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The Incredible Rise and Fall of the Ukrainian Gatsby

The scholar Thomas P. Riggio was among the first to explore the similarities between Theodore Dreiser's Mr X in *Twelve Men* and Fitzgerald's titular hero, Jay Gatsby, but few if any have explored Robin's life in any real detail. This mini-book takes a look at the life and times of the sky-rocket millionaire from his days as a bootblack in Times Square to his spectacular rise and fall of one of New York's most flamboyant and mysterious millionaires.

The Ukrainian Gatsby



*“I was impressed with this man; not because of his wealth but because of something about which suggested dreams, romance, a kind of sense or love of splendour and grandeur which one does not encounter among the really wealthy. He seemed to live among great things ...”*¹

And so it begins. With just a few strokes of his pen, the 48 year-old veteran author, Theodore Dreiser, thrashes out the first rudimentary sketches of what might eventually turn into F. Scott Fitzgerald’s hero, Jay Gatsby, the fabulously cool yet just as fabulously fake millionaire bootlegger who now stands like some colossus at the golden gates of the American Dream: the International Man of Mystery, now, then, tomorrow, perhaps forever. In Collodi’s classic children’s story, Pinocchio starts off as a common, log-wood puppet before completing the moral assignments that turn him into a ‘real boy’. In a reversal of Collodi’s story, the exquisitely turned-out bootlegger that comes to life under the pen of F. Scott Fitzgerald, evolves, at least in part, from the real man. Fitzgerald would later describe Gatsby as an ‘amalgam’.² He had taken people he had known and blended them with his own self-idea. In the end, the real man (or real men to be fair) is hewn to fairy-tale perfection in one of the most beautiful and most successful literary extrapolations by one of Dreiser’s most devoted fans. Not that Dreiser would have been aware of any of it. The man who suggested “dreams, romance” and other “great things” wasn’t known as Jay Gatsby at this time but as *Mr X*, an anonymous yet beautifully realised character in his 1919 book, *Twelve Men*, a collection of twelve biographical sketches of men that Dreiser had known during his time as journalist and newspaper editor, men who had, to one degree or another, influenced his life or his writing in some way.³ None of the men in his book are well known. In fact all of them are rather obscure. One of the men is the Dreiser’s brother — the songwriter Paul Dresser —whilst other figures include Mike Burke, a foreman at the New York Central Railway, Harris Merton Lyon, a writer he knew at Broadway Magazine, William Muldoon, a former

¹ *Twelve Men*, Theodore Dreiser, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, pp. 264-265.

² Letter to John Peale Bishop, August 9, 1925, *Life In Letters*, pp.125-126

³ Thomas P. Riggio on Theodore Dreiser Studies, *Studies in American Naturalism* Vol. 5, No. 1, Special Issue: *Naturalism’s Histories* (Summer 2010), University of Nebraska Press, pp. 66-78

Wrestling Champion who had helped Dreiser back to health after suffering a nervous breakdown and Thomas P. Taylor, a former mayor.

The book had been roughly divided into six men who had triumphed, and six men who had, with varying degrees of defective heroism, failed in some way. Mr X was man number nine, one of those who had failed. His real name was Joseph G. Robin the ‘skyrocket financier’ from Long Island, New York who had been convicted for grand larceny in 1911, and whose spectacular rise within the upper echelons of Manhattan’s financial district had only ever been matched by his just as spectacular fall. His was a story of boom and bust, of dreams and ambition pushed just that little too far. And the soundtrack to that story wasn’t the roaring thunderclap of Casey Jones’ engine steamin’ and a rollin’ at the throttle of the Cannonball Express, it was the sound of the boosters peeling prematurely away from the rocket and falling noisily back down to earth. Robin’s crime, or so it was alleged, had been the misappropriation of some £90,000 in funds whilst serving as President of the Washington Savings Bank. He’d been shuffling the assets around in the most creative and lawless of fashions, setting in motion a sequence of disasters that destroyed several organisations and brought down several powerful figures. A high-profile court case ensued and the ‘bootblack who made a million from Niagara Falls’ found himself facing a lengthy spell in jail. For Dreiser, Robin and his story defined the period perfectly, a period when the financial mechanisms of America were at their most extravagant — when no gesture was too grandiose and no risk was too great. He wasn’t of noble birth, but that certainly didn’t stop him trying to pass for a man who was: *“He looks like a Russian Grand Duke. He has the manners and tastes of a Medici or a Borgia. He is building a great house down on Long Island that once it is done will have cost him five or six hundred thousand.”*⁴

Born Joseph Gregory Rabinovitch in Odessa, Ukraine in 1877, Joseph G. Robin had been one of the many thousands of penniless Russian immigrants flooding into North America in the wake of the Tsarist pogroms. Within twenty-years he had become one of the wealthiest and most successful bankers on Wall Street. Dreiser had first encountered him in 1907 when he was editor of a successful *New Woman’s* journal and on his regular trawl of the parties for the ‘imitate revelations’ and much-sought confidences of the gossiping Smart Setters which provided the basic fodder of stories for the magazine. And it was at one of those parties that he had first met Robin.

⁴ *Twelve Men*, Theodore Dreiser, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, p.271

By this point in time, the man who had once been so poor that he had tramped the streets of the Lower East Side of New York up to his knees in snow, shoes collapsing around his feet with no more than a shirt on his back, now controlled four banks, several trust companies, a hydro power company, a railroad company, an insurance company and a series of real estate ventures. In Dreiser's estimation, Robin was showy, he was gaudy and had the "flare, recklessness and imagination" that gave him the sparkle that those who were born into money could seldom match.⁵ For those who have watched either of the movie versions of *The Great Gatsby*, or read the novel, there's a feeling of familiarity in the scene that Dreiser paints of the meeting. On his arrival at Robin's party, Dreiser, rather like *Gatsby's* gentle and reflective narrator, Nick Carraway, is greeted by a rare and exotic human menagerie: opera singers, an Italian sorceress, a bevy of stage beauties, singers, writers, artists, poets. There is a parallel scene in *Gatsby* in which Daisy, blown away by the size of his new house, asks Jay how he could possibly live there alone. Jay replies that he keeps it always "full of interesting people, night and day — people who do interesting things. Celebrated people". Robin's mansion was just the same. His host, who he describes as somewhat "savage and sybaritic" in nature, had surrounded himself with a wild and eclectic coterie of supporters and hangers-on. The Pharaoh of Long Island was weaving dreams of grandeur "so outré and so splendid that only the tyrant of an obedient empire, with all the resources of an enslaved and obedient people could indulge with safety".⁶ Dreiser shares with the narrator of *Gatsby* not only the same giddy fascination with his host, but the same niggling sense of revulsion too. His host is a master magician and has created the whole absorbing spectacle for his own amusement. Yes there was something "amazingly warm and exotic" about Robin, but there was also "something so cold and calculated."⁷ The host regarded, and retained his guests with the appetite and curiosity of a collector. They were his butterflies, his "specimens", each with their own unique charms and properties. Unlike *Gatsby*, women didn't hold quite the same fascination with the author describing them as the "fringe and embroidery of his success and power". He was the ruler, the "cangrande". In spite of this, Dreiser liked him.

Like *Gatsby*, Robin is described as a shy beast socially, and it is not until later in the evening that the master of the house makes his entrance. When he does he is not the gorgeously blonde Adonis made famous by Robert Redford but a stockily built man, a little taller than average in height,

⁵ Ibid, pp. 264-265.

⁶ *Twelve Men*, Theodore Dreiser, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, p. 270

⁷ Ibid, p. 271

with “curly black hair, keen black eyes, heavy, overhanging eyebrows, full red lips and a marked chin ornamented by a goatee.” Dreiser reflects that he is like a “Pan” figure, someone as oblivious to the formalities of social life as a goat is to dining etiquette.⁸ For the author, there is something raw and elemental about Robin, a disruptive ‘pagan’ energy that seeks to jam the circuitry of predictable life. Here was a man who saw the sun go up and the sun go down, the wind blow to the east, the wind blow to the west, the tides move forward and the tides roll back and yet as happy as he was to observe these pleasingly familiar phases had never been completely satisfied with such a dull and automated cycle. It was all boring, all old news.

Ecclesiastes 1:2-11: ‘Vanity, vanity, says the Preacher’. Dreiser used the phrase for his chapter on Robin. There was nothing new under the sun. *What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done.* America was locked in an interminable loop and it couldn’t break free of its orbit. The laws of precession had taken over. The word used in the original Hebrew text of Ecclesiastes was ‘hebel’ meaning ‘vapour’ or ‘mist’. It alludes to the ultimate emptiness of all ‘vanity’ — the inevitable return to ashes. The only man in New York who seemed to want to change this was Robin. Robin wanted a world that was shiny, bright and new — and he wanted it all of the time. He wanted to see new things, hear new sounds, drive at new speeds. He wanted to go beyond ‘terrestrial consciousness’, ‘beyond the wall of sleep’— boldly or otherwise.⁹ Robin even has his own personal advisor, De Shay who provides counsel in all matters of ‘social progress’, keeping him regularly updated on new music, new literature, new people, new pleasures. This first encounter with Robin, who Fitzgerald never met as far as we can determine, sets in motion a remarkable creative synthesis that begins in the warm, moist air of life before condensing into the miraculous fine spray of fiction and from there — into the mists of legend.

⁸ Ibid, p. 267

⁹ *Beyond the Wall of Sleep* is a collection of short stories by American author, H. P. Lovecraft, published in 1943. One of the stories, *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, features a group of Pan-like alien creatures what might be the original source of the Star Trek mission statement: ‘*To boldly go where no man has gone before.*’

Icarus Falls



Just as stars rise in the night sky and sparkle, there has to come a time when they fall and fade also. Dreiser had so far only told half of the story, the story in which a talented entrepreneur from the Lower East Side had transformed himself into the ‘cangrande’ of New York having made the miraculous transition from bootblack to bank-owner in little more than a decade. The change that would destroy Robin would come during the fall of 1910 when out of a clear blue sky, the sky-rocket financier had found himself thrust into the media spotlight. According to the newspapers, several of Robin’s banks and business projects had been at the centre of a crude and unsuccessful attempt by the United Copper Company to the drive up the price of copper in 1907. This attempt had led to a chain of disastrous failures, as the banks and trust companies who had poured money into the scheme started falling one by one. Within a week, the city’s third-largest trust, The Knickerbocker Trust was near to collapse. The role played by Robin in the so-called ‘panic’ had come to light during a five year investigation into the head of the United Copper Company, F. Augustus Heinze of 42 Broadway.¹⁰ A report in the New York on May 11, 1910 described how Heinze, a partner of Robin in his ‘Bank of Discount’, had, at Robin’s request, deposited £400,000 in cash and securities into another of his banks, The Riverside Bank, in an effort to keep it afloat. The incident dated back to the ‘Knickerbocker’ panic of October 1907. In return, Robin’s bank had promised to hold all of Heinze’s securities then and previously deposited until the panic had subsided and Heinze was in a better position to redeem them.¹¹ The same thing was being repeated at several other banks and trusts in Robin’s care. Robin, Heinze and several other associates of theirs had been juggling around assets and buying up cheap shares — a common enough practice among banking officials and stockbrokers but on a scale that made previous attempts to control the markets seem fairly crude and fairly pedestrian. He was a genius with figures but the whole had been a gamble, and the vast majority of the people who lost were the ordinary working men and women of New York. The money that Robin was gambling with was not his own. Despite the commonality of these practices in the banking system the press

¹⁰ 42 Broadway would later be used as an address by ‘Bootlegger Gatsby’ Max von Gerlach, an associate of F. Scott Fitzgerald, who is believed to have provided Gatsby with his famous ‘Old Sport’ salutation. Heinze, one of the Copper Kings of Montana, had been born in Brooklyn to a German father and Irish mother. In 1869

¹¹ ‘Defense Puts Value on Heize Coppers’, New York Times, May 11, 1910, p.6

were all over him; *his career as Trimalchio was over*.¹² Dreiser writes of his shock at the transformation in the second half of his portrait: “although no derogatory mention had previously been made of him, the articles and editorials were now most vituperative. Their venom was especially noticeable. He was a get-rich quick villain of the vilest stripe.”¹³ There was something else that Dreiser had noticed too. The decision to launch a separate prosecution against Robin had come at a time when he had begun to make serious inroads into the Long Island Street Railway market, putting him directly up against rival Tammany figurehead, August Belmont Jr. who in December 1905 had sensationally bought-out Thomas Fortune Ryan of the Metropolitan Street Railway Company. For the best part of seventy-years the Tammany Hall had been the power house of the US Democrats — the seat of concentrated power in New York, and concentrated, more often than not, in just one man.

During its golden era it was hard-boiled men like William ‘Boss’ Tweed and Richard Croker, who had earned their reputations through ‘graft’ and illegal means, but by the early 1900s the power was being more evenly distributed among its wealthier, more respectable and aristocratic patrons like Belmont and new ‘Boss’ Charles F. Murphy. It was a well-oiled and particularly well organised ‘machine’, brutally maintained and staffed by well organized crime. Like any machine it had its power-source, the immigrant vote, and its sensors and controllers. For Tammany Hall, the sensors and controllers were the street gangs of New York, first the Bowery Boys and then much later crime bosses like Arnold Rothstein — the ‘Meyer Wolfshiem’ of the Gatsby novel. It was a powerhouse marriage that gave them control of the police, the courts, the juries, the racecourse, the ring, the ballpark and all of New York’s major industries. The Metropolitan Railway buy-out placed Belmont at the head of the city’s traction industry. As a result, shares in his business had rocketed violently. A rival line would send them tumbling.¹⁴ According to the press, Long Island was one of Metropolitan’s ‘clover patches’ and Robin’s overnight success in the industry was making the newcomer unwelcome. His *South Shore Traction Company*, which had just opened a 56 mile long trolley route from Babylon and Amityville on the South Shore of the Island to Manhattan via Queensboro Bridge had infringed

¹² TGG, Penguin, p.108.

¹³ Twelve Men, p.276

¹⁴ ‘Belmont is Traction King’, New York Tribune, December 23, 1905, p.1

on territory under the tight control of Tammany Hall.¹⁵ The first section of the line had just been completed that summer with the cost of a fare significantly lower than average. In the fall, a close examination of transactions in the company books unearthed several queer practices within the trusts holding the traction company's bonds and Robin's dream of revolutionizing the passenger and freight business of Long Island started to crumble.¹⁶

Ten years earlier Robin had played a key role in a bid to keep Tammany veterans Nicholas Muller and Perry Belmont — August Belmont's brother — out of Congress in an era defining battle for New York's Seventh District.¹⁷ In his efforts to show the considerable influence being brought to bear on Robin, Dreiser quoted a report from a New York newspaper in which it was being alleged that a 'hitch' in a deal which was to have transferred ownership of Robin's South Shore Traction company to the Long Island Electric Railway, controlled in part by August Belmont and the Interborough Rapid Transit Company. The deal would have seen Robin make some \$2 million in profit. The deal was said to have been blocked by powerful figures on Wall Street and the clearing house refused to clear the necessary funds for his banks. 'Sinister influences' were said to have blocked the transfer and frozen had further opportunities to act.¹⁸ A petition of bankruptcy had been filed against Robin's Realty and Security Company in Broadway which had been handling the deal. It was alleged that the company was insolvent and no longer in any position to make the necessary transfers. Robin now faced charges of juggling the accounts of the various banks and trusts he owned, transferring, temporarily, the funds of one bank to another. Large sums of money would be drawn out and put down as securities on new companies and new ventures he was organizing. As Dreiser was quick to point out, these "tricks" were the standard practices of Wall Street: he had been taking money from Peter to pay Paul, "washing one hand with the other," as they said at the time. According to Dreiser, Robin would tell the grand jury that he had received a direct warning from August Belmont Jnr. not to get involved in the deal: "Listen closely to what I am going to say", Belmont was speaking quietly, "I want you to get out of the street railway business in New York or something is going to happen to you. I am giving

¹⁵ Queensboro Bridge is the bridge used by Nick and Gatsby during their breakneck dash to New York in Gatsby's Yellow car. Gatsby is recognised by the Policeman who stops him for speeding and then let's him off. It was an area controlled by the Tammany Hall and its gangs.

¹⁶ 'New Trolley Road Opened at Babylon,' New York Times, June 12, 1920; *The Western Underwriter* 1910-12-29: Vol. 14 Issue 52, 29 December, 1910, p.27

¹⁷ The Seventh District comprises areas of Lower Manhattan, Queens and Brooklyn — the immigrant engine-rooms of New York.

¹⁸ *Twelve Men*, p.277

you a reasonable warning. Take it.”¹⁹ Within days a formal investigation into Robin’s traction dealings had been launched and a Federal receiver appointed to liaise with the company’s treasurer Frederick K. Morris and its Vice President, William L. Brower. It eventually transpired that the books at the traction company were on the level. Unfortunately for Robin, the investigation into his books had expanded to into the various checks and the balances of his other banks and trusts and discrepancies were found at three of them: the Aetna Indemnity Company, the Northern Bank and the Washington Savings Bank. James M. Gifford, Robin’s co-director and attorney his Northern Bank, tried to dodge the investigation: he had never been connected with any of the acts of wrong doing as Robin had employed outside counsel on all matters relating to the fraud. Few seemed to pick up on the fact that Gifford had previously been counsel for the *Hamilton Bank* in 1906 and had found himself in much the same position during the panic of 1907, when a similar trail of discrepancies had brought it to the attention of the courts. A short time later the bank’s director and chief cashier, Jesse C. Joy had shot himself dead at a New York sanatorium where he had been checked in as a patient. Joy is alleged to have been frustrated by the methods used the bank’s director, the United Copper magnate, F. Augustus Heinze, Robin’s partner at the ‘Bank of Discount’.²⁰ As a result of the *Hamilton* scandal Heinze resigned and the bank changed its name to the *Northern Bank*. Gifford was retained as counsel and Robin, now one of the trustees of the Carnegie Trust Company, had been brought in as director. Resigning from their positions were ‘ice king’, Charles W. Morse, a close associate of former Tammany Boss, Richard Croker. Morse had also featured in Robin’s acquisition of the of the Riverside Bank. As usual, the deal would be made through Morse and once closed Robin would throw out the old officers and replace them with men of his own choosing.²¹

Another of the men who would submit their resignation over the Carnegie Trust affair was Edward Russell Thomas, a businessman, publisher, Broadway mogul, horse-breeder and race car driver who had been born into one of New York’s ‘Old Money’ families. Racing his Daimler Phoenix ‘White Ghost’ at over 40 mph in West Harlem in Upper Manhattan, a district popular with powerful men driving powerful cars, Thomas mowed down 7-year-old Henry Theiss who had been out with playing with friends. The boy died instantly upon impact. Thomas would repeat

¹⁹ Ibid, p.283

²⁰ ‘J.C. Joy Takes His Life’, New York Tribune, December 1, 1908, p.7; ‘Says Hamilton Bank Made Usury Charges’, New York Times, December 10, 1907, p3. The press of the period use the phrase, the E.R Thomas-Heinze’ clique, a reference to Heinz and his partner Edward Russell Thomas,

²¹ ‘Millions from Nothing’ Alaska Citizen, February 13, 1911, p.7

much the same offence with the same car in January 1904 in Gaeta near Naples when he killed a young peasant woman in a cowardly hit and run which saw the playboy millionaire raced-off with his beautiful actress girlfriend, Theodora Gerard at great speed to Paris.²² Even in spite of the accidents, Thomas remained a key establishment figure at the Union Club — a more fashionable, cross-party rival to the more conservative and ‘aristocratic’ Knickerbocker Club.

As the son of Union Army General, Samuel Russell Thomas, Edward may well have been an associate of Robin’s business mentor, General James R. O’ Beirne, the former Provost Marshall of Washington D. C. and another gallant ‘Union’ man of the Civil War era. If the Gatsby novel was the story of beautiful yet “careless people” who “smashed things up” then retreated back into their fabulous wealth and “vast carelessness” unscathed, there were few more careless than the Thomas-Heinze clique that acted as Robin’s rocket boosters.²³

The Hamilton Bank formally reopened on January 2, 1908 with Robin in charge of a syndicate managing its renewed interests. Dreiser explains that anyone who has read *Frenzied Finance* by Thomas W. Lawson and *Lawless Wealth* by Charles E. Russell would understand the cutthroat rivalries existing between ‘new money’ Trimalchios like Heinze and old banking conservatives like John Pierpont Morgan. One thing seems clear: the Northern Bank had been up to mischief well before Robin had come on the scene, but it had little bearing on the investigation carried by the Justice Department into Robin in 1911.

As far as Robin was concerned it was his foray into August Belmont’s traction industry that had made him such a threat. As soon as Belmont had issued his threats the interest of the interest shown by New York investors went cold. The depositors had withdrawn, the securities had bombed, and fear of ‘trial by association’ had seen each desert Robin, one by one. Nothing was so “squeamish or so retiring as money”, he once mused.²⁴ This instant retraction of friends is repeated in the *Gatsby* novel. Gatsby has just been murdered by Wilson and the papers are crackling with rumours about his life. Nick, the book’s narrator and a man that Gatsby has known only for the duration of that summer, is left to arrange the funeral but nobody wants to know — not Daisy, his former sweetheart, not Meyer Wolfshiem his mentor, not any of the hundreds of

²² ‘Broker’s Ride Kills Boy’, New York Tribune, February 13, 1902, p.2; ‘Rich New Yorker’s Auto Kills Woman in Italy’, Washington Times, January 9, 1904, p.3. The car had been owned previously by a member of the Vanderbilt family.

²³ TGG, p. 170

²⁴ Twelve Men, p. 284

‘friends’ who had attended his lavish, life-affirming parties. Everybody was suddenly unavailable. Nobody was interested in Gatsby anymore. Dreiser observed much the same thing with Robin: “*I never saw such a running to cover of friends' in all my life*”. As the lurid stories about Robins parties and his lifestyle gathered pace in the press, all those who had attended his parties and ridden in his cars suddenly knew absolutely nothing about him. Even his closest friend and aide, de Shay, had deserted him. In interviews with the press de Shay would express his shock at the man who had robbed millions from the poorest of people. According to de Shay he had been tricked into attending the parties. None of it was true, of course. As Dreiser explains in his portrait in *Twelve Men*, there wasn’t the slightest evidence that Robin had robbed anyone. The money he had been juggling from one bank to another had been his own.

Slaying Dragons



The man brought in to defend Robin at his trial was the indomitable ‘courtroom warrior’ William Travers Jerome, the tirelessly energetic former District Attorney of New York. Jerome was an unsmiling broad-faced man of fifty whose neat and very solemnly-trimmed moustache and pince-nez gave him the look of a bible thumping Baptist minister. He’d been twelve months out of the job as District Attorney, having lost the battle to Republican, Charles S. Whitman the previous year. Jerome was the man who had spearheaded the decade long fight against political corruption and organised crime that had gripped the city when the “thick-set and scrubby bearded” Irish-American, Richard Croker replaced ‘Honest’ John Kelly as Grand Sachem of Tammany Hall in the final years of the 19th Century.²⁵ Writing in his 1931 biography of Croker, the controversial author and historian Lothrop Stoddard had described how Jerome had a knack for dramatizing the sordid tragedies of commercialized vice — the majority of whom were the daughters of immigrants on the Lower East Side: “*Foreign-born audiences on the East Side, who could scarcely understand English, sensed his meaning and burned with indignation. Bearded Jews, and swart Italians, fathers of growing daughters, sobbed and wailed as they listened to Jerome*”.

²⁵ Master of Manhattan, Lothrop Stoddard, Longman Green & Co, 1931, p.241

Stoddard's assessed that it had been little more than a ploy to steal votes from the Democrats to Jerome's newly revived Reformists.²⁶

To his friends and admirers Jerome was the Saint George of Manhattan, slaying dragons of the underworld renowned for his "ruthless examinations and incisive summations".²⁷ Chicago had Elliott Ness, Gotham had Batman, and Lower Manhattan had William T. Jerome. According to Lothrop Stoddard's much quoted book on the Croker era, *Master of Manhattan*, the Jerome family had allied themselves, as "good democrats", with Boss Tweed, the Boss-man of Tammany Hall during the Hall's no less scandalous 'golden period' in the late 1860s and early 1870s. When Croker had finally been disposed of in 1902, it was felt that Jerome had lost his edge, and fallen back in with the more righteous Tammany crowd under its new Boss, Charles F. Murphy and his more respectable, middle-class patron, Thomas Fortune Ryan — the man who had been forced to concede ownership of the Metropolitan Street Railway Company to Robin's nemesis, August Belmont Jr just five years before. It had been Murphy who had backed Jerome for the District job in 1902 and again in 1905, although he was keen to emphasise the fact that he had no love for him personally.²⁸ At the beginning of his career he had been passionate about social reform, protecting the poor from the careless excesses of excessive wealth. Now his attention had turned to protecting the excesses of wealth from the trust-busting, anti-Capitalist heroics of President Theodore Roosevelt whose efforts to curb the reckless, insatiable appetites of unrestricted trade brought him into conflict with the biggest wolves on Wall Street, J. Pierpont Morgan and Thomas Fortune Ryan. The sources of all America's woes were no longer the corrupt politicians and police officers but the unregulated practices of corrupt bankers. There was chaos where there should be order, darkness where there should be light. The most dangerous of all classes, Roosevelt had concluded, were now the wealthy criminal classes. As far as the President was concerned, Jerome had grown lax in his prosecutions as friends and family grew wealthy off the back of a new and cleaner Tammany machine. Before long, rumours started to spread that Jerome had been quietly stonewalling efforts to explore the crooked affairs of Ryan's Metropolitan Street Railway and the executives who had been looting its handsome coffers.

When President Roosevelt heard the rumours that Jerome had been seen dining, shaking dice and sharing drinks with suspects Ryan and accident-prone playboy, Edward Russell Thomas — a

²⁶ *ibid*, p.249

²⁷ *Courtroom Warrior*, Richard O' Connor, Little Brown and Company, 1963, p.5

²⁸ 'Murphy Wished Jerome on Ticket', *New York Times*, February 6, 1906, p.16

member of Robin's *Hamilton-Northern Bank* clique — his career as Sir Galahad came to a less than chivalrous conclusion. Providing legal counsel to Thomas when he was due to be indicted in the banking cases of 1907 had been the final straw.²⁹ A Grand Jury was convened to investigate his dereliction of duty. According to Judge Samuel Seabury, who had been called a witness, the New York District Attorney had failed to make an “honest effort to prosecute wrongdoers” in connection with jury-fixing matters connected to the investigation of the Metropolitan Street Railway.”³⁰ Jerome had lost his dignity.³¹ But it hadn't always been like this. Far from it.

The Jeromes



The Jeromes were of a devout puritanical stock who had for many years been committed to reforming a crooked metropolis. William's uncle was Leonard Jerome, co-founder of the American Jockey Club and grandfather of Winston Churchill and Scott Fitzgerald's friend and publishing mentor, Shane Leslie.³² In the 1860s, William's father, Lawrence Jerome, and his Uncle Leonard had been part of several hunting trips in the American West organised by Wild Bill Cody. Among the family's intimates and oldest patrons was James Gordon Bennett Jr, the gregarious yet much maligned editor of the New York Herald and mainstay of the New York Yacht Club where Lawrence had also dropped anchor. If the Belmonts were New York's liberal-progressives, then the Jeromes were the city's reforming-preservationists, determined to confine the best part of power and influence to the respectable god-fearing and British-friendly elites that now dominated Oyster Bay and The Sound on the distinguished northern shores of Long Island. They wanted reform, but not at any price. In one of his most combative episodes Jerome had criticised the aristocrats of New York for not doing enough on improving conditions for the lower classes. The only valid contributions to the civic health and welfare of the city were being made by the Russian Jews and Irish Catholic Charities of the Lower East Side. With wealth came responsibility. The Jeromes were espousing a form of 'Noblesse oblige', of privilege balanced

²⁹ 'New Yorkers Try to Oust Jerome', *The Irish Standard*, May 30, 1908, p.7; 'Thomas Wants Court to Throw Out Indictments', *The New York Evening World*, June 25, 1908, p.8

³⁰ 'The Hearing on the Jerome Charges', *The Bellman*, Volume 4, p.659

³¹ *Courtroom Warrior*, Richard O' Connor, Little Brown and Company, 1963, p.5

³² Leonard Jerome (1817-1891) . His daughter Jennie Jerome married Lord Randolph Churchill and was the mother of Winston Churchill and his daughter Leonie Jerome was the mother of Shane Leslie, the man who got Scott Fitzgerald his deal with Scriber and who nurtured his talent in the first few years of his literary career.

by duty, or what might be called today 'One Nation Conservatism'; they were aristocrats who cared.

In fairness, the family's eye for social betterment was almost as good as their eye for business. It was Leonard Jerome who had co-founded the original American Jockey Club with August Belmont Sr., and William R. Travers in 1865. With just a few years the friends had amassed enough good fortune to build Jerome Park in Fordham (now the Bronx), which was at that time a lavish, upper-class sporting resort. Things changed when August Belmont Jr. took over the reins and set about making racing a sport for any dishonest politician, railroad man, actor and actress who had a spare bundle of dollars in their pocket and not just for kings. Within a decade they had extended the franchise. The Coney Island Jockey Club opened in June 1880 with money invested directly from Belmont Jr. and William R. Travers. Suddenly the sport was sparking with corruption. Illegal pools were being managed from outside the state and the demand for inside information on races increasingly led to bribery, blackmail and sometimes death. 'Dreamland' was fast becoming a nightmare. Twenty years later Belmont would enter a fractious but mutually beneficial arrangement with mafia-boss, Arnold Rothstein in which Belmont would manage the thoroughbreds and Rothstein would manage the bets.

How and why William Travers Jerome had found himself in the position of providing legal counsel to Robin isn't clear, but one might speculate that it had something to do with their mutual friends, Thomas Fortune Ryan and Edward R. Thomas whose Hamilton Bank had been re-launched by Robin back in 1907. As Jerome had been accused of colluding with both men during his humiliating fall from grace as District Attorney in 1908, it's quite possible that the veteran 'Courtroom Warrior' had been brought in to close the lid on certain disadvantageous truths being leaked to the muckraking press and President Taft's ever vigilant federal authorities. Curiously enough, one of the first decisions made by Jerome was to have Robin declared mentally unfit to stand trial and have him committed to an asylum. Just weeks before being arraigned on the first charge of misappropriating \$80,000 from the Washington Savings Bank, Jerome and Robin's Dr Louise G. Rabinovitch, a qualified alienist and psychologist, had Robin admitted to a sanatorium in Central Valley where he was placed under the care and supervision of respected psychiatrist, Carlos MacDonald, one of the doctors who just ten years earlier had successfully pronounced President McKinley's anarchist assassin, Leon F. Czolgosz sane enough to stand trial. A short time after his hasty admission, District Attorney Whitman served MacDonald with papers demanding Robin's release on the grounds that Robin was facing a criminal prosecution.

MacDonald was left with no other option but to cooperate. He had based his assessment on the word of his sister, a respected doctor herself who was adamant that her brother was suffering paranoid delusions and suicidal. In an attempt to avoid the press, Robin had been quietly removed to the home of his sister at 28 West 26th Street. Jerome was forced to present him for further assessment by Dr William Mabon, superintendent of the Manhattan State Hospital on Ward's Island. The examination, requested by District Attorney Whitman found Robin to be sane enough to stand trial. Jerome paid the \$25,000 in bail and was Robin was free to return home. The former District Attorney said he was astonished that he successor was desperate to ahead so quickly with the case. "Long Island Traction is responsible for Robin's present predicament", he told the press. "They are jealous that he had invaded the traction field there." He predicted that Robin would be found innocent of all charges, and that not one dollar in funds had been misplaced.³³

In the end, the court's refusal to have him admitted to a mental institution may have been the one that saved him the inconvenience of a premature death. But that didn't mean he was in the clear. As the Robin investigation turned to the activities of the Hungarian-American Bank of New York— another link in his chain of finances — it was discovered by District Whitman that the bank had loaned large sums of money to Joseph G. Robin and his partner William Cummins, in return for New York City deposits. The arrangement had been managed by Robin's 'man in the Hungarian-American bank', William E. Holloway, the Bank's President. A short time later it was being reported that the chief cashier of the *August Belmont & Company* bank of New York had shot himself dead in Paris. The news came less than a week after Robin had accused Belmont of being the man behind in his 'ruin' in the *New York Evening World*. Hermann Guthmann had checked himself into the Hotel Continental in Paris in the last week of February 1911 and on April 9 was found with a gunshot wound to the head. Belmont told reporters that the German-born Guthmann had been a correspondence clerk in his office and considered him a valuable man. The 45 year old bachelor was said to be on vacation but was found to be attending to some banking matters on behalf of the firm. His sister, who he lived with at West 112th Street, said that there no reason on earth why her brother would kill himself.³⁴ The coroner in Paris put it down

³³ 'Robin Pleads To Indictment Today', New York Tribune, December 30, p.1

³⁴ 'American Suicide in Paris', The New York Times, April 10, 1911, p.1

to an isolated episode of ‘neurasthenia’. It seems that Guthmann had committed suicide as a result of some spontaneous emotional meltdown that had come over him in his room that day.³⁵

Was Guthmann’s death in any way related to Robin’s story about Belmont or the illegal activities of the Hungarian-American Bank? It’s difficult to tell. At its inception in 1905 it was announced that Belmont & Co had been among a handful of New York banking houses looking to foster closer relations with Austria-Hungary by opening a bank in New York that would cater specifically for Hungarian workers and which would help in expanding trade relations between the two countries.³⁶ The news of Guthmann’s suicide arrived on the very day that the bank had published an advertisement in the *New York Times* alerting customers that the bank had moved its premises to 147 Fifth Avenue from 32 Broadway, adjacent to Robin’s partner F. Augustus Heinze and the offices of J.S. Bache & Co.³⁷ The application to move the bank had been accepted on December 17, 1910 just five days before Robin’s arrest. It is further interesting to note that 32 Broadway had been the address used by Robin and his business partners, General James R. O’ Beirne and Robert E. Waldo for the Popular Banking and Loan Association and The Ocean and Navigation Construction Company in the first few years of the century.³⁸

Exactly what stakes they had in the bank isn’t known, but Belmont & Co certainly had significant shares in the company after the bank had changed its name to the Transatlantic Trust Company in 1912 and found itself at the centre of an intense and far-reaching Federal investigation.³⁹ The bank had been selling Hungarian and German War Bonds. That was fine in itself, but the advertisements the bank had been using to sell the bonds abroad had fallen foul of the standards committee. According to one advertisement, a German Submarine had landed in Baltimore and was taking back cash earned by immigrant workers to aid the war effort. It was subsequently

³⁵ The Paris newspapers reported that Guthmann had checked in to the Hotel Continental on February 18th at same time as George Rubler of Berlin and British author, Rudyard Kipling. See: *New York Herald*, Paris Edition, February 18, 1911, p.4.

³⁶ ‘Plan International Bank’, *New York Times*, August 24, 1905, p.4. Other banks included Kuhn, Loeb & Co and J & W. Seligman & Co.

³⁷ *New York Times*, April 11, 1911, p.5. Bache’s daughter had married the son of General John J. Pershing. Pershing’s nephew, James F. Pershing Jnr. features in the life of ‘Bootlegger Gatsby’, Max von Gerlach. See: Horst Kruse, *F. Scott Fitzgerald at Work*, pp. 42-43

³⁸ ‘O Beirne Examined’, *New York Times*, February 14, 1901, p.9; *Marine Review*, Volumes 19/20, Penton Publishing, 1899, p.18

³⁹ Belmont & Co’s Walther Luttgen is down as director of the trust in 1914. Luttgen became a partner of Belmont & Co in 1880 and was a member of the New York Yacht Club.

accused of trading in pro-German propaganda, an ‘un-American activity’ that was being used to destabilise US relations with Britain and its allies.⁴⁰

Over the course of the next twelve months Robin would reject the view of his sister and his counsel Jerome that he had been in any way mentally incapacitated — and perhaps with good reason. Jesse C. Joy, the chief cashier for Robin’s business partner, F. Augustus Heinze had been admitted to an asylum shortly after the collapse of the Hamilton Bank in 1907. Perhaps Robin had now recalled that a few months after Joy’s admission, a nurse had found him dead in his cell with a gunshot wound to the head in another apparent suicide.

Jerome’s bid to have Robin committed was almost as passionate as his bid to hide the assets of the South Shore Traction Company and file for bankruptcy on Robin’s behalf. In February that year, the Public Service Commission found that 1,000 shares of stock had been transferred across to Jerome shortly after Robin’s arrest. These shares had previously been in the possession of Robin’s secretary, Theodore Werner, who had received them from Robin in the first week of December as part of his alleged ‘manipulations’. Upon request, Werner had transferred the shares across to Jerome and all previous entries referring to the shares had been carefully removed from the books. The court duly requested Arthur C. Hume, the company’s treasurer (and Dreiser’s lawyer) to provide duplicates and paste them back into the books.⁴¹

Robin Attempts Suicide



Having hidden Robin’s assets as best he could, Jerome’s next move was no less desperate or dramatic. As he arrived at the court to hear the charges against him on December 30th Robin declared that he was a ‘doomed man’. He then told the astonished officials how he had swallowed twelve tablets of Hyoscamine — the poison that the infamous Dr Crippen had used on his wife

⁴⁰ *Brewing and Liquor Interests and German Propaganda: Hearings*, Volume 3 United States Congressional Serial Set, Volume 7598; *Lives and Deaths of a Hungarian Bank in New York*, Susan Glanz, Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS) , Spring, 2014, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 131-155

⁴¹ ‘Gave Jerome Robin’s Stock’, New York Times, February 2, 1911, p.4. Robin’s men, Arthur C. Hume, Anthony Stumpf (Finance publisher) and Frederick K Morris had represented the interests of the Hudson Long Island Traction Company back in 1908. Hume and Robin would remain partnership until Robin’s death in 1927. He was also Theodore Dreiser’s personal attorney at Boni & Liveright.

just months before. Robin spoken calmly and lucidly as sat in half-stupor in the district attorney's office waiting for the court to convene.

