

The IMMIGRANTS

Howard Fast



The Immigrants

HOWARD FAST

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY BOSTON

For Bette

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SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT WITH ERIC LASHER.

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Fast, Howard Melvin, date
The immigrants.

I. Title.

PZ3.F265Im [PS3511.A784] 813'.5'2 77-9317
ISBN 0-395-25699-2

Printed in the United States of America

s 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

CONTENTS

The Immigrants 1

PART ONE

Fisherman's Wharf 27

PART TWO

Russian Hill 79

PART THREE

Sons and Daughters 143

PART FOUR

The Vintage 219

PART FIVE

The Wind 295

PART SIX

The Whirlwind 335

The Immigrants

The immigrants were without any deep consciousness of the role they were playing. They did not dream of history or see themselves as a part of history. They partook of a mythology of the place to which they were going, but of the fact of the place they knew little indeed. Misery absorbed them. Nausea absorbed them. The agony of their stomachs absorbed them. In the pitching, shifting, fetid cabin occupied by eight human beings, four of them adult, four of them children, measuring eight feet by eight feet, stinking of a mixture of body odor and vomit, unventilated, they were absorbed by the various degrees of their misery — and this misery appeared to them to go on for an eternity.

On the small, cold, wind- and water-swept deck that was allotted to steerage passengers, there was some relief from the closeness of the cabin, but the North Atlantic in the month of December, in this year of 1888, provided small compensation for the breath of fresh air the deck granted. The deck was wet and icy cold and awash whenever the weather worsened. And the weather was not good during that passage.

Most of the time Anna Lavette spent in her bunk. A dark, good-looking girl in her early twenties, she was in the seventh month of her pregnancy. She had been born and raised in the tiny fishing village of Albenga, in the north of Italy on the Ligurian Sea. Her husband, Joseph, was a distant cousin, not by blood but by the intricate network of Italian family connection. The Lavettes were a family of fishermen, part Italian, part French, part of them in San Remo, part in Marseille. Joseph had grown up in Marseille, a fisherman from the age of ten.

Now, twenty-five years old, he was large, strong, immune to

seasickness, built like a bull, cheerful, and hopeful. His marriage to Anna had been arranged when they were both children, and he saw her for the first time only ten months before, when their marriage took place. He was delighted with his good luck — a wife who was pleasant to look at, round and delicious to embrace, cheerful, and obviously equally pleased with the man chosen as her husband. She welcomed his body as he did hers, and their lovemaking satisfied both of them. If she spoke no French, his own Italian was ample, and she found his French accent attractive. She was also possessed of imagination, and when he told her that his son — he never for a moment considered that it might be a daughter — must be born in America, she agreed.

So they became a part of that vast wash of mankind who were the immigrants, a flow of nations across the Atlantic and into another world. They had been at sea for sixteen days. For the past five days, Anna had lain in her bunk, flushed and feverish, without privacy, without air, her cheerfulness turning into hopelessness, fearing more for her unborn child than for her own life, vomiting out the will to live — with the single gratification that she had married a man who was patient and gentle, who sat beside her for endless hours, wiping her hot brow with a wet cloth, building pictures of what their life would be in the golden land of America.

“No,” she said to him once. “No, Joseph, I will die here.”

“I will not permit it,” he said flatly. “You are my wife. You will honor and obey me and get well.”

“I am so miserable.”

She did not die, and a day came when the pitching and lurching of the ship ended, and then he picked her up in his arms and carried her up to the deck. She was thin and wasted, but when she saw the sun and the sky and the smooth water of New York Harbor, she knew that she would live and that she wanted to live.

They stood on the deck as the ancient, rusty ship that had been their home and ark for seventeen days wore into Ellis Island — shoulder to shoulder, cheek to jowl. Everyone was on the deck, the old and the young, screaming children, weeping babies, the silent, the terrified, the sick, the hopeful, nationalities and tongues in a flux of sound and tears and laughter. The great

lady of hope welcomed them, and this they had been waiting to see. The Eighth Wonder of the World. "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." In five tongues the statistics floated over the babble of sound. She is a hundred and fifty-two feet high and she weighs two hundred and twenty-five tons. Yes, you can stand up there in the torch at the very end of the arm. Across the water, there was the mass of buildings on the battery, but the lady of liberty was something else.

