Value Conflicts

Mary Simkhovitch never tired of pointing out that Greenwich Village had an unusually heterogeneous population. She was aware that in the public mind the Lower East Side was more often thought of as the district with the largest concentration of foreign-born residents, but she liked to observe that compared with the Village, the Lower East Side’s immigrant masses were quite homogeneous ethnically and economically, being nearly all working-class East European Jews. By contrast, members of every economic class were found in Greenwich Village, and the neighborhood’s working-class districts were ethnically very diverse. In addition to large numbers of Irish, Italians, and blacks, there were Villagers from many other ethnic groups; in an early survey of the neighborhood, social workers from Greenwich House identified representatives of more than two dozen nationalities living on Jones Street.¹

Just as the Washington Square Association’s members and many of their working-class neighbors disagreed over what constituted the proper use of public space, Villagers were sharply divided when issues arose regarding sexual mores, alcohol consumption, leisure time activities, and criminality—all of which were significantly influenced by class and ethnic culture. Mary Simkhovitch was well aware that ethnic diversity made it difficult to build a consensus in the Village about values. “The multiplicity of elements forming such a composite district,” she wrote, “hinders the development of a common purpose to effect improvement.”²
Improvement would be achieved, Simkhovitch and her progressive reform allies believed, through efforts to repress prostitution and criminality and to enforce decorous behavior in the era’s new entertainment venues—dance halls, movie theaters, and amusement parks. Moral reform campaigns with objectives of this sort were commonplace in the Progressive Era, and such crusades typically reflected class and cultural conflicts between the native-born white Protestants who generally sponsored the campaigns and the working-class Jews, Catholics, and blacks who were the campaigns’ targets. But the Village version of this wider conflict was nevertheless unusual in that the moral reformers and the working-class people whose behavior they wished to reform lived in close proximity to each other.

The first section of this chapter describes the progressive reformers’ campaigns to impose their view of moral order. A second section examines why Village artists and writers, most of whom were from the same class as the moral reformers, took a more positive view of the emerging urban culture of their time and a more tolerant stance vis-à-vis the moral behavior of their working-class neighbors.

**The Improper Villagers**

In the late nineteenth century, Greenwich Village was not a major locale for the illicit sex business. A large part of the neighborhood was still dominated by middle- and upper-class residences, not the type of housing in which prostitution flourished. Still, the area was not totally free of vice activity, and, in fact, in the early 1890s some of the city’s most notorious vice dens were located in or near the Village.

The presence and unsavory character of these Village sites was first brought to light by the Reverend Charles Parkhurst, the most persistent and successful anti-vice investigator of the 1890s. Parkhurst, who was the minister of the Madison Square Presbyterian Church, went in disguise to various places of assignation (brothels and concert halls) throughout the city and then launched, in February 1892, a series of headline-grabbing sermons in which he charged that New York was ridden with moral decay. These exposés contributed to the public outrage that led to the victory of William Strong, the anti-Tammany mayoral candidate, in the 1894 municipal election.

According to Parkhurst’s findings and those of subsequent investigations over the next ten years, brothels and concert halls were confined to a relatively small section of the Village. This was the black-and-tan Minetta Lane–Minetta Street area, and nearby parts of Sixth Avenue, West Third Street, and Bleecker Street.
The two south Village establishments that most scandalized anti-prostitution campaigners in the 1890s were the Golden Rule Pleasure Club on West Third and The Slide on Bleecker. What made these places especially offensive to Parkhurst and his allies was that both were patronized by males seeking assignations with other males. (Female prostitutes were also available.) On his visit to the Golden Rule Pleasure Club in 1892, Parkhurst took one look at the scene—male prostitutes who wore heavy makeup, spoke in falsetto voices, and called one another by women’s names—and, as his guide recalled, “instantly turned on his heel and fled from the house at top speed.” Similarly, also in 1892, a New York Herald reporter writing about The Slide referred to it as “that most notorious of dens of iniquity in the city” and described the presence of “fashionably dressed young fellows, whose cheeks were rouged and whose manner suggested the infamy to which they had fallen.”

The Slide and the Golden Rule were forced out of business by the Strong administration in the mid-1890s, the same years that a police crackdown brought some measure of peace to the heretofore very violent Minettas. However, following the return of Tammany Democrats to power in 1897, the commercial vice trade boomed again in the Bowery–Broadway red-light districts on the eastern periphery of the Village. The election of Seth Low’s anti-Tammany administration in 1901 brought another round of crackdowns, which reached their high point in the Village on February 28, 1903, when police officers raided four south Village disorderly houses and rounded up dozens of prostitutes and their customers.

The vice trade, like a hydra-headed monster, soon arose again in the Village. Moreover it took new forms, as did the strategies and organization of anti-prostitution campaigners. Mary Simkhovitch, soon to be one of the neighborhood’s most relentless crusaders against vice, had barely gotten her Greenwich House social settlement organized when the Low administration was voted out of office in 1903. Police statistics on citations of houses of assignation during the first decade of the twentieth century show that the Village had one of the lowest citation rates in the city, but Simkhovitch and her staff could see for themselves that prostitutes and pimps were active on streets close to her Jones Street settlement. In 1905, therefore, she became a founding member of the Committee of Fourteen, a group of social workers, businessmen, and clerics whose goal it was to combat the latest institutional form that prostitution had taken in the city, the so-called Raines Law hotels.

Raines Law hotels had sprung up in the aftermath of the New York state legislature’s passage of the Raines Law in 1896. This act had created an exception to the state’s unpopular Sunday closing laws by permitting hotels to sell liquor to guests in their rooms or with meals served in dining rooms.
All that an establishment needed to qualify as a hotel was to have ten bedrooms, a dining room, and a kitchen. New York City saloon owners quickly capitalized on this loosening of the excise laws by adding the requisite number of rooms to qualify as hotels. So attractive was the prospect of lucrative profits from Sunday liquor sales that by 1905 more than a thousand Raines Law hotels were operating in Manhattan and the Bronx alone. Since the added rooms were not needed for legitimate guests, they were rented at low rates to prostitutes, with the result that Raines Law hotels supplanted the old-style brothel as the main site for assignations in the city.6

During its first five years of existence, the Committee of Fourteen tried a variety of approaches to eliminate the Raines Law hotels. These included seeking the repeal of the enabling legislation, demanding the enforcement of city ordinances to close saloons and hotels that allowed solicitation on their premises, and pressuring beer manufacturers to refuse to give financial assistance to owners of unsavory establishments who needed aid in paying liquor license fees.

Progress was slow both citywide and in the Village. In 1910, the Committee of Fourteen issued The Social Evil in New York City, a book-length evaluation of its anti-vice efforts to date. In one section of the report the committee identified five neighborhoods where the city’s vice trade was most densely concentrated, often in close connection with commercial entertainment districts. Although two of the five neighborhoods were quite close to the Village—Sixth Avenue between Twenty-third and Thirty-third streets, and East Fourteenth Street between Third and Fourth avenues—no section of Greenwich Village made the list. However, prostitutes continued to ply their trade at dozens of locations—seedy saloons, tenements, hotels (both the standard and the Raines Law variety), and streetcorners—throughout the Village.7

In 1910, the part of the Village in which prostitutes were active was, as it had been in Parkhurst’s day eighteen years earlier, confined to a fairly narrow zone on lower Sixth Avenue and the blocks in and immediately adjacent to the Minettas. It was perfectly possible for Frederick H. Whitin, a stockbroker and the long-time executive secretary of the Committee of Fourteen, who also served the cause by doing undercover investigatory work, to visit nearly every significant site in the Village’s vice zone in a single night. The following reconstruction of a hypothetical tour, based on reports he and other investigators made on the Village’s trouble spots, serves to illustrate the committee’s mode of operation and to provide a glimpse of the transgressive culture that survived despite the committee’s efforts to eradicate it (map 4).8

Traveling downtown from his home on West 113th Street and suitably
dressed for his night’s work in garish clothes that were also somewhat worn and dirty, Whitin stepped off the Sixth Avenue Elevated train at the Eighth Street station. Looking north he could see, looming above the platform just to his right, the narrow arched windows and pointed roofs of an imposing Victorian Gothic building, Jefferson Market Courthouse, which housed the Night Court where prostitutes were arraigned and tried (fig. 28). (It was also the site, in 1907 and 1908, of the two trials—the first ended in a hung jury—of Harry K. Thaw for the murder of the architect Stanford White, whom Thaw hated because Thaw’s wife, the former Evelyn Nesbit, had been seduced by White before her marriage.)