It seems that Robin had ingested the slow-acting poison some forty-five minutes earlier at his the home of his sister, Dr Louise Rabinovitch. The officers who had driven him to court had had no idea. Robin blearily explained how he had found the tablets in a drawer in his sister's room. His sister had occasionally prescribed the drug to counter the effects of the morphine he was taking to relieve a complaint in his kidneys. Disturbed by what lay ahead, he had taken everything that was in the box. Louise supported him as he spoke, his head resting on her shoulder. It was all true, she said, although she had no idea her brother had taken the dose until he said goodbye to her in the attorney's office before collapsing. The doctors who had assembled at the court to report on his mental health scrambled into action. Robin was extracted from the court room, packed as it was with reporters and excited observers, and raced at speed to Hudson Street Hospital where his stomach was pumped. After recovering he was taken to a prison ward at Bellevue Hospital where he spent the next two or three days recovering.⁴²

The drama continued the following week when an elderly Jewish couple purporting to be Robin's parents entered the office of the District Attorney. In true Gatsby style, Robin denied that they were related. In Fitzgerald's novel its discovered that Jay Gatsby is really James Gatz, the son of a poor farmer from the American Midwest who had reinvented himself as 'Jay Gatsby' after an encounter with millionaire adventurer Dan Cody at Lake Superior. Even his closest friends are led to believe that his parents are dead. It is only at the end of the novel when Gatsby is dead that his father, a "solemn" and "very helpless" old man is tracked down to Minnesota and attends the funeral, bringing with him a child's crudely sketched ledger showing a list of resolves for self-improvement, the last one reading, 'Be better to parents'. When confronted by the couple in the office of District Attorney, Charles Whitman, Robin brushed them away with his hand, indifferent to the tears they cried and the protests they made. Whitman had brought them forward as a means of stonewalling, if not completely, destroying the plea of insanity arranged by Jerome and Robin's sister. In an effort to seize control of Robins few remaining assets, Dr Louise Rabinovitch, had identified herself as her brother's next of kin. Whitman sought to prove this wasn't the case and the couple's story contradicted her affidavit. A charge of perjury was being pursued by his office. Whitman sent two of his men to Williamsburg in Brooklyn with subpoenas

⁴² 'Robin Now in No Danger of Dying', New York Tribune, December 31, 1910, p.1

and Mr and Mrs Herman Rabinovitch were brought dramatically before the jury. In one of the more surreal episodes of the sessions, Mr Rabinovitch, a stooped old man of some 75 or 80 years of age rambled incoherently in Yiddish, his failing eyesight and uncertain shuffling adding a queerly slapstick dimension to the encounter. No one had prepared Robin. The elderly couple had arrived at the criminal court building in complete anonymity and without any forewarning. Every effort was clearly being made to trip him up. When informed they were in the building Robin is alleged to have snapped back at one of the detectives, "I won't meet them. You can't force me in there." In an effort to spear them further indignity, Whitman questioned the couple in an adjoining room. The story they told was that they had four children: Frederick, the eldest who held a government position in Europe but could not be located, Edward (who had changed his name to Edward Robinson), Louise (originally called Leah) and Josef, the youngest. Their testimony seemed to match the details provided by Louise in her affidavit, but with one notable exception: she had never mentioned the eldest brother Frederick. Satisfied that they were indeed Robin's parents Whitman brought them back before Robin and the court. As soon as the mother caught sight of Robin as he conversed with Jerome she cried, 'Meine kinder! Meine kinder!' holding out her arms toward him. Evidently bemused by the spectacle, Robin is alleged to have smirked before responding, "What the hell are you trying do?" Shattered, the woman broke down and wept. Robin was unmoved. He admitted that these were the people who had brought him to America but that they were not his real parents. His real parents had been exiled in Siberia by the Russian government for some political offence some thirty years before. Their real mother was a French woman. When their parents were exiled a friend of their mothers from her native country ensured they received an education. He and his sister had travelled with the couple from Odessa. In a bid to dodge the immigration laws they had travelled under the name 'Pincus', and had posed as the couple's own children. They weren't even friends of the parents, but friends of friends that their parents had been vaguely aware of. His sister, a veil draped over her face, was led into the court and immediately threw her arms around her brother with complete indifference to the elderly couple. The New York Times describes Louise as almost crushing him in her arms and kissing him again and again in a "storm of hysterical tears". The old couple looked on a little unsure of what to do until the mother, in a moment of either great tenderness or great adlibbing, stood up and repeated her only lines so far, "Meine kinder"!, she shouted as she spread out her arms again.

William Travers Jerome, probably sensing the kind of innuendo the overly affectionate scene might have presented to the men of the press, began guiding Louise away from her brother,

making light with a nervous quip about her hat pin taking his eye out. With all four of them now sitting down and Louise's veil removed, District Attorney Whitman asked the mother if the two were their son and daughter. They said they were, and broke down in tears again. With the aid of an interpreter the same question was put to her husband, who got up and shuffled toward Robin for a closer look. With his grizzled old forehead bent as close to the man as he possible, he stared analytically at his face. Robin couldn't have looked any more awkward. The tall, immaculate thirty-five year old millionaire, who Dreiser would describe in his portrait as looking every inch the Russian Grand Duke, handsome and well-built, was nose to nose with thin and wiry old Yiddish man who stood "hardly five-feet in height" insisting that he was his father. The old man smiled, and Robin duly smiled back at him, but without any semblance of recognition. Shuffling back to his seat the old man threw his hands up and groaned aloud, his wife holding her face in her hands. They had come to offer their help, only to suffer the cruellest rebuke possible: their children had disowned them.

The court asked the old couple if they were able to produce any evidence that the defendant and his sister were indeed their children. They replied no. The mother explained that Robin and his sister had visited their house just twelve months previously and "removed a large number of papers and letters." The only thing they had was a letter from an 18 year old Robin, written to his father (in English) demanding money. As a counter-reproach, Robin's sister dutifully reminded the court that since her brother's 'bank-wrecking' story had gone public they'd been a regular stream of Rabinovitches all claiming to be kin, and all saying they were owed money. The couple's counsel, William Travers Jerome, who'd had little time to investigate the couple's claim, promised that it would have little or no foundation. As far as he was concerned the story told by Dr Louise Robinovitch in the affidavit she had provided was correct: their parents had been political exiles in Russia, and had become separated from their parents as a result.

When a reporter visited the elderly couple's three-root flat at a tenement in Williamsburg, a friend of the family, speaking only through the letterbox, did her best to back up their story. Mrs Rabinovitch had said only yesterday that Robin was her son and how he had never once offered to contribute a cent toward their rent. It was their son Edward who helped with that, although the daughter — the woman doctor in Manhattan — had also assisted from time to time. Her husband had been a carpenter in Odessa and had earned enough money to send their children to grammar school. Frederick, their eldest child, had been the first to come to New York and soon after began writing letters saying what a great country it was and how easy it was to make money there. A

little time later, the couple made the trip to New York themselves, bringing with them Louise (Leah) and Josef. How the impoverished immigrants were able to put Louse through an expensive medical school in Paris was never disclosed, nor how Robin had spent several years in Paris himself. According to the reporter, Mr Rabinovitch had ditched his carpentry work and started a bakery, but Josef had taken no interest and moved out, getting a job in a bank in Lower Broadway near Bowling Green. When Louise returned from Europe she got a job at a woman's hospital on Blackwell's Island. Since leaving home Robin had tried to convince everyone that he was a Protestant Christian when the family was in fact, Jewish.⁴³

Theodore Dreiser, who perhaps knew Robin better than anyone, had been less than convinced by the claims of the old couple. Up until the elderly couple appeared, the stories of just when and how Robin had arrived in America had often been a maze of contradictions: Robin at arrived in New York as Josef Rabinowitz at the age of 22 about sixteen years ago, was single, spoke in broken-English and had come to the country alone. The only cash he had arrived with had been used to pass the immigration barrier.

Dreiser acknowledges that the couple's story was backed-up by those who had worked in his father's bakery but is clearly sceptical about their value, and not without reason. One man, who says he had worked for Robin's father explained that Joseph was "very vain and liked to appear intellectual". He described how he had moaned a great deal when working morning and evening shifts at the bakery. The statement contradicted outright the story told by the elderly couple: Robin had refused point-blank to work in the bakery and had found a job at a bank in Lower Broadway. Additionally, little was done to explain why Robin spoke English with a French-twang or where his father, a lowly carpenter in Odessa had accumulated enough wealth to put his two youngest children through grammar school and Louise through medical school in Paris, which as we'll learn later was all completely true.

⁴³ 'Say Robin's Their Son', New York Times, January 5, 1911, p.2; 'Robin Rejects His Old Parents', New York Times, January 6, 1911, p.3

The Bootblack Millionaire



How much of Robin's rags to riches story is true is likely to remain a mystery. The general consensus is that Robin came from Odessa and settled in Manhattan somewhere on the Lower East Side.⁴⁴ The story that he told the *New York Tribune* was the classic rags to riches story dreamed of by the majority of Russian immigrants as they sailed past Liberty Island. He had come to the country as a boy of fifteen some twenty years ago with his sister, a brilliant doctor. After leaving Russia they had spent several years in Berlin and then Paris. They arrived in New York in the early 1890s with no money. His sister had taken a post as interne in the Manhattan State Hospital for the Insane on Wards Island. The only tools at his disposal were a good knowledge of French and Russian and an unusually good aptitude for mathematics. He ran errands, he shovelled snow and shined shoes in Union Square. It was here that he started assisting reporters chasing stories among the immigrant colonies on New York's Lower East Side.

A few years later Robin was writing for the *New York Recorder* where he picked up an exclusive on the abuses being meted out to inmates at a psychiatric hospital on Ward Island. The story, told to him by his sister Louise, a visiting doctor at hospital, was a national sensation and threw a spotlight onto wide scale corruption going on at New York's immigration centres, Wards and Ellis Island. A short time later Robin was introduced through the charities commission to the former Provost Marshall of Washington, General James Rowan O' Beirne, and did some 'good government' campaigning on O' Beirne's behalf. Joseph was keen at this point to acknowledge the glass ceiling — or brick wall rather — that prevented millions of immigrants like him climbing the ladder: "*the name of the wall was Indifference and its doors were locked with chilled steel called Suspicion*" he once wrote. There was only one door that had ever been opened and that one led through the office of the Charities Commissioner — General O' Beirne. The dream that had lured millions of hopeful Russian to New York had a cold, hard interior of often nightmarish reality that few of them ever woke up from. Once here the big bright lights of Manhattan helped cauterise the wounds of the old country, but after being corralled into the

⁴⁴ 'Bank-owner began on a shoe string; With Less Than \$500 Robin, Born Robinovitch, Bought a Million-Dollar Company', *New York Times*, December 28, 1910 p.2; 'Cheney Shuts Northern Bank, Shortage Found in Harlem Concern Due to Manipulations by J.G. Robin', *New York Times*, December 28, 1910 p.1. In earlier versions of *The Great Gatsby* Nick says he fully expects Gatsby to have come from the 'Lower East Side'.

swarming immigrant districts that grew around the ‘fashions’ industry, fresh wounds would develop. Slavery might have been abolished, but its place came poverty and a lifetime of modern serfdom in the great metropolis. New York hadn’t been looking for entrepreneurs when the gangway came down at Ellis Island. It had been looking for cheap labour. And once it had it, it was eager to raise the platform and stop the boats. The dream which had once been rooted in the firm soils of truly egalitarian ideals was beginning to prove as fragile as fairy wings.

Robin had gone to General O’Beirne with a scheme: he wished to create a building and loan association that would help people on low incomes build their own homes. The New York Charities Commissioner duly set-up an office on Lower Broadway and Robin was put to work as General Manager. When O’Beirne asked why he had changed his name from Robinovitch, Robin is alleged to have told the General that he was a fugitive from Russia had altered it to protect his identity from the dozens of Tsarist spies secreted around New York.⁴⁵

Mission to Unify the World



Whilst the details regarding Robin’s early history as the young, ambitious immigrant Josef G. Rabinovitch are really quite sketchy at best, we do have some interesting insights into the man that the ambitious young Ukrainian turned into after emerging from the chrysalis as Gatsby-esque millionaire, Joseph G. Robin. According to his sister, the combination of being separated from their parents and the pair’s sensational expose of the abuses being suffered by the inmates at the Manhattan State Hospital for the Insane had given Joseph a ‘mission’ in life. Within weeks of the disclosures he was experiencing an almost divine compulsion to right wrongs, restore balances and ‘unify the world’. Louise explained to the court how her brother had been utterly convinced that God had sent him to New York to “fulfil a financial mission’. The voices that he was hearing had been telling him to do great things. But that was not all he believed. His noble mission, Robin feared, was encountering lethal opposition from some of New York’s most powerful men who were determined to keep the upper tiers of financial success in the city under the management and the privilege of its oldest and most distinguished families. Robin was

⁴⁵ ‘Bootblack Made a Million out of Niagara Falls’, New York Tribune, January 8, 1911, p.3; ‘Robins First Flights’, The Literary Digest, Funk & Wagnalls, Vol. 42, No.3, January 21, 1911

insisting that there was someone out to kill him, and the man who had wanted him dead was J. Pierpont Morgan.

A close shave with death the day prior to his arraignment in the last week of December had done little to calm his nerves about the plot. A doctor who was taking him to MacDonald Sanatorium in Central Valley had had to grab Robin by both arms and pin him against a standing car after a wildcat locomotive had come tearing along at high-speed. The passengers had been passing over the track to catch their train when the train has streaked by out of nowhere. Only the warning cry of the conductor had been between the passengers and certain death. The doctor later reported the engineer responsible to the New York Police. ⁴⁶

On January 24th 1911, Robin was to stun the courtroom once again when in a long and rambling tirade he personally accused Morgan and the New York State Banking Department of trying to silence him. They were, he said, trying to have him “railroaded” into an asylum to prevent him telling the world about a climate of “frenzied” corruption that was hanging like a cloud over Wall Street. Robin duly demanded that the court examine the records of the *Carnegie Trust Company* and expose the deals being struck at the highest levels that saw bargains being picked up when smaller interests were placed in impossible positions: *“They say I am crazy and ought to be in an asylum ... but if they will just examine the records of the state banking department and the records of the Carnegie Trust Company and force the former officials of the Carnegie Trust Company to go before the grand jury and tell the truth, then it will be shown how business concerns are forced to the wall so that big interests can pick up bargains in banks.”* ⁴⁷ Talking disconnectedly at times Robin hinted at various ‘dark plots’ featuring the chief officers of the Carnegie Trust Company and Jordan D. Rollins, counsel for the State Banking Department. “You newspaper men think I’m crazy”, Robin had screamed, “But you are the ones who are crazy if you can’t see that the State Banking Department is retaining Rollins & Rollins, the lawyers who appear against me ... Rollins boasts that he is the whole banking department and can push any one to the wall if he likes”. Robin then made an allusion to the Dreyfus Affair of the late 1890s in which an innocent Jewish soldier in France had been tried on charges of espionage for the German military. The charges against Dreyfus were generally regarded as political and anti-Semitic in nature: *“I am in the position of the hero of Devil’s Island. The people at home laughed*

⁴⁶ ‘A Physician’s Statement’, ‘Robin nearly Killed’, New York Times, December 29, 1910, p.2.

⁴⁷ ‘Robin Breaks Up Hearing In Court’, New York Times, January 25th, 1911, p.5

while Zola told his story and began the work that finally cleared his fair name.”⁴⁸ Robin followed it up with a demand for a fair public hearing and to let the New York District Attorney examine the evidence that would reveal the kind of people who were so determined to see him buried. He had, he said, absolutely no doubt at all that the man at the back of all this was J. P. Morgan. The accusations went down almost as emphatically as Morgan’s ship the RMS Titanic in the year that followed. The court session concluded with the resignation of his counsel William Travers Jerome and a request for further assessment of his fragile mental state. The Alienists were called back in and a fresh examination based on Section 836 of the new penal code was requested by Judge Swann.⁴⁹

The investigation into Robin’s business dealings at the Northern and Washington Savings Banks had been triggered by two vaguely related cases: the investigation into F. Augustus Heinze and the United Copper Company, which had got rolling in the aftermath of the Panic of 1907, and a no less sensational scandal — the *Carnegie-Savoy Scandal*. It seems that Robin’s associate, Joseph B. Reichmann, President of the Carnegie Trust Company had been indicted for ‘official misconduct’ as a result of his failure to disclose that the Trust Company had been experiencing debts in excess of \$100,000 in a report compiled by the trustees of the company in 1910. In a subsequent attempt to cloak its disastrous fortunes, a series of illegal loans had been secured by Savoy Trust Company and Robin’s Northern Bank. But it wasn’t just their creativity and deception that had got Robin and the banks in trouble, it was the fact that the group’s chief representatives had lied about it. Shuffling around loans and money to save or create another bank was hardly an unknown practice but it was certainly illegal.

Before long, Andrew Carnegie’s Trust Fund was facing charges of usury. As the weeks wore on, the trust managers began digging a deeper and deeper grave. At its inception in November 1906 Carnegie had been careful to leave his name off the board of directors, but his name had since been re-attached “without his authorisation” and “against his wishes”. As was customary with powerful men, it was the Trust’s senior representative, Joseph G. Robin who was left to face the

⁴⁸ Emile Zola. Robin is probably referring to a famous 4,000-word open letter written by French author Emile Zola accusing the French Government of a huge miscarriage of Justice. Alfred Dreyfus, a captain in the French army, had been convicted of treason and sentenced to solitary confinement for life on Devil’s Island. There is no evidence that Zola knew Robin personally.

⁴⁹ ‘Robin Breaks Up Hearing In Court’, New York Times, January 25th, 1911, p.5

music, Andrew Carnegie generally escaping public scrutiny and prosecution. Officially at least, Robin had been enjoying full control of the trust's affairs since 1908.

Louis N. Hammerling



The Savoy Trust Company's director was foreign-press magnate Louis N. Hammerling, a furiously ambitious political meddler of uncertain heritage: many thought he was Austrian, some thought he was from Hawaii, some assumed he was from Italy, whilst Hammerling, rather late in the day, did his best to persuade the world that he had actually been born in Poland. As President of the American Association of Foreign Language Newspapers, Hammerling was believed to have accumulated significant power over some 800 newspapers in nearly two dozen languages including American anarchist Saul Yokovsky's *Freie Arbeiter Stimme*, Afifa Karam (Carrm)'s Arabic newspaper, *The New World*. Other titles under his control included Herman Bernstein and Meyer Aaronson's *Der Tog*, Leo Pasvolsky's, *Russkoye Slovo*, Leo Wise's *American Israelite* and *Chicago Chronicle* and Frank M. Delatch's *Narodni Vestnik*. Hammerling also an equally impressive range of Japanese, Swedish, Finnish, Italian and Hungarian titles. Hammerling's troubles had really started with the war in Europe when his pro-German activities caught the attention of the Federal authorities. According to the Feds, a substantial number of his newspapers and journals had publicly backed a resolution to appeal to the American nation to refuse manufacturing or trading products used by America's European allies in their conflict with Germany. The whole thing had been conceived and bankrolled by Hammerling and was deemed 'un-American'.⁵⁰ A letter written to Hammerling by rival publisher and banker, Frank Zotti ahead of a Grand Jury hearing in April 1918 described him as a 'Coward', a 'Perjurer', a 'Fraud' and an 'Impostor'.⁵¹ The court later ruled that he was a 'menace to Americanization', his dubious loyalties and infidelities betraying the very purpose and spirit of immigration in the 'Land of Opportunity'. A Foreword to a book published on the Hammerling hearing began by praising the noble purpose of the immigrant's struggle, which refined their spirits into 'pure gold': "The fields of endeavour in these United States yield rich harvest to the

⁵⁰ US Congress. Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, 1919, Hearings: Brewing and Liquor Interests and Bolshevik and German Propaganda

⁵¹ A Menace to Americanization, *Narodni List*, 1919, pp. 6-7. The *Narodni List* was published by Frank Zotti, born in 'little Montenegro' (at this time Austria-Hungary).

worker with a will to win ... Wealth and power are theirs, but when they walk among their fellow men the eye of suspicion is cast upon them.”⁵²

Among those who advertised their services with Hammerling’s title was the Hungarian-American Bank, who had been similarly disqualified when it ran the story of a German submarine landing in Baltimore to run remittances from immigrants back to the homeland in aid of the country’s war efforts. It wasn’t looking for Robin, as he was suspected of having juggled money around for both companies.⁵³ In 1918 both Hammerling and the Transatlantic Trust were shut down as ‘enemy agents’, and their assets confiscated.

Interestingly, Hammerling’s political career had first got off the ground when he had been hired by William McKinley’s campaign manager, Mark Hanna during his 1896 presidential race with William Jennings Bryan, whose own bid was being funded by Robin’s Trust Fund chief, Andrew Carnegie. As owner and editor of a worker’s journal aimed principally at immigrants, McKinley had appointed the ‘ethnic advocate’ to manage the party’s campaign to harvest the immigrant vote. Hammerling’s experience as Union leader of the Wilkes-Barre advertising giant had allowed him cultivate a powerful rhetoric and he was a natural publicity agent and manipulator. Senator McKinley’s friend and political advisor, Mark Hanna had Hammerling write articles and editorials on McKinley policies for the Republican and Democrat press, alternately attacking and defending the Republican candidate’s policies, breathing energy and fresh conflict into what might have been a stale debate. It was judged that Hammerling’s influence on the rural immigrant populations practically ensured McKinley’s nomination.

In addition to the charges that Hammerling faced over pro-German propaganda were the no less serious charges he faced over the support that he and his papers were offering to the Liberal movements who were now campaigning against prohibition. Financing the campaign was the British-German brewing magnate, Percy Andrae, who was now living in Chicago. Like Hammerling, Andrae had used his position as President of *The National Association of Commerce and Labor* to foment (or even ferment) a national grassroots challenge to prohibition. Open your copy of *Gatsby* at Chapter Five and you’ll find an oft overlooked reference to Gatsby’s gothic mansion: “A Brewer had built it early in the ‘period’ and there was a story that he’d agreed

⁵² A Menace to Americanization, Narodni List, 1919, Foreword.

⁵³ The Transatlantic Trust Company had been known as Hungarian-American Bank when it featured in the Robin investigation.

to pay five years taxes on all neighbouring cottages if the owners would agree to have their roofs thatched with straw.”⁵⁴ It’s the bigger picture we are meant to see. The image the author presents of Gatsby and his empire is less about the criminality of Gatsby’s bootlegging activities but how it all relates to the issue of civil liberties. For many progressives, Prohibition had marked a worrying turning point in the American constitution and the rights and freedoms of its citizens. It was felt that the tyrannical Puritanism of the Temperance movement was somehow desecrating America’s more vital and visceral past — a past that had advanced without moral interference. The reference to ‘roofs thatched with straw’ suggests the brewer was either English or, perhaps like Gatsby, had English affectations. And whilst its unlikely that Fitzgerald was thinking specifically of Percy Andreae when he wrote these lines, I think it was almost certainly a nod and wink to the anti-Prohibition and pro-Liberties views being expressed by the British Brewing Industry and by British ex-pats in America at this time: the pure heathen joy of liquor and the freedom — and imagination — it represented, and the relief that it provided from the firm, oppressive grip of Puritanical Conservatism.⁵⁵ For men like Percy Andreae, the doors of the typical saloon-bar were nothing less than the gates of Xanadu. The God-pushers of America were obstructing that gate. The world was being reduced to “a barren, forbidding wilderness” in which we, its inhabitants, were “forced to pass our time contemplating the joys” of what lay behind that gate. The “autocracy of the Russian Czar” was a “mere trifle” by comparison.⁵⁶

In a macabre twist, William McKinley the man whose Presidency Hammerling had assisted, would be assassinated by ‘ethnic anarchist’ Leon Czolgosz in 1901, just six months into his presidency. Hammerling by contrast, would be tried over what was perceived as a deeply subversive anti-war (and pro-Liquor) advertising campaign that he had funded and manage personally during the war. It was patently clear from the ads being run that the Russian-born, Hammerling — a passionate anti-Tsarist — had been using his newspaper to make direct and frantic appeals to stay out of the war with Germany. An ad run in Hamerling’s *American Leader* journal in April 1915 read: “An Appeal to the American People: Let us alleviate human suffering and preserve life — not help destroy it”. The headline was backed-up by a 500-word case that argued in lofty, isolationist prose how the “honour of the American people” and the “integrity of

⁵⁴ TGG, p. 85

⁵⁵ There’s an amusing story of how future British Prime Minister Winston Churchill used a prescription given to him by Doctor O.C. Pickhardt on East 80th Street to get around Prohibition during his tour of the United States.

⁵⁶ *A Glimpse behind the Mask of Prohibition, Percy Andreae, The Prohibition Movement in its Broader Bearings upon Our Social, Commercial, and Religious Liberties*, Felix Mendelsohn, 1915, pp. 9-19

the nation” were at stake. ⁵⁷As you might imagine, he was suspected of being a German agent — although if we are to statements he made much later, much of his anti-war energy had been derived not from his loyalty to Austrian-Hungary but from his loathing of the Russian Romanovs and his hopes for Polish independence. ⁵⁸

In April 1935 the 61 year-old Hammerling fell to his death from his 18-storey apartment at 5 Prospect Place in Manhattan. The view of the Police was that he may have suffered a dizzy spell or a heart attack whilst opening a window. In 1921 Hammerling had relinquished his American citizenship to become a citizen of Poland after being suspected his forging his US naturalisation papers. As a result of the investigation into this and his anti-prohibition liquor brewing activities, Hammerling resigned his post as President of the American Association of Foreign Language Newspapers. ⁵⁹

It wasn't the first mysterious death associated with the affair either. In fact there are two worth mentioning.

The Death of Mrs Blanche Dennis



The first of these deaths was the death of Blanche Turner Dennis, the widow of Major Hugh C. Dennis, in March 1906. According to the New York Daily Tribune, the young widow, who the press would describe as a “young woman of thirty, beautiful of face and figure” had left her home in St Louis and checked into the Hotel Marseille in Broadway in February that year. The following month she is believed to have had a secret meeting with Dr Hugh Kidder of West 46th Street, near Times Square in Midtown Manhattan. It's generally that Blanche had sought an abortion but there had been unfortunate complications after surgery. The autopsy revealed that Blanche had died of blood poisoning after self-administering drugs to ease the pain. The hotel's proprietor, H. C. Griswold, said he knew little about the woman other than that she was very quiet, received few friends and paid her room bills promptly. The woman's Canadian husband,

⁵⁷ ‘An Appeal to the American People, The American Leader’, April 5th, 1915

⁵⁸ *The Most Dangerous German Agent in America: The Many Lives of Louis N. Hammerling*, According to American historian, Mieczysław B. Bikupski, Cornell University Press, 2015, p.69

⁵⁹ ‘18-storey Fall Kills Louis N. Hammerling; ; Ex-Head of Foreign Press Group Plunges Into Prospect Place -- Citizenship Revoked in 1924’; New York Times, April 28th 1935, p.2

Major Hugh C. Dennis, was at one time one of the highest-salaried life insurance agents in America. He believed to have taken his own life after a Federal Grand Jury in St Louis had found Dennis and several of his partners at the Rialto Grain and Securities Company guilty of fraud and corruption charges in January 1904. The case against the men was thought by some to have been political in nature, an attempt by Republican Progressives led by President Theodore Roosevelt, to remove Senator Joseph R. Burton from office and replace him with the more compliant, Joseph L. Bristow.⁶⁰ Like his Democrat counterparts, William Travers Jerome and John Drake Townsend, Roosevelt and Burton had been intent on uncoupling America's invisible Governments and break the unholy trinity of corrupt politicians, businessmen and crooks operating in its cities.

According to the *Tribune* reporter, one of the few friends who were believed to have visited Blanche at the hotel was Joseph G. Robin, President of The Bank of Discount and speculation was rife that he may not only have been the woman's secret lover but also the father of the unborn child. From his room at the Hotel Woodward in Broadway Robin issued the following statement:

"I have been shocked both by the death of Mrs Dennis and the circumstances surrounding it. I was introduced to her by a mutual friend about 18 months ago at the Park Avenue Hotel, where she was living. She had returned to the city from California a few weeks ago and advised me of her return. I have accepted her invitation and called upon her. On two or three occasions I called for her with my automobile and accompanying other friends she went riding with me. I sent her tickets to amusements on several occasions and since, I learned of her illness, saw her almost daily until the end came. I was at the Hotel Marseille on Wednesday night, until nearly the hour of her death. I have nothing to conceal as to my relations with Mrs Dennis and the attempt to make any mystery of our acquaintance is a gross injustice to me."⁶¹

Sadly, that wasn't the end of the affair. Blanche's death was followed by the death of her friend, May Kay, an attractive 28 year-old who had checked herself into the Hotel Alabama. Shortly after Coroner Shrady had finished conducting the autopsy on Blanche he received a call from a woman who asked if it was true that Blanche was dead. He replied that it was. The woman broke down in tears and the call ended before he had a chance to ascertain her full identity. The woman had been weeping violently and could only manage to give him her first name. The rest had been

⁶⁰ *Leaders of Reform: Progressive Republicans in Kansas, 1900-1916*, Robert S. La Forte, University Press of Kansas, 1974, p.39

⁶¹ 'Joseph G. Robin banker denies mystery in his relations with widow', *New York Tribune*, march 30, 1906, p.5

incoherent. The *New York Evening World* reported that Blanche had died of gunshot wounds to the stomach that same evening. The suicide was put down to grief over the death of her friend and a former lover, known only as 'Bill' who had jumped from the sixth floor window of an apartment block some five months before. The *World* reporter divulged that much of the \$150,000 estate that Blanche had inherited some three years before had been entrusted to a businessman on Broadway who was now acting as trustee. The previous week she had tried to reclaim her property from the man but there had been niggles and complications. It's believed that she had given the man funds and securities for which she had received no receipt.⁶²

The press offered another tantalising snippet of gossip. Until recently Blanche had been engaged to a rich 'Russian' gentleman who went by the name Aribert Sacky. During the inquest that followed the sometime 'Count' claimed that prior to his arrival in America in the early 1890s he had been a cadet in the German army. His entry in the US census for 1910 has him living as a stock broker at 110 10th Avenue on the West Side of Manhattan. His place of birth is given as Courland, Russia.⁶³ Accusations made by 'Baron' Fernand Bavastro de Cortazzi, suggested that a vicious 'beating' that Blanche had received from the 38 year old Sacky may have played a role in the woman's death. The Baron was a small, slightly implausible man, vaguely involved in writing scenarios on Broadway who spent much of his time shuttling between New York, Paris and Monte Carlo. According to reports the Baron's left arm was completely missing and his right hand was badly crippled. He says he had known the woman for only some six days prior to her death but provided a graphic account of seeing the woman in a beaten and traumatic state shortly before she died. Sacky denied any accusations that he had abused or maltreated the woman in any way and the coroner duly reported that no external bruises had been found on the woman's body.⁶⁴ Reporters also claimed that the woman was acquainted with a well-known Republican leader. Among those questioned by Police were William Henry Lee of Equitable Life and the Socialite, Clare Ellison Page, a frequent visitor to Paris, London and Rome who had made a series of claims against Sacky. Page was declared bankrupt the following month. In February 1920 she was found dead in her room at the Hotel Vanderbilt in New York. She appears to have

⁶² 'Keeps Death Pact with her Sweetheart', *New York Evening World*, March 30, 1906, p.9; *New York Times* March 31, 1906, p.6; *New York Times*, March 30, 1906, p.1

⁶³ An historical religion in Western Latvia.

⁶⁴ 'Woman Sues Promoter', *New York Tribune*, April 3, 1906, p.14; 'Sacky No Count he Says', *New York Tribune*, April 11, 1906, p.5

shot herself in the head.⁶⁵ The executor of her will was named as Charles A. Stoneham, a friend of the gangster Arnold Rothstein and owner of the New York Giants and whose name cropped in the 1919 World Series and E.M Fuller scandals that year. Stoneham received in excess of \$10,000 from Page's estate.⁶⁶

After two weeks of investigation, the *New York Times* was reporting that the death would remain a mystery. As far as the Coroner was concerned, the death of Mrs Dennis had been caused by blood-poisoning "following an operation performed in a manner unknown".⁶⁷ News of the mystery had been greatly drowned out by the news that Maxim Gorky, the great literary hero of Russia's 1905 revolution had arrived in New York to speak with President Roosevelt. America's own literary hero, Mark Twain, immediately got involved in a committee organised on Gorky's behalf as a means of raising funds for the Socialist Revolutionaries in Russia who were now determined who were bitterly objecting to the opening of a State Parliament that had been suggested by the Tsar as a means of appeasing the anarchists and curbing the worst of the violence. When questioned on his support of the revolutionaries at his mansion on Fifth Avenue, Twain was unambiguous: if the American people were to accept the help of France during the Battle of Independence then it was only right that they should help Russians like Gorky in their own noble struggle with tyranny.⁶⁸

The second death that Robin's name featured in was mysterious still.

⁶⁵ 'Link Name of Supposed Count', Commercial Tribune, April 15, 1906, p.1; 'Losses Blamed For Suicide', Alexandria Gazette, February 11, 1920, p.1

⁶⁶ 'Mrs Page Will Found in Safe Deposit Box', New York Tribune, February 14, 1920, p.18

⁶⁷ Sacky No Count, he says, New York Tribune, April 11, 1906, p.5; Dennis Case Closed, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Vol. 58 No. 234, April 12, 1906, p.19

⁶⁸ 'Gorky and Actress asked to Quit Hotel' 'Mark Twain's Position', New York Times, April 15, 1906, p.3



Joseph G. Robin aka. Joseph G. Rabinovitch

The Death of Charles C. Dickinson



On May 22nd 1910, shortly after the first reports of financial irregularities at the heart of Robin's *Carnegie Trust Company* started to emerge in the nation's press, the founding President of the trust, Charles Courier Dickinson, had found himself invited to a scientific experiment being conducted in the laboratory of Dr Fred W. Lange in Scranton, Pennsylvania — home of Carnegie Steel. According to his brother who had accompanied Charles to the experiment, Dr Lange had prepared the Lab and then signalled for the men to come in. Within moments there had been a terrific explosion. The newspaper described the scene that followed: clouds of toxic gas had filled the air, and picking themselves up from the floor the men had found Charles lying motionless amidst the fumes. Something had gone tragically wrong and the man died from a pneumonia-like condition a few days later at St Lukes' Hospital. It was the second time that tragedy had struck the family. Just six years earlier the brothers had suffered the crippling misfortune of pulling the dead body of their younger brother Louis from the frozen Cayuga Lake. ⁶⁹

⁶⁹ 'Banker Dickinson Dies in Hospital, Family Denies Suicide and Says Death Came from Gas Fumes Inhaled in Scranton', *New York Times*, May 25, 1910, p.1

Neither the man who had invited Dickinson, Victor W. B Hedgepeth, nor his brother Stanton C. Dickinson, still treasurer at the Carnegie Trust Company, had been able to provide any clear details about the nature of the experiment nor the corrosive metal gas that was believed to have been leaked so disastrously as a result of the explosion. No one else in the room had suffered serious injuries, only shock and a little bruising. A pathologist's report found the discoloration on Dickinson's skin as consistent with zinc and chlorine gas poisoning. Within hours of his death the *New York Times* were reporting that the case was to be taken out of the hospital's hands at the behest of the District Attorney. The only records that would be retained would show the date of Dickinson's admission and the time of his death. None of the physicians who were asked to comment on the incident could account for the colossal impact the gas had had on his lungs.⁷⁰

The rumours of a possible suicide had been stirred by a new development. Just 24 hours after Dickinson and his brother had attended the experiment in the Lab in Scranton, it had been announced in the press that Wall Street broker, Rudolph Kleebolte had been seeking to obtain a deposition at the Supreme Court of New York from Dickinson. In a move that had surprised everyone, Dickinson had quit as head of the Trust in December just six months earlier.⁷¹ The Examination Before Trial (EBT) order that Kleebolte had served had been demanding an out-of-court oral, sworn testimony from Dickinson relating to the transactions between the *Carnegie Trust Company* with Patrick J. Keiran and the bankrupt *Fidelity Funding Company*. Interest in the loans had been brewing for some several months, but it was from this one deposition and the subsequent provision of books and records that had seen the entire scandal engulfing the beleaguered company begin to gather pace. And from here things just got worse.⁷²

After Dickinson's death on 23rd May, the press hounded Dr Fred W. Lange for answers that nobody else seemed able, or indeed willing, to provide. What had been so urgent about the meeting that not even Dickinson's brother had known the reason for their visit? What had been the nature of the experiment and why had no else been so badly affected as Charles by the fumes? Wild rumours began to emerge that this had been a spontaneous desperate suicide attempt by Dickinson that had been subsequently covered up by his brother and his friends. Dickinson's

⁷⁰ 'Banker Dickinson Dies in Hospital, Family Denies Suicide and Says Death Came from Gas Fumes Inhaled in Scranton', *New York Times*, May 25, 1910, p.1

⁷¹ 'Quits as President of the Carnegie Trust, In going out Charles C. Dickinson leaves big bank merger he planned uncompleted', *New York Times*, Dec 30, 1909; p.2

⁷² Broker Reports on Carnegie Trust Kleebolte, Sued for \$137,955 *New York Times*, May 18, 1910, p. 6

insurance company responded by launching an immediate investigation, clearly worried that they were about to sign-off a substantial pay-out for something that was supposed to have been a complete freak accident. Having now had several days to come up with something that looked like an explanation for the urgent visit, Lange made the most sensational of claims: in the days leading up the tragic incident he had discovered “the art of alchemy”. He had been so excited by the discovery that he had wanted to share it with Dickinson and Hedgepeth as soon as possible. According to Lange, during the course his scientific research the respected homeopath had stumbled upon something rather marvellous: that he could transform silver into gold.⁷³ It was obviously a bogus story, but within hours of Lange making his sensational claim, the direction of press discussion had moved onto arguments surrounding alchemy, and the plausibly, or rather implausibility, therein. Before long, the reporters had stopped asking meaningful questions about the fund and Lange had been dismissed as a harmless fantasist. Contrary to the sensational reports of the New York press, Lange’s cousin, J. U. Wagner had been telling reporters that the doctor had been pursuing the tests with a view to producing a non-corrosive iron. That Lange’s work at the nearby Hahnemann Hospital had been rooted in homeopathy and not metals seems to have dodged the suspicions of the press entirely, although in fairness, the founding father of homeopathy, Samuel Hahnemann, had like Helena Blavatsky — Prussia’s High Priestess of pseudo-Scientific Hokum and spiritual charlatanry — expressed no small amount of belief in the practice. Lange was in fact President of the *Homeopathic Medical Society* covering Pennsylvania.⁷⁴ Dabbled though he may have done in esoteric alchemy and the cosmic sciences, it’s unlikely that the Dickinson brothers would have shared that same enthusiasm. Transforming a small short-term stake or investment into fat healthy profit is likely to have suited them more.

