

American Literature Readings 2



from “All Right! Hurry Up!”

Abraham Cahan

❖ **About the Selection** Abraham Cahan (1860–1951), a Lithuanian Jew, came to America in 1882 to escape political troubles. More than 2 million Jews followed him between 1887 and 1915. Most were from Eastern European countries, were poor, and spoke no English. Cahan, a brilliant thinker with a compassionate heart, soon learned English and became a champion for his people. His first journalism job was for the *New York Commercial Advertiser*. He covered news and human interest topics as varied as war and sacred holidays. Later he became the first editor of the Yiddish newspaper the *Forward*, a family paper written in simple, colloquial Yiddish, addressing everyday problems faced by his immigrant readers. Cahan was equally a respected story and novel writer.

GUIDED READING

As you read, look for evidence of the author’s feelings for the immigrants. Then answer the questions that follow.

One day, for example, he saw a young Czech hand his newly arrived sister a list of English words and their definitions which he ordered her to get by heart by the time her case had been disposed of by the clerks. The girl looked alarmed, but her brother would not relent.

“If you want to be treated with respect you must know how to speak English,” he explained to her. “It won’t take you more than ten minutes, dear. When you have lived in America for some time you will understand how necessary it is to know how to say ‘all right,’ ‘hurry up,’ ‘street’ and such words. . . .”

An old woman sat with a little girl by her side. When the polyglot observer asked her, in Romanian, whether it was her daughter, she interlocked her fingers and shook her head mournfully.

“Her father left for America six years ago,” she said, “and when he sent a ticket for her—her name is Margiola—I brought her over.”

About an hour later Margiola came face to face with her father. He looked her over, smiling curiously. “What’s the matter?” asked the linguist.

“No matter at all,” the Romanian answered, wistfully. “I recognized her at once. She is her mother all over. The very picture of her. I never saw a little bit of a girl look so much like a big one, did you?”

He smiled as he went on scanning Margiola from head to foot, now talking to the old woman, now eyeing the child silently. At one moment his eyes filled with tears. The next moment he started.

“But what is this I see?” he shouted. “Barefoot? That won’t do. No barefooted children in America. I can’t take her home this way. Is there a shoe store on the island?”

When told that there was not, he was in despair. “I could take her to a shoe store on our way home,” he said, “but suppose somebody I know meets us in the car? My New York friends don’t know anything

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about my old home, and when they see this little girl without shoes, they will say: 'Ah, you were a peasant at home.' So I want her to look like an American girl."

The old woman had to wait the rest of the day on the island, so she volunteered to take care of the girl until her father should bring her a pair of shoes. An hour and a half later he returned with the shoes and a red dress.

"Will you be an American girl?" he asked Margiola as the old woman took her into a corner to put on the new things.

Margiola nodded assent.

"Your name is not Margiola any longer. It's Maggy, do you hear?"

"Yes," answered "Maggy," dazed and tearful.

Presently Margiola or Maggy made her appearance in shoes and a brand-new dress of flaming red. Her tears were gone. . . .

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READER RESPONSE

Directions: Answer the following questions on the lines below.

1. What does Cahan mean by the phrase "a polyglot visitor to Ellis Island"?

2. What does the young Czech tell his sister? Why is his instruction humorous?

3. What is the main idea in Cahan's two portraits? Why was this idea so important to many immigrants?

4. **CRITICAL THINKING** The little Romanian girl Margiola is at least five years old. Her father dresses her like an American girl, but how do you think she can still be identified as a new arrival in America?
