

THE YOUNG AVENGERS From a Book of East Side Memoirs

Winter. Warm clothes, good shoes, coal, food, so many costly necessities.

Winter. A blind old beggar singing in the backyard. His face is lifted to the snowy sky. He sings the vulgar smut of the Yiddish music halls. He is hoarse and patient. People throw pennies to him, and hunks of bread wrapped in newspaper.

Winter. Children and old men and women fight like a pack of hungry dogs around a half-finished building. Waste lumber is being given away. A gaunt old Jewish woman drags a child's sled piled with lumber. She wipes her nose on her shawl, then tugs at the rope.

Winter. Bums sleep in rows like dead fish on the sawdust floors of the saloons. It is long past midnight. In a ragpickers' basement five old Jewish men sit by a lamp and sort rags. One of them eats a sandwich.

Winter. In an Irish home a dead baby lies wrapped in a towel on the kitchen table. The father and mother sit side by side, quarrel, and guzzle whisky from a bottle.

Winter. An Italian child is sick with fever in a bedroom. Her eyes are swollen; a wet handkerchief is tied around her forehead. But she must earn her living. She sits up in bed and works at artificial flowers—at lilies, roses and forsythia.

Winter. There are too many bodies to be buried in Potter's Field. The city is forced to plant them in layers of three, to "save time and space", say the newspapers.

Winter. Snowball fights. We snowballed fat dignified men in derby hats, to see them grow angry. We made ice slides; we built bonfires on the pavement, and roasted potatoes until the cop chased us and stamped the fire out.

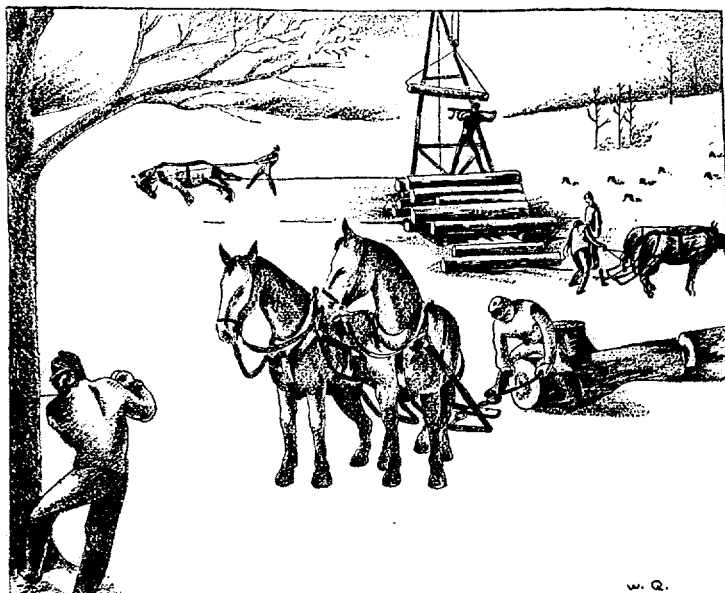
2.

Nigger, our leader organized a secret league known as the "Young Avengers of Chrystie Street." Pishtepel, Jakey Gottlieb, and I and two others were the charter members with Nigger.

Our object was to avenge wrongs done to a member, and to hold pow-wows and roast sweet potatoes.

We built a house of old lumber and junk in the vacant lots of Delancey Street, and met there nights.

The house was entered by a secret tunnel. It contained two chairs, a mattress and a lantern, and had a chimney made of tomato cans.



Clearing Timber, New Hampshire—Drawn by Walter Quirt

The walls were plastered with newspaper pictures of baseball players and prize fighters, our heroes.

We took the Indian oath of fire and blood. We pricked our thumbs and smeared the blood on paper. Then with a burning stick we branded our forearms with the mystic star.

I was the first member to be avenged. A big Irish boy who sold newspapers at Houston street and Bowery beat me up several times, and tore up my papers. "I'll murder yuh, kid, if yuh peddle around here again," he said.