From the downtown platform of the elevated station Whitin could look up Greenwich Avenue, which ran at an angle to the northwest. Standing on the nearest corner (Christopher Street and Greenwich Avenue) was Luke O’Connor’s saloon. Not long after the Raines Law passed, O’Connor had added ten bedrooms to his establishment and opened the Columbus Hotel. The saloon offered food along with liquor as was required by the Raines Law, but none of the patrons took the offer seriously. “At the bar,” one customer remembered, “was an everlasting stack of sandwiches. One of these was served with every drink but if one had ever been eaten the waiters would have dropped dead.” Surveillance by its investigators led the Committee of Fourteen to conclude that the hotel was being used for illicit purposes. Whitin himself, in 1907, observed “many infractions,” noting specifically that the hotel was patronized by “unaccompanied women”—that is, probable prostitutes. In 1909 another investigator reported that the hotel’s register listed “too many couples to be all legitimate,” a large turnover of guests being typical of use by prostitutes and their clients. Under pressure from the Committee of Fourteen, O’Connor agreed that the hotel would in the future be for men only. However, when a committee investigator returned later in 1909, he again found what he called “suspicious” entries in the hotel’s register. Revisiting the place in 1910, the committee’s agent concluded that the register now looked satisfactory, but that the “rear room [was] suspicious.” O’Connor’s, like many saloons of the time, had a front room used mainly or exclusively by men and a back room for women or couples. The word “suspicious” suggests that the investigator observed single men and unaccompanied women socializing in a way that might indicate solicitation.

O’Connor’s saloon and hotel were at the northern end of the Village’s trouble zone. This was a seven-block-long commercial strip along Sixth Avenue from Eighth Street south to the Minettas. Socially, this part of the Village was a borderland between the mixed ethnic (but mainly Irish and Italian) middle- and working-class west Village and the classier residential
area around Washington Square North and lower Fifth Avenue. Since it ran underneath the elevated line’s tracks, Sixth Avenue down to West Third, where the elevated turned east, was almost always in partial or complete shade. This, combined with the noise of trains passing overhead every two to six minutes between 5:15 A.M. and midnight, contributed to the avenue’s general shabbiness.11

At the bottom of the elevated line’s stairs, Whitin crossed the street to the east side of Sixth Avenue. On the northeast corner of the intersection were the two small businesses that absorbed so much of the Washington Square Association’s attention, Antonio Mastrino’s bootblack stand and
Charles Gordon’s newsstand. Immediately behind the stands was the Clinton Place Hotel, one of the Committee of Fourteen’s perennial problem cases. In 1909, after receiving repeated reports that the Clinton Place Hotel was the site of suspicious activity, the committee gave it an “AH” designation, an internal rating meaning that they considered it an assignation hotel, one definition of which was a lodging place “whose principal business is furnishing accommodations to men and ‘wives’ without baggage and staying less than twenty-four hours.” Despite pressure from the committee on the police and the surety companies that financed the establishment’s liquor license, the hotel stayed in business through the early 1910s.12

As he proceeded south on Sixth, Whitin passed two places where the committee’s pressure had produced somewhat more satisfactory results.
28. The Sixth Avenue Elevated line at Jefferson Market Courthouse. From *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*; courtesy of the Library of Congress.
One block south of St. Joseph’s, on the same side of the street as the church, was Cadigan’s, a saloon without an attached hotel. Although it was an Irish-owned saloon in an Irish neighborhood, it had a mixed-race clientele and did a booming business. According to the investigator’s notes from 1907, the back room was “so full of those of both sexes and races that there was no vacant place.” In an example of the uncooperative response the committee initially received from many municipal authorities, Judge Matthew Breen (an honorary member of the County Clare Men’s Society) dismissed a police citation against Cadigan. Before much else could be done, the owner, Agnes Cadigan, had died, and a new proprietor took control. Two years later conditions had improved somewhat.13

One block farther down Sixth, on the other side of the street, was another Irish saloon owned by a woman proprietor, Mamie Curtin. Curtin’s was reported as an assignation house in 1905, the first year of the Committee of Fourteen’s operation. The committee achieved quick success here because both the brewer and the surety company that had backed the place removed their support and Curtin abandoned the business. By 1907 a new licensee had taken over and the committee’s investigator initially reported “all quiet.” A subsequent visit turned up evidence of illegal Sunday sales, a less serious infraction than vice activities but still a bad sign from the committee’s viewpoint.14

Thomas Wallace’s Golden Swan, located in the same block as Curtin’s, was rarely all quiet. A rowdy Irish pub that also attracted African Americans, Village gangsters, and slumming artists and writers, the Golden Swan came under fire from the committee in 1911–1912. When charged with excise violations, Wallace, an ex-boxer who had owned his Village saloon since the mid-1870s, resolutely defended his interests. He hired Patrick McManus, an Irish American attorney who specialized in cases that arose out of excise violations and had considerable success in winning them. Although the court determined that a violation had taken place, the case was settled out of court and discontinued later in 1912, leaving the “Hell Hole,” as it was known to its aficionados, open for business as usual (fig. 29).15

As Whitin walked down Sixth Avenue and crossed West Third Street, he reached the Village’s most unsavory area. Before the mid-1920s, Sixth Avenue terminated at the corner of Minetta Lane and Carmine Street, the site of two of the worst dives still open in the Village. Both the West Side Cafe at 2–4 Carmine and the Green Cup Cafe next door at 6 Carmine were black-and-tan (i.e., mixed-race) saloons. Committee of Fourteen undercover agents visited both on many occasions and kept more detailed notes on them than on any other sites in the Village.

Investigators usually tried to visit these saloons in the late evening when
they were likely to be busiest. Of the Green Cup Cafe one undercover agent wrote: “This place is even worse than its twin on the corner [the West Side Cafe]. Coloured prostitutes infest the backroom and bar. It is a most disorderly place and it and No. 2 [the West Side Cafe] should be ‘straightened.’” On several occasions when the private detectives visited it the Green Cup’s bar room was full of black and white men. Whiskey sold for a nickel a shot and there were many takers. One investigator reported, as evidence of vice transactions in progress, that he saw a black “wench” go out a back door with a white man and that he overheard a black man ask a black woman, “Have you made five yet?” (At fifty cents to one dollar per trick, five dollars would have taken a while to earn.) On another visit, the committee’s detective noted the brash insouciance of the black “wenches” who patronized the place. He described one woman as being “seated on top of a table with her clothes halfway up her back” and arguing with another black woman who was standing in the middle of the floor. The detective seemed both awed

and appalled by the seated woman’s forthright and filthy speech. “Her flow of language,” he wrote, “was remarkable, and her use of profanity and obscene expressions baffles description.”

The last stop on this hypothetical tour would have been the West Side Cafe on the corner of Carmine and Minetta Lane. “This,” one detective wrote, using the slang racial epithets common in the era, “is a bad coloured joint supplied by nigger men and nigger prostitutes from Minetta Lane and its environs,” a place “so vicious that a policeman is on the corner for duty.” The front room had a piano and a phonograph to provide entertainment for the saloon’s patrons. As he entered this room, the committee’s agent observed “nigger wenches” drinking at the bar, several “coons” playing dice, and some “white men standing around.” The back room he described as “a 'hore house in distress (simply rotten).” An Italian named Nick was hugging Mamie, a black woman. Another black woman came in and said, “Christ, look at Nick loving Mamie.” A young white girl, who the investigator estimated to be about twelve years old, came to the back door of the saloon with a pail and some money, and Nick got up to fill her pail with beer or ale.

The detailed notes taken by undercover agents provide rare glimpses of saloon culture, including the language and the social interactions of these lower-class New Yorkers. On one occasion, the committee’s agent observed an obviously drunk black woman enter the cafe to buy cigarettes from the black bartender. “Did you hear,” she asked the bartender, “that Sadie got ‘punched?’ ” (Sadie had been arrested and taken to night court at Jefferson Market Courthouse to “explain how it happened.”) Continuing her monologue, the cigarette buyer added that she herself had just been warned to move on by the policeman on the corner: “About five minutes ago the cop said to me, ‘Beat it.’ But I said, ‘You cocksucker! I can’t walk fast; my feet are sore.’ He said, ‘Don’t you see Lennon coming?’ I said, ‘Fuck Lennon.’ ”

A short while later the agent overheard another exchange among the bar’s patrons. Ida, another black woman, came in to get a half pint of whiskey. Upon her arrival a black man named Jim got up and abruptly left the room. Lottie looked around and asked the crowd, “Did you see Jim blow when Ida came in? Why G[od] D[amn] it, I don’t want her Jim.” When the detective later got up to leave, Lottie turned to him and addressed him familiarly: “Are you going, Sweetie?” He replied, “Sure,” and left.