Then on Ellis Island, a ragged rock, jutting out of the harbor, covered with buildings that were stuffed with people, Lady Liberty was laughing at them. They were herded together like cattle, and they whimpered in fear at the mysteries. The smallpox inoculation was a mystery. The hours of waiting were another mystery. There were Turks, and no one spoke Turkish; there were Greeks, and no one spoke Greek. With Italian, it was another matter. An immigration officer spoke Italian fluently, and he asked Joseph how much money he had.

"Seven hundred and twenty French francs."

"Which is French money," said the immigration man, "and what good is French money in America?"

"Mother of God!" whispered Anna.

Warm and friendly, the immigration man took them aside. They were both relieved after their sudden twinge of terror. Here was a friendly face, a friendly soul, and their own tongue.

"You don't mean that our money is worthless?" Joseph pleaded.

"Of course not. But you must have dollars, American money."

"Yes, yes, of course." He explained the matter to Anna. "Women," he said to the immigration inspector. "And she's carrying. She was sick on the passage." "Of course, of course." The inspector's name was Carso. "Paisano," he said warmly, ignoring Joseph's French accent, and Joseph replied, "Paisano." Men understand these things. Carso had a friend whose name was Franco, and Joseph hefted the bundle that contained all their worldly goods, and with an arm around Anna's waist, he followed Carso out of the crowd.

Franco was a small, sharp-eyed, long-nosed man, with a furtive air and a mournful manner. He made it plain that he suffered; he suffered doing favors for softhearted idiots like Carso.

Who needed French francs? Who wanted them? Why did Carso insist upon making his life so difficult? Finally, he weakened and gave Joseph sixty dollars for his seven hundred and twenty francs — about one third of what they would have brought in an honest exchange.

So the Lavettes, Joseph and Anna, the immigrants, came to America.

At the end of five weeks, the sixty dollars was gone. Joseph learned that he had been cheated, and he also learned that there was nothing he could do about it. He learned that the process of being cheated, put upon, robbed, bamboozled was an intricate part of the existence in America of two immigrants who spoke no English and had neither relatives nor friends. The questions in his wife's dark, pain-filled eyes were unspoken, but nonetheless clear. "Look at me with my swollen belly. I'll bring him forth in a coal cellar. That's his inheritance." They had paid seven dollars for a month's rent in advance for half of a coal cellar on Rivington Street. Light came in from two dirty windows, high on the wall. Anna cleaned and cleaned, but there is no way to clean a coal cellar. From dawn until sunset, Joseph offered his body, his intelligence, his great strength. First, at the dockside on the East River, he offered himself as a fisherman. There were no jobs. It was winter, a cold, icy winter, and only the largest boats were going out. For every job on the big boats, there were ten men laid off out of the small boats, and they spoke English. He offered himself in dumb, impotent silence. One day, he found a construction site with an Italian foreman. He threw away his pride and pleaded. "No use, paisano. Come back next week, the week after."

Anna persuaded him, with much argument, to spend two dollars for a heavy jacket. They had to see a doctor, and each time cost them a dollar. At the docks, Joseph met an Italian named Mateo, and Mateo told him that he, Mateo, could find him a job as a deck hand on an excursion boat. No one told Joseph that the excursion boats did not function during the winter. To get the job, to assure it, Mateo would have to have ten dollars in advance. They would meet then at the Battery. At the Battery, Joseph waited five hours in the freezing cold, and then, heart-sick, filled with the mortification of the decent man who has been cruelly tricked, he returned to Anna.

The cellar was always cold. At night, they huddled together like two lost children, the great hulk of a man robbed of his manliness, the woman robbed of her joy and cheerfulness and youth, Joseph embracing her swollen body and wiping away her tears. He knew that she must eat well; they came from a land of sunlight and warm winds, where food was life and joy and tradition; but as their few dollars dwindled, they ate only bread and pasta and salt fish, counting out pennies. Soon the pennies would be gone. What then?

