

CHAPTER FOUR

The Fountain

THE windows of our three-room railroad flat looked down on the big fountain in Rutgers Square, a huge plaza into which flowed four important thoroughfares: East Broadway, Canal Street, Rutgers Street, and Essex Street. The fountain was a tapering, eye-filling, circular structure surrounded by two semicircular stone benches. It had a broad basin four or five feet above the base, and two graduated smaller basins in tiers above it. The stone benches were always occupied. In the morning they held mothers and babies and women shoppers tired out from bargain-hunting, the pursuit of which necessitated visiting distant markets, sometimes a mile from their homes. In the late afternoon, school-children took over the fountain, sailing paper boats in the lowest basin and playing tag around the benches. In the evening, after a hot day, old people sat around to catch what

tenuous breezes might hover over the square. The old people seldom stayed long, and they were succeeded by young couples who had been walking hand-in-hand in the square, waiting for a chance to sit down in the proximity promised by the crowded benches around the fountain.

Presumably the small tenements could not accommodate the old people and the young at the same time. Privacy in the home was practically unknown. The average apartment consisted of three rooms: a kitchen, a parlor, and a doorless and windowless bedroom between. The parlor became a sleeping-room at night. So did the kitchen when families were unusually large. Perhaps because of the accessibility of the light refreshment that it was customary to offer guests, the kitchen rather than the parlor became the living-room until bedtime, and all social life centered in it. Made comparatively presentable after a long day of cooking, eating, and the washing of dishes and laundry, it was the scene of formal calls at our house and of the visits of friends and prospective suitors. However, the etiquette of courting was strict. A transplanted from the old country, it had well-defined prohibitions known to everyone. Chaperonage was an acknowledged institution, and the chaperon could even be, if necessary, a child. When a gentleman offered to call on one of my sisters on a night when I was to be the only other member of the family at home, my mother, before leaving the house, would openly caution me to remain in the kitchen until the visitor had taken his leave. On the other hand, it was considered proper for young people to go walking together, attend concerts and balls and the theater. But in such cases the parents were to be apprised beforehand of the extent and duration of the walk or the nature of the entertainment. It therefore turned out, ironically enough, that privacy could be had only in public. The streets in the evening were thick with promenading couples, and the benches around the fountain and in Jackson Street Park, and the empty trucks lined up at the

river front, were filled with lovers who had no other place to meet. Boys of my age were required to be at home around ten at night. Those of us who were still in the streets at that hour might decide perversely to hang around the fountain with the intent of embarrassing the lovers on the benches. We would sneak up on them from behind and imitate the amorous confidences we *imagined* they exchanged. "Darling!" we would whisper, "I love you more than the world. Will you marry me?" And one of us would answer mincingly: "Yes, dear, I *will* marry you—and we will have *many* children," the daring afterthought being intended to convey the abnormally advanced state of our sophistication.

The conversation of lovers I did overhear was on the more serious plane of politics, religion, literature, and the theater. The majority of these young people were immigrants, and their language was still Yiddish, with an admixture of Russian, Polish, Romanian, German, and English words and phrases. They worked in dark, fetid sweatshops, in airless attics and cellars. They attended night schools and read liberal, socialist, or anarchist newspapers and magazines. Politically and ideologically they were at odds with their parents and grandparents, who leaned through habit and tradition toward conservatism and paternalism. In the minds of the older people, unionism or criticism of constituted authority and resistance to it invariably led to atheism, or at least to a slackness in the observance of the laws and traditions of religious orthodoxy. Yet, though their expressed opinions were iconoclastic, the actual behavior of the young people was strictly, though unconsciously, in the tradition of their elders.