Another regular face at Lange’s Hahnemannian Hospital during this period was Dr Louise G. Rabinovitch, the sister of Joseph G. Robin, the former director of the Carnegie Trust Company currently embroiled in a parallel investigation into irregular practices at the Washington Savings Bank. As founding trustees of the Carnegie Trust Company, Robin and Dickinson had been old associates. In 1888, the Hahnemann Medical College journal published notice of a paper that was being prepared by Dr Rabinovitch for publication in the *New York Medical Journal*. Her work at the nearby Philadelphia General Hospital (the Old Blockley asylum and poorhouse) had seen

⁷³ ‘The Alchemist’, New York Times, September 13, 1910, p.8

⁷⁴ The Hahnemannian Monthly, 1892, Volume 27, p. 144

Robin's sister complete further and far-reaching studies of fever reduction in typhoid using antipyretics — the impact of insulin on tuberculosis and on 'toxic antagonist' pairings.⁷⁵

Louise's ground-breaking work in Paris and Germany had been sensationally revealed to the American masses when it was reported that she had been successfully restoring life to bodies that were 'apparently dead'. In November 1909 the nation's press were running the headline "Dead Brought Back to Life By Woman". New York had its very Dr Frankenstein, only this time it was a woman. And not only a woman, but an immigrant woman. In a rare interview with the *New York Times*, Robinovitch explained how her "electrical life giver" had been hooked up to a woman who had been pronounced dead at the Hospital of St Anne in Paris. All usual methods of resuscitation had failed, and the so electrodes were applied to the back and the top of the head. Within moments the woman was breathing again. Better still, she was still alive and healthy in Paris. Louise dutifully repeated the 'trick' on a dead a rabbit before Dr John Woodman of J.W. Lieb and a small selection of invited guests from the New York Edison Company. To everyone's astonishment, it worked. Earlier claims by newspapers on the continent had cast the poor woman as little more than an alchemist in the mould of Johan Konrad, the Hessian magus who had inspired Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Lieb and the Edison company rejected these claims outright, saying the doctor's work was a genuine and far-reaching scientific breakthrough. The age of enlightenment was truly upon them.⁷⁶

In March 1910, Shelley's *Frankenstein* was imaginatively reassembled for the playhouse-loving masses of New York. The electricity legend Thomas Edison, eager to challenge the retarded notion that a person's physical impairments had ever prevented anyone from achieving greatness (he himself was deaf in one ear) produced a one-reeler 'photo play' movie that sought to pull back the curtain on the immorality and grotesqueness of the American Eugenic program. The film came just months after Edison had been left spellbound by the efforts of Dr Louise G. Rabinovitch's to bring a rabbit back from the dead. The sister of Joseph G. Robin had stood before officers of the New York Edison Company and proved beyond all doubt that man did indeed have power over life and death.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ New York Medical Journal, Volume 50, 1889, p.54

⁷⁶ 'A Woman who brings the apparently dead back to life', New York Times, November 21, 1909, p.9; 'Revives dead rabbit', Washington Evening Star, November 19, p.13

⁷⁷ 'Dead Brought to Life By Woman', The Hattiesburg News, November 19, 1909, p.1;

Edison's 15-minute Kinetogram production had been filmed at his Edison Studios in Bedford Park, a district of the Bronx dominated by dream-hungry Italians, Jews and Irish, and offered a stiff rebuke to the race suicide notions that had led to the introduction of sterilization in several US states just a few years earlier. The film shows Dr Frankenstein declaring his intention of creating "the most perfect human being the world had known", before skipping to his laboratory where a monstrous, misshapen figure emerges from the chemicals and ashes of a smoking cauldron — ostensibly a crude but powerful metaphor for America's much derided 'melting pot'.⁷⁸ Charles Ogle, the actor playing the Caliban-like monster, himself the son of Irish immigrants, can be seen rising from the pot in a costume that drew significantly on imagery used in stage productions of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Edison, who had had a keen and demonstrable interest in Eugenics and social welfare, had already set his stall out in the 1904 production, *The Strenuous Life*, a short four-minute commentary on the absurdity of the 'race suicide' notion being popularised by Ross and Roosevelt.⁷⁹ Further skits of the movement would appear in 1914 with Harry A. Pollard's *Eugenics versus Love* (a light-hearted look at the 1913 Eugenic marriage law in which love wins, actually), William Selig's *Eugenics at the Bar* and Thomas Edison's *Wood B. Wedd and the Microbes*. By 1922 it was F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* starring the fabulously sinister Max Schreck as the Dracula-esque Count Orlock that was shaping debate on Eugenics. This time it was more supportive of the program, trading on the post-war hysteria brought about by the Spanish Flu and the ominous Red contagion as it moved virulently west from Russia. This time the action switched to the mountainous border regions of South Eastern Europe as the creepy (and peculiarly semitic looking) count spreads his 'evil blood' through Germany and Central Europe. No surprises to learn that the film's director, F.W. Murnau was a big fan of Nietzsche.

⁷⁸ 'Frankenstein Today', *The Fairmont West Virginian*, March 31, 1910, p.1. Edison's rival Nikola Tesla believed that Eugenics would totally eliminate the world's 'undesirables' by 2100. Edison, like Scott was from a low-income Dutch family from America's Midwest. He had started professional life as a railroad newsboy.

⁷⁹ Edison made regular donations to Eugenics research. In 1911 he his company produced a film on behalf of The Department of Child Hygiene highlighting the danger presented to children by fireworks during Independence Day celebrations. Frankenstein's director J. Searle Dawley got his break in acting at the Grand Opera House in Manhattan, the theatre managed by Max Gerlach's 1905 employer, John H. Springer.

At the time of Robin's indictment on charges of grand larceny, interest in Eugenics was sweeping the nation. The previous year the Eugenics Record Office had been set-up at Cold Spring Harbour on Long Island and everybody everywhere was asking where 'genius' came from. Was there a clear genetic basis for what made exceptional men exceptional? To understand the enormous magnetism the term Eugenics had and the inspiration that it provided, you had only had to look at its etymology: in Greek, this harmless derivative of the words 'eu' and 'genius', means 'good genes', whilst in Roman Mythology, the word 'genius' represented the divine spark that was believed to be inherent in every man or woman alive. Genius was the creativity in man that not only maintained life but perfected it. Genius was man's guardian angel, his 'higher-self'. This is why Sir Francis Galton, the Godfather of Eugenics, had concentrated all his early efforts in tracing the discreet relationship between 'heredity' and 'genius'.

Initially at least, Eugenics had been the science of first tapping and then mining the vast reservoir of human potential. Theodore Dreiser wrote his book, *The Genius* about it and his friend, Joseph G. Robin, would later try to adapt it into a play. Robin's own sister, Dr Louise Robinovitch, who would try to argue that her brother's 'genius' had been partially responsible for his fragile mental state, had generated no small amount of sensation herself when she published her own study, *The Genesis of Genius* in the Journal of Mental Pathology in January 1906. According to Dr Robinovitch, the greater number of geniuses in the world had been born to men and women of maturity — those of forty years and above — contradicting the then fashionable Eugenic notion that women should marry fast and marry young if their children were to inherit the best of the couple's genetics. The doctor's more level-headed study had shown quite the opposite to be true: "the high cellular potentiality of almost all great men are given life when their parents present the highest degree of cellular potentiality" — typically when the man was between 30-35 years of age and the woman between 25-30 years of age. In her remarkable 20-page essay, Louise sends a shot across the bow at social reformer and Eugenicist, Felix Adler. Adler had taken the seemingly orthodox view that the object of marriage was procreation "in order to keep the flame of human life burning". Dr Robinovitch had responded by saying that these claims were "absolutely valueless".⁸⁰

⁸⁰ 'The Genesis of Genius', Dr Louise G. Robinovitch, The Journal of Mental Pathology, Vol. VII, No.5, 1905, pp.228-248

Adler had virtually kickstarted the entire *'Love or Eugenics'* debate in an address he had made at the at Steinway Hall in New York in 1905. Speaking before members of the Society for Ethical Culture, Adler coolly declared that happiness was not essential for a successful marriage, dismissing as “selfish egotists” practically anyone who thought that their own happiness was more important than “anything else in the universe”. These young men and women were wrong, Adler concluded. What should be striven for was not love but “better offspring.”⁸¹ When the whole ‘race suicide’ debate was being revived in 1915, the New York World responded to Adler’s theories by repeating the basics of an address that Louise Robinovitch had made at the First International Congress of Psychiatry in Amsterdam in 1907. According to the doctor, poor, dysfunctional families were apt to produce as many great men as those in the upper set. The evidence, Dr Rabinovitch had suggested, showed that the “commercialism underlying marriage in all countries” was more likely to have greatly increased the number of “mediocre children” in the world than reduced it.

Dreiser’s friendship with Louise’s brother, Joseph, may well have rubbed off on the author because his own book, *The Genius*, written in 1913 would dismiss Adler’s theories with no less intensity than Robin’s sister, Louise Robinovitch. Dreiser’s novel follows the fortunes of Eugena Witla, an artist who is struggling to express his sexual and artistic energy within the tight, oppressive boundaries of a conventional, monogamous marriage. Dreiser was, appropriately enough, described by the Minneapolis Journal as “literary Caliban” for the hero’s failure to curb his appetites in the novel.⁸²

Dreiser would arouse even greater controversy with his deeply provocative essay, *Right to Kill*. The essay, published by the Socialist magazine, *The New York Call* in March 1918, had been written in response to the furore that had been caused by ‘Bollinger Baby’ affair. In November 1915, Dr Harry J. Haiselden of Chicago had performed involuntary euthanasia on a seven year old child with severe learning difficulties. The whole thing had divided the nation, with Dr Haiselden — the ‘Black Stork’ as he became known — attracting as much commendation as condemnation.⁸³ Dreiser, an anti-war pacifist, seized the opportunity to expose the hypocrisy

⁸¹ ‘Happiness is Not Needed’, *New York Tribune*, December 19, 1905, p.6. Felix Adler had, like her brother’s nemesis August Belmont, donated substantially to Charles Davenport’s Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbour.

⁸² *Theodore Dreiser*, Richard Lingeman, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, p.120

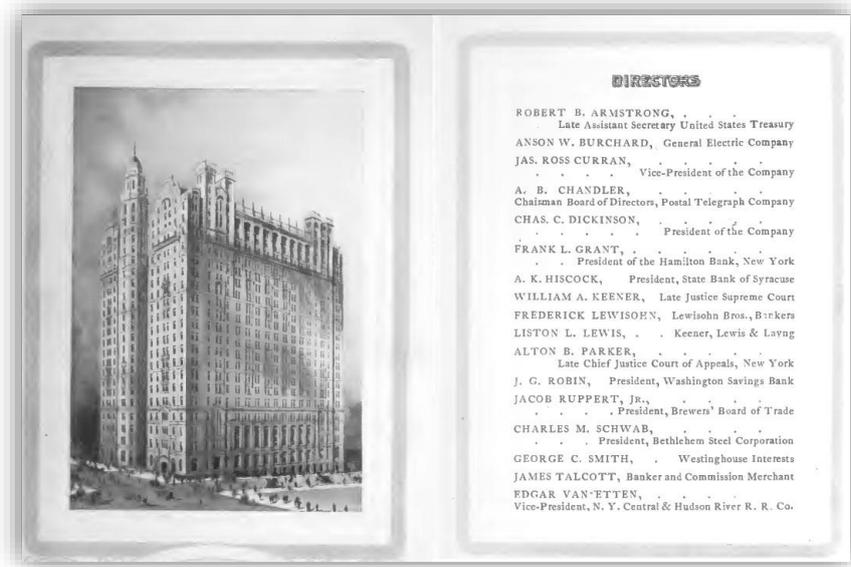
⁸³ ‘Has a Physician the Right to Take Life?’, *The Washington Post*, November 18, 1917, p.1

and double standards of a Christian America that could offer its unconditional support for the killing of Germans but which rejected outright the mercy killing of children born with severe health defects or those experiencing mental or physical pain. In his typically black, dry-witted style, Dreiser offers a scathing critique of the anti-choice Christian movement, framing his narrative, not unreasonably perhaps, around the issue of self-determination and the basic principles of human kindness. He was imitating the logic of the mob and turning it back against the mob in the hope of jamming the pro-war argument: “If a state can protect itself (the individual) against criminals, so called, or predatory or diseased forces of any sort, how about the defective child or grown person?”

For Dreiser, the war had been a disgraceful commercial racket. The writer suggested that the “bugaboo” of the pro-moralists — those who believed in “the existence of exact and spiritual laws of right and wrong” — should be shown the door immediately so that people could be freed of “invariable rules” set by arbitrary masters. It was Dreiser’s view that the various dogmas of religion were opposing the urgent demands of a “pagan reality” and the “progressive way”. The religionists didn’t deal in laws, but in “theories”, in “dreams” and “delusions”.⁸⁴ Perhaps drawing on the suicide attempt made by his friend, J. G. Robin at the height of the Northern Bank scandal in 1911, Dreiser asked his readers if they had never heard of a businessman taking his life because he was ruined? Did they actually understand the sheer scale of the suffering that some people, often through no fault of their own, were experiencing in the world? The author was at a loss to understand how America could accept the complicated laws of death in the animal world or in war, but not in the interests of mercy. Dreiser viewed the typical American as someone trading in fairy tales: “Man dreams of what he would like to do and builds up paper defences”. Nature, on the otherhand, knew instinctively what was required. The author thought it was time to clear away the finely spun webs of sweet, religious notions and face the facts: man lived by killing and eating other animals. Life was Darwinian. It was “an eating game”.

⁸⁴ ‘The Right to Kill’, Theodore Dreiser, *The Call Magazine*, New York, March 16, 1918, from the book Theodore Dreiser, ed. D. Pizer, Wayne State University, 1977, pp.224-229

In light of her brother's proximity to Charles C. Dickinson at the *Carnegie Trust Company*, was it possible that the ambitious 'alchemist' Dr Lange and Dr Rabinovitch had crossed paths before, during her early career in Philadelphia? At the time of Robin's death in 1929, the brother and sister team had been hoping to launch a series of medical breakthroughs relating to antiseptic treatments. Curiously enough, just 21 years prior to the death of Dickinson in his laboratory, Dr Fred W. Lange can be seen promoting a range similar antiseptic dressings and medical treatments in the *Hahnemannian Monthly*.⁸⁵



Carnegie Trust Company (brochure, 1908)

But there was more to come. At the time of Dickinson's sensational death in Lange's laboratory there had been a slew of disparaging whispers about Lange's German heritage. Rumours had been circulating for years that the Trust Fund's founder, Andrew Carnegie had been promoting the interest of Germany, whose naval ambitions and renewed imperialism, were beginning to unsettle the future allies. To make matters worse, at the time that Charles C. Dickinson had met his unusual end in Scranton, the Fund's founder, Andrew Carnegie had been some 3,000 miles away in London, addressing a meeting of the *Society of Peace* in London and telling them of intention to place the organisation under the International banner of the *League of Peace*. The suggestion was said to be in line with a request made by Kaiser Wilhelm in conversation with

⁸⁵ The Hahnemannian Monthly, Volume 24, 1889

Stephen Pichon, the French Journalist. According to Pichon's statement, the Kaiser had expressed himself as a lover of peace and an advocate of Carnegie.⁸⁶

Despite expressions of support from respected politicians and economists like Sir Thomas Barclay and Sir William Mather, both of whom had felt passionate enough to describe peace as a 'business necessity' that the world could ill afford to miss, hostile forces were conspiring to show that the Kaiser's courtship of Carnegie had been a devious attempt to decelerate the armaments race among the nation's fiercest rivals, Britain, France and Russia.⁸⁷ Not for the first time in his life, Carnegie had been asking that the ten leading nations of the world should federate on a basis of reciprocity and equal opportunity. It was Carnegie's belief that international differences could all be settled by a supreme and federal court with one army and one navy united in preserving (if not enforcing) peace. Preparation for war by one nation compelled rival preparations by others.

Despite the best efforts of the German Press to kill any idea that the Kaiser would back such an impossible Utopian notion, the story, which was backed in full by *The Daily Mail*, gained sufficient traction with the sceptical Conservative public. As a result of the *Mail's* efforts, Carnegie's genuinely sincere message was to be wrecked before it could get a fair hearing. Fantasies of a German 'fifth column', which had been quietly gestating in the novels of Anglo-French author, William Le Queux, were beginning to be coupled-up to the propaganda matrix that would provide the circuitry and energy-flow for Britain's world-changing intervention in the escalating war in Europe.

Concern about Carnegie's mental state was at this time being voiced on both sides of the Atlantic. Whilst staying at Pasadena in California, the butler of American railroad magnate, Russell Sage had slammed the door in Carnegie's face believing the shabbily dressed man to be a tramp after he had called round unexpectedly. The arrival of his views on income tax fared even worse, not least the old man's suggestion that everybody who had more than \$100,000 in savings should surrender to the State all they possess in excess of that amount. No one doubted the huge sums

⁸⁶ 'Powers League of Peace', Leeds Mercury, 25 May, 1910, p.5

⁸⁷ Barclay, who had played a critical role in the Annexation crisis or the First Balkan Crisis (1908-9) was a patron of the International Women's Franchise Club. In 1911, St Pancras housing activist and suffragette Winifred Gottschalk Paul was lodging at 6 Oakley Square. In November 1911 Vladimir Lenin was also lodging at this address. Next door were the Kolckmanns, a family of Anglo-German brokers whose clients included Barclay. Winifred Gottschalk Paul used the address of the International Women's Franchise Club on her marriage certificate.

of money that the ‘Great Carnegie’ had given away over the years, nor his commitment to making the world a more just and equitable place, but there was a large and influential contingent of Anglo-centric Americans who were beginning to doubt his motives. The great man had arrived in the English seaport of Plymouth on Thursday, May 12th from New York on board the White Star liner, *Adriatic* and the address he made in London took place the following Wednesday on May 24th, just one day after the death of his company’s trustee, Charles C. Dickinson in Lange’s laboratory in Scranton.

German Intrigue



On arriving in England, Carnegie was alleged to have told the British newspaper, the *Daily Mail* that people in England didn’t appreciate the Kaiser like they should. Carnegie believed the German Emperor to be “sincerely devoted to his mother’s country” and that the Kaiser’s decision to accelerate Germany’s naval development shouldn’t be misconstrued.⁸⁸ If Carnegie had said any of this, he was clearly doing himself no favours. Not only was he saying that every millionaire, except himself, should part with their surplus wealth, he now appeared to be saying that every country should reduce its military capabilities except the Kaiser. Some four years later Carnegie’s friend, Sir Thomas Barclay, an enthusiastic supporter of his dynamic global peace efforts in 1910, would hear the news of the Arch Duke Ferdinand’s slaying and remark in a somewhat less than prophetic fashion, that his passing had greatly bettered the prospects of peace in Europe.⁸⁹

The actual decision to investigate Robin — the senior director of the Carnegie Trust Company — had been seen by some financial analysts as an attempt by Carnegie and Hammerling to find a scapegoat. Like Hammerling, the talented and ambitious émigré had been appointed to this position by the company’s chairman, William J. Cummins and its president, Joseph B. Reichmann, who’d used much the same mechanisms to appoint Robin. In fact, it’s fair to say that Robin and Hammerling’s meteoric rise through the ranks bore many striking similarities: both were Russian exiles of ambiguous origin, both men got started in journalism, both got their first real start in the presidential campaigns of the late 1890s and both ended up as key players in the

⁸⁸ Daily Mail, May 13, 1910, p.5

⁸⁹ The Washington Times, June 29, 1914

various schemes and enterprises being managed through Carnegie's legal henchmen, Cummins and Reichmann.

As a result of the Robin scandal, Carnegie himself was brought before a Grand Jury and his trust collapsed. Thankfully for Carnegie, the confidential statement that he provided before the Grand Jury ensured that any wrongdoing had pretty much been limited to and contained within the secret and entirely self-serving activities of ex-City Chamberlain Charles H. Hyde, Reichmann, Cummins and Robin. In a bid to reduce his sentence, Robin turned State Witness. In returning for dishing the dirt, Robin pleaded guilty to grand larceny and revealed the full extent of corruption that existed between the banks and the trusts on Wall Street. The court decided that Robin had been coerced into 'stealing' the \$130, 000 of the Savings Bank money and putting into the Carnegie Trust. City Chamberlain Hyde, a crucial cog in the Charles F. Murphy's Tammany Hall machine faced charges of bribery in a public office. He immediately tendered his resignation. It had all come down to statements made by Robin. Hyde was naturally accused of colluding with the District Attorney's Office. As a controlling influence at the Trust Company, the burden of responsibility was carried by Hyde. Robin was jailed for several months in January 1913. He appealed and was released.⁹⁰ The huge cleansing waves that many had hoped had hoped to come crashing around New York had failed to materialise. The men at the top were still in place and the water made its usual transit to the drain at the end of the pool, and for the next ten-months at least, the almost imperceptible ripples grew weaker with each passing news-day.

In the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald, the "holocaust was complete".⁹¹

Dishing the Dirt



Several contemporary observers were of the opinion that many of the accusations levelled against Robin's financial misdoings were unjust, among them the *Socialist Labour Party of America*. At the height of the Robin investigation in January 1911 the party's publishing organ the *Daily People* claimed that the Joseph G. Robin had become nothing short of a martyr and his apparent 'fraud' the most pitiful manifestation of a more insidious and institutionalized deception on the

⁹⁰ 'Robin gets a year; Court Order Permits His Remaining There for Examination in Pending Litigation', New York Times, January 11, 1913

⁹¹ TGG, p. 154 (the death of Gatsby).

part of the banks: *“The Robin affair uncovers a series of facts that should serve the workers as warnings against the Savings Bank mouse-trap. One of the transactions of Robin was to raise from a Savings Bank a loan to the amount of \$118,000, secured upon real estate.. Such liens must be recorded. If unrecorded the innocent purchaser of the real estate buys it unencumbered, and the lender forfeits his security ... Not all the racket of indignation at Robin, or whatever his name is, can keep the lid down upon the Bank stench that Robin’s “genius” has helped to spread.”*⁹²

It wasn't Robin that was at fault: it was the system. For a time the newspaper had come under the editorship of Buffalo resident, Boris Reinstein, the reformed 'Paris bomber' who was taken in for questioning over the assassination of President McKinley in 1901 and who would subsequently serve under Lenin and Trotsky on his return to Russia after the Second Revolution in October 1917. But perhaps we shouldn't read too much into this. Robin was in no way being celebrated as a hero for Socialism. Although the *Daily People* makes no attempt to absolve Robin of blame, its editor isn't without some sympathy. De Leon believes the millionaire's shocking revelations in court had done much to expose the gross abuse of the poor by the Wall Street 'ruling classes'. The consensus among those on the political Left was that Robin had been offered to the courts as the proverbial lamb to the slaughter. As a supporting mechanism to the daily forensic scrutiny of dubious Wall Street practices, the finger-wagging commentary provided by Boris Reinstein and De Leon did its best to show that they were all as guilty as Robin. Robin was simply a scapegoat. His offer to turn State Witness in a return for a lighter sentence certainly suggests that he was conscious of the untold damage his muckraking exposures could inflict upon the world of finance, but it's still a long way from providing evidence that J. G Robin had embarked on his sky-rocket journey through Wall Street for the sole purpose of revealing the extent of its corruption. Either way, whether it had been Robin's intention to expose the inner workings of a corrupt and dishonourable 'savings bank mousetrap', the year-long high-profile case certainly revealed it as the shady and toxic dreamland that it was.

Was there anything like a Socialist or 'anarchist' streak in Robin? His friendship with the Socialist author, Theodore Dreiser, makes it plausible, but there is no telling when or even how this supposed conversion might have happened. Carnegie's own sympathies for Russia's

⁹² Joseph G. Leon, Daniel De Leon, Editorial, *Daily People*, vol1, no.200, January 16, 1911

anarchists was well known and after the controversy surrounding his *The Gospel of Wealth* essay, there was those who considered him a closet Socialist and his trust company a front for pushing Socialist ideals and beliefs. The only possible indication that Robin may have had any kind of Socialist or Anarchist sympathies is in the story about his ‘real’ parents back in Russia. According to Robin and his sister Louise, their parents had been forcibly exiled in Russia as result of their political beliefs. This is all perfectly plausible. Thousands of the Tsar’s opponents had suffered this fate, a significant proportion of which were from Ukraine and many of whom would never return. The American Russianist and explorer George Kennan had already done much to highlight the plight of the exiles in his regular tours of the States. But it wasn’t just Anarchists and Socialists who made up the exiles, there was sizeable quota of Liberals too. In fact anybody who resisted the absolute monarchy of the Tsar, in theory or in practice could find themselves embarking on the torturous, month-long journey to the ‘vast prison without a roof’ that was Siberia. It wasn’t uncommon for children of exiles to be entrusted to friends and family in Paris, a city that enjoyed more than its fair share of Russian and Ukrainian dissidents and their sympathizers. The way in which Robin and his sister Louise clung to each other as if they were all that they had left in the world is certainly familiar to orphans, so their story might well be true.

However, its Louise’s story about Robin and his philanthropic ‘mission’ that makes the whole thing a little more interesting. Robin’s founding of the Good Government Club in Williamsburg and his contribution to the ‘Horrors of Bedlam’ story in the *New York Herald* suggests that he considered himself a man principles and a champion of the underdog. We also know that Robin either approached or was approached by Charities Commissioner, General O’Beirne with a scheme to offer clean and affordable housing to immigrants and their families. That said, Good Government Clubs were often cross-party initiatives. Democrats could join, Republicans could join. Even Socialists could join. The aim of the Clubs was much like it said on the tin: to encourage the kind of fair and reasonable administration of a city that would lead to growth and prosperity for all and not just the corrupt and criminal few. The Clubs being organised by men like Robin had evolved out of the New York State Senate probe into Police corruption and the unfair, pernicious grip of Tammany Hall under its monosyllabic hoodlum leader, ‘Boss’ Croker. The sensational Ward Island scandal that Louise and Joseph G. Robin had both played incendiary roles in the previous decade had been part of a broader concerted plot to clean-up the city. The election of Mayor William L. Strong in 1894 marked the beginning of a long and arduous battle in social reform. When the Lexow Committee was launched in the autumn of 1894, the group

was determined to wash-down and recalibrate the entire mechanics of the city. In a righteous partnership with the New York Vigilance League, the Committee, which took its name from the man tasked with managing the clean-up job, Senator Clarence Lexow, would take a zero tolerance approach to crime and political meddling.⁹³ A series of successful raids in Long Island City led by Anthony Comstock and his squad of social reformers was greatly upsetting the City's vice bosses.⁹⁴ Interestingly, Clarence's brother Charles K. Lexow would be one of four trustees and auditors of the Washington Savings Bank indicted and charged with perjury in the first few months of the investigation into Robin's finances in 1911.⁹⁵ The other three officials were Tammany leader, Thomas F. Murphy, William P. Youngs and Dr Harrie James.

Not that it was entirely a matter of ideals for any of those involved. More often than not it came down to business. The Jeromes and the Townsends represented the Old Money. The Tammany represented the New Money, with both camps eager to dominate key industries within the city. Curiously enough, one of the first campaigns taken up by the Good Government Clubs of Brooklyn was to prevent the construction and operation of a railway on Ocean Parkway by Patrick H. Flynn's Nassau Electric Railway Company.

Once the Good Government Club set out its agenda, bribery, extortion, voter intimidation, gambling, and prostitution would no longer be tolerated in any district in which a Club had been formed. It was felt that people of New York deserved more from their police, more from their hospitals, more from their immigration officials and more from their politicians. In celebration of their radical nature, the Clubs were being promoted as a "unique political experiment". Mayor Strong and Senator Lexow believed that the route to greater fiscal autonomy in New York, and less Federal interference from Washington D.C would be opened by creating a local administration that focused on prosperity for all, not power for the few. By means of a mission statement, a 48-page booklet was produced with the principle agenda stated rather briefly: *city government was business, not politics*. Elected officials should be appointed solely on the basis of their personal integrity and the skills they could bring to that particular municipal office. As long as man or woman was fit for the job and had the ambition to match they reserved the moral and professional privilege to serve to New York. The future of the city lay in skills, not national politics. If functioning correctly the Clubs would be able to "procure the nomination and election

⁹³ Clarence Lexow's brother Charles K. Lexow

⁹⁴ 'Comstock's Raids', New York World, July 10, 1896, p. 14

⁹⁵ 'Four Robin Bank Trustees Indicted', New York Times, January 14, 1911, p.18

of fit persons to city offices and perform their roles in an honest, efficient and independent, non-partisan government of New York”. It wasn’t meant to be anti-Democratic or anti-Republican — “Just anti-bad government”.⁹⁶ Since the arrival of Boss Croker, hairline fractures had begun to appear in the Tammany Machine. A battle was taking place not just for the heart and soul of the city for the direction that the Democrats were going to take as they entered the 21st Century. Among the Club’s senior members was the man who would become Joseph G. Robin’s attorney in 1910 — William Travers Jerome the man who would spend the next seven years of his life trying to uncouple the Tammany machine from the New York power matrix. In an additional bid to crank things up, a second Committee of Seventy was established with Jerome immediately tasked with managing its affairs. The first Committee of Seventy, featuring William’s uncle Leonard Jerome as Supervisor, and John D. Townsend as witness had successfully removed Tammany’s former Boss, William M. Tweed from office after a five month investigation had found the Tammany leader guilty of a deliberate misuse of office.⁹⁷ Tweed was arrested, charged with embezzling millions of dollars in public funds and released on bail. By 1897 The Good Government Club were meeting regularly with the Committee of Seventy. It would be the beginning of a coalition that would see the emergence of a new coalition party to take on Croker’s Tammany Hall — the Fusionists.⁹⁸

Reforms for the City



Robin’s dedication to ‘Good Government’ and social reform doesn’t appear to have ended with the growth of his commercial ambitions. If you were to cast your eyes over the ‘Subscribers’ section of a 1901 Good Government book by John Drake Townsend, you’ll notice that a ‘Joseph G. Robin’ appears in the penultimate list of names.⁹⁹ Other names on the list include the then

⁹⁶ Club Book of Good Government Club A, May 1st 1895

⁹⁷ *New York in Bondage*, John Drake Townsend, Issued for Subscribers, 1901, p.80. Think of the group like the Magnificent Seven x 10 but with the weight of office rather than pistols behind them. See: *The Lexow Investigation*, Harper’s Weekly, April 30, 1894, Vol. 38, No. 1958, p. 607

⁹⁸ ‘Good Government Club Delegates Meet the Seventy’s Men’, New York Times, September 22, 1894, p.9

⁹⁹ The book was privately published with the phrase ‘Issued for Subscribers’. This may have been a crowd-funded effort with the names representing those people who had contributed money to the project or were ‘shareholders’ in some way. These were often ‘limited edition’ publications prepared for and provided to a relatively small group of subscribers. The names arranged into various groups may represent the various coalitions that became the ‘Fusionists’. The contents were sometimes issued in instalments.

serving Secretary of War, Elihu Root — President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and one time legal partner of Robin and Dreiser’s counsel, Arthur Carter Hume — and H.P. Belmont, the husband of socialite and suffrage activist Alva (part of Jerome’s extended family). Another name on the list is the Long Island spy for the Brits, Frederic (Frank) Kernochan, an old friend of the Townsend family. Curiously enough, the Townsends had their own spy in the family: Patience Lovell Wright, the beautiful Oyster Bay daughter of Patience (Townsend) Lovell who was generally accepted to have been the spy used by George III of England during the American Revolution, sending information back to the colonies inside her wax figures.¹⁰⁰

Townsend’s 1901 book, *New York in Bondage*, provided a history of Tammany Hall as the Democratic executive slid deeper and deeper into vice and corruption under its menacing figurehead, Richard Croker. Townsend, in his own words, was from one of New York’s “oldest and most aristocratic families”. Among his forebears was said to be the Marquess Townsend of Norfolk in England. According to family lore, the Townsends had been on Manhattan Island with a Kings Grant since 1639.¹⁰¹ His daughter Margaret Townsend Tagliapietra would eventually marry the famous Italian baritone, Giovanni Tagliapietra and became well known in New York for hosting the same kind of lavish parties packed with “interesting people” that were hosted by Gatsby and Robin.

Townsend’s book, *New York in Bondage*, had been written from the point of view of a Tammany insider, the author having spent the best part of a decade as Boss Tweed’s loyal and highly-charged legal counsel. At the time he offered his services, it was Townsend’s belief that Tammany Hall under Tweed, an aspiring Irish immigrant from the Lower East Side of Manhattan, had been infinitely preferable to the ‘chariot of vice and corruption’ driven by his successor, Richard Croker. The institution had become a ‘pitiful; spectacle of tinsel pomp’. Too much ‘New Money’ had moved in, and too much of the ‘Old Money’ had done too little to stop it. Townsend had been fond of Tweed and his short-lived successor, the Democratic reformer ‘Honest’ John Kelly, but during Kelly’s time the Democrats had split into two factions: the ‘Swallow Tails’ under Presidential candidate, Samuel Tilden and the ‘Short Hairs’, a group of

¹⁰⁰ *Patience Wright, American artist and spy in George III's London*, Charles Coleman Sellers, Wesleyan University Press, 1976, p.9

¹⁰¹ *Townsend-Townshend, 1066-1909: the History, Genealogy and Alliances of the English and American House of Townsend*, Margaret Townsend Tagliapietra, Press of the Broadway Publishing Company, 1909, p.107 (Patience Wright), p.108 (Kings Grant)

working men and pugilists led by John Morrissey who eventually broke away to form rival political machine, Irving Hall. It was nothing short of a civil-war. The Tweed Ring had relied heavily on Republican state legislators almost as much as its own. It was a cross-party problem needing a cross-party solution. Coalition building had been one of Tweed's key strengths. Townsend and Jerome would apply the same logic in their attempts to bring down his successor.

As Tammany Hall became more and more corrupt under the influence of organised crime, Townsend joined William Travers Jerome and the *Committee of Seventy* in their war on Croker, sitting with the courtroom warrior on the group's Executive Committee.¹⁰² A keynote speech by Colonel Asa Bird Gardiner, Croker's candidate for the race for New York District Attorney in 1897 defined the true banner motto of the conflict at a rally at Carnegie Hall in October that year: "To hell with reform". Backing him up that evening was Perry Belmont — the man that Robin had been hired to beat by General James Rowan O'Beirne in his bid for Congress. It was because of the conviction of Croker and Bird Gardiner that the anti-Libertarian measures being demanded on gambling and liquor by McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt were rejected by New Yorkers.¹⁰³ With the continued support of the Vigilance League, the last few years had seen the non-partisan, pure municipal Good Government Club gain in influence in the city but now Boss Croker and Perry Belmont were fighting back. As far as they were concerned Townsend and Jerome had allowed the Republican Party "under the disguise of reform and non-partisanship" to steal control of New York's administrative affairs from the Democrats. They had "looted and robbed" the city. The Club's reorganisation of the city's Police Department had resulted in more crime and fewer convictions, civil liberties had been invaded and the stench of the sewers was worse now than it had been for decades. The non-partisan approach of Jerome and the Reformists had failed. There was no cohesion, no vision. The feeling among the Democrats was that the whole thing had been a "sham and a fraud and a pretence."¹⁰⁴ And this is the way it seesawed for years; the Tammany 'machine' would weaken, the Reformists would move in and perform a deep clean and then unapologetically bear the consequences of administrative failures at the

¹⁰² 'Reforms for the City', New York Times, December 28, 1894, p.16. Jerome and Townsend were joined by Joseph Laroque and Jacob H. Schiff.

¹⁰³ 'Perry Belmont Speaks', New York Times, October 17, 1897, p.2

¹⁰⁴ *Courtroom Warrior*, Richard O' Connor, Little Brown and Company, 1963, p.65

city's polling booths when Election Day came back round again. It wasn't true reform as such; the city was on a wash-cycle.

Crocker's administration would eventually come to an end in 1902 when it was discovered that he had secretly backed Republican William McKinley as President, favouring his tariff increases and his much criticised attempts to impose a strict quota on the number of Jewish immigrants making their way to America from Russia and Eastern Europe — which he believed betrayed the not only the spirit of the Democratic Party but the American Dream itself. ¹⁰⁵

The Master of Manhattan



In 1931, the historian and Eugenics champion, Lothrop Stoddard published a history of Crocker's battles with Jerome and the Reformists. The book, *Master of Manhattan*, was published in the final, tumultuous days of Tammany Hall, as the group and its leaders collapsed under the weight of that year's Seabury Investigations. Peculiarly enough, the need for the investigations had arisen after the result of a legal examination of a payment made by Tammany magistrate, Albert Vitale to gangster Arnold Rothstein (Meyer Wolfshiem in the *Gatsby* novel). The man who had been handed the responsibility of leading the legal commission was Justice Samuel Seabury — the Judge who had been personally responsible for ending the career of William Travers Jerome as New York District Attorney over the latter's failure to "prosecute wrongdoers" in the Metropolitan Street Railway scandal. It was also Seabury who led the case against Robin and the Washington Savings Bank in 1911 and assisted in granting him his last-minute pardon. ¹⁰⁶

The Reformists had sprung into action again. And again the scrutiny the executive fell under was felt to be political in nature. Stoddard's publisher *Longman Green and Company* responded by trying to argue that "no reform administration in New York City ever had succeeded itself". Stoddard, whose book *The Rising Tide of Color* is referred to in the *Gatsby* novel by Jay's bigoted and anti-Reformist love rival, Tom Buchannan, put up an even more aggressive defence of non-

¹⁰⁵ 'He Shouts for Bryan But This is the Way he will Vote', *Puck*, Vol. 47, No.1220, July 25th, 1900. It's probably fair to say that Crocker also anticipated strong competition in business from the East European Jews.

