

I Bow to the Stones by JIMMY SAVO

"Jimmy Savo's book gave me the same joy that Jimmy gave me as a performer and as a friend. It's good to have him back."

—HELEN HAYES

"There are few men during my lifetime whose artistry should be recorded for all time. Jimmy Savo was truly a great contribution to the world of entertainment, and one of the world's foremost clowns. With his pixie face he could do more than many comedians could with a thousand words. Once seen, the great Savo could never be forgotten. Though small of stature, he is ten feet tall in my memory."

—EDDIE CANTOR

"It is difficult for me to express in words the affection and admiration I have always held for Jimmy Savo. *I Bow to the Stones* revives for me all his great talent and artistry."

—STAN LAUREL

"Probably the best humor in the world comes from people who have something touching as well as funny to convey. This was certainly true of Jimmy Savo as I knew him and is equally true of *I Bow to the Stones* as I read it."

—RICHARD RODGERS

"Those of us who like to laugh are extremely sorry that Jimmy Savo is gone from the scene. How fortunate we are, though, that he has left us this entertaining autobiography."

—STEVE ALLEN

"I read *I Bow to the Stones* with absolute delight . . . Jimmy Savo's artistry and spirit are preserved in this delightful memoir of a New York childhood."—GEORGE FREEDLEY

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I Bow to the Stones An Autobiography JIMMY SAVO



Memories of a New York Childhood

\$3.75

I Bow to the Stones by JIMMY SAVO

For those who remember Jimmy Savo as one of the immortal comedians of the American stage, this autobiography will be a joyous reacquaintance. *I Bow to the Stones* is Jimmy's own story of his childhood, from his birth on East 97th Street in New York through the family move to the Bronx, where he ran errands for his father while dodging the neighborhood bullies.

The title derives from a favorite proverb of his father, an immigrant Italian shoemaker who

faced poverty and prejudice in this country with dignity: "Always bow to the stones in the street," he told his son. It was his father's way of saying, don't let obstacles embitter you, bow to them and go on. Jimmy listened obediently—but always carried a few stones in his pockets for insurance.

Jimmy Savo went on the stage when other boys his age were still playing marbles. *I Bow to the Stones* tells the story, often hilariously, of his efforts to perfect his vaudeville act as The Boy Wonder Juggler, plagued by the clause in his contract which compelled him to wear short pants on and off stage. He rose to the heights of his profession, "in the company," wrote Brooks Atkinson, "of Charlie Chaplin, Joe Jackson, and the Frères Fratellini."

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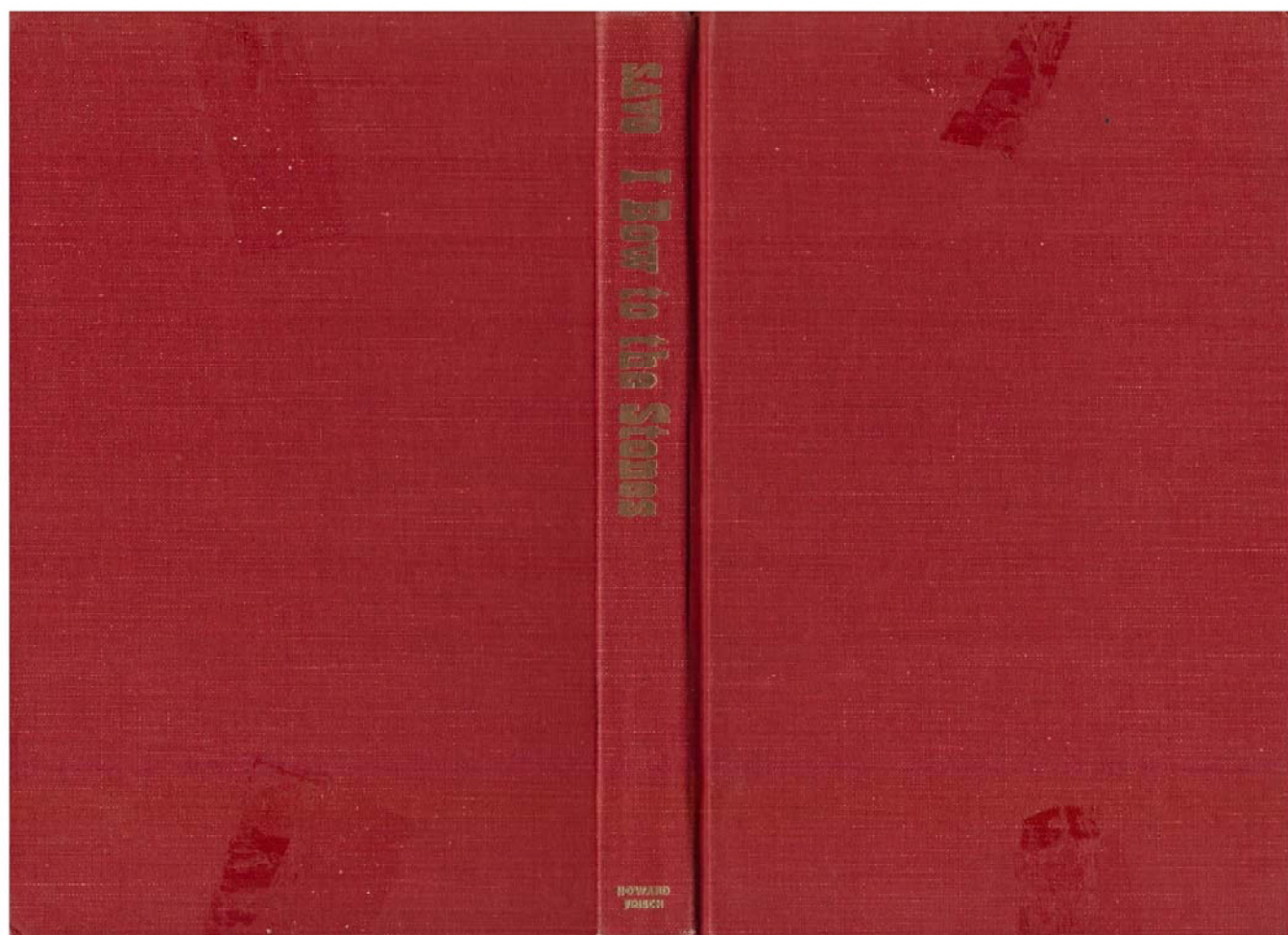
It should not be surprising that Jimmy Savo recaptures in his life story the flavor of amateur nights at the turn of the century and of burlesque skits in which the comedian lost the seat of his pants. What may surprise is the artistry with which he revives a New York in which goats still wandered on the streets, and young boys banded together in now-forgotten street games. *I Bow to the Stones* is a classic of modern New York in the making.

NINA SAVO, who was born in Rome, met Jimmy when she came to interview him for a New York newspaper. "If you make it a good interview, I'll marry you," he told her. (It was a good interview and he kept his promise.) Mrs. Savo continued to take down the stories that Jimmy told her and they became, eventually, this book. At present Mrs. Savo divides her time between New York and the eleventh-century castle in Italy which she was given by her parents as a wedding present and which she is establishing as the Jimmy Savo International Art Center.

VICTOR J. DOWLING, who has illustrated *I Bow to the Stones*, resides in upstate New York but he was born in the Bronx, not far from the streets that Jimmy Savo describes. Mr. Dowling's most recent illustrations graced *Mr. Cat* and *More Mr. Cat*, and *A Bit of Amber Too*, two books of memoirs by George Freedley which are surely a part of every cat-lover's library.

AN ALBUM of photographs and playbills from Jimmy Savo's later career will be found at the end of *I Bow to the Stones*.

Jacket Design by Robert N. Essman



I Bow to the Stones



Memories of a New York Childhood
by **JIMMY SAVO**

Introduction by **GEORGE FREEDLEY**

Drawings by **VICTOR J. DOWLING**

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INTRODUCTION

By GEORGE FREEDLEY

Curator, Theatre Collection, New York Public Library

I READ *I Bow to the Stones*, the story of a New York childhood and adolescence, with absolute delight. It is a nostalgic and loving story about a youngster growing up in New York in the early years of the present century and tugs at your heartstrings as you read of the minor triumphs and disasters which made up a poor boy's life in America's largest city. Better perhaps than in Israel Zangwill's justly famous *The Melting Pot* do you realize how European, and, to a slight extent Asiatic, nationalities have fused into a new nationality, American. Jimmy Savo catches that beautifully in his brief autobiography, which has been so faithfully transcribed by his loving wife and faithful amanuensis, Nina Savo.

He tells the seldom recorded story of neighborhood playhouses in New York City and their amateur nights

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which were Jimmy's schooling for the professional theatre in which he was later to star. Beginning as a juggler and semi-magician, Jimmy made his professional start on a vaudeville bill at Hammerstein's glamorous Victoria Theatre in 1912, which starred Mlle. Polaire, sometimes billed as the world's ugliest woman.

Probably Jimmy thought of his relatively humble beginnings on that famous night of January 18, 1948 when the first *ANTA Album* was presented for a single gala performance at the Ziegfeld Theatre. He shared star billing with Katharine Cornell, Maurice Evans, Jack Pearl, Paul Robeson, Buck and Bubbles, Jane Cowl, Florence Reed, Libby Holman, William Gaxton, Dorothy Stickney, Helen Hayes, Judith Anderson, Willy and Eugene Howard, Alfred Drake, Cliff Edwards, Vivienne Segal, John Gielgud, Raymond Massey as Abe Lincoln and Walter Huston singing the unforgettable "September Song." It was a proud night in the American theatre for everyone on either side of the footlights. Jimmy Savo with his baggy pants in the famous number, "River Stay 'Way From My Door" from his mime revue of 1940, *Mum's the Word*, was up there with top stars of our theatre and shared the adulation of the audience.

From the bottom of the bill at Hammerstein's Victoria he varied between burlesque and vaudeville. He toured the Orpheum Circuit for years. From this theatrical form he was tapped for the legitimate theatre. He was first featured on Broadway in the *Vogues* of 1924 and teamed with Fred Allen. They were in support of May Boley, Odette Myrtil and J. Harold Mur-

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ray. Another member of the company was Betty Compton, later the second wife of James J. Walker, the playboy mayor of New York in the Prohibition era.

In 1929, in *Murray Anderson's Almanac*, he endeavored to embrace the expansive waist of Trixie Friganza in an unforgettable number, "I May Be Wrong" (but I think you're wonderful). The next year saw him in *Earl Carroll's Vanities* of 1930 with Herb Williams, Jack Benny and Patsy Kelly. Five years later found him appearing in an early workers' revue for the Theatre Guild, *Parade*, directed by Philip Loeb. Jimmy played a variety of roles at the head of a cast which included Eve Arden, Earl Oxford, Leon Janney, Charles Walters, Ralph Riggs, Esther Junger, George Ali and Ezra Stone. I chiefly remember him as the zany proprietor of a factory. Robert Alton staged the dances against the decor by Lee Simonson.

One of his greatest successes was in the original George Abbott production of *The Boys from Syracuse* which opened at the Alvin Theatre on November 23, 1938. He and Teddy Hart teamed as the two comic Dromios in this "free adaptation" of *The Comedy of Errors* which contained one of the greatest Rodgers and Hart scores. Ronald Graham, Eddie Albert, Muriel Angelus and Wynn Murray were the other leads, and Burl Ives was also in the cast.

It was a bitterly cold night that he opened in his one-man mime revue, *Mum's the Word*, December 5, 1940 at the tiny Belmont Theatre then on West 48th Street just east of The Playhouse. I remember huddling in the inadequate entrance of the theatre, catching a

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cigarette and a breath of icy air, with Frances and Richard Lockridge, at the time that Lockridge and I were writing drama criticism for New York dailies, and we reviewed our thoughts about this great new mime before disappearing to our typewriters.

Three years later, Jimmy appeared in the first Lerner and Loewe collaboration, *What's Up*. However, he is best remembered for his hilarious pantomime, in which he ranks with the greatest, Chaplin, Marceau, Lillian Gish and Martha Graham.

Between Broadway engagements or concurrently with them, Jimmy was making records and appearing in films and in night clubs. For a long time he was the mainstay of Cafe Society Uptown of the night club circuit.

Simon and Schuster published his charming book *Little World, Hello!* E. E. Cummings' poem was a genuine tribute to the elfin spirit which was Jimmy's greatest asset on and off stage, in books or in real life. This great artist departed this world September 6, 1960, at the age of sixty-five, and was buried in Cuardea, Terni, in Italy, the homeland of his parents. His artistry and spirit are preserved in this delightful memoir of a New York childhood. He was one of the great comic artists of the century.

PREFACE

MY HUSBAND DID NOT REALLY THINK at first of writing his autobiography. He was a wonderful story-teller, and I was fascinated listening to him. He used to talk about his childhood, and I, fresh from being a reporter, could not resist jotting down what he was saying. At first he was surprised; then he got used to it, and he would simply dictate as I sat at the typewriter.

After all, had we not first met when I was sent to interview him for a New York newspaper? Our marriage became known as the interview that never ended. Jimmy dictated the rest of his life to me, but that is another story.

We never discussed the title, but I think Jimmy would have approved of this one: *I Bow to the Stones*. It was a favorite proverb of his father, a gentle Italian shoemaker, an immigrant to this country who withstood poverty and adversity and prejudice. To his father the proverb meant, face adversity with dignity and courage. Jimmy was fond of repeating it, and it was his own philosophy in later life.

NINA SAVO



1: BEGINNINGS

MY FATHER ARRIVED IN NEW YORK harbor on the eve of the blizzard of 1888. He was twenty years old. In New York everyone was locked in. The water froze. They took the snow and boiled it for water. For five days the city was snowbound. On the fifth my father, disgusted with this Eskimo life, boarded the same boat he had come on and went back to Italy.

There in the village in the south where he was born he fell in love with a girl named Carmela, with large liquid eyes. She owned a farm of forty acres of olive trees. Something even more valuable, this girl had an adventurous spirit.

Her brother had gone to Brazil and was now the owner of a coffee plantation. Once he had returned, loaded down with money, for a visit to his young sister

and had given a banquet for the whole village. He was a jokester and had taken a man's watch and hidden it in the ruins of an old castle on top of a lonely hill. Then, at the banquet, when his friend missed the watch, Carmela's brother pretended to be a magician, mumbled a few mysterious words, told the owner of the watch that some strange power had tipped him off where the watch would be found, and when the whole village climbed up to the old castle, there was the watch, just as he had said.

Well, Carmela, his sister, longed to come to America. When my father told her of his five cold days here, she answered,

"You went in the winter. . ."

She had her way, as she always had her way thereafter. They were married and sailed for America.

It took them thirty days to come over and cost them thirty dollars each for passage in the crowded steerage, but when they got off the boat, it was spring.

She fell in love with this country at once. It was the country for her. She was resourceful, she had initiative. The young husband and wife opened a cobbler's shop in Manhattan on 97th Street and Third Avenue.

After a few years a baby girl was born. But my mother had prayed for a little boy with big eyes. When some years later I came, with eyes as requested, a great ambition stirred her. The first nine days of my life were very busy ones for my father. Mama had him running around, making a great many arrangements. She wanted to move into a better house and open a new business.

The house where I was born, a few doors away from the shop, was not worthy of all the great things she thought were ahead of me, of the great prosperity that was to come to my family. My mother knew that all this was going to happen because she had already acquired the important thing, the one thing on which all this future happiness depended. It was me.

My father liked to take his time.

"Why hurry?" he asked.

"I cannot wait," was her reply. She was going to make big money and send me to college.

"You are going to hear about my baby," she said. And when I was nine days old we moved into the new house.

Mama liked music, people and gaiety. She had a brass band marching along 104th Street to celebrate my arrival. The new baby was taken to the church at 115th Street, and drops of holy water were sprinkled over his face. Everybody danced in the street as in a big block party, pennies and candy were thrown into the air and kids scrambled for them.

As far as that brass band could be heard, people knew that my mother had a new baby.

"A brass band for a baby?" Nobody had ever heard of such a thing. All right, my mama wanted things different for me.

Father had to give up his shoemaker's store to become a big businessman. Mama had her heart set on it. A rainbow of success spread over their new wholesale grocery.

Even if it was hard for Father to get up and go to

the market early in the morning. Mama saw to it that he did.

Money came rolling in. Two years after I was born my parents owned a five-story house, with our store and a butcher store on the ground floor.

Mama sang to me as she worked. She sang songs she made up, about how my eyes were going to be famous. And she told everybody who came into the store that she was going to send me to college and make me God's chosen man—a priest.

And two years and nine days after I was born she died.

• • • • •

My father could not face the solitude in which she had left him. He closed the store, sold the house and brought the little orphans, Lucy and me, to a boat, and we all sailed for Italy.

