



Boredom

BY MAXIM GORKY

[The following article is a remarkable proof of the trite saying that what is seen depends upon the eye which sees it. To most people Coney Island, the playground of the metropolis, seems a place of gayety and comparatively innocent tho somewhat vulgar amusements. But to the man who has assumed the name of "Gorky," "The Bitter One," it only affords further evidence of the stupidity and depravity of the human race and of the tyranny of capital. When Maxim Gorky was in this country last summer he seemed to find life and its conditions everywhere as bad as in darkest Russia. Finally, to cheer him up, his friends took him to Coney Island, and this is the impression it made upon his sensitive mind. After reading it one knows better how to interpret his pictures of Russian life.—
EDITOR.]

WITH the advent of night a fantastic city all of fire suddenly rises from the ocean into the sky. Thousands of ruddy sparks glimmer in the darkness, limning in fine, sensitive outline on the black background of the sky, shapely towers of miraculous castles, palaces and temples. Golden gossamer threads tremble in the air.

They intertwine in transparent, flaming patterns, which flutter and melt away in love with their own beauty mirrored in the waters. Fabulous and beyond conceiving, ineffably beautiful, is this fiery scintillation. It burns but does not consume. Its palpitations are scarce visible. In the wilderness of sky and ocean rises the magic picture of a flaming city.

Over it quiver the reddened heavens, and below the water reflects its contours, blending them into a whimsical blotch of molten gold.

Strange thoughts fill the mind at the sight of this play of fire. In the halls of the palaces, in the radiant gleam of flaming mirth, methinks, strains of music float, soft and proud, such as mortal ear has never heard. On the melodious current of their sounds the best thoughts of the world are carried along like sailing stars. The stars meet in a sacred dance, they throw out dazzling sparks, and as they clasp in a momentary embrace, they give birth to new flames, new thoughts.

I see a huge cradle, marvelously wrought of golden tissue, flowers and stars rocking yonder in the soft darkness, upon the trembling bosom of the ocean.

There at night rests the sun.

But the sun of the day brings man nearer to the truth of life. Then the fiery magic castles are tall white buildings.

The blue mist of the ocean vapors mingles with the drab smoke of the metropolis across the harbor. Its flimsy white structures are enveloped in a transparent sheet, in which they quiver like a mirage. They seem to beckon alluringly, and offer quiet and beauty.

The city hums with its constant, insatiate, hungry roar. The strained sound, agitating the air and the soul, the ceaseless bellow of iron, the melancholy wail of life driven by the power of gold, the cold, cynical whistle of the Yellow Devil scare the people away from the turmoil of the earth burdened and besmirched by the ill-smelling body of the city. And the people go forth to the shore of the sea, where the beautiful white buildings stand and promise respite and tranquillity.

The buildings huddle close together on a long, sandy strip of land, which, like a sharp knife, plunges deep into the dark water. The sand glitters in the sun with a warm, yellow gleam, and the transparent buildings stand out on its velvety expanse like thin white silk embroidery. The effect is as of rich garments thrown carelessly on the bosom of the island by some bather before plunging into the waters.

I turn my gaze wistfully upon this

island. I long to nestle in its downy texture. I would recline on its luxurious folds, and from there look out into the wide spaces, where white birds dash swiftly and noiselessly, where ocean and sky lie drowsing in the scorching gleam of the sun.

This is Coney Island.

On Monday the metropolitan newspapers triumphantly announce:

"Three Hundred Thousand People in Coney Island Yesterday. Twenty-three Children Lost."

"There's something doing there" the reader thinks.

First a long ride by trolley thru Brooklyn and Long Island amid the dust and noise of the streets. Then the gaze is met by the sight of dazzling, magnificent Coney Island. From the very first moment of arrival at this city of fire, the eye is blinded. It is assailed by thousands of cold, white sparks, and for a long time can distinguish nothing in the scintillating dust round about. Everything whirls and dazzles, and blends into a tempestuous ferment of fiery foam. The visitor is stunned; his consciousness is withered by the intense gleam; his thoughts are routed from his mind; he becomes a particle in the crowd. People wander about in the flashing, blinding fire intoxicated and devoid of will. A dull-white mist penetrates their brains, greedy expectation envelopes their souls. Dazed by the brilliancy the throngs wind about like dark bands in the surging sea of light, pressed upon all sides by the black bournes of night.