¹⁰⁶ The Seabury Investigation was known more formally as the Hofstadter Committee. It ran between 1930 and 1932. It had been demanded by Reformist Democrat (and prohibition moderate), Franklin D. Roosevelt during his time as New York State Governor.

interference: Walter D. Hickman writes: “In 1897 the Reformers had been in power three years under Mayor Strong, who gave New York a model administration. And yet before it was a year old, it was tremendously unpopular, and at the next mayoralty it was repudiated and Richard Croker put back in control of the city.”¹⁰⁷ Men like Joseph G. Robin and Jay Gatsby were paradoxically regarded as both the solution and the problem; they represented the purest ideal of American freedom and the appalling abuse of that freedom. America was getting stuck in an infinitely recursive loop.

It’s worthwhile noting perhaps, that at the time that *Master of Manhattan* was published, Stoddard was, and not for the first time in his life, campaigning on immigration issues. Just a few weeks earlier the author had embarked on a State-wide tour of the US with Russian author, Maurice G. Hindus. During the course of his tour Stoddard would argue *against* immigration from East Europe and Hindus would speak in favour of it. Not for the first time in US history would the issue of immigration find itself being used as a battering ram by a rightist quasi-Populist or libertarian movement in their battle with the Reformists.

It’s likely we’ll never know what Robin’s exact interest was in Townsend’s book, *New York in Bondage*. We can guess that it may have been a reflection of his input into the ‘Horrors of Bedlam’ affair at Wards Island but this would be pure speculation. All we know for sure is that it was probably an extension of his work with the Good Government Club in Williamsburg and the charitable ‘savings’ projects he had pitched to O’Beirne. There are a number of possibilities about what happened next: either Robin became so unimaginably successful in the city that he succumbed to its usual temptations and slipped naturally into its corrupt and self-serving practices or, and perhaps more likely, the philanthropic bent of his railroad and real estate ventures — and particularly the way in which Robin undercut his competitors — had put him in the cross-hairs of his more cut-throat and more powerful rivals on Wall Street. The subtitle of Townsend’s book had said it all: “For those who favour PURE MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT” — a government of New York serving its people and run by its people, with little or no intervention from federal offices, political machines or crime lords.

After his sudden and unexpected death on Christmas Day in 1896, Townsend’s daughter Margaret Townsend Tagliapietra did her best to continue her father’s work. The book that Robin had subscribed to had been published posthumously, Townsend having been putting the finishing

¹⁰⁷ ‘The Book Nook’, Walter D. Hickman, Indianapolis Times, April 10, 1931, p.15

touches to it in the days before his death. According to the *Boston Post*, Townsend had keeled over and died as he attended a dinner party at 335 West 34th Street, a few doors away from home. The press and journals of the period suggest the host for the evening was homeopathic doctor, William Giveans Hartley, born to an English father and American mother in New Jersey.¹⁰⁸ Hartley's street address was repeated in several other newspapers. The only news title that gave a different address for Townsend's death was *the New York Times*, who for whatever reason put it a few doors up at 337 West 34th Street. The reasons for this are unclear but it's intriguing to note that the paper's owner, Adolph Ochs, had been on the side of Croker in opposing the Presidential candidacy of William Jennings Bryan in November 1896. Croker had in actual fact offered Ochs the publisher's job at the Croker influenced *Mercury* but had turned it down. Instead, Ochs, a 'Gold Democrat' whose instincts were quite Conservative, secured full control of the *New York Times* just months before Townsend's death in August 1896 at a greatly reduced price. During the Presidential Campaign of summer and autumn 1896, in which Bryan waged a thrilling and controversial battle against Republican, William McKinley and his running mate, Theodore Roosevelt, Ochs's newspaper would call Bryan an "irresponsible, unregulated, ignorant, prejudiced, pathetically honest and enthusiastic crank". The Times had viewed his last-minute banking of the Populist ticket as fraudulent and "distasteful", the two parties having fought each previously with the 'ferocity of wild beasts.' His coalition partnership with Senator Thomas E. Watson was little more than a cynical stunt.¹⁰⁹ By contrast, Lothrop Stoddard's *Master of Manhattan*, the sensational account of Boss Croker's glittering career in New York City, advertised and promoted as a 'good political shocker' and 'politically apropos' arrived on the bookshelves of America just as it was gearing up for the battle of the decade: the battle between progressive Democrat, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Republican Herbert Hoover for the keys to the White House.

At the time of Townsend's death on Christmas Day, many regarded the *New York Times* as a toy of Croker and the Wall Street bankers. The newspaper put his death down to 'kidney trouble'. Townsend had just flushed down the last few spoonfuls of his Christmas pudding with the customary glass of wine when he is said to have gone frightfully pale. As he made his way from the dining room to the hall he collapsed, the suddenness of his death preventing anyone from

¹⁰⁸ *Vivisection : Hearing on the Bill (S. 1552) for the further prevention of cruelty to animals in the District of Columbia*, US Senate, 54th Congress, 1st Session, 1896, p.4

¹⁰⁹ 'W.J Bryan Populist', *New York Times*, July 26, 1896, p.1

seeking help. According to his obituary, which focused on his years at the forefront of Tammany mechanisations rather than his subsequent battle to tame them, Townsend was 53 years old.¹¹⁰

The Passing of the Idle Rich



New York in Bondage wasn't the only literary trove of treasure that Townsend's daughter would unlock after the death of her father. In 1912 she penned a dramatic retelling of *The Passing of the Idle Rich*, recently published to much acclaim by her cousin, Frederick Townsend Martin. The book was a barbed, satirical and occasionally quite comical account of the rise of the nouveau riche, the scourge of nepotism, idle privilege and the gradual loss of American integrity during its rapturous 'Gilded Age'. There was, Martin contended, a "vast difference between the Old and New Rich." A report in the *New York Times* as Robin was hauled before court gave him all the space he needed to make his case: "Being a conservative I believe had the new rich contented themselves with a slower pace to reach their mad endeavour to reach their goal. It might have resulted in an orderly evolution. " Family and tradition had become objects of ridicule. But it was the families of wealth and tradition that knew instinctively how to best manage and direct their wealth into improving civilisation."¹¹¹ Frederick's words would later find their way into the mouth of Tom Buchanan as he explains his loathing of Gatsby. The chapters of his book are packed with descriptions of often ludicrous, extravagant wealth and switchblade corruption and vice that kept it's controllers in place. Townsend Martin starts by saying that he 'knows' Society. He was born into it. He goes on to explain how he knew and understood the true traditions of American Society, and likewise, as a result of travels, societal traditions elsewhere in the world. In spite of the "hideous abnormalities" that had been grafted on to it in recent years it had at its very soul the spirit of democracy. But like all successful democracies in the world, Frederick writes that it was based around a tyrannical oligarchy. Those who now ruled America had 'earned' their power and influence by hereditary right. The antidote was simple: those who had inherited their wealth had a responsibility to feed the wealth back into the soils of America and help their fellow man. Frederick Townsend Martin was championing a new form of 'Good Government' — a 'caring Conservatism'. Like William Travers Jerome and his uncle John Drake

¹¹⁰ 'Died at Dinner Party', Boston Post, December 26, 1896, p.3

¹¹¹ 'Passing of the Idle Rich', New York Times, February 26, 1911-p.45

Townsend, the book's author had found himself championing a form of 'Noblesse oblige', of privilege balanced by duty. A passionate Anglophile, he lionised the meticulous bureaucracy of English business and its centralised banking system. Frederick took a dim view of American finance, believing that it was the combined evils of fiscal ignorance and the reckless and unsound methods used in managing trusts in America that had culminated in the Great Panic of 1907 and the demand for a central bank.

Frederick Townsend Martin makes one thing crystal clear in his book: he was no Socialist and "entertained no Utopian dreams concerning the equal distribution of wealth" or the public control of its sources. It was down to the individual not the state to provide the industrial, commercial and social development of the world. Poverty and degradation had been a high price to pay for idle wealth, and Frederick advocated engaging directly and proactively with their poorer neighbours. The former director of the Metropolitan Trust Company turned energetic 'slum worker' was now a 'millionaire with a mission'. Every Christmas he would make the bleak, cold journey from his lavishly decorated mansion on Fifth Avenue and cook dinner for the homeless at the Bowery Mission in Manhattan's Lower East Side. Townsend Martin was preaching the 'Gospel of Daily Helpfulness' that he had picked up from the Wesleyan missionaries on his frequent visits to the East End of London as a loyal and active patron of the Anglo-American Society. In Frederick's perfectly balanced world, the rich would support the poor and the poor would provide the gratitude and moral servitude that would keep the church and the noble American gentry in high regard. It was time to stop hunting the almighty American Dollar and to start investing in people.¹¹²

Tragically, the rewards for his efforts were short-lived. In February 1913, Frederick's brother, Bradley Townsend Martin, whose fabulously extravagant daughter Cornelia had married the Earl of Craven, died suddenly at his home in Mayfair, London. Like his brother Frederick, Bradley had been a passionate member of the Anglo-American Society. He had also been a popular figure in both Scottish and London Society, most notably with the Marlboroughs, the Churchills and the Duke and Duchess of Buccleuch. Just twelve months later, Frederick was dead too. *The New York Times* described how the 'New York Society leader and friend of the poor' had died suddenly of heart failure at the Hotel Berkeley near Hyde Park in London. Frederick his brother

¹¹² 'One Good Deed; Thanks Worth a Million', *The San Francisco Call*, December 29, 1912, p.10; 'Lecture by Frederick Townsend Martin', *Northern Chronicle* (Scotland), September 27, 1911, p.4

Henry, Lady Craven and his recently widowed sister-in-law were due to leave for Cannes after completing the final chapters of a new book called ‘Snobs’.¹¹³

Sadly, the fortunes of the family continued to degrade. In May 1915 their brother Howard was admitted to Flavius Packer’s asylum in Riverside New York on the recommendation of Judge Thomas F. Donnelly of the Supreme Court. He was found dead there three months later. Howard was believed to have developed various delusions since his return from London the previous November. Against the better advice of his friends, Howard had wanted to return to the States.

Among those family members concerned for Howard’s mental health was his son, Townsend Martin, a close friend of likeminded pleasure-seekers, F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Peale Bishop at Princeton University. During his university days Townsend had been President of the Princeton Dramatic Association (later the Triangle Club)¹¹⁴ and had assisted in the staging of one of Scott’s musical comedy, ‘Safety First’ written and performed by the group in December 1916.¹¹⁵ The pair’s friendship would continue into the 1920s when Martin, a successful screenwriter and impresario would grease Scott and Zelda’s entry into Hollywood as a founder of the Film Guild and supervisor for Famous Players-Lasky. The pair’s mutual friend Edmund Wilson once speculated that Scott’s character, Amory Blaine in his first novel, *This Side of Paradise* was at least partially based on Martin, and another of his early characters — Adam Patch — on Martin’s Uncle Frederick.

Was Robin a closet Socialist? It’s too difficult to say for certain. No evidence has so far come to light that he was a member of any Socialist organisations, and F. Townsend Martin is living proof that the ‘Compassionate Conservatism’ that America saw under President George W. Bush and the ‘One Nation Conservatism’ revived under British Prime Minister Cameron were not entirely new phenomena. Even so, there may be a further clue offered in a drama that Robin published in 1920 under the pseudonym, Odin Gregory. *Caius Gracchus*, an epic blank verse tragedy re-told the story of reformist politician and ‘Tribune of the Plebs’ Gaius Sempronius Gracchus of Rome in the Second Century BC. Gracchus was your original Frederick Townsend Martin and Andrew Carnegie, fighting for better civil rights and improved conditions for the ordinary men and

¹¹³ Frederick was also a friend of Alva Belmont and her husband H.P. Belmont. Alva’s mansion Beacon Towers was among the inspirations for Gatsby’s Long Island mansion. See: *Life*, Volume 59, Part 2, *Life*, 1912.

¹¹⁴ ‘Interesting Chat and Stage Gossip for Playgoers’, *New York Tribune*, July 2, 1922, p.124. Townsend would serve in the war in France where he would earn the French Croix de Guerre medal.

¹¹⁵ ‘Mr F. Scott Fitzgerald as Chorus Girl’, *New York Times*, December 10, 1916, Picture Section.

women of Rome. The man who told his story originally, Marcus Livius Drusus, half-Plebeian, half-Patrician, likewise followed the progressive tradition of ‘noblesse oblige’ in which the powerful and more capable elites would fight for the rights of the common classes — the major stockbrokers of a moral economy. Other instances of this tradition in literature can be found in Homer’s *Illiad*, Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* and in the legend of Robin Hood.

Watchman, What of the Night?



A kiss and tell book planned by Robin shortly before being sentenced failed to materialise. It didn’t matter anyway. By September 1913 Robin had secured a pardon from the no less corrupt New York Governor, William Sulzer and was released from detention, his reputation partially even if not fully restored.¹¹⁶ An exemplary show trial had been enough to purge the current system and New York and Carnegie were allowed to continue and flourish unimpeded. Book or no book, the various trials that Robin and Hammerling’s confessions triggered that year had revealed a widespread pattern of dishonesty existing between New York officials and the Carnegie Trust Company.

Within weeks of Joseph G. Robin being pardoned, impeachment proceedings had been launched against the man who had granted that pardon — New York City Governor William Sulzer, who was eventually convicted on three charges of perjury and fraud and quickly removed from office. It was clearly a set-up job by high ranking Tammany officials intent on punishing Sulzer’s disloyalty to the machine. Up to being elected Governor of New York in January 1913 Sulzer had been loyal to the Tammany Hall under both Charles F. Murphy and his more infinitely more dubious predecessor, Richard Croker. In pure political terms, the thin-lipped Democrat with the brow of a Bald Eagle and a piercingly sincere stare had always been as passionate and vociferous as the Reformers and Fusionists when it came to issues of immigration, support for the Boer Republic or when condemning the gross and inhumane way that Tsarist Russia was treating its Jewish people. He had even challenged Boss Croker’s poorly concealed preference for McKinley during the McKinley-Bryan race for the White House at the turn of the century. The problems had really started to develop when Sulzer had been handed the keys to the city and started making decisions independent of Murphy and the Machine. Headlines in March 1913 made his split with

¹¹⁶ ‘Appeal pardons Robin’ New York Times, September 14, 1913, p.7

Tammany all the more clearer: “*No more Invisible Government*”, Says Governor. New York was to be reorganised along the terms laid-down by District Attorney Whitman and the Fusion Party movement. A formal statement was being prepared and Governor Sulzer intended to tell Murphy what his “real place” in the future of New York would be. The way that the Governor saw it, it was he and not the Tammany Hall boss-figure who was Democratic leader of the city. Sulzer had taken the oath of office and he had every intention of following it through.¹¹⁷ The first of the tasks he would undertake would be to block the Tammany’s access to the millions of dollars that belonged to the State. As if to prove how committed he was to destroying Bossism, Sulzer was handing a New York City State pardon to Robin after his offer to turn State Witness and assist the District Attorney’s office in jailing key Tammany men. In return for his support in challenging ‘Bossism’, Robin had been awarded a light sentence by Justice Seabury.

The city’s Patriotic Societies based in Broadway had described the abstemious city ‘Watchman’ as a burly, commanding figure, over six feet tall with sandy, blonde hair, weighing 185 pounds and carrying the “grace of a trained athlete”. Sulzer’s “steel blue eyes looked straight into your soul and revealed your innermost thoughts”. The phrasing of the description recalls a line from *Gatsby*. Nick is describing a look he receives from Gatsby during one of their first meetings; “it understood you as much as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself.”¹¹⁸ But unlike the eyes of Dr T. J. Eckleburg, as penetrating his gaze is, Gatsby respects your privacy. Your secrets are safe with Jay. The one thing that Sulzer did have in common with Jay Gatsby was his soul. Beneath the intellect and the precision was the soul of a common man. He was ‘Plain Bill’. His father, a farmer, was German and his mother was Scots-Irish. At 12 he left home to become cabin boy on a floating military prison. He was perceived as a man who ‘did things’, a man who ‘changed things’. “Eternal vigilance’ was the price of American liberties, progress ‘the Watchword of humanity’. He was out to destroy the Boss System.¹¹⁹

No sooner had Justice Seabury handed Robin the one year sentence on Blackwell’s Island than an application was put in by District Attorney Whitman to have Robin fully pardoned and

¹¹⁷ ‘Sulzer to Break with Tammany’, The Norwich Sun, March 21, 1913, p.1

¹¹⁸ TGG, p. 49.

¹¹⁹ *Life and Speeches of William Sulzer*, The Patriotic Societies, New York, 1916, pp. 2-13; *Tammany’s Treason, Impeachment of Governor William Sulzer*, Jay W. Forrest & James Malcolm, The Fort Orange Press, 1913

released.¹²⁰ When Governor Sulzer looked likely to grant that pardon, Senator James J. Frawley, proving his loyalty to Murphy and the machine, organised a committee to investigate allegations of fraudulent activity relating to the management of Sulzer's campaign fund in 1912. Frawley had been alleging that several cheques including one from Jacob H. Schiff and Kuhn, Loeb & Co had failed to be declared in one of the Governor's sworn statements.¹²¹ By July 1913, Governor Sulzer was facing impeachment and a charge of perjury. No sooner had this happened than Robin's pardon was being debated. The District Attorney General, Thomas Carmody was coming under increasing pressure to review the legality of a pardon that had been granted by Governor Sulzer whilst the Sulzer was being investigated on charges of fraud. The pardon was an executive function, and as Sulzer was pending trial on impeachment, it was questionable as to whether he was in any legal position to exercise that function.

Robin's new legal representatives reacted furiously to the new development and sought a postponement of the hearing. The man who had replaced William Travers Jerome as Robin's lawyer was Republican William Stiles Bennet, the new crusading leader of the Fusion Party, and his legal partner, Benjamin Franklin Tracy. Understandably, the men were quick to remind the press of the political significance of the pardon that Robin had been awarded. As a result of turning State Witness, five Tammany Senators, two Assembly men and an Assembly district leader had been implicated in city-wide fraud and corruption. It was the monster Tammany Machine that Robin and Sulzer were fighting against.

Stephen J. Stilwell, owner and editor of democratic newspaper *The Reformer*, was another who could help unlock the chains that kept New York in bondage. If the city was to go ahead with freeing Robin, Governor Sulzer was also prepared to release Stilwell from prison where he had been languishing since May on charges of bribery and corruption relating to the Robin case. But there was an additional proviso too; like Robin he would need to turn State Witness and provide evidence of corruption among his former Tammany colleagues.

As news got around that Murphy and the Machine were seeking to reverse Sulzer's decision to award a pardon to Robin and have the battling New York City Governor banged-up and removed from office on charges of fraud, the Lower East Side of New York erupted in anger. In the first

¹²⁰ 'Robin Gets a Year, May Stay in Tombs', New York Times, January 11, 1913, p.8; 'Reports to Governor o Application for Robin's Pardon', New York Times, February 14, 1913, p.11

¹²¹ 'Sulzer Campaign Gifts Covered Up', New York Times, July 31, 1913, p.1

week of September, a breathless *New York Times* reporter described the crazy scenes on the Lower East Side and over three thousand men and women launched a protest at a packed-out Cooper Union, with three thousand more banging at the doors to be admitted. Word from the organizers was that this was an uprising of the great East Side” to mark the mark the objection of the common man to the politically motivated charges being brought against Sulzer. The man who had endeavoured to triumph over “corruption and treason” had been hung out to dry.

The old regime was in its last throes of death. The people of New York were demanding “social justice, economic freedom and civil and religious liberty”. It was the Boss System that had put Sulzer on trial and it was the Boss System that would pay the price. As the crowd roared with a righteous mixture of victory and indignation, Reverend Canon Chase and Robin’s legal counsel, William Stiles Bennet marched onto the stage and sank their sharp, righteous incisors into Tammany Hall, excoriating Charles F. Murphy. “This is an uprising of the people against invisible government, against Fourteenth Street, against Good Ground”, barked Bennet. The roar of the crowd was like a cork erupting from the bottle. The crowd were in a frenzy of enthusiasm. An ever more buoyant Bennet carried on: “*A man, I declare it before God, cannot be an adherent of Tammany and be the best sort of patriot. Their interests in the people is the same as the interest of the lion in the lamb*” Bennet was convinced that the heart of the people was with the Governor. The question that everybody was now asking was whether the State to be ruled by one man, the graduate of a barroom. Louise E. Miller, editor of *Die Wahrheit* was the next to be cheered on to the stage. Eventually, someone referred to Murphy by name. The crowd booed as his name was mentioned. In Miller’s estimation Murphy was the biggest political coward living. As if by alchemy, the boos turned to cheers. Sulzer’s legal counsel, Samuel Bell Thomas ended the evening by reading letters of regret from Edwin Markham, Abraham Gruber and other of his supporters. The Governor wished to relay the message that he knew the “Great East Side was with him”.¹²²

That October, 50,000 New Yorkers massed outside Grand Central Station to welcome Sulzer and his wife after they arrived back in the city from their home in Albany to receive his nomination for the city assembly. Although having little option but to resign his position as Governor, he was a free man. Jay W. Forrest, an Albany lawyer and Supreme Grand Master of the Sons and Daughters of Washington, an organization formed to combat all forms of corruption including

¹²² ‘Cheer Sulzer, Boo Murphy’, *New York Times*, September 4, 1913, p.3

Boss Rule, was among them. Writing later that year, Forrest would describe a mad scene of waving hats and hands as a triumphal procession made its way from the way through the broad, hopeful streets of the Lower East Side. This was the man who had come a whisker away from casting the demon out of New York. It had been an eye-opener for the Machines, the *Albany Knickerbocker Press* commenting that it was the kind of ovation traditionally reserved for the returning war hero.¹²³

After Sulzer's resignation, all hopes returned to New York City, Mayor William Jay Gaynor, now seeking his second term in office. The opinion among many observers was that Gaynor had been the real target all along. After being backed in his mayoral campaign by Tammany leader Murphy, Gaynor had immediately set about full the city administration with men beyond the Boss's control. Among the Mayor's admirers was the author and journalist, H. L. Mencken, a good friend of Scott Fitzgerald who described him as one of those rare politicians who actually believed in the Bill of Rights. The man that Murphy had gone after was Gaynor's former law partner and City Treasurer, Charles H. Hyde. It was alleged that Hyde, the man who handled over \$500,000,000 a year in municipal funds, had accepted a \$18,000 bribe from Robin and the Carnegie Trust Company in return for the \$130,000 loan from the city treasury to prop up the failing trust. Robin had claimed that he had been coerced into parting with the money after pressure had been applied from the Trust's senior directors William J. Cummins and Joseph B. Reichmann. District Attorney Whitman was convinced that Robin's allegation against former City Treasurer Hyde had been coordinated by Boss Murphy but was nonetheless reluctant to prevent the case going before the Grand Jury.¹²⁴ It was the duty of his office to investigate. This was the second in three years that Mayor Gaynor had come fire — although the first time the shots that had been being fired against him had been quite literal.

The story into corruption at the Carnegie Trust Fund had first broke in May 1910, shortly before the mysterious death of the trust's former President, Charles. C. Dickinson in the explosion at the science laboratory in Scranton. Within a month of the Northern Bank and Carnegie Trust stories making the headlines, an attempt was made on Mayor Gaynor's life by 'disgruntled ship worker' James J. Gallagher. Gaynor was shot through the throat at point blank range and died some three years later of the injuries. A hastily convened trial took place and Gallagher was

¹²³ *Tammany's Treason, Impeachment of Governor William Sulzer*, Jay W. Forrest & James Malcolm, The Fort Orange Press, 1913, p.p. 187-189

¹²⁴ 'Hyde Indicted for Accepting \$13,800 Bribe', *New York Times*, May 2, 1911, p.1

sentenced to 12 years imprisonment.¹²⁵ By this time Gaynor's romance with Tammany had already collapsed as the newly appointed mayor filled one post after another with men beyond the control of the Tammany Hall machinery. The *Merritt Committee* handling the Carnegie Trust investigation had tried to subpoena Hyde for the best part of a month before he was even willing to come forward for questioning. Concern had been growing of Hyde's proximity to Robin, which Hyde, the man in control of the city's finances, was quick to refute entirely.

The alignment of Robin with the Tammany Hall machine was completed by a report that appeared in several newspapers including the *New York World*. Referring to the statements made by the estate's managers, Charles Janichen and Frank Santos, the report alleged that long serving Tammany Hall leader, Charles F. Murphy, had been among the more frequent visitors to Robin's deeply mysterious and immodest Long Island parties.¹²⁶ Murphy immediately denied the accusations, telling the *New York Times* that they were nothing more than a salacious "tissue of lies". He admitted that he had met Robin once, when Robin had dropped by his office at Tammany Hall, but that it was strictly a business affair. According to Murphy, Robin had arrived with a delegation to urge the nomination of German-American trader and New York City Controller, Herman A. Metz for city governorship the previous year. Metz too admitted to meeting Robin, but again it was city matters. Despite a picture being produced showing Murphy and Robin together at one of his parties, Murphy chalked up the slur as just another attempt by the *New York World* to link corruption with Tammany Hall.¹²⁷ It was an extraordinary story certainly. Historically at least, Robin had done everything in his power to loosen the grip of the Tammany machine, and here he was being accused of complicity in its machinations.

William Jay Gaynor's response to the renewed efforts of Murphy and the Tammany Hall to remove him, his former legal partner, Charles Hyde, and his good friend, William Sulzer, had been to launch a passionate defence of his office. Gaynor was determined to run for a second term as mayor. As the crowd of three thousand gathered at the Cooper Union in support of Sulzer, a visibly weakened Gaynor made an address at the City Hall. He was going to seek re-election on the independent ticket. Addressing Charles F. Murphy by name, Gaynor said the people of the city were going to shovel all of these miserable little political grafters into one common dump

¹²⁵ 'Gallagher faces 24 years in prison', *The New York Times*, August 11, 1910, p.2

¹²⁶ 'High Jinx at the Expense of Patrons', *Lincoln Evening News*, January 6, 1911, p.1

¹²⁷ 'Murphy Denies Visiting Robin', *New York Times*, January 7, 1911, p.2

heap. Leaping to his feet he raised a shovel and swung it theatrically about his head: “this is how we will shovel them out”, he shouted. ¹²⁸

Encouraged by the scenes, Robin’s counsel immediately set about reviving the work of The Fusion Party and getting their members to back Mayor Gaynor’s campaign. Every Republican and every Democrat who wanted nothing better than to see the back of Murphy and Tammany Bossism were encouraged to rally behind him. To support these efforts, the group set up a new campaign office at Fifth Avenue Building but loyalties remained divided: for all those who backed Gaynor for the post, there were as many prepared to back ‘the boy’, John Purroy Mitchel.

¹²⁹

Sulzer’s response to the infighting among the Fusionists and the lack of agreement between its Republican and Democrat members was to launch his own party, built specifically on the energy whipped-up by the efforts of Murphy and the Machine to have him removed forcibly from office. The party that he formed in response was an outgrowth of the American Federation of Patriotic Societies, a small and self-styled movement founded in 1914 by D.J. Reynolds and C.W. Bibb of the Masonic Temple in Minneapolis as “earnest and honest defenders of American Liberty” and religious diversity. ¹³⁰ It was a fiercely Protestant organisation that sought to triumph over “papal tyranny”, oppression, racial and religious intolerance and hate. *The Catholic Bulletin* in Fitzgerald’s hometown of Saint Paul in Minnesota instinctively what Sulzer was doing: he was seeking to build his future on the anti-Catholic patriotic organisations and Prohibition movement. In mid-July 1916 Sulzer had addressed the town’s Prohibition Convention where he touched on the religious question with the following words: “I am so much in favour of religious liberty that I want every man and woman on earth to have the right to worship his or her own maker according to the dictates of his or her conscience. I believe in all religions. I believe in all churches.” It was the view of the reporter that Sulzer regard for the Catholics of America had soured since his at the hands of the predominantly Irish Tammany Hall and now sought to build his own church on the broken rocks of where the Machine once stood. ¹³¹

¹²⁸ ‘Gaynor Swings Shovel at Foes’, New York Times, September 4, 1913, p.1

¹²⁹ ‘Fusion Leaders fear the Knife’, New York Times, September 4, 1913, p.3

¹³⁰ The Menace, October 2, 1915, p.1

¹³¹ ‘Sulzer and the Religious Issue’, Saint Paul Catholic Bulletin, July 29, 1916, p.4

A pamphlet drawn up by Sulzer's legal counsel and American Party co-founder, Samuel Bell Tomas on behalf of the Patriotic Societies made its pitch with a message that wouldn't have looked out of place in Scott Fitzgerald's 'Valley of Ashes': "*Watchman, What of the Night? Are you a patriot? Are you for God, Home and Country? Then, Brothers, On Guard! Remember eternal vigilance is the price of our liberties. Progress is the watchword of humanity.*" The pamphlet goes on to describe how 'America is America'. There was no other country in the world like it. It was "the beacon light of human inspiration" and stood for freedom in all things, a chance to escape "the cobwebs of the past". No one was to be forfeit the right to freedom because of their religion, and no politician was going to use a man's religion against them for the sake of politics: 'religion was one thing and politics another'. The new party would stand for good government, a square deal, for the ideals of a progressive and patriotic America; for Prohibition.

The next bit is little more intriguing, especially for all those readers who know *The Great Gatsby* well. In the bottom right hand corner of Sulzer's pamphlet, next to The Patriotic Society's signature and address, is a Swastika symbol.¹³² When the character Nick Carraway visits Gatsby's partner and mentor, Meyer Wolfshiem at the end of the novel, the door to the gangster's office is marked *The Swastika Holding Company*. It's interesting to note that Sulzer's Swastika is making an appearance on literature pushing narratives of Patriotism, anti-Corruption and National Pride some four years before it was re-appropriated and presented for similar purposes by the German Nazi Party. Shortly before this first pamphlet appeared in July 1916, Sulzer's legal counsel had founded a sister organisation and journal at the American Party's headquarters in Room 711, at 203 Broadway in Lower Manhattan. The name of it was: *The Swastika Science Society*, similarly based around talismanic Sanskrit emblem of a healthy prosperous state.¹³³

One of The Swastika Society's first publications was a tongue-in-cheek newsletter explaining everything that Americans needed to know about 'Getting Rich Quick'. According to Sulzer and his supporters, history had shown that the 'Fundamental Economics' of America, had always been in preserving the wealth of the rich by having the poorer man in America pay substantially more in tax. The route to getting rich was Prohibition. The newsletter then reprinted an address delivered by Sulzer to an audience in Corning, New York, in which he explained how Prohibition

¹³² *Life and Speeches of William Sulzer*, The Patriotic Societies, New York, 1916, pp. 2-13. The address provided is the Broadway Central Hotel at 675 Broadway near the Bowery in the Lower East Side. The hotel served as the HQ of Sulzer's new 'American Party'.

¹³³ The pamphlet explains the symbol's mysterious origins: "The word is from the Sanskrit and means wealth-making' (the making of a prosperous state).

would save fifty sixty percent of the working man's taxes and solve the problem of the high cost of living. 'Alcohol was a form of slavery', Sulzer thundered. For every dollar the State received on taxing liquor it paid out twenty-dollars on solving the burdens of alcoholism — the support of courts and juries, of hospitals, poorhouses and asylums. The Swastika newsletters ended with a word of encouragement to swell its membership: "A Swastika is one who knows".¹³⁴ If Fitzgerald had written *The Great Gatsby* some ten years earlier he might very well have had replaced the 'eyes of the Dr T.J Eckleburg' staring out of the Valley of Ashes with the penetrating gaze of the Swastika. How the Swastika made the transition from a liberal, pro-Jewish symbol of authoritarian patriotism in the US, to symbol of Aryan pride in Germany is perhaps a question for another day, but the battle for its 'talismanic' charms had evidently begun.

Who Was the Real Joseph G. Robin?



Trawling through the archives of *The New York Times* we learn that Robin's early days as Joseph G. Rabinovitch had been spent pounding the avenues and squares on the Lower East Side of New York as a bootblack — a story he appears to have had come up with himself. Within a year or two, however, his familiarity and knowledge of the Russian émigré community would bring him to the attention of journalists, politicians, immigration officers and police. After a brief spell as an informer and a founding member of the anti-corruption and anti-Tammany Hall organisation the 'Good Government Club', Rabinovitch had been taken-on as reporter at the *New York Recorder*. Here he would assist a small team of reporters chronicling the daily affairs of the East Side's thriving Russian colony and transatlantic business affairs under the pen name, 'Gus Podin'.¹³⁵

It was probably as a result of Robin's work with the *Good Government Club* that Rabinovitch had come to the attention of New York's Charities Commissioner, General James Rowan O'Beirne¹³⁶. It was O'Beirne who in 1902 took Robin on as campaign manager in his fight

¹³⁴ The Swastika, The Science of How to Get Rich, Swastika Science Society, Scrapbook Williams M. Sulzer, William Sulzer: 1863-1941,

¹³⁵ 'Bootblack Made a Million out of Niagara Falls', The Washington Herald, Literary Supplement, January 11, 1911, p.1. The name Gus Podin is clearly a play on 'Gospodin', the Russian form of address (not unlike the British 'Mister').

¹³⁶ His name is regularly misspelled as O'Beirne and O'Brien in press articles of the day. Whilst O'Bierne dominates, O'Beirne is more likely to be correct.

against Perry Belmont for Congress. O'Beirne, a fiery Irish Nationalist who had previously served as second in command at New York's Immigration Bureau at Ellis Island, would later take an active role in garnering Republican support for the Boer against the British in South Africa. In October 1899 the feisty US General had appointed himself 'Commissioner Extraordinary to the Transvaal Republic'. Once appointed he made a beeline for Minneapolis where he hoped to plead with President McKinley to intervene in the Transvaal crisis. O'Beirne was accompanied on this visit by two other 'informal commissioners': one was Cornelius van der Hoogt of Baltimore and the other was Joseph Gregory Rabinovitch or Joseph G. Robin as he now preferred to be called.¹³⁷ A letter addressed to George E. Waldo, Commissioner of Records at Kings County in Brooklyn, at whose Broadway office Robin was now based, made its way from South African President, Paul Kruger endorsing O'Beirne's petition to the President: "*Kindly communicate to Gen. James R. O'Beirne that this Government has decided to appoint him Its Commissioner Extraordinary to the United States, and that it expresses the hope that he will accept the post.*" The despatch was duly forwarded by Waldo to Dr Bosnian, the Boer representative in New York.¹³⁸

Just who appointed O' Beirne as 'Commissioner Extraordinary' for the Transvaal is a matter of speculation. The story at the time was that it had been made at the request of Dr Hermanus Stephanus Bosman, Pastor of the Dutch Reform Church in Pretoria in South Africa.¹³⁹ The Pastor had arrived in America to attend the Assembly of Presbyterians taking place in Washington in September 1899. The nomination is likely to have been based on General O'Beirne's popularity and influence with the Irish Brigades that had been formed under his US Army colleague, Colonel John Blake. A contingent of Blake's men had arrived in Pretoria just weeks before his visit and Bosman had made straight for the US capital in an attempt at to convince McKinley to mediate with the British and avoid any further bloodshed. A report published in the *Daily Brooklyn Eagle* in October describes how Robin had been appointed Deputy Commissioner, Cornelius van der Hoogt as Secretary and Brooklyn lawyer George E. Waldo — Commissioner of Records at Kings County — as counsel for the mission. Bosman was said to be a close personal friend of

¹³⁷ 'O'Bierne May See the President, Transvaal Representative Waiting at Minneapolis for an Interview', New York Times, October 13, 1899, p.2

¹³⁸ The World, New York, October 6, 1899, p.1; Joseph G. Robin, b.1875, US Passport Applications, 1901, New York State

¹³⁹ Hermanus Stephanus Bosman (1848 - 1933). Pastor at the Dutch reformed Church in Pretoria from 1875 to 1925. The church was Calvinistic and Evangelical Lutheran in orientation. Former US Presidents Martin Van Buren and Theodore Roosevelt were both affiliated with the Church.

President Kruger and had presided at the President's Methodist church in Washington the previous Sunday. After discussion with the President it became clear that a Commissioner Extraordinary would be needed, and having been aware of General O Beirne's capabilities, had cabled Kruger to formally recognise the appointment. Kruger cabled back immediately, acknowledging the "considerable financial interests" that the General had in the Transvaal in estimation of his knowledge and suitability for the post. ¹⁴⁰

President McKinley managed to sidestep the issue altogether, rejecting O'Beirne's efforts to get America to back the Boer in their war with the British, and offering to mediate in the crisis instead — a move that was to cause no small amount of offence to a contingent of hardcore Republicans and provoke a stiff rebuke from Britain. The President had been placed in a no-win position. The negotiations with London over an Anglo-American engineering contract for the Panama Canal had tied McKinley's hands over the future of the Boer Republic. America had been a friend to the Orange Free State for years, and there was no way that President McKinley was willing to offend the British. A mass meeting organised at Cooper Union in March 1900 would leave the McKinley Administration in no doubt to the extent of anger among Republicans over the issue, but from his perspective at least, the President was powerless to aid the Boer whether he wanted to or not.

