

Ragtime

E. L. Doctorow



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The March

Creationists: Selected Essays, 1993–2006

RAGTIME

BY

E. L. Doctorow



RANDOM HOUSE TRADE PAPERBACKS

New York

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and the Creative Artists Program Service
for fellowships awarded during the period in
which this novel was written.*

Respectfully dedicated to

Rose Doctorow Buck

Do not play this piece fast

It is never right to play Ragtime fast...

—SCOTT JOPLIN





In 1902 Father built a house at the crest of the Broadview Avenue hill in New Rochelle New York. It was a three-story brown shingle with dormers, bay windows and a screened porch. Striped awnings shaded the windows. The family took possession of this stately manse on a sunny day in June and it seemed for some years thereafter that all their days would be warm and fair. The best part of Father's income was derived from the manufacture of flags and buntings and other accoutrements of patriotism, including fireworks. Patriotism was a reliable sentiment in the early 1900's. Teddy Roosevelt was President. The population customarily gathered in great numbers either out of doors for parades, public concerts, fairs, picnics, political picnics, social outings, or indoors in meeting halls, vaudeville theatres, opera ballrooms. There seemed to be no entertainment that did not involve great swarms of people. Trains and steamers and trolleys moved them from one place to another. That was the style that was the way people lived. Women were stouter then. They visited the fleet carrying white parasols. Everyone wore white in summer. Tennis racquets were hefty and the racquet faces elliptical. There was a lot of sexual fainting. There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants. On Sunday afternoon, after dinner, Father and Mother went upstairs and closed the bedroom door. Grandfather fell asleep on the divan in the parlor. The Little Boy in the sailor blouse sat on the screened porch and waved away the flies. Down at the bottom of the hill Mother's Younger Brother boarded the streetcar and rode to the end of the line. He was a lonely, withdrawn young man with blond moustaches, and was thought to be having difficulty finding himself. The end of the line was an empty field of tall marsh grasses. The air was salt. Mother's Younger Brother in his white linen suit and boater rolled his trousers and walked barefoot in the salt marshes. Sea birds started and flew up. This was the time in our history when Winslow Homer was doing his painting. A certain light was still available along the Eastern seaboard. Homer painted the light. It gave the sea a heavy dull menace and shone coldly on the rocks and shoals of the New England coast. There were unexplained shipwrecks and brave towline rescues. Odd things went on in lighthouses and in shacks nestled in the wild beach plum. Across America sex and death were barely distinguishable. Runaway women died in the rigors of ecstasy. Stories were hushed up and reporters paid off by rich families. One read between the lines of the journals and gazettes. In New York City the papers were full of the shooting of the famous architect Stanford White by Harry K. Thaw, eccentric scion of a coke and railroad fortune. Harry K. Thaw was the husband of Evelyn Nesbit, the celebrated beauty who had once been Stanford White's mistress. The shooting took place in the roof garden of the Madison Square Garden on 26th Street, a spectacular block-long building of yellow brick and terra cotta that White himself had designed in the Sevillian style. It was the opening night of a revue entitled *Mamzelle Champagne*, and as the chorus sang and danced the eccentric scion wearing on this summer night a straw boater and heavy black coat pulled out a pistol and shot the famous architect three times in the head. On the roof. There were screams. Evelyn fainted. She had been a well-known artist's model at the age of fifteen. Her underclothes were white. Her husband

habitually whipped her. She happened once to meet Emma Goldman, the revolutionary. Goldman lashed her with her tongue. Apparently there *were* Negroes. There *were* immigrants. And though the newspapers called the shooting the Crime of the Century, Goldman knew it was only 1906 and there were ninety-four years to go.

Mother's Younger Brother was in love with Evelyn Nesbit. He had closely followed the scandal surrounding her name and had begun to reason that the death of her lover Stanford White and the imprisonment of her husband Harry K. Thaw left her in need of the attention of a genteel middle-class young man with no money. He thought about her all the time. He was desperate to have her. In his room pinned on the wall was a newspaper drawing by Charles Dana Gibson entitled "The Eternal Question." It showed Evelyn in profile, with a profusion of hair, one thick strand undone and fallen in the configuration of a question mark. Her downcast eye was embellished with a fallen ringlet that threw her brow in shadow. Her nose was delicately upturned. Her mouth was slightly pouted. Her long neck curved like a bird taking wing. Evelyn Nesbit had caused the death of one man and wrecked the life of another and from that he deduced that there was nothing in life worth having, worth wanting, but the embrace of her thin arms.

The afternoon was a blue haze. Tidewater seeped into his footprints. He bent down and found a perfect shell specimen, a variety not common to western Long Island Sound. It was a voluted pink and amber shell the shape of a thimble, and what he did in the hazy sun with the salt drying on his ankles was to throw his head back and drink the minute amount of seawater in the shell. Gulls wheeled overhead, crying like oboes, and behind him at the land end of the marsh, out of sight behind the tall grasses, the distant bell of the North Avenue streetcar tolled its warning.