There in Stigliano, his home town, he tried to make a home, but everytime he looked at me, he remembered the brass band and my mama's big plans. He sighed, and waited. Then one Sunday, in the church, Father saw five girls with their mother. He noticed especially one among the girls. He spoke to a relative about her. Would she respond? The answer was encouraging. He called at the girl's home. Would she marry him? Strangely, this girl did not care to come to America. But my father had to return, for my mama would have wanted it for me. So, he had his way. With a new mother we came back to New York. Once again he opened a shoe repair shop on 97th Street, a few doors away from the house where I was born, but the store



He remembered the brass band.

was in the cellar, and we lived in the back of the store. His savings were gone. There were no dreams of prosperity.

My first recollections begin there. I was three and a half years old. There were always fights in the streets and often stones would be thrown. Once I was hit over the eyebrow, and an old woman, a neighbor, burned a little piece of rag until it was crisp and put it in oil and bandaged me up.

I remember a big Christmas tree in the Church basement with a little horse on it for me, a horse with pepper spots all over and a white tail. There was a slice of bread for me, too, on the tree, bread white and so soft that I could bend it four ways and make a whole mouthful of it.

And then at home my father made noises on the roof to give the impression that Santa Claus was in the chimney. Ashes and soot came down. That night I could not sleep. I knew Santa Claus would come. I tossed on the corn husks which the mattress was made of. They pricked my face, and everytime I moved I made a noise. I slipped out of bed and sat near the chimney, waiting for Santa Claus, until I got scared there all alone and wanted to get back into bed. But the bed was too high, and I couldn't reach it.

And the factory whistles blowing for the New Year! Blowing at midnight . . . the sound of bells, bells of churches, cow bells next door to us.

Once my father took me to 115th Street and Third Avenue to one of those museums with mirrors that make you look big and small, fat and thin. It was

wonderful. There was a snake, I remember. And there was a side show. It was in that museum, watching the side show, that I became an actor, I guess.

You had to climb stairs. The first thing I saw on the little stage was a wire-walker. (Later, much later, recollecting that wire-walker, I did a wire-walking act of my own. I still do it sometimes, but only in pantomime.) And the second thing I saw was a black-faced comedian who danced and told jokes and played a banjo. I watched with my mouth open.

The banjo player made a big impression on me. The next day I started to dance. But it was mostly jumping on one foot. I took one of my father's strops, made of wood and sandpaper, and I used it for a banjo, as I danced like the black-faced comedian. But on one leg. Later with my home-made banjo I began to dance in the street and earned my first pennies.

There was a Chinese laundry above my father's shop, and the man who ran it used to give me Chinese nuts. I told him I wanted to play marbles with them, but after I had eaten the nuts, I'd go back and say the marbles had broken. When I had an urge for candy, I could always rely on the Chinese nuts.

For my other sweets there was a German grocery two doors down with a very nice lady. She had kind eyes and always smiled and she had two daughters. They seemed to me very rich because they lived in an upstairs apartment. She gave me pickles once in a while.

The grocery woman owned the house and rented the other rooms. One day as I passed by, I heard voices

from above: "Oh, sonny! sonny!" They were the voices of two chorus girls who worked in the little show at the Museum. They were fascinating girls in Japanese kimonos. When they called me, they must have just gotten up because their hair was all fuzzy and I could smell coffee.

I climbed up the stairs happily, and they made a fuss over me. "Oh, what a nice boy!" They sent me with a note to a drygoods store around the corner to buy five cents worth of hairpins. When I came back with the hairpins, they gave me a slice of bread with butter and granulated sugar all over the top.

Every day I used to gaze up at their window to see if there was another call. I would pace up and down, looking up at the window, waiting, very anxiously. Finally one day to my surprise, instead of sugar there was jam on my slice of bread. It was the first time I had ever had jam. And I got a kiss on the cheek.

The first Fourth of July that I remember was very important for me. I collected all the fireworks after they had gone off—yellow Roman candles, pinwheels, a little cone on the floor that sprouts and makes a red light, and firecrackers, firecrackers of all colors, pink, yellow, red, some purple, and of different shapes. Beautiful, they were. Fascinated, I collected a whole boxful, and for days I played with them underneath the table, taking them out of the box, fondling them, then putting them back in their hiding place. The table was my hangout, and any time I did something mischievous and they told me the police would get me, I ran under it.

On that first Fourth of July, I danced on the street corner and made a capful of pennies that the boys of eighteen or nineteen threw to me. I danced for them, and then, because I did not know any other way, brought my short routine to a finish by kicking one of them in the shin and running away. As it happened, it was a good ending, for they told some new fellow if he threw me a penny I would dance for him. First I picked up the penny, and then I did my act ending up with the fast kick in the shin. Of course, he had to play the same trick on someone else. I gathered quite a chain of spectators.

And when I counted up the pennies, there were 144!

I gave them to my father. And every time I felt mad at someone, I would ask to have my 144 pennies back, so that I could run away.





My first kindergarten

2: MY FIRST KINDERGARTEN

WHEN I WAS LITTLE MORE THAN A baby, my father had a great deal of trouble keeping me out of saloons. The saloons were his Sunday evening club. He would start out, and suddenly discover me trotting at his heels.

"Go home," Father would say, and I would pretend to obey, but a minute later he would find me smiling at his side again. Sometimes Father got really angry, and then I scratched my face. I stamped my feet and cried, and I showed him my cheeks, bleeding, to stir his sympathy. I had learned that he would soften when he saw me in such misery. It always worked. He would take his handkerchief out and dry my tears and scratches and say, "All right—stop scratching yourself. Come on." And taking two steps to his one, I followed him happily over the bridge to 107th Street and First

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I BOW TO THE STONES

Avenue to a corner house with a large sign of a goat holding a mug of beer in his paw. The saloon had a swinging door which I could crawl under before Father opened it, and there I was—in my kindergarten.

At the bar people were standing and drinking. The bartender was a short fellow but wore an air of importance. He wore something else that impressed me even more—ribber garters embroidered in red flowers, on both sleeves, and spots of shiny brass on them. Behind him gleamed a small mountain of glasses that seemed to my childish eyes a kind of crystal heaven.

The floor was covered with sawdust, and in the center was a round-bellied stove. Card-players with big mustaches sat crowded around many tables, kibitzers at their sides. They all drank slowly, smoking pipes and cigars and concentrating on their cards, but making a great deal of noise. Every time one of them slapped a winning card down, his knuckles pounded the table. So there was a constant rattle of knuckles.

At the end of the game, they totaled the score at the top of their voices. All those noises—counting, knuckles pounding, calling for drinks—made the bartender's wife smile as she held me on her lap. They were my lullaby.

The players wiped their long mustaches with their hands after each drink of beer. One of them, surnamed Mengucci, was the president of the Society of Stigliano, the little town in southern Italy where all these people came from. Members of the Society were barbers, blacksmiths, shoemakers, tailors and so forth. As the president, Mengucci was a highly respected gentleman.

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MY FIRST KINDERGARTEN

I don't know if the respect came as a tribute to his office or because of his wonderful grammar. Or maybe it was the starched collar he wore, with cuffs to match. He knew just what to wear. He was a tailor, and always in the lapel of his coat was a needle with the thread hanging down.

At the table where my father played was a big fellow nicknamed Cauliflower—a barber by trade and quite a joker. He must have been very rich, for in the upper center of his mouth was a fine gold tooth which he loved to show. So he was always smiling. A wonderful smell of bay rum came from his hair. Between a long nose and a sharp chin, there was a mustache with waxed, curling ends. Another barber—Petrocelli—was a talker, and when he got up, talked until everybody fell asleep. Toward the end of his speech, when everybody started to wake up, he began all over again. Petrocelli was a little fellow with evil eyes, and eyebrows raised as if in amazement all the time. He put great emphasis and gestures into his speeches—fast round gestures. His voice was pitched up all the time. Everybody admitted that he spoke well and used fine words—only they fell asleep.

Nicola, another tailor, was short and fat, but he looked lovable to me with his chubby face and shock of hair. He impressed me because every time he asked the bartender for a glass of beer, he would say, "A g-g-g-glass of b-b-b-beer." It sounded like baby talk to me, and I was enchanted.

Workers then averaged about a dollar and a quarter a day, out of which they managed to save a little be-

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cause it was the fashion to go back to the old country to pick out a wife. But later I learned that most of them married in this country after all and saved the cost of the boat ride.

My father was secretary of the Society. If anyone got out of order, it was his job to quiet him down. My father had wonderful thick, curly hair, cut short, and standing upright. His forehead was all furrowed with wrinkles, like clotheslines, one above the other. Every Sunday morning he was shaved by Cauliflower, the barber with the gold tooth. Father looked good with powder on his face. He was five feet eleven, and somehow or other he looked to me like George Washington, with one difference—he had a mustache. His fellow card players loved him, though he knew how to fix the cards so that they came out all right for him. Everybody knew he did it, but no one could catch him at it.

Another thing about my father was that he had strong teeth. On Sundays there was always someone to bet him he couldn't crack a hickory nut with them. I watched with pride as he put a nut in his mouth, and beamed as I heard it crack. His triumph always brought a bottle of wine, and I would get a piece of bread soaked in it. Father was known as a good story-teller. I was too young to follow the thread of all the tales told on a Sunday evening, but the friendliness of the talk charmed me.

I felt my happiest in the saloon. Besides my father's presence, there was a strange yearning that drew me there. In saloons I found women. They admired me, they fell for me, they petted me, they gave me presents,

they combed my hair. They even wiped my nose for me on their aprons. They wiped it so often it was red and shiny and sore. No child ever had more dates and pretzels than were given me by fair hands on Sundays in the back rooms of the saloons on 107th and 108th Streets. Ah, women!

The one who had the most appeal for me was the wife of the saloon keeper. It was she whose apron went most to my nose. It was she who made the fuss that left me happiest. She was a large darling with a round face and a tiny pug nose and wide nostrils. Her arms were fat and her chest seemed to me to have soft pillows under it. A cozy lady. She held me on her lap at the bar when she made change for the customers, for she was bookkeeper and boss.

After a while, with all these sounds and sights, my head grew heavy and I fell asleep. My father would see me, pick me up and carry me home in his arms.



"Hot pizza, red hot..."

3: FESTIVAL OF THE MADONNA DEL CARMINE

THEY WERE HAPPY—MY KINDERGARTEN days. There was, for instance, July 16th. On July 16th in New York, from 104th Street to 116th Street, between Avenue A and Second Avenue, the streets were crowded with thousands of people from different neighborhoods—Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, sometimes from as far as Philadelphia—for the biggest holiday, the Madonna del Carmine.

Red, white and green votive glasses with candles burning in them lined the streets like chandeliers. Families with five or ten kids struggled along in the crowd. Vendors managed to circulate among them, pancake sellers in white chef hats and white aprons, balancing their platters over the heads of the crowd, shouting, "Hot pizza, red hot..."



FESTIVAL OF THE MADONNA DEL CARMINE

People hung from windows and fire escapes, together with pots of flowers and basil. Horses and wagons moved slowly among the crowd with drivers stepping hard on the gong. Peddlers held hazelnuts strung together like a necklace, sixteen nuts to a string, to symbolize the day of the festivity. Others held big boards with displays of flags, corsages and buttons of the Madonna.

Balloons, pin wheels, whips with whistles on them, jellied apples on sticks, iced lemonade at two cents a glass, ice cream, confectionery. Cafes were jammed with people eating spumoni and cakes, huge doughnuts with powdered sugar on them, white candies with almonds, like fudge but harder. Slices of watermelon, muskmelon and pineapple on ice—two cents each. One guy would scrape ice into paper cups and pour flavors over it from bottles of different colors.

Then the procession started from the church and came down into the crowd—little girls with long white veils and little saintly boys with white ribbons around their foreheads. Then the statue, white and blue, of the Madonna was carried out. It was followed by four men holding a big white sheet wide open for people to throw money in. Then came the priest, assisted by two choirboys in white robes, blessing the crowd with drops of holy water from a stick. Barefooted people walked behind him. Once I had been sick with pneumonia, and my father, in thanks for my recovery, walked barefoot behind the priest.

I remember that there was always a little drama in the celebration, a skit about Jesus and the Romans

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seeking him, with actors yelling loudly. They stamped on the floor and made a great commotion but we could never hear what they were saying. We thought them very good just the same. We could always hear the voice of a prompter speaking the lines just ahead of the actors.

The Church of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel on 116th Street was so crowded that people stood outside. Straw hats were then in vogue. Every man had to have a straw hat. Women wore shawls over their heads. The members of my father's Society always wore sashes across their chests and little Confederate hats. The church doors were wide open. From the street, one could see the priest officiating at the altar. The people knelt in the street, and every time the bell rang . . . din din din . . . they hit themselves on the chest. Some kids holding boards with buttons of the Saint still cried once in a while, "O bottone du Carmine . . . dieci soldi . . . a Madonna du Carmine . . ."

At night, the climax—fireworks. Shooting rockets burst like weeping willows. The statue of the Madonna stood over a pedestal, and the fireworks sparkled around like shining chandeliers. Sky rockets made noises like thunder. The vibrations were so strong I could feel them in my head.

Then the band started. Everybody danced in the street holding festoons of flowers. The musicians wore uniforms turned green with the years. Year after year they played the same tunes. The fiesta closed at midnight. That was very late in those days.

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4: A MANDOLIN LESSON— AND A HAIRCUT

EVERY OTHER SUNDAY AFTERNOON

we visited Mengucci, the president of the Society, and he and his family returned the visit the following Sunday. We had other visitors too, and sometimes two black-haired girls, a little older than me, Rosa and Michaelina. Rose was self-assured and studied piano. Michaelina was wistful. There was always a banquet, and our parents would ask Rosa to sit down at the piano, and Michaelina and me to sing. This delighted the older folks for a while, and then they played cards, their coats off and on their shirtsleeves fancy, embroidered elastic bands with initials. The children played together. The women sat for hours on the sofa's edge, dressed up and stiff in their homemade dresses with jabots. They talked, chiefly whispering. Coffee, cakes and ice cream were offered to the women, but the men had meat balls and spaghetti.

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A frequent visitor was Nicola, the tailor who stuttered, with his wife. When he spoke, I felt so delighted. I admired him so much for speaking that way and looked at him with wide-open eyes. I tried to imitate his stuttering, but my father scolded me, so I assumed it was a privilege only Nicola had.

One Sunday afternoon, Nicola arrived alone. He came to see my father and Mengucci privately, and they went into the bedroom. I managed to slip open the door. Nicola's big round hands moved in helpless gestures, and his full face was now red. His hair stood up like potato whiskers. I thought how really nice-looking he was. His baby teeth showed while he went stuttering through his story. He said that his wife had run away with his assistant. He said that his assistant had black, wavy hair. He said that everyone made fun of his stuttering. I could not grasp all the things Nicola was saying, but I gathered that he was unhappy and I felt a strong desire to console him. If he had my colored marbles, how happy he would be, I thought.

And now he appealed to Father and to Mengucci, as officers of the Society, to have this guy give him back his wife. "W-w-we have eight small children," Nicola said. "Who-who-who is going to take ca-ca-ca-ca-ca-care of them?"

The two officials of the Society got up and went immediately to look for Nicola's wife and the assistant shoemaker.

She came back, but it remained the whispered scandal of the community. Now, when the two went visiting, a feeling was ever-present of a disgrace so great

that even we children had a sense of shame. But nobody ever mentioned anything. The little shoemaker became very jolly, as if to deny that anything had happened. She remained always silent.

A fellow called Sciacquetta was one of our visitors. I liked him. He was funny in his talk, and talked very fast. I was happy every time he came to the house, chiefly because he always brought strawberries. He had been a shoemaker by trade like my father, but then turned to making collars for horses. Sciacquetta went around to stables, drumming up trade for his horse-collar business. It was a good trade and he made good money.

One day we heard that Sciacquetta had been found murdered in Mott Street by robbers who knew he was making money. I was sorry he was dead. The only time I ate strawberries was when he brought them. They were second-hand strawberries, a little spoiled, but with sugar spread over them I never noticed it.

Once my father won a raffle, and the prize was a mandolin. As soon as I saw it, I wanted to learn how to play. Cauliflower, the barber, was a good mandolin player and often performed at our parties. He promised my father he would teach me, so every afternoon for several weeks I went to his shop for lessons. I liked the barber shop. It was bright and shiny, there was a wonderful towel dryer with the steam coming out, and there was always a smell of bay rum in the air. Each customer had his own shaving mug, and there was great competition over whose was the best.