The full identities of most patrons of the Green Cup Cafe and its twin next door are unknown; only Louis Seiderman, the Polish-born Jew who ran the Green Cup from 1905 into the early 1910s, can be identified for certain in the 1910 census. (He lived with his wife and young son upstairs from the saloon.) Whatever else can be said about the individuals who pa-
tronized the Carmine Street dives, they showed staying power in the face of repeated assaults on their presence. The reformers expressed disgust with the wide-open practice of prostitution in the Minettas and were repelled by the mixed-race nature of the participants, but even with the law and—as they saw it—morality on their side, the anti-vice campaigners had little immediate success in their efforts to reform the area. Early in their campaign against Seiderman’s saloon, the Committee of Fourteen took police evidence to a judge, but he threw the case out on a technicality. By the early 1910s, Seiderman had sold out. Although his successor signed an agreement with the committee in 1915 not to allow solicitation on the premises, the Green Cup Cafe was still on the committee’s probation list in 1916 and 1917.18

Well before those years, Mary Simkhovitch had concluded that the only way to end debauchery in the Minettas once and for all would be to raze the area and create a playground for Village children. Her idea was finally drawn up as a formal proposal in the early 1910s, at which point it was endorsed by the Washington Square Association and forwarded to the appropriate city officials. In the absence of any immediate action on her playground proposal, Simkhovitch and her allies continued to pursue more piecemeal measures. In 1912, the Committee of Fourteen, the police, and building owners succeeded in closing several brothels and in breaking up a “cadet club” (a gang of pimps) in the Minettas. Prostitutes still frequented “two tough saloons”—the Green Cup and West Side cafes—but, statistically speaking, the number of places where prostitutes were active in the Minettas and the Village as a whole was down by perhaps 40 percent.19

In *The Social Evil in New York City*, the 1910 publication of the Committee of Fourteen, the authors reported that although the nature of the vice trade had been changed by twentieth-century urban conditions, the evolving situation was more insidious than before. For most of the nineteenth century, prostitution had been centered mainly in “disorderly houses” and had been tolerated as a necessary outlet for the male sex drive. Now, however, the authors found that prostitution was no longer “the simple process of a man seeking a woman in a place kept for such a purpose,” and that it had become “the center of an elaborate system . . . fostered by business interests.”20

The business interests in question were those associated with the commercial entertainment industry, which expanded at an explosive pace in the first decade of the twentieth century. In that period amusement parks added capacity, hundreds of new dance halls opened, and motion picture theaters spread throughout the city, their numbers growing tenfold (from fifty to five hundred) between 1900 and 1910—all to serve a growing urban audience. But according to the Committee of Fourteen, the expansion of these
mass audience commercial entertainments was fostering a culture of freer self-expression and contributing to the emergence of a new morality in which looser sexual behavior was becoming more acceptable among women as well as men. The new culture of pleasure-seeking was, the committee feared, particularly attractive to young people, many of them recent arrivals in the city, whose migration there for work had the effect of “breaking the moorings of the past.” In the absence of moral restraints that parents and neighbors once would have enforced, these young people were, in the committee’s view, in danger of becoming sexually promiscuous and even of being lured into the vice trade that flourished in the Raines Law hotels found near many dance halls and amusement parks.  

Before 1910, Greenwich Village had few such commercial entertainment outlets within its borders. Three movie theaters operated in the Carmine Street–Bleecker Street Italian enclave, and a dance academy that taught the new dance styles did business briefly in the west Village, but the paucity of public entertainments was no obstacle to those drawn to such activities. There were many such establishments within easy walking distance on the Lower East Side, and for a few nickels in carfare one could reach much more distant locales, including Coney Island.

If it was difficult for the Village’s moral guardians to clean up their own neighborhood, it was even harder for them to control businesses like the emerging motion picture industry or the burgeoning public dance halls that drew young Villagers to locations outside the neighborhood. The great popularity of these recreational activities is suggested by Louise Bolard More in her 1907 study of Greenwich Village workers’ budgets: she noted that as workers’ incomes rose above the level required for basic needs, they tended to spend a disproportionate amount of the surplus on recreation.

The Committee of Fourteen’s particular concern about public dance halls was that “outwardly they seem fairly respectable to the ordinary stranger.” However, appearances were deceiving:

The greatest danger lies in the fact that hotel accommodations may be easily secured in the same building or nearby, and that women are expected to drink with their partners. Another source of danger to the respectable girl at these dances is the constant companionship night after night with immoral women who predominate in places of this type. They appear in gowns far beyond the reach of the average working girl and she gradually becomes dissatisfied with her own personal appearance, and is soon seeking the acquaintance of men who will either give her money or presents.

The committee’s concern with the public dance hall environment’s impact on young women—rather than its impact on both men and women—is
quite revealing. That unmarried men frequented such places was no great change; that respectable young women did so was a disturbing departure from traditional social practice.23

Establishing the standards of social conduct and public behavior that would prevail in the new century was not a struggle limited to the public sphere. It was also a matter of discussion between parents and children. Susie Fromella’s story is a case in point. In 1910 a Catholic social worker wrote Father Demo of Our Lady of Pompei on behalf of Mrs. Maria Fromella, an Italian-born mother of eight who lived at 19 Jones Street. Mrs. Fromella was having trouble with her daughter Susie, age fifteen. The family was quite poor. Mr. Fromella was a truck driver, and his two oldest daughters, Jennie and Susie, worked in a paper box factory (probably the one that was across the street next to Greenwich House). The trouble, the social worker wrote Demo, was that Susie “wants more liberty than her mother wishes her to have. She works all day in a factory, and like most young people wants some recreation.” Traditionally, unmarried Italian girls stayed home and did no socializing outside the family and church. Grace Gazzola, a south Village garment worker who was also the daughter of Italian immigrants, remembered that she had “never [been] allowed to go out. Not even on a Saturday night with her girl friends.” But those were the old rules, and Susie Fromella clearly didn’t think they applied to a working girl like herself in New York City in 1910.24

Freedom to socialize away from the vigilant eye of parents and neighbors was one feature that drew young New Yorkers to public dance halls, but another source of their allure was the new style of dancing. Older dance fashions—the waltz, two-step, Virginia Reel, and barn dance in which partners followed patterned movements—were now replaced by styles that emphasized improvisational movement done to a ragtime beat. The fact that ragtime, a rhythm developed in southern black dives in the 1890s, was gaining such popularity indicated that the new dance styles were percolating up from below. The names of the new dances that surfaced as early as 1910—the Turkey Trot, Bunny Hug, Lame Duck, and Grizzly Bear, a veritable animal kingdom of dances—further reinforced the feeling that old social controls were being cast aside. As one scholar has remarked, “The wonderful nomenclature of the dances, taken from the barnyard, added to the general tone of exuberance, unpretentiousness, and informality between the sexes.”25

From her vantage point in Greenwich Village, Mary Simkhovitch worried about these trends. She took an active role in repressing what she called the “dubious dancing academy” that set up for business near the settlement. But she found it equally troubling that the Village lacked facilities where young people could gather for wholesome recreation, and in 1907 Green-
wich House began to sponsor dances for the youth of the neighborhood. In the next few years, as the number of public dance halls in the nearby Lower East Side and midtown West Side areas grew, Simkhovitch expanded her efforts. In 1911 the settlement rented and refurbished a building at 18 Jones Street. Dances were scheduled for three nights a week, with the settlement organizing the programs and providing chaperones. According to a report written later in 1911, Simkhovitch was not too pleased with the results. “There were,” she wrote, “many difficulties in maintaining order and a proper standard of conduct.” Perhaps young Villagers accustomed to the freedoms allowed in public dance halls simply were not willing to accept the standards of decorum the settlement folk sought to maintain. But Simkhovitch, ever the pragmatist, went on to say, “It is inevitable that a certain kind of deterioration exist while new standards are struggling to emerge. It is hopeless to maintain the old. The only way is to fight through to the new.”

Gangsters, like prostitutes, sex-seeking saloon patrons, and the owners of dubious dance academies, qualified in Simkhovitch’s mind as disorderly Villagers. But Simkhovitch recognized that one type of gang, the youth gang, was not in and of itself a disturbing phenomenon. A natural outgrowth of school-age boys playing with neighbors on the same or adjacent blocks, the youth gang was ubiquitous throughout the neighborhood. Hanging out with one’s pals often took entirely harmless forms: playing baseball or football in streets or vacant lots, pitching pennies, throwing craps, playing cards, and smoking. (One social worker reported that the typical West Side street urchin “smokes incessantly,” starting as early as age six.) Boy gangs also frequently fought rival gangs in turf wars, the usual weapons being fists, “clubs, stones, and beer bottles.” More dangerous weapons, knives or revolvers, were not widely used by school-age gang members.

The neighborhood’s youth gangs did become troubling to Simkhovitch, however, when their members’ activities brought them into conflict with the law. If the lure of the street became stronger than the attraction of staying in school, truancy was the result. Petty theft was widespread, and some forms—stealing lumber from a construction site or coal from an unguarded cellar—had the tacit approval of poor parents who sent their children out to locate fuel and didn’t ask questions about where the youngsters found the much-needed combustibles. Pilfering small items from local stores or packages from freight wagons was more likely to produce a police record. These minor crimes did not inevitably lead youths to become criminals as adults, but that choice, if made, generally came quite early in a boy’s life—usually around the age of fourteen, when school attendance was no longer compulsory and the boy dropped out of school and either found a legitimate job or joined an adult gang.

Unlike the relatively minor harm that resulted from the unlawful activi-
ties of youth gangs, crimes committed by the city’s adult gangsters—muggings, major thefts, armed assault, and murder—did serious injury to New Yorkers’ property and persons.