Annoyance among American Republicans was only to be expected. For many of them, the gargantuan task the Boer were now facing had much in common with the one faced by American Patriots in the fight for Independence during the Revolution of the 1700s. Their fight against British 'tyranny and oppression' had been something that they could connect with. At the Cooper Union meeting in March 1900, one of the speakers had made a bold and provocative statement: "None of our Revolutionary heroes fought more desperately than the Boers are fighting now. I demand that this Government do for those republics what France did for us, and what we did for Venezuela, Mexico and Cuba." ¹⁴¹ Much the same statement would be made by author Mark Twain in his defence of the arms and relief package that he and his committee were putting together in support of Maxim Gorky and the Revolutionary heroes of Russia in 1906: their fight was like that of George Washington, Alexander Hamilton and American Patriots one hundred and thirty years before in America's War of Independence. McKinley's Presidential rival,

¹⁴⁰ 'O' Beirne's Appointment', Brooklyn Daily Eagle, October 6, 1899, p.4.

¹⁴¹ 'Pro-Boer Mass Meeting', New York Times, March 16, 1900, p.3; 'Report of the Pro-Boer Meeting', New York Times, March 18, 1900, p.3

William Jennings Bryan had made it known that he was standing alongside the great majority of American citizens who believed that the United States should intervene to prevent the South African Republics from annihilation. The mood of the crowd couldn't have been less ambiguous. When the speakers referred to O'Beirne and Robin's patrons, the Boer leader, President Kruger or the Generals and Cronje they were met with a wall of cheers. References to England were always followed by vigorous hissing. The same city officials who were demanding 'good government' and an end to the corrupt machinery of the Tammany Hall were also passionate members of the Anti-Imperialist League that had been set-up two years before to oppose U.S. annexation of the Philippines. Among the League's more obdurate celebrity co-founders were Andrew Carnegie, Mark Twain and former-President, Grover Cleveland, all of whom believed that American Colonial Expansion should be resisted with as much passion and force as that of the English.

There was nothing particularly exceptional going on here. The bonds between the anti-Imperialist movement, the Russian 'anarchist' and pro-Boer movement were strong. Just ten years earlier, the celebrated American explorer, George Kennan and Martin's co-author, Andrew Carnegie had formed a mutually sympathetic relationship with the *Society of Friends of Russian Freedom*, at that time operating under exiled revolutionaries, Leon Goldenberg in America and Sergei Stepniak and Felix Volkhovsky in Britain. Kennan's concern for the plight of the Russian anarchists was such that he formed a dedicated US version of the group, *The Society of American Friends of Russian Freedom*. His partners in the project were former abolitionists and anti-Imperialists, Francis J. Garrison, and Julia Ward-Howe, composer of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* — a patriotic rewrite of the song, *John Brown's Body* that Ward had made famous during the American Civil War. Such was the sympathy between the Russian anarchists and the Boer and Filipino Insurgencies that many Russian exiles, perhaps capitalising on the intensely divided mood in America, sent small battalions of men to fight in the war with the English.

At approximately the same time that the pro-Boer crowd were gathering at the Cooper Union, a 17 year-old James V. Martin was putting the finishing touches to 'Expansion: Our Flag Unstained' — a precocious anti-Imperialist tract that would feature 'special contributions' from millionaire Andrew Carnegie and 1896 Presidential hopeful, William Jennings Bryan. Twenty years later, Martin, now a pioneering aviator and naval captain, would find himself at the centre of a whistle-blowing scandal that threatened to derail the Harding Administration when he lifted the lid on what he alleged had been a 'secret compact' between British Secretary of War, Sir

Winston Churchill and Herbert Hoover's Relief Administration to replace grain supplies with military supplies during the Russian Civil War.¹⁴² On July 24, 1919 Martin received an urgent cable ordering him from Hoover's Paris Bureau telling him to cancel all previous assignments and await further instructions. The man who cabled him the message was Scott Fitzgerald's brother-in-law, Major Newman Smith. Smith had been appointed aide de camp to Hoover after an outstanding 12 months in the army's legendary Rainbow Division. Martin was then cabled another message from the London office of the A.R.A with instructions to reload the cargo with 60 Q.M.C Class Liberty trucks, 150 drums of oil and supplies and deliver them to General N.N Ivanoff, the Central Agent of Supply for the Russian North Western Army under General Yudenich in Reval. Just as Martin arrived in Reval, Newman's old service buddy William J. Donovan arrived in Omsk on a strictly confidential mission to meet White Russian General, Aleksandr Kolchak. The future CIA founder had been personally tasked by President Woodrow Wilson with assessing the credibility of the General's forces against Lenin's much better organized advancing Bolsheviks. The report that Donovan filed to Wilson was grim: the White Russians under Kolchak were no match for the well-trained and a fanatical Red Army. Russia's fate was about to be decided. On December 31st 1919 an order was received by the US Expeditionary Forces to withdraw. According to Donovan's biographer, Richard Dunlop, the taproot of America's Office of Strategic Services and CIA reached back to this moment.¹⁴³

At a Senate hearing a few years later, Martin contended that there had been a secret understanding between Churchill, Hoover and the French Government (which he referred to as 'the Paris Bureau') for the British to provide additional planes, tanks, and oil to the counter revolutionary movement. Martin's Senate stunt, ostensibly aimed at further destabilising Harding's Presidency, had been conceived by Populist Senator, Thomas E. Watson – the 1896 running-mate of William Jennings Bryan. Captain Martin had no sooner got the ball rolling on this when he made another announcement: he and a team of investors had plans to construct a \$10,000,000 floating 'liquor

¹⁴² Proceedings and Debates, Second Session of the Sixty-Seventh Congress, Congressional Record-Senate, May 25-June 13 1922: Vol. 62, Washington Government Printing Office, 1922, pp. 8249-8252; 'Secret War Pact'; Daily Herald, April 2 1924, p.3

¹⁴³ Donovan, *America's Master Spy*, Richard Dunlop, Rand McNally, 1982, pp. 102-128

palace' off New York beyond the three-mile limit, in a deliberately provocative act that would test the legal limits of enforcing prohibition in New York State. ¹⁴⁴

In his first brush with politics in 1900, the prodigious aviator had very skilfully combined the fashionable theories of flag desecration with the hard, reactionary rhetoric of Revolutionary Socialism. It wasn't an original idea. The actual phrase that Martin had recycled, 'Our Flag Unstained', dated all the way back to the mid-1800s when it appeared in clashes in Congress about the controversial attack at Monterey Bay in the autumn of 1842. ¹⁴⁵ Understanding the battle for control of the 'Red, White and Blue' at a symbolic level is crucial to understanding the moral and social conflicts at the heart of *The Great Gatsby* — the story of a skilful and resourceful nobody who pulls himself out of poverty and embarks on a truly ambitious class-war with people who considered themselves his betters.

Despite their hostility towards America's immigrants from Eastern Europe, the vast majority of Americans conflated the struggle of The Boer and Russian anarchist with their heroic bid for freedom. It was an ethical and political paradox that persists to this day; the influx of immigrants at Ellis Island were a constant, if not always desirable, reiteration of the legitimacy of the US Constitution. Those who made it to America were embraced at a symbolic level, but at a social and cultural level they faced the usual wall of prejudice and resistance. Martin and Carnegie's 13,000 word challenge to 'Tyranny and Oppression' may have come in response to the annexation of the Philippines, but its sentiments reached much further back in to the country's history and the US consciousness.

General James R. O'Beirne



Robin and General O'Beirne's potentially humiliating clash with President McKinley appears to have earned him short-shrift with the McKinley Administration. The group were most famously slapped down by McKinley's 1901 running mate, Theodore Roosevelt in New York, who

¹⁴⁴ 'Floating Booze Palace Off New York To Be Fought', Marysville Evening Tribune 11 March 1922, p.1. Martin had previously been connected with the National Security League under the direction of Princeton professor, Robert McNutt McElroy.

¹⁴⁵ 'James Vernon Martin (Imperialism , Tyranny and Oppression: Our Flag Unstained)', St. Louis Post Dispatch, St. Louis, Missouri, November 4, 1900, p.34

responding to a threat made by O'Beirne to rally an American-Irish militia to launch attacks against the British in Canada in January that year, is believed to have roared back with all his customary force and vigour, that he would "clap them all in prison" should the General and his men resort to terrorism to pressure the English.¹⁴⁶ Despite his Dutch heritage, Roosevelt, at this time serving as New York Governor, strongly favoured English dominance in South Africa. It was a confrontation that would have some rather unpleasant consequences.

In February 1901, the man who had vainly sought formal recognition as a 'Commissioner' of the Boer Republic was now faced with legal proceedings over a cheque that had bounced at a hotel in Washington. The scandal had emerged as Robin and O'Beirne had prepared to run against the Tammany Hall's Perry Belmont for control of New York's Seventh District in Congress.¹⁴⁷ At the time these charges were being heard, O'Beirne had just been taken on as Director and President of the Washington Savings Bank. Robin had joined him as controller. It was the same bank that Robin would become famous for 'wrecking' some ten years later.¹⁴⁸

The charges against General O'Beirne were rather trivial when compared with those of Robin some ten years later. During the time that Robin and O'Beirne had been heading the Transvaal mission to Washington for Boer leader President Kruger, they had made out a \$500 cheque to cover the cost of a hotel stay. The cheque had been returned to the hotel owner marked, 'Not Sufficient Funds'. The General told the court that he had given the owner specific instructions *not* to cash the cheque until a certain date and that the request had been ignored. The address he had given was 32 Broadway. He, Robin and his counsel, George E. Waldo were involved in a home loan association at a property on the premises. When the charges were brought against him, the General had been obliged to hand in his resignation at the Washington Savings Bank owing to any possible judgements that might arise from the charges levelled against him.¹⁴⁹

The fortunes of State Immigration official, Cornelius van der Hoogt and General Samuel Pearson, the men who had joined Robin and General O'Beirne on their Boer crusade in Washington and

¹⁴⁶ 'Briton, Boer, and Yankee : the United States and South Africa', 1870-1914, Thomas J. Noer, Kent State University Press, 1978, pp.80-81. This was no idle threat. In the spring of 1866, a band of Irish-Americans who fought on both sides of the Civil War united to launch attacks on British Settlements in Canada. O'Beirne had himself fought in the Irish Brigade. Fenian raids like these were not uncommon during the mid-19th Century. An Irish Corps were already in South Africa fighting alongside the Boer.

¹⁴⁷ 'Gen O Beirne Named for Congress', New York Tribune, October 5, 1900, p.8

¹⁴⁸ 'Gen. O'Beirne Examined', New York Times, February 14, 1901, p.9

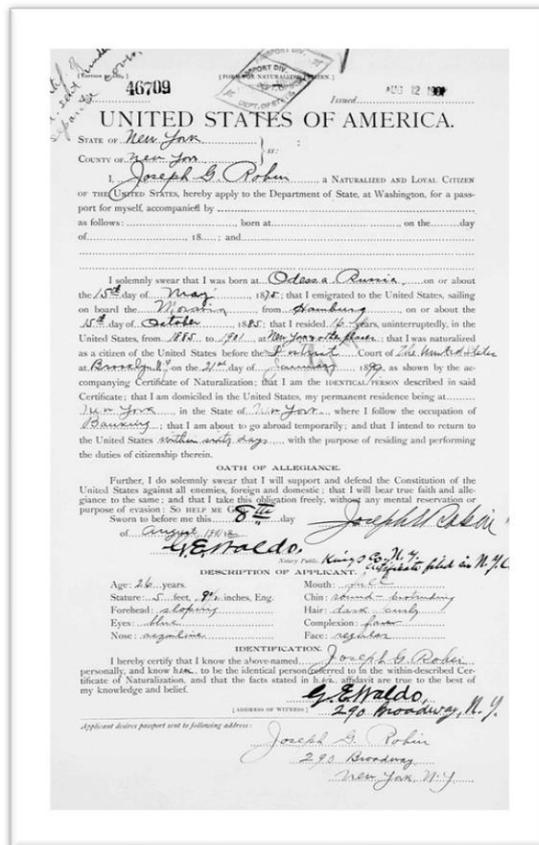
¹⁴⁹ *ibid*

who had actually gone on to fight against the British as part of the Boer insurgency, fared even worse. The pair had been arrested in 1904 for the attempted blackmail of a government official in the McKinley administration. According to a report in the New York Times in October that year, the complaint against the pair had been made by ex-Assistant Secretary of the Interior, Webster Davis. The former member of the McKinley Administration alleged that the pair had attempted to extort \$30,000 dollars from him and made threats against his life. Davis admitted that during the time he had served in the McKinley Administration he had visited South Africa for the purpose of a report. What he observed in South Africa had persuaded him to serve the Boer cause and had embarked on State-side lecture tour in support of the British challengers. Pearson and van Hooght say that Webster had been entrusted with some \$40,000 in gold bullion.

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Not for the first time, James R. O'Beirne had found himself in complete agreement with Andrew Carnegie, whose support for the Boer in the war with Britain was almost as fanatical as O'Beirne's. The pair had shared much the same view and had acted in the same pugnacious manner over McKinley's hard-nosed imperialist stance during the Filipino and Spanish-American Wars. It was in fact McKinley's failure to support these people that persuaded Carnegie, a committed Republican, to back the Democratic hopeful, William Jennings Bryan. The hostility would inevitably spill over into Congress and the Boer issue was still being fiercely debated at the time of his assassination the following year. On balance, given the declining fortunes of his fellow Boer 'commissioners' O'Beirne and van der Hooght, it was really only a matter of time before someone came after Robin.

¹⁵⁰ 'Webster Davis Accuses a Boer War General, Causes Arrest of Samuel Pearson on Blackmail Charge. VAN DER HOOGT ALSO HELD Prisoners Declare They Sought Accounting of 40,000 of Boer Gold', New York Times 18 May 1904, p.3



Hero of Ellis Island



Robin's link to O'Beirne is a curious one. The Roscommon-born O'Beirne had enjoyed an illustrious career, serving with distinction during the American Civil War — during which he was decorated with the Congressional medal of honour for actions of bravery “beyond the call of duty” — as well as leading the famous manhunt of Lincoln assassin, John Wilkes Booth, who, as we know, had a curious familial link to Scott's father, Edward Fitzgerald whose cousin Mary was married to Lincoln conspirator, John Surratt. It was O'Beirne detective, John Lee who had been the first identify Surratt as a suspect.¹⁵¹ O'Beirne, who watched as Lincoln lay dying on his bed in Washington, would also act as a pallbearer at Lincoln's funeral. He would recount the whole tragic drama in an interview with The New York World in May 1901.

Shortly before the death of Lincoln, the Provost Marshal General James B. Fry had appointed O'Beirne Provost Marshall of Washington, D.C. It was here that O'Beirne was tasked with

¹⁵¹ ‘Surratt's Trial’, Philadelphia Inquirer, June 21, 1867, p.1-2

purging the US Army of corrupt officers and officials in a bid effort to restore public confidence in government in the immediate aftermath of the assassination. O'Beirne is said to have got to work immediately, overhauling the department, firing clerks, and removing any officers that had been found guilty of corruption. At the request of newspaper publisher and Republican Party leader, Thurlow Weed, General O'Beirne would next use his considerable experience in espionage and handling agents to penetrate the precincts of New York City now dominated by Tammany Hall democrats and convince its Irish voters to enlist and stifle what O'Beirne called "treasoning and plotting" against the Federal government. The O'Beirne family's loyalties to the leaders of Young Ireland movement back in Ireland and the Irish Republican Union in America ensured that O'Beirne remained active in Irish-American affairs for many years to come. As a result of his influence, the General had been appointed as one of the reception committee that met the Irish National politician, Charles Stewart Parnell on his arrival in the US and organised his address at the House of Representatives.¹⁵² In 1899, Parnell's old supporters among Irish nationalists had made a resolution to back the efforts of an Irish-American militia in support of the Boer, eventually deploying several brigades of their own guerrilla fighters against the British. Their contribution was, however, dwarfed by the vast wave of support from Russia, among them many anarchists and Socialist Revolutionaries whose attendance at pro-Boer meetings had already registered on both sides of the Atlantic. One of those straddling the divide was American anarchist, Emma Goldman. It was Goldman's powerful address in support of the Boer at a meeting on Clerkenwell Road in London in February 1900 that cemented American ties to veteran Russian anarchist, Peter Kropotkin.¹⁵³ In the immediate aftermath of the McKinley assassination, there were a series of heated exchanges about 'Miss Goldman and the Pro-Boers' that this particular London meeting had stirred. In the last few months of President McKinley's life the Boer War had entered a critical phase. Press reports in June were beginning to focus on the appalling abuses being meted out to prisoners by British Officers. Pacifist and anti-war campaigner, Emily Hobhouse had just published an account of her experiences in the prison camps which she described as being "crowded without mercy, decency and humanity".

On learning of Hobhouse's report, the Liberal MP, David Lloyd George accused the British Government of carrying put a "policy of extermination". These were not detention centres but concentration camps. A small section of 'defiance' newspapers in America responded with no

¹⁵² New York Times, ObituaryNo.3, February 18, 1917, p.17.

¹⁵³ 'A War Protest Meeting', Justice, February 10 1900, p.8

less revulsion, the *Irish Standard* writing that “the blood of the starved, thirst-tortured, murdered mothers and little ones” were upon the head of President William McKinley, “just as much as though he individually had slain them with his own hands”.¹⁵⁴ The day after McKinley’s assassination in September 1901, the African American newspaper, *The Washington Bee*, published a profile on Emily Hobhouse praising the work she had done in exposing the horrors of the camps and breathing fresh interest into the plight of the Boer.¹⁵⁵ Although it was a little bit late in the day, more Americans were coming round to General O’Beirne’s way of thinking. America was feeling morally obliged to act. However, if O’Beirne, Carnegie or any of America’s radical patriot movement — or ‘pro-Republikeinse’ as they were known at the time — had been using the anarchists in pushing their propaganda, they were playing a very dangerous game. Even so, he had no shortage of admirers among the anarchists.

Support for O’ Beirne among America’s Russian émigrés dated back to the early 1890s when as Superintendent of Immigration at Ellis Island he had heroically resisted pressure from the General Consul of Russia, A. E. Oelavosky to provide a numerical list of all the Russian Jews who had immigrated to the US since January 1891. The explanation that Oelavosky had provided to the immigration bureau had been less than convincing, claiming that he had received ‘numerous applications’ from dissatisfied Jews in America who now wished to return home and have and their ‘rights’ there fully restored.¹⁵⁶ Not unreasonably, doubts were raised. O’Beirne’s superior, Assistant Secretary Nettleton, would subsequently advise the acting Superintendent to exercise special care in the instance of Russian Jews arriving at Ellis Island and other ports in what was clearly a destitute state. The advice was based on reports appearing in foreign newspapers that described how thousands of Russian Jews were being re-diverted to America by officials of foreign governments. The consul’s request had been preceded by a further of spate of riots against the Ukrainian Jews by Russian Nationalists. On this occasion over thirty people had been killed and hundreds more wounded in Tambov alone. As a response, an underground movement had been organized to assist in their emigration. Committees were said to have been formed at Odessa, Kiev, Kishinev, Poltava, Kharkiv and Simferopol. The donations poured in from sympathetic Jews and Christians across the world, anxious to speed-up their escape from

¹⁵⁴ ‘The Slaughter of Innocents: The Atrocities Practiced by the British on the Women and Children of the Boers’, *Irish Standard*, July 27, 1901, p.1

¹⁵⁵ ‘Miss Emily Hobhouse: English Girl who Exposed the Horrors of British Concentration Camps in South Africa’, *The Washington Bee*, September 7, 1901, p.6

¹⁵⁶ *Washington Post*, July 10 1891, p.1

the madness. Those who had made their way to Jerusalem were being turned away by the Ottoman government. The helpless refugees were finding themselves stuck between a rock and hard place. If they were still in town after a certain fixed period they were being deported. At this stage in history their ‘romantic idea’ of large scale resettlement in Palestine was being dismissed as little more than a ‘dream’ —none more so aggressively than by Jewish leaders in Europe. Even so, the various Committees being organized as part of relief efforts were not being organised to fulfil some purely romantic notion. They were being organised to facilitate a more practical and more desperate means of escape.¹⁵⁷ Lord Rothschild was among those recommending the British colonies and the Choverei Zion Association was among those supporting him.

Sadly, as result of some immigrants arriving on these assisted funds, a good number of them were refused entry to land in America. In the end, General O’Beirne had little option but to refuse other refugees arriving on a similar basis. Unable to offer further practical assistance under the current terms of law, the General was forced to rely on John Forrest Dillon, a former Judge and extended member of O’Beirne’s family on his mother’s side, to campaign on his behalf for the exception of Jewish relief funds that had been organized by German and English financiers.

In a letter to the *New York Times* Dillon drew attention to the efforts of Baron Maurice de Hirsch and the *Hebrew Educational Alliance* of East Broadway to form an official American Relief Committee, writing that the persecutions of the Jewish people, often meted out with “medieval cruelty” by the Russians had meant they were often exiled “without cause, suddenly and en masse with all the nameless hardships and sufferings” that accompanied such an exodus. Dillon would later join social workers and activists Clarence Darrow and Jane Addams in leading protests over the 1903 massacres in Kishinev. By August the following year, reports were emerging from Russia that the Tsar had approved Hirsch’s scheme for an organized exodus of more than 3, 500, 000 Jewish subjects over a period of 25 years, with 20, 000 prepared for the first year. In 1892, the whole immigration crisis was fully investigated and all related issues explored by the United States congress. O’Beirne was called as a witness.¹⁵⁸

The following year, O’Beirne would welcome the arrival of a completely different kind of exile when the Irish Land League’s William Nangle arrived at Ellis Island. Nangle had just been

¹⁵⁷ Morning Post, July 9, 1891, p.5

¹⁵⁸ Congressional Serial Set, First Session of the Fifty-Second Congress, 1892-1893, Washington Government Printing Office, pp.357-358; ‘Exiles from Europe’, *The Daily Boomerang* (US), October 2th, 1891, p.4

released from prison and found himself being immediately deported by the British. As he disembarked from his steamship in New York, Nangle is said to have been embraced affectionately by O'Beirne, who would ensure that his case was heard promptly by the court and that he was quickly granted asylum as a political refugee.¹⁵⁹ By 1912, Fitzgerald's 'life-coach' Shane Leslie had become a prominent figure in American-Irish and Anglo-Irish relations and his brother-in-law, the maverick US politician, William Bourke-Cockran would have doubtlessly encountered O'Beirne and their mutual associate, John Devoy at the Irish National Federation and the American Irish Historical Society, where Bourke-Cockran and O'Beirne both served as members.

After beating Perry Belmont for in his bid for congress, and expressing his commitment to the Boer-campaign, O'Beirne, who always had a great head for business, made Joseph G. Robin a permanent member of his staff. Robin's early affiliation to the *American German Reform Union*, which was mentioned by the *New York Times* at the time of Robin's trial in 1911, throws up another curious parallel, as its founder, Herman Rosenthal was an author-librarian in the mould of Russian revolutionary exile, Alexsei Teplov at the *Free Russian Library* back in London.¹⁶⁰ Rosenthal had started his career with a printing trade in the Ukrainian cities of Kremenchuk and Kiev promoting Jewish culture and assisting in the general the cultural and spiritual development of its students. After leaving Ukraine, Rosenthal had moved to Berlin and then to the United States. In 1892 he was hired by James J. Hill (an associate of the Fitzgerald family in Saint Paul) to examine the economic conditions in China, Japan and Korea on behalf of the Great Northern Railway. Two years later he was been appointed chief of the discharging department of the Immigration Bureau on Ellis Island by General O'Beirne. Curiously, Rosenthal died at his East 83rd Street address in New York just weeks before the General's own death in New York on the eve of Russia's February Revolution.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Irish Independent December 8, 1892, p.2

¹⁶⁰ 'Death of Jewish Scholar and Author', B'nai B'rith Messenger, 16 February 1917, p.1. Herman Rosenthal (1843- January 1917). Author, editor, librarian and a vice president of the Federation of American Zionists of New York. He also served alongside Shane Leslie's cousin, Travers Jerome on the Committee of Seventy, the committee tasked with investigating Tammany Hall corruption.

¹⁶¹ 'Brig General O'Beirne Dies in New York', Orange County Times, February 20 1917, p.7; <https://fordham.libguides.com/c.php?g=279634&p=1863270>

Becoming Joseph G. Robin



According to reports at the time of the Robin scandal in 1911, the address that appeared in his naturalisation papers and on his passport had been registered to the office of the law firm Waldo & Bullard at 290 Broadway.¹⁶² By this time Rabinovitch had already completed his remarkable transformation from lowly Russian émigré to high-flying Wall Street executive, Joseph G. Robin. His sponsor at this time had been Republican congressman, George E. Waldo, who had assisted O’Beirne and Robin in a legal capacity during his time as President of the *Popular Banking, Savings and Loan Association* and then at the ill-fated *Washington Savings Bank* in 1900.¹⁶³ The latter was the same bank that Robin would crash so emphatically some ten years later.¹⁶⁴ The man who had introduced Robin to O’Beirne was the no less mysterious copper mines magnate, F. Augustus Heinze. The pair’s calamity-prone partnership that had been formed as result of the introduction would eventually see Robin become successful in a number of high-value business projects and from here he just kept climbing the ladder — success in real estate and various trusts seeing him amass a substantial fortune fairly quickly. As we have seen already, Robin’s subsequent dealings would eventually take down two major financial institutions: the *Washington Savings Bank* and the *Northern Bank of New York*.

Practically opposite Robin’s office at 290 Broadway was Leo Hartmann and Lazar B. Goldenberg’s *American Headquarters of Free Russia*, at that time operating at 321 Broadway under the auspices of the *Russian American National League*.¹⁶⁵ Interestingly, the *League*’s Brooklyn-based Secretary, Gregory Weinstein would end up working alongside future Bolshevik legend, Leon Trotsky during his three-month stay in New York. It’s clear from O’Beirne’s recruitment of Herman Rosenthal and the news-thirsty Ukrainian, Robin (Rabinovitch) that the General was making every attempt to understand and subsequently harvest the immigrant vote. To this end, it may be that the proximity of O’Beirne and Robin to the more militant wing of émigré outreach in New York may well have been by design. Insight was one thing, having the

¹⁶² US Passport Application 1901/New York Times, September 6, 1904, p.5; New York Times, August 11, 1905, p.9

¹⁶³ ‘O’Beirne’s Appointment’, Brooklyn Daily Eagle, October 6th, 1899, p.4; ‘We announce conservative investors’, New York Times, November 7, 1902, p.13

¹⁶⁴ ‘General O’Beirne Examined’, New York Times, February 14, 1901, p.9

¹⁶⁵ Free Russia (American Edition), Society of Friends of Russian Freedom, No.5, December 1890.

means to shape that insight into direct action was another. Robin had firm roots and contacts within the community of exiles — that much is clear from his usefulness to the press and police at that time — and if his father and mother really had been political exiles in Russia, then he would have found immediate sympathies within the groups.

The deal that the Russian American National League had negotiated with their British counterpart would see Society of American Friends of Russian Freedom publish a US edition of the *Free Russia* journal from their base at 321 Broadway in New York.¹⁶⁶ In Britain the publication would be published under the scrupulous management and furious pen work of 1901 signatories, Felix Volkhovsky and Vladimir Burtsev, but in America the task of editing and pressing the journal would fall to the *League's* founder Leon (Lazar) Goldenberg. By 1901 Goldenberg had relocated to London, where he continued his work for the British branch of the society from Augustus Road in London's Hammersmith.

In a twist that is likely to satisfy fans of John Le Carre, it also transpires that 321 Broadway was the registered office of the 'Victor Typewriter' (as advertised in 'Free Russia'). There was a number of other sister companies listed here too, but the one that really caught my eye was Elias Bernard Koopman and Israel M. Rose's Magic Introduction Company, the people behind the 'Photoret Watch Camera' — a groundbreaking sub-miniature snooping camera. Koopman, a pioneering cinematographer with the K.M.C.D. Syndicate, would commit suicide in August 1929 by stabbing himself in the stomach at the Hotel Cumberland on West 54th Street in Upper Manhattan. According to reports in the British Press, Koopman also had offices at 18-19 Holborn Viaduct in London at this time.¹⁶⁷

It's worth pausing in the Broadway district for a moment as the streets around Robin's offices are crammed with curious histories and strange, surprising coincidences. Take the Russian American National League, which would subsequently move to 203 East Broadway¹⁶⁸ and the New York offices of its publishing partner, *Free Russia* who would relocate to Room 51 Tribune Building at 154 Printing House Square.¹⁶⁹ The latter move is quite intriguing. 154 Printing House

¹⁶⁶ *Free Russia* (American Edition), Society of Friends of Russian Freedom, No.5, December 1890.

¹⁶⁷ *The Era* 17 July 1897, p.12

¹⁶⁸ 'Russian Americans Protest: They Do Not Like the Extradition Treaty with the Czar', *New York Times*, February 10, 1893, p.9

¹⁶⁹ *Free Russia* (English Edition), vol.8, No.12, December 1, 1892, p.2

was directly opposite the *New York Recorder* at 15 Spruce Street — the newspaper that would be the first to hire a young J. G. Robin as a hard-boiled, nose-to-the-ground news hack on New York’s Lower East Side. In a curious twist of fate, 15 Spruce Street would also reappear as the ‘Place of Employment’ on the US draft papers of Leon Trotsky’s friend Ludwig Lore in 1918.¹⁷⁰ At the time that Lore was working here it was the home of radical *New Yorker Volkszeitung* newspaper and Louis C. Fraina’s *Class Struggle*. According to the 1910 census, Lore’s apartment at 732 Himrod Street in Williamsburg in Brooklyn was also just minutes away from 301 Bushwick Avenue, the home of the pitiful elderly couple who claimed to have brought Robin and his sister over from Russia, Mr and Mrs Hermann Rabinovitch.¹⁷¹

It was from Spruce Street that a young Joseph G. Robin went about his task of covering the crime and local issues emerging from the struggling Russian colonies on New York’s Lower East Side — a district of New York that Scott had imagined Jay Gatsby might have sprung from in the very first drafts of the novel.¹⁷² According to the story he was apt to tell reporters, one of Robin’s first jobs at the paper was shovelling snow and running errands, supplementing his meagre income by working as a bootblack on Union Square.¹⁷³ It was the stuff of American dreams. Robin explained how one of the Square’s most popular and successful bootblacks had been retiring and the plucky 18-year old Rabinovitch had been handed the various leftovers of his trade on the day of the man’s final shift. Rabinovitch immediately set to work on organizing his pitch, coming up with the gifted idea of promoting his ‘one minute shoeshine’ on a neatly lettered legend he had fitted to an old messenger boy’s cap he’d found lying around on the streets.

He’d been in the country less than two years when the clever and resourceful 17-year old found himself translating into English for Russian merchants doing business with the local press. Robin had arrived from the continent with a good working knowledge of French and English, and a talent for advanced mathematics (including calculus). His sharp grasp of calculus, he explained,

¹⁷⁰ Ludwig Lore, b. June 26 1875, New York City, No.40, World War I Draft Registration Cards, First World War, 1917-1918

¹⁷¹ ‘Bootblack Made a Million out of Niagara Falls’, *The Washington Herald, Literary Supplement*, January 11, 1911, p.1.

¹⁷² *Trimalchio, An Early Version of The Great Gatsby*, ed. J.W.L West III, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.43: “*But he must have some sort of past. Tell me he comes from the lower east side or from Galena, Illinois and I’ll be satisfied—*”. Fitzgerald’s maternal grandfather Philip Francis had immigrated from County Fermanagh to Ireland in Galena in the 1830s. The town was also home to a distinguished German-English College.

¹⁷³ ‘Bootblack Made a Million out of Niagara Falls’, *The Washington Herald, Literary Supplement*, January 11, 1911, p.1.

had improved with several months of evening classes and by and by he'd lost his Ukrainian-French accent. His easy familiarity with the Russian colony and the news hungry police reporters of Printing House Square would eventually bring him into contact with George W. Turner, the editor-in-chief of the *New York Recorder*.

By the age of twenty-one Rabinovitch was on a roll. His grasp of French, English and German had improved significantly and he was invited by Turner to write a trans-Atlantic column for the *New York Recorder*. Within a relatively short space of time, Robin could be found whipping-up the goods on various society scandals under the pen-name 'Gus Podin', ostensibly a play on the Russian name 'Gospodin' meaning 'Mister'. When news was scarce or his talents not thought relevant, he provided stories for the women's department, working under pioneering women's editors, Cynthia M. Westover and Eliza Putnam Heaton. A short time later the upwardly mobile twenty-something ditched the name Rabinovitch forever and became Joseph G. Robin. In just ten years Rabinovitch would go from being a penniless immigrant to being the controlling voice in three banks, two bonding companies, two property companies and find himself appointed a senior representative of the *Andrew Carnegie Trust Company*.

Doubt remains about the rags to riches tale he told to the press, which was in some ways contradicted by a story re-told to the *Savannah Morning News* by O' Beirne's friend and superior, Colonel John B. Weber, the then serving Commissioner of Immigration in May 1892. In the *Savannah* report, Weber attempts to explain the corruption at the heart of the Tsarist Government who he regards as being responsible for the mass of daily arrivals at Ellis Island and the spiralling crisis in Russia. The recent famine, which had aroused the sympathies of the world, was due in part, Weber explained, to the mass exodus of Russian Jews and the impact on its harvests. The fields of grain left by the fleeing masses had simply been left to rot. Many of those fleeing weren't peasants but successful farmers and skilled traders employing vast volumes of people. Salesmen and shipping merchants were being lost in their thousands. The pogroms had crashed their internal trade mechanisms and the country was left in financial chaos. To illustrate his point, Weber related the case of a friend of his, a 'Mr Rabinovitch': "*This man was worth about 200,000 rubles when he was forced to leave Russia. He sold his possessions and (received) a little over 16,000 rubles. He did not even get 10 percent of his own property. This man too was a thoroughly cultured and delightful character. He could speak English and French fluently, was*

*educated very highly in every branch and was a man whom any one would be delighted to meet. Yet he had to go at so great a sacrifice.”*¹⁷⁴

If subsequent descriptions of Joseph G. Robin are anything to go by, then the picture of a highly cultured gent called Rabinovitch who can speak English and French fluently is quite a remarkable match. Would it be so preposterous to think that the very well-educated and “thoroughly delightful” Mr Rabinovitch and Joseph G. Rabinovitch (aka Robin) were one and the same person? The fact that Weber was a close friend and colleague of Robin’s mentor, General O’Beirne certainly makes it plausible. That both men knew a ‘Mr Rabinovitch’ who was fluent in several subjects with all the charm and manners to match suggests Robin’s rags to riches story may have been cooked-up for the press and to attract more in the way of sympathy from the public. The journalists and the court certainly had their doubts about the story he told.

There was nothing wrong with the vision that Robin had or the story told. This was after all, the American Dream. It a story that gave hope and drove ambition, but by the time that the corruption scandal broke in January 1911, a more sinister pattern was beginning to emerge. Either the glitter was losing its sparkle, or it had never been glitter at all. Perhaps it had been dust all along; dust that had the caught the light in some blustery, magical way as it blew and settled from the city’s trash heaps. Some ten years into the dream, one thing was certain at least: there were shadows within these dreams. Was it possible that Robin’s meteoric fortunes after 1901 were not the upshot of his tireless commitment to self-improvement but from complicity in various frauds and crimes?

The murder of President McKinley in September 1901 must boosted hope for the pro-Boer lobby. He had been sceptical of intervention at the start of the war and had been just as sceptical in the days and weeks leading up to his death. In February 1901, Mark Twain had published, *To the Person Sitting in Darkness*, an anti-Imperialist tract criticising McKinley for playing the “American Game” in public and the “European Game” in private. In short, the President’s failure to stand up to tyranny made him no better than either than Joseph Chamberlain of Britain, Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany or Nicholas II, Tsar of Russia. The title of Twain’s essay had been an

¹⁷⁴ ‘Russia’s Disgrace: Causes that led to the famine in the Czar’s domain’, Savannah Morning News 07 May 1892, p.3

allusion to Matthew 4:11 describing the light that Christ brought to all mankind. General O’Beirne and Robin had come forward bearing light and all McKinley had done was douse it. Mary Hobhouse’s summer report on British abuses only served to pour more oil on the fire. Anger about the Boer and the draconian measures being introduced by the President to reduce the influx of refugees from Russia saw the keg all set to explode. Either by accident or design Joseph G. Robin and General O’Beirne had found themselves on the farthest fringes of a plot to murder the President.

The Flight of Icarus



In 1894, Joseph G. Robin was sacked by the *New York Recorder*. He and his sister Louise Rabinovitch had found themselves embroiled in an unsavoury medical scandal relating to Ward’s and Blackwell’s Islands — the extensive refuge colonies catering for sick and destitute immigrants. Her witness testimony in front of the New York State Lunacy Commissioners provided a dire assessment of its unethical and neglectful practices. A few days later the Tribune described how the story had stirred-up Tammany officials. Surprisingly though, Robin’s sacking hadn’t been down to his sister’s involvement in the scandal, it was down to him having sold and written-up the original scoop for the *New York Herald*, the Recorder’s rival newspaper.¹⁷⁵

The investigation, conducted at New York’s Park Avenue Hotel focused not on the cruelties and abuses being meted by individual carers but on the totally inadequate system of care that was being provided by those in management. The food supply was not sufficient or nutritionally balanced, the medical care and supervision was exceptionally poor and the inmates were herded together in a way that was cruel and inhumane. The poor that the city of New York was putting aside for the provision of these people and the size of the buildings they were corralled into, was simply not fit for purpose. Dr Louise Rabinovitch, then serving in the Department of Charities and Correction, provided a no-holds barred account of attempted suicides and inmates crammed in like sardines. Bathrooms, which inmates were permitted to use only every fortnight, regularly functioned as makeshift morgues. Corpses would be left in the bathrooms for up to four days before burial. The food the women consumed was delivered in forty-gallon canisters, and on one

¹⁷⁵ ‘Horrors of Bedlam’, *New York Herald*, May 13, 1894; ‘Bootblack made a million out of Niagara Falls’, *The Washington Herald, Literary Supplement*, January 11, 1911, p.1.

occasion an old pair of stockings and a bar of soap were found in a can of ten. There were even old handkerchiefs that had been found in the soup. The top and bottom of it all was this: the patients were living in tombs.¹⁷⁶

Louise Rabinovitch, who had been employed as Fifth Assistant Physician at the city asylum under Dr E. C. Dem had left that position at the beginning of May 1894. The press reports that emerged in the months that followed focused on the lurid and sensational aspects of the claims that Louise had made on the second day of the inquiry, when she had made the astonishing claim that doctors had not only been shameful in their neglect of the patients but had been systematically prescribing lethal doses of barbiturates to keep the most needy of the inmates subdued. On one occasion at least, this practice had resulted in death. Compared to the institutions she had visited in Paris, there was no match for the scale of barbarity on Ward's and Blackwell's Island anywhere in the world, "not even in China". At first she had contemplated writing a book on the subject but thought direct action the more appropriate route to change. When asked by lawyer, Duncan Edwards of the *New York Herald* to speak at the inquiry she had jumped at the chance to share her findings and those of her informants. Her subsequent refusal to name these informants, however, very nearly resulted in a charge of contempt of court. In the end it was decided that a combination of overwork, poor facilities and shoddy contractors were to blame.