Everywhere electric bulbs shed their cold, garish gleam. They shine on posts and walls, on window casings and cornices; they stretch in an even line along the high tubes of the power-house; they burn on all the roofs, and prick the eye with the sharp needles of their dead, indifferent sparkle. The people screw up their eyes, and smiling disconcertedly crawl along the ground like the heavy line of a tangled chain.

A man must make a great effort not to lose himself in the crowd, not to be overwhelmed by his amazement—an amazement in which there is neither transport nor joy. But if he succeeds in individualizing himself, he finds that these mil-

lions of fires produce a dismal, all-revealing light. Tho they hint at the possibility of beauty, they everywhere discover a dull, gloomy ugliness. The city, magic and fantastic from afar, now appears an absurd jumble of straight lines of wood, a cheap, hastily constructed toy-house for the amusement of children. Dozens of white buildings, monstrously diverse, not one with even the suggestion of beauty. They are built of wood, and smeared over with peeling white paint, which gives them the appearance of suffering with the same skin disease. The high turrets and low colonnades extend in two dead-even lines insipidly pressing upon each other. Everything is stripped naked by the dispassionate glare. The glare is everywhere, and nowhere a shadow. Each building stands there like a dumbfounded fool with wide-open mouth, and sends forth the glare of brass trumpets and the whining rumble of orchestrons. Inside is a cloud of smoke and the dark figures of the people. The people eat, drink and smoke.

But no human voice is heard. The monotonous hissing of the arc lights fills the air, the sounds of music, the cheap notes of the orchestrons, and the thin, continuous sputtering of the sausage-frying counters. All these sounds mingle in an importunate hum, as of some thick, taut chord. And if the human voice breaks into this ceaseless resonance, it is like a frightened whisper. Everything round about glitters insolently and reveals its own dismal ugliness.

The soul is seized with a desire for a living, beautiful fire, a sublime fire, which should free the people from the slavery of a varied boredom. For this boredom deafens their ears and blinds their eyes. The soul would burn away all this allure-ment, all this mad frenzy, this dead magnificence and spiritual penury. It would have a merry dancing and shouting and singing; it would see a passionate play of the motley tongues of fire; it would have joyousness and life.

The people huddled together in this city actually number hundreds of thousands. They swarm into the cages like black flies. Children walk about, silent, with gaping mouths and dazzled eyes. They look around with such intensity,

such seriousness, that the sight of them feeding their little souls upon this hideousness, which they mistake for beauty, inspires a pained sense of pity. The men's faces, shaven even to the mustache, all strangely like one another, are grave and immobile. The majority bring their wives and children along, and feel that they are benefactors of their families, because they provide not only bread, but also magnificent shows. They enjoy the tinsel, but, too serious to betray their pleasure, they keep their thin lips pressed together, and look from the corners of their screwed-up eyes, like people whom nothing can astonish. Yet, under the mask of indifference simulated by the man of mature experience, a strained desire can be detected to take in all the delights of the city. The men with the serious faces, smiling indifferently and concealing the satisfied gleam of their sparkling eyes, seat themselves on the backs of the wooden horses and elephants of the merry-go-round and, dangling their feet, wait with nervous impatience for the keen pleasure of flying along the rails. With a whoop they dart up to the top, with a whistle they descend again. After this stirring journey they draw their skin tight on their faces again and go to taste of new pleasures.

The amusements are without number. There on the summit of an iron tower two long white wings rock slowly up and down. At the end of each wing hang cages, and in these cages are people. When one of the wings rises heavily toward the sky the faces of the occupants of the cages grow sadly serious. They all look in round-eyed silence at the ground receding from them. In the cages of the other wing, then carefully descending, the faces of the people are radiant with smiles. Joyous screams are heard, which strangely remind one of the merry yelp of a puppy let to the floor after he has been held up in the air by the scruff of his neck.