As measured by the ratio of police arrests to population, the west Village ranked just below the average level of general criminal activity among city police precincts at the turn of the century. However, the Mercer Street precinct, in which the upscale Washington Square North was located, had a higher crime rate, largely because its boundaries included the south Village slum area around the Minettas and the notoriously crime-ridden Broadway–Bowery district to the east of the Village.29

At the turn of the century the principal Greenwich Village adult gang was the Hudson Dusters. The gang’s name apparently was derived from its members’ home turf, the tough dock area between the river and Hudson Street, and from their liberal use of “dust” (cocaine). A few sources suggest, less persuasively, that the hoodlums were so called because of their practice of using brass knuckles to “dust off” victims. Whatever the case, little is known of the history of this Irish American gang in the years immediately after it coalesced in the late 1890s. Apparently the activities of the original gang went largely unrecorded because the Dusters avoided the spectacular shootouts and murderous feuds that characterized the histories of some of their contemporaries.30

Not that the early Hudson Dusters were pacifists. They specialized in violent but low-level crimes such as mugging drunken sailors and other unwary citizens. Although the gang’s name did not appear in the newspaper accounts of it, a theft and beating that occurred in 1904 during a band concert in Washington Square had the Dusters’ signature written all over it. Joseph Perry, a part-time truck driver and sometime pickpocket, attempted to steal a male concertgoer’s gold watch. As Perry lifted the watch from its owner’s pocket, the watch’s chain broke, alerting the victim to the theft in progress. He shouted an alarm and Perry fled, with a policeman, John P. Shea, in hot pursuit. Shea collared Perry under Washington Arch but was immediately attacked by a dozen or more of the thief’s confederates, who stabbed the officer in the forehead and kicked and beat him, breaking three of his ribs. Officer Shea might have suffered even worse injuries, except that other police arrived, routed Perry’s pals, and took Perry into custody. Perry gave his age as nineteen and his address as 400 Hudson Street.31

In the 1910s the Dusters were still the Village’s dominant gang, but such was the violent and often short life of the era’s gangsters that although the gang’s name and Irish American ethnicity had not changed, its most famous early members (Kid Yorke, Circular Jack, and Goo Goo Knox) had disappeared from the scene. The gang’s new leader was Mike Costello, and his
chief henchmen were Richard “Red” Farrell, Rickey Harrison, and Robert “Rubber” Shaw. According to Edward Swann, a municipal judge and a close observer of the city’s gangs, the Hudson Dusters were a type of gang he identified as “feudists,” which were basically adult versions of schoolboy gangs. The Dusters fought with rival gangs that ventured into the Village, indulged in fairly low-risk criminal activities such as stealing unguarded cargo from the docks, and whiled away their idle hours drinking, dancing, and snorting cocaine at their Hudson Street hangouts. But even as Swann wrote this appraisal, the Dusters were becoming more like a second type of gang composed of “gunmen” who were, as Swann put it, “cold, calculated assassins for hire,” specializing in major crimes: murder, armed robbery, and extortion.

The gunman type of gang had recently achieved a new level of organizational development. Shortly after Jack Zelig, the leader of Monk Eastman’s old gang of Lower East Side Jewish thugs, was gunned down by rivals in 1912, his successor, Dopey Benny Fein, engineered an intergang agreement that produced a price list for services rendered—murder, extortion, beatings, arson—and tried to establish territorial monopolies within which each gang would operate. Dopey Benny’s diplomatic genius was such that he got even the Hudson Dusters to commit themselves to the new scheme of things, and this commitment probably explains why the Dusters suddenly abandoned their tradition of low-profile crime and became a more disruptive force in politics, union-management relations, and public life during the crime wave that hit New York in the mid-1910s.

On primary day, September 17, 1913, carloads of Hudson Dusters and their sometime allies, the Gopher Gang from the West Thirties and Forties, engaged in a shootout from automobiles with members of the Sirocco Gang. Most of the thugs escaped, but the police captured four toughs from the Gopher–Hudson Duster contingent. A search of their pockets produced six bundles of paper slips with the names of registered voters on them. The plan apparently was that the each hoodlum would go to as many as six polling places, claim to be someone named on the slips, and vote for a candidate backed by one of the rival Tammany factions josting for control of the district. Although the precincts in question were located in the West Sixties, the primary day ruckus there was a ripple effect of a struggle to fill the power vacuum caused by the recent disappearance of the Lower East Side’s Democratic boss, Big Tim Sullivan. By venturing so far from their usual turf and engaging in a gun battle, the Hudson Dusters played a small role in the events that, according to the New York Times, made the 1913 municipal election “the most violent election in years.” Public disgust with well-publicized ties between gangsters and machine Democrats con-
tributed to the election of an anti-Tammany Democrat, John Purroy Mitchel, as mayor in November.35

On taking office in January 1914, Mayor Mitchel ordered police to get tough with gangsters. His words were welcomed by Thomas O’Sullivan, a patrolman in the west Village’s Charles Street precinct. O’Sullivan had already launched a personal campaign against Village gangsters, having arrested “Red” Farrell, a leading Duster, the previous November. O’Sullivan now set out to bring charges against every Hudson Duster he could, and over the next eleven months he managed to apprehend nine more members of the gang. Included in this number was Mike Costello, the gang’s leader, who was picked up and briefly incarcerated at Elmira State Prison for his part in a violent November 1914 altercation over gambling debts that left one man dead. Indirect evidence suggests that Costello’s right-hand man, Rickey Harrison, was also arrested during O’Sullivan’s anti-Duster crusade.36

The Dusters’ code required retaliation. Around 2 a.m. on Christmas Day, 1914, two gangsters they had hired for the job (the Dusters couldn’t do it themselves because O’Sullivan would have recognized them and not fallen into their trap) approached O’Sullivan and claimed to be plainclothes detectives who had a suspect cornered in a nearby building and needed help in arresting the man. O’Sullivan ran with them to a vacant tenement and entered it, at which point the two thugs attacked and beat him nearly to death, breaking his nose, knocking out three teeth, and stabbing him eight times in the neck and head. The Dusters’ Gopher Gang allies were so impressed by this achievement that one thug wrote a poem about it that was widely distributed; copies were even delivered to the police of the Charles Street Station where O’Sullivan was posted.37

This brazen attack and equally brazen poetic taunt took place as the Dusters entered the final and most violent phase of their history. In addition to their participation in political conflicts, they managed to get mixed up in an often vicious struggle between corrupt labor unions and union-bashing businesses. Just before the Dusters’ attack on O’Sullivan, a wholesale poultry merchant named Barney Baff had been murdered at his place of business in the northwest corner of the Village. Although newspaper reporters and the police failed to uncover any direct connection between Baff’s killers and the Dusters, the murder had happened on their turf, and for reasons no one could determine they got caught — quite literally — in the crossfire that followed soon after the killing. Three months later, in March 1915, Mike Costello was slightly wounded when he and two other men who had formed an independent teamsters’ union were attacked by representatives of the national union. One of Costello’s companions, Luke Doyle, who also happened to be a material witness in the Baff case, was fatally wounded in the incident.38
The Hudson Dusters’ days were numbered. Rickey Harrison, who was listed in the Police Department’s Rogues’ Gallery as the “Greenwich Village Terror,” was arrested in 1918 during an armed robbery; he escaped from jail, only to be immediately recaptured. The following year another leading Duster, “Rubber” Shaw, suspected of having murdered a rival gang leader, was himself gunned down in Hoboken, New Jersey, slain by a barrage of fifteen shots fired from a passing automobile. Mike Costello, thought by the police to have set up his old sidekick, went into hiding. As the decade ended the leading Dusters were either dead, incarcerated, or on the run. New Village gangs arose in the 1920s, but as the neighborhood and the nation had changed, so too did crime and criminals in the Village. The Jazz Age Village gangster, like the Village’s overall population, was now more often Italian than Irish, and his crime of choice was frequently bootlegging, a by-product of the era’s recently instituted national prohibition law.

**Village Artists at Work and Play**

Villagers who belonged to one of the neighborhood’s artistic or literary communities in the early 1910s generally occupied a middle ground in the controversies that arose regarding personal morality and public entertainments. These artists and writers—a group that included magazine illustrators and journalists as well as novelists, short story writers, painters, and sculptors—were, like the vice reformers, educated, well traveled, and middle class or higher in status. But unlike the vice reformers, the Village artists and writers, especially the younger ones, found themselves more fascinated than repelled by their working-class neighbors’ behavior. Where reformers saw debauchery, the artists saw potential for a story or a picture. Where the reformers warned of the dangers of cheap amusements, the artists were more inclined to join in the fun, and when reformers identified behaviors they wanted to regulate or suppress, the artists, as individualists devoted to artistic freedom and self-expression, were more likely to argue for tolerance.

The heart of the matter in each of these differences was that vice reformers sought to establish the boundaries of appropriate behavior, while the artistic and literary Villagers felt that their life’s work required the freedom to move back and forth across those boundaries. Hutchins Hapgood, in the introduction to his book *Types from City Streets*, published in 1910, aptly described this boundary-testing spirit when he said of himself, “I have been for several years what I may call an intellectual and esthetic adventurer; and my adventures have led me for the most part among people who are generally regarded as ‘low.’”