Afterward, Joseph would say that they owed their lives and their child's life to Frank Mancini. When he said that, Anna's lips would tighten and her eyes would harden, and Joseph would shrug and say something to the effect of that being the difference between the way a man and a woman looked at things.

Frank Mancini was an elegant gentleman. He wore a black Homburg and a black overcoat with a collar of fine dark mink. He had a scarf of white silk, and his pointed shoes were polished to a glitter. He came into the wretched cellar place where Joseph and Anna lived as if he were entering a palace, took off his hat, bowed to them, informed them that his name was Frank Mancini — in impeccable Italian — and that he had been given their address by Rocco Cantala, who was the foreman at the construction site where Joseph had asked for a job.

To all of this, the Lavettes listened with amazement. This was the first person to set foot in their place, and a person of such elegance and bearing made them speechless. They simply stared.

"I am a labor contractor," he announced.

Still, they stared and waited.

"Forgive me. I have been thirty years in America, and I forget that there are other places and other ways. I forget that the world is not America. I will ask you whether you have ever heard of the Atchison Railroad?"

Joseph was wondering whether it would be proper and polite to suggest that Mr. Mancini remove his coat. It was very cold in the cellar. He wore the jacket that he had purchased, and Anna wore three layers of cotton under her sweater. He decided that in any case it would be presumptuous of him.

"The Atchison Railroad?"

Joseph and Anna shook their heads.

"It is a great railroad, far out to the west. You must understand that America is a vast country — as big as all of Europe. Now this great railroad, which is called the Atchison, has begun the construction of a spur line to connect its main line with the City of San Francisco."

"San Francisco," said Joseph. He had heard the name.

"A beautiful, splendid city that sits like a jewel on the Pacific coast of the United States. Now you understand, of course — "

"Please sit down," Anna said. She had forgotten courtesy; she had forgotten that whatever this place was, it was, nevertheless, their home, and that the wealthy and elegant Mr. Mancini was a guest in their home.

Mr. Mancini examined the three wooden boxes that served as chairs. His expression was dubious, and Joseph looked at Anna disapprovingly. Then Mr. Mancini seated himself gingerly and went on to explain the qualifications for building a railroad, the specific one being men of firm muscle and large build.

"I hire such men," he went on to say, "men who are not afraid to work hard."

"My God," said Joseph, "that's all I want — to work and earn my bread. My wife is with child."

"As I see. May it be born blessed! As I said, the work is hard. I will not deceive a countryman. But the pay is good, twenty cents an hour, two dollars a day, twelve dollars a week — with meals and a place to sleep."

The sudden hope in Joseph's heart died. "You see my wife's condition. I can't leave her."

"But would we want you to? You will find others with wives, with children, too. It's a hard life, but a healthy life. Better than living in a place like this."

"How far is it?" Anna asked uncertainly. "Is it still America, or is it another country?"

"Because my son must not be born in another country," Joseph said firmly.

"Good. Good. I admire that. But I must explain about America. It is a group of states bound together. That is why it is called the United States. You will work in a state called California — a wonderful place, I assure you."

He went on to assure them of all the joys and rewards that flowed from working for the Atchison Railroad. Then he took

some papers out of his breast pocket. They were written in English, which Joseph could not read, but Mancini explained that they were only a simple work contract.

A troubled Anna watched Joseph sign the papers. The baby was kicking, moving constantly now. She could no longer remember whether she had calculated the weeks and the months properly.

"Tomorrow then," Mancini said, "at the Lackawanna Ferry on the North River. Seven o'clock in the morning. You know where the ferry is?"

He nodded. That he knew, having prowled the waterfront from 14th Street down to the Battery, looking for work, any work. Now, God be praised, he had work.

That night, Anna pleaded with Joseph not to go, not to take them into another unknown. Her knowledge of geography, place, and distance was vague. She had never been to school, and she could neither read nor write, nor had she any English — for the simple reason that during her time in America she had only the most minimal contact with those who spoke English. Joseph had acquired a vocabulary of a few dozen words, but Anna had been made silent, bereft of voice and will. The passage from Europe had been an eternity of suffering, and she knew that there was no way back ever — no way ever to reach out again and touch family or friends or the things of home, and she clung to the miserable room they lived in as at least something known.