¹⁷⁶ 'Herding the Lunatics; A Woman Doctor Testifies; New York World, June 8, 1894, p.9



Dr

Louise Rabinovitch (right, seated) testifies (New York World, June 8, 1894)

The investigation launched by the Department of Charities and Correction may have focused on issues of sanitation and neglect at the hospital, but the report by Robin for the *New York Herald* derived much its energy from an attempt to expose the endemic corruption at the heart of its facilities being managed by Boss Croker and Tammany Hall — the political engine room of the rival Democrats whose grip on New York’s immigrants had been ferociously tight. A parallel investigation launched by Shane Leslie’s cousin, William Travers Jerome, John D. Townsend and the Lexow Committee that same year was also to find gross and persistent corruption operating at the heart of the New York Police Department. After William L. Strong — the founding father of the city’s Department of Public Charities and Correction — was elected as Major the year following the asylum scandals, something of a clean-up campaign had been launched, and for a short time at least, the Tammany Hall’s cast-iron grip on New York’s various institutions, reinforced by Hugh J. Grant and Thomas F. Gilroy’s terms as mayors, was loosened. As we learned in an earlier chapter it was the beginning of long and ultimately unsuccessful campaign to remove Tammany and Irish influence from the city.

By November 1894, some six months after the *Herald* had blown the whistle on the systematic failures and abuses at Blackwell and Ward Islands, William Travers Jerome and the Committee of Seventy issued a statement regarding what they saw as the mis-management of the asylums.

Drawing on the findings of the State Lunacy Commission it was alleged that Boss Croker and the Tammany Hall had taken “better care of New York’s criminals than that of honest people who are only herded, watched and guarded”. The Committee said that it had been shown beyond question that many of the buildings in which the city’s insane had been cared for were unfit for human habitation. Despite their knowledge of the abuses being carried out by carers at the institutions, Tammany Hall had done nothing to relieve their suffering.¹⁷⁷ J.G. Robin’s ‘Horrors of Bedlam’ expose for *New York Herald* had landed the first real blow to the Tammany Hall under its new Boss, Richard Croker. Fast forward seventeen years and the Lexow Committee’s campaign manager, William Travers Jerome would be representing Robin in court as part of the Northern Bank-Carnegie Trust embezzlement scandal, which after several months of investigations and a daily soap opera of dramatic courtroom of shocks and revelations would deal a fresh and fatal blow to the already weakened Tammany machine. The Good Government Clubs that both men had been members of were beginning to yield firm results.

Robin’s mentor, General James O’Beirne had been made Superintendent of Immigration just four years before and it’s only reasonable to think his appointment had been offered, at least in part, as a result of his strong Irish sympathies. Yes he was a Republican, but he was a Republican with divided loyalties. It is moreover curious to note that by 1904 General O’Beirne and Tammany Mayor, Hugh J. Grant and both had both been given a place on the *National Committee of the Irish National Federation*. The party had originally been launched in 1891 by former supporters of *National League* leader, Charles Parnell with the full backing of its leader in Ireland, John Dillon. Both men were also permanent fixtures at the *Irish-American Historical Society*.

The *New York Herald* was represented throughout the trial by the attorneys, Duncan Edwards and Henry C. Bryan of Nassau Street, Printing House Square. The pair had been tasked with protecting Robin’s story by the paper’s Paris-based editor, James Gordon Bennett Jr, whose family had close personal links to Robin’s future lawyer, William Travers Jerome of the Lexow Committee.¹⁷⁸ At this point it’s worth noting that upon his arrival in America, Joseph G. Robin had been accused of having a very distinctive French accent and to have maintained some

¹⁷⁷ ‘Tammany’s Foul Record in Connection with the Insane’, *New York Daily Tribune*, November 6, 1894, p.3

¹⁷⁸ Both the Jerome family and the Bennett family were part of The Belmont Clique at the American Jockey Club. William Travers Jerome, was also appointed trustee of a fund set aside by James Gordon Bennett Snr. for his daughter, Mrs. Jeanette Bell.

pronounced French affectations.¹⁷⁹ Is it possible that there had been some prior contact between Robin and Bennett Jnr. during their respective periods in France? According to some, the Russian had insisted that his new name ‘Robin’ was pronounced ‘Ro-ban’, which has a distinctive French intonation. Interestingly, Bennett’s arrival in Paris in 1887 also coincides with Joseph and Louise Rabinovitch leaving Paris for New York in the final months of the decade.¹⁸⁰

Like all those who had suffered prejudice and persecution, General O’Beirne had always been a passionate champion of the underdog. And not just the Irish. In 1890 he had reacted with fury when he learned that Wild Bill Cody (Buffalo Bill) had been mistreating the Indians of the Pine Ridge Reservation that he had brought into his show in the late 1880s. Three of the tribe leaders had made a personal appeal to O’Beirne, who with the help of an interpreter learned of conditions in Wild Bill’s circus that were “unfit for dogs”. These once proud warriors were broken men. “I have spent many years among the Indians,” the General explained to the press, “and I never saw an Indian cry before.”¹⁸¹ The Dream that had been either sought or forced upon America’s people had occasionally attracted the foul stench of exploitation. Its waters were becoming polluted.

An Idyll of Printing House Square



Authors Sharon Seitz and Stuart Miller once described Blackwell’s Island as a “kind of dark inverse to Emma Lazarus’s famous poem, a place where the tired, the poor and the wretched refuse lost their freedom, taken from society and tossed inside personal wretchedness”.¹⁸² Some fifty years before Robin and the *New York Herald* had published its ‘Horrors of Bedlam’ story, the legendary British novelist, Charles Dickens had visited the Island. It is claimed that Dickens had found the scenes at the hospital so distressing that he had come up with excuses to leave prematurely before the inevitable invite came to observe the most violent of its inmates.

¹⁷⁹ The exact year that Joseph G. Rabinovitch and his sister arrived in America is difficult to determine. According to the report in *The Washington Herald* in January 1911, Robin says he arrived in New York about ‘20 years ago’ when he was just 15. This would make it around 1890 or so. His passport has his birth date down as 1875 but his arrival in America dated 1885.

¹⁸⁰ ‘Bootblack Made a Million out of Niagara Falls’, *New York Tribune*, January 8, 1911, p.11.

¹⁸¹ ‘Three Hungry Indians’, *New York World*, July 22, 1890, p7; ‘Hatchets for Buffalo Bill’, *Evening World*, July 21, 1890, p.5

¹⁸² *The Other Islands of New York City: A History and Guide*, Sharon Seitz, Stuart Miller, The Countrymen Press, 2011, p.154

Tammany Hall's grasp on the Island ended when the Republican Liberal progressive Fiorello La Guardia became New York's 99th mayor in 1934. Within weeks of being appointed, La Guardia tasked Austin MacCormick to raid its buildings. Picking up where it left off in 1894, the *New York Herald* took a great deal of pleasure in reporting that a highly organised drug and racketeering industry operating within the "worst prison in the world" had finally been busted. The scene described by the paper is certainly one that would Joseph and Louise Rabinovitch would have been proud of: "*boss gangsters lived in luxury, swaggered around, and at the same time there was an almost incredible condition of misery and degeneration*". 'Welfare Island' superintendent Louis A. Rehberg and several other officials, including a doctor, were suspended immediately and a further 125 employees and civilians were left facing serious charges. ¹⁸³

The impact that the Asylum scandal had on Robin's journalistic career at the *Recorder* had been emphatic: he was out, and not even the *New York Herald* chose to pick up his services after the whole sensation had faded. Although the issue of abuses at Blackwell and Wards Islands had rattled on for years, this particular dramatic spectacle appears to have been conceived for the sole purpose of undermining the Tammany Hall machine, and whilst it's unlikely that Robin and his sister were the chief motivators behind the scheme, they certainly played key parts. In the end, the article that Robin produced for the *New York Herald* on May 13th 1894 was not just his first, but his last.

After parting with the *New York Herald*, Joseph G. Robin began to lease-out his 'Gus Podin' alter-ego to a miscellany of newspaper titles. In August 1894 he was reporting on the destruction of the famous *Umayyad Mosque* in the Syrian capital of Damascus in his characteristically lyrical prose for the *Burlington Gazette* and several other regional titles.¹⁸⁴ In spite of its travelogue style and conventions, the level of detail that Joseph poured into the article suggests that the iconic monument had a deep and personal resonance for him. The 'Pride of Islam' which had lasted for thousands of years had sadly perished in a matter of hours as a fire tore through the area. The mosque's significance crossed the usual religious divides with both Christian and Muslim followers believing it to be the site where Jesus would return at the end of days. A legend dating back to the sixth century purported that the head of John the Baptist was buried here. Although

¹⁸³ 'Many Facce Ouster at Welfare Island', *New York Times*, February 1, 1934, p.3

¹⁸⁴ 'The Pride of Islam; Great Mosque at Damascus is no more', *Burlington Gazette*, May 5, 1894, p.5

triumphantly restored, the Pride of Islam was destroyed again during the Syrian Civil war in 2014.

With the exception of a handful of by-lines, it's clear that the newspaper work was drying up for Joseph G. Robin. Undeterred, he decided to try his luck at writing a novel, drawing on his experiences of New York's ferocious press industry. The novel, based partly on his newsroom experiences at the *New York Recorder* on Spruce Street and partly on a lofty treatise on the follies of ambition, was lavishly titled, *The Flight of Icarus: an Idyll of Printing House Square*.¹⁸⁵ Whilst the novel itself lacks much in the way of a plot, it does include some interesting ruminations on notions of artifice and truth and the impact that random misfortunes and debilitating personal vices have on the purer pursuit of one's dreams — a theme more successfully developed by F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* some twenty years later:

*“Of the countless number of plans conceived by man in a lifetime, how many are realized? The evolution of a plan or scheme is the exemplification of subjectivity - as for the actual eventuality - that is the result of surroundings, of extraneous influences - how often of chance! When we consider the infinity of character—of self—when we take the merest glance at the incomprehensibly various nature of personality, it seems little short of an affront to the whole race for any member of it to indicate a certain line of action for a certain ‘character’. There is nothing fixed or immutable in human nature”.*¹⁸⁶

Scholars of anarchist history may be interested to note that the preface to Rabinovitch's book consists of a rejection of absolutism that is every bit as passionate and concise as any anarchist tract by Prince Kropotkin or Sergei Stepniak. In its partially successful social-realist style, the novel takes up the issues of racism, sexual inequality and the ego-led recklessness of social reform. That Lazar Goldenberg's *Russian American League* (and all its glorious dreams therein) was based at 154 Printing House Square is unlikely to have been a coincidence.

Beginning with a quote about vice from Alexander Pope's 'Essays on Men, Epistle II', Robin's novel anticipates his own subsequent financial downfall and that of his literary twin, the ever plummeting Icarus, Jay Gatsby. Either by accident or design the irreconcilable triumphs and

¹⁸⁵ *The Flight of Icarus; An Idyl of Printing House Square*, Jay Robin, F. Tennyson Neely, 1898

¹⁸⁶ *The Flight of Icarus; An Idyl of Printing House Square*, Jay Robin (aka Joseph G Robin), F. Tennyson Neely, 1898, Preface

tragedies of the two men's flaws are foreshadowed very poetically by Pope's much earlier work. It is not the dream that destroys Robin and Gatsby but too much knowledge and too much weakness, 'a chaos of thought and passion all confused'. All three men, Gatsby, Robin and Icarus, are destined partly to rise and partly to fall. They were living proof that there was "nothing or fixed or immutable in human nature". Fitzgerald had much the same thing to say of Gatsby. Jay Gatsby, Fitzgerald would write, "had sprung from his Platonic conception of himself — he was the Son of God" and went about his father's business "in the service of a vast vulgar and meretricious beauty" — a beautiful fake, so to speak. A demi-urge.¹⁸⁷

It is, perhaps, not a coincidence that Fitzgerald's infinitely superior novel, *The Great Gatsby* invokes much of the religious imagery that features in Pope's *Essay on Man*. I think we can be almost certain that Fitzgerald had read, or at least heard about, Jay Robin's *Icarus*, whether out of curiosity at the time of the Carnegie Trust Company scandal in 1911 or as a result of Robin's later correspondence with Theodore Dreiser — an occasional muse to Fitzgerald. The themes and verbal similarities that persist across all three works are just too great to be the result of mere coincidence. Even Robin's pen-name 'Jay' appears echoic. And in a classic case of life imitating art, Robin becomes not the 'rapid comet' described by Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Man*, but the 'sky rocket financier' described by New York reporters covering the Robin scandal. The "universe of ineffable grandeur" that spun itself out in Gatsby's brain as the 17-year old James Gatz transformed himself into Jay Gatsby makes him the spitting-image of the rapid, un-tethered comet of Pope's poem. Fitzgerald revives the Icarus metaphor in his description Gatsby in his car tearing from the Valley of Ashes with "fenders spread like wings" scattering the light as he goes. For the purposes of his fantasy, the Valley of Ashes represents the impoverished industrial areas that lie between the city and his dazzling Long Island paradise, and the hearse that he passes, his inevitable fall.

It may be worth reminding ourselves at this point that *The Great Gatsby* is the story of an enigmatic millionaire who mysteriously sets up home in the less fashionable West Egg district of Long Island. Nobody really knows who is or how he acquired his money. As a result of this indeterminacy, a vapour trail of rumours and speculation follow in his wake. Some think he is a bootlegger, others whisper as him being a German spy during the war. Some even think he may have killed a man. Whatever he is, his narrator and friend makes it abundantly clear that he had

¹⁸⁷ *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Penguin Classics, 2000 (first published 1926), p.95

acquitted his vast wealth in a relatively short period of time, and the lavish all-night parties that he hosts at his magnificent beach-side mansion have all been contrived that he may meet and rekindle his romance with his first love, Daisy Buchanan — now unhappily married to ‘old money’ in the adjoining East Egg district. Using whatever means he has, Gatsby has pulled himself out from the gutter and is flying towards the stars to steal his prize. Whether by coincidence or design, Fitzgerald’s novel is a deeply enriched fusion and part-extension of Pope’s *Essay on Man* and Robin’s *Icarus*. And the missing link that may help explain this fusion is Socialist author, Theodore Dreiser, the man who provided the foreword to Robin’s next literary effort, *Caius Gracchus: A Tragedy*.

Dreiser, Robin & Gatsby



As mentioned in an earlier chapter, it was Dreiser’s beautiful profile of Joseph G. Robin in *Twelve Men* that is believed to have been the inspiration for the ‘Party Gatsby’ of Fitzgerald’s novel: impeccably-dressed, impeccably-mannered and serving his guests the most unselfish and most lavish of entertainments in the most lavish and unselfish of ways. Fitzgerald, who had been a fan of Dreiser for some years by the time he sat down to write *Gatsby*, finally got to meet the author in January 1923 after several years of corresponding by mail. The place they met was in Dreiser’s apartment in New York.¹⁸⁸ This was a financially lean period for Dreiser, and to help relieve the stress and the burden of trying to write with all the distractions of being broke, the author was loaned the use of an office by his old friend, Joseph G. Robin. Within two years of Dreiser and Fitzgerald meeting, the pair’s momentous twin publications *An American Tragedy* and *The Great Gatsby* had been published to dual acclaim.

Whilst it’s not entirely clear how and where Robin and Dreiser met, the generally accepted story is that Robin had fallen in love with Dreiser’s debut novel *Sister Carrie* published in 1900. According to Dreiser, Robin had sympathized with his character George Hurstwood, a rather dubious self-made man of fashion who takes a few too many risks, sees his savings and his business collapse and ends up committing suicide in a doss house having succeeded in his wish to make Carrie, the object of his affections, a wealthy and famous actress. Like *Gatsby*, the novel

¹⁸⁸ F. Scott Fitzgerald; an Introduction and Interpretation, Milton Hindus, Kahle/Austin Foundation, 1968, p.45

explored the challenges faced by immigrants and the nouveau riche in their attempts to penetrate the off-limit territories of America's upper class and raise the flag of the America Dream — only this time under the no less controversial banner of Women's Suffrage.

At the time that Dreiser and Robin met, the author was still editing the crusading new women's journal, *The Delineator*, whose gentle reformist pattern was cut to a similar design as the work produced by Robin in the women's department of the *New York Recorder*. It was here that the young reporter had worked under the patronage of pioneer editors, Cynthia M. Westover and Eliza Putnam Heaton.¹⁸⁹ Dreiser had been lured across to *The Delineator* from Benjamin B. Hampton's *Broadway Magazine* where he had spent several years sculpting the very best in muckraking theatre gossip and soft-core erotica. Robin's life-long affection for Broadway dominates Dreiser's description of the extravagant parties hosted by Robin back on Long Island and it's entirely possible that that the pair had crossed paths before, perhaps as a result of Dreiser's editorship of *Broadway Magazine*.¹⁹⁰

After expressing his admiration for the author, the pair began to exchange a series of letters and before long Dreiser was attending the lavish all-night parties at Robin's Driftwood Manor estate. As Dreiser started work on his seventh novel, *American Tragedy*, Robin offered him the use of his office at the *Guardian Life Building* in Union Square.¹⁹¹ By this point in time Robin had gained his law degree and was now in partnership with Robin's former attorney, Arthur Carter Hume, who Dreiser promptly hired too. The arrangement not only allowed Hume and Robin to provide regular, on-demand advice for the legal aspects of Dreiser's novel, which covered the trial and execution of its central character, Clyde Griffiths, but also for the controversy (and the bans) that the novel would inevitably face as a result.¹⁹²

Given the extraordinarily thematic likeness that *American Tragedy* shares with Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, it's difficult not to daydream about late evening discussions over illicit shots of

¹⁸⁹ 'Bootblack Made Millions out of Niagara Falls', Washington Herald, January 15, 1911, p.1. Dreiser was editor of *The Delineator* from June 1907 to October 1910. H. L. Mencken, another favourite of Scott Fitzgerald, was among several writers that Dreiser brought to the magazine. Princeton lecturer and future US President, Woodrow Wilson was also among those writers who contributed during Dreiser's time. See: *A Theodore Dreiser Encyclopaedia*, Greenwood Press, 2003, pp. 39-40; 'Shaping the Life of the New Woman: The Crusading Years of the "Delineator"', Sidney R. Bland, *American Periodicals*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2009), Ohio State University Press, pp. 165-188

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¹⁹¹ *My Life with Dreiser*, Helen Dreiser, World Publishing Company, 1951, p.110

¹⁹² *My Life with Dreiser*, Helen Dreiser, World Publishing Company, 1951, p.110

Old Overholt whisky, with Joseph G. Robin regaling the two novelists with his staggering life story and his own disastrous close encounter with the fiery, consuming magnetism that defined the American Dream. I have this fantasy taking shape in which Robin approaches the two men with a gripping proposition; Fitzgerald will go away and write a misty-eyed modern-day Icarus story, taking large cues from his own life, and Dreiser will crawl back to the Guardian Life Building and write a similar indictment of the American Dream, bringing its more bloody and unforgiving magma to the surface and delivering a less hopeful and more socially realistic resolution. The scholar, Thomas P. Riggio was quick to nail the similarities between the two novels in his essay, *Dreiser, Fitzgerald, and the Question of Influence*: “both books deal with poor Midwesterners whose youthful dreams of women, money and power lead them to ruin”.¹⁹³ Ultimately though, the pact I was envisaging was a fantasy, nothing more. We may just have to accept it didn’t happen.

Whilst this is no place for a comparative study of the two novels, it’s worth remarking on how both novels deal with the fundamental darkness at the heart of the American Dream. Each of the novels is essentially about weakness. For Jay Robin’s Icarus, the Greek hero’s weakness was the sun, for Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, the ‘enchanted object’ was the green light at the end of the dock that his trembling, outstretched hand reaches nervously toward — his hope of reclaiming his first love, Daisy Buchanan and by doing so, repeating the past. For Theodore Dreiser’s Clyde Griffiths it’s the acquisition of common-or-garden material things: flash cars and expensive suits. It was clear from the stories of each character that a beautiful kind of cruelty went hand in hand with the dream, that the dream was impossible to realise without leaving a foul smelling dirt-trail of all it had ingested as it bore its gluttonous way forward. In this instance, misery was those coiled casts of sand left by the burrowing lugworm as it followed its dream. Each of the heroes in the two novels would violate laws and each would be cursed by that violation. Each would be destroyed by their pursuit of their dreams; a paradise gained and a paradise lost.

Gatsby’s own quest was slightly different in that his pursuit of fantastic wealth is balanced by an equally fantastic gift for sharing it. The ‘full orchestra’ garden parties he hosts are truly egalitarian. These consuming summer spectacles that “go on for days” are hosted entirely at Gatsby’s own expense. Yes, he’s out to impress Daisy, but there’s something quite innocent

¹⁹³ ‘Dreiser, Fitzgerald, and the Question of Influence’, Thomas P. Riggio, Theodore Dreiser and American Culture: New Readings, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani, University of Delaware Press, 2000, pp. 234-47

and generous about the way that he allows others to enjoy his fortune. The novels' narrator duly informs us that the men and women coming and going "like moths" from his sumptuous Long Island estate would also have full, unsupervised use of his motor boats and aquaplanes. Even his Rolls Royce would be used at weekends as a bus to ferry parties to and from the outlying cities, and the substantial repairs that would result from such abuses would be carried out at no expense, despite his swarm of guests having rarely been invited. His friend and neighbour Nick, who regards everything he sees from his own self-imposed 'oblivion', makes clear at the start of the novel, that the myriad of people arriving at Gatsby's parties would "come with "a simplicity of heart that was its own ticket of admission".¹⁹⁴ To put it plainly; the greed in Fitzgerald's novel is offset by magnanimity and generosity. Gatsby doesn't even wear the shirts "piled like bricks in stacks a dozen high" that he has specially made and sent over from London. However ill-gotten his gains may be, they are being put to a noble use and for the benefit of everyone.

In an 1899 interview with Robin associate, Andrew Carnegie, Dreiser's attention had been drawn to the part that self-publicity had played in the rise of successful young men. Carnegie believed that nothing was impossible. All that young needed to succeed in the world was to recognise the value of doing something more than what was expected, that they should focus on doing 'something exceptional'. For Carnegie it was about 'self-culture'. Such is the resonance it has in both novels that it's hard not to think that Carnegie's guide to overreaching had an impact on the novelists as much as it had on Carnegie's trust-fund manager, Robin. But wealth is only a part of Fitzgerald's novel. According to Dreiser, Carnegie had told him that the time was fast approaching when true success in life would be recognized as consisting neither or wealth nor fame, but having been useful to mankind.¹⁹⁵ Fitzgerald's Nick Garraway tells us much the same thing about Gatsby very early on in the novel. It wasn't Gatsby's cars, his house or his empire of flamboyant shirts and suits that made Gatsby exceptional it was his "extraordinary gift for hope" and "romantic readiness" — a resource for mankind as infinite as it was useful. At the heart of the common bootlegger was a common philanthropist. His wealth isn't seen as an end in itself but as a catalyst for

¹⁹⁴ *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Penguin Classics, 2000 (first published 1926), p.43. Many assume that Fitzgerald had meant to use the word 'incognito' rather than 'oblivion'. I'm not so sure. I think the author was trying to suggest a state of stupefaction, of ignorance and amnesia, a state in which all judgement has been suspended. He is there only consume and be consumed by all that is happening around him.

¹⁹⁵ 'A Monarch of Metal Workers', *Success Magazine*, June 3, 1899, pp.453–54;

all that might be achieved. Gatsby's extraordinary gift for hope could be trashed without shame like it was at his parties, or used to accomplish some incurable romantic dream of social recognition and equality.

From Socialist To Communist



Despite a long protracted history of unequal literary (and personal) successes, Dreiser was a busy man and would spend much of the first two decades of the twentieth century campaigning on various social injustice battles including the 1917 lynching of union leader Frank Little, head of the *Industrial Workers of the World*, the Sacco and Vanzetti case and the deportation of Emma Goldman. Using the handsome royalties he'd picked up for *The American Tragedy* Dreiser bought a 26-room house at Mount Kisco close to Robin's modest country retreat in Westchester County Park.¹⁹⁶ Within months Dreiser, Robin and Hume would get the ball rolling on selling the film rights to Paramount Pictures, initially approaching Russian director Sergei Eisenstein, but eventually having to settle for the Brooklyn-based Josef von Sternberg after failing to get studio approval.¹⁹⁷ Dreiser's novel had picked up a two year ban in several States in America and the studio would be required to proceed with caution. *Paramount* had, incidentally, also been the studio behind Irish director Herbert Brenon's take on Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, similarly released within months of the book's publication. Interestingly enough, von Sternberg's Suydam Street address would also put him within strolling distance of the Robin estranged family back in Williamsburg. Was this an association that had gone back years?

On October 3rd the following year, shortly ahead of the 10th anniversary of Russia's October Revolution¹⁹⁸, Dreiser would be invited on an all-expenses paid trip to Russia as part of a cultural exchange mission organised by Soviet leader, Josef Stalin and his VOKS American organizer,

¹⁹⁶ 'My Life with Dreiser', Helen Dreiser, World Publishing Company, 1951, p.162; *The Last Titan : A Life of Theodore Dreiser*, Jerome Loving, Berkeley : University of California Press, 2005, p.335

¹⁹⁷ *The Last Titan : A Life of Theodore Dreiser*, Jerome Loving, Berkeley : University of California Press, 2005, p.454. Josef von Sternberg was an Austro-Hungarian filmmaker whose family moved to America in 1901.

¹⁹⁸ The October Revolution was the second revolution in Russia. The Tsar had abdicated in March 1917 and a new provisional government had been formed under Prime Minister Alexander Kerensky. Also known as the Bolshevik Revolution, the October Revolution was when Lenin's Bolsheviks 'stormed' the Winter Palace and supplanted Kerensky's government. Stalin was Lenin's successor.

Ruth Epperson Kennell. Curiously enough, Dreiser's six-month Soviet trip came to a pertinent close in the city of Odessa — Robin's birthplace. A handful of diary entries made before his departure reveals several phone calls and meetings with Robin. The first on October 12th 1927, describes a telephone message he had received from Robin saying that he would have *Genius* (an allegorical drama that Robin was preparing) ready for proof reading on the Saturday. This is followed by a meet with Robin on 200 West Street during which Robin would read him excerpts from his play, before stopping off at *Iroki* at White Plains for dinner. The entry made on the Sunday suggests that Dreiser was with Robin again, this time at Kiscoand, and on the Tuesday he meets Robin again, reporting on that day's meeting with several other Russian personages, including the movie director Serge M. Eisenstein, theatre-mogul, Vsevolod Mysterhold, Leon Trotsky's sister, Olga Kameneva (VOKs organiser), Ivy Litvinova (the wife of Maxim Litvinov, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs), Jacob Deletsky (editor of *Tass*), theatre-director Stanislavsky, and ex-American strike leader, Bill Haywood (who died in the Soviet Union the following year).¹⁹⁹ Somewhat extraordinarily, no mention is made in the diaries of Robin's own experiences in Russia or the political exile of his parents. Instead, Dreiser's account of their meeting that day rests squarely on the pair's discussions about Robin's allegorical interpretation of Dreiser's novel, *The Genius*, which he felt was losing the "emotional beauty and visibility" of the original book. In another letter Dreiser asks his partner, Helen Richardson, to have Robin make the necessary changes so it might reflect the original spirit of the book, and if Robin couldn't or wasn't willing to make these changes, then to ask him to ditch the allegorical framework of his interpretation altogether. Several years earlier in 1920, Dreiser had played a critical role in Robin's post-crash literary effort, *Caius Gracchus: a Tragedy*, for his new publishers *Boni and Liveright*.²⁰⁰ A full twenty years had elapsed since his last creative effort, *An Idyl of Printing House Square* and Robin had been keen to abandon the whole 'Jay Robin' thing for something a little more intellectual. The pen-name he chose was Odin Gregory.

Robin's ambitious blank-verse drama tells the story of Gaius and Tiberius Gracchus, tribunes of the plebs in Rome in the second century BC, whose fortunes had been theatrically revised to reflect the tyrant-felling efforts of post-Revolutionary Russia. At the invitation of Robin and his literary agent, Donald Friede — himself a Russian immigrant — Dreiser had been asked to write

¹⁹⁹ *Dreiser's Russian Diary*, ed. Thomas P. Riggio, James L. West III, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996, pp.32-35;

²⁰⁰ The left-wing *Boni & Liveright* enjoyed a highly respectable literary status. Their authors included Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, Sigmund Freud, E. E. Cummings and T.S. Eliot.

an effusive introduction, part-justifying and part-praising this epic feat of metric drama. The author, waxed Dreiser, had brought “the spirit of the Elizabethan verse to the Twentieth Century ... not uninfluenced by the refinement of Pope” and had skilfully applied it to the structural qualities of an Epic. In Dreiser's estimation his friend's new literary alter-ego, Odin Gregory had shown “an exquisite and precise sense of values”. As a study in psychology, the author went on, the work had “not been surpassed” in any of the imaginative writing with which he was familiar. Just how sincere Dreiser was being isn't clear, as it wasn't anything of the sort. In actual fact, this a ham-fisted attempt at Shakespeare was really rather embarrassing — and Dreiser appeared to know this. In a letter written to Edward H. Smith in July 1921, Dreiser says he'd had no shortage of reservations about even reading Caius Gracchus. In what amounts to a surprising U-turn and betrayal, Dreiser went on to explain how he did not like Robin very much to begin with, and that “in some ways” he had disliked him very much. He was, in actual fact, quite weary of the many fashionable attempts to write a tragedy in metric form, and if Robin was not a “fool” then he was almost certainly a “slick grafter”.²⁰¹ It's a staggering confession given the generosity that Robin had shown to Dreiser, both before and after its publication, and one can only wonder about the true nature of their relationship or, more likely perhaps, Dreiser's honesty with Edward H. Smith at this time. In her memoirs of their time together, Dreiser's wife, Helen Richardson, would subsequently write of the enormous affectation and regard that the author had for Robin right up until his death at the end of the decade.

Obviously there's little point denying that Robin's *Caius Gracchus* is packed with the full gamut of Socialist motifs and the anti-tyranny messages of the post-Revolutionary period. And despite Dreiser's claims to the contrary, there's little doubting it had a modern resonance and was an attempt, however unskilfully carried out, to glimpse the noble aims of the revolution through the prism of the ancient world. Attempts to correlate the story of the Gracchi with modern concepts of revolution were nothing new, of course. Gracchi revisionism had started among the revolutionaries of the 1800s. To many on the Left, the Brothers Gracchus had been the first Utopian Socialists, to others they were proto-Communists. There were other borrowings too. The French Socialist and revolutionary François-Noël Babeuf took his pen name, Gracchus Babeuf in deference to the brothers and R. Wherry Anderson of the ‘citizen's’ Sunday newspaper, *Reynold's News* in England used the Gracchus moniker to write his columns.

²⁰¹ *Letters of Theodore Dreiser: A Selection*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959, p.334

There was clearly a personal dimension to Robin's story too. At the centre of his plot is the honest idealism of the Gracchi brothers to expose the evils of a corrupt judiciary and economic system. The series of social reforms that they embark on is shown as an attempt to redistribute the vast acres of private land and wealth of the Roman nobles among its poor and ordinary people and bringing an end to the abuses of the senate of Rome. In the end, both brothers are martyred. The fact that it mirrored aspects of his own life — or rather a version of his life he was clearly keen to promote — suggests the work may have gone some way toward replacing the whistle-blowing account of his meteoric rise and fall on Wall Street and Robin's celebrated run-ins with Gilded Age icons, August Belmont and J.P Morgan. Even if it's not, it is clear from the author's preface that the play was always intended to be a revolutionary allegory for modern times and a commentary on the dreams and idylls of ambitious young liberals and social democrats being ground into weary submission by the absolute rule of the Tsar. Dreiser's lyrical introduction had also been keen to frame it within the arena of ongoing class struggles elsewhere in the world. His preface, in fact, makes a deliberate point of mentioning that the senate are the "upper class" that have done everything in their power to prove Caius and his patriots "dishonest" and "corrupt". If Caius could create a State in which its citizens could actually control the making of the laws by exercising "their rights of suffrage" then sufficient social progress could be made without recourse to violence. Robin was to maintain that his character had seen the danger of class warfare and had endeavoured to preclude rebellion by curbing the powers and prerogatives of the ruling class. The remedy for social injustice, as Joseph G. Robin saw it, lay not in destruction but in moderation.²⁰² In all fairness, the play might well have been subtitled: *Good Government Club 170 BC*.

Some twelve months after the publication of *Caius Gracchus*, Robin and Dreiser's publisher, Boni and Liveright, would publish *The Bolshevik Myth*. The publisher had been formed as a company just three weeks prior to Russia's February Revolution, so there was something rather apropos about the project²⁰³. The book had been written by anarchist revolutionary, Alexander Berkman, the long-time partner of Emma Goldman and the man who had been previously convicted of the attempted murder of Andrew Carnegie's business partner, Henry Clay Frick

²⁰² *Caius Gracchus*, Odin Gregory, Boni & Liveright, 1920, p.11-15

²⁰³ *Dictionary of Literary Biography: The House of Boni & Liveright, 1917–1933: A Documentary Volume*, ed. Charles Egleston, Gale, 2004, Preface, xxxiii. The publisher had been launched with the expressed purpose of providing first class literary works at affordable prices ('The Modern Library of the Word's Best Books' would include works by Nietzsche, Wells, Wilde and Kipling).

some thirty years earlier. Despite the author's obvious political bent, the book is not what you might think. Contrary to all expectations, Berkman's story describes how his initial enthusiasm for the Bolshevik Revolution had gradually subsided with the realisation that Lenin's new Soviet Government were now brutally suppressing all forms of political dissent. This wasn't the publisher's first foray into Soviet matters. In the autumn of 1919, Boni & Liveright had also been the first to publish John Reed's first-hand account of the 1917 revolution, *Ten Days That Shook the World*. Such was the publicity generated by the book that Lenin himself would provide an additional introduction to the book for the publisher's 1922 reprint. Herman Bernstein, the Bronx-based journalist who had been the Russian correspondent for Robin's old newspaper, the *New York Herald* during the war, was also placed on the publisher's roster.

Jesus: The Tragedy of a Revolutionary



A few years after the less than blistering success of *Caius Gracchus*, Robin followed it up with another blank verse drama; the equally lofty *Jesus: The Tragedy of Man*. It was another story of sacrifice, betrayal and how a privileged class are prepared to use every means in its power, even murder, to stamp out everything that threatens its existence. *Boni and Liveright* were clearly not thrilled with the lack of commercial or even critical success of Robin's thoroughly indulgent blank verse drama, *Caius Gracchus* because this time around the book was published by Elbert Hubbard's Anarcho-Socialist Arts and Craft movement, the *Roycrofters Colony Press*. Interestingly, the premise of the book had its roots in a discussion taken up by Socialist philosopher and revolutionary, Chaim Zhitlovsky and the dramatist, S. An-sky, best known for his 1922 play, *The Dybbuk*. Was Jesus the son of God, or was he a Socialist Revolutionary?

In her biography of S. An-sky, Gabriella Safran explains how on his 1887 book, *Thoughts about the Historical Fate of the Jews*, An-sky's life-long friend and colleague, Zhitlovsky had argued that Jesus and his teachings had emerged from the beliefs of a "communist Jewish sect" known as the Essenes. According to Zhitlovsky, Jesus had been the first Jewish Socialist Revolutionary. Had it not been for his betrayal by Judas, and subsequent death on the cross, Zhitlovsky was convinced that with just a little more time, Jesus could have brought down the Roman Empire.

²⁰⁴ He even went so far as to say that had he himself lived at the time of Jesus, he would have fought alongside him as part of a revolution in Jerusalem. Safran goes on to describe how Zhitlovsky had urged An-sky to see the teachings of Jesus as a direct response to the period in which he and his disciples were living and to view him not as a prophet but as a talented propagandist who had deliberately cut his teachings to a populist design. As he was concerned, those colourful and engaging parables were not the peep-hole onto some profound universal or transcendental truth, but the bright and memorable illustrations of a people's manifesto. ²⁰⁵

Scratching around for endorsements, Joseph's *Roycrofters* publisher, *Colony Press* mailed an advance copy of Robin's *Jesus* to author Thomas Hardy for review, but Hardy's views on the use of fictional episodes from the Bible had elicited a mixed response. Whilst praising the drama for its 'ambitious' intent, Hardy was of the opinion that the 'safe and orthodox' scriptural passages from which much of the plot had been drawn, generally frustrated any attempts at originality. ²⁰⁶ Robin's intent had been to reveal the true character of Christ's ministry, which the author believed to have been misunderstood by Christ's followers. In Robin's eyes, Jesus was a revolutionary, a political exile.