Of course, living in the Village or using neighborhood scenes in their art
did not necessarily lead Hapgood’s contemporaries to adopt his unabashed unconventionality. These artists and writers were too numerous and independent-minded to fit any single mold, and for many, particularly the novelists, Greenwich Village served as little more than a picturesque backdrop for stories they wanted to tell. Indeed, the phenomenon of giving novels and stories a Village setting was so common that Arthur B. Maurice, in a series of articles written in 1900 on New York City in literature, declared: “An imaginary circle, with its centre in the white Memorial Arch [in Washington Square] and a radius of five or six hundred yards, would hold fully one-half of what is best in the local colour of New York fiction.” Maurice went on to illustrate his point with examples, most of them from books now deservedly forgotten; yet even limiting the evidence to the most important late nineteenth-century writers, his case holds up well. Henry James’s classic *Washington Square* (1881) offered readers a masterful description of the patrician Village in the mid-1800s, a world James recalled from his childhood and his visits to his grandmother’s mansion on Washington Square North, which he used as the model for Dr. Sloper’s house. In *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889) William Dean Howells has his expatriate Bostonians, Basil and Isabel March, stay at a hotel near Washington Square while they exhaust themselves searching for a suitable apartment. Among a younger generation of writers, Theodore Dreiser, an occasional Villager himself, used 112 West Thirteenth Street as the place where Carrie Meeber and George Hurstwood lived in *Sister Carrie* (1900).41

Many Village authors used scenes from the neighborhood not simply because they were picturesque, but because they lent themselves to the exploration of a liminal cultural landscape. Washington Square South, which Howells had described as composed of “lodging-houses, shops, beer gardens, and studios,” is a case in point. Where patrician members of the Washington Square Association saw signs of the neighborhood’s decline, the young writer David Graham Phillips, who lived in a Washington Square South rooming house while writing his first novel, *The Great God Success* (1901), viewed the scene from his window in a very different way. Below him, he saw what he called the “panorama of the human race.” Visible on the south side of the square were “actresses, dancers, shop girls, cocottes, touts, thieves, confidence-men; artists and students from the musty University building, tramps and drunkards from the ‘barrel-houses’ and ‘stale-beer shops’; and, across the square to the north, representatives of New York’s oldest and most noted families.” This juxtaposition of aspiration (and also failure) on one side and established wealth on the other appealed to Phillips and offered dramatic contrasts that he exploited in his fiction.42

Besides its dramatic possibilities, the south side of the square attracted
young artists and writers like Phillips because rents were relatively low, inexpensive restaurants were near at hand, and a loosely knit artists’ colony composed of men and women in their twenties and thirties existed among the residents of Washington Square South’s boarding houses. In 1910, for instance, more than 60 percent of the lodgers in the best-known rooming houses (numbers 45, 60, and 61) were artists, illustrators, magazine writers, newspaper reporters, musicians, music teachers, or playwrights. In this setting, fact and fiction mirrored each other. David Graham Phillip’s Howard of *The Great God Success*, like Neith Boyce (who had once lived on Washington Square South), was a journalist; Stephen F. Whitman’s Felix Piers, the central figure in a melodramatic novel, *Predestined* (1910), was, like Phillips, a newspaper reporter hoping to become a novelist; and Willa Cather’s Don Hedger in “Coming, Aphrodite!” (1920) represented another familiar Washington Square South type, the aspiring artist who supported himself as a magazine illustrator while trying to launch his career as a serious artist.43

Willa Cather moved into a small rooming house at 60 Washington Square South in 1906. She was nearly thirty-three years old, had published short stories and a book of poetry, and had come to the city to join the staff of a major monthly magazine, *McClure’s*. The magazine’s dynamic and sometimes irascible owner, S. S. McClure, had recently had a falling out with his senior editors and writers, four of whom, led by Lincoln Steffens, had resigned, leaving McClure in desperate need of new staff. He recruited Cather, whom he knew through her writing, and soon promoted her to the job of managing editor.

In the years that Cather served in that capacity, 1906–1911, the magazine business was undergoing a dramatic transformation. Just as entrepreneurs in nonprint entertainment businesses (theaters, movies, and dance halls) were reaching for a wider audience, so too were the publishers and editors of magazines. By lowering their cover prices to ten cents or even a nickel, capitalizing on advertising revenue available from huge consumer products companies that were seeking to promote their goods to an emerging national market, and using livelier graphics and photographs to attract general readers, magazines tapped what one scholar called “a vast new audience” of subscribers. Part of Cather’s task as managing editor was to recruit authors, both established writers and neophytes, whose work would keep *McClure’s*, known for its muckraking articles and quality fiction, competitive with folksier and visually more flashy journals such as *Collier’s*.44

One of the novices Cather encouraged was Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, a 1903 graduate of Bryn Mawr College who showed up at *McClure’s* offices one day in January 1910. Cather—“youngish, buoyant, not tall, rather square”—met Sergeant in an outer office and led her to her private office.
There she began to scan Sergeant’s manuscript, a piece of investigatory journalism on sweatshop conditions in New York City tenement districts. Cather soon said she liked the objective tone of the piece, but then demanded to know why Sergeant was drawn to exposé journalism rather than to short story writing. Sergeant protested that the social wrongs she wrote about were too terrible to be ignored.

An example of the type of situation Sergeant had in mind was the story of the Rapallos, an Italian family of nine, who lived in a three-room apartment on Macdougal Street in the south Village. Mr. Rapallo had been out of work for two years, so Mrs. Rapallo and the five oldest children eked out a marginal existence by earning $4.50 a week making artificial flowers for hat decorations and corsages. (73 percent of the work in this large American industry was done in Italian sections of the Village and the Lower East Side.) Sergeant had heard through a mutual acquaintance that Cather, while on a visit to Italy, had admired Italian women “sitting in the sun, by the fountain in Naples, brushing their long black hair,” and she reminded Cather of this, pointing out that the same women, once they immigrated to New York, had to work themselves nearly to death in “vile, dark tenements below Washington Square.” According to Sergeant, “Miss Cather brooded and rather gruffly replied that she knew the Italian children, because they splashed in the fountain in Washington Square of a summer evening when she often sat on a bench with a book. She lived in Washington Place, right up against the Italian Quarter I was talking about, and she loved the big brown eyes, dark smooth skins and Latin voices of the youngsters.” Sergeant’s essay became the lead article in *McClure’s* July 1910 issue, complete with a photograph of Mrs. Rappolo and three of her children making artificial flowers.45

Cather remained a Villager for more than three decades. In September 1908, she and her friend Edith Lewis rented an apartment at 82 Washington Place. While still living at that address, Cather, in 1910–1911, reached a turning point in her career. Growing restive with editorial work that distracted her from her own creative development, she took a leave of absence from the magazine. Remembering the advice “to find your own quiet centre of life, and write from that” given her some two years before by the writer Sarah Orne Jewett, Cather discovered her own original voice and began her brilliant exploration of midwestern themes, the first of which was a long short story called “The Bohemian Girl,” published in *McClure’s* in 1912. About a year later, she and Lewis moved to yet another Village address, 5 Bank Street, where they remained until 1927. Though all of Cather’s greatest books—*O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, The Professor’s House,* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*—were written during the years that she lived in the Vil-
lage, their subjects were definitely not of it. Only one short story, “Coming, Aphrodite!,” published in 1920 as the lead piece in *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, used a Village setting, the Washington Square South house where she roomed from 1906 to 1908.46

This finely wrought story operates on several levels. It is a superb description of the physical setting: the seedy, cramped house whose inhabitants live in an atmosphere of forced intimacy, sharing sounds, smells, and the common bath, for which they must stand in line outside the door in their dressing gowns waiting for their turn to come. Then, in what is surely the most erotic passage in all of Cather’s work, there is the scene of the artist-illustrator, Don Hedger, watching through a keyhole as his new neighbor, Eden Bower, a beautiful singer, does her exercises in the nude. Fictional though this incident is, it conveys how social relations among the single men and women who lived in the rooming houses of Washington Square South inevitably had sexual undertones, if not overtones. Finally, as Hedger and Bower become friends and lovers, the focus is not so much on a love story but on the debate that arises between them over what an artist should value most: artistic integrity, to which Hedger is committed, or celebrity and commercial success, which Eden Bower seeks.