The Young Avengers trailed me one afternoon. The big Irish boy as usual, rushed at me like a bulldog. But the five of us fell upon him with whoops and cries, punching and clawing in a pinwheel of gory excitement. We defeated him.

3.

This boy's family was known as one of the poorest on our street. He worried about them behind his grim mask of a little Indian. But he never whimpered; his lonely grief and pride were expressed in an abnormal pugnacity.

Nigger's father was a "journeyman" tailor. He sewed by hand the finest suits for the fashionable Fifth Avenue shops. This work could not be done in mass production by the large clothing factories. It needed the skill of individual craftsmen.

But the pay was less than that earned by a girl in an over-all factory. The craftsmen had no trade union. They were poor isolated immigrants working at home.

I will never forget Nigger's home; this place where were manufactured so many expensive suits for American judges, bankers and captains of industry.

Nigger was ashamed of it; and allowed none of the boys to call on him there. But one day my mother brought from the restaurant a box of eggs. She would have been indignant had anyone said she was stealing them. She had merely taken them; the cafeteria was rich, it had wagonloads of eggs. Why should they miss a mere dozen or two? So she sent me with half the box to Nigger's family.

I came into a dingy gaslit room. I could see two smaller rooms leading off from it, gray and spidery dens. Every inch of the flat was crowded. There were beds everywhere; a family of seven lived here.

In a corner a sick child whimpered on a mattress. Near her face stood a chamber pot. The rooms were terrifically hot. Nigger was feeding the blazing stove with lumber he had just dragged in from the street.

Toys, newspapers, pieces of cloth and tailor's trimmings littered the floors. The walls were a poisonous green. Three calendars hung on the walls. One was a chromo showing Teddy Roosevelt charging up San Juan Hill; the most popular art work of the period. There was also a large crayon enlargement in a fryspecked gold frame. It showed Nigger's father and mother on their wedding day; she standing in her white veil, holding a bouquet; he sitting in solemn bridegroom's black at a table.

The photograph had been taken during their first year in America. The faces were young, naive, European peasant faces.

The face Nigger's father turned upon me was fifteen years older. It was a skull with sharp cheekbones and nose from which the flesh had rotted as in a mummy. His eyes were large and strange. They reminded me of the eyes of a dog I had seen dying in the street.

"What do you want?" Nigger's father asked in a hoarse voice. He sat crosslegged on a table under the gasjet, hunched in the working pose of tailors. He was sewing an expensive coat. A dirty rag was tied around his throat, and a towel around his forehead. God had given him a cancer. Its faint sickly violet

smell mingled in the room with the stink of dirt, old lumber, chamber pot, bed linen, greasy dishes, and despair.

The man's eyes and his hoarse voice terrified me. I thought he was angry. I could not breathe in this hot room. I felt oppressed by it all, I couldn't tell why. I wanted to escape.

The tailor smiled at me kindly and wagged his head.

"Has the cat stolen your tongue?" he asked. "What is it, little one?"

His needle flashed in and out, sewing a millionaire's coat, and scenting it with the perfume of pauper's cancer.

I remained dumb. Nigger stepped forward belligerently his fists doubled, as if he wanted to hit me. He resented my coming here; I could tell it in his gloomy eyes.

"What the hell do you want?" he said. "Talk up."

I found my voice at last. I produced the eggs and gave them to Nigger.

"My mother sent these eggs," I stammered.

There was a crash. A stout little woman in a kimono dashed in from the next room, upsetting chairs and dishes in her crazy haste. It was Nigger's mother. She flung her arms around me.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, my darling!" she cried, smothering me with hysterical kisses. "May there be better days for all of us! May a fire burn up our enemies! They don't let me sleep at night, but I spit on them! I spit on them!"

I was appalled and bewildered.

"Malika," said the tailor quietly to his wife, "you are frightening the child, Abie, give your mother a glass of water. She is excited again."