Cauliflower used to tear a newspaper into small

squares which he kept in a pile. When he shaved a customer, he would put one of these pieces over his client's lapel, and on it he wiped his razor clean of lather. When he was through with the paper, he would fold it up and throw it into a beautiful vase. I was fascinated to watch Cauliflower sharpen his razor with great dexterity, and then test it with a hair plucked from his customer's head. When he got to shaving around the upper lip, he was so delicate. He used to hold his client's nose up, and the moment was so important that the man would hold his breath.

Ten cents for shaving, fifteen cents for hair cuts, no tips.

Mandolin in hand, I watched him shaving. When he noticed me he would say, "Sit down, until I get through with this customer." But one customer followed another and he never was free at all. Every day I returned with my mandolin:

"Can I get my lesson?"

"I have one more customer. Come back tomorrow."

Then one day he sat me on the high chair and put bay rum on my hair. He combed it down over my forehead and stood a yard away to look at me. He seemed pleased; he said that my eyes looked even larger, even greener. He lifted me down from the chair, hung my mandolin over my shoulders and sent me out the door with a pat on the head. He never did give me a mandolin lesson.

I walked in the street, admiring myself in the windows. I saw people were smiling at me. Even the little girls looked at me, and I felt important. I thought that



Cauliflower was so delicate.

the perfume on my hair was enchanting everyone. What I didn't know then was that the new haircut that Cauliflower had just given me was to be the one I was to use all my life on the stage.

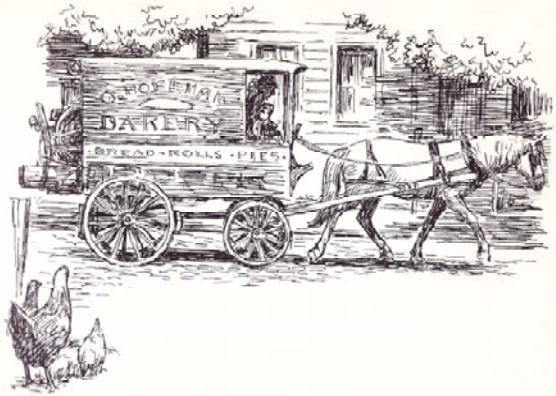
My father finally decided for me that I should stop the mandolin lessons.

* * * * *

One winter night there was a big rainstorm and the cellar was flooded. We were all sleeping. It had been raining since dinnertime. The water rose to the height of the beds. My father awoke and came to me. The lights went out. He lifted me from my bed and carried me out, almost up to his knees in water. Mother followed, holding Lucy's hand.

We went to the floor above and knocked at the door of the Chinaman. He had been sleeping, but came to the door smiling and obliging and let us sleep on the floor on some laundry bags. He gave me Chinese nuts and made us some tea. When the water subsided, I found that my toys and my fireworks had all been ruined by the water.

For my father, the flood was the last straw. Business on 97th Street had never been good, and he decided to make a complete change. He heard that up in the Bronx things were flourishing. With the baker's horse and wagon, we moved from our flooded cellar.



5: I LEARN TO RUN FAST

WE RODE OVER COBBLESTONES TO 144th Street in the Bronx, a beautiful wide street flanked with big oak trees, brownstone houses, wooden sidewalks and empty lots where goats, geese and chickens roamed. We passed a farm house with a hundred foot frontage of picket fence. And we stopped in the block between Willis and Brook Avenues, with a row of little houses with wooden fronts. The wagon came to a halt before one of these, a one-story, flat-roofed house with a vacant store.

Children came rushing around us like flies. Father stepped out of the wagon and lifted me down. The kids nudged each other, and one said, "Don't he look funny!" pointing at me.

Father helped my stepmother down. She was expecting a child. Then my sister Lucy climbed down.

Meanwhile, our landlord, a German with a name that sounded to me like Ole Sole, impressive in size as well as in wealth, came out of his corner grocery store, opened the door for us, and welcomed us into our new home.

We stepped in. There was a store front and a partition setting it off from the room at the back. And there was a window at the back, with a horse outside. Father went to the window. Ole Sole said, "You can make a nice vegetable garden there."

"Yes," my father said, "it's a beautiful yard to plant something. We'll plant corn."

"And if you want manure," said Ole Sole, "there's my horse—plenty of manure!"

This house, explained Ole Sole, was the only one with the advantage of access to the cellar right inside the house. He opened a door in the floor and we all looked down into the cellar.

We went outside and Father took the chairs down from the wagon. He handed me my box of ruined toys, the firecrackers, the old used ones, and the sticks from the Roman candles of the past Fourth of July.

The kids, still around, stared puzzled at the box and I felt rich. I helped carry the shoemaker's tools into what was to be Father's shop.

A big oak tree was in front of our store, and across the street stood one in front of another shoemaker's store. Ole Sole had assured Father the neighborhood was rich and there would be plenty of work for both. The owner of the store opposite was the only other Italian in the neighborhood of Irish and Germans. He

had a vegetable store as well as his shoe repair shop. He was successful, prosperous and established, but felt superior and resented our intrusion.

For different reasons, maybe because we were so poor or because we were not Irish or German, the rest of the neighborhood also resented us. Nobody patronized our store. But Father said he had to make a living somewhere.

The new house had flypaper hanging from the ceiling in strips that made our place look like a bazaar. Over the trap door that led to the cellar we kept a small rug. Every time we wanted a pail of coal, we lifted the rug and raised the trap door, and I climbed down a stepladder.

The great wealth of our home was a bedspread that my stepmother made with her own hands with hundreds of little circles all crocheted together. It was a great day when, by collecting hundreds of Babbitt soap wrappers, we won a bed with brass knobs at its four corners, and we could lay the bedspread on it. When I looked into the brass knobs from a distance I could see the whole room. If I looked from close up, I could see myself with my nose twice as large as my face. And that's how I used to comb my hair. We had no mirror.

In back of the house was a little cabin with a small window in the door.

By this time I was six, small, very skinny and all eyes. There were always holes in the knees of my corduroy pants, and the seat was patched. The pants had been given to me by a kind lady, and I thought them very

beautiful. Over them I wore a dark blue sweater so long it came down to my knees. My folks said I would grow into it pretty soon, but I didn't until several years later. The sweater had become stretched at the neck from being pulled over my head every day.

Whether because of the sweater or the eyes or what, I had the same trouble as my father in that neighborhood. I didn't have a friend.

Children would not play with me. They laughed at me and chased me. They would not speak to me at all except to call me names. I looked at them from the door of the shop, not understanding why they wore such menacing looks and why they shook their fists as if about to hit me. I was frightened and stayed inside most of the time and from the window watched the butterflies on the tree in front.

Our family was growing. I acquired two brothers and a new sister. I had to be more active. Every other day I was sent to a baker and to a butcher shop at 138th Street and Third Avenue where there might be left-over bargains. I didn't mind going except that I had to be on constant watch, for the gang was always waiting half a block away. When I ran my errands, they would chase me—in groups, never alone—in groups of three or four, at least. If they cornered me, they pulled my sweater, tore my trousers, hit me anywhere they could.

At the stores, I asked for steak bones and stale bread. I paid three, five and at the most ten cents and they gave me a bagful. When I carried these home, I ran my fastest. My load must not be lost. And when Father

saw me coming, he would come out of the shop to meet me. The kids, seeing me reinforced, would give up the chase.

I also went to 141st Street and Brook Avenue where there was a park with a church and big hickory trees. There used to be a soldiers' cemetery there too, connected with the church. And on the paths of the little park there were ash cans. They put ashes on the paths because they had no cement. I was sent there to look in the cans for pieces of unburned coal.

Five blocks away was a store where Father had an arrangement by which he could buy one pair of rubber heels at a time at the wholesale price. So, when a rubber-heel customer came into our shop, Father would cut a piece of paper the size of the heel and give it to me.

I would take the paper and run to the store, braving the presence of the gang along the way, buy the heels and then run back as fast as I could. By the time Father got the old heels off and had everything ready for the new ones, I was back.

But there were other things that had to be done along the way. On the corner of 146th Street and Willis Avenue, just in front of the wholesale store, was a white stone about six inches square, with a little hole in the center. The neighborhood called it the Blarney Stone, and it was supposed to bring good luck. It was the custom to spit on it, and the closer you came to the center the luckier you would be. So, on the way back from the wholesale store, I had to stop running in order to spit in the center of the stone. That cut

down my running time. It took away the advantage of the few seconds I gained by cutting through a baker's store that went through to the next street.

Near the door of this bakery was a high shelf with doughnuts on it, and I used to grab one every time I went through. The gang, though, was not allowed to gallop through the store and had to run around the block. I used the short cut every day until they put a counter in front of the door and I couldn't pass through. No more shortcuts, no more doughnuts.

Many times a brewery wagon with two big gray horses with black spots saved me from the gang. I would dash in front of the horses and run along ahead of them. The gang was afraid of them and would split in two in order not to be run over. The bakery wagon, which had one horse, offered the same protection. The horses were fast runners, and I had to move fast too so they would not catch up with me.

One day, as I was running in front of the horses, the paper pattern of the rubber heels slipped from my hand and I had to run back to recover it. The kids ganged up on me immediately, and I kicked and swung my arms. I fought my way through blows of elbows and bumps of heads, the kids running after me, until I caught up with the horses and ran in front of them again. The fellow who drove the horses hollered at me, "Get out from the horses, get away from the front of the horses!" He was very sore.

One day the boys had visiting cousins, which made the gang twice as big. My teeth clenched, I ran full speed with the rubber heels in one hand and small

stones in the other for protection. It was my fastest trip. It looked to me as if the whole block was full. Just as I was hardest pressed, a policeman turned the corner. What a break! I stopped running and walked along in front of him, happy but a little nervous on account of the stones in my hand. I hid them inside my sweater, but I was puffing from running, and to my horror the stones started to slide slowly down over my stomach. They dropped one at a time at the feet of the walking policeman. As soon as I was near enough home, I made a break for it. My father gave me hell for taking so long. I explained I had to walk slowly on account of the policeman. "He's a policeman, he doesn't run," I told Father.

Finally, one afternoon, a gang of boys came to my father's shop and opened fire with stones and garbage, throwing them through the door. One boy threw a dead cat. It lay there in the doorway. Father got up from his work and chased them away. He found out the names of some of the gang and reported them to the police. With my father I went before the magistrate. Three of the boys came with their parents. The magistrate warned them that if they came before him again he would send them to reform school.



6: I TAKE A STAND

IT WAS THE FIRST TIME SOME KIND of man was a help in our distress. Now we thought we would have no more trouble from the gangs, but instead it became worse. The families of the boys hated us all the more. But at least it was all quiet in the store, partly, of course, because fewer people came.

Nobody passed in front of the store. Only the butterflies flew back and forth around the tree in front. Their colors gave me such joy I used to turn to the tree. It was loaded with butterflies. And I watched the velvety purple caterpillars that crawled on the leaves. It was heavenly to be out in the open, even for a rapid second, and the chirping of the birds in the trees was good to my ears.

Even the flies in the store were a comfort to my loneliness. I watched them chase each other in happy

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I BOW TO THE STONES

flight. How different from me, always on the watch for a rock!

My happiest days were when it rained. Nobody was out, nobody to be afraid of. The other children were all kept inside. A storm was a pleasure to me. I played in the street in the rain. It was like a lake full of bubbles. The sewerage made the water swell. I could kick the water barefooted. A crash of thunder was like a friend saying, "No harm will come to you," and I was inspired by it, and heaven was open to me. But when I was obliged to go out, and it didn't rain, the boys would still chase me. And when they cornered me, I had to fight.

Whenever I went out I had gotten into the habit of carrying one stone in my hand and more in my pockets. I was never without a supply. My father had a favorite proverb from the old country which he used to repeat to me, "Always bow to the stone in the street." To him it meant, "If you encounter an obstacle in your way, don't let it embitter you. Say to yourself, this I can take, and go on. Don't let it stop you and don't kick it."

Bow to the stones, he would say, but in those days I could not understand him. To me stones meant only something to dodge or something to throw, for running away did not always save me. I learned to fight and kick back and butt with my head, and I got to be pretty good at it. If you practice anything every day, you turn out to be good. But even then I had to watch out for stones, and I always had some to send back.

For about a year the war was on every day. By that time I could take care of them, one at a time. I even

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I TAKE A STAND

got a little reputation. After that first year it wasn't so often necessary to run. I had learned enough about fighting, and unless there were too many I stood and fought.

One day I met the head of the Irish gang alone. Just the two of us, Eamon and I, face to face. We were coming out from school. He was a tough, husky boy who had everybody buffaloed. He had curly red hair, a freckled face, a small nose and strong big bones and a strong chin.

He said that I had to give him back a top I had won from him shooting dice at school recess. I didn't want to, since I had won it fair enough. I didn't feel that I had to give it back. He had a different feeling. And he thought that he was big enough to make his feeling prevail. He tried to take it out of my pocket and I grabbed his hand. He had pretty nearly got it, so I kicked him in the shins. He took his hand out of my pocket and screamed, "Oh, oh, oh!" and after a few seconds, he said, "Guinea wop, I'm going to beat you up like nobody," and he made a swing at me.

I dropped my bag of books and we got down to business right away, without another word. I had been defending myself against numbers so long that just one single boy looked easy, even if he was taller. I backed up and he came after me. He swung and I backed up again. I blocked every blow, and when he swung really hard I didn't block but I jumped aside and his blow hit the air. Sometimes, as he swung with all his might and I jumped away, he got off balance,

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and I ran to him quickly and punched him in the nose before he could swing again.

This lasted a long while, not a word being said, each of us swinging and pushing and grunting. We got very tired, but neither of us would give up.

By this time the other children had circled around us and were enjoying the performance. They even began to look upon me as important.

Eamon's nose was bleeding and I was badly off, but neither of us could quit. Finally an old lady came along and said, "Shame, shame!" She stuck her umbrella between us as we went on fighting wearily. "Come, break it up!" she said. We broke it up. For now we could both stop without being ashamed, telling ourselves it was not our fault we could not continue, and we were glad.

Later we became friends. Eamon gave me some special marbles called cherry stones that had cost two and three cents each, and I reciprocated with the top that we had fought over.

It looked to me as if I had to fight with each boy individually to win them over.

7: LIFE LOOKS UP

OUR LANDLORD, OLE SOLE, HAD A grocery store, a horse and wagon, and a stable. He had an old wife who was a little bit of a woman and who sat all the time rocking in front of a pot-bellied stove in the middle of the store. Ole Sole was German. He never wasted anything. The money he made he saved. Money meant a lot to him. In his grocery store he would measure out every grain of sugar with his big hands, taking a grain away if it was a grain too much. He was stingy. That was what they said, and perhaps he was. I forgive him.

We had been living across the street for a long time, waiting and wishing for some of the customers of the established shoemaker to come and have a shoe or two repaired in my father's shop. Finally, people began to get used to us, and some of them became customers.

The other shoemaker didn't like this at all. He went to Ole Sole, the stingy one.

He offered to pay fifteen dollars a month, instead of the nine my father paid, if Ole Sole would put us out.

Ole Sole, who counted every grain of sugar, every cracker in the box, every penny, said, "No." He couldn't do a thing like that, he said. Nine dollars was all he wanted from my father. He said, "Where will these poor people go?"

I will always remember Ole Sole for that.

Another German family lived on the top floor of Ole Sole's four-story building on the corner. They had two sons, and one of them was a bicycle racer who won a lot of medals, which I admired very much. There were cups, too. I thought that was marvelous, winning all those prizes.

The father was fat and had asthma, but had to climb to the top floor. I used to meet him out of breath, on the steps. His wife wore at least nine petticoats, following the custom, I suppose, of her native country. She had a face red and shiny as an apple. She was the first woman in the neighborhood who ever gave me a smile.

It was a big grin on a happy peasant face. She gave me cookies, too, that she made herself, and she always said, patting my shoulder, "Dat's goot! Dat's goot!" And once when I was sick she came to my bed with big oranges, big navel oranges. I had never had an orange before.

On the third floor of Ole Sole's house lived a

Swedish family. Their boy was tall and skinny, and looked like Pinocchio, which made him an enchantment to me. He had the finest mother. She used to give me a slice of bread with cinnamon and sugar on the top every time I called at their home, and she taught me how to say five million five hundred and fifty thousand and five hundred and fifty dollars in Swedish. In order to say it you have to pucker up your lips as if chewing a lemon.

At one corner of Alexander Avenue and 138th Street was the Church of St. Jerome. On the opposite corner was a saloon. On the other two corners were the police station and a drugstore.

Men of the neighborhood used to get drunk in the saloon and fight. They spent the night in the station house across the street, and when they were released in the morning, they went to the drugstore for aspirin to relieve their headaches. Finally they wound up in the last corner to attend Mass and ask forgiveness for their sins.