Integrity or popularity: the subject was a perennial one where artists gathered; only the places where they gathered changed. In 1900 two of the most popular artists’ hangouts had been the Black Cat on Bleecker and Maria’s at its second site, West Twelfth Street. By 1907, however, Maria Daprato had moved her hotel and restaurant again, this time out of the Village altogether, and the original Black Cat had closed. For artists and writers wanting a cheap meal, Mama Bertolotti’s on West Third Street under the elevated line offered a “Fifteen Cent Lunch.” Those who could afford a classier though still modestly priced Italian place had a variety of choices, one being Renganeschi’s at 139 West Tenth Street. According to one man who dined there in 1907, “For forty cents you get the most complete dinner, with wine, that can be found in the city” (fig. 30).47

The artist John Sloan made several visits to Renganeschi’s in 1909 and 1910. On one of those occasions he was joined by his distinguished artist friend Robert Henri and Henri’s second wife, Marjorie Organ. She was a native of Ireland whose parents had brought their family to New York in 1899. The Organs had lived on Waverly Place, and Marjorie had attended St. Joseph’s School on Washington Square, but in subsequent years the Organs had moved out of Greenwich Village. These small changes—an Irish family moving out of the neighborhood and an Italian restaurant, Renganeschi’s, opening for business just around the corner from that family’s old home—reflected the larger demographic trends that would soon bring an
end to Irish dominance in a part of the west Village that had once been an Irish preserve. 48

Another artists’ rendezvous in the Village was Gonfarone’s, which, according to one chronicler of bohemian life “rose into prominence at the corner of Eighth and Macdougal Streets as a resort of scribes, artists, cranks, and lovers” after Maria’s moved farther uptown. Here Stephen F. Whitman’s fictional hero Felix sat, watching “the patrons round him, their
feet twisted behind chair-legs, their elbows on the table, all arguing with gesticulations. Sometimes, there floated to him such phrases as: ‘bad color scheme!’ ‘sophomoric treatment!’ ‘miserable drawing!’ ‘no atmosphere!’ ”

Gonfarone’s was a restaurant with an attached hotel, whose original owner was a widow named Caterina Gonfarone. She had recently made her longtime manager, Anacleto Sermolino, a full partner in the ownership and operation of the place. About the time she did so, in 1906 or 1907, the Committee of Fourteen had begun its inspections of all hotels. But Gonfarone’s, which investigators described as a “legitimate hotel,” never gave the committee cause for concern.

Anacleto Sermolino’s daughter Maria later recalled that “Madama” Gonfarone’s started out as a tiny basement restaurant that initially attracted only Italians, and that even these customers were exclusively northern Italians like Madama and the Sermolino family. The energetic Anacleto soon talked Madama into moving the dining room upstairs, getting a liquor license, and expanding into several small neighboring houses on MacDougal and Eighth. Even though Madama worried about having to borrow money to pay for this expansion plan, Papa Sermolino (as Anacleto was called) made it work out. He pampered his customers, offered seven-course meals for fifty to sixty cents (“including a pint of California red wine; imported wine was ten cents extra”), and hired trios of musicians, at least one of whom had to be a singer, to provide music. “They were short on Beethoven and Bach,” his daughter Maria remembered, “but long on Bellini, Rossini, Verdi and Puccini.” Soon Gonfarone’s was attracting a larger clientele, most of them non-Italians, many of them artists and writers who enjoyed the good food and the Old World ambience.

Several sources of artist patrons were close at hand. Washington Square South was barely three blocks away, and diagonally across the street from Gonfarone’s corner location was MacDougal Alley, a narrow, block-long lane behind the mansions on Washington Square North. Since the late 1880s the alleyway’s low-lying buildings, which had once been stables and carriage houses for the elite’s horses, carriages, and servants, had gradually been converted into studios and workshops for artists, most of whom were sculptors. A spirit of friendly collegiality prevailed within the MacDougal Alley artists’ enclave, with well-established individuals encouraging the lesser-knowns. Chief among the alley’s luminaries in 1910 was Daniel Chester French, a prolific sculptor whose numerous commissioned works included the Minute Man Memorial at Concord, Massachusetts, and the seated figure of Abraham Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Toward the other end of the alley was the studio of James Earl Fraser, an artist and sculptor best known for The End of the Trail (1894), his statue...
of a weary mounted Native American warrior. Among the other artists in the MacDougal Alley colony was Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, a sometime student of Fraser’s, who opened a studio there in 1907.\footnote{52}

In addition to being an aspiring sculptor, Whitney was an extremely well-to-do socialite who had inherited a fortune from her Vanderbilt connections and had further enhanced her wealth through marriage to Harry Payne Whitney, a financier and sportsman. Whitney’s decision to establish a studio at 19 MacDougal Alley was prompted in part by a marital crisis. She had married Harry in 1896 in what—for her—had been a love match, and she was distraught when within only a few years he began having affairs with other women. Unfulfilled by her roles as a society matron and mother, Whitney in 1900 set out in earnest to become a sculptor. Over the next few years, as Harry’s interests and amusements—raising and racing thoroughbreds, playing polo, yachting, and hunting—diverged ever more sharply from hers, she became increasingly determined to make something of herself independently of him and of the social roles expected of her. As she wrote in her journal in 1904, “I cannot be the sort of person which my life demands me to be—so why not try and be my own self.” At this point she also recognized that her money and social position, far from hindering her in what she wanted to do, could enable her both to support herself as an artist and to have an influence as a patron of the arts.\footnote{53}

Whitney already had several connections with Greenwich Village, and these played a role in her decision to set up a studio there. Since 1903 she had served on Greenwich House’s board of trustees, and for many years she not only gave Simkhovitch’s settlement monetary gifts as large as or larger than those from any other benefactor, but assisted Greenwich House’s programs by teaching art classes to the neighborhood children. Whitney also had ties with all three of the most important circles of Village artists—those connected with the Tenth Street Studio, MacDougal Alley, and the group known as The Eight.\footnote{54}

The Tenth Street Studio, located just east of Sixth Avenue on the side street whose name it bore, was a venerable institution that dated back to the mid-nineteenth century. It had been built and endowed by Emily Johnston de Forest’s father and grandfather. Once the workplace of such distinguished tenants as Albert Bierstadt, Winslow Homer, and Augustus Saint-Gaudens, its last illustrious occupant was John La Farge, who died in 1910. Many years earlier, in 1898, Whitney had visited La Farge at his north Village studio and had come away deeply impressed both by the man and by the spare functionality of his workplace.\footnote{55}

Her connection with the MacDougal Alley circle also went back quite a few years. Not long after her visit with La Farge, she began to correspond
with Daniel Chester French. She studied with James Earle Fraser and Andrew O’Connor, both of whom were sculptors with close ties to the MacDougal Alley group. Her decision to become a neighbor of the MacDougal Alley artists was a natural outgrowth of these earlier relationships.

The third circle of Village artists with which Whitney soon developed ties were painters who were known collectively as The Eight. They acquired the name in 1907 as the result of a controversy that pitted the distinguished painter Robert Henri and his students against the conservative coterie that led the National Academy of Design, an organization whose exhibitions were considered the principal arbiter of artistic taste in New York City. Rejecting the emphasis on the pretty, uplifting, and often upper-class subject matter favored by traditionalists in the National Academy, Henri and his students chose to represent the grittier realities of daily life among ordinary city dwellers. Similarly, in matters of style, instead of the sharply defined lines and figures typical of the Academy’s dominant faction, The Eight preferred briskly applied, more spontaneous brush strokes that they felt were more suitable for depicting the fast pace of life in a metropolis where continuous activity was the rule.56

Henri and his students had long felt that the Academy’s traditionalists promoted orthodoxy and mediocrity rather than diversity and innovation, and when the jury selecting items for the Academy’s spring 1907 show rejected paintings submitted by several of Henri’s students and gave Henri’s entries less than unanimous approval, the rivalry between the two factions became a matter for press comment. “The academy,” Henri told a reporter, “rejects good work right and left and the result is that the exhibitions are dull. . . . There are many, many good painters in the country whose work is never seen on this account.” 57

Unwilling to take what he viewed as a slight to himself and his students, Henri joined seven members of his circle in organizing their own exhibit, which opened at the Macbeth Galleries on Fifth Avenue in February 1908. The insurgents, dubbed “The Eight” in press accounts, included two Villagers, William Glackens and Everett Shinn, and three Villagers-to-be, John Sloan, Ernest Lawson, and Maurice Prendergast. Sensational press reports—“New York’s Art War and the Eight ‘Rebels,’ ” and “8 Artists Secede from the Academy”—provided good publicity for the Macbeth Galleries show, although references to “war” and “secession” greatly overstated the magnitude of the break being made by Henri and his allies. Even as they sought ways to show their work independently of the Academy, most of The Eight also continued to submit paintings for the Academy’s exhibits.58

As these events were unfolding, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney was asserting herself ever more confidently as an art patron and a sculptor. In
April 1907 she organized an art exhibition at the Colony Club, an exclusive social club founded in 1903 for wealthy New York women. In an era when American art was not greatly admired by the city’s elite, it was striking to note that about a third of the pieces shown were by contemporary American painters with ties to the insurgents within the National Academy of Design. That this was no accident was confirmed in February 1908, when she bought four paintings—one each by Robert Henri, Ernest Lawson, George Luks, and Everett Shinn—during the Macbeth Galleries exhibit. In so doing Whitney was making a dramatic statement about herself and her view of contemporary art. To paraphrase an astute scholar’s interpretation of Whitney’s purchases, they were evidence of how she was distancing herself from the conventions of her upper-class New York circle and identifying herself with the more iconoclastic artists of MacDougal Alley and the Village.59

Two of The Eight were Villagers in 1908: William Glackens, who maintained a studio on Washington Square, and Everett Shinn, who had his home and studio west of the square at 112 Waverly Place. Three more of the insurgents—Ernest Lawson, John Sloan, and Maurice Prendergast—moved to the Village (and stayed for longer or shorter periods) over the next few years. Although great differences in temperament, politics, and even artistic style were evident among these five men and the rest of The Eight, they shared an appreciation of city life and in particular of life in New York City. All had migrated to New York City from somewhere else, most of them from Philadelphia, a move Glackens and George Luks made in 1896, Shinn in 1897, Henri in 1900, and Sloan in 1904. (Sloan had also spent the summer of 1897 in the city.) In every case their decision to move to New York reflected their ambition to make their mark in a burgeoning metropolis that was surpassing its American rivals—Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago—and becoming a world-class city and the nation’s unquestioned cultural capital. Simply put, New York had the tallest buildings, the largest population, the most new immigrants, and the most magazines and art galleries in the country.