One of the topics in the air in that period was the double standard of morality. The Russian author Chernishevsky had written a novel on the subject, and the book, though not new, was enjoying a vogue on the East Side. *What is to be Done?* was its provocative title. It posed for its heroine and,

by extension, to all women, the question of acceptance or rejection of the hitherto unchallenged promiscuity of males. The author himself took the most serious view of the license enjoyed by men, and pleaded through the mouth of his heroine for a single standard for both sexes. As a final gesture of protest the heroine committed suicide, but I don't remember what effect this act of desperation had on the question involved. I do remember that *What is to be Done?* was earnestly debated in my own house, on the sidewalks, and on the benches by the Rutgers Square fountain, and that sympathy was generally on the side of the heroine and the author. The male arguments against a single standard appeared to lack force, and almost always capitulated to the sterner moral and spiritual convictions of the opposition. Perhaps the lack of privacy contributed to the high moral tone of the East Side intellectuals. *What is to be Done?* may have helped to sublimate this deprivation, as did the moralistic Russian and Yiddish literature that formed the chief intellectual fare of those days. "The wages of sin is death," Tolstoy had inscribed under the title of *Anna Karenina*, and no one ever questioned the stern judgment of the author on his beautiful and erring heroine. Infidelity, promiscuity, and all other sexual aberrations were held to be incompatible with the life of the spirit and the intellect in a serious world where young men and women labored ten and twelve hours a day merely to keep body and soul together. In these circles love was held to be primarily intellectual. Young people met in classrooms, in night schools, at lectures on politics, economics, and literature, at plays and at concerts, and seemed to be drawn to one another by a community of interests rather than by chemical affinity. The ignorant, the idlers, and loafers of both sexes managed to achieve vulgar and sordid relations, and there were frequent betrayals and sex scandals. But those attachments which had an intellectual basis generally led to marriage. A cousin of ours who worked in a sweatshop and studied dentistry at

night was introduced to a girl at a concert and ball in Pythagoras Hall on East Broadway. While dancing with him the girl confessed to a passion for Dostoievsky's *Crime and Punishment*, the very book he admired most in the world. They fell in love, and on his receiving his dentist's diploma two years later, they married. Love was, indeed, a serious and lofty matter among the young men and women in Rutgers Square.

In summer the fountain in Rutgers Square played all day, and in the late afternoon and on Sundays the more adventurous boys of the neighborhood would strip and dive into the lowest basin. This was prohibited by law, and a warning to that effect was painted on the basin's rim. One of us would be delegated to stand guard over the heap of discarded pants, shirts, underwear, shoes, and stockings and to keep an eye open for policemen. Espying one, the lookout would let out a piercing "Cheese it—the cops!" grab a handful of garments, and make for a certain prearranged meeting-place. The swimmers would scramble out of the basin and scatter in all directions. This was also prearranged to confuse our pursuer, who, not being quick enough in deciding which direction to take, would generally stand helpless for the time it took the boys to make good their escape. A few minutes later we would all have made our way, dripping but elated, to some dark tenement vestibule, or have descended to the cellar workshop and living-quarters of some friendly ragpicker or shoemaker, whither our sentry had preceded us with our clothes. And sometime later we would emerge, singly, of course, to allay suspicion, and saunter nonchalantly back to the fountain, perhaps under the puzzled scrutiny of the very cop who had caused our flight.

Better swimming was to be had in the river a few blocks east of the fountain. There it was perfectly legal to dive off the docks provided one wore one's underwear. On really hot

days we repaired to the waterfront, but we preferred the fountain because of its risks.

The law also frowned on gangs. For that reason it behooved one to belong to a gang. I applied for admission to the East Broadwayers soon after we moved into the neighborhood, and after submitting to a series of physical tortures to test my powers of endurance, I was accepted and solemnly installed as a member. The East Broadwayers was a loose association of young residents of a well-defined area. Their professed aim was to detest all outlying gangs whose forces were numerically comparable to their own, and to dedicate themselves practically to the harassment and, ideally, to the complete destruction of the others. Rival gangs of approximately equal man-power delivered ultimatums to one another and met openly in battle on their home grounds or on the enemy's terrain, the choice of battlefield being the acknowledged prerogative of the challenger. With sticks and stones and whatever else was at hand for weapons, the battle would often last from after school to past supper time, when the armies would disintegrate upon the advent of worried relations, who would collar and bear off large contingents of fighters, including, perhaps, the intrepid leaders themselves.