I was the choir boy of that church on Sundays. In the morning, I attended the class in catechism with the nuns and then I went to the vestry to put on a black skirt and a long white shirt with laces. Together with twenty-four other children, I climbed the steps up to the balcony and sat on a bench.

We had music books in front of us, and when the nun gave us the nod, we sang in the chorus like angels.

Below us, I could see the priest walking in the aisle, blessing the people with drops of holy water, and the

altar boy burning incense. How beautiful and orderly and clean and shiny and perfumed and rich! It gave me a big thrill.

While the people were leaving, there were little hymns for us to sing. Then we had to step down to the aisle and kneel and cross ourselves. I was the smallest and last in line, and the nun at the end followed me. One day she noticed something sticking out of my black skirt. She asked what I had in there, and I crossed myself and confessed. It was my slingshot.

At school we had athletic events. There was a 100-yard dash, a 220-yard dash, and a mile run.

I ran in all three races against boys who were trained. And I won three medals. The boys who had been training were surprised and so was I. I had learned that if I ran fast enough, my father would make twenty-seven cents on a pair of rubber heels. And I had learned that if I didn't run faster than the boys who were chasing me, I would be beaten up. Now I learned that if I ran fast enough I would be given a medal.

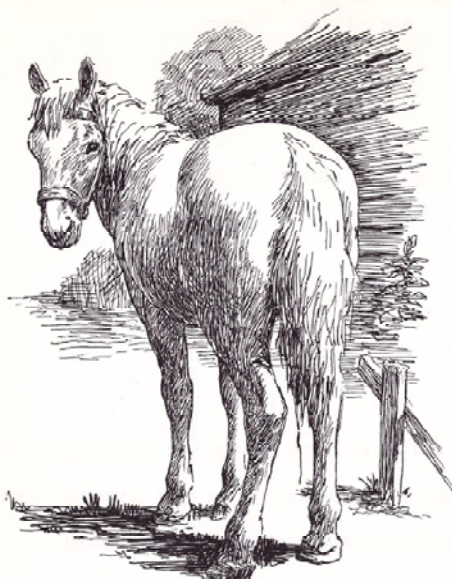
Life is wonderful, I began to realize!

8: STREET GAMES OF NEW YORK

LIFE ON 144TH STREET BECAME fuller when more people began to build houses nearby and move into them. This increase in population did a wonderful thing for us. The families that had resented our coming into the neighborhood now had more newcomers to absorb. There was plenty of work for everybody. The two rival shoemakers began to smile at each other.

By this time, too, the neighbors' kids had given up chasing me as I went on my errands. They had accepted me as one of them. So during our play time now we all played together, still fighting each other, but on a new basis: they were not united against me. When a Jewish family moved into the neighborhood, the kids gave them the same treatment they'd given us. The father was a tailor, and his children were afraid to leave the house. So I volunteered to deliver his packages for him. And later on the new family was accepted too.

We had good times. We used to pull hair from horses' tails to make watch fobs. All the horses that stopped



Looked around reproachfully.

STREET GAMES OF NEW YORK

in the block were our source of supply. But Ole Sole's horse was the one we patronized most. We could pull only one hair at a time. It came out easily. The horse just turned around and looked kind of reproachfully. But when we tried to pull more than one, he flinched and kicked and the hair did not come out.

We got old wooden spoons and hammered four nails in the top. On these we placed four strings of horse hair, and braided them by pulling them through the spool. It made a dandy watch fob.

Another popular game was called Swinging the Can. We stole potatoes and put them into a can, then built a fire on top of them, attached a wire to the can and swung it around in the air. It made a nice effect and we ate the potatoes.

In the wintertime we made a big snowman, with pieces of coal for eyes, mouth and coat buttons. After we had admired it a long time and everybody else had gone, I stole the coal and took it home. It saved my picking it from the ash cans.

On Halloween, we wore masks or painted our faces with stove polish and went into the back yards dressed as women and sang wild quartets. We put flour in a long stocking, and when a kid from another block passed by, we would sock him. It left a white mark on his clothing.

In the evening, when our fathers were through with work, we were eager to be asked to get them a tin pail of beer. At the saloon we waited turns to slide our pail under the swinging door. The bartender was a big German with short, stiff white hair. He would fill

the pails with foaming beer up to the top. There were always a couple of pretzels and a little piece of salami between two white crackers for us. So we were all very ambitious to go for the beer. He poured from seven to nine glasses into each pail, depending on the amount of foam. When Father got only seven glasses out of a pail, he would say, "The bartender is getting stingy." When he could pour out nine glasses, he said, "The bartender gave us good measure."

Next door to us there was a candy store. It was owned by an Irishman named Moffett. Later I delivered papers for him. At six in the morning I would get them at the station, take them to his store, divide them and deliver them to his customers. I used to deliver Sunday papers for Moffett also, and I also delivered after school from three to four. He paid me one dollar a week.

Moffett fell in love with an Irish girl who was one of his customers and they kept company for five years. She was there all the time. The Christmas before they were married, she gave me a pair of kid gloves with fur in them. They must have cost three dollars. They were so rich-looking that I wore them only on Sundays, and carefully put them away for the rest of the week. I didn't want to wear them out. Then I found they wouldn't fit me any more. I was growing.

On Sunday afternoons, I sold candies for Moffett at the neighborhood baseball games, and carried them in a tray across my chest. I always sold out, and he rewarded me with twenty-five cents each time. But then I got smarter. I learned where the wholesale

candy place was and I bought them myself at one hundred chocolate bars for fifty cents. I sold them at a penny a bar. I sold two or three boxes each Sunday. That was a lot of money. When I sold one box, I used to run home and get another. I couldn't carry more than one box at a time because the tough kids always tried to upset my tray and swipe the chocolates.

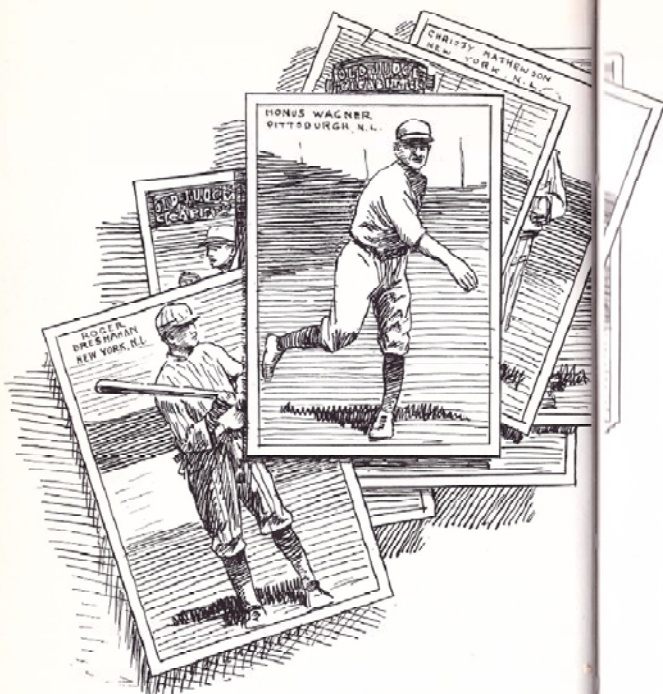
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Now that there was enough work for both of them, the two shoemakers found out that theirs were, after all, the only Italian families in the neighborhood, and what about having a picnic together?

The other shoemaker owned a horse and wagon for his vegetable store. He got his merchandise from a big market on 101st Street, where farmers came to sell. On the day of the picnic, he drove us in this wagon to a farm a couple of miles away and "bought" a cherry grove, that is, the privilege of picking all the cherries that we could eat. Each family had cooked something: omelets with green peppers and macaroni, cakes and breads . . . and they brought one keg of beer between them.

Everybody wore their best clothes. We were twenty in all. All the way to the farm we sang and admired the scenery and the cows and the horses. When we arrived, a farmer sold us milk right from a cow. We banqueted, the women talked in groups and the men played cards.

After that the two families became so friendly that we children began to call one another cousins.



9: I MAKE PALS

IN ST. ANN'S AVENUE, ACROSS FROM the school, at lunch hour, we children sat against the iron fence of St. Mary's Park and ate sandwiches we had brought from home. The girls played London Bridge Is Falling Down among themselves, and played checkers with us. The girls always won. We shot a lot of dice. We played for marbles or for pictures of baseball players and soldiers of the Spanish-American War, which came with packs of cigarettes. Also we shot for United Cigar Store coupons, which were worth a dish or a pen as a premium after you saved five thousand or so.

One of the boys, Russell, I really envied. He had a beautiful sled, fireman red, with Super Express written across it in big letters. He would never give any of us

a ride. I used to follow him around St. Mary's Park, hoping to get a ride some time.

"How about a ride?" I would say.

"No."

I watched him go down the hill and waited for him to come back.

"How about that ride?"

"Nothing doing."

This went on for several afternoons. Finally he consented.

"Give me a penny and I'll let you ride once."

It was great. But he was so greedy that even with me giving up my penny he said he would have to ride with me. After some discussion, I said that at least I should have the right to select the hill. He granted that.

I picked the highest and the steepest. When he lay down on the sled, he left no room anywhere for me. I had to lie down on top of him.

We started. The sled went down fast, so fast that Russell lost control. There was a tree at the foot of the hill, and the sled ran into it. He bumped his head. I was shorter and farther back on the sled, so I wasn't hurt. But I had to help him home, and his mother took him to the hospital.

Once, at school, I won a paint box for good conduct. I worked very hard for that paint box. As long as they were giving prizes, I was very good, the best behaved child in the school, with my hands behind my back, very attentive, never talking, never throwing spit balls, always my hat off coming in, nails clean, never making

drawings on the blackboard, never balancing the pointer on my ear or juggling the wiper and the chalk. I even stole grapes to bring, politely, to my teacher. I stole them every morning from a vine in an orchard. I used to cut a big cluster with a couple of leaves attached. Teacher was always very pleased. She put the grapes on her desk with tissue paper over them. She had paper cuffs around her sleeves, held on with a rubber band. At 11 o'clock she started to take one grape at a time, while we studied. I used to look up and she acknowledged me, as if to say, "Fine."

I won every prize. One after another. Then they stopped giving prizes. I stopped holding my shoulders back and my chin up and was no good at all. In fact, I was so bad that they finally transferred me to another school.

In the new school, there was a boy named Murphy, who used to crack stones of different colors and reduce them to sand, which he put in a milk bottle. When the bottle was full, it was like a rainbow of colors for all the other kids to admire and envy. Murphy saw my paint box and came to me with a proposition.

"If you lend it to me, I'll give you this water pistol," he said.

"Sure," I said. "Let me see how it works."

He pulled the handle and the water came in. Then he pushed the handle and the water shot out. He said it belonged to his big brother. I accepted it and loaned him the paint box.

The water pistol was great fun, and I used to squirt

water at the other kids until my father saw it and had an unpleasant reaction. He said it was a medical syringe of some kind. I didn't know it, but my father did.

He asked me to give it to him. I didn't want to, so he compromised by giving me ten cents and taking it away.

That left me with nothing. I missed my paint box with all the bright colors in it and thought I'd better get it back from Murphy. I got it, but with the paints pretty nearly used up.

"I just lent it to you, you know," I said. "I didn't give it to you to use up all my paints." There was a lot of hollering about the matter.

So, as compensation, Murphy gave me his brand new stockings, which he took off his feet then and there. It was an exchange, though. I had to give him mine. Mine were full of holes. But even then for some reason I was not satisfied, and he gave me water wings to learn to swim with.

As a result, I learned to swim in the creek where we used to catch crabs and killies.

I got to be pals with the minister's son. He lived on 143rd Street in a brownstone house between Willis and Brook Avenues, and never came out in the streets to play. He played by himself near the stoop in his back yard.

During the winter I shoveled snow from sidewalks for thirty-five cents, sometimes fifty cents and sometimes even more. His mother gave me fifty cents for clearing the snow from the walk and the stoop in front of their house. The boy used to watch me as I shoveled.

After I finished I rang the bell and went down the steps to the basement.

"Come in," his mother would say. "I will make a cup of cocoa for you."

I had never had cocoa before. And cookies! That was a treat for me. So every winter I used to look forward to it. Sometimes I had to shovel in front of their house two or three times a winter, and that meant more half dollars, more cups of cocoa.

Her son had all the toys in the world—a rocking horse, a football, a train with an engine on tracks, dumbbells. He let me play with his toys in the backyard, let me rock on his wooden horse and run the engine.

I had never seen such things. It was like paradise to step into his home. I used to pray for the snow to fall so I could be admitted. He treated me as a companion even if I was in rags.

When the boy heard me shoveling, he always came out to watch. I taught him snowball games.

"See if you can hit that tree fifty feet away," I'd say. And we threw snowballs to see if we could. Those were my ways of playing. Then he would take me to his games in the backyard.

One Christmas day he got a bicycle, a brand new one, and as he rode up and down the street, he said to me,

"I'm going to ride around Brook Avenue and 144th Street and around Willis and back here. You take my watch and time me. See how long I take, just like a race." And he put his Ingersoll watch in my hand.

I waited and waited and waited. Fifteen minutes, twenty minutes, a half hour. . . . He didn't show up. I waited until a woman came to the boy's house and rang the bell. She told the mother that her son had just been run over by a moving van and its big truck horses. I felt sick at my stomach.

I watched the funeral. I was the only kid following him, because he had never played in the streets, and I was the only one he had played with.

I didn't know what to do with the watch. When I went there the next winter to shovel snow I said to his mother,

"Want the sidewalk shoveled this year?"

"Yes, yes. . . ."

When I was through I rang the bell and stepped down as before, and she said,

"Come in. I will make some cocoa for you."

But I couldn't finish the cocoa. I said,

"Here is the watch. I was minding it for him."

She said,

"You keep it. You were the only boy he played with."

And, as I went out, she gave me the rocking horse.

He was her only child.



10: WILD WEST DAYS

ROLAND WAS A MAMA'S BOY, THE only boy on our block with fine clothes and very good stockings. He looked stylish in his tweed suit. In spite of his nine years, he had long hair in curls that his mother made with hot irons.

Roland once read about the robbers of the express coaches in the West. They were well-known robbers and operated with black masks. The head man of the band got killed while visiting his mother's home. His name was Jesse James.

When Roland told us all he knew about Jesse James, we felt very strongly the lack of train coaches in the neighborhood.

For a few days we were very unhappy, and the neighborhood remained peaceful. Then suddenly someone discovered that after all we had the milk wagon.

At that point Otto protested. He was a German boy with round, red cheeks. His father was the milkman, the one who delivered the milk in our neighborhood, so naturally Otto didn't want to rob him. But when the other boys asked, "Do you want to be a robber or don't you?" and another said, "You can stay out of the game if you don't want to be a robber," Otto's cheeks became hot coals, and he said, "Of course I want to be a robber. I didn't say I don't. I want to be in the game." I felt glad at that because I admired Otto. We were in the same class, and he always let me copy his lessons. I had to copy somebody's answers because I was selling newspapers early in the morning before school and again late at night, so I had no time for study. Otto understood that.

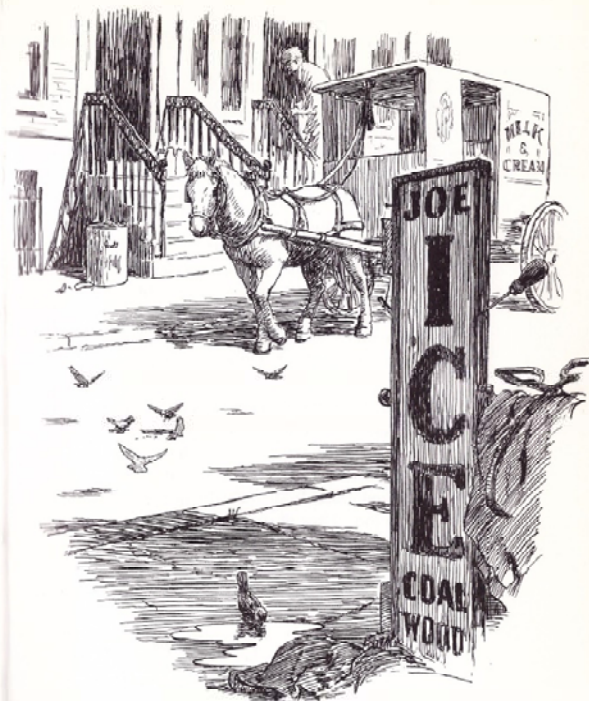
Roland went on with his description, which made our mouths water.

"Out West," he said, "they make people get out of the coaches and sometimes in their trunks the robbers discover gold."

After that, we dignified the milk wagon with the name of "Express Coach."