Across town the little boy in the sailor suit was suddenly restless and began to measure the length of the porch. He trod with his toe upon the runner of the cane-backed rocking chair. He had reached that age of knowledge and wisdom in a child when it is not expected by the adults around him and consequently goes unrecognized. He read the newspaper daily and was currently following the dispute between the professional baseballers and a scientist who claimed that the curve ball was an optical illusion. He felt that the circumstances of his family's life operated against his need to see things and to go places. For instance he had conceived an enormous interest in the works and career of Harry Houdini, the escape artist. But he had not been taken to a performance. Houdini was a head-liner in the top vaudeville circuits. His audiences were poor people—carriers, peddlers, policemen, children. His life was absurd. He went all over the world accepting all kinds of bondage and escaping. He was roped to a chair. He escaped. He was chained to a ladder. He escaped. He was handcuffed, his legs were put in irons, he was tied up in a strait jacket and put in a locked cabinet. He escaped. He escaped from bank vaults, nailed-up barrels, sewn mailbags; he escaped from a zinc-lined Knabe piano case, a giant football, a galvanized iron boiler, a rolltop desk, a sausage skin. His escapes were mystifying because he never damaged or appeared to unlock what he escaped from. The screen was pulled away and there he stood disheveled but triumphant beside the inviolate container that was supposed to have contained him. He waved to the crowd. He escaped from a sealed milk can filled with water. He escaped from a Siberian exile van. From a Chinese torture crucifix. From a Hamburg penitentiary. From an English prison ship. From a Boston jail. He was chained to automobile tires, water wheels

cannon, and he escaped. He dove manacled from a bridge into the Mississippi, the Seine, the Mersey, and came up waving. He hung upside down and strait-jacketed from cranes, biplanes and the tops of buildings. He was dropped into the ocean padlocked in a diving suit full weighted and not connected to an air supply, and he escaped. He was buried alive in a grave and could not escape, and had to be rescued. Hurriedly, they dug him out. The earth is too heavy, he said gasping. His nails bled. Soil fell from his eyes. He was drained of color and couldn't stand. His assistant threw up. Houdini wheezed and sputtered. He coughed blood. They cleaned him off and took him back to the hotel. Today, nearly fifty years since his death, the audience for escapes is even larger.

The little boy stood at the end of the porch and fixed his gaze on a bluebottle fly traversing the screen in a way that made it appear to be coming up the hill from North Avenue. The fly flew off. An automobile was coming up the hill from North Avenue. As it drew closer he saw it was a black 45-horsepower Pope-Toledo Runabout. He ran along the porch and stood at the top of the steps. The car came past his house, made a loud noise and swerved into the telephone pole. The little boy ran inside and called upstairs to his mother and father. Grandfather woke with a start. The boy ran back to the porch. The driver and the passengers were standing in the street looking at the car: it had big wheels with pneumatic tires and wooden spokes painted in black enamel. It had brass headlamps in front of the radiator and brass sidelamps over the fenders. It had tufted upholstery and double side entrances. It did not appear to be damaged. The driver was in livery. He folded back the hood and a geyser of white steam shot up with a hiss.

A number of people looked on from their front yards. But Father, adjusting the chain on his vest, went down to the sidewalk to see if there was something he could do. The car's owner was Harry Houdini, the famous escape artist. He was spending the day driving through Westchester. He was thinking of buying some property. He was invited into the house when the radiator cooled. He surprised them with his modest, almost colorless demeanor. He seemed depressed. His success had brought into vaudeville a host of competitors. Consequently he had to think of more and more dangerous escapes. He was a short, powerfully built man, an athlete obviously, with strong hands and with back and arm muscles that suggested themselves through the cut of his rumpled tweed suit which, though well tailored, was worn this day inappropriately. The thermometer read in the high eighties. Houdini had unruly stiff hair parted in the middle and clear blue eyes, which did not stop moving. He was very respectful to Mother and Father and spoke of his profession with diffidence. This struck them as appropriate. The little boy stared at him. Mother had ordered lemonade. It was brought into the parlor and Houdini drank it gratefully. The room was kept cool by the awnings on the windows. The windows themselves were shut to keep out the heat. Houdini wanted to undo his collar. He felt trapped by the heavy square furnishings, the drapes and dark rugs, the Oriental silk cushions, the green glass lampshades. There was a chaise with a zebra rug. Noticing Houdini's gaze Father mentioned that he had shot that zebra on a hunting trip in Africa. Father was an amateur explorer of considerable reputation. He was past president of the New York Explorers Club to which he made an annual disbursement. In fact in just a few days he would be leaving to carry the Club's standard on the third Peary expedition to the Arctic. You mean, Houdini said, you're going with Peary to the Pole? God willing, Father replied. He sat back in his chair and lit a cigar. Houdini became