Every street had its gang, but the exigencies of geography necessitated alliances among gangs of contiguous streets. The East Broadwayers joined up with the Jefferson and Madison Streeters and the Rutgers Streeters and operated as a solid block against associated gangs residing in more distant neighborhoods. Our chief enemies were the combined forces of the Cherry, Pike, and Montgomery Streeters, though sometimes powerful gangs from the remote purlieus of Brooklyn Bridge or the Grand Street waterfront conducted swift raids on the East Broadwayers and retreated hastily before we could summon the aid of our allies. In these lightning skirmishes some of us were so conspicuously

mauled that we feared additional punishment at home and consequently remained in the streets long after bedtime, laving our wounds in the dirty waters of the fountain and inventing plausible excuses to account for our injuries. When our wounds looked as if they might become serious, we repaired, escorted by an honor guard, to the Gouverneur Street Hospital, where we were bandaged neatly and sometimes outfitted with impressive arm-slings. We then made our way home, conscious of our importance, followed at a respectful distance by admiring comrades.

Gang laws prohibited members of rival gangs from passing through each other's territory. Strange faces aroused suspicion, and it was mandatory for an East Broadwayer to accost any boy he did not know and put the question: "What Streeter?" To incur punishment, the stranger did not even have to belong to a rival gang. It was enough if he lived on an enemy street. This was so well known that boys would take to their heels without answering the fateful query, and so frequently make their escape. To avoid unpleasantness, boys whose shortest way to school lay through forbidden territory were obliged to make lengthy detours.

Aside from the hazard of gang warfare, there was also the hazard of racial and nationalistic enmity. Cherry Street was completely Irish and Catholic, while the neighborhood of East Broadway and Rutgers Square was predominantly Jewish. Being numerically superior, we felt no antagonism for the non-Jewish in our midst, rather looking upon them with the friendly contempt one normally felt for goyim. An Irish family lived in a rear apartment on our floor. They were an unusually dirty group, the parents much given to drunkenness and quarreling. Yet our relations were cordial, and my mother and her Christian neighbor would exchange lengthy visits, though neither understood a word of the other's language.

I, however, longed to see for myself the forbidden, solidly

Christian territory of Cherry Street, and one Saturday morning I entered the street and walked, nervous and apprehensive, for several blocks without molestation. At the corner of Montgomery Street two boys leaning against a lamppost looked closely at me as I passed them. Trying hard to repress any signs of fear, I walked on. They left their lamppost and walked behind me. Suddenly they spurred ahead and barred my way. I said: "Wha's a matter?" and one of them countered with "What Streeter?" "Grand Streeter," I lied. The Grand and the Cherry Streeters, I knew, had recently concluded a mutual-assistance pact. This seemed to satisfy my questioner. But his friend now took another tack. "Hey!" he said, looking me over carefully. "Are you a sheeny?" "Me?" I said, summoning a wretched smile. "No! I'm a Chreestch." I had now silenced my second tormentor. "Well, I gotta go," I hazarded breezily, and started to walk. "Wait a minute," the first one said, grabbing me by the arm. "Let's *see* if you're a Chreestch." I knew what he meant. I broke loose from his hold and started running as fast as I could, the two after me. Fear gave me the speed to outdistance them, and presently my feet were on friendly territory and my pursuers dared go no farther. The story of my adventure and escape, embellished with some highly imaginative details, was speedily incorporated into the oral collection of the heroic exploits of the East Broadwayers.

The days in summer and winter were crowded with incidents, amusing, soul-satisfying, perilous, or adventurous (at the very least, one could find satisfaction in just being an onlooker). There were gang wars to be fought, policemen to annoy and outwit, and sentimental couples to be teased and ridiculed. Standing unobserved at one's window, one could focus a burning-glass on the face of a person resting on the stone bench of the fountain and relish his annoyance and anger as he tried helplessly to locate his tormentor. From the same vantage point, one could let down a weight attached to a long