We got up at six for our first secret meeting. A few of the boys didn't show up because they overslept. That morning we watched the milkman with his white horse delivering milk on the stoops. After a few minutes, we saw the bakery wagon come along with packages of rolls and buns which were left next to the milk bottles.

After they had gone, we made our plans. A place for hiding the loot was the first concern.



We watched the milkman.

We built a cave, four yards by four, under the ground, off the street. We built a secret passage underground to get to the cave. This took some time and some work. Then we covered the top with boards and covered the boards with dirt and grass. In the dirt, as a landmark, we stuck a sunflower. From the blacksmith we got a horseshoe to put up for luck in our den. We held our first robbers' meeting inside, with candles, and we built a fire. But we soon discovered we had to do without the fire, as there was no ventilation and we were smoking ourselves out.

Next morning we waited until six for the passing of the Express Coaches. First, Otto's father passed with his wagon and delivered milk bottles on every stoop. Soon after, he was followed by the baker's wagon with bread and rolls. When the street was clear, we—the robbers—jumped from the cave and picked up all the milk bottles and all the bags of rolls and buns. In the cave we accumulated from forty to fifty bottles and pretty nearly forty bags of coffee rolls and sugar buns. All that day we drank milk and ate rolls.

There were a great many complaints from all the families in the street, for a couple of days. We had planned a second attack, but by that time we were all sick of milk and buns. We decided instead to collect the two-cent deposits on the bottles. We took them to the dairy and found out that the dairy would not accept them because they hadn't been bought there. So we had to plan other uses for the bottles. We walked up to Hunts Point on Long Island Sound, each carrying two bottles, passing lots of iron and steel factories. We

stopped at the creek and caught killies and put them into the bottles, ten or fifteen killies into each. We carried them back to the cave and fed the killies with stale buns. The next morning they were all dead. We went down to the candy store to buy rubber bands and made sling shots. Then we took the bottles outside and made targets of them until they were all broken.

We switched to another type of robbery: soda bottles from the grocery store. Now we had become Indians, and we sat in a circle outside the cave. We could not smoke, but instead we passed soda bottles around, each robber taking a sip and saying "Good!" in a deep voice. We had noticed in the A & P stores that there were shelves of canned peas. We operated in that direction, stole them, and sold them retail to the ladies passing by in the streets, each robber wearing a smile: "Do you want to buy a can of sweet peas for only four cents?"

What we could not sell in the streets we took to our friend the junkman at 140th Street and Brook Avenue, to whom once we had sold stolen irons and fences at eight cents a pound, and also washtubs made of tin with copper bottoms. To him we now made a special offer for the cans of peas—two cents each. It was a bargain price. They were sold at the A & P for eight cents.

After school hours we watched the cave in turn. One afternoon Roland, the boy with the stylish suits and the long curls, was appointed watchman. He was sitting as usual inside the cave, when goats—they ran wild in our streets—decided to eat the sunflower which was our

banner overhead. Poor Roland! Ceiling and goats fell down over him, and he had to face his mother with curls and suit all messy.

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Election Day was approaching—how hard we worked for those elections! We had decided to do something worthy of the occasion. We were going to build a high tower made of wooden boxes to be burned on Election Night! We felt sure it was our duty, a form of patriotism, a strange patriotism all for ourselves, the robbers of the block. Three months in advance we started to pile up the boxes in our empty lot. We stopped fighting each other, and there was no more name-calling. Even the bigger boys got together with us to carry heavy logs to our wood bank. While carrying the logs, we sang "Yankee Doodle Came to Town," and "East Side, West Side," and "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah." We had learned at school about the spirit of 1776, and that spirit was now revived in us. We were all fighters for the same cause. We asked for, took or stole any possible piece of wood or iron that we saw. We even destroyed fences near the park.

The children of the other blocks soon got the same idea, and so 144th Street became a fighting ground. We were furious when they started thieving our tower. If one of our gang carried a box across their ground—138th Street and Brook Avenue—at least four kids would jump him and take away his box. Regular stone fights started. We had to fight hard to defend our pile. We, too, watched for kids of the other gangs passing by and jumped on them. It became dangerous as well

for passers-by and innocent kids. Every once in a while two policemen, called frantically by the residents, appeared, and both gangs would run for their lives. Everything was peaceful until the policemen left.

The higher the tower, the prouder we felt. We had built it crooked, like the tower of Pisa, and were even more proud of this originality. Ah, the wonderland of its fire on Election Night!

During those months, we of our block had stood together like sworn brothers-in-arms. A peculiar form of patriotism that united about fifty kids of Irish, German, Italian, Swedish and Jewish descent, but at the same time isolated them from the children of the next block or any other.

144th Street between Brook and Willis Avenues was all America to us.



"Wait till the sun shines, Nelly." (see page 79)

11: MY STAGE DEBUT

MANY PEOPLE HAVE ASKED ME DURING the course of my life as an actor how I started and why. Usually they want to know if anyone in my family had been on the stage. I always shy away from such questions, but I owe everything to Nelly. What my life would have been if I had never met that kind, homeless creature I can't guess. All I know is she made for me the first dollar I ever earned in the theater. In fact, I'm not sure that I would ever have become an actor if it hadn't been for her.

Nelly was half collie and half St. Bernard. She had had a good home for a while. Then she hurt her leg in an automobile accident, and her owners didn't want her any longer. When I first met her on 144th Street, she had the look that all homeless dogs get. I could not

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I BOW TO THE STONES

resist that please-take-me-home look. Nelly took to me at once. I tended her injured leg and by luck it came out all right.

However, Nelly was a problem. My family asked me how I was going to feed her. I took the whole responsibility. I would go to work for her. But after a few days it became apparent that Nelly and I were both losing weight.

"What's the idea?" my father said. "You are not eating. You are getting skinnier every day."

The reason was that Nelly was under the table and she got my ration of bread. But she became skinnier too, and it worried me. She needed meat.

So every night I went out and sold racing papers, the racing forms. It was before radio, and the latest editions were grabbed up for the results of the day's races. I found my customers in the saloons.

The saloons were the salvation of Nelly. I went into them to sell to the horse-players, and when the bartender was not looking I reached up over my head for the boloney and liverwurst on the free lunch counter. Nelly sat outside and waited for me.

We learned that was the way to do it. At first she went in with me, but the bartenders formed the habit of throwing ice at her. So she waited until I would come out and give her all I could snatch.

We went from saloon to saloon. After the third or fourth, Nelly felt better. Sometimes she ended with a piece of store cheese. She liked it, but she would make funny faces when she chewed, like a kid with chewing gum, because the cheese stuck to the roof of

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MY STAGE DEBUT

her mouth. I had to stick my finger in her mouth and dislodge the cheese so she could get it down.

At home at night she made her bed under my bed, scratching the floor until it suited her. It was her nightly routine. Sometimes I used to buy a penny ice cream sandwich and she would share it with me. She adored ice cream. It was her dish. She swallowed it with a gulp and with piercing eyes looked at me as if to say, "How about a little more?"

"Wait till I get a little myself!" I used to tell her, but she always got more.

Saturday night was the big night. The saloons were crowded. On one of these Saturday nights my life took a new turn.

In my neighborhood, wandering quartets sang the popular songs on the street corners. I knew the tunes. For two cents a copy, I got the lyrics, and with my soprano voice—trained in the choir at St. Jerome's Church—I broke out one night, all alone, with "My Wild Irish Rose." It went all right.

By request, I followed with the rest of my repertory—"The Man with the Ladder and the Hose," "In a Village by the Sea," "Take a Card," "That's How to Spell Chicken."

There were more requests, but my repertory was exhausted. I had to build it up, and I learned, fast: "Wait Till the Sun Shines, Nelly." That became my big number.

When I got through singing, I would pass my hat, collecting pennies and nickels.

Now Saturday night topped the business of all the

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other nights, for in singing all the take was clear profit. Some time later I learned from the wandering quartets about amateur nights, and that prizes were given, gold watches!

One Friday, a dull night in the saloons, I left Nelly behind and started for 129th Street, where the Olympic Theater was, an upstairs vaudeville house. While I was crossing the bridge, Nelly overtook me. She wouldn't be left behind. So we went on together over the bridge to the theater. It was lucky for me she came.

The stage-door man stopped me.

"What do you do?" he asked.

"I sing a song," I said.

"You can't take that mutt in with you," he said.

"Then I can't sing, because I don't want to lose her."

The man smiled and said,

"Go in, but don't let her go on the stage."

Backstage, just before I was to go on, I told Nelly to sit down and not move. Then it was my turn and I went on.

It was my debut.

I had a couple of newspapers under my arm that I still had to sell. The pants I wore had holes in the knees from playing marbles, and on the coat was a big patch. I had a black sweater that looked like a horse-collar pulled up around my head, and I hadn't had a haircut in six months.

I was eight then.

As I stood there on the stage, the orchestra leader asked me,

"Where's your music?"

"I haven't got any."

"What song do you sing?"

"Wait Till the Sun Shines, Nelly."

When Nelly heard me say Nelly, she thought I was talking to her and came out onto the stage and sat down alongside of me. The people, the first stage audience I had ever seen, started to whistle at her.

"What key do you sing in?" the leader asked, and I said,

"I don't know what you mean." And the people laughed. So, confused, I started to sing in my soprano voice, and the orchestra played along with me.

"Wait till the sun shines, Nelly," I sang, and Nelly looked and wagged her tail at the sound of her name.

"And the clouds go drifting by . . .

"We will be together, Nelly . . . (again her tail)

"By and by . . .

"Long through the lane we wander,

"Sweetheart, you and I . . .

"Wait till the sun shines, Nelly . . . (tail)

"By and by . . ."

I hit a C, I think, above high C on that last one, and my note must have hurt Nelly's eardrums, because she joined me with a loud moaning sound and we both ended,

"By and b . . ow . . ow . . wo . . . ow . . ."

When Nelly and I got through singing there was a riot. To put it modestly, we murdered them. Nelly had been wonderful.

I took my hat off, just as if I were on a street corner or in one of the saloons, and handed it around to the

nearest people in the boxes. This was something new in the theater. Someone put a dollar bill in. It was my first dollar bill.

Then the manager said, "Stay and line up for the prizes."

We all formed a line on the stage, but everybody shouted,

"Give it to the boy who sang Nelly!"

And Nelly, hearing her name called by so many people, wiggled her tail again and looked expectant.

The announcer led me downstage and gave me the watch. He announced that it was a genuine gold-plated watch, guaranteed for twenty years not to turn green.

"I can't tell time, but I'll give it to my father," I said to him.

It was sunshine for Nelly and me that night. We walked back over the bridge again and on the other side, at 130th Street, we went into a lunch wagon to celebrate. We used some of the money I had collected, but we wouldn't break that dollar bill. I ordered pork and kidney beans, and Nelly settled for a frankfurter.

We went home. I climbed into bed and heard Nelly scratching the floor under the bed, moving in circles. She felt pretty good. And then everything was quiet.

12: LOVE ENTERS

I HAVE NEVER BEEN BIG FOR MY age. At ten I was as small as a seven-year-old. When I looked in the mirror which hung over the sink in our kitchen, I could see my face and nothing else, so I never thought much about how big I was, or wasn't. It was only when the boys used to chase me, whooping, every time I went on an errand for my father, that I longed to be bigger.

In our little mirror—it had a brown wooden frame and hung on a piece of wire from a nail driven into the plaster—I saw a round funny face with round green eyes. Somehow those big eyes made the face funnier, but not funny enough to suit me. So I stuck my fingers in the corners of my mouth, and pulled, and at the same time pushed my eyes up at the corners and got very good effects.

The results I got in the mirror, though, couldn't compare with the ones I got by just looking in the bright, rounded surface of the one brass knob that was left on the posts of the iron bed. I had only to open my

mouth, bending close to the knob, and I could see a face that was almost all mouth. A cavern of a mouth, surrounded by a sort of backdrop of a face. It was terrifying.

Just to keep in practice, I sometimes sat on the doorstep of my father's cobbler shop and stretched my mouth with my fingers as far as it would go. One day a voice interrupted my homework.

"You're making faces at me. I'm gonna tell my mother," it said.

I took my fingers out of my mouth and out of the corners of my eyes, and then I could see where the voice came from. It belonged to a little girl in a red dress with white spots in it. As I stared at her, I realized for the first time in my life that a pretty face, as well as a funny one, can be interesting to look at. I kept right on staring.

The little girl fingered the hem of her skirt and tossed her head, like a woman of the world. She was two or three years older than I was.

"See anything gold in my eyes?" she demanded, pertly.

"No," I said earnestly. "They're the brownest eyes I ever saw."

The little girl dropped the hem of her skirt and turned away.

"Maybe I won't tell my mother you made faces at me," she said, in a softened tone.

I hardly noticed what she said. What I saw was her back—she was going away. Desperately, I looked around for some means of keeping her there.

"Wait a minute!" I cried.

She turned her adorable face toward me, over her shoulder.

"What for?"

What for? What for? I was racking my brains. Suddenly it came to me. I darted to the edge of the unpaved, half-built-up Bronx street, and picked up three good-sized stones. One was a young cobblestone. Now, standing a few feet from the little girl, I began to juggle my stones. The result was all I could have hoped for. She consented to be entertained by my performance and went over and sat down on the step of my father's shop. I threw my stones higher and higher. I had to run a little to catch some of them as they came down. After one breathless catch, I couldn't resist stealing a glance at the face turned upward, absorbed in my exhibition of skill. At the same time I tossed another stone—the big one. But my eyes clung a fraction of a second too long to the lovely, shining eyes fixed on me, and the cobblestone crashed down on my head.

It hit my head, but it knocked me off my feet. I sat down in the middle of the street. I raised one wobbly hand to my head. I thought it was shoved in, but it seemed to be as watertight as ever.

"Did you hurt yourself?" said the little girl, in a voice that rang in my ears like a bell. Or, maybe the ringing was inside my head. At that point it was pleasant, at any rate.

"Hurt? Me? Oh, no," I said with as much conviction as I could put into the words. But I could not keep the tears in my eyes from spilling over. They ran down my

round face, and I caught some in my mouth and swallowed them.

The little girl watched me. I swallowed. The tears were coming faster now, and my nose was running. I needed a handkerchief. I knew there was no use looking in my pockets, I didn't own one. The little girl came close. She pushed something into my hand.

"Here," she said, and turned and ran away. I opened my hand, and smoothed out a little crumpled white handkerchief. It had a name in small red letters across one corner.

"Anita," I read.

I folded the handkerchief with reverent fingers, and put it in the pocket of my old jacket. Then I drew my sleeve across my nose and went into my father's shop.

When I glanced in the mirror above the sink, I found I was looking funnier than ever, without trying. There was a lump the size of my little brother's rubber ball, at one side of my forehead.

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Ever since I was four years old, I had seen street entertainers roll out their frayed red carpets, and juggle and balance balls and torches of fire. In my father's cobbler shop, I had tried juggling his tools, and when he said that I would hurt myself and chased me away, I went to the kitchen and juggled pots and pans. When I was chased from the kitchen, I used to go to the bedroom and balance chairs and other pieces of furniture. I became pretty good at it. If you practice anything every day, you turn out to be good at it.

I heard that W. C. Fields was the greatest juggler



The street entertainer.

of the day, and when somebody told me that he was appearing on Broadway, I decided to invest twenty-five cents to see him perform. Outside the theater on 42nd Street where he was appearing, people were holding twenty and twenty-five dollars in dollar bills in their hands, waiting for the ticket speculators, and my eyes bulged. I had never seen so much money. Then at last I got on line, waiting to buy a seat. When my turn came at the box office, I stretched up my arm and dropped my twenty-five cents on the counter.

"Ticket in the gallery," I said.

The man counted the pennies and said, "Nothing less than half a dollar."

So I reached to get my pennies back.

I was distressed, but not for long. As I looked up at the building, I saw a fire escape and wondered where it would take me. I waited until the speculators had sold all their seats, and then I ran up four flights to the roof and got into a little room. It led into a washroom. A second later, an usher came in, all braid and brass, and I got off fast. I went down one aisle and sat on the steps. A colored usher came over and tapped me on the shoulder. "You can't sit here." So I went back to the top and down the other aisle and sat on the steps there. Four times, four different ushers told me to move.

Finally I saw what I had come to see: W. C. Fields. They had told me he juggled fifteen balls in the air at one time. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't juggle more than seven at that time. He must have very big hands, I thought.

Fields came out in a tramp suit and a battered straw hat. First he juggled five balls and always pretended that one was going to fall. He never said anything, but the expression on his face was enough to make the audience roar. He kept adding balls and hats and cigar boxes, and everytime he caught something from dropping he would scowl at it. Then the curtain went up behind him, and there was a pool table. He carefully picked out a cue which was full of twists and bends. He took a long time aiming the stick and then with one shot sent all the balls spinning into different pockets. Many years later I found out that it was a trick pool table.