voluble. He paced back and forth. He spoke of his own travels, his tours of Europe. But the Pole! he said. Now that's something. You must be pretty good to get picked for that. He turned his blue eyes on Mother. And keeping the home fires burning ain't so easy either, he said. He was not without charm. He smiled and Mother, a large blond woman, lowered her eyes. Houdini then spent a few minutes doing small deft tricks with objects at hand for the little boy. When he took his leave the entire family saw him to the door. Father and Grandfather shook his hand. Houdini walked down the path that ran under the big maple tree and then descended the stone steps that led to the street. The chauffeur was waiting, the car was parked correctly. Houdini climbed in the seat next to the driver and waved. People stood looking on from their yards. The little boy had followed the magician to the street and now stood at the front of the Pope-Toledo gazing at the distorted macrocephalic image of himself in the shiny brass fitting of the headlight. Houdini thought the boy comely, fair like his mother, and tow-headed, but a little soft-looking. He leaned over the side door. Goodbye Sonny, he said holding out his hand. Warn the Duke, the little boy said. Then he ran off.



As it happened Houdini's unexpected visit had interrupted Mother and Father's coitus. There was no sign from Mother that it was now to be resumed. She fled to her garden. As the days passed and the time for Father's departure approached, he waited for the mute sign that he might visit her bed. He knew that to make an overture of his own was to threaten the occasion. He was a burly man with strong appetites, but he appreciated his wife's reluctance to assume the indelicate attitudes that answered to his needs. In the meantime the entire household girded for his departure. His gear had to be packed, arrangements had to be made for his absence from his business, and a thousand other details had to be seen to. Mother lifted the back of her wrist to her forehead and pushed aside a strand of hair. No one in the family was unmindful of the particular dangers to which Father would be exposed. Yet no one would have him stay because of them. The marriage seemed to flourish on Father's extended absences. At dinner the night before he was to leave, the cuff of Mother's sleeve brushed a spoon off the table, and she grew flushed. When the entire household was asleep he came to her room in the darkness. He was solemn and attentive as befitted the occasion. Mother shut her eyes and held her hands over her ears. Sweat from Father's chest fell on her breasts. She started. She thought: Yet I know these are the happy years. And ahead of us are only great disasters.

The next morning everyone rode down to the New Rochelle railroad station to see Father off. Some of the office staff was there, and Father's chief assistant made a short speech. There was a spattering of applause. The New York train arrived, five varnished dark green cars pulled by a Baldwin 4-4-0 with spoked engine truck wheels. The little boy stared as the wiper with his oilcan checked the brass drive pistons. He felt a hand on his shoulder, turned, and his smiling Father took his hand and shook it. Grandfather had to be restrained from lifting the bags. With the porter's help Father and Mother's Younger Brother laid the trunks aboard. Father shook the young man's hand. He had given him a raise and a more responsible position with the firm. Keep your eye on things, Father said. The young man nodded. Mother beamed. She gently embraced her husband, who kissed her on the cheek. Standing on the rear platform of the last car, Father doffed his skimmer and waved goodbye as the train went around the bend.

The next morning, after a champagne breakfast with the press, the men of Peary's polar expedition cast off the lines and their sturdy little ship, the *Roosevelt*, backed out of her berth into the East River. Fireboats sent up sprays of water which misted in rainbows as the early morning sun rose over the city. Passenger liners tooted their basso horns. It was not until some time later, when the *Roosevelt* had reached the open sea, that Father was persuaded of the actuality of the trip. As he stood at the railing there was transmitted to his bones the awesome unalterable rhythm of the ocean. A while later the *Roosevelt* passed an incoming transatlantic vessel packed to the railings with immigrants. Father watched the prow of the scaly broad-beamed vessel splash in the sea. Her decks were packed with people. Thousands of male heads in derbies. Thousands of female heads covered with shawls. It was a rag ship.

with a million dark eyes staring at him. Father, a normally resolute person, suddenly foundered in his soul. A weird despair seized him. The wind came up, the sky had turned overcast, and the great ocean began to tumble and break upon itself as if made of slabs of granite and sliding terraces of slate. He watched the ship till he could see it no longer. Y aboard her were only more customers, for the immigrant population set great store by the American flag.



Most of the immigrants came from Italy and Eastern Europe. They were taken on launches to Ellis Island. There, in a curiously ornate human warehouse of red brick and gray stone, they were tagged, given showers and arranged on benches and waiting pens. They were immediately sensitive to the enormous power of the immigration officials. These officials changed names they couldn't pronounce and tore people from their families, consigning to a return voyage old folks, people with bad eyes, riffraff and also those who looked insolent. Such power was dazzling. The immigrants were reminded of home. They went into the streets and were somehow absorbed in the tenements. They were despised by New Yorkers. They were filthy and illiterate. They stank of fish and garlic. They had running sores. They had no honor and worked for next to nothing. They stole. They drank. They raped their own daughters. They killed each other casually. Among those who despised them the most were the second-generation Irish, whose fathers had been guilty of the same crimes. Irish kids pulled the beards of old Jews and knocked them down. They upended the pushcarts of Italian peddlers.