Boats fly in the air around the top of another tower, a third keeps turning about and impels some sort of iron balloon, a fourth, a fifth—they all move and blaze and call with the mute shouts of cold fire. Everything rocks and roars and bellows and turns the heads of the people. They are filled with contented

ennui, their nerves are racked by an intricate maze of motion and dazzling fire. Bright eyes grow still brighter, as if the brain paled and lost blood in the strange turmoil of the white, glittering wood. The *ennui*, which issues from under the pressure of self-disgust, seems to turn and turn in a slow circle of agony. It drags tens of thousands of uniformly dark people into its somber dance, and sweeps them into a will-less heap, as the wind sweeps the rubbish of the

the thick, dirty odor of grease. Hell is very badly done. It would arouse disgust in a man of even modest demands. It is represented by a cave with stones thrown together in chaotic masses. The cave is penetrated by a reddish darkness. On one of the stones sits Satan, clothed in red. Grimaces distort his lean, brown face. He rubs his hands contentedly, as a man who is doing a good business. He must be very uncomfortable on his perch, a paper stone, which cracks and rocks.



MAIN PROMENADE, LUNA PARK, CONEY ISLAND.

street. Then it scatters them apart and sweeps them together again.

Inside the buildings the people are also seeking pleasure, and here, too, all look serious. The amusement offered is educational. The people are shown hell, with all the terrors and punishments that await those who have transgressed the sacred laws created for them.

Hell is constructed of papier maché and painted dark red. Everything in it is on fire—paper fire—and it is filled with

But he pretends not to notice his discomfort, and looks down at the evil demons busying themselves with the sinners.

A girl is there who has just bought a new hat. She is trying it on before a mirror, happy and contented. But a pair of little fiends, apparently very greedy, steal up behind her and seize her under the armpits. She screams, but it is too late. The demons put her into a long, smooth trough, which descends tightly into a pit in the middle of the cave. From the pit issue a gray vapor and

tongues of fire made of red paper. The girl, with her mirror and her new hat, goes down into the pit, lying on her back in the trough.

A young man has drunk a glass of whisky. Instantly the devils clutch him, and down he goes thru that same hole in the floor of the platform.

The atmosphere in hell is stifling. The demons are insignificant looking and feeble. Apparently they are greatly exhausted by their work and irritated by its sameness and evident futility. When they fling the sinners unceremoniously into the trough like logs of wood, you feel like crying out:

"Enough, enough nonsense, boys!"

A girl extracts some coins from her companion's purse. Forthwith the spies, the demons, attack her, to the great satisfaction of Satan, who sits there snickering and dangling his crooked legs joyfully. The demons frown angrily up at the idle fellow, and spitefully hurl into the jaws of the burning pit everybody who enters hell by chance, on business or out of curiosity.

The audience looks on these horrors in silence with serious faces. The hall is dark. Some sturdy fellow with curly hair holds forth in a lugubrious voice while he points to the stage.

He says that if the people do not want to be the victims of Satan with the red garments and the crooked legs, they should not kiss girls to whom they are not married, because then the girls might become bad women. Women outcasts ought not to steal money from the pockets of their companions, and people should not drink whisky or beer or other liquors that arouse the passions: they should not visit saloons, but the churches, for churches are not only more beneficial to the soul, but they are also cheaper.

He talks monotonously, wearily. He himself does not seem to believe in what he was told to preach.

You involuntarily apostrophize the owners of this corrective amusement for sinners:

"Gentlemen, if you wish morality to work on men's souls with the force of castor oil, you ought to pay your preachers more."

At the conclusion of the terrible story

a nauseatingly beautiful angel appears from a corner of the cavern. He hangs on a wire, and moves across the entire cave, holding a wooden trumpet, pasted over with gilt paper, between his teeth. On catching sight of him, Satan dives like a fish into the pit after the sinners. A crash is heard, the paper stones are hurled down, and the devils run off cheerfully to rest from their labor. The curtain drops. The public rises and leaves. Some venture to laugh. The majority, however, seem absorbed in reflection. Perhaps they think:

"If hell is so nasty, it isn't worth sinning."