After the show I was quite hungry. At Seventh Avenue and 42nd Street there was a restaurant with a big display of bread pudding and rice pudding in the window. Being a little hungry, and with twenty-five pennies in my pocket, I thought I would have a dish-ful. They gave you a can of powdered sugar, and you could shake as much as you liked over the pudding. I thought that was a good idea. I had seen powdered sugar in the bakery shop, but the baker shook the can himself.

So I ended up having five dishes of bread pudding with lots of sugar.

I had never thought of juggling on the stage before this, but now I wondered if I could work it into one of my amateur nights. So I practiced juggling and balancing until I thought I was ready. First, though, I wanted to try it out in front of a real audience, and I had a good idea: my classroom at school.

During a rest period, I took a chair and balanced it on my chin. I got a terrific reaction from the other kids. Encouraged by my success, I grabbed one of the smaller boys, stuck him on the chair, and balanced it on my chin. There was an avalanche of laughs and screams. Teachers came running, and stopped short at the threshold. They screamed too, watching my performance, and I lost balance; chair and boy fell to the floor, boy crying miserably. I was taken by one ear to the principal of the school; my father was summoned. It was the climax to a bad record, and he got notice that his son was expelled from P.S. 27.

A sad father registered me in another school. "Now, son, behave!" he told me, but it wasn't long before I was practicing my balancing act in front of another spell-bound classroom. The reaction was equally noisy from the children, and indignant from the teachers. Father was summoned again, and eventually the poor man had to transfer me to yet another school. The children seemed to respond very favorably to my act, all but that little fool who invariably fell off the chair. I didn't know at the time that he should have been an acrobat, and known how to fall gracefully on his toes.

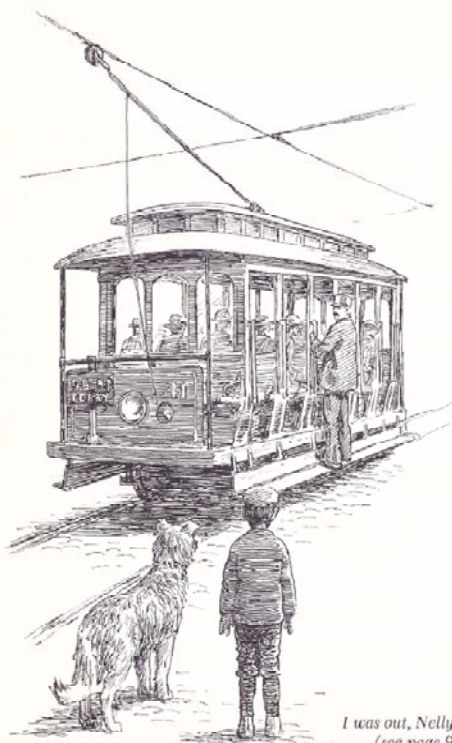
The school system required that I go on with my studies, but I seemed to be running out of schools. And Nelly would have to be satisfied for the time being dining on the income of my newspaper sales and the free lunch counters in the beer saloons.

In order to discourage me from the stage, Father got an idea that disclosed a new future for me. A friend of his, from his home town, was an artist. He painted

angels in churches. Father went to see him. Would he teach his son to paint? Maybe it would take balancing off his mind.

The artist was delighted to get an apprentice free. Yes, he would have me, and watching him I too would learn to paint angels. For several days in advance I dreamed of angels, white, black and all colors, flying with lovely wings in golden skies. Paradise could be nothing less than gold. Finally one morning, Father took me by the hand down to 59th Street near Ninth Avenue. The church was big and dark, with huge scaffolds that reached the high vault of the ceiling. My eyes were immediately drawn to that vault, and it was gold. My heart beat faster . . . I could hardly wait to climb the scaffold! But my father was still holding me by the hand, looking right and left. He asked a passing priest where the artist was, and the priest pointed to the scaffold. Father held his other hand to his mouth and called, "Amedeo, I brought the son!" From the top, the artist shouted down, "Fine, let him bring that bucket of paint to me." I tried to pull my hand from my father's grip, but he held hard. He looked carefully at the bucket of paint, then up the scaffold to Amedeo, and his frown became deeper and darker. "What? My son up there?" He waved his arm scornfully toward the ceiling. That seemed to satisfy his disgust, and he walked away, dragging me along, my eyes still pinned to that wonderful gold ceiling.

Father found a new school in the Bronx for me, and had to resign himself to my juggling.



*I was out, Nelly and I.
(see page 93)*

13: A TRIP TO ASTORIA

FOR TEN CENTS YOU WENT OVER ON a ferry from 134th Street to North Beach.

I took Nelly for a ferry ride over to Astoria, and we had an ice cream sandwich together, which stopped her sticking her tongue out for a while, but not for long. She kept close to my side and she was shedding, which made my corduroy pants look like seaweed. From the stern of the boat as it headed for North Beach, we watched the rippling of the water.

At last we arrived, and our first thrill was the smell of hot dogs. I had been pitching pennies and had a pocket full of them, which worried me. It was my best pocket, the one without a hole in it, and I was afraid a hole might develop any minute. Besides, the sea air made me hungry.

"Just one of the fattest hot dogs!"

"You want mustard on it?" the man said.

"Only on half. My girl don't like mustard."

We walked along eating quietly, pausing now and

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I BOW TO THE STONES

then to chase away a fly that alighted on her half of the hot dog.

So we arrived at the stagedoor of the theater. It was amateur night. That is why we had come.

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It was very late when we got out of the theater, long past my sleeping hour. The prize had been a gold watch. Feeling like a prince and with no thoughts of the ferry, I took out my wonderful big gold watch and put it to my ear. It was ticking. The sound delighted me, and I put the watch away and asked a passer-by what time it was.

"Twelve-thirty," he said.

"Gee! The last ferry leaves at 11:30! I missed it! For sure!"

What were we to do? The man told us about a trolley car.

It was waiting to take on its passengers and set out for another ferry that went across the river at the foot of 92nd Street, way downtown. We hurried through the warm summer night and climbed up the side of the open car. While the conductor wasn't looking, I sneaked Nelly on and hid her under the seat. Taking off my coat, I let it hang down to hide my pal.

After a while the car started and when we had gone a mile or so, the conductor came walking along the runningboard outside. I was drowsing in my seat.

"Fare, please!" The conductor had a big voice. It woke me up. The reaction of my friend under the seat was worse.

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A TRIP TO ASTORIA

She thought the man was being mean to me, so she stuck her head out from under the coat and barked her loudest. That was a mistake.

"No dogs allowed on this car!" growled the conductor, and he pulled the bell cord. The car stopped. We were in the middle of a wood.

The conductor said, "Get off, you two!"

Another passenger tried to intercede. "Why don't you let the boy ride? The dog isn't bothering anybody."

"Why don't you mind your own business? It's the company rule. You gotta get off, boy!"

Nelly began to bark again, louder than before, for now she knew the man really was mean. She not only barked but she went for him. He ran along the outside on the runningboard, and Nelly, running after him, made the mistake of getting off the car.

The conductor yanked the bell cord. The car jumped ahead. I yelled at him that I had to get off with my dog. The car stopped and I was out, Nelly and I.

There was a big round moon, the crickets chirped, the fireflies flickered and not a sound of human beings could be heard. Nelly was at my side, licking my hands. It seemed to me she was frightened too.

As we walked along the road we began to hear sounds. We were passing a graveyard. I touched my dog to make sure she was with me. There were a lot of graveyards along that road, but worse than that there were big trees, and they cast big shadows. I promised myself I would never again miss singing in church on Sunday. Chills iced my whole body. The dust I kicked up as I ran got into my nose, and I

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sneezed and was frightened at the sound of my own sneezes.

Nelly was not comfortable either. She was scratching herself uneasily and nervously trying to catch fireflies.

After hours of walking and running, houses began to appear. We felt safe. We sat down in the warm, encouraging light from an electric light pole.

I looked down at my sweater and my shoes. They were covered with snow. No, it was only dust with the light shining on it.

But my gold watch was still ticking and shone bright.

We came to the ferry, and it took us across to Manhattan. Then another problem confronted us—no trolley would take us. We would have to walk from 92nd Street to 144th. My feet were tired, and I suppose Nelly's were too. But we had luck. An ice wagon came along.

I jumped on the step at the back and Nelly jumped on my lap. She was a big girl. My arms got tired clutching her. My feet were hanging down. There was really room for only one of us on that step. Every time Nelly began to slip, I readjusted her and she gave me a big caress with her tongue.

The ice wagon went as far as 125th Street and there turned west. We had to get off. Nelly jumped first. We walked over the bridge at 138th Street and were home.

By this time a big sun was coming up. My father, standing in his red flannel underwear, greeted me at the door.

"What happened?"

14: THE GRAND PRIZE MEDAL

"ALL FIRST-PRIZE WINNERS MUST appear April 23 for the championship finals."

I turned the card in my hand, the first mail I had ever received.

"Dad," I shouted, "I got a letter without an envelope!"

The day came. All the amateurs who had won during the year were to compete with each other. But I had to serve my customers with the sporting news in the *Telegram* and the *World* before I could start. With Nelly, I made the tour of the saloons. Then I walked to the elevated instead of heading for home.

"Go home," I said to her, "I'll see you later."

Nelly could not figure it out. You could see by her expression that she was puzzled. She must have thought

it a new kind of saloon, an upstairs place, for she sat down at the foot of the stairs to wait for me as usual.

I picked up a stick. Her ears went up. I threw it, and she dashed after it. I ran up the stairs, but when I looked down there she was at the bottom, the stick at her feet, waiting.

I stood on the platform as the train took me downtown from the East Bronx over the bridge to East New York. I watched the streets flying by, the boats in the river. Then down the long steps of the elevated to the Gotham Theater. The El was way up in the air at that point.

People were gathered in front of a saloon on the corner next to the theater, elbowing each other for a glimpse of the prizes on display there. I edged my way to the front to see what they were looking at. Medals.

In the center was a big medal, the championship medal, gold and three inches in diameter, with the date of the contest set in diamonds. And around it were six smaller medals of silver. I heard comments from the crowd. A kid said that Sammy would win because he had his gang there. Another said Charley would win because one of the judges was his uncle.

"If I could only win the little silver medal over in the corner!" I thought. I caught sight of my reflection in the window pane, in my dark blue sweater with its neck stretched from being pulled over my head every day. The silver would look nice on the front of my sweater. "It would match the medal I got for running."

I presented my postcard to the doorman to enter

the contest. He looked at the list of acts. My name was the seventh on the list of thirty.

"Come back at 10:30," he said.

I said I had to get fifteen chairs for my act, and the manager sent me to a place across the street with a letter. He told me that because I was only twelve, he would have to be responsible for the chairs. I got ten chairs into the theater. All this took time.

"You're on twelfth," they told me.

I got the fifteen chairs across into the theater. It took more time.

"You're on twentieth," they said. I didn't mind.

"Maybe they'll remember me more easily when we line up for the medals," I thought.

Each act came on. Each entertainer had his own following, and their applause was tremendous.

"I shouldn't have come. Too much opposition. I should have saved the dime carfare."

The stage hands tapped me on the head to let them pass by. They were moving things on a big iron truck. I got the idea of doing something I had never done before. I didn't know if I could do it, or if my chin would hold, but the thought struck me that I would balance the big handtruck on my chin. Even for a split second.

"You're next! Get your chairs!" the stage manager called—interrupting my dreaming. I lined up my fifteen chairs. I saw the announcer on the stage in a beautiful full-dress suit and no hair on his head, the lights shining bright on it. He was announcing my name.

I came out, took a bow and the first thing that happened was that one of my stockings came down, one of my long black stockings. My garters were too old. I had to stop my trick to pull the stocking up.

First I balanced one chair on my chin. Then two, one overlapping the other. Then three. I was working up, adding one at a time, to the fifteen, but the fellow in the dress suit said, "You're taking too much time!"

I moved right up from five chairs to fifteen. As I was about to lift them, my stocking came down again. I pulled it up, lifted the fifteen chairs and balanced them on my chin.

I got tremendous applause. I took a bow. Then, excited by success, I wheeled the handtruck to the footlights and motioned to two young ushers to come and lift it. The drummer helped by giving a roll, announcing a sensational event.

The ushers began to lift the truck. I stood in the center of the stage, waiting to have them put it on my chin. As they got it half way up, somebody threw a quarter onto the stage. A quarter! It was big money. I left the handtruck and the ushers standing there and stopped to pick up the quarter. The ushers got tired and let down the truck.

We began again. They lifted the truck. Just as they got it up, some one threw a half dollar. It had a wonderful ring as it hit the stage. I went and picked it up, leaving the ushers struggling with the truck. We began again. More money tinkled onto the stage. The quarters looked bigger to me than the medals. And I was sure of them. This went on until the stage was full of them.

The audience was roaring. Finally the stage manager said,

"Come on, get on with the trick! We'll pick up the quarters for you!"

The ushers started to lift the truck again. But they had lifted too often. They were tired. So two stagehands came to their rescue. They lifted it up and placed it on my chin.

I balanced it for a split second and jumped away as it dropped. I took a bow and in the same motion started to pick up my quarters. My stocking came down again. The crowd laughed and yelled and the quarters rained again. One of the judges picked up some and gave them to me.

A beautiful girl followed me, singing a love song. But as she sang I kept spotting quarters I had missed, and slipped over to pick them up. Finally they came and dragged me off, but I broke back. There were more quarters left.

"You keep off the stage!" shouted the stage manager.

"But that's my money there!" I yelled back. The audience was delicious and tossed more. The stage hands lifted me up and carried me away while I wriggled like a fish in their arms.

The time came to line up for the prizes.

The man with the bald head and the beautiful full-dress suit held a paper over the head of each of the thirty contestants in turn to determine who received most applause. Out of the thirty, six were told to step forward. I was one of them. From the six, four were eliminated, two left. I was one of the two.

The other was a team, a man and a girl, a twirling dancing pair called "The Whirlwind Millers." They were from the neighborhood. She was blonde and pretty and went straight from there into the Ziegfeld Follies.

For fifteen minutes the judges couldn't decide which of us got more applause. Then somebody shouted, "Give it to the little fellow and let's go home."

The judges got together. They took a vote and I won.

The announcer came over, and after I had pulled my stocking up, he pinned the big gold medal on the chest of my dark sweater.

Outside the theater the gangs favoring other contestants had gathered for trouble. They were going to steal the medal from me.

The manager kept me inside.

"You don't dare go out," he said. "Stay here!"

They took me into a small dressing-room and pinned the medal under my sweater on my underwear.

I sat with the manager and his wife, drinking soda.

"What are you going to do with the medal, son?" asked the manager's wife.

"I'm going to show it around at school."

After two hours we were still there. The manager telephoned the police station, and two plainclothesmen came around to take me to the elevated.

When we came out of the theater, it was pouring rain. But the gangs were still there. Voices from the crowd shouted,

"Hey, kid, let me look at the medal."



The man with the bald head and the beautiful dress suit.
(see page 99)

I walked between the two detectives, each holding on to one of my hands, while the shouting continued. "What are you going to do with it, hock it?"

"How about giving me a diamond?"

The detectives with their badges gave me a feeling of importance. They started for the elevated with big steps, I trotting along between them, the quarters jingling in my pockets, my stockings falling down. I couldn't pull them up, for with each hand I was clutching the hand of a policeman. As we passed the saloon, I caught sight of myself in the window. "There is a medal under that old sweater now." When the train got to City Hall, the detectives took me to the Bronx train, put me on, and bade me goodbye.

I came to my station, started for the elevated stairs, looked down and at the bottom step I saw Nelly still waiting for me.

She ran all the way up to greet me. I sat down on the step, lifted my sweater and showed her the medal.

"See what I won?"

She gave me a big kiss.



15: FROM BROCKTON TO BROADWAY

PRETTY SOON I WAS APPEARING AT amateur nights two or three times a week. My family complained at first about my staying up so late at night, but after I won five dollars several times in succession and a number of gold watches as well, they let up on their objections. They still thought the theater as a career was a childish dream, though.

I was doing other things around the theaters also, like going out for coffee for the manager. And watching the other acts was always fascinating.

During an amateur appearance at the Mount Vernon Opera House, the manager asked me if I would like to play there steady for a week.

"I can't," I said. "I have to go to school."

"You can say you're sick, can't you?" he said.

I thought about it for a minute, and then said O.K. He gave me a letter for Mr. Holmer, the theater agent, and told me to take it to his office at the James Building, Broadway and 28th Street.

When I got to the building the next day I stood outside a while, looking up. Mr. Holmer's office was on the ninth floor. It was my first elevator ride, and my heart and stomach seemed to reverse. I rapped on the door and a deep voice said, "Come in."