Every season of the year wagons came through the streets and picked up bodies of derelicts. Late at night old ladies in babushkas came to the morgue looking for their husbands and sons. The corpses lay on tables of galvanized iron. From the bottom of each table a drainpipe extended to the floor. Around the rim of the table was a culvert. And into the culvert ran the water sprayed constantly over each body from an overhead faucet. The faces of the dead were upturned into the streams of water that poured over them like the irrepressible mechanism in death of their own tears.

But somehow piano lessons began to be heard. People stitched themselves to the flag. They carved paving stones for the streets. They sang. They told jokes. The family lived in one room and everyone worked: Mameh, Tateh and The Little Girl in the pinafore. Mameh and the little girl sewed knee pants and got seventy cents a dozen. They sewed from the time they got up to the time they went to bed. Tateh made his living in the street. As time went on they got to know the city. One Sunday, in a wild impractical mood, they spent twelve cents for three fares on the streetcar and rode uptown. They walked on Madison Avenue and Fifth Avenue and looked at the mansions. Their owners called them palaces. And that's what they were, they were palaces. They had all been designed by Stanford White. Tateh was a socialist. He looked at the palaces and his heart was outraged. The family walked quickly. The police in their tall helmets looked at them. On these wide empty sidewalks in this part of the city the police did not like to see immigrants. Tateh explained that this was because an immigrant some years before had shot the steel millionaire Henry Frick in Pittsburgh.

A crisis came to the family when somebody delivered a letter telling them the little girl would have to go to school. This meant they could not make ends meet. Helplessly, Mameh and Tateh took their child to the school. She was enrolled and went off each day. Tateh roamed the streets. He didn't know what to do. He had a peddler's business. Never could he

find a place at the curb that was profitable. While he was gone Mameh sat by the window with her stack of cut cloth and pedaled the sewing machine. She was a petite dark-eyed woman with wavy brown hair which she parted in the middle and tied behind her neck in a bun. When she was alone like this she sang softly to herself in a high sweet thin voice. Her songs had no words. One afternoon she took her finished work to the loft on Stanton Street. The owner invited her into his office. He looked at the piece goods carefully and said she had done well. He counted out the money, adding a dollar more than she deserved. This he explained was because she was such a good-looking woman. He smiled. He touched Mameh's breast. Mameh fled, taking the dollar. The next time the same thing happened. She told Tate she was doing more work. She became accustomed to the hands of her employer. One day with two weeks' rent due she let the man have his way on a cutting table. He kissed her face and tasted the salt of her tears.

At this time in history Jacob Riis, a tireless newspaper reporter and reformer, wrote about the need of housing for the poor. They lived too many to a room. There was no sanitation. The streets reeked of shit. Children died of mild colds or slight rashes. Children died on beds made from two kitchen chairs pushed together. They died on floors. Many people believed that filth and starvation and disease were what the immigrant got for his moral degeneration. But Riis believed in air shafts. Air shafts, light and air, would bring health. He went around climbing dark stairs and knocking on doors and taking flash photos of indigent families in their dwellings. He held up the flash pan and put his head under the hood and a picture exploded. After he left, the family, not daring to move, remained in the position in which they had been photographed. They waited for life to change. They waited for the transformation. Riis made color maps of Manhattan's ethnic populations. Dull gray was for Jews—their favorite color, he said. Red was for the swarthy Italian. Blue for the thrifty German. Black for the African. Green for the Irishman. And yellow for the cat-clear Chinaman, a cat also in his traits of cruel cunning and savage fury when aroused. Add dashes of color for Finns, Arabs, Greeks, and so on, and you have a crazy quilt, Riis cried, a crazy quilt of humanity!

One day Riis decided to interview Stanford White the eminent architect. He wanted to ask White if he'd ever designed housing for the poor. He wanted his ideas on public housing, on air shafts, on light. He found White down at the docks looking at arriving shipments of architectural furnishings. Riis marvelled at what was coming out of the holds of the ships: whole façades of Florentine palaces and Athenian atria, stone by marked stone; paintings, statuary, tapestries, carved and painted ceilings in crates, tiled patios, marble fountains, marble stairs and balustrades, parqueted floors and silk wall panels; cannon, pennants, suits of armor, crossbows and other ancient weaponry; beds, armoires, chaises, refectory tables, sideboards, harpsichords; barrels of glassware, silver, goldplate, porcelain and china; boxes of church ornaments, boxes of rare books, snuffboxes. White, a robust burly man with reddish brush-cut hair turning gray, went about smacking the backs of the handlers with his rolled-up umbrella. Careful, you fools! he shouted. Riis wanted to ask him his questions. Housing for the poor was Riis's story. But he had a vision of the dismantling of Europe, the uncluttering of ancient lands, the birth of a new aesthetic in European art and architecture. He himself was a Dane.

That evening White went to the opening night of *Mamzelle Champagne* at the roof garden.