They proceed further. In the next place they are shown "The World Beyond the Grave." It is large, and also made of papier maché. Here the souls of the dead, hideously garbed, wander in confusion. You may wink at them, but you may not touch them. This is a fact. They must feel greatly bored in the dusk of the subterranean labyrinth, shut up within rugged walls, in a cold, damp atmosphere. Some souls cough disagreeably, other silently chew tobacco, spitting yellow saliva on the ground. One soul, leaning in a corner against the wall, smokes a cigar.

When you pass by them they look into your face with colorless eyes. They compress their lips tightly, and shiver with cold as they thrust their hands into the gray folds of their rags of the other world. They are hungry, these poor souls, and many of them evidently suffer from rheumatism. The public looks at them silently. It breathes in the moist air, and feels its soul with dismal *ennui*, which extinguishes thought, as a wet, dirty cloth extinguishes the fire of a smoldering coal.

In another place again "The Flood" is displayed. The flood, you know, was brought on to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their sins.

And all the spectacles in this city have one purpose: to show the people how they will be punished after death for their sins, to teach them to live upon earth humbly, and to obey the laws.

Everywhere the one commandment is repeated:

"Don't!"

For it helps to crush the spirit of the

majority of the public—the working people.

But it is necessary to make money, and in the commodious corners of the bright city, as everywhere in the world, depravity laughs disdainfully at hypocrisy and falsehood. Of course the depravity is hidden, and, of course, it's a wearying, tiresome depravity, but it also is "for the people." It is organized as a paying business, as a means to extract their earnings from the pockets of the people. Fed by the passion for gold it appears in a form vile and despicable indeed in this marsh of glittering boredom.

The people feed on it.

The people are always constrained. As yet they have never acted as free men. So they permit the enslavement of their bodies and their souls; for this alone are they to blame.

They pour in thick streams between two lines of dazingly illuminated houses, and the houses snap them up with their hungry jaws. On the right they are intimidated by the terrors of eternal torture.

"Do not sin!" they are warned. "Sin is dangerous!"

On the left, in the spacious dancing hall, women slowly waltz about, and here everything cries out to them:

"Sin! For sin is pleasant!"

Blinded by the gleam of the light, lured by the cheap, but glittering sumptuousness, intoxicated by the noise, they turn about in a slow dance of weary boredom. To the left they go willingly and blindly to Sin, to the right to hear exhortations to Holy Living.

This aimless straying stupefies the people. But for that very reason it is profitable both to the traders in morality and the venders of depravity.

Life is made for the people to work six days in the week, sin on the seventh, and pay for their sins, confess their sins, and pay for the confession.

The fires hiss like thousands of excited serpents, dark swarms of insects buzz feebly and dimly, and the people slowly wind about in the dazzling cobwebs of the amusement halls. Without haste, without a laugh or a smile on their

smoothly shaven faces, they lazily crowd thru all the doors, stand long before the animal cages and chew tobacco and spit.

In one huge cage a man chases Bengal tigers with shots from a revolver and the merciless blows of a thin whip. The handsome beasts maddened by terror, blinded by the lights, deafened by the music and revolver shots, fling themselves about between the iron bars, and snort and roar. Their green eyes flash, their lips tremble; they gnash their teeth in fury, and menacingly raise now one forepaw now the other. But the man keeps shooting straight into their eyes, and the loud report of the blank cartridges and the smart blows of the whip, drive one powerful, supple creature into a corner of the cage. All in a tremble of revolt, seized with the impotent anguish of the powerful, choking with the sharp pang of humiliation, the imprisoned beast sinks down for a moment, and looks on with dazed eyes, his serpentine tail writhing nervously.

The elastic body rolls itself into a firm ball, and twitches, ready to leap into the air, to bury its claws in the flesh of the man with the whip, rend him, annihilate him.

The hind legs of the animal quiver like a spring, his neck stretches, the green irises flash blood-red sparks. The watchful, waiting eyes that blaze in the vindictive countenance confront beyond the bars the dim, coppery blotch of a thousand colorless eyes, set in uniform, yellow faces, coldly expectant.

The face of the crowd, terrible in its dead immobility, waits. The crowd, too, hankers for blood and it waits, not out of revengefulness, but from curiosity, like a satiated, long-subdued beast.