The woman sat down and wiped her face with her apron. She drank the water, and panted with hysteria. We watched her. Finally, she reached out and took the eggs from Nigger. Her voice now was very gentle. She stroked my hair.

"What a good woman your mother is!" she said. "Tell her we are thankful. And you, too, are a good boy to bring the eggs. Thanks, my darling."

I left Nigger's home shaken. I never forgot that scene. But to Nigger it was everyday life. His mother did queer things at times that were the talk of the neighborhood. She was half-insane; her misery had poisoned her, and made her too indignant. Only the passive are "sane."

4.

Lily was five years older than her brother Nigger. She was an attractive child, with her soft olive face and great eyes. She was taken from school at an early age, and basted coats at home with her mother and another sister.

Two adults and three children worked incessantly in that family, and together never earned more than an average of \$12 weekly during a year.

Lily hated the long dreary hours of work. Her only fun was snatched when she was sent to the Fifth Avenue shop to carry back the finished suits, or to fetch the unfinished materials.

She would put down her bundle on the sidewalk, and dance to every handorgan she met. She could not resist this. Once her mother caught the dark, gay little girl dancing, and grabbed her by the hair.

"Monster! So this is where you are! Take that and that!"

"But mamma, I want to play sometimes! I must have some play!"

"Play, play!" her mother screamed, "while at home we starve! How can we work if you do not bring us the coats, but dance in the street?"

She beat the child. Lily would not leave the handorgan. There was a frantic, ugly scene between the mother and child. At last the mother subdued her, and the sobbing child said, "Yes, I'll go home."

They looked around for the bundle of coats Lily had been carrying. It had disappeared. A Bowery bum had stolen it during the excitement. He would probably sell it to some pawnshop for a dollar. Nigger's mother went out of her mind. For months



THE GRIM JOKE:— While millions of people slave and die, twenty nations meet for the protection of birds—Drawn by Louis Ribak.

she was hysterical day and night. But even in her delirium she worked, and drove the others on to work faster. The lost bundle had to be paid for.

Nigger was sent to the shops with bundles after that. Lily could not be trusted. She might play again. For years she was kept indoors all day, basting coats. At the age of fifteen she rebelled. She went to work in a paper box factory. She began to wear long dresses, and put up her hair. She flirted with boys in the hallways; she went to dances and stayed out late at night.

Her parents scolded her; but she fought back, she was earning wages, she was free at last.

One night, after a terrific quarrel in which her mother tried to beat the grown-up girl, Lily ran out of the house and didn't come back. The mother hunted for her everywhere, but couldn't find her. Weeks passed, Lily didn't appear.

Then someone saw her walking on 14th Street, with Louis One Eye. She was powdered and painted, and swung the insouciant little handbag of a prostitute. Her name was never mentioned again in Nigger's home.

Nigger said nothing. But one night, at a meeting of the Young Avengers around our campfire, he stood up and said: "Foller me, gang."

We obeyed. He led us to the roof of the tenement where Louis One-Eye kept his pigeons.

There, in the moonlight, we crawled on our bellies to the pigeon house, and broke the lock.

We entered and cut the throats of forty pigeons.

They fluttered their wings as we murdered them, then lay silent and gory.

The thick snow glittered on the roof. Skyscrapers vibrated in the distance. A black cat prowled in the snow.

We whispered to each other, and stared about us, expecting Louis. Our hands reeked with blood.

5.

Louis One-Eye may have suspected Nigger of the crime but never tried to punish him for it.

When the boy and the man met, however, they glared at each other like enemies.

Nigger's sister called at the home once, to see the children, whom she loved. The parents wouldn't talk to her.

Nigger's father died. Lily came to the funeral, but her mother refused to speak to her even then.

Lily sent money to the family by mail, and they spent it, but never answered her letters.

I met her once with Nigger, and she laughed and tried to talk to us. Nigger walked away. Lily died in a hospital at the age of 19, of what the East Side called "black syphilis."

Seven years later, when Nigger grew up, one of his first deeds as a gangster was to kill Louis One-Eye.