Madison Square. This was early in the month of June and by the end of the month a serious heat wave had begun to kill infants all over the slums. The tenements glowed like furnaces and the tenants had no water to drink. The sink at the bottom of the stairs was dry. Fathers raced through the streets looking for ice. Tammany Hall had been destroyed by reformers but the hustlers on the ward still cornered the ice supply and sold little chips of it at exorbitant prices. Pillows were placed on the sidewalks. Families slept on stoops and in doorways. Horses collapsed and died in the streets. The Department of Sanitation sent drays around the city to drag away horses that had died. But it was not an efficient service. Horses exploded in the heat. Their exposed intestines heaved with rats. And up through the slum alleys, through the gray clothes hanging listlessly on lines strung across air shafts, rose the smell of fried fish.



In the killing summer heat politicians up for reelection invited their followers to outings in the country. Toward the end of July one candidate led a parade through the streets of the Fourth Ward. He wore a gardenia in his lapel. A band played a Sousa march. The members of the candidate's Benevolent Association followed the band and the entire procession made its way to the river where everyone boarded the steamer *Grand Republic* which then set a course up the Long Island Sound to Rye, New York, just beyond New Rochelle. The steamer, overloaded with perhaps five thousand men, listed badly to starboard. The sun was hot. The passengers jammed the decks and crowded the railing for a breath of air. The water was like glass. At Rye everyone disembarked for another parade to the Pavilion, where at picnic tables the traditional fish chowder was served by a small army of waiters in white full-length aprons. After the luncheon speeches were made from a band shell. The band shell was decorated with patriotic bunting. This had been provided by Father's firm. There were also banners with the candidate's name spelled in gold and small American flags on gold sticks that were given as favors at each table. The men of the Benevolent Association spent the afternoon consuming beer from kegs on tap, playing baseball and throwing horseshoes. The meadows of Rye were dotted with men dozing on the grass under their derbies. In the evening another meal was served and a military band played a concert, and then came the culmination of the entertainment: a display of fireworks. Mother's Younger Brother had come here to supervise personally this aspect of the event. He liked to design fireworks. They were the only part of the business that really interested him. Rockets went up booming in the close electric evening air. Heat lightning flashed over the Sound. A great wheel of spinning fire seemed to roll over the water. A woman's profile, like a new constellation, embossed the night sky. Showers of light, red and white and blue, fell like stars and burst again, like bombs, over the old steamer down at the water. Everyone cheered. When the fireworks were concluded torches were lit to mark the way to the dock. On the trip home the old steamer listed to port. Among her passengers was Mother's Younger Brother who had leapt lightly aboard at the last possible moment. He stepped over men lying asleep on the deck. He stood at the rail up at the prow and lifted his head to the breeze coming up over the black water. He turned his intense eyes on the black night and thought of Evelyn.

Now at this time Evelyn Nesbit was daily rehearsing the testimony she would give in her husband's forthcoming trial for the murder of Stanford White. She had not only to deal with Thaw in her almost daily visits to the Tombs, the city jail where he was kept, but with his lawyers, of whom there were several; with his mother, a regal Pittsburgh dowager who despised her; and with her own mother, whose greediest dreams of connived wealth she had surpassed. The press followed her every move. She tried to live quietly in a small residential hotel. She tried not to think how Stanford White looked with his face shot away. She took her meals in her rooms. She rehearsed her lines. She retired early believing that sleep would improve her skin tone. She was bored. She ordered clothes from her dressmaker. The key to the defense of Harry K. Thaw would be that he had become temporarily deranged by the

story she had told him about her ruination at the age of fifteen. She was an artist's model and an aspiring actress. Stanford White had invited her to his apartments in the tower of Madison Square Garden and offered her champagne. The champagne was drugged. When she woke up the following morning the effulgence of White's manhood lay over her thighs like a baker's glaze.

But it was going to be difficult to persuade a jury that Harry K. Thaw became deranged only upon the telling of that tale. He was a violent man who all his life had created incidents in restaurants. He drove cars up sidewalks. He was suicidal and had once consumed an entire bottle of laudanum. He kept syringes in a silver case. He injected things into himself. He had a habit of clenching his fists and beating them against his temples. He was imperious, possessive and insanely jealous. Before they were married he had concocted a scheme whereby Evelyn was to sign an affidavit accusing Stanford White of beating her. She refused and told White about it. Harry's next move was to take her to Europe where he could have her without worrying if White was to have his turn when he was through. Her mother went along as chaperone. They sailed on the *Kronprinzessin Cecile*. In Southampton Harry paid off Evelyn's mother and took Evelyn alone to the Continent. Eventually they arrived at an ancient mountain castle in Austria that Harry had rented—the Schloss Katzenstein. Their first night in the Schloss he pulled off her robe, threw her across the bed and applied a dog whip to her buttocks and the backs of her thighs. Her shrieks echoed down the corridors and stone stairwells. The German servants in their quarters listened, grew flushed, opened bottles of Goldwasser and copulated. Shocking red welts disfigured Evelyn's flesh. She cried and whimpered all night. In the morning Harry returned to her room, this time with a razor stroke. She was bedridden for weeks. During her convalescence he brought her stereopticon slides of the Black Forest and the Austrian Alps. He was gentle when he made love to her and mindful of the tender places. Nevertheless she decided their relationship had gone beyond its tacit understanding. She demanded to be sent home. She sailed back to America alone on the *Carmania*, her mother having long since returned. When she reached New York she immediately went to see Stanford White and told him what had happened. She showed him the traces of a laceration across the flesh of the inside of her right thigh. Oh my, oh my, Stanford White said. He kissed the spot. She showed him a tiny yellow and purple discoloration on the face of her left buttock where it curved toward the cleft. How awful, Stanford White said. He kissed the spot. The following morning he sent her to a lawyer who prepared an affidavit as to what happened in the Schloss Katzenstein. Evelyn signed the affidavit. Now, darling, when Harry comes home you show him that, Stanny White said, smiling broadly. She followed his instructions. Harry K. Thaw read the affidavit, turned pale and immediately proposed marriage. She had only been in the chorus but she had done as well as any of the Floradora girls.