The tiger draws his head in his shoulders and looks out sadly with his wide-open eyes. His whole body sinks back softly, and his skin wrinkles up, as if an icy rain had fallen on a surface heated by the passion for vengeance.

The man runs about the cage, shoots his pistol and cracks his whip, and shouts like a madman. His shouts are intended to hide his painful dread of the animals. The crowd regards the capers of the man, and waits in suspense for the fatal attack. They wait; unconsciously the primitive instinct is awakened in them.

They crave fight, they want to feel the delicious shiver produced by the sight of two bodies intertwining, the splutter of blood and pieces of torn, steaming human flesh flying thru the cage and falling on the floor. They want to hear the roar, the cries, the shrieks of agony.

But the brain of the throng is already infected by the poison of various prohibitions and intimidations. Desiring blood, the crowd is afraid. It wishes, yet does not wish. In this struggle within itself it experiences a sharp gratification—it lives.

The man has frightened all the ani-

mals. The tigers softly withdraw into a corner of the cage, and the man, all in a sweat, satisfied that he has remained alive that day, bows to the coppery face of the crowd, as to an idol. He endeavors to conceal the tremor on his pale lips with a smile.

The crowd shouts and claps its hands and sighs—is it relief or is it regret?

Then the crowd breaks into dark pieces, and disperses over the slimy marsh of boredom.

Having delighted their eyes with the picture of man's rivalry with beasts, the human animals go in search of other



LUNA PARK AT NIGHT, CONEY ISLAND.

amusements. There is a circus. In the center of the arena a man tosses two children into the air with his long legs. The children dart over them like two white doves with broken wings. Sometimes they fall to the ground. Then they cautiously look into the blood-suffused face of their father or master, and again ascend into the air. The crowd have disposed themselves about the arena, and look on. When the children slip from the performer's legs, a thrill of animation passes over all the countenances, as a wind sends a light ripple over the slumbering waters of a stagnant pool.

You long to see a drunken man with a jovial face, who would push and sing and bawl, happy because he is drunk, and sincerely wishing all good people the same.

The music rends the air. The orchestra is poor, the musicians worn out. The sounds of the brass instruments stray about as if they limped, as if no even course were possible for them. Even the circus horses, who are used to everything, turn cautiously aside, and nervously twitch their sharp ears, as if they wanted to shake off the rasping tin sounds. This music of the poor for the amusement of slaves puts strange notions into your head. You would like to tear the very largest brass trumpet from the musician's hand, and blow into it with all the power of your lungs, long and loud, so terribly that all the people would run from this prison, driven by the fury of the mad sounds.

Not far from the orchestra is a cage with bears. One of them, a stout brown bear with little, shrewd eyes, stands in the middle of the cage, and shakes his head deliberately. Apparently he thinks:

"All this is sensible only if it's contrived to blind, deafen and mutilate the people. Then, of course, the end justifies the means. But if people come here to be amused, I have no faith in their sanity."

Two other bears sit opposite each other, as if playing chess. Another is busy raking up straw in a corner of the cage. He knocks his claws against the bars. His snout is disappointedly calm. He seems to expect nothing from this life, and has made up his mind to go to bed.

The animals arouse the keenest inter-

est. The waiting eyes of the spectators follow them steadily and minutely. The people appear to be searching for something long forgotten in the free and powerful movements of the beautiful bodies of the lion and panther. They thrust sticks thru the gratings, and silently experimenting prod the animals' stomachs and sides and tickle their paws, and look to see what will happen.

The animals that have not yet become familiarized with the character of human beings are angry. They thrust their paws against the bars, and roar. This pleases the spectators. Protected from the beast by the iron grill, and assured of their safety, the people look calmly into the blood-shot eyes and smile contentedly. But the majority of the animals pay no heed to the people. When they receive a blow with a stick, or are spat upon, they slowly rise, and without looking at the insulter retire into a distant corner of the cage. There the lions, tigers, panthers and leopards couch their beautiful, powerful bodies. In the darkness their round irises burn with the green fire of scorn for mankind. And the people glancing at them once again walk away, saying:

"Uninteresting!"

