

A German Heart

by Emil Rittershaus

On Lake Erie a summer evening is balmy and mild;
The day draws to a close; the zephyr, like a sleeping child,
Curls up in the crowns of sweet-scented flowers; suddenly a sharp cry, -
A frightened water fowl bolts the reeds and soars on high.
In the underbrush the songbird no longer its melody sings.
When the last ray of sunlight fell, it now rests its tired wings.
All is calm, except the pier, there where the arriving steamer in the moonlight
gleams,

There the hustle and bustle of all humanity teems.
The jarring of unwieldy barrels loaded by a strapping youth,
Black Gospels with a whistled "Yankee Doodle" mix uncouth,
The cackle of passengers, the roar of a shipmate,
A never-ending cacophony, until by the light of the moon,
they somewhat abate

When the boat weighs anchor by the shore. - - - - -
- - - - - All around there stand
People clustered and airing their views. Creole lasses roll with their hand
A right smart cigarette; then flirting with a fan
They nonchalantly sip their glass of lemonade while listening to a man,
Parisian, telling silly jokes, the girls to please,
But they give the unsuspecting Yankee the eye, busily making kindling chips
and completely at ease.

Germans, too, are on board. A woman does her child embrace.
She sits with the little lad on her wardrobe case.

Beside the woman, a man from Germany does stand,
A German, who has won the treasures of this virgin land,
A German once, but now in the State of Wisconsin he resides!
He has no desire to return to the Old World, which he derides!

. - - - -
"No matter what you say, I'll not change my mind!
Here in the Land of the Free I am with my own kind!
Germans, with their inveterate madness, build castles in the sky!
I have purged my soul of such a crazy lullaby!
Once I was a soft touch, German style, and easily "had" -
Many there were who tried to take advantage of the kindheartedness of an
innocent German lad!

If there were, let's say, a lazy good-for-nothing, he would come
crawling to me;

He would know how to tap my generosity.
Then I would pull out my wallet, then I would pour out my wine" -
I was showered with gratitude while he laughed himself blind!
Then I fell on hard times. What had happened to the
Guardian Angels, Heaven Above?

The dear, good friends, who once called me "Brother" out of a sense of love?
They were all alike! - "To hell with them", I fumed!
German noble-mindedness is with hypocrisy consumed.
With feeling, with decency and all such stuff -
I received a lesson in misery! - Enough is enough!

“Chase it away! Oh look, from the ship’s wake,
 I see the black figure reaching out to give our ship a fatal shake!”
 Soothingly, the mother the little lad’s blond locks does stroke.
 “My dear one, what you saw was but a shadow made by belching smoke!
 Come under my coat, and lay your little head on my lap,
 My little man, it is time for a good long nap!”
 In the folds of her coat, the mother does her little son safe and sound encase.
 The tears soon begin to dry on the little one’s face,
 And, before the boy can fall asleep, aye, how he does laugh and joke.
 A child will forget all danger, when protected by a mother’s love in a mother’s
 cloak!

. - - - -
 While on the deck, a mother her sleeping child serenely holds,
 In the cabin a completely different scene unfolds.
 There in that musty, humid hole, a flask of brandy from mouth to mouth is
 conveyed;
 One man tossing dice spits out a curse; the other, when trumps are played.
 A plantation owner from the Deep South is holding his hands angrily against
 his waist.
 Sporting a shirt with brightly colored stripes and standing beside the captain,
 he shouts out in distaste:
 “God damn! I must confess here on Lake Erie you folks don’t know
 how to sail!
 You set out at a snail’s pace! I’ve never seen the like,” he continued to rail.
 Way down South, in the Gulf of Mexico, you learn the meaning of speed.
 Right from the start, we settle things as we need.
 But up here in the North, you’re too lazy to succeed!
 I’ll put up bottles of whiskey ten
 That in one hour this old ship cannot make harbor by then!”
 “Though one and one half, its always been,
 yet not more than an hour shall pass by,
 For my ship is the *Swallow*, and, like the swallow, she does fly!
 Full steam ahead!” Then said the plantation owner, not to be outdone:
 “In one hour’s time, I want to be in harbor and having fun!
 By God, if I get my way, I’ll give you this edge:
 Ten dollars on top of the whiskey I pledge!
 You have neither wife nor child, so you can’t lose ’em,
 So if you don’t reach the harbor, you’ll end up in Abraham’s bosom!”
 The German spoke up loud: “What about the passengers on board?”
 The captain went on quietly chewing his tobacco, though the question
 he abhorred.
 That is so typical of the German race! Now, young German, mark what I
 have to say and mark it well!
 You folks say, All for one and one for all! But we say, Every man for himself
 even if he goes to hell!
 If a fast voyage is my delight, it will cost you, young man, not a dime,
 I confess.
 You’re on, Southerner, and God bless!
 Ten bottles of whiskey and ten dollars to boot! It’s a deal!” the captain laughed

and began to expostulate:

“You’re talking about passengers. Now a passenger is only freight.
So get your lives insured!” and giggles softly and with no sense of guilt:
“The ship may be ramshackle and moldy, but it is insured to the hilt!”

The ship’s master goes down into the engine room. It is in a state of disarray.
The ship’s wheels are thundering wildly as they scoop the lake
and fling a foamy spray.

The smokestacks exhale black clouds, which with the sky do wed,
Sparks shoot out like Roman candles, and fade a crimson red.
A massive column of steam climbs higher and higher; its monster shadow
is cast in the moonlight onto the far reaches of the lake below.
Then, up the stairs came the dash of feet. Abruptly from a quavering throat: .
“Fire! Fire on the ship! Where is the lifeboat?

Put up the distress signal! Ring the warning bell!”

A blinding flash of light, the mast is ablaze and hot as hell;

Up the tarred ropes the hungry flames go;

As red as blood the white pearls of water glow.

Steam hisses out of the ship’s seams, and rumors of disaster are afloat,

But the captain and the plantation owner are already in the lifeboat.

The bell peals out shrilly and the foghorn booms out loud and clear –

In vain these sounds resound unheard in the lake both far and near.

From the hatch clusters of yellow flames spring forth as in a craze;

They lick the walls of the steamer and dart their tongues out at the waves

Liberated from the bowels of the ship; in the smoke they shoot into the sky,

As if they were striving to kiss the stars in the firmament good-bye.

Loudly groans the engine, surrounded by flames on all flanks;

Swimming in the lake, the shipwrecked passengers cling to planks.

A dreadful curse is heard. Then, “Oh Lord, have mercy!”

another moanfully does shout.

For the lifeboat, a hundred hands reach out.

And those in the lifeboat, they draw their knives and fight

And stab at those holding fast to the boat, the one chance

to escape their plight.

“You I’ll finish off!” The plantation owner madly shouts, his voice

uncontrolled:

Though drops of blood do trickle, the fingers do not give up their hold;

Out of the foaming water, more and more climb o’er the rim.

The lifeboat’s limited space is filled to the brim.

With bloody hands they seize each other’s throat and rave.

Then the lifeboat capsizes! May the Lord our souls save!

A gurgling sound, the presage of death’s comic burble,

that final breath, a dying chill

As the waters boil, then all is still.

Not far from the ship a plank is drifting in the moonlight;

Its supports a heavy burden, a mother holding on tight,

While on the plank there sits her son cradled in his mother’s arm.

The woman prays to God for His loving help and rescue from all harm.

Then with tired strokes a swimmer approaches the tiny beleaguered band.

Now he spies the plank; salvation is close at hand!