And now Harry, in jail, was on public display. His cell was on Murderer's Row, the top tier of the cavernous Tombs. Each evening the guards brought him the papers so that he could follow his favorite team, the Pittsburgh Nationals, and their star Honus Wagner. Only when he had read about the ball games would he read about himself. He went through every paper—the *World*, the *Tribune*, the *Times*, the *Evening Post*, the *Journal*, the *Herald*. When he finished reading a paper he would fold it up, stand at the bars and flip it over the rail of the cellblock promenade so that it came apart, fluttering in pieces six stories down through the

central vault, or well, around which the cellblock tiers were arranged. His behavior fascinated the guards. It was seldom they had people of this class. Thaw was not really fond of the jail fare so they brought in his meals from Delmonico's. He liked to feel clean so they passed along a change of clothes delivered each morning to the jail doors by his valet. He disliked Negroes so they made sure no Negro prisoner was lodged near his cell. Thaw was not unmindful of the guards' kindnesses. He showed his gratitude not discreetly but with impeccable style, crumpling and tossing twenty-dollar bills at his feet and telling them what swine they were as they stooped to retrieve the money. They were very happy. Reporters asked their views when they left the Tombs at the end of a shift. And each afternoon when Evelyn arrived looking crisp in her high-collared shirtwaist and pleated linen skirt the husband and wife would be permitted to stroll back and forth across the Bridge of Sighs, the iron catwalk that connected the Tombs with the Criminal Courts Building. Thaw walked with a dipping, pigeon-toed gait, like someone with brain damage. He had the wide mouth and doll eyes of a Victorian closet queen. Sometimes they saw him gesticulate wildly while Evelyn stood with her head bowed, her face in shadow under her hat. Sometimes he would ask for use of the consultation room. The guard whose station was just outside the consultation room door with its small porthole window claimed that Thaw sometimes cried and sometimes he held Evelyn's hand. Sometimes he paced back and forth and beat his fists against his temples while she gazed through the barred window. Once he demanded proof of her devotion and it turned out nothing else would do but a fellatio. Abutted by Thaw's belt Evelyn's broad-brimmed hat with its topping of dried flowers in tulle slowly tore away from her coiffure. Afterwards he brushed the sawdust from the front of her skirt and gave her some bills from his money clip.

Evelyn told reporters who met her outside the Tombs that her husband Harry K. Thaw was innocent. His trial will prove my husband Harry K. Thaw is innocent, she said one day stepping into the electric hansom provided her by her august mother-in-law. The chauffeur closed the door. In the privacy of the car she wept. She knew better than anyone how innocent Harry was. She had agreed to testify in his behalf for the sum of two hundred thousand dollars. And her price for a divorce was going to be even higher. She ran her fingertips over the car upholstery. Her tears dried. A strange bitter exaltation suffused her, a cold victory grin of the heart. She had grown up playing in the streets of a Pennsylvania coal town. She was the Gaudens statue Stanny White had put at the top of the tower of Madison Square Garden, a glorious bronze nude Diana, her bow drawn, her face in the skies.

Coincidentally this was the time in our history when the morose novelist Theodore Dreiser was suffering terribly from the bad reviews and negligible sales of his first book, *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser was out of work, broke and too ashamed to see anyone. He rented a furnished room in Brooklyn and went to live there. He took to sitting on a wooden chair in the middle of the room. One day he decided his chair was facing in the wrong direction. Raising his weight from the chair, he lifted it with his two hands and turned it to the right, to align it properly. For a moment he thought the chair was aligned, but then he decided it was not. He moved it another turn to the right. He tried sitting in the chair now but it still felt peculiar. He turned it again. Eventually he made a complete circle and still he could not find the proper alignment for the chair. The light faded on the dirty window of the furnished room. Throughout the night Dreiser turned his chair in circles seeking the proper alignment.