Mr. Holmer was a huge man sitting in a straw arm chair. I gave him the letter, and after reading it he looked at me for a long while.

"How much do you want?" he said.

"I don't know," I replied.

"Hmmm. Will twenty-five dollars do?"

Would it do? I would have jumped out of the window for that!

"Jimmy Savo," said Mr. Holmer. "Lessee . . . Jimmy Savo, The Boy Wonder Juggler. How's that? You open at the Mount Vernon for a week. Have your father sign this paper and mail it to me."

When my family saw the contract, they were finally impressed. Twenty-five dollars a week! It was a fortune. One of the clauses in the contract was that I had to wear short pants not only on stage but off stage as well. My mother sewed up a pair of black velvet short pants and a white blouse. They looked rich to me. The short pants became a part of all my contracts from then on. At first I didn't mind, but later on I kept hoping for the day when I would be allowed to appear on the street in long pants. I didn't for a long time.

My appearance at the Mount Vernon was a success, and I got other engagements around New York from time to time. My teachers got used to my becoming violently ill in the middle of the afternoon. It was a great relief to everyone when my official school days finally came to an end.

Then I was signed up at last for an out-of-town engagement. The Brockton, Mass., Vaudeville House had taken a chance on me. I was to be billed as The Boy Wonder Juggler, and I had to wear the short pants that would prove it.

My father went with me to the boat which was to launch me on my out-of-town career. I was to take the boat to Fall River, then go by train to Brockton.

As we walked along to the streetcar, I stumbled over a loose stone. Father repeated his favorite proverb: "Always bow to the stones in the street."

I said, "Sure, I remember." It was my father's way of saying don't be embittered by the obstacles you may meet. It became my philosophy too, but not yet, not for a few more years.

We got to the Battery and found the pier that said "Fall River Line." My boat was to leave at three in the afternoon. I had a big suitcase that opened out like an accordion. In it were a few clothes and a lot of my props. My father carried a paper bag of sandwiches and a milk bottle full of tea. I got on the boat, hurried up on deck, and looked down at my father, standing there on the pier.

Suddenly I didn't want to go to Brockton, Mass. I wanted to go home. It was just a short jump to the

picr—but what would I do about my baggage? While I was considering a jump, the gangplank was pulled up and the boat began to move away from the shore.

"Goodbye, father!" I called. My voice sounded pretty thin in my own ears. My father didn't say anything at all. He just waved something he had in his hand. The boat was far out in the bay before I realized what it was my father had been waving. It was my bag of sandwiches.

But as it turned out, I did not suffer for want of lunch. Once we got out to sea, the sky began to darken, the thunder rolled and so did the ship. Rain came down in a cataract, the wind screamed. All the passengers got seasick.

"Worst storm in thirty years," said the captain.

It was an overnight trip to Fall River. Each cabin had bunks in tiers of three. I had the top bunk in my cabin. Only the fact that I was an acrobat saved me from falling out of the bunk. I slid and slipped, and had to keep catching myself all night long.

At 5 o'clock in the morning the boat docked at Fall River, and I got off and found a waterfront restaurant where I had a cup of coffee. I didn't want any other breakfast. Then I took the train to Brockton.

Massachusetts was a new, unknown land, and I tried my best to watch out the windows of both sides of the train at the same time. It was very exciting. A farmhouse here, a tavern there. For the first time in my life I saw acres and acres of growing corn. I saw cows and little villages and magnificent trees. But it had been a long night and I got very tired and leaned my head

back against the seat. My eyes closed of themselves. It was a three-hour trip to Brockton.

"Hey you, where are you going?"

I woke up gradually. I had been sound asleep. The conductor was shaking me by the shoulder.

"Boston!" he yelled in my ear.

"Brockton is what I want," I said.

"Well, you're in Boston. We passed Brockton one hour ago."

This was a catastrophe. I had to wait for a train back to Brockton. I ate at the station restaurant and worried until the train came. I was supposed to be at the theater by 10 A.M. I was going to be late for rehearsal.

A couple of hours later I got to the theater in Brockton. I rushed backstage, running head-on into other members of the troupe who were just leaving. But the orchestra was still there.

"You're late," said the orchestra leader, when I bounded onto the stage. "Rehearsals are over."

"Just play a little waltz for me, please," I begged him. "Something so I can hear music when I come out on the stage."

He took a look at my short pants and said: "Just one." I ran back into the wings and made my entrance, to music, and started my juggling act. I thought the orchestra would just play a few opening bars, but they stayed on. They sat and played right through my act.

I needed that rehearsal too. After all the jolting and excitement, the long, cramped sleep on the train, the worry over being late, I felt as if I were on a stage for the first time. But my act went over big that night.

At the end of the week, to make me feel good, the management paid me in forty one dollar bills. It made me feel good, all right, but it worried me what to do with the money. I never let it out of my sight, and for the remaining appearances I hid the bills in my shoes. When I hobbled on the stage, the orchestra leader raised his eyebrows in surprise.

After the Brockton engagement, I was offered the Orpheum Circuit. This was big town vaudeville. The Orpheum Circuit was as wide as the country in those days, just before World War I. Taking off from New York, we circled the land, crisscrossing the Midwest and the prairies to stop off at all sizable spots.

The farthest stops northwest were Seattle, Tacoma, and Spokane, Washington. It rained most of the time I was there. That would have spoiled the sightseeing for me if I had had any time for it. All I saw of any place was the outside and the inside of the theater, and whatever else of local color I could pick up in my trips from the hotel to the theater, to a good place to eat, and back again. I hadn't yet gotten very far into my teens, and food was one of my real interests.

Seattle will always be for me the place where you could buy a whole salmon for twenty-five cents. Beyond that I recall it mainly as a hilly town which had a curio shop near the theater, favored by the troupers who wanted souvenirs to send back home.

But Seattle was also the place where I found out I could make people laugh. Still billed as "The Boy Wonder Juggler," I had the opening act, so that even the other members of the troupe liked me. Nobody was

jealous of the opening act. That was the spot that everybody tried to avoid.

I balanced a big plow and a heavy iron-rimmed wagon wheel. Their weight and my size made many suspect that I was using phony props. Then one day my act really went over with a Bang!

While I staggered under the weight of the wagon wheel, there was a moment of breathless suspense before I let it drop to the floor, and then a terrific splintering crash as it went right through the stage.

I got the wheel back and a carpenter bill that gave me something to worry about. Besides, the same kind of accident might happen again any time. More carpenter bills.

Ideas came, but they offered no solution until I hit on a flat cast-iron plate about three feet wide, to be placed over the spot where I was balancing the wheel. The first time I dropped the wheel on that iron plate the noise nearly knocked the audience off their seats. This was my first lesson in the magic power of sound effects.

I had to take three bows—two head bows and one bending from the waist. At the next performance the orchestra leader glorified my new sound effect with a tremulous chord just as the wheel hit the iron plate. The loud crash, followed by a rumbling noise as the sound traveled from the metal rim to the hub, accompanied by a musical chord, revolutionized my act.

I had another inspiration. Leaning over, I stood the wheel on end, held it steady to the floor with my foot through the spokes as I struck a pose—my arms out-

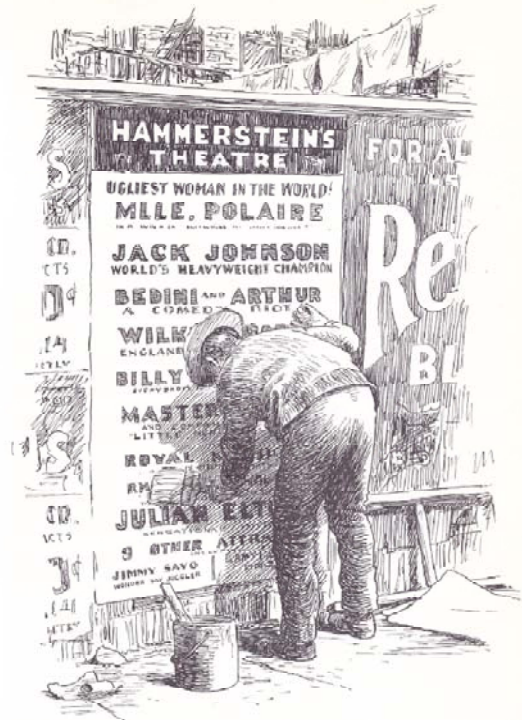
stretched like a boy gladiator's at the Roman Colosseum. Such a little guy for such a statuesque pose. That brought more laughter than applause. Laughter! I could make people laugh! That was real magic! From that moment on I knew what I wanted to do—get a laugh.

Sharing my joy with the orchestra leader, we decided on a military march as a fitting finale. After the gladiator pose, I marched off the stage. The applause got me never less than three encores. A broken board had turned my Sandow routine into comedy, and comedy evidently was what the world was looking for.

One year later, I was one of seventeen acts of vaudeville that were playing Hammerstein's Theater in New York. It was an outstanding bill, featuring two of the greatest comedians of the day, Bedini and Arthur, along with Jack Johnson, the heavyweight champion, who did three rounds of boxing for his act, Wilkie Bard, who sang funny songs, Julian Eltinge, the famous female impersonator, and Mlle. Polaire, who had built up an international reputation as "the ugliest woman in the world."

Little Jimmy Savo, in short pants—had the privilege of doing my juggling act among these great names of vaudeville. I went on at 6:30 in the evenings, when there was no one in the theater.

Even I knew that 6:30 in the evening was not the best time in the world to make an impression on an audience. At that hour there just wasn't any audience. All the same, I was very proud of being at Hammerstein's, and if there was nothing to be gained in the



way of applause from across the footlights, at least there was a lot I could learn from the exalted beings who occupied the dressing rooms around me.

I learned from Jack Johnson that, in my case at least, the best way to win with a professional prizefighter was to run as fast as possible.

Wilkie Bard talked with a strong British accent. I had never heard anything like it in the Bronx. I was fascinated. In his sketch, Bard played a watchman, guarding a hole in the street. A society girl came out of a house and talked to him. Their conversation must have been good, because the house rocked with laughter. I often wished they would talk in English so I could share the jokes.

From Wilkie Bard I seem to have learned only a song, and that not complete. There must have been more than the two lines I remember now:

*"Caruso told me I ought to do so,
That's why I want to sing in opera."*

From Bedini and Arthur I learned that it pays to have efficient aides in putting over a comedy act. They had a helper, a youth with enormous, dark popeyes, and he assisted with the props, breaking dishes, and providing other off-stage noises. The Arthur and Bedini prop boy impressed me a great deal. I even remember his name to this day. It was Eddie Cantor.

The tips I picked up from Mlle. Polaire were never of any use to me. But I saw a great performer. When I heard that she was arriving, my curiosity led me to the

pier. I attached myself to a group of newspapermen who were waiting around for the darling of the French music halls, and when Mlle. Polaire, her dogs, her maid, her ten trunks and her husband had all been assembled on the pier, and the newspapermen closed in, I moved in with them. Mlle. Polaire, I gathered from her musical lamentations, had suffered a great bereavement on the way over. I listened and looked at the same time. What I was looking at was a ring in her nose. It was a small ring set with pearls. I had never seen a woman with a ring in her nose before.

I got up enough courage to ask the reporter standing next to me: "What's she yelling about?"

"She lost her pig," said the reporter.

"Her pig? What was she doing with a pig on a steamship?"

"It was a pet," said the reporter, and went away fast, before he had to answer any more questions.

Now I looked at Mlle. Polaire with more sympathy. Polaire was no beauty, but she was still a long way from being the ugliest woman on earth, as she claimed to be. Her own description of herself was, "I have the eyes of an animal, the mouth of a fish, the waist of a sylph and the foot of an ogre."

Her act was a combination dramatic sketch and dance. Speaking English with a strong French accent, she played the part of an actress who told her Russian admirer that she didn't know the meaning of the word fear. They talked and joked about what she would do if a burglar appeared in her room, and the admirer left.

Shortly afterward, an Apache actually entered her

apartment, with a knife in his hand. Polaire, seeing that she had to think fast to save her own life, offered to entertain the Apache by dancing for him, which she did with wild efforts. The burglar, infatuated with her skill, laid down his knife. Instantly she danced toward it, seized it and threw her arms around the Apache. She forced him to join her in the dance, and sank the knife into his back. Together they fell to the floor, the Apache dying before her eyes.

Newspaper accounts of Mlle. Polaire's act described it as giving the audience the same feeling as riding on a roller coaster.



16: A COMEDIAN AT LAST—AND LONG PANTS!

FOLLOWING THE HAMMERSTEIN engagement, I had been away a year on the road. Now my family and I sat around the table in the kitchen. They were giving me big scowls. Before I left home, I had told them, "When I send home seventy-five per cent of my pay check, you can have fifty per cent, and you must put twenty-five per cent in the bank for me."

Now they were telling me they had saved only ten per cent of the money for me.

"But why?" I wanted to know. My father spread wide his hands.

"We needed it," he said.

I stood up, which made it easier for me to stamp my foot. I stamped it. Four or five times. It would have been more impressive if it hadn't been for the short pants, I sensed.

"That is no way to treat an actor!" I yelled.

"You are not an actor, you are a juggler," said my fresh kid brother.

"I juggle on the stage, don't I? I am an actor. Besides, it was my money."

"You can earn more," said my father.

That was true, I thought. So I said O.K., but from now on when I send my check, they must put twenty-five per cent in the bank for me. Wherever I went, I wrote home: "Don't forget. I am getting twenty-five per cent."

I needed money in the bank to make my act an important one. Maybe some day I would be making enough to ask Anita to marry me. I still had her handkerchief.

The next time I came home, I found that instead of twenty-five per cent they had put fifteen per cent in the bank for me. After that, I did my own banking, so everything ran smoothly.

Finally I had \$600 saved. Then the old man asked for the loan of a hundred, and I gave it to him, but I went out quick and invested in a new prop, a papier-mâché horse, life size.

I practiced putting a little boy on the horse, then I balanced horse and boy on my chin. When I also bought a life-size papier-mâché ostrich, my family rebelled.

"You are spending all your money! Keep it in the bank," they said.

"How can I get ahead if I don't improve myself?" I wanted to know. What I meant was, get ahead so that I can ask Anita to marry me.

"You were doing all right," said my father. "Do you think they will pay you back for all the money you are spending?"

"I'll get a bigger salary," I said, and went on practicing with my ostrich.

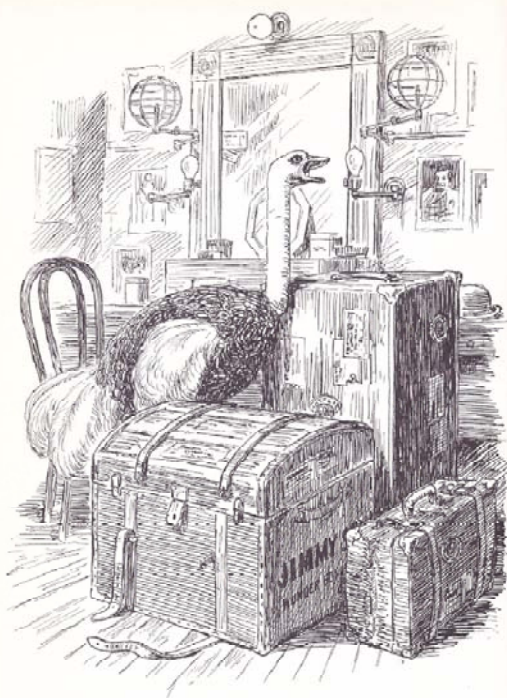
I balanced the ostrich, upside down, on my head. Then I juggled four balls, throwing them finally one by one into the ostrich's stomach which was hollowed out so that the balls ran down through its neck and out of its mouth into my hands. I would toss the balls back into the stomach so that the audience saw a continuous procession.

But I did not get a raise in salary.

"We told you so," my family said when I came home again, but they were proud of me. The shoemaker had the walls plastered with pictures of "The Boy Wonder Juggler," along with pictures of other vaudeville acts which friends on the same bill had given me. There were also pictures of hunting the boar in Stigliano, my father's native town. It was a very lively-looking shoemaker shop.

Whenever I came back to New York I went to see Anita and had dinner at her house. Her mother was a good cook, and after we ate Anita and I sang duets, and her family said it sounded fine. When I began to hint about wanting to marry her, they stopped smiling. They said Anita ought to marry somebody who could give her a nice home. Somebody like that young fellow who worked in the Sanitation Department.

Whenever I went back on the road, I kept wishing I had proposed to Anita before I left. I was getting sixty dollars a week. I might get a lot more. Some



Traveling with an ostrich was expensive.