Each of The Eight appreciated this urban environment and consciously pursued an esthetic that embraced city life in all its varieties. From the various studios he occupied on Washington Square, first at number 3 on the north side and later at number 50 on the south, William Glackens observed the passing parade of life and incorporated it into his art. Although many of his paintings, particularly portraits of friends and family, did not directly reflect the surrounding urban milieu, several important paintings and nearly all the illustrations he did for Collier’s had city scenes as their subjects. Ordinary citizens are shown engaged in commonplace activities: shopping, playing, or just taking a stroll.
Implicit in Glackens’s presentation of these images of daily life is his interpretation of them as positive expressions of the human spirit—a interpretation definitely not shared by his near neighbors, the patrician members of the Washington Square Association. Around the same time that the association was waging war on street vendors and pushcart merchants (1908–1911) and campaigning for orderly public behavior in Washington Square (1910–1912), Glackens was producing cover pictures for Collier’s that presented in an amiable, indulgent spirit the behaviors that the Village gentry deplored and decried (fig. 31). Patriots in the Making (1907) shows a rowdy Fourth of July celebration in a working-class neighborhood; in A Football Game (1911) the neighborhood boys are turning a vacant lot into a dust bowl; and Washington Square (1913) depicts urchins, both boys and girls, roughhousing—throwing snowballs, fighting, and playing pranks—on the south side of the patricians’ beloved park.

John Sloan, though more radical than Glackens politically, shared his friend’s interest in urban life. One of Sloan’s favorite pastimes was roaming the city’s streets in search of subject matter. His rambles often took him into the Village, which was barely half a mile from the West Twenty-third Street apartment he and his wife, Dolly, occupied until 1911. (They moved to East Twenty-second in 1911 and in 1912 to the Village, where he established his studio at 35 Sixth Avenue and they made their home at 61 Perry Street.) What caught his eye were images of the ebb and flow of daily life. The era’s popular amusements are represented in Carmine Theatre (1912), a small movie house near his Sixth Avenue studio, and Movies (1913), a nighttime scene outside a similar neighborhood theater at night, where potential patrons are shown considering whether they want to see that evening’s offering, A Romance of the Harem. In Renganeschi’s Saturday Night (1912) Sloan depicts a restaurant scene of nicely dressed diners, with a tuxedoed waiter about to attend to a party of three young women, the central figure of which is a pretty blonde whose posture and animation suggest that she and her friends are shopgirls excitedly enjoying a night out. In his etching Hell Hole (1917) Sloan immortalized Tom Wallace’s Golden Swan, one of those Sixth Avenue saloons that so troubled the Committee of Fourteen’s investigators.

As it happened, the Golden Swan was one of the Village dives that the Hudson Dusters patronized. Various Village artists and writers—Djuna Barnes, Dorothy Day, Charles Demuth, and Eugene O’Neill, most of them migrants to the Village during its post–1912 bohemian era—also frequented the saloon. They went there, in part, to rub shoulders with the gangsters and other “lowlife” types who were among its habitués. Unlike the moral reformers who viewed the criminal element with revulsion, the neighborhood’s artists approached the Hell Hole scene with undisguised
31. *A Spring Morning in Washington Square, New York*, an example of how William J. Glackens converted the view from his studio window into a magazine illustration. From *Collier’s*, April 16, 1910.
interest. “Girl-painters and girl-writers,” Albert Parry wrote in his Garrets and Pretenders (1933), “avid for local color, were unafraid to go to [the] Hell Hole and make friends with the toughs.”

One reason that Sloan and Glackens (and Shinn and Lawson as well) were successful interpreters of early twentieth-century city life is that they were not just observers but also participants. The most extensive evidence of their activities comes from a diary that John Sloan kept between 1906 and 1913. Entry after entry documents his enthusiastic pursuit of virtually every available kind of public entertainment. (Dancing was an exception.) He attended performances at the city’s most popular vaudeville theaters, opera at Hammerstein’s, a Wild West show at Madison Square Garden, baseball games between top-flight teams of black players, automobile races, and motion pictures of every type, both high and low quality. On one of several outings to Coney Island’s amusement parks, he went on rides and, though he had never learned to dance well, he had fun watching the assembled crowds at a concert hall doing the “Stomach Dance,” one of the latest fads.

Masquerade dances were also the rage in 1910, and Glackens, who was more playful than Sloan, did his share of dancing at the costume balls sponsored by the Kit Kat Klub, an organization for magazine illustrators. Like Sloan, Glackens visited Coney Island and enjoyed the sights and sounds of ordinary New Yorkers at play. Occasionally, Glackens and his wife, Edith, along with several artist friends, got together at Everett and Florence Shinn’s Village apartment and amused themselves by staging silly skits. For about a year in 1911–1912 this purely amateur activity took on semiprofessional status when Shinn named the group the Waverly Place Players and offered public performances at a small theater he built in back of his studio. The plays, with titles such as “Ethel Clayton, or Wronged from the Start,” were parodies of old-fashioned melodramas and had much in common with a popular entertainment style of the time, the comedy acts offered by the city’s cheap vaudeville theaters.

Villagers in The Eight regularly dined with friends in a West Side commercial entertainment zone where streetwalkers plied their trade. During 1910 and 1911 the artists particularly favored two sites for their rendezvous: Mouquin’s, a modestly priced French restaurant on West Twenty-eighth Street near Sixth Avenue, and Petitpas’, a small bistro and boardinghouse run by three French sisters on West Twenty-ninth Street. Both places were less than a mile north of the Village in the so-called Tenderloin district that the Committee of Fourteen denounced as one of the worst vice zones in the city. Indeed, the Haymarket, a concert saloon widely regarded as a citadel of vice and a gathering place for prostitutes and gangsters, stood at West
Twenty-ninth Street and Sixth Avenue, barely a block from the artists’ favorite haunts.

Sloan used scenes related to the city’s illicit pleasures in his art and rendered them without placing a negative judgment on those who participated in them. His painting *The Haymarket* (1907) evokes both the allure of the dance hall and the response of respectable people, working-class and middle-class alike. Three women in elaborate white dresses, possibly prostitutes, are about to enter the dance hall, the promise of pleasure within suggested by the hall’s glowing interior that can be glimpsed through the doorway; among the onlookers is a mother who is frowning at her daughter because the youngster is gazing back at the Haymarket’s entrance with a look of curiosity and wonder. In his only Greenwich Village picture that touched a related subject, *The Women’s Night Court: Before Her Makers and Her Judge* (1913), Sloan inverted the moral scheme to which the Committee of Fourteen and like-minded respectables adhered. He portrayed the individual being arraigned at Jefferson Market Court as a sweet-looking young woman in white surrounded by a group of men—a judge, two bailiffs, a court recorder, and others—whose hard eyes and hard-heartedness, suggested by their frowns and dark attire, contrast with her winsome softness (fig. 32).65

Sloan’s interpretation of certain subjects, including *Night Court*, was influenced by a growing commitment to socialism that dated from 1908. In 1909 he began drawing political cartoons for the *New York Call*, a Socialist daily. The following year he and his wife, Dolly, joined the Socialist Party, and Sloan even made a token run for the New York State Assembly on the Socialist ticket. One of his drawings also appeared in the second issue of *The Masses*, a New York–based Socialist monthly magazine that commenced publishing in January 1911, but his primary commitment in this period remained to *The Call*, which had a large circulation among working-class radicals on the Lower East Side. *In Memoriam*, a front-page illustration done in response to the Triangle fire of March 1911, was a powerful political statement, juxtaposing a skeletal figure of Death and a silk-hatted capitalist beside a black triangle labeled “Profit,” “Rent,” and “Interest,” inside of which lay the burned body of a young woman worker (fig. 33).66

In actively supporting the Socialist Party and its publications, Sloan moved away from the political views held by most of The Eight and closer to the left-leaning Villagers who had founded the A Club cooperative housing association and writers’ colony in 1906. After Sloan joined the party in 1910, the names of A Clubbers—Robert and Martha Bruère, Arthur Bullard, and Ernest Poole, all of whom were also party members—began appearing in Sloan’s diary with some regularity. Just as Glackens and Sloan capitalized on the magazine revolution by doing illustrations for mass cir-
culation journals, the writers from the A Club circle found in the new magazine era a ready market for their manuscripts. Collectively, in a three-year period (1910–1912), the A Clubbers mentioned above and three other A Club veterans, Leroy and Miriam Finn Scott and Mary Heaton Vorse, produced seven books and 115 essays or stories in major magazines.67

Mary Heaton Vorse, the most prolific of all the A Club writers, returned to the Village in the fall of 1910 after a nine months’ absence. Newly widowed, she rented rooms for herself, her two young children, and her aged father at 88 Grove Street. Never a joiner, she did not become a Socialist, but she shared the socially progressive, feminist views to which her A Club friends subscribed. Moreover, widowhood and the need to be the sole breadwinner for her family had helped her clarify her thinking about the place of women in American society.