"We will die if we stay here," Joseph said in answer to all her arguments, and she thought, "I will die anyway."

With the first light of dawn, Joseph put together their few possessions, and then they went out into the icy cold to walk across lower New York to the Lackawanna Ferry. When they reached the ferry slip, they joined a group of a dozen men and women and two or three children already gathered there; and by the time Mancini appeared, an hour later, the group had increased to eighteen men, six women, and seven children. Anna's fear increased, and she clung to Joseph. Some of the men were literally in rags, dirty, unshaven, cold, some of them abjectly surrendered to circumstance, spiritless, hopeless, almost all of them immigrants, Swedes, Italians, Poles, their women subdued and troubled, the few children frightened and cowed

by the sight of the broad, icy river, and the smoky cloudy unknown beyond it. Mancini was their shepherd. Smiling, confident, wholly in command of the situation, he herded them onto the ferry. Chilled, her fear frozen into silence, Anna watched the gray water slide by and felt cold tears congeal on her cheeks. Not Joseph, not any of the contract laborers spoke; they lined the rail and watched Manhattan drift away into the distance, their faces blank and hopeless.

At the railroad yard, across the river, the contract laborers were fed slices of ham on stale white bread and coffee in tin mugs. Mancini, always smiling and cheerful, assured them that arrangements had been made for their care and feeding on the trip across the country, and then he led them to a part of the yard where a boxcar stood. There he turned them over to a railroad official, who checked them off Mancini's list and herded them into the boxcar. When some of the men began to protest, Mancini assured them that this was no ordinary boxcar. There were toilets at one end of the car, and it was divided into two sections so that the women might have privacy. There were mattresses on which to sleep. Each day they would be given food and fresh water. It would be an interesting and enlightening trip, and they would see a great deal of this beautiful country which they had chosen as their new homeland.

So much for what Frank Mancini told the group of contract laborers in the railroad yard on the west bank of the Hudson River. There was much more that he might have told them that he failed to tell them — that the toilets were filthy and functioned poorly, that the stench would fill the boxcar in short order, that sixteen additional men would join the group in Chicago, that the food would be wretched and in short supply, that they would not have enough drinking water, and that it would be cold beyond belief in the unheated car. He also failed to tell them that the trip across the continent would take seven days.

Seven days in a boxcar, as Anna Lavette discovered, can be an eternity. There was a single primitive latrine built into one end of the car, a traveling outhouse of sorts. There was no heating, no seats, no blankets except what the immigrants had with them, and the food, brought to them at train stops, was a dismal, unchanging diet of cold sausage and stale bread. The population of the car was fragmented by language and origin. The men

were quick to anger; frustration became rage. With no other place to vent their fury and despair, men turned on their wives, beat the submissive, inarticulate women, and turned like caged animals on whoever dared to interfere.

For three days, Joseph and Anna huddled together for warmth and watched the life in the boxcar with a growing sense of hopelessness. On the fourth day, Anna's pain began, and at four o'clock in the morning, in the rattling, swaying, cold boxcar, Anna's child was born. A Polish woman and a Hungarian woman served as midwives, and suddenly and miraculously, the strife in the boxcar ceased. Anger turned into compassion, and the tiny bit of squalling life became a sort of covenant and promise to the immigrants. Jackets and coats were given to Anna to warm her and the baby, and in a way, the child became the triumphant possession of the entire population of the car. The husband of the Polish woman who had served as midwife produced a bottle of carefully hoarded plum brandy, and everyone drank to the health of the newborn babe. Their own misery was forgotten, and a babble of tongues and halting translations played the game of finding a name for the child.

Joseph fixed on the name of Daniel. The child was delivered in a lion's den, or its vague equivalent. As for Anna, she was content with the end of the pregnancy and the fact of this lovely, healthy bit of life sucking away at her breast. At least she had milk, and the child would live. And sooner or later, they would find a priest who could baptize him.

Thus Daniel Lavette came into the world in a boxcar rattling across the length of the United States of America. He weighed well over eight pounds, and he sucked manfully and grew fat and round. Years later, doctors would tell Anna Lavette that the manner of the birth and certain complications that must have occurred destroyed her ability to bear additional children. Now she knew only that the pain was over and that a fine, healthy child had been born.

