, conceived in freedom, was going the way of other nations which had turned from personal responsibility to Statism. (Up to this point the novelist is dealing with the documented past. The challenge to his imaginative faculty and his knowledge of social and political behavior starts with war in the making.)

Then came war. It was known as World War III, but the fact is there were only two real opponents, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. The Allies upon whom the U.S. had placed some reliance in the beginning turned out to be too far debilitated by long years of Statism to be of much help in the struggle; in fact, some of them quit before the fighting started. The novelist might develop this point, in detail, but far more important for the central theme (that is, the exodus

of Americans to Russia) is the picturization of the social and political consequences of the war on both nations.

The prosecution of the war and this is an essential point in the development of the thesis—demanded complete abandonment of social power in favor of political power. America had to go totalitarian, ostensibly for the duration, for the survival of the nation was at stake. One does not talk of personal rights and prerogatives when the village is on fire or when the enemy is at the city gates. The Constitution was put into moth balls, private property was abolished, the government undertook to manage, control and direct all production, to fix prices and wages, to ration supplies, to channel all behavior into the main purpose.

In due time the war was over. Attrition brought the struggle to an end, and attrition came to Russia first because of its antecedent experience. The Russians had endured six centuries of economic slavery, four under the czars, two under the commissars. And slaves, as we have noted, are notoriously poor producers. When the stockpile of war material which the commissars had been able to whip out of their reluctant subjects was exhausted in the first weeks after the opening of hostilities, the jerry-built capital structure was unable to provide replacements fast enough to meet the flow from American factories. To this deficiency must be added the apathy and even hostility of the populace; the Russian people had little stomach for war, particularly a war which promised to further entrench the commissars in power. Indeed, when it seemed that the Americans had a better than even chance to succeed, spontaneous fires of rebellion sprang up in the commissars' rear and they were faced with two fighting fronts.

## FLIGHT TO RUSSIA

The commissars did not surrender; they simply vanished, knowing full well what the verdict of expected "war crime trials" would be. Their mass disappearance created a problem of proportions for the American government, for there was nobody with whom to conclude a peace treaty. A political establishment is equipped to do business only with another political establishment, not with a people, and the Russian people were too preoccupied with the problem of living to give any attention to political matters. So, the occupation troops had to sit around and wait for orders, while the people took to feeding, clothing and sheltering themselves. They worked hard because that was the only way to survive. Gradually, it dawned on them that there was no government around to rob them of their substance, that they could keep and consume all they produced, and the consciousness of private property gave them additional energy. In short order they found themselves possessed of capital, in the way of goods and tools, small factories making consumer goods, and a thriving market place. Something like a spiritual uplift came to them: hope, ambition, enterprise and the dreams that freedom gives rise to.

There was a social structure, to be sure, for trading has a way of creating a society. The social unit was the village or town, and such common problems as did come up were threshed out at the town hall meeting, with dispatch, since everyone was more concerned with the festivities that invariably followed the "business" part of the gathering. Respected elders took over, by common consent, the juridical functions of the community, and priests did what priests are supposed to do. But, there was nothing resembling a government—no constabulary, no tax collector. Everybody



was too busy doing things to have any concern with politics—a word that carried evil connotation and was associated with the late hated regime. In fact, anyone who dared talk of political affairs was courting social ostracism, which turned out to be most effective in maintaining order; “order” was disassociated from “law.” Contracts, mostly verbal, were strictly adhered to because nobody dared to be accused of “talking with a split tongue.” Everybody was on his own, though neighborliness did not neglect hardship cases.

And now we come to the point of the story—flight of Americans to Russia. This calls for a plot, with action, an affair of the heart, *dramatis personae* and all the trappings of a readable novel. In fact, the plot should carry on its back, from the first page, the aforesaid economic, social and political argument; this should be an interesting story, not a treatise. Just by way of suggestion—I am not a novelist—I offer the following outline of a plot.

An American doctor, attached to a regiment in some village, is asked to attend a sick girl who is something of a local heroine, for during the late war she had done in a particularly hated commissar. Of course the girl is beautiful, of course the doctor saves her life, and just as assuredly he falls in love with her. In fact he marries her and when his regiment is ordered home he decides to remain in the village with her. He hangs out a shingle, trade is brisk and profitable, and for added compensation he enjoys the warm acceptance of the community. It should be pointed out that he might have induced his lady love to accompany him to America, but he made no such effort because back home

## FLIGHT TO RUSSIA

socialized medicine was going strong and he preferred the prospect of practicing as a free doctor.

The story of the transplanted American doctor reaches home by way of tale-bearing soldiers. It is considerably expanded in transmission, and is embellished with a moral: there is gold in them thar hills. Russia is the place where anyone can make his fortune provided he has "guts." There is plenty of rich farming land to be had for the taking, there are natural resources to be exploited, a great need for enterprise of all sorts. Also, the people are kindly and appreciative, the scenery is beautiful, and so are the girls. Besides, there is no government to harass you or to confiscate your earnings. This is the El Dorado of the twenty-first century.

The American press (still dependent on the government for its paper supply) at first ignored the story of the doctor, mentioning him only in a list of defectors printed in small type. As the volume of word-of-mouth advertising increased, this treatment was replaced by derogatory articles, not only about the doctor but about Russia in general. It was a chaotic and primitive land, inhabited by barbarian individualists, disgustingly unsocial, capitalistic to the core, without any of the advantages (like social security) of life in a well-regulated and well-planned economy. And the weather is terrible. Somehow, however, these articles only whetted the curiosity of many readers, especially since, as the story expands, the doctor is joined by an army of defectors, who seem to be well satisfied with their new life. Credence is added to homecoming soldiers' tales by the government's clamp down on resignations and deserters.

Willingness to believe a rumor turns it into a fact. And

there is great willingness to believe the glorious picture of Russia because of conditions at home. The interventionary powers acquired by the government at the beginning of the war are still in operation because, it is said, a sudden return to pre-war conditions would cause distress. Industry is still supervised by the bureaucracy, labor leaders (with powers to conscript workers) have become government officials, rationing has been firmly institutionalized, there is a scarcity of everything except laws and edicts. About the only way one can rub along is by aiding and abetting the black market, under the aegis of the bureaucrats themselves.

There is no lack of jobs under the compulsory labor laws, and unemployment is equated with absenteeism. Nor is there a shortage of money. Everybody has a pocket full of large denomination notes, which everybody is anxious to exchange for anything tangible. Since money is plentiful and goods are scarce, gambling has become the national pastime. Also, especially among farmers, barter is engaged in wherever possible, even though the laws forbid it.

Altogether, the America that once attracted immigrants has undergone a complete metamorphosis. It is no longer a land of opportunity, although, according to official pronouncements, it is a free country because nobody starves. Most of the people have made peace with the new order—that is, they are too preoccupied with the business of living to pay any attention to public affairs. They even joke about the discomfort of queuing up at the supply stations. Sometimes an old codger will wistfully bring up the “good old days,” but his stories are indulgently discounted.

Yet, among the youth the story of the doctor (and his as-

## FLIGHT TO RUSSIA

sociates) makes the rounds and stirs the imagination. And the slogan, "Go East, young man" (or, on the Pacific coast, "Go West") arouses the spirit of adventure which is the hallmark of youth.

(Just how the youth manages to go east or west across the ocean is something for the fictioneer to figure out. After all he cannot expect me to work out all the details for him.)