string, conk the head of a passer-by, and draw up the missile before the victim could look around for the offender; or, with the aid of an accomplice stationed on the curb, stretch a string head-high across the sidewalk, which, unseen by some unsuspecting pedestrian, would lift his straw hat or derby from his head and send it rolling down the street. There were the great games of leave-e-o, prisoner's base, and one-o'-cat to be played, the last limitlessly peripatetic, so that one might start to play on East Broadway and wind up, hours later, on the Bowery. There were ambulances to be run after and horse-cars to hang on to—unobserved by the conductor. If one was on intimate terms with a currier in a livery stable, one could sit bareback astride a horse and ride through the streets. Something was constantly happening which one had to repair to the spot to see at first hand. People were being knocked down by horse-cars. There were altercations on every street, often ending in blows. The changing of street-car horses at certain termini was a spectacle well worth a walk of a mile. One could run after an ambulance with a view to being in a position to give an eyewitness account of an accident to one's comrades. There were parades to be followed, also organ-grinders, bums, and itinerant sellers of cure-alls, who would assemble a crowd in a moment, deliver a stream of seemingly sensible, yet strangely incomprehensible, oratory, quickly dispose of some wares, and suddenly move on. There was Chinatown to be explored. Familiarity could not dispel the delicious fear of a walk through Mott and Pell streets or curb one's speculation on what went on behind the bamboo curtains in the dark interiors of dimly lit shops, or, for that matter, in the inscrutable heads of the pigtailed Chinamen who shuffled along on the narrow sidewalks or sat in doorways, smoking pipes and cigarettes. No young boy in his senses would face Chinatown alone. We always went in twos or larger groups. And when we entered a shop to purchase lichee nuts, one of us always remained outside to

raise an alarm in the not improbable event of an Oriental attempt to kidnap us and mark us out either for lustful murder or for something less immediate but more dreadful, known to us vaguely as "the white-slave trade."

On election nights, there were bonfires to watch and perhaps assist in making. Fires broke out constantly in all seasons, and the air was seldom free from the clang of the fire engines, the shrieks of the siren, and the clatter of the horses on the cobblestones. Following the fire engines could conceivably occupy all one's leisure time. I found the waterfront fires in winter the most gratifying, for the warehouses were large and their contents inflammable, and an entire block of buildings could be counted on to go up in smoke before the firemen gained control. An æsthetic by-product not to be underestimated was the lovely spectacle provided by the freezing of the water from the fire-hoses the moment it touched the buildings. Not infrequently the fire engines led directly to one's own house. These fires, whose origin even children suspected, were generally less interesting, containing no element of suspense, as all the tenants, acting as if through some common impulse, had left their homes and were on the sidewalks by the time the engines drew up. But they were fires none the less, and necessitated the dragging of miles of hose into the building and the wielding of hatchets and axes by the firemen. Often one arrived breathless at a fire only to find that it had been a "*fourjolahm*" (a false alarm). "*Fourjolahms*" were held to be the work of criminal-minded youngsters, who, we were told, were certain to end up in the electric chair. But if they were criminal-minded, they were always uncommonly clever in eluding detection. I sometimes thought they were actuated by nothing more evil than a desire (which I shared) to witness a full turnout of fire engines. On quiet days I should myself have loved to spread a "*fourjolahm*." Fortunately for me, quiet days were very rare. Besides, there appeared to be no lack of these criminal-

minded youngsters on the lower East Side. I really was not needed, for hardly a day passed without the excitement of a "*fourjoulahm*."

Diversions were also available closer to home. One could spend a profitable afternoon in one's own back yard. The poles for clotheslines soared five stories in the air. To shinny up a pole was a feat in itself, and the exhilaration felt on reaching the top had a quality of its own. Also there was the sense of danger, not actually felt, but induced by the fears of the women who watched the ascension from their back windows and yelled: "Get down, you bum, you loafer! Do you want to get killed?" A restaurant in the adjoining house kept its milk cans in our yard. These served for games of leapfrog and also offered a means of revenge on the proprietor of the restaurant, a man insensitive to the need of children to play and make noise. Every time he chased us out of the yard, we would return at night, pry open his milk cans, and drop sand and pebbles in them. He (and his clientele as well) must have also been insensitive to the quality of the milk he was imbibing and dispensing, for our unsanitary peccadillo was either never discovered or else ignored.