A brass band plays desperately at a semi-circular entrance, a kind of dark, wide-gaping jaw, within which the backs of chairs stare like a row of teeth. In front of the musicians is a post to which a pair of monkeys are tied by a thin chain. It is a mother and her child. The child presses closely against the mother's breast, and its long, thin hands, with their little fingers cross over the mother's back. The mother encircles the baby in a firm embrace with one arm. The other is cautiously extended forward, its fingers nervously crooked, ready to seize, to scratch, to strike. The mother's strained, wide-open gaze clearly bespeaks impotent despair, the anguished expectation of unavoidable insult and injury, melancholy rage. The child has nestled its cheek against its mother's breast and looks slantwise at the people with cold terror, motionless, hopeless. Apparently it has been filled with dread from the first day of its life, and the dread has frozen and congealed

it for all days to come. Displaying her white teeth the mother, without for the second removing the hand that clasps the child of her flesh, continually rebuffs the canes, the umbrellas, the hands of the lookers, her tormentors.

The spectators are many. They are all white-skinned savages, men and women in straw hats and hats with feathers. It is fearfully amusing for all of them to see how skilfully the monkey mother shields her child from the blows they aim at its little body.

The mother quickly turns on a smooth pace the size of a plate. She risks falling any second under the feet of the crowd, but she tirelessly repels everything that threatens to come in contact with her child. Sometimes she does not succeed in warding off a blow, and then she shrieks out pitifully. Her arm quickly cuts the air like a lash, but the onlookers are so many, and every one desires so much to pinch, to strike, to pull the monkey by the tail or by the chain around its neck, that sometimes she misses. Her eyes blink thoughtlessly, and radiate wrinkles of injury and distress appear around her mouth.

The child's hands squeeze her bosom. It clasps her so firmly that its hands are almost hidden in her thin hair. It has sunk down motionless, and its eyes stare fixedly at the coppery blotch of the faces all around.

Sometimes one of the musicians turns the stupid, brass bellow of his instrument upon the monkey, and overwhelms the animal with a deafening noise. The little baby timidly clasps the mother's body still harder, shows its teeth and looks at the musician sharply.

The people laugh and nod their heads approvingly to the musician. He is satisfied and a minute later repeats the feat.

Among the spectators are women, some apparently mothers. But no one utters a word of protest against this cruel fun. All are satisfied.

Man is nurtured on terror, so he endeavors to inspire others with terror of himself. But he arouses only disgust, the poor, unfortunate wretch!

This torture continues thru the whole long night and part of the morning.

Alongside the orchestra is the cage of an elephant. He is an elderly gentleman

with a worn, glossy skin. He thrusts his trunk thru the grating and swings it with serious mien. He looks at the public, and, good wise animal that he is, he thinks:

"Of course, these scoundrels, swept together by the dirty broom of tedium, are capable of making sport even of their prophets. So I've heard old elephants tell. But I'm sorry for the monkey, any way. I've heard also that human beings, like jackals and hyenas, sometimes tear one another to pieces. But that's no consolation to the monkey."

You look at the pair of eyes in which is depicted the grief of a mother powerless to protect her child, and at the eyes of the baby, in which the deep, cold, dread of man has congealed into immobile rigidity. You look at the people capable of deriving amusement from the torture of a living creature, and turning to the monkey, you say:

"Little beast, forgive them! They know not what they do. They will become better in time."

Thus, when night comes, a fantastic magic city, all of fire, suddenly blazes up from the ocean. Without consuming, it burns long against the dark background of the sky, its beauty mirrored in the broad, gleaming bosom of the sea.

In the glittering gossamer of its fantastic buildings, tens of thousands of gray people, like patches on the ragged clothes of a beggar, creep along with weary faces and colorless eyes.

Mean panderers to debased tastes unfold the disgusting nakedness of their falsehood, the *naïveté* of their shrewdness, the hypocrisy and insatiable force of their greed. The cold gleam of the dead fire bares the stupidity of it all. Its pompous glitter rests upon everything round about the people.

But the precaution has been taken to blind the people, and they drink in the vile poison with silent rapture. The poison contaminates their souls. Boredom whirls about in an idle dance, expiring in the agony of its inanition.

One thing alone is good in the garish city: You can drink in hatred to your soul's content, hatred sufficient to last thruout life, hatred of the power of stupidity!