Scarcely had Vorse settled at her new Village address than she learned about a public health crisis that touched her heart deeply. Most milk distributed in New York City in 1910 was tainted, unpasteurized, handled in un-sanitary ways, and often watered down to increase volume and thus the
income of farmers paid by bulk weight. As a consequence, infant mortality rates were extremely high in the city, and fatalities traceable to impure milk always rose during the summer when poor-quality milk spoiled especially fast. Since 1892, Nathan Straus, a New York philanthropist, had funded milk stations throughout the city at which poor mothers could get milk free. He also advocated laws to require pasteurization and toured widely in the United States and Europe to promote that cause. But early in 1910, tired of being subjected to criticism that questioned his methods and his
motive, Straus announced he was going to close his New York City milk stations at the end of that summer.

At this point Mrs. J. Borden Harriman, president of the Colony Club, stepped into the breach, proposing to establish a New York Milk Committee to run an expanded system of milk depots throughout the city. District leaders would be found to help organize branch milk stations in every neighborhood. In Greenwich Village the existing milk distribution depot was on MacDougal Street, and Vorse volunteered to be the Milk Committee's chairman for the district. She had previously investigated the impact of poverty on infant mortality rates in western Europe and had written that a “society that allowed children to die because their parents didn't make enough money seemed senseless and vicious.” But she also took the issue personally; as a single mother she found it frightening to think of what might happen to her children if she couldn't support them adequately. “I was the sole support of my children,” she wrote. “I saw myself poor and my own wanted and beloved children dying because I couldn't make enough money.” With help from her old friend Mary Simkhovitch of Greenwich House, Vorse succeeded in keeping the local depot operating. Much to Vorse's satisfaction, a substantial drop in the city's infant mortality rate occurred in the years immediately after the new program was initiated.68

Vorse took an interest in every aspect of the Village and didn't mind living close to its Sixth Avenue vice zone. Luke O'Connor's Greenwich Avenue Raines Law hotel and saloon, whose unaccompanied female patrons so troubled the Committee of Fourteen's investigators, was located barely two blocks from Vorse's Grove Street apartment. One day a friend made a passing reference to the place, and Vorse jokingly replied: “You mean the Working Girl's Home?” The name stuck, becoming a part of Greenwich Village lore in her generation.69

In doing research for a magazine article titled “Picture Show Audiences” (1911), Vorse went to Lower East Side, Bowery, and Greenwich Village movie theaters (fig. 34). She conducted her Village investigation at a movie house that was located in the Village's Italian quarter near Bleecker Street and Our Lady of Pompei Church. Vorse was impressed with the friendly informality of the moviegoers, especially of several Italian mothers with their children who, upon learning that Vorse also had children, quizzed her on why she had not brought them along. The featured film was a melodrama about a cowboy who became a thief to provide for his dying wife, a plot that stimulated a noisy debate among those present about whether the cowboy’s crimes were simply immoral or justified by his love for his wife. But to close the Village segment of her article, Vorse chose to describe one viewer’s more private response, the reaction of a young innocent, “an eager
little girl of ten or eleven,” for whom the images unfolding on the screen were so entrancing that she was literally spellbound: she “couldn’t laugh, couldn’t clap her hands with the others.”

Another Village story from about this time connects Vorse and her A Club friends to another of the era’s allurements, the new dance styles of the 1910s. In 1910, Bobby Edwards, a musician newly arrived in the Village, convinced owner Paul Paglieri of Paglieri’s restaurant on West Eleventh Street to sponsor after-dinner dances. When diners had finished eating, the floor would be cleared of tables and chairs, and the music would begin. According to one oft-told tale, A Clubbers—among whom Vorse, Arthur Bullard, and Leroy Scott were mentioned specifically—were the core group

34. *Movies* by John Sloan, 1913. The Toledo Museum of Art, Museum Purchase Fund, 1940.16.
of a “merry crowd” of Tuesday night partygoers that danced the new dances and called themselves the “Crazy Cat Club.”

The Committee of Fourteen’s early campaigns and The Eight’s rebellion, like the history of Our Lady of Pompei, Little Africa, Greenwich House, Ascension Forum, A Club, the Washington Square Association, and the Women’s Trade Union League prior to 1912, all belong to the latter days of the Sixth Village, the period immediately before Greenwich Village gained its reputation as America’s bohemia. Of course, the years from 1898 to 1911 can be viewed both as the final phase of the Sixth Village and as a prelude to the Seventh. But before the thinking of individual Villagers and the public’s perception of the neighborhood could be truly transformed, something more had to happen to trigger the change. For Mary Heaton Vorse that something, the event that gave her life a whole new dimension, was a huge strike by textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

In mid-January 1912, a spontaneous worker protest against wage cuts led to a walkout of more than twenty thousand Lawrence mill operatives, approximately half of whom were women and children. Having no significant prior ties with organized labor, the strikers in their hour of need accepted help from representatives of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), a radical industrial union. Early in the strike the I.W.W.’s national leader, Big Bill Haywood, arrived in Lawrence to assist other I.W.W. organizers who were already on the scene. Some property damage had been done by workers during the strike’s first few days, and this provided the pretext for the governor to send in the state militia. By then the strikers had adopted the tactic of nonviolent protest—picketing and massive street demonstrations—but the local police and the state militia responded harshly, and before the middle of February two workers had been killed, one shot, the other bayonetted.

As these events unfolded, New York City social progressives, including many Villagers, became involved and organized parades, fundraisers, and public addresses in support of the Lawrence mill workers. When the strikers proposed to send some of their children out of town for the duration of the strike for their safety and to publicize their poverty, the workers’ New York sympathizers welcomed the chance to help. On succeeding Sundays, February 10 and February 17, trains carrying more than a hundred children each arrived in Grand Central Station, where John Sloan’s wife, Dolly, representing the Women’s Committee of the Socialist Party, distributed food and warm clothing to the youngsters. Offers to house the Lawrence children were screened with an eye to placing as many as possible with working-class families and members of the Socialist Party. At least four Villag-
ers—Inez Milholland, Percy Stickney Grant, Anne O’Hagan Shinn, and Martha B. Bruère—volunteered. Milholland and Grant were turned down as being too rich; what decisions were made on Shinn’s and Bruère’s offers is unknown.73

Another group of children, scheduled to leave Lawrence for Philadelphia on February 24, was prevented from departing by state militiamen, who handled the crowd of waiting mothers so roughly that two pregnant women had miscarriages. Shocked by this news, Mary Heaton Vorse and another Villager, Joe O’Brien (a Socialist and feminist who would soon become her husband), traveled to Lawrence together to see for themselves what was happening. At least two other Villagers, Ernest Poole and Lincoln Steffens, also made the pilgrimage to Lawrence.

The Villagers came away impressed by Haywood and his I.W.W. co-workers and inspired by the joyful spirit of the strikers, who sang almost constantly as they marched and picketed. The fact that women had played an increasingly large role in street demonstrations—the theory being that police and militia would hesitate to attack them for fear of attracting more negative press attention—was also cause for admiring comment among sympathetic Villagers. Two months into the strike, the mill owners, unable to recruit enough strikebreakers to keep the mills running at capacity and faced with a torrent of public outrage because of the mistreatment strikers had endured, finally capitulated and offered the workers a pay increase and time-and-a-quarter pay for overtime. On March 14, 1912, tens of thousands of Lawrence workers gathered and voted to accept the mill owners’ offer. Then, as was often done at labor meetings in the period, the assembled throng joined in singing “The Internationale,” a revolutionary Socialist anthem dating from the late nineteenth century.

Pro-labor Villagers were deeply affected by this chain of events. Mary Heaton Vorse recalled feeling that she had witnessed a battle between “the forces of Light and of Darkness,” and the forces of light had won. This result was an eye-opener for Vorse and other socially progressive Villagers. If a group of previously unorganized workers, who had exceedingly diverse ethnic origins and whose ranks included many women and children, could defy and defeat the combined economic and political power of the mill owners, state and local officials, and many local small businessmen and religious leaders, then perhaps the first serious cracks had appeared in the old system. If so, then perhaps the looked-for transformation of American society would come sooner rather than later, and the time would quickly arrive when, as a line from “The Internationale” promised, “The earth shall rise on new foundations.”74