Tenement roofs offered a series of connected playgrounds. The element of danger in playing tag on roofs was considerable enough to heighten the ordinary excitement of the game. Cornices were only knee-high. They could hardly be a barrier to destruction should one, in running to escape the tagger, fail to have the presence of mind to veer quickly to right or left. Some buildings were taller than others, thus necessitating a thrilling drop of ten or twelve feet, and on returning, an equally exciting scrambling up skylights and chimneys. A breath-taking hazard was the open air shafts that separated houses otherwise contiguous. To miss, even by an inch, a jump over an air shaft meant death, but death did not really matter. For death was only an academic concept, a word

without reality, at worst something that could happen only to others.

Every variety of adventure was to be had in Rutgers Square and its environs. Excitement lay in wait at the turn of a street corner, in the somber hallways, in the windows of shops, in manure-fragrant stables, in the rubble of demolished buildings, in the ruins of fire-swept lofts, in open manholes (one could climb down into them at noon when the men working there knocked off for lunch). In the oppressive heat of summer, one could revel in the deliciously painful sensation of running barefoot over melting asphalt or stand bravely in the path of a huge hose the street-cleaners trained on the garbage-strewn, burning streets. Threatening skies, thunder and lightning, cloudbursts, sheets of slanting rain that one watched from the protective vantage of doorways and from behind windows or boldly went out to meet in the hope that one would be observed and admired—all these manifestations of mysterious power one enjoyed with uneasy delight. Walking barefoot along the gutters in the rain, with the water gurgling over one's toes, as it washed over the pebbles in the illustration of a country scene in a story in *McGuffey's Reader*, the delicious feel of wet garments, one's face upturned to the pelting skies and one's mouth open to catch refreshing drops of rain—these offered untroubled delights. In the late fall, one could look forward to the week of Succoth, when my father would construct a shelter close to the row of toilets in the back yard and cover it with pine branches. Here we would have all our meals, even on cold days or when it rained. This was decidedly life in the open! Sitting at supper in the rustic hut, with the rain leaking through the prickly foliage, gave one a sense of communion with nature and the elements and, indeed, of being a member of some close-knit, savage tribe. To pass from the thatched structure in the yard into Rutgers Square was an instant transition from barbarism to civilization.

In winter the rim of the big basin of the fountain was coated with ice, and I could walk on it gingerly, balancing myself with my hands like a man on a tightrope, to the admiration of my little sister, who watched me from our window across the street. One day I slipped in the act. She saw me fall and raised an alarm, and my mother rushed out and carried me into the house. The accident left a scar on my eyelid which for some years I could point to as a proof of my recklessness and daring. A few of the well-to-do boys (the sons of doctors) owned sleds, which they agreed to share with us on pain of being expelled from the East Broadwayers. The first snowfall always arrived on Thanksgiving Day (or so it seems now), and the time not spent in school was taken up in snowball fights and in making snowmen and building fortifications, enormous in size and elaborately constructed for defense. After successfully withstanding an attack that lasted till supper time, it was pleasant to be at home at night, lie on the warm floor face down near the stove in the kitchen, and give oneself up to the delights of *McGuffey's Reader*. Soon the sweet, fetid, airless, autointoxicating atmosphere of the overheated room would take possession of the senses and one would slide into a profound sleep, from which even violent shaking by one's mother and the command to "wake up and go to sleep" could not pry one loose.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Theater

WHEN I joined my comrades in taunting the lovers on the benches by the Rutgers Square fountain, I was also aware, through hearsay, that the world of the theater on Grand Street and the Bowery was, morally, quite untrammelled. Rumors came to my ears of fascinating irregularities in the lives of the chief personages of the Yiddish stage. The relish with which these rumors were heard by all but very old and very orthodox people, who shunned the theater on principle, proved that the stage was a world apart, one not subject to the moral code of the world around me. If what one heard could be believed, actors led as fabulous an existence in real life as in the theater. For one thing, they took their marriages lightly. It was said that the rival male stars of Grand Street and the Bowery negotiated among themselves an exchange of wives for a limited period, after which interlude