Although born into the Jewish faith in Odessa in the mid-1870s, it seems that Robin, certainly on the evidence provided by this book at least, had adopted a rather contemptuous attitude toward the Jews and Romans who had demanded his crucifixion: according to Robin, Jesus had been tortured and killed because he had refused to conform to orthodox religious practices. A similar view was being expressed by French Catholics writers of the period who were anxious to conflate the abuses being carried out by the 'Jewish' Bolsheviks (of which there were few incidentally) with the church leaders who had 'collectively' put Jesus to death (which wasn't historically true). The common misconceptions about Christ's life, Robin contended, had arisen from a series of tragic mistranslations during the Bible's transition from Hebrew and Aramaic to Greek (Maxim Gorky held a similar view). In view of the 'New Israel' movement co-founded by his 'Jewish Christian' namesake in Kishinev, it's an interesting shift in creative direction at this time and a

²⁰⁴ Zhitlovsky had compared Judas to Yevno Azef (1869-1918) who was a leading figure within the Socialist Revolutionary Party of Russia. He was later found to be working for the Okhrana — the Tsar's Secret Police. He is believed to have betrayed the revolutionaries on a huge scale over the years.

²⁰⁵ *Wandering Soul*, The Dybbuks Creator, S. An-sky, Harvard University Press, 2010, p.161-163. In later years, Zhitlovsky and S. An-sky would shift their efforts across to the Zionist movement, Zhitlovsky working closely with Pinchas Rutenberg.

²⁰⁶ *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Handbook and Commentary*, J. O. Bailey, University of North Carolina Press, p.320

curious adjunct to the views put forward by the Novy Israel movement.²⁰⁷ In his play Robin sees “Christianism” as the direct antithesis of “Jehovism”. His preface describes how Jesus had been tortured and killed because he advanced theories that were unacceptable to the “modishly proper people” of his period. In his customary zealous fashion Robin then identifies the “eternal slogan” of the Jewish elders: “Conform or be crucified”. Conformity was the cross on which Jesus had died.

In the book’s introduction, Robin offered a word or two of thanks to Louis V. De Foe, a theatre critic for the *New York World* who had supported both his dramatic efforts and offered his opinion on early drafts:

“I recall vividly my resentment when I first read his analysis, and my later appreciation, when I had studied it repeatedly, and had begun to understand the quality of its writer's vision and understanding, and his desire to be helpful. I tore to shreds that which I had regarded as my finished work, and rewrote it—more than once. And of all the pleasing things that have come to me since the publication of that book, there is not one that I treasure more than Louis V. De Foe's personal note of commendation of it in its final form.”²⁰⁸

Interestingly, one of De Foe’s most imitate friends and admirers was David Belasco, the gifted New York stage producer whose meticulous eye for detail and social realism is mentioned by name in Fitzgerald’s novel.²⁰⁹

At his trial in 1911, Robin’s sister, Dr Louise Rabinovitch had described how her brother had genuinely believed he was on some kind of divine mission in life. In an affidavit heard by the court, his sister explained that there had been a history of mental instability in the family and that her brother was presently suffering delusions of persecution. Not only that, Joseph, like the Jesus of his play, believed he was being driven by God to do great things. In spite of his fears that figures like J.P Morgan were out to kill him, he believed his enemies

²⁰⁷ Another Joseph Rabinovitch (1837-1899), originally from Orgeyev but most active in Kishinev, had been a leading figure in the New Israel (Novy Israel) movement, seen by many as an attempt by the Russian Orthodox Church to accept the ministry of Jesus Christ. Its founder Joseph Prelooker, who would later join Vladimir Burtsev in exile in England, confessed that his intention had been to unite a reformed synagogue with the dissenters from the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches.

²⁰⁸ Jesus, The Tragedy of Man, Odin Gregory (J.G. Robin), Colony Press, 1922

²⁰⁹ *The Theatre through its Stage Door*, David Belasco, Harper & Brothers, 1919 (ed. Louis V De Foe), Preface; “This fella’s a regular Belasco”, *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Penguin Classics, 2000 (first published 1926), p.47

could not defeat him. As far as her brother was concerned he was the subject of an unknown force of “a supernatural character”, regularly speaking in grandiose terms of a mission which included the “unification of the world”.²¹⁰

The story told by Louise is interesting on a number of levels, not least because of the intriguing phrase she uses: “the unification of the world”. Was Joseph anticipating some kind of League of Nations some nine years before it was formed or was this another way of describing the ‘Peace Society’ discussions embarked on by his mentor, Andrew Carnegie in May the previous year? Was Robin talking politically, economically or spiritually? Were we talking a one world government, a world-wide federal coalition of governments, or an ‘Internationále’? It seemed a little confusing at first, but the more one digs, the clearer it gets.

After trawling through the various newspapers of the period I stumbled across something rather interesting from a report in the *Surrey Comet* dated May 1903. Andrew Carnegie had arrived in Kingston upon Thames to launch another of his famous ‘Free Libraries’. After a banquet dinner in which the millionaire philanthropist had been thanked for his generous donations, the Mayor and Professor Dixon extended further gratitude to “Mr Carnegie’s efforts to bring about the *unification of the world*, his efforts to make one country of the universe.”²¹¹ This somehow made a lot more sense. Robin had spent several years as President of the Carnegie Trust Company. The words he was using were Carnegie’s own. There were who thought Carnegie had been mad, so it’s not entirely surprising to find Robin’s sister framing her brother’s ‘crazy’ Internationalist beliefs in this rather peculiar light. A more detailed look at Carnegie’s 1889 article, *The Gospel of Wealth* and his regular discussions with the Persian Bahá’í leader ‘Abdu'l-Bahá confirms the missionary, god-driven zeal with which Carnegie and Robin approached their scheme to get the message out: wealth was the nobler ideal. It was God’s wish that wealth should be reached for and pursued with the energy and the passion that Christ had seized his own mission: “*Not evil, but good, has come to the race from the accumulation of wealth by those who have the ability and energy that produce it.*”²¹² Some twenty years later, Carnegie dusted down his copy of the

²¹⁰ ‘Robin’s Defence will be Insanity; Banker’s Sister Makes Affidavit That He Has Long Suffered from Delusions’, *New York Times*, January 4, 1911, p.20.

²¹¹ ‘New Free Library: Opening by Mr. Andrew Carnegie,’ *Surrey Comet* 13 May 1903, p.3

²¹² ‘Wealth’, Andrew Carnegie, *The North American Review*, Jun., 1889, Vol. 148, No. 391, Jun., 1889, pp. 653-664

article as he grappled with the increasing pressure on America by Britain to join the war against Germany. Although that hoping that the war may at least result in the formation of General European Federation, Carnegie's failing health and the general war weariness catching on among the public was seeing the heroic efforts of his Peace Society and Anti-Imperialist League begin to lose steam. In response, 'Abdu'l-Bahá sent America and Carnegie a message of hope and support from his base in Syria:

Mr Andrew Carnegie:

May God assist him! He is God O thou illustrious soul! O thou pillar of the palace of Universal Peace.

... Today the most great service to the kingdom of God is the promotion of the principle of the unification of mankind and the establishment of Universal Peace.

All the leaders and statesmen of Europe are thinking on the plane of war and the annihilation of humanity, but thou art thinking on the plane of Peace and Love

*New York Times, September 5 1915*²¹³

Whilst there's no indication whatsoever that Carnegie was a member of the Bahá'í faith, the religion's pacifist statute and unwavering anti-Imperialism certainly coincided with Carnegie's 'one world' vision and his own ecstatic philanthropy. Marxism and the various principles of Socialism pursued a similar victory, but as Carnegie was apt to acknowledge, Marxism risked mooring capable entrepreneurs like Robin in temperance and mediocrity by preventing the "free play of economic forces". If Carnegie and Marx's vision did have common ground it was Internationalism. Communism hadn't worked. Individualism hadn't worked. Carnegie was looking for some suitable middle ground. As much as he subscribed to the notion of the survival of the fittest, the answer was to be found not in evolution but in revolution — a seismic change in the order of things. The remedy for the pandemic of inequalities causing such grief and misery in the world was opportunity. The best and most long lasting treatment was be found in empowering the individual, and by empowering the individual, the individual could help empower others. It was the millionaire's belief that a more equitable distribution of wealth would bring about "the reconciliation of the rich and

²¹³ 'Carnegie Exalted by Bahaist Leader, Extolling his efforts for peace, Says American will sit upon the Throne of Incorruptible Glory in the Kingdom of God', New York Times, May 9, 1915

the poor” that Americans had been dreaming about for centuries. If a mechanism could be put in place that ensured that the wealthy distributed their wealth more evenly, then the violent transfer of wealth to the masses, envisaged by the Socialist planned economies, would not be required. He wasn’t totally with the anarchists, but he was with them up to a point. That he quotes Tolstoy explains so much: Carnegie was preaching the gospel of moderation.²¹⁴

The Great Power of the New World



Carnegie’s decision to write ‘The Gospel of Wealth’ for the *North American Review* had come as a response to the ‘Millionaire Socialist’ headlines being run by newspapers like the *New York Times* just a few years before. Carnegie wasn’t a Marxist, but it didn’t stop his rivals capitalising on his sympathy for their causes to undermine his market dominance. In the last weeks of December 1884, Carnegie had attended a meeting of the *Nineteenth Century Club*. Joining him that evening was Brooklyn-based journalist and Marx supporter, John Swinton. Writing of the event in his own newspaper a few days later Swinton had declared Carnegie a Socialist. Carnegie subsequently talked to *New York Times* as a way of qualifying his support. Yes, Swinton was present at the meeting, and yes he did speak of social inequality. It was clear to him that working men must keep on rising as they had done in the past. Socialism was the “the grandest theory ever presented” and would one day rule the world. The men of the future would be willing to work for the general welfare and share their riches with their neighbour. Asked by the reporter if he was willing to divide his own wealth, he said he wasn’t.²¹⁵ Men like John Swinton were welcome to share his vitriol, but they weren’t going to share his fortune. The anarchists wanted one thing, Carnegie wanted another, but if they wanted to destroy the State, then they could at least destroy the State in a way that was favourable to his own gallant notions of noblesse oblige.

²¹⁴ ‘Wealth’, Andrew Carnegie, *The North American Review*, Jun., 1889, Vol. 148, No. 391, Jun., 1889, pp. 653-664

²¹⁵ ‘Millionaire Socialist’, *New York Times*, January 2, 1885, p.1

After the launch of the International Court of Justice at the First Hague Peace Conference in Geneva in 1899, a Carnegie-esque article appeared in *The Speaker* journal in support of the world's first efforts at a League of Nations. Not surprisingly the contribution came with a lively religious zeal that wasn't uncommon at this time. According to the author of the piece, who remained anonymous, the idea of a "world-empire" had been the dream of Popes as well as Kings. It was the work of missionaries more than it was Statesmen. The League of Nations was, moreover, the development of a "divine purpose to establish a universal Kingdom of Christ on earth". It was the belief of the author that American and British domination of the world had been sanctioned by God himself. America, the "great power of the New World" was, by degrees, abandoning its policy to isolate itself politically from the rest of the world. Once President McKinley had committed the United States to the Spanish and Filipino wars the Rubicon had been crossed and there was no turning back. It was dawn of a new era in the history of the world. The emergence of a new world from the ashes of an old one had been foretold in the bible. Christ's return at the end of days was to be "ushered in by a period of universal war" and there was every reason to believe that the universal war "was not far off". Like Robin, the author of the article expressed his belief that the war — and the world that follow the war — was proceeding to the specifications of a divine plan. For many British and Americans there was just one major problem: the man leading these efforts in the "unification of the world" was Imperialist Russia's Tsar Nicholas II. And this would certainly have worried the anarchists. Carnegie may have been seeking the end of social inequality but the same thing couldn't be said of the Tsar.²¹⁶ At worst the notions being expressed by the author of the report in *The Speaker* was at best the stuff of well-meaning optimism and at worst, a sanctimonious and grossly sentimental bit of nonsense in topsy-turvy times.

Whether or not Robin had ever been sincere in his bid to see the world 'unified' isn't known, but one is clear: his sister had certainly been using the anecdote as a means of propping up her brother's insanity plea before the court. She was desperately looking for proof that Joseph was mentally unfit to stand trial — that he was in actual fact, clinically insane. The statement about his "mission in life" was either the first thing that popped into her head that day or her more orthodox religious beliefs were telling her that the new age Internationalism

²¹⁶ 'The World State and the World War', *The Speaker: The Liberal Review*; London Vol. 19, Jan 14, 1899. p.48-49

that her brother had been espousing was in her opinion at least, delusional. Her brother had clearly discharged all reason to serve in a cult. And by association — *so had Carnegie*.

There's no doubting that Joseph G. Robin had been close to the *Carnegie Foundation* in all its manifestations. The only thing we don't know for sure is how close. At the time of his downfall in 1911 Robin had been at the centre of its various machinations for a good four years. The *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* that the millionaire had launched with his long time legal adviser, Elihu Root two years previously had been built on the very same 'insane' principles that Louise claimed Robin had been espousing.²¹⁷ That Robin was close to Carnegie's dream factory wasn't something you could deny. He was after all, one of its leading chief executives. The proximity between Robin and Theodore Dreiser's own legal advisor, Arthur Carter Hume and Elihu Root was even greater still.²¹⁸

Even in this deeply Conservative period of American history, Internationalism was unpopular and 'off the wall' but it certainly wasn't thought to be insane, so why had Louise Rabinovitch chosen to use such a weak and contentious example? Yes it could have been a spur of the moment thing, but it might have also have been conceived to shift the blame and direct public discussion onto the 'crackpot' industrialist Carnegie, who had already famously written that 'to die rich was to die disgraced'. Was it an attempt to put both men on trial, so to speak?

Whether it was a deliberate ploy or not it was certainly attractive bait for writers and editors. At the time that Robin was standing trial news had begun to emerge that the much anticipated Carnegie Peace Palace in the Hague secured by a \$50, 000, 000 dollar donation from the great man's Peace Foundation had finally been given the go ahead.²¹⁹ With the full support and backing of Presidents William Taft and Woodrow Wilson, the Peace Palace finally opened in August 1913, just a month before Robin was pardoned and less than twelve months before The Great War. Both stories at this time were getting serial front-page coverage. The whole subject had captured the world's attention. Perhaps the editors of the newspapers had

²¹⁷ '\$200, 000 Root Fund Given by Carnegie', New York Times, April 9, 1909, p.7. The original intention had been to call it the *Elihu Root Peace Fund*.

²¹⁸ Carter Hume and Elihu Root had been legal partners during the early 1900s.

²¹⁹ 'Propose Hague Conference', New York Times, May 28, 1911, p.4. Robin's fellow direct at the Carnegie Trust Fund, Robert A. Franks was also trustee for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The story about the Peace Palace and the story about Robin would regularly sit side by side in the news columns.

quietly sussed Louise's ploy and denied her the platform she sought. The whole crazy thing about Robin's mission to 'unify the world' gained no traction at all. The newspapers simply ignored it. From this perspective, Robin's deeply contentious play on the final days of Comrade Christ may well be looked on not as a modern allegory but as an exercise in self-imaging. Robin really was beginning to look a lot like Gatsby. He wasn't just rich, he wasn't just a genius, he was reinventing himself as the Son of God and going about "His Father's business" in "the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty" they were now calling world peace — the common ideal of the common man.²²⁰ But just how sincere Robin was about the notion isn't clear.

There's a point in the *Gatsby* novel when Gatsby's friend Nick asks his 'business' partner Meyer Wolfshiem if it was he that got Gatsby started in business. Wolfshiem's answer leaves little to the imagination: "Start him? I made him". The reader can only really infer one thing: Gatsby isn't just a self-creation but the centrepiece of a polished front organisation and used to shield crime lords like Wolfshiem from the curiosity of the press and the reach of the law. The mafia had its own more rough-edged version of noblesse oblige: they saw themselves as serving the public, whether the public liked it or not. To many of their original members they were the clans of disinherited nobles, not bandits, not fugitives but separatists. An interview with historian and politician, Pasquale Villari in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in June 1896 attempted to throw some light upon the organisation; the original Mafia had been organized in Sicily in 1848 and consisted of "high-toned gentlemen led by Giovanni mafia". It was a political organisation and included such Sicilians as Francesco Crispi and the Marquis Starabba di Rudinì among its founding members. Professor Villari, who had been the first to introduce Nietzsche to the masses in Italy described it as a reactionary and populist movement intent on weeding out corruption and Machiavellianism at the highest levels of power.²²¹

That the Italian Mafia had its roots in Sicilian Syndicalism isn't disputed. The word crime-syndicate says it all. There were strict codes of conduct and a moral imperative to protect. In short, they saw themselves as knights with knuckle-dusters not lances and scores to settle

²²⁰ TGG, p.95.

²²¹ 'Mafia or Vendetta', *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 7, 1896, p.5. Villari's friend Malwida von Meysenbug was a good friend of Nietzsche, who was himself a fan of Villari. Villari had also been a founding member of the original Sicilian mafia.

rather than tournaments to win. Reviewing the politics and traditions of Sicilian culture in 1889, the folklorist, Giuseppe Pitrè, a long-time partner and colleague of Villari, had this to say of the Mafia: “*La Mafia is neither a sect nor an association. It has neither regulations nor statutes. A mafioso is not a thief nor a rascal ... Mafia is the consciousness of one’s individuality, the exaggerated conceit in one’s strength, which is regarded as the sole arbiter of every dispute, of every conflict of interests and opinions, which results in an intolerance of anyone else’s superiority, or worse still, anybody else’s power.*”²²² To those either within the organisation or those who had been lucky enough to find their favour, the Mafioso figure was a Nietzschean superhero driven by the same desire to solve conflicts and disagreements with the same passion and noblesse as the League of Nations.²²³ Part of their tool-kit was innovation. The mafioso was the classic overreacher, transcending boundaries, transcending laws. It seems clear that the man who had made Robin was General James O’Beirne, an establishment Wolfshiem figure. Robin had become the frontispiece of the Good Government and One World movement. With his love of poetry, drama and ballet, he was its mild-mannered, polished exterior. That doesn’t mean to say that it didn’t hide a thousand sins. The Trusts of New York had found their champion: a man with all the charisma and gallantry of Galahad and all the sinister dark magic of Mordred, a man whose ability to juggle funds and conceive of outrageously genius frauds could transform base-metal into gold and mischief into virtue. There may have been a vast difference between how people like O’Beirne and Robin conducted themselves in public, but the syndicates of Wall Street were not a great deal different to those of organised crime. Robin’s “romantic readiness” and his “extraordinary gift for hope” didn’t take anything away from the fact that he was a thief amongst thieves. He was in actual fact, a bit of a fraud. Scott was right, there was indeed “foul dust” floating in the wake of the American Dream.

²²² *Biblioteca delle Tradizioni Popolari Siciliane Vol XV*, Giuseppe Pitrè, Palermo, L. Pedone-Lauriel, 1889, pp.292-293; *Sicily*, Douglas Sladen, E.P Dutton and Company, 1907, p.23

²²³ It was in Italy that Nietzsche wrote *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which Scott says greatly inspired him in the mid-late 1920s. Nietzsche lived in Palazzo Berlendis in Venice between 1880 and 1887. Scott and Zelda visited Venice in 1921.

German Money, German Agents



Despite a rollercoaster career of huge, implausible triumphs and the layer upon layer of screens, walls and trenches that he had built around his Riverhead estate on Long Island, it seems almost certain that Joseph G. Robin, the shape-shifting Russian chimera, Joseph G. Rabinovitch, was being investigated as a German Agent, triggered, at least in part, as result of the millionaire's links with Andrew Carnegie, the *Hungarian-American Bank* and the increasing political belligerence of his Socialist friends like novelist Theodore Dreiser.²²⁴ The several years he had spent in Berlin might also have come under scrutiny.

By the early 1920s the man who had introduced re-introduced Robin to the world in his novel *Twelve Men* was coming to the attention of the US Justice Department and FBI as a result of his pressure group activities in support of the release of Wall Street bombers, Sacco and Vanzetti. It was the bank of J.P Morgan, the man who Robin had accused of trying to silence him in 1911, that had borne the brunt of the explosion, when one 100 pounds of dynamite ripped through its headquarters at 23 Wall Street. By the time of his death in 1945, the entries in the files of the FBI on Dreiser had swelled into a rather remarkable 240 dossier, his 1927 trip to Soviet Russia having been just the tip of the iceberg.

The wartime and post-war investigations into Robin's old friend, Louis N. Hammerling, the foreign press publishing magnate who had found himself at allegations of pushing pro-German propaganda and anti-prohibition material for brewing agents Percy Andreae, would also have been adding considerable pressure on the Federal authorities to review Robin's earlier financial activities and any political affiliations he may have made since his arrival in America. At his address of 104 East 40th Street New York, Hammerling, an Austro-Hungarian, was just 500 feet away from Gatsby's 'other' literary doppelganger, Max von Gerlach at 24 East 40th Street, with both men being little more than 500 metres from Joseph G. Robin's 79 West 40th Street office. According to a senate hearing into the publisher's brewing and German propaganda activities in December 1918, Hammerling had confessed

²²⁴ You will recall that at the time Carnegie was discussing the formation of a League of Peace in London in May 1910, he was being accused of acting as an agent for Kaiser Wilhelm. The accusation coincided with the investigation into J.G. Robin and the activities of the Hungarian-American Bank.

that Russian dissident (and suspected German agent) Leon Trotsky had visited him twice in his New York office and had on one occasion even made a threat against his life.²²⁵ Hammerling may have been rumoured to be “the most dangerous German agent in America”, but Robin would almost certainly have been considered it’s most numerate and it’s most resourceful. The pen may have been mightier than the sword, but cold hard cash was more powerful than either. And Robin had plenty of it. Robin had lived in Germany, he’d lived in France and he’d made his million pound banking fortune practically overnight. Much like the whispers swirling around at Gatsby’s parties questions were being asked: *Just where had he come from and what was he doing here?*

In a 1905 edition of the *New York Times* it was being reported that certain financiers in the city were hoping to foster much closer relations with Hungary. Involved in those talks was Jacob Schiff of *Kuhn, Loeb & Company*, the company that had propped-up Herbert Hoover’s raft of urgent relief missions during the war. According to the *New York Times* article, a group of individuals were already in the city looking to organize a new bank that would collect and transfer the remittances of Hungarian immigrants in the US back home to Hungary.²²⁶ As a result of the discussions and negotiations taking place at this time, the *Hungarian American Bank* was founded at 32 Broadway in October 1907. Among the bank’s directors was James Ross Curran, Vice President of the *Carnegie Trust Company* where Joseph G. Robin had been sitting as chairman during its disastrous fall from grace in 1911. Somehow the bank had managed to survive the Robin scandal and during the early years of World War I was in the advantageous position of selling both German and Austro-Hungarian war bonds. In her 2015 article for the *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, Professor of Economics, Susan Glanz describes how in mid-1918 the Alien Property Custodian of the US arrested the senior management team at the Trust and took over the bank. As a result of an emergency court order the trust was formally dissolved in 1919 and its depositors were handed back their deposits.²²⁷ But there was plenty in the way of incident before that time.

²²⁵ *The Most Dangerous German Agent in America: The Many Lives of Louis N. Hammerling*, M. B. B. Biskupski, Cornell University Press, 2015, p.42.

²²⁶ ‘Remittances to Hungary: New Bank to Stimulate Trade’, *New York Times*, August 27, 1905, p.31

²²⁷ Lives and Deaths of a Hungarian Bank in New York, Susan Glanz, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* (HJEAS), Vol. 20, No. 1 (Spring, 2014), pp. 131-155

Another prominent figure at the bank was the German-born and educated Louis Ettlinger²²⁸ of the *American Lithograph Company* whose founder, Joseph P. Knapp, had given Robin his very first break in journalism at the *New York Recorder* back in the 1890s. At this point it gets a little more interesting, as the man who had been Knapp's partner at the *New York Recorder* during this period was none other than 'Tobacco Tsar', James Buchanan Duke whose *American Tobacco Company* was one of the *American Lithograph's* most highly regarded customers.²²⁹ The close relationship the two men enjoyed in this period had arisen not just over their joint shares in the *New York Recorder* but as result of a multi-million pound contract that had been handed to Knapp's company to print the now legendary T206 series of Baseball cards between 1909 and 1911. In actual fact, many of the American League baseball players who would appear on those cards were working day jobs at Duke's Penn Street and Wythe Avenue factories in J.G. Robin's hometown of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Also, The Duke's tobacco company and associate trusts held absolute sway in Cuba, increasing the possibility of business and gambling dealings with Giants owner Charles A. Stoneham and high-stakes adventurer, Cushman A. Rice — wartime sponsor of Gatsby's *Mr Hyde* personality, Max von Gerlach.

In Chapter Four of Fitzgerald's novel Nick includes a reference to "the prince of something", man they called, "Duke". Whilst a more likely source would be the scores of Russian and German Princes turning up on US shores — Grand Duke this and Grand Duke that — it's not beyond the realms of possibility that the novelist was doffing his cap to the former owner of the *New York Recorder* who would die just six months after the publication of the novel.

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The circumstances that surround the early fortunes of the *Hungarian American Bank* and its failure that as a result of Robin's creative redistribution of loans, were not unlike those of

²²⁸ Lives and Deaths of a Hungarian Bank in New York, Susan Glanz, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* (HJEAS), Vol. 20, No. 1 (Spring, 2014), pp. 132

²²⁹ 'Knapps Week', *Time* (The Weekly Newsmagazine), February 25, 1935, Vol. XXV No. 8, p.48; *Game Faces: Early Baseball Cards*, Peter Devereaux, Smithsonian Institution, 2018; *Cigarette Wars : the Triumph of the Little White Slaver*, Cassandra Tate, Oxford University Press, p.168

²³⁰ After the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 many Russian aristocrats were forced to escape to Europe and America. The daughters of American millionaires were falling over backwards to marry them. The newspaper columns at this time were full of their hard-luck stories and their grace and favour partying: Prince Dimitri Alexandrovich Obolensky, the Grand Duke Kirill, the Grand Duke Dmitri and Prince Felix Youssouppoff among them. Max von Gerlach's sponsor, Major Cushman Rice had been instrumental in their mass evacuation from Constantinople (1921-1922).

the *Carnegie Trust Company*. The bank had loaned large sums of money to Robin and William J. Cummins in exchange for the promise — but not the fulfilment — of New York City deposits. William Holloway, the former President of the Hungarian-American Bank and Robin's equally disastrous Northern Bank, would tell a Grand Jury in March 1911 how seventeen other banks and trust companies under Robin's supervision had made loans to the Cummins syndicate. It was through Holloway, who was known as Robin's man in the directorate at the Hungarian-American, that several loans were negotiated and paid. The first deposits to the bank had been made in June 1910. On August 10 that same year, the bank executive committee approved an \$80,000 loan to the Cummins syndicate. After the loan was made New York City Treasurer Charles H. Hyde approved an additional \$80,000 deposit from the city funds. By December 1910 the city of New York's deposit in the *Hungarian-American Bank* was in the region of \$125,000. And much like the arrangement with the *Carnegie Trust* the deposit approved by Treasurer Hyde was based on a bribe proposed by Robin. On March 25, 1911 Holloway made a full and frank confession that he and the *Hungarian-American Bank* had loaned large sums of money to William Cummins and Joseph G. Robin, in exchange for the promise of New York City deposits. This was fraud and as we now know, both Robin and Cummins were jailed.²³¹

Oddly enough, the man whose *Savoy Trust Company* had acted as middle man in both the Carnegie and *Hungarian-American Bank* bribes was foreign press publisher, Louis N. Hammerling, the ubiquitous Austro Hungarian who had bagged his first large advertising contracts with the *American Tobacco Company* and whose founder James Buchanan Duke had hired Robin at the *New York Recorder*.²³²

²³¹ 'Robin Disclosures reach Grand Jury; Investigators Tracing Connection Between City Deposits and Banks Loans on Poor Security', New York Times, March 17, 1911, p.1

²³² *The Most Dangerous German Agent in America: The Many Lives of Louis N. Hammerling*, M. B. B. Biskupski, Cornell University Press, 2015; *Brewing and Liquor Interests and German and Bolshevik Propaganda*, Report and Hearings, 66th Congress 1st Session, Washington Government Printing Office 1919, pp.472-473, p.2473

The Transatlantic Trust Company



As a result of his illegal activities, Robin was sued by Anthony Stumpf, the German-born publisher he had partnered at the Northern Bank, and whose fortunes had followed those of the *Hungarian Austrian Bank* and the *Carnegie Trust Company*. By 1912 the *Hungarian-American Bank* was finished and was going into voluntary liquidation.

In 1915 the bank had been re-launched as the *Transatlantic Trust Company*. But the dust had far from settled. As the war in Europe progressed it became clear to some that the bank had been organized as little more than a cover by the Austro-Hungarian Government to fiancé the work of the Austrian secret service.²³³ It was alleged that the bank was not just transferring remittances from workers but was selling German and Hungarian war bonds as well. But to understand the full significance of the Robin case one needs to view it within the deeply paranoid matrix of the pre-war arms race with Germany and Austro-Hungary and the diplomatic tightrope the US would walk with its allies in Britain and Europe.

On July 28, 1914, just one month to the day after Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was gunned down by Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. It would prove to be the opening move of the First World War. Serbian aspirations had been viewed as an increasing threat to the stability of the Balkans. Austria-Hungary responded to the assassination by making preparation for a mass military invasion of Serbia. Alerted to the impending crisis, Imperial Russia, Serbia's most powerful ally in the region, took its own initial steps towards a military assault on Austria. We all know what happened next, but few are really aware of just how long all this had been simmering.

In April 1909, *The Washington Post* had run the inauspicious headline, *Europe's War Cloud*. The story had focused on a forecast by experts that Germany and Austro-Hungary were upping their efforts to extend Teutonic commerce and political influence to Croatia to the Black Sea. Kaiser Wilhelm was on track to humiliate Russia. A month previously the Franco-British-Russian alliance thought they had isolated Germany, but the increasing

²³³ 'Says America is in Peril from Teutons', November 12, 1915, p.10

aggressive policies of the Kaiser were undermining confidence. The “iron master of the Teuton peoples” that was the Austro-Hungarian-German alliance was no longer afraid to fight. Its naval strength was now at its peak. The final lines of *The Washington Post* story said it all: the plot was ready, the train of gunpowder had been laid, and all that was lacking was the hand to apply the match.²³⁴

By the time that the inner workings of the *American-Hungarian Bank* came under scrutiny in 1911, tensions in Europe were mounting further still. According some sections of the American press, the Triple Alliance of Italy, Austro-Hungary and Germany was making Germany the single most powerful State in Europe and its belligerent ruling classes were spoiling for greater things. In an effort to deescalate (or better manage) the growing crisis, America’s President Taft and British Prime Minister Asquith began pushing ahead with plans to establish a Treaty of Arbitration. Germany wasn’t convinced and remained cynical about any peace agreement being controlled by the Anglo-Saxon peoples of the world. Proposals for the Treaty received a howl of disapproval from Irish-American and German-American Societies of New York with John Devoy and George von Skal saying that if the Anglo American treaty was signed it meant “ultimate war with Germany”.²³⁵ Seen in this context, it’s hard not to view the collapse of the *Hungarian-American Bank* as somehow concomitant with US efforts to retard the growth of Austro-Hungary and demonstrate to its British ally that America was not colluding with the Triple Alliance via the savings of its immigrant workforce. Even so, the pressures being exerted on the bank were more likely to be the result of paranoia than any sinister payload its operations carried.

According to Professor Susan Glanz a preliminary report submitted to Congress by the Dillingham Commission in 1910 put the amount of funds being transferred to Hungary from America between 1893 and 1903 at \$44,660, 000, 61% of which was being transferred through Austro-Hungarian Banks. During the period 1904-07 the volume of these transfers from the United States was substantially greater. In 1907 two American banks alone sent \$21,509,343.43 to Austria-Hungary.”²³⁶

²³⁴ ‘Europe’s War Cloud’, *The Washington Post*, April 20, 1909, p.6

²³⁵ ‘Meeting Condemns English Treaty, Means Ultimate War with Germany If United States Adopts It, Declares Theodore Sutro’, *New York Times*, February 21, 1911, p.9

²³⁶ Lives and Deaths of a Hungarian Bank in New York, Susan Glanz, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* (HJEAS), Vol. 20, No. 1 (Spring, 2014), p.1

What part Robin had played in any of this isn't known, but it seems likely that Federal officials would have had no shortage of concerns about the ease with which certain financial institutions in New York were helping regenerate the fortunes of Germany, and buffer them from aggression using a scaffold of appeasement. Andrew Carnegie's visit to London as part of his League of Peace mission in May 1910 had done little to avert suspicion, many seeing his trip as devious attempt by Kaiser Wilhelm to swing the armament race in Germany's favour, and scuttle British defences before they ever had a chance to flourish. At any other time it's likely that Robin's sleight of hand tricks with the loans would have passed without incident — such practices already being exceptionally common on Wall Street.

Much of the speculation would have been complete nonsense, of course, but the spy mania that had been gripping Britain during the first few years of the war was now being successfully exported to the major cities of the United States. The rumours of Gatsby being a German spy may have taken root in the novelist's imagination from whispers that were gaining in volume both during and after the war. And whilst it's unlikely to have been a specific reference to the activities of Joseph G. Robin, it is clear that the spy fever depicted in the novel had sprung from the anxieties and paranoia that paralysed pre-War America and the more full-spectrum Germanophobia arising from its emergency wartime efforts. What's more; Germans, Jews, Bolsheviks and Spies were very nearly synonyms during this period. In *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald is more accurately describing the manifestation of a fever, not a man.

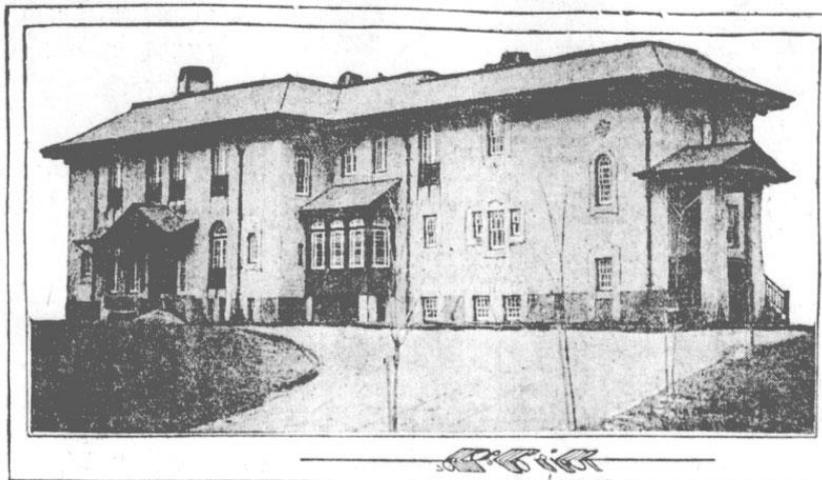
Interestingly, at the time of his arrest the newspapers were quick to mention how the Driftwood Manor, which sat in over 110 acres of private ground, had been acquired by Robin in a typically clandestine fashion. The mansion hadn't purchased in his own name but under the *Wading River Real Estate Company*, a company that had been founded specifically for the purpose. According the press, Robin had ensured that the house was built in such a way as to minimize the intrusive eyes of neighbours. Already situated one mile from the highway, Robin tasked a large gang of 'shovellers' with erecting a series of mounds that would extend around the property — the only exception being the large gates at the front of the manor which were guarded day and night. John Buchan's *Hunting Tower* (1922) provides a fictional counterpart of sorts, a coastal country manor guarded by fiercely private landlords, replete with a dash of Russian intrigue. The novels of William Le Queux provide similar patterns and motifs.

Driftwood Manor



The vast number of artists, poets, musicians, Italian tenors and uninhibited bohemian gigolos regularly washing-up at her Robin's Driftwood Manor Estate featured first in Dreiser's portrait. The location in Dreiser's book is like it was in real life: just east of Wading River in the Woodcliff Park on Long Island. Baz Luhrmann's 2013 movie production may have taken its cue from a mansion at Kings Point but the original Gatsby mansion was a semi-finished pleasure house just east of the Mortimer L. Schiff Scout Reservation. In a letter to his publisher Dreiser described it as "un-pretentiously pretentious ... on a rise of ground commanding that vast sweep of sea and sand". A story went round that in the long tapestried halls of the manor, among the overturned glasses on the tables, and with ice having melted to water in the silver champagne buckets, a woman drearily exclaimed that that she thought she had missed her train. Robin was said to have sprung into action. At little more than the push of a button a limousine was chugging in front of its great steps and a young lady in a fur was hurled into the back and driven off at great speed to the station. But the train had already left. There'd be another one along in an hour, but an hour was too long. Robin is said to have jumped to a phone and was through to the Long Island Railroad. "This is Robin", he said, "the banker. One of my guests has missed her train." He was told again that there'd be another train and there wouldn't be long to wait". But didn't want to wait. "Send me a special train. Yes I'm aware of the costs. Never mind about the cost. Just send me the train". And send him the train they did.

*Palace of Bank Wrecker Robin is
Valued at Million and a Half*



Robin had thrown no idle amount of cash at its construction, much of it coming from the bonanza with his first major acquisition, the Hamilton Bank in 1906. In December 1961 the *Long Island Forum* newspaper described how it was based around three floors with ceilings on the ground floor that were in excess of nine feet high. Many of the rooms were panelled with expensive hardwood and there was a stairway made of cypress. The exterior of the house was stuccoed in the Spanish style and the front law stretched for up to a quarter of a mile, ringed originally by driveways and later by woods. In the spring the garden would be filled with over 40, 000 roses.