For the first three months of Daniel Lavette's life, he was nursed in railroad camps while his father drove spikes and handled steel rails. Of all this, he was happily unaware. He was equally unaware of the day when his father first saw the hills of San Francisco and decided that this was the place where he would live and be, and his first memories of his father and mother were of the flat on Howard Street that Joseph Lavette

had moved into after he found a job on one of the fishing boats that went out of the wharf. The misery of Anna Lavette's illness that came out of a confinement in a filthy boxcar was also prior to his consciousness. He was the only child. There would be no others.

Joseph Lavette had saved forty-two dollars working on the railroad. The experience had turned him into a careful and thrifty man who lived with a nightmarish dread of ever again being penniless, and as the years passed, as he learned to deal with the English language, his life took on a single focus — to become the owner of a fishing boat, to be his own master and never again to be in the position of hopelessness, a leaf blown by the winds of chance.

In 1897, when young Daniel was eight years old, already adept in that strange, complex, and convoluted language called English — still a mystery to his mother — and already going to school and learning all sorts of incredible things about this place, this San Francisco, this California, his father had managed to save six hundred dollars. It had been no easy task. It meant scrimping and saving and going without anything but the barest necessities, and still it was only half of what he needed to buy the boat — not any boat, not one of the lateen-rigged sailing craft that most of the independent Italian fishermen owned, but one of the new power-driven boats; and as far as Joseph was concerned, it was either a power-driven boat or nothing. For this too was the manner and the ideology of the immigrant. The boat was not for him; the boat was for Daniel. Twice already his boss had allowed him to take the boy with him in the off season. His reward was young Daniel's excitement and joy at being out in the bay, and he boasted about it to Anna.

"And why must he be a fisherman?" she asked him. "He's a smart boy. You know how smart he is."

"Meaning that I am a fool."

"No, no. But this is America, and there are other things. Maria Cassala told me that her boy will be an accountant one day. An accountant sits at a desk and wears clean clothes."

"I can't argue with you," Joseph said. "There are things you don't understand — too many things."

Maria Cassala was a kind, openhearted young woman, a Sicilian who was married to a Neapolitan bricklayer named Anthony Cassala. They had been in San Francisco since 1885, or rather

her husband had. Maria had married Anthony in 1892, the year she came to America from Sicily. She had met Anna while shopping, and she had taken the frightened, frail young woman under her wing. To Anna, the Cassalas were a source of inspiration and wonder. They lived in their own house, a frame house on Folsom Street, which Anthony Cassala had built — for the most part with his own hands.

One day Anna confided to Maria Joseph's dream of owning his own powerboat. "He's never content," she said. "Nothing for today — only for tomorrow, and it will never be."

"Why will it never be?"

"Because he needs five hundred dollars. In ten years more, we will not save another five hundred dollars."

"Then," said Maria, "you send him to see my man, Tony. Tony will lend him the money."

"Why?"

"Why? What a foolish question! Because Joseph is a good man."

"But how could we ever pay it back?"

"Joe will have a powerboat, and instead of working for a boss, he'll be the boss. You'll make the money and you'll pay it back. Please, Anna, tell him to go to Tony."

Anthony Cassala, slender, dark-skinned, dark-haired, was indeed that very rare individual, a happy man, happily married, content with his lot, devout and dedicated to his home and his children. He and Maria had two children, Stephan, who was eleven, and Rosa, who was nine. Entirely without schooling, he had taught himself to read and write English, and his son, Stephan, had passed on his grammar-school lessons to his father, teaching Anthony the simple elements of arithmetic.

Early in the year 1903, a small Italian contractor for whom Anthony worked occasionally begged him to lend him a thousand dollars for a period of three months. He promised at the end of that time to pay back the loan with a bonus of two hundred dollars, twelve hundred dollars in all. Cassala knew nothing of the rules or laws or history of interest; he had not the faintest notion that he would be repaid in terms of 80 percent, 20 percent for three months, 80 percent per year, nor was he able at that time to calculate percentages. Neither had he ever heard the word usury. He took his life savings and gave it to his friend; and at the end of three months, the contractor repaid the