A COMEDIAN AT LAST — AND LONG PANTS!

vaudeville people did. That was the time Eva Tanguay was a big vaudeville star. She was getting \$3,000 a week. You could live on \$3,000 a week then. I was doing all right on sixty dollars. Those were the days when a dollar was money, not just small change.

But it was expensive to travel with a horse and an ostrich. I had to have crates made for them, and pay excess baggage on the train. Vaudeville, I decided, was too expensive. Someone suggested that I go into a burlesque company because then I would be part of the show and they would pay all my traveling expenses. So I made a deal with a burlesque manager.

He was a short, fat man who smoked a cigar that was never lit, and he never wore a coat. But he never appeared without a vest. He wanted me to work for half the money I was getting in vaudeville, but he promised to make a comedian out of me eventually and then I would really be making money.

"I got an idea," he said; "this'll be a knockout until we work out a comedy spot for you. Listen. I fix you up with a horse-show act, like in a circus. I put about sixteen gorgeous girls in riding habits on the stage behind you, and you go through your routine juggling act. Then we get a bang-up finish. You balance one of the girls sitting on your paper horse, and the other girls strip, you know, fast. Then before anyone gets a good look, everything happens at once. The girl and horse come down, the others run like hell into the wings."

It sounded fine to me. I never did see what went on though, because I was balancing the horse, and by the time the curtain came down and I could turn

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I BOW TO THE STONES

around, all I could see was the girls running away, picking up their robes.

And the only other part I ever had in this show for a long time was when I put on an apron, and brought out a table and chair for one of the real comedians to do a scene.

The show finally came to New York. As a full-time troupier I stayed at a downtown hotel with the rest of the cast. Only on Sunday afternoon would I be free to visit my family or Anita. We played the Columbia Theater at 47th Street and Seventh Avenue, a famous burlesque house. It was about the same for burlesque as the Palace was for vaudeville. There were two comedians in the show, and the second string comedian got sick when the show reached Broadway. This poor fellow had inflammatory rheumatism, and both his legs swelled so that he couldn't stand on his feet. There was nobody to play his part.

"Why don't you give it to the crazy juggler?" the stage manager said. "He is practicing dancing and everything all the time."

So the company manager asked me if I could take the part.

"Sure I could," I said. "You told me you were going to make me a comedian, so I kept practicing. But you didn't keep your word."

"Well, I'm keeping my word now," he said.

In my opening appearance I was supposed to be an Englishman, and wore a long gray coat with tails, long pants at last, a silk hat, and a monocle. And when I turned around there was no seat to my pants.

Just as I was going on, I noticed a woman standing

A COMEDIAN AT LAST — AND LONG PANTS!

in the wings. It was winter, and she was holding a muff. I had a bright idea. I would improve my costume.

"Would you let me take your muff for a minute? I'll give it right back."

She gave me the muff, and I carried it on with me. My first entrance was coming down a flight of steps. The other comedian used to walk down the steps, but I hopped down with both feet together. I got my first laugh.

The scene was a hotel lobby. I went to the desk and said to the clerk, "I want a room and a bath with southern exposure." Then I was supposed to turn around and the audience would get a big laugh.

But they started screaming before I turned around, and they kept it up for a long while. I couldn't figure out what they were screaming about, so I just said again:

"I want a room and a bath with southern exposure," and the audience kept screaming.

Not until I had left the stage and returned the muff to its owner did I find out what caused all the excitement. It was the way I held the muff. It seemed that the particular way I held it was the trademark of certain ladies of that period.

From then on, whenever I walked out on the stage, the audience roared. It was the turning point of my career. Someone told me later that the general manager of the Columbia asked the show manager,

"Who is that comedian? I never saw him before."

"That is no comedian," said the show manager.

"That's the juggler of our show."

"That's a comedian," said the Columbia manager.

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"Tell him to forget his juggling. Tell him to throw away his paper ostrich and his paper horse."

But even before the show manager came back to the dressing room with his face all smiles, I knew I was a comedian at last.

A comedian! And long pants! The very next Sunday, I would go up to the Bronx and ask Anita right out to marry me. I would go straight to her house, without even stopping to see my family first.

That Sunday I dressed carefully. I wondered if the high hat I wore in the act would look good on me. I decided against it.

About four o'clock I rang the doorbell, and Anita's father opened the door.

"Hello, Jimmy," he said, "You're early."

"Early for what?"

"The wedding, of course. It's at five o'clock at the church. Afterward we come back here to eat."

"Who's getting married?" I whispered.

"He asks who's getting married!" cried Anita's father. "You think maybe Mama's getting married? Anita, of course. Anita is marrying. . ."

But I never waited to hear who Anita was marrying. I was already running up the street. I didn't know where I was going, or care. Anita was getting married. I had lost her.

When I looked up, I was in front of my father's shoe-maker shop. I had run home.

"Jimmy!" said my father. "A nice surprise you are here. For dinner we had spaghetti and meat balls and there is some left. I will warm it up for you."

Father pretended not to notice the big tears that were running down from my eyes, but Nelly took care of my sorrow in a simpler way. She put her front legs on my shoulders and disposed of my tears by licking them away.

• • • • •

Nelly lived to be twenty-one and when she died I had been a regular professional actor for quite a few years. I had to go off on tour many times and leave her behind. We both worried when I was away from her.

Then one day I came back to my father's house to find her very sick. She died the day after.

I took her to little St. Mary's Park in the Bronx and buried her there. Over her grave I put a little stick in the shape of a cross and on it a sign on which I painted the words "I love Nelly."

For a long while after that it was a lonely world for me.

• • • • •



Drawing by A. Birkenstein, copyright 1947 Simon and Schuster, Inc.

An Album of Jimmy Savo

"There are few men during my lifetime whose artistry should be recorded for all time. Jimmy Savo was truly a great contribution to the world of entertainment, and one of the world's foremost clowns. With his pixie face he could do more than many comedians could with a thousand words. Once seen, the great Savo could never be forgotten. Though small of stature, he is ten feet tall in my memory."

—Eddie Cantor

WEEK BEGINNING MONDAY EVENING, MAY 19, 1924
Matinee Wednesday and Saturday

THE MESSRS. SHUBERT
In association with George B. McAllister
Present

The New Musical Revue

VOGUES

—with—
ODETTE MYRTIL

FRED ALLEN, MAY ROLEY, JIMMY SAVO

—and—
J. HAROLD MURRAY

Book and Lyrics by Fred Thompson and Clifford Gray

Musical by Herbert Stothart

Dances and assembles by David Bennett.

Staged by Frank Smithsonian and Alexander Leftwich.

Stage Settings by Watson Barratt.

Orchestra under the direction of Alfred Newman.

All gowns designed by Charles La Mère.

THE FIRST ACT

THE CAST

MARIE ANNETTE BADE

JULIE BETTY COMPTON

MADAME COLLETTE MAY ROLEY

SCENE 2—"Outside the Asylum"

FRED ALLEN and JIMMY SAVO

SCENE 3—"The Garden of the School of Dramatic Art"

THE CAST

MADAME CALLENDER, the principal MAY ROLEY

MISS LURAY, a pupil BEATRICE SWANSON

MISS MANNAY, a pupil MARCELLA SWANSON

MISS FANNAY, a pupil ANNA MAY DENNEHY

THE STEELMAN, of "The Miracle" J. HAROLD MURRAY

THE PRINCESS KAYDRA ODETTE MYRTIL

THE SALESMAN GEORGE ANDERSON

THE VICTIM JIMMY SAVO

Musical Numbers

"Three Little Maids" The Misses Swanson, Dennehy and Pupila

"Pierrot" Miss Myrtil

"Rain"—The Sadie Thompsons are the Misses Swanson,

Bade, Thomas, Cowan and Compton

The Rover and Davidson are the Messrs. Lowe,

Altman, Toger, Cohen, Castle and Pales

The Mrs. Davidsons are the Misses Boley,

Dennehy, Palmer, Tierney, Carlsfeld and Arnold

"The Belle of the Ball," Keene Twins, Mr. Murray and Glegg

"The Belle of Today" Miss Myrtil and Girls

SCENE 4—"In Front of the Curtains"

FRED ALLEN and JIMMY SAVO

SCENE 5—"The Land of Happiness"

Revised and Staged by J. C. Huffman.

Musical Numbers

"Eldorado" Miss Myrtil and Mr. Murray

"The Legend of the Shirt" Mr. Murray

The Pascualis.

"Laugh and Play" Joseph Toner

"Star of Destiny" Miss Myrtil and Ensemble

VOGUES OF 1924

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Savo: "I would rather be Chaplin than Shakespeare."

Allen: "Why?"

Savo (whispering): "Because Shakespeare's dead."



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EARL CARROLL'S VANITIES OF 1930

To the left, Jimmy Savo dressed up for a skit from the *Vanities*. Above, the four stars, Jack Benny, Herb Williams, Patsy Kelly and Jimmy Savo.

NEW AMSTERDAM
THEATRE
42nd Street, West of Broadway
THE HOUSE BEAUTIFUL
Tramper, Illingham & English, Managing Directors

Fire Notice: Look around now and choose the nearest exit to your seat in case of fire, walk (don't run) to that exit. Do not try to help your neighbor to the door.
JOHN J. DORMAN, Fire Commissioner.

WEEK BEGINNING MONDAY EVENING, JULY 1, 1930
Matinee Wednesday and Saturday

WORLD'S GREATEST REVUE
A SUPER-SPECTACLE OF 60 SCENES
EARL CARROLL
VANITIES
(EIGHTH EDITION)
MEETING AMERICAN DEMAND FOR
SUPERSTANDARD ENTERTAINMENT
DANCES AND ENSEMBLES STAGED BY LARRY BENT
DANCES BY GUYE WILSON AND DEANNE CORPUS
STAGED BY HERB WILLIAMS
MUSIC AND LYRICS BY
FRANK M. LEWIS AND FRED KRAMER
ORCHESTRAL SCORE BY GEORGE M. COVINO
COMEDY SKITS BY GEORGE M. COVINO
ENTERTAINMENT BY MISS ARDENT
ENTERTAINMENT BY MISS ARDENT
PROGRAM CONTINUED ON SECOND PAGE FOLLOWING

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Part of the program for Earl Carroll's *Vanities of 1930*. Not on the program: an unrehearsed trip to Magistrates Court when the Police Department objected to one of the skits.

PROGRAM CONTINUED		
SCENE 17—JUST KISS	WITH COLLETTE	
SCENE 18—VOICE WITH A SMILE	MILBRED COLLETTE	
SCENE 19—"INFORMATION, PLEASE"	JOHN HAY	
SCENE 20—BROWN PANTHERS	WILSON RAY	
SCENE 21—FLIRTATION DANCE	WILSON RAY	
SCENE 22—A CAPTAIN FROM HANKING	WILSON RAY	
SCENE 23—THE NOTED CHINESE ACTOR, SATSUMON	WILSON RAY	
SCENE 24—DANCE	WILSON RAY	
SCENE 25—PLANET X	WILSON RAY	
SCENE 26—"THE MARCH OF TIME"	WILSON RAY	
SCENE 27—STRANGE INHABITANTS OF THE SKIES	WILSON RAY	
SCENE 28—THE MYSTERIOUS STARS	WILSON RAY	
SCENE 29—DANCE	WILSON RAY	
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PROGRAM CONTINUED		
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Theatre Collection, New York Public Library

PARADE, MAY 20, 1935

From Brooks Atkinson's review of *Parade* in The New York Times the following morning: "Translate Jimmy Savo into a bogus Indian and the sheer good humor and gleam of Jimmy's comic dance will shatter your risibilities and open your heart, at the same time."

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Another scene from the Theatre Guild's *Parade*. Jimmy used to do a similar skit at a hot dog stand with Fred Allen years earlier in vaudeville.



Collier Pictures, Inc.



THE BOYS FROM SYRACUSE, NOVEMBER 23, 1938

The drawing by Al Hirschfeld shows Jimmy Savo and Teddy Hart as the twin Dromios in George Abbott's adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors*, music and lyrics by Rodgers and Hart. When *The Boys from Syracuse* was reviewed in 1963, many of the critics still remembered Jimmy's performance.

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Culver Pictures, Inc.

THE BOYS FROM SYRACUSE



Theatre Collection, New York Public Library

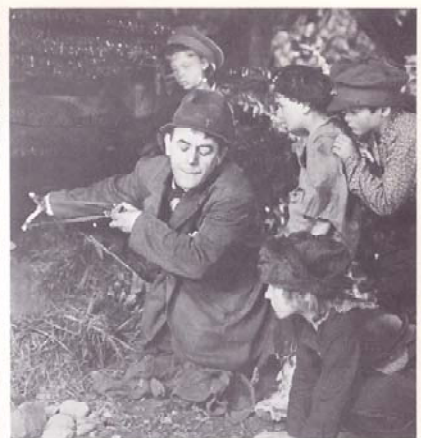
Above left, Jimmy Savo and Wynn Murray; at the left Jimmy and Teddy Hart in unaccustomed repose; above, Eddie Albert and Jimmy as Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse.

Culver Pictures, Inc.



THE MOVIES

Although he made several motion pictures, Jimmy was never entirely successful in the films. Greatest expectations were for *Once in a Blue Moon* (1934), written, produced and directed by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. In the cast was Nikita Bludoff, impresario of the famed *Chauve Souris*, shown above with Jimmy who played a clown in a Russian traveling show. Above right, Jimmy with some of the "Russian" children Hecht and MacArthur rounded up in Astoria. Everything was praised but the picture. Bottom right, in *Reckless Living* for Universal Films, Jimmy, a racing tout, is shown tangled up in a harness.





Culver Pictures, Inc.

CAFE SOCIETY

In all of his night club appearances, Jimmy Savo was always expected to perform two songs. One of these, of course, was his version of "River Stay 'Way From My Door." Reproduced is a well worn page from the score with Jimmy's scribbled notes to the orchestra leader. Jimmy was also expected to sing "One Meat Ball," the pathetic ballad by Hy Zaret and Lou Singer, of the little man who had only enough money for one meat ball. When he timidly asks for some bread to go with it, the waiter (also played by Jimmy) thunders back: "You gets no bread with one meat ball!" It was one of the theme songs of the depression.



"River Stay 'Way From My Door," by Mort Dixon and Harry Woods Arranged by Ed. Morbach, Jr.
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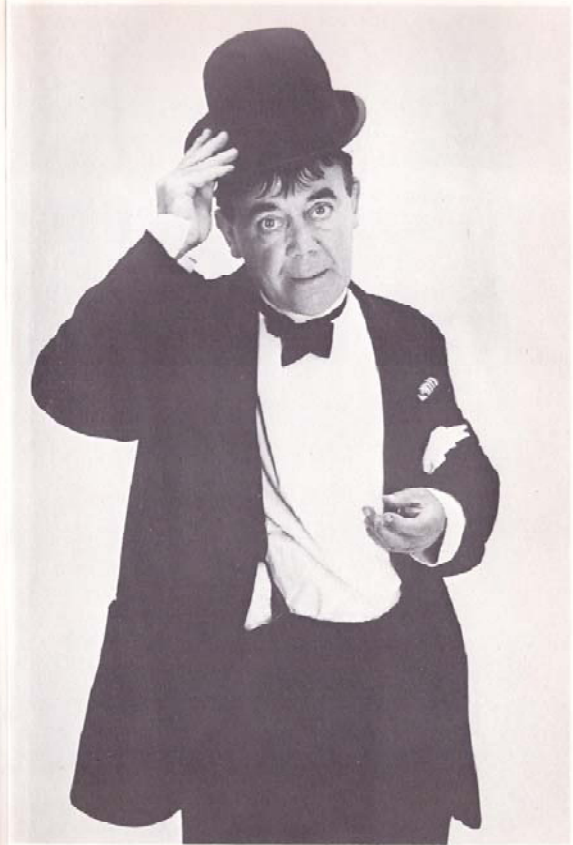
When Edward Steichen, dean of modern photographers, made the selections for his 1961 retrospective exhibition at The Museum, he included his portrait of Jimmy Savo. Describing how he took this photograph, Steichen told the New York Times, "To me, Jimmy was like a delightful little elf. He was singing one of those songs of his, you know. He brought the music with him. I can't recall the song, but he did it a couple of times and first I got one exposure and then the other. He was such an exquisite artist."

Jimmy Savo 1929
For "Vanity Fair"
Photograph by Edward Steichen
Collection of The Museum of Modern Art



"This mime, clown, variety singer, sweet spirit,
poet of the comic and tragic grotesque, this song,
dance and chronicle of our time,"—Stark Young

Photograph by Richard Avedon
From *Observations* by Richard Avedon and Truman Capote,
published by Simon and Schuster, 1959.
Courtesy of Harper's Bazaar.



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Poem by E. E. Cummings,
from *POEMS 1923-1954*, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.

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