In Fitzgerald's novel, Gatsby fairytale mansion is located at West Egg. In the novel its described as a truly Gothic affair and structurally at least, had taken no small amount of inspiration from Alva Vanderbilt Belmont's multi-towered Beacons Towers mansion at Kings Point — just across the bay from Great Neck. By contrast, Robin's mansion was at Baiting Hollow, a 47 beach-side paradise on the north side of Sound Avenue just east of Fresh Pond Avenue. Today all that is said to remain of this inspiring Xanadu is the carriage house that belonged to the manor and a concrete boundary wall that runs along a section of Sound Avenue. In those days the 100 acre estate played host to 48 hour "wild orgies" where chorus girls would finish the night standing on women standing on the tables and trying to kick off the men's hats. In the summer they went skinny dipping in the surf. Theodore Dreiser describes the scene:

“As the morning wore on (for it did not begin until after midnight) the moods of all were either so mellowed or inflamed as to make intentions, hopes, dreams, the most secret and sybaritic, the order of expression. One was permitted to see human nature stripped of much of its repression and daylight reserve or cant. At about four in the morning came the engaged dancers, quite the piece d resistance — with wreaths about heads, waists and arms for clothing and well, really nothing more beyond their beautiful figures—scattering rose leaves or favours. These dancers the company itself finally joined, single file at first, pellmell afterwards — artists, writers, poets--dancing from room to room in crude Bacchic imitation of their leaders--the women too--until all were singing, parading, swaying and dancing in and out of the dozen rooms.”²³⁷

Despite an awful lot of weight being heaped on the notion of trickery and deception in Fitzgerald’s novel, any suggestion of pretence is noticeably absent in Dreiser’s portrait. The house is “really grand but in a limited way”. It’s full of art but not artifice. The suggestion of dreams and romance was not one Dreiser had encountered among the very wealthy. Its sense of lavishness and largess was not ostentation but a peculiar way of aggregating the skills and fortitude that went into building it. For Dressier self-made millionaires like Robin presented “huge and Aladdin-like adventures”.

The tone in Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby* is a little different. The author is exploring the nebulous mists and rumours that often swirled around ‘new money’. In the opening chapters of Fitzgerald’s novel a reference is made to Gatsby being ‘a regular Belasco’ for having the foresight to furbish his house with ‘real’ books. It seems like a throwaway line but it’s packed with hidden messages. The Belasco that he is referring to is David Belasco, a Broadway theatre producer known for the realism of his sets (and exactly the kind of man to have graced Robin’s Driftwood parties). Robin’s own fascination with theatre is well documented, and the scores of young girls he would often ferry in from the city for his weekend parties were predominantly the high-kicking chorus girls of Broadway.

²³⁷ ‘Vanity, Vanity’, Theodore Dreiser, *Twelve Men*, Boni & Liveright, 1919

50 Union Square



Sometime in the early to mid-1920s, Robin, Hume and Dreiser secured a number of offices at the Guardian Life Insurance Building at 50 Union Square, New York. Another organisation occupying offices in the building at this time was *Keren Hayesod* — the Palestine Foundation Fund. Launched to support to the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the Palestine Mandate ordered by the League of Nations a few years later, the foundation had been formed to provide a sound financial basis for an anticipated Jewish State. Among its leaders at this time was the Russian-born, Zionist leader, Chaim Weizmann. Weizmann's relationship with the American side of its business affairs was fractious to say the least. The leader of the Zionist Organisation of America, Judge Julian W. Mack had wanted the fund to operate on a strictly business basis, with budgets, receipts and accounts managed by a dedicated commission whose speciality was in making and managing money. Mack's view was that the land they had in mind could not be built on dreams alone. Weizmann was of the opinion that its New York headquarters should function solely as a donation fund and was wary of having it operate commercially.

The building already had an interesting history. The Guardian Life Insurance Company's German founder Hugo Wesendonck, had been a civil rights lawyer who played an active role in the country's Liberal-Socialist led March Revolution of the mid-1800s. Prior to 1917 the company had been known as the Germania Life Insurance Company. The change of name reflected a dramatic shift in US relations with Germany after America had entered the war. Had Robin and Hume been recruited by the Palestine Foundation to advise on investment matters? It's certainly possible. Especially when you learn that the office that they were occupying was Room 901.²³⁸

According to a 1923 copy of the *Jerusalem and Palestine Haaretz*, the newspaper's New York press office was operating out of this same room under the meticulous supervision of Ukrainian-born journalist and editor, Gershon Agron. Operating as part of the Zionist Commission press bureau chaired by Chaim Weismann, the journal had been conceived to maintain the extraordinary momentum triggered by the Balfour Declaration. The energetic young Socialist

²³⁸ New York Times, Display Ad 188, 10 July 1929, p.48

was elected 'Field Secretary' of the Philadelphia Zionist Organisation on March 23rd 1917 at the age of just 23. ²³⁹

The men in control of the Palestine Foundation's activities in New York were Samuel Untermyer and Harris L. Selig. Robin had come into contact Untermyer a few years before, when he was brought in to defend Charles H. Hyde at the Supreme Court of Justice during the investigation into Robin and the Carnegie Trust. As New York's city treasurer, Hyde had helped Robin and his co-director William J. Cummins and Carnegie President, Joseph B. Reichmann juggle money from the city funds over to the trust fund in an effort to conceal its losses. Filling in the gaps was former McKinley propagandist Louis N. Hammerling, later accused of spying for Germany. The whole scandal had exploded when Robin had accused Hyde of having accepted a bribe.

As mentioned in an earlier chapter the transaction featured Hyde loaning \$130, 000 to the Carnegie Trust by juggling deposits from the city treasury. In return the Northern Bank, which Robin controlled, would receive additional city money. What made matters difficult for the ruling Democrats of New York was that Hyde was a central cog in the Tammany Hall machine and had been for years. Hyde's closest Tammany associate had been its king pin, William Jay Gaynor, the former Supreme Court Justice currently serving as New York's Mayor. Within a month of the Carnegie usury story breaking an attempt was made by 'disgruntled ship worker' James J. Gallagher on Gaynor's life. He was shot through at point blank range and died some three years later of the injuries. The Merritt Committee had tried to subpoena Hyde for the best part of a month before he was even willing to come forward for questioning. Concern had been growing of Hyde's proximity to Robin's Carnegie Trust Company, which Hyde was to refute entirely.

The alignment of Robin with the Tammany Hall machine was completed by a report in the New York World. The report alleged that long serving Tammany Hall leader, Charles F. Murphy, had been among the more frequent visitors to Robin's deeply mysterious and immodest Long Island parties. Murphy immediately denied the accusations and in an interview with the New York Times called them a salacious "tissue of lies". Yes, he had met Robin once, when Robin had dropped by his office at Tammany Hall. But it was strictly a business affair. Robin had arrived with a delegation to urge the nomination of German-American trader and New York City Comptroller, Herman A. Metz for city governorship the previous year. Metz too admitted to

²³⁹ Editor and Publisher 27 January 1923, Vol 55 Issue 35, p.176

have met Robin, but again it was city matters. Despite a picture being produced showing Murphy and Robin together at one of his parties, Murphy chalked up the slur as just another attempt by The World to link corruption with Tammany Hall.²⁴⁰ Little more than two years later another key Murphy-man, New York Governor William Sulzer was handing Robin a pardon and releasing him from jail.

On May 1911 Untermeyer entered a plea of not guilty on Hyde's behalf but was found guilty of bribery in connection with the performance of his duties as a city official. By contrast, Robin's guilty plea was seen by some to be a sign that some kind of deal had been struck in return for turning in Hyde. That Joseph G. Robin and Samuel Untermeyer occupied offices in the same iconic building some ten years later can't fail but to raise an eyebrow. The man who helped crash the Tammany machine, not just over the Wards and Blackwells Islands asylum case, but as a result of the statements he made against Hyde, was now sharing views over Union Square with the Tammany super-lawyer and the Palestine Foundation. If anyone was aware of just how resourceful Robin could be with other people's money, it was Untermeyer.

At the time of the Carnegie Trust investigation, the German-born super-lawyer had worked his way onto several anti-corruption and anti-monopoly committees: the Pujo Committee and the Walsh Committee. Untermeyer's nemesis Carnegie fared poorly in both, as did Joseph H. Schiff, the leading Jewish co-religionist whose hostility to the Zionist cause had practically disabled its growth on American soil. The Pujo Report singled out individual bankers like J.P Morgan, Jacob H. Schiff, Felix M. Warburg and William Rockefeller for special attention. A report had identified that between them the men controlled over \$22 billion in resources and capitalization controlled through 341 directorships held in 112 corporations. As trustee of the Baron de Hirsch Jewish resettlement fund, Schiff's input and control was duly questioned.

During the parallel Walsh Commission of January 1913 Untermeyer was asked his opinion of the Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Russell Sage Foundations. His response wasn't at all favourable. He stated that in their "interstate and international character, in their perpetuity and in their irresponsibility except to self-perpetuating trustees, he saw danger". He criticized all three foundations for securing charters from New York without adequate restrictions. Nevertheless, he said that all are "doing great good and no harm." One of the trusts, however, was a "hot bed of radicalism". Sadly, he never specified which. His recommendation was that they should be

²⁴⁰ New York Times, 07 January 1911, p.2

chartered under a uniform federal law, should be terminable at a fixed date, limited in size, not be allowed to make investments in order to add to or increase the various donations and the government should have a say in the appointment of trustees. Attempts to clean-up the State of New York were clearly coming from all sides.²⁴¹

The impact of the various committees on the life and work of Jacob H. Schiff appears to have been immense. At address at the annual convention of Kehillah in June 1916 Schiff announced he was quitting Jewish politics for good. His voice trembling with emotion he told the delegates that he had decided to break off all affiliation with his various charitable efforts. Two weeks earlier he'd rejected a call by Jewish leaders to have only Yiddish spoken in all public spaces. It was Jewish separatism, Schiff believed, that had been largely responsible for the persistent persecution Jews had had to endure over the years. As an advocate of Jewish Reformism, Schiff believed in the need for Jews to adapt and engage with their new environments. His views were anti-territorial and inclusive. Jewish Nationalism for him threatened to destroy the whole resettlement program.²⁴²

The Last Tycoon



By April that year Joseph G. Robin was dead. With the exception of a few lines in the Death Notices section of the *New York Times* on April 10th 1929, his passing went by pretty well unnoticed, as if the last of the last cannon roars at the end of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* had been replaced by the sound of one hand clapping. Fitzgerald's novel couldn't have put it any more suitably: "*The minister glanced at his watch and waited for a good half hour, but nobody came.*"

The only noteworthy reference to Robin's sudden death was made in the *White Plains Daily Press*, a suburb of New York, some twenty miles north of Yonkers and Manhattan. The 300-word report told how Robin had been found lying dead on the bedroom floor of his apartment at 254 Martine Avenue around 6.30 pm on Sunday April 7th by his friend Miss Helen S.

²⁴¹ The Survey, January 30 1913, The Survey, p.467

²⁴² New York Times, 05 June, 1916, p.6

Jones of 43 East Street, New York and the superintendent of the building Oswald Laska. It was said that Miss Jones, a 39 year old landscape architect, had become concerned about his wellbeing when Robin had failed to answer to his door. The pair had been out motoring during the day and had returned to the apartment at 6.15 pm. Robin complained of feeling ill and asked Miss Jones to return the car to a garage that he had on Mamaroneck Avenue. She returned some ten minutes later and was surprised to find the door locked. Back at her own apartment in Manhattan, the woman's neighbours Norman J. Fitzsimmons, retired detective, and romance author, Irene Alexander knew little about the drama unfolding. After a short examination and a chat with Miss Jones, Dr A. O. Squire returned a verdict of death by myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart that can be both toxin and virus related.²⁴³

Entirely befitting a man whose last play was about the betrayal of Jesus Christ, the 52 year old lapsed Jew had died at the end of Easter, just as the first dire rumblings of the 1929 Wall Street Crash were registering on the US stock market. The timing couldn't have been sweeter or more dramatic; America's most infamous symbol of outrageous speculation and optimism had keeled over and died in a way that was apropos to the failing heart of the American markets. In a bizarre but fitting twist, Robin had found himself at the centre of his own Greek Tragedy. As the last of the city's oxygen-rich blood pumped to the heart of Wall Street, the financial district's most prosperous and flamboyant pulmonary vein emptied for the very last time into the Hudson estuary where it merged with the Field of Reeds. In a development that was just as pertinent, the magnificent Driftwood Manor in Long Island's Wildwood State Park that Robin had been compelled to sell to Real Estate tycoon, Alfred H. Wagg in 1913, became a casualty of the same devastating crash when Wagg's vast fortune, like that of so many of his peers, was wiped out in the financial tsunami that followed. The man who had once claimed to possess the kind of touch that turned earth matter into gold had found himself on the embarrassing flipside of alchemy.

According to the wife of novelist Theodore Dreiser, Robin's funeral was held at New York's *Church of the Transfiguration*, also known informally as the 'Little Church around the Corner', an Episcopal parish church located at 1 East 29th Street, between Madison and Fifth Avenues in the Nomad district of Manhattan. If Joseph G. Robin had been a source for

²⁴³ 'Joseph G. Robin Dies Suddenly', Daily Press, White Plains, April 8, 1929; New York Times, April 10, 1929, p.23. Irene Anderson published *Villa Caprice* in 1932, a romance about an architect. Jones had experience in designing for hospitals.

Gatsby, the venue couldn't have been more apt, the little church having taken on an almost legendary status among New York's theatre profession. It was his final performances, so to speak. The *New Philadelphia Daily Times* of May 7th 1928 had described the little church as "the shrine of all romantics", located in New York but belonging to the whole of the world "just like the Statue of Liberty". Poems had been written about it, songs had been sung and it featured regularly in Bohemian novels and plays. It had also found a place in the heart of New York suffrage campaigners, having provided sanctuary for the fleeing black minorities during the race riots of the American Civil War. In 1923 the church had also provided the background to a play and film celebrating the plight of miners and written by Marion Russell. Another of the plays performed regularly at the theatre, 'The Outcasts of Poker Flat', tells the story of a mid-Western town trying to clean-up its streets of vice and corruption.²⁴⁴ A secret society is set-up and a group of elders decide who is to die and who is to be exiled, repeating in a number of ways Robin's story for the *New York Evening Journal* in 1911 which provided a long heroic summary of his battles with the city of New York's dishonest power brokers. As newspapers like the *Evening Journal* and the *New York Tribune* saw it, the story wasn't about the rise and fall of a city banker, it was about "the lonely boy Rabinovitch and how he ate his way like an acid through the thickly folded fabric of New York affairs".²⁴⁵ Wall Street was the poison and Robin was the antidote.

An editorial about the church in *Billboard Magazine* in 1911, read lyrically "Here within its sacred precincts, the actor or showman is the peer of his fellow worshipper, here his sorrows are equally respected ... its lights guide banker and commoner alike. Here the spiritual balm for wounded hearts is dispensed with equal liberality ... here he is judged justly."²⁴⁶

Is there any meaningful trade-off between the mysterious life of the fictional Jay Gatsby and the very real Joseph G. Robin? There's little denying that the rumours and speculation about the hero provide the absorbing abracadabra at the heart of Fitzgerald's novel, but there's no real reason to assume the book's author knew any more about Robin than his own literary idol, Theodore Dreiser who had remained friends with Robin till the end. Robin, like Gatsby, was a man who took shape from a cloud of whispers. The fabulous wealth he earned just put

²⁴⁴ *The Outcasts of Poker Flat*, Bret Harte, adapted by Perry Edwards, Dramatic Publishing Company, 1869

²⁴⁵ 'Belmont Plotted Ruin', Says Robin, *New York Evening Herald*, April 3, 1911

²⁴⁶ *The Billboard*, Cincinnati Vol. 21, Issue 52, December 25, 1909, p.14

flesh on the bones and added a few more red cells to the blood. He was part-Golem and part-Zelig.

Robin and Gatsby



And so the question remains: did the titan mould of ‘Mr X’, the mysterious and generous host of Theodore Dreiser’s *Twelve Men*, form a substantial part of the sweltering crucible in which F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby took shape? Mr X is not the only source, of course. Horst Kruse, Professor Emeritus of English and American Literature at the University of Münster, presents a very convincing argument that Jay Gatsby is based on Scott’s friend, Max Gerlach, whilst Scott himself admitted to his friend John Peale Bishop that Gatsby had been based on someone he knew before becoming more and more like himself.²⁴⁷ Robin, wasn’t some someone Fitzgerald knew, so where does that leave us?

Like so many of the best-loved figures in fiction, Gatsby is a composite character, consisting of many different personalities, randomly compacted from a variety of life experiences and presented as sleek and as gorgeous and as packed with as many “layers of glass” as the bright nickel car that the bootlegger drives in the novel.²⁴⁸ It’s probably fair to say that writers rarely base their characters on any one person. The natural impulse of the author is to import a vast sample of experiences and impressions to create something that is for the most part unique, expressing aspects of their inner selves that their ‘self-idea’ might otherwise reject or downgrade. In this respect, the writer is part-body snatcher, part-Prometheus and part-master distiller. And if we cared to extend the whisky metaphor, it might be equally fair to say that it is very often the case that the blends produced from these experiences will be taken from different stills, left to mature in their own unique casks for several years and then served without further explanation. I am more inclined to think that characters in a novel are less like solid people and more like the vapours of unresolved conflicts in a dream — or better still, the ‘Angel Share’ — that small volume of alcohol that gets lost to evaporation as

²⁴⁷ *F. Scott Fitzgerald at Work: The Making of ‘The Great Gatsby’*, Horst H. Kruse, University Alabama Press, Reprint edition 2014; To John Peale Bishop, August 9, 1925, F. Scott Fitzgerald, *A Life in Letters*, pp. 125-126

²⁴⁸ TGG, p. 63

it sits maturing in the barrel in the cellar. It seems to me that there's the idea that one has of oneself and then there's the truth. And I think this was certainly true of the characters that Scott came up with. Gatsby was what was left of Scott when you blended all the various ideas he had of himself, and all the various folk he desperately wanted to be, together in one barrel. Gatsby was the 'Angel Share', the light, miraculous vapours that floated toward the heavens.

The book that Dreiser had written, *Twelve Men*, was an anthology of stories that comprised of short biographical sketches of twelve anonymous yet extraordinary men. As we know, Dreiser's friend, Joseph G. Robin featured in the book as 'Mr X', struggling to pursue his rather beautiful goals and ideals against a wave of hostile rivals. The chapter that Robin and Gatsby spring from was called *Vanity, Vanity, Saith the Preacher*. Given the volume of precise details about Robin's life and the Northern Bank corruption scandal that Dreiser recycled from the press columns almost verbatim in his book, it's really quite difficult to see how the identity of 'Mr X' had ever been in doubt in the first place. The decision to include Robin was never fully explained by Dreiser and is steeped in contradictions. Writing to journalist H.L. Mencken in April 1919, Dreiser had said that Robin was "still around" but had become something of a "failure". As his new idea for a book consisted of a look at exceptional men, he said it might be a "kindness" not to lug Robin back into the limelight again.²⁴⁹ At the same time Dreiser was telling other friends that he had never really liked Robin. If this is true, then it certainly doesn't come across in his portrait of the man, which is sympathetic to the point of doting. Perhaps Dreiser's respect for Robin was not terrifically unlike the respect that Nick has for Gatsby in the novel. Despite the fact that the fraudster represented everything that Nick has "unaffected scorn" for, Gatsby 'was alright in the end'.²⁵⁰ The good stuff outweighed the bad.

What was never really in doubt was the bond that the two men shared. Asked by Helen Dreiser what he liked about her husband, Robin had replied that when Dreiser put his pen to paper "he tells the truth" and it was this same honesty and frankness that he brought to his portrait of Robin:

²⁴⁹ Letters of Theodore Dreiser: a Selection, Dreiser, Theodore, 1871-1945, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959, p.264

²⁵⁰ TGG, p.8

“He was a typical multi-millionaire in the showy and even gaudy sense of the time. For if the staid and conservative and socially well-placed rich have the great houses and the ease and the luxury of paraphernalia, the bohemian rich of the X-type have the flare, recklessness and imagination which lend to their spendings and flutterings a sparkle and a shine which the others can never hope to match ... I was impressed with this man; not because of his wealth (I knew richer men) but because of a something about him which suggested dreams, romance, a kind of sense or love of splendour and grandeur which one does not often encounter among the really wealthy.”²⁵¹

The similarity between this and other sequences from Dreiser’s portrait of Robin and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel are extraordinary — both in its language and its spirit. For a more thorough examination of Dreiser’s influence on Fitzgerald I would recommend that readers take a look at Thomas P. Riggio’s, *Dreiser, Fitzgerald and the Question of Influence*, an essay I was introduced to by Fitzgerald expert, Horst Kruse. As Riggio explains in his article, issues regarding influence “often wait on the evidence of biography”, and evidence of an interested exchange of views between Dreiser and Fitzgerald are regrettably thin on the ground. Even so, Fitzgerald did acknowledge that Dreiser was “one of the greatest men living in the country” and at the time that he was knuckling down to work on *Gatsby*, the authors were exchanging letters. But as Riggio acknowledges, the greater weight of evidence can be found at the level of text, and most tellingly in the “rhythms and images of *Gatsby*’s prose”. Even the most superficial read of Dreiser’s story reveals the same contrary levels of intoxication and instinctive reserve in the narrator of *Twelve Men* as you’ll find in the silent and slightly dissociated watcher, Nick Carraway — *Gatsby*’s neighbour.²⁵²

Riggio wasn’t the first to draw a parallel between Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and Dreiser’s *Twelve Men*. Speaking to the *Princeton Daily* in May 1927, the translator and literary critic, Maurice Edgar Coindreau, at that time teaching French at Princeton, explained how *The Great Gatsby* and *Twelve Men* were among only a handful of Modernist novels that critics considered ‘daring’ in France. The reason for this was simple: unlike America, there was no longer any attempt at censorship in

²⁵¹ Joseph G. Robin as Vanity, ‘Vanity’ in *Twelve Men*, Theodore Dreiser (1919), ed. Robert Coltrane, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, pp.263-286

²⁵² *Dreiser, Fitzgerald and the Question of Influence*, Thomas P. Riggio, Theodore Dreiser and American Culture, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000

France. This gave writers the freedom to explore and develop deeper intellectual books.²⁵³ Peruvian Victor Llona, a respected member of the literary salons in Paris headed by James Joyce, had just translated Dreiser's *American Tragedy* and Scott's *Great Gatsby* into French which had created a sizeable buzz about the authors.

The first man to have made a more definitive statement about the similarity was Maxwell Geismar in his 1954 book, *Rebels and Ancestors*, which took a look at the evolution of the American Realism between the late 1890s to the second decade of the 1900s. In a footnote that accompanies an entry on Dreiser's *Twelve Men*, Geismar writes that the *Vanity, Vanity* story provided a "synopsis or outline" for *The Great Gatsby*. To support his claim he cites the obscure birth of its hero, the rejection of the parents and drive for material success and luxury, "including a Long Island estate with a garden of 40, 000 roses".²⁵⁴ Geismar doesn't seem to have been terrifically impressed by Fitzgerald, it has to be said. The critic had also seen similarities between *Gatsby* and *My Ántonia*, the 1918 novel by Willa Cather. The problem for Geismar is that everything came down to text. There was nothing outside of text. Rather than exploring the cultures and time periods that these novels had in common, Geismar chose to cut the books off from the rest of the world, build an arbitrary, structuralist frame around them and set them apart from history. Umberto Eco may have been right when he said that book speaks of another book and tells a story that has already been told, but books also reflect, and engage with their time. Dreiser and Fitzgerald's stories were alike, not because Scott was copying exactly, but because he was engaging with subjects and issues that were dominant at the time. Robin wasn't the only man hosting parties on this scale on Long Island, he wasn't the only man inventing a plausible backstory about his life, and he certainly wasn't the only non-practising Jew attempting to break into the respected world of Old Money. The newspaper columns were full of stories like them. A book is like a rock in this respect. That heavy lump of composite you have in your hands is the result of over 500 million years of collisions and distortions. It is a product of its environment: gasses, soils, microbes, water, extreme heat, extreme cold, expansion and contraction.

²⁵³ 'Daring American Novels Fail to Impress French', Daily Princeton, May 26, 1927, p.1, p.2

²⁵⁴ *Rebels and Ancestors: The American Novel 1890-1915*, Maxwell Geismar, W.H. Allen, 1954, p.342. Like Dreiser, Geismar was a long-time member and sponsor of the Communist Party of America and campaigned during the 1960s against the War in Vietnam, as part of the New Left movement at Berkeley University.

Fitzgerald's novel is no less a product of its environment. The world exerts its influence on the man and the man exerts his influence on the story. Dreiser's story in *Twelve Men* was no different. Both books were parables and allegories of their time, and both books had their influences.

Geismar's entry in the *Who's Who in America* may shed a little more light on his motives: "I despise and detest all literary fabrications (and there are many), fads, hoaxes, etc. and all writers who know but do not reveal the truth about their world and their times."²⁵⁵ Geismar detested fakes and phonies. Discovering the source of a book was like identifying the perpetrator of a crime. Plagiarism was symptomatic of a world that was easily seduced and satisfied by cheap copies and mass production. In *Society of the Spectacle*, the Marxist theorist Guy Debord wrote that in societies "where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles". It was world in which the liar had lied to himself. However, Debord also said that ideas improve, that plagiarism was necessary. "Progress", he wrote, "implies it". It embraced the author's phrases, made use of his expressions, erased false ideas, and replaced it with the right idea.²⁵⁶ Scott and Robin would have probably agreed: there was a genius to be found in stealing. But whatever Geismar's motives, there really is no denying that there is an unusual likenesses between Dreiser's portrait of Robin and Fitzgerald's portrait of Gatsby, certainly in terms of the lavish scale of the parties, the cool and gentle rectitude of their hosts and the intoxicating spell that both men cast on the books' narrators.

Most of the main episodes from Robin's life in the public eye and his more insolvent upbringing in Brooklyn are included in the sketch by Dreiser: his father making his living as a baker in Williamsburg, his *Icarus* book, his change of name, his clash with August Belmont Jr. over a deal that featured the Long Island Railroad, his life on Broadway, his attempted suicide in court, his time in the sanatorium and the inevitable cloud of whispers and speculative 'hot-air' drawn in to the public arena by the vacuum of genuine detail relating to any of them. The penniless emigrant from Russia, now in his "richly braided fur coat and fur cap" looking every inch the

²⁵⁵ 'Maxwell Geismar, Book Critic, Author and Editor, Dead at 69', C. Gerald Fraser, New York Times, July 25, 1979, p.6

²⁵⁶ The Society of the Spectacle, Guy Debord, trans. Donald Nicolson-Smith, Zone Books, 1994, p.12, p.145

Russian “Grand Duke” is described by Dreiser as the master of all he surveys: “*He was always so grave, serene, watchful, yet pleasant and decidedly agreeable, gay even, without seeming so. There was something so amazingly warm and exotic about him and his, and yet at the same time something so cold and calculated, as if after all he were saying to himself, I am the master of all this, am stage managing it for my own pleasure.*”²⁵⁷

Whilst Dreiser successfully conveys the magic, mystery and munificence of this goateed Tatar Prospero in his book’s dreamy illustration of Robin, we get to learn a little bit more about Robin the man in Helen Dreiser’s 1951 memoirs, *My Life with Dreiser*. This powerful stocky man with blue eyes and a ruddy complexion had been a “constant source of inspiration” to them both, his “brilliant intellect and warm sympathetic understanding” matched only by his gift for classical writing. She had heard him talk with authority on everything from politics to chemistry, to literature and even medicine. “Despite having the tenderness of a woman”, Helen writes, “he had something uniquely Mongolian and wise about him, sitting around for hours like a young Confucius.” The business advice he had given to Dreiser had proved to be invaluable, despite Dreiser’s repeated unwillingness to listen. The copyright “traps and snags” set down by various publishers, studios and media agencies would require especially careful management, and Robin would be on hand to suggest ways of moving around them. Sometimes he and Dreiser would quarrel and then not see each other for months. Then they would reunite as if nothing had happened. Their friendship was to endure periods of extreme poverty and extreme wealth.²⁵⁸

Despite Dreiser’s attempts to pull back the screen and reveal the ‘Oz’ in his life, I can find no trace of Lucien de Shay, the man who Dreiser claims to have introduced him to Robin in 1908. Shay is described in the book as a “n’er d-well pianist and voice culturist” who was one of those “odd natures so common” to the city of New York: “half artist half man of fashion who attach themselves so readily to men of strength and wealth.”²⁵⁹ Neither a trawl of the censuses, newspapers or travel records during

²⁵⁷ *Twelve Men*, Theodore Dreiser (1919), ed. Robert Coltrane, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, p.271

²⁵⁸ *My Life with Dreiser*, Helen Dreiser, World Publishing Company, 1951, p.108-110.

²⁵⁹ *Twelve Men*, Theodore Dreiser (1919), ed. Robert Coltrane, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, pp.263-265

this period has so far yielded a match. As a result, it may be possible to surmise that Dreiser was either protecting the man's true identity, had got his name wrong or had simply invented him. Whoever he was it may significant to note that de Shay, described as Robin's 'fidus Achates', features in the story almost as much Robin himself.²⁶⁰

Reading the portrait of Robin in Dreiser's *Twelve Men*, the first thing any fan of Fitzgerald's novel might notice is the stunning similarity between the thrilling, lavish parties hosted by Mr X and those described in bountiful detail by Gatsby observer, Nick Carraway who, like Helen Dreiser, makes a deliberate point of mentioning his startling blue eyes and his huge capacity for joy:

"There was dancing now on the canvas in the garden, old men pushing young girls backward in eternal graceless circles, superior couples holding each other tortuously, fashionably and keeping in the corners — and a great number of single girls dancing individualistically or relieving the orchestra for a moment of the burden of the banjo or the traps. By midnight the hilarity had increased. A celebrated tenor had sung in Italian and a notorious contralto had sung in jazz and between the numbers people were doing 'stunts' all over the garden while happy vacuous bursts of laughter rose toward the summer sky."²⁶¹

The first thing that Dreiser talks about in *Twelve Men* is not Robin himself but the vast and uninhibited menagerie of artists, poets, musicians, chorus girls, Italian tenors and bohemian gigolos regularly washing-up at her Robin's Driftwood Manor Estate. As in *Gatsby*, the munificent host takes a more assuming back seat. The first people we are introduced to are the guests. One of them, an "Italian singer and sorceress of great beauty" with "gorgeous chain earrings" is Robin's current girlfriend.²⁶² If I'm correct, then the woman that Dreiser is describing is Lina Cavalieri, at that time a centrepiece member of Cleofonte Campanini's Manhattan Opera Company and

²⁶⁰ 'fidus Achates'— devoted follower. I initially took the phrase 'voice culturist' to mean 'voice coach' but the term also appears in matters relating to transcendental meditation and therapy. I'm tempted to think that Dreiser means the former: a singing coach. The only mention of such a figure in Dreiser's life was voice-coach and pianist Lillian Rosenthal (Lillian Rosedale Goodman) with whom he had a ten-year affair. Her father was Elias Rosenthal, a Russia-born New York Attorney, lived fairly close to Robin in Manhattan (Riverside Drive). We may have to accept defeat on this one. Broadway was teeming with pianist-voice coaches at this time. The phrase 'fidus Achates' was popular among Catholics like Dreiser. It also featured in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. It dates back to Virgil's *Aeneid*.

²⁶¹ *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Penguin Classics, 2000 (first published 1926), pp.47-48

²⁶² *Twelve Men*, Theodore Dreiser (1919) University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, pp.265-266

subsequently famous for having cast a spell over Robert Winthrop Chanler of the legendary Astor family. On her arrival in New York she had quickly become as famous for her dazzling jewellery and pulchritude as much as her voice. Dreiser, who had just moved-in as editor of women's fashion magazine, *The Delineator*, tells us that her beauty was so remarkable that the Sunday papers were giving full pages to her face and torso alone. The man financing the company was Otto H. Kahn, owner Oheka Castle, the sprawling North Shore estate used as the basic for Baz Luhrmann movie adaptation of *Gatsby*. Cavalieri and Chanler had a whirlwind romance and married in 1910, Lina having clearly brought into play much of the enchantment she had brought to her of Marguerite in Charles Gounod's rapturous musical drama, *Faust*, the show she had brought to New York shortly before meeting Robin. Her husband's sister-in-law was Margaret 'Daisy' Chanler, the society friend of Sigourney Fay who is rumoured to have inspired the name of Scott's heroine, Daisy Fay.²⁶³ Just like *Gatsby*, Robin liked to keep his mansion filled with "interesting people", who did "interesting things" day and night.²⁶⁴

As mentioned in a previous chapter, the location in Dreiser's book is like it was in real life: just east of Wading River in Riverside, Woodcliff Park on Long Island.²⁶⁵ Luhrmann's lavish movie adaption of *Gatsby* may have taken its cue from Otto H. Kahn's Oheka Castle, but the original *Gatsby* mansion was a semi-finished pleasure house just east of the Mortimer L. Schiff Scout Reservation. In a letter to his publisher Dreiser described it as "un-pretentiously pretentious ... on a rise of ground commanding that vast sweep of sea and sand".²⁶⁶ The man who designed it was George Carnegie Palmer, the son of investment broker, Nicholas F. Palmer who Robin had known on Wall Street. One of the architect's earlier successes had been the Church of the Good Shepherd on Blackwell's Island, the 'Isle of the Insane' whose culture of maltreatment had been famously exposed by Robin and his sister, Louise in 'Horrors of Belam' story in the mid-1890s. Palmer and his father had remained

²⁶³ Margaret Daisy Chanler married Robert's brother, Winthrop Astor 'Wintie' Chanler, a Tammany politician and former soldier who served as aide to General Pershing during the war. It's Margaret memoirs that provide the most memorable of Scott's mentor, Sigourney Fay.

²⁶⁴ TGG, p.87

²⁶⁵ 'Total from Driftwood Manor Sale', New York Tribune, January 22, 1911, p.9

²⁶⁶ Letters of Theodore Dreiser: a Selection, Dreiser, Theodore, 1871-1945, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959, p.264

prominent vestrymen at Manhattan's wonderfully ostentatious Trinity Church at the intersection between Wall Street and Broadway. The man who Palmer had assisted in the construction of the church at Blackwell's Island had been the English architect, Frederick Clarke Withers, whose Gothic-revival church in Manhattan, the Little Church Around the Corner, is where Robin would later be buried.²⁶⁷

A good deal of weight has been heaped on the notion of trickery and deception in Fitzgerald's novel, but in Dreiser's story the notion of pretence is comparatively downplayed. His Long Island mansion is "really grand but in a limited way". It's full of art but not artifice, nothing like the preposterous mock-gothic palaces being constructed on the Island's North Shore by Alva Belmont and Otto Kahn. According to Dreiser the suggestion of dreams and romance was not one he had encountered among the very wealthy. The Manor's sense of lavishness and largesse is put down not to ostentation but from a desire that sought aggregate the skills and workman-like fortitude that had gone into building it. For Dreiser, self-made millionaires like Robin presented "huge and Aladdin-like adventures". It's not artifice or theatricality that dominates Dreiser's description but the generous distribution of solid joy. The only one exception to this is the allusion to Robin having 'stage managed' the spectacle. The studio he has back on West 57th Street in Upper Manhattan is likewise described as a 'dream'. Meeting Robin here one day the narrator encounters a crowd of Broadway characters assembled in its rooms: opera singers, "a sorceress of great beauty", a "basso profundo" to sing and a long-list of celebrities. But what he is describing here is not artifice but art. It's a straightforward revelation of wealth; the great good that money can buy. There are profound 'inner mysteries' to unravel but there is little or no sense of the visitor being deceived. Robin is presented as an intoxicating figure, someone who would have made "a good Bacchus or Pan".²⁶⁸

In Fitzgerald's novel, Gatsby is an illusionist, a fraud, and his skill in maintaining his illusion is nothing short of overwhelming in its attention to detail, much like it is in the world of spies and counter-espionage — a theme that Fitzgerald comes back to

²⁶⁷ The Church's design was part of the High Gothic Revival the men had inherited from France. The Church has played a key role in the Anglo Catholic movement within the American Episcopal Church. The Astors also featured prominently at the Trinity Church.

²⁶⁸ *Twelve Men*, Theodore Dreiser (1919), ed. Robert Coltrane, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, p.267

throughout the novel. Spying is in its purest form rather like committing oneself to a lifetime programme of verisimilitude. To all intents and purposes the spy is an actor, they are living a lie. And at the time, anybody in the same upwardly mobile position as Gatsby, drifting through life without mandate and without inheritance, was also thought to be living a lie — Fitzgerald included. But it's not just spies who were adopting the principles of deception: it was the ordinary people of America — often second generation exiles who had really had little option but to embrace these tricks. Exercises in verisimilitude are as much a part of the class struggle as they are the spectacle at Madame Tussauds. A plausible back-history, however misleading or ill-acquired, was all that was really needed to win acceptance among their 'old money' peers. Gaps needed to be filled in, images needed to be preserved and the "series of unbroken successful gestures" that you projected back to the watching world should never be allowed to stutter. Others may get away with the odd transgression or missing frame but the parvenu must project a consistent and interrupted image if he or she is to be at all believable. As a new kid on an old block, the public consumption of Gatsby would need to remain conspicuous; the series of still, disjointed images he projected to the world must be allowed to flow. And it's the ensuing dissonance that drives the novel: when is wealth good and when is it bad? When is wealth real and when is wealth unreal? When is it authentic and when is it not authentic?

In his obsessive pursuit of his dream and his delusions of absolute power Gatsby has neglected the very real world that has put his life at risk. The Magus has failed in his bid to control his impulses and anchor them firmly in the soils of reality. The masque has ended and the actors disperse, and the writer is forced to leave the safety of the bubble that has provided the means of his escape. Starved of oxygen he makes his exit and the life-support pod he sets course in drifts purposelessly into space. Fitzgerald once wrote that as a "restless, ambitious man" he was "never disposed to accept the present but always striving to change it, better it, or even sometimes destroy it."²⁶⁹ The first rule of self-invention is that if something isn't working you rip it up and start again. It should have been as true for Gatsby as it was for Joseph G. Robin. If Fitzgerald could be accused of anything, it wouldn't be plagiarism, it would be of tuning-in in his own intricate seismometer into those barely cognisant metaphors of

²⁶⁹ *Invented Lives: F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald*, James R Mellow, Houghton Mifflin, 1984, p.470

the age: the realisation that the American Dream had died before it had ever been formally named. All that remained now was a dream of the dream.