The impending Thaw trial was not the only excitement down at the Tombs. Two of the guards in their spare time had fashioned new leg irons that they claimed were better than the standard equipment. To prove it they challenged Harry Houdini himself to put them to the test. The magician arrived one morning at the office of the Warden of the Tombs and was photographed shaking the hand of the Warden and standing between the two smiling guards with his arms around their shoulders. He traded quips with reporters. He gave out lots of free tickets. He held the leg irons under the light and examined them carefully. He accepted the challenge. He would escape from the irons at the following night's performance at the Keith Hippodrome. With the press crowded around, Houdini now proposed his own challenge: that then and there he be stripped and locked in a cell and his clothing placed outside the cell; if everyone would then leave he would contrive to escape from the cell and appear fully dressed in the Warden's office within five minutes. The Warden demurred. Houdini professed astonishment. After all he, Houdini, had accepted the guards' challenge without hesitation: was the Warden not confident of his own jail? The reporters took Houdini's side. Knowing what the newspapers could do with his refusal to go along with the stunt the Warden gave in. He believed in fact his cells were secure. The walls of his office were pale green. Photographs of his wife and his mother stood on the desk. A humidor with cigars and a decanter of Irish whiskey stood on a table behind his desk. He picked up his telephone and holding the shaft in one hand and the earpiece with the other he looked significantly at the reporters.

A while later Houdini was led, stark naked, up the six flights of stairs to Murderer's Row on the top tier of the jail. There were fewer inhabitants on this tier and the cells were believed to be escape-proof. The guards locked Houdini in an empty cell. They placed his clothing in a neat pile on the promenade, beyond his reach. Then the guards and the accompanying reporters withdrew and, as they had agreed, went back to the Warden's office. Houdini carried in various places on his person small steel wires and bits of spring steel. The time he ran his palm along the sole of his foot and extracted from a slot in the callus of his left heel a strip of metal about a quarter-inch wide and one and a half inches long. From his thick hair he withdrew a piece of stiff wire which he fitted around the strip metal as a handle. He stuck his hand through the bars, inserted the makeshift key in the lock and twisted it slowly clockwise. The cell door swung open. At that moment Houdini realized that across the vault of gloom the cell directly opposite was lighted and occupied. A prisoner sat there staring at him. The prisoner had a broad flat face with a porcine nose, a wide mouth and eyes that seemed unnaturally bright and large. He had coarse hair combed back from an oddly crescent hairline. Houdini, a vaudevillian, thought of the face of a ventriloquist's dummy. The prisoner was sitting at a table laid with linen and service. On the table were the remains of a large meal. An empty bottle of champagne was stuck upside down in a cooler. The iron cot was covered with a quilted spread and throw pillows. A Regency armoire stood against the stone wall. The ceiling fixture had been ornamented with a Tiffany lampshade.

Houdini could not help staring. The prisoner's cell glowed like a stage in the perpetual dusk of the cavernous prison. The prisoner stood up and waved, a stately gesture, and his wide mouth offered the trace of a smile. Quickly Houdini began to dress. He put on his briefs, his trousers, his socks and garters and shoes. Across the well the prisoner began to undress. Houdini put on his undershirt, his shirt, his collar. He tied his tie and set the stock pin. He snapped his suspenders in place and pulled on his jacket. The prisoner was now as naked as Houdini had been. The prisoner came up to the front of his cell and raising his arms in a shockingly obscene manner he thrust his hips forward and flapped his penis between the bars. Houdini rushed down the promenade, fumblingly unlocked the cellblock door and closed it behind him.

Houdini was to tell no one of this strange confrontation. He went through the celebration of his jailhouse feat in an uncharacteristically quiet, even subdued manner. Not even the line at the box office following the stories in the evening papers could cheer him up. Escaping from the leg irons in two minutes gave him no pleasure at all. Days passed before he realized that the grotesque mimic on Murderer's Row had to have been the killer Harry K. Thaw. People who did not respond to his art profoundly distressed Houdini. He had come to realize they were invariably of the upper classes. Always they broke through the pretense of his life and made him feel foolish. Houdini had high inchoate ambition and every development in technology made him restless. On the shabby confines of a stage he could create wonder and awe. Meanwhile men were beginning to take planes into the air, or race automobiles that went sixty miles an hour. A man like Roosevelt had run at the Spanish on San Juan Hill and now sent a fleet of white battleships steaming around the world, battleships as white as his teeth. The wealthy knew what was important. They looked on him as a child or a fool. Yet his self-imposed training, his dedication to the perfection of what he did, reflected an American ideal. He kept himself as trim as an athlete. He did not smoke or drink. Pound for pound he was as strong as any man he had ever run up against. He could tighten his stomach muscles and with a smile invite anyone at all to punch him there as hard as they liked. He was immensely muscular and agile and professionally courageous. Yet to the wealthy all that was nothing.

New in Houdini's act was an escape in which he released himself from an office safe and then opened the safe to reveal, handcuffed, the assistant who had been onstage a moment before. It was a great success. One evening after the performance Houdini's manager told him of being called by Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish of 78th Street, who wanted to book Houdini for a private party. Mrs. Fish was one of the Four Hundred. She was famous for her wit. Once she had given a ball at which everyone had to talk baby talk. Mrs. Fish was throwing a commemorative ball in honor of her friend the late Stanford White, the architect of her home. He had designed her home in the style of a doge palace. A doge was the chief magistrate in the republic of Genoa or Venice. I won't have nothing to do with those people, Houdini told his manager. Dutifully the manager reported to Mrs. Fish that Houdini was not available. She doubled the fee. The ball was held on a Monday evening. It was the first event of the new season. At about nine o'clock Houdini drove up in a hired Pierce Arrow. He was accompanied by his manager and his assistant. Behind the car was a truck carrying his equipment. The entourage was shown to the trade entrance.

Unknown to Houdini, Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish had also engaged for the evening the entire

sideshow of the Barnum and Bailey circus. She liked to shock fuddy-duddies. Houdini was led into some sort of waiting room where he found himself encircled by a mob of freaks all of whom had heard of him and wanted to touch him. Creatures with scaled iridescent skins and hands attached to their shoulders, midgets with the voices of telephones, Siamese twin sisters who leaned in opposite directions, a man who lifted weights from iron rings permanently attached to his breasts. Houdini removed his cape and his top hat and his white gloves and handed them to his assistant. He slumped in a chair. His grips were waiting for instruction. The freaks yattered at him.

But the room itself was very beautiful, with carved wood ceilings and Flemish tapestries of Actaeon being torn apart by dogs.

Early in his career Houdini had worked in a small circus in western Pennsylvania. He recalled his loyalties now in order to regain his composure. One of the midgets, a woman separated herself from the rest and got everyone to step back a few paces. She turned out to be the eminent Lavinia Warren, the widow of General Tom Thumb, the most famous midget of all. Lavinia Warren Thumb was dressed in a magnificent gown supplied by Mrs. Fish: it was supposed to be a joke on Mrs. Fish's nemesis, Mrs. William Astor, who had worn the identical design the previous spring. Lavinia Thumb was coiffed in the Astor manner and wore glittering copies of the Astor jewels. She was nearly seventy years old and carried herself with dignity. Upon her wedding fifty years before she and Colonel Thumb had been received in the White House by the Lincolns. Houdini wanted to cry. Lavinia was no longer working in the circus but she had come down to New York from her home in Bridgeport, a clapboard house with scalloped bargeboards and a widow's walk, which cost something to maintain. That was why she had taken this evening's job. She lived in Bridgeport to be near the grave of her husband, who had died many years before and was commemorated in stone atop a monumental column in Mountain Grove Cemetery. Lavinia was two feet tall. She came to Houdini's knees. Her voice had deepened with age and she now spoke in the tones of a normal twenty-year-old girl. She had sparkling blue eyes, silver-white hair and the finest wrinkles on her clear white skin. Houdini was reminded of his mother. Come on, kid, do a coupla numbers for us, Lavinia said.

Houdini entertained the circus folk with sleight of hand and some simple tricks. He put a billiard ball in his mouth, closed his mouth, opened it, and the billiard ball was gone. He closed his mouth and opened it again and removed the billiard ball. He stuck an ordinary sewing needle into his cheek and pulled it through the inner side. He opened his hand and produced a live chick. He withdrew from his ear a stream of colored silk. The freaks were delighted. They applauded and laughed. When he felt he had discharged his responsibilities Houdini rose and told his manager he would not perform for Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish. There were remonstrations. Houdini stormed out the door. Crystal light dazzled his eyes. He was in the grand ballroom of the doge palace. A string orchestra played from a balcony. Great parted red drapes framed the clerestory windows and four hundred people were waltzing on the marble floor. Shading his eyes he saw bearing down on him Mrs. Fish herself, a clutch of jeweled feathers rising from her piled hair, ropes of pearls swinging pendulously from her neck, a witticism forming on her lips like the bubbles of an epileptic.

Despite such experiences Houdini never developed what we think of as a political

consciousness. He could not reason from his own hurt feelings. To the end he would be almost totally unaware of the design of his career, the great map of revolution laid out by his life. He was a Jew. His real name was Erich Weiss. He was passionately in love with his ancient mother whom he had installed in his brownstone home on West 113th Street. In fact, Sigmund Freud had just arrived in America to give a series of lectures at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, and so Houdini was destined to be, with Al Jolson, the last of the great shameless mother lovers, a nineteenth-century movement that included such men as Poe, John Brown, Lincoln and James McNeill Whistler. Of course Freud's immediate reception in America was not auspicious. A few professional alienists understood his importance, but to most of the public he appeared as some kind of German sexologist, an exponent of free love who used big words to talk about dirty things. At least a decade would have to pass before Freud would have his revenge and see his ideas begin to destroy sex in America forever.

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