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## [ THE GANGSTER'S MOTHER ]

From a Book of East Side Memoirs

By MICHAEL GOLD

Gangsters are mercenaries; you buy them as you do journalists. The gangster is too thrifty to kill for passion; he kills for money; he is just another strange American businessman.

He fights the police only when it pays. He also helps the police. I have seen a cop and a gangster work together in a strike. They beat one of our girls to the sidewalk, broke her arm with a blackjack.

Many gangsters keep pigeons, and fly them from the East Side roofs. They like to gather in bird stores on the East Side, in basements white as tombs with bird-droppings, to discuss the market in murder and pigeons. There has been a pigeon cult among New York gangsters for fifty years.

One hates gangsters, as one must hate all mercenaries. Yet some are unfortunate boys, bad eggs hatched by the bad world hen.

Gyp the Blood, who burned in the chair for the killing of the gambler Rosenthal, was in my class at public school. He was just the ordinary rugged East Side boy. Any of us might have ended in the electric chair with him. I am not proud I escaped, it is only my luck.

I knew some gangsters well when I was sixteen. When I was a child I knew Louis One Eye, who flew pigeons on the roof next to ours.

### 2. THE ROOFS OF NEW YORK

Louis One Eye had seized this roof and held it for his own, like a despot. The roof was important to a tenement, and so Louis was hated. In summer, when the Sun turned gangster and slugged workers and their children in the street, the roof gave us help.

Like rats scrambling on deck from the hold of a burning ship, that's how we poured on the roof at night, to sleep. What a melange in the starlight! Mammias, graybeards, shy young girls, exhausted sweatshop fathers, young consumptive coughers and spitters, all of us snored and groaned there side by side, on newspapers or mattresses. We slept in pants and undershirt, heaped like corpses. The city reared about us.

Each family was delicate enough to leave a lane between itself and the next family. This was our only privacy on the roof. I woke one hot choking night and saw it all like a bad dream. I saw the mounds of pale stricken flesh tossing against an unreal city. I was frightened, and didn't know where I was. Then I cried, and wondered what would happen if I jumped off the roof. My mother heard me, and soothed me, and I went back to sleep.

Sometimes the wind stirred from the Atlantic. Sometimes the hot fantastic moon looked down, and remembered us in the Arabian desert.

Some nights it rained. The heavens suddenly split, the thunder rolled down the Brooklyn Bridge. We saw the lightning, like a stroke of insanity, as it created huge nightmare vistas of an unbelievable city of towers, New York.

All sprang up in bedlam, screaming, cursing the rain, shouting to others, the babies in weak tears. We grabbed our bedding, and

scrambled back into the fire of the bedrooms. But there were some who slept through the rain, rather than go back into that fire.

It is said that the Dawn is beautiful, but where? For on the roof nobody loved that hour when the feverglow appeared on the pale sky, as on a consumptive's cheek. For then the swarms of bloodsucking flies arrived, and sleep was intolerable, and the humid day was here, and reality, and poverty.

Women hung their washlines on the roof. And lovers climbed there, seeking that treasure which will never be found on the East Side; privacy.

We children played on the roof. It was quieter than the street, though as dangerous. We flew kites, or explored the upper world from roof to roof, a horror for mothers to think about.

Yes, the roof was important. All roofs were social playgrounds and bedrooms, and yet Louis One Eye had seized the roof of his tenement, and was the master of an island of hot tin and smoky chimneys and bright gangsters' pigeons. And he was hated for it.

### 3. U. S. PRODUCT

Louis was young. He had a slim, springy body, he was graceful as a snake. He had Indian hair and proud Jewish features; he would have been handsome but for his one eye, and the hard sneer fixed on his mouth. Both disfigured him like wounds. They were the fatal wounds given him by Society.

The legend ran that Louis had a violent father. At fourteen Louis once saw this father attempt to beat his mother. Louis pushed the man out of a window, and almost killed him. For this the boy was sent to a reformatory.

There the State "reformed" him by carefully teaching him to be a criminal, and by robbing him of his eye.

Is there any gangster who is as cruel and heartless as the present legal State?

No.

A keeper once lashed Louis for an hour with a leather belt. The boy had broken some "rule." The flying buckle cracked open an eyeball. The boy screamed in pain. But the insane and legal gangster of the State continued the "punishment."

All that night the boy lay sobbing and bleeding in his cell. He was fourteen years old. In the morning he was quiet. In the morning a cruel and legal "Doctor" of the State snipped out the useless pulp of an eye. Louis had been known as One Eye ever since.

His remaining eye had become fierce and large. It was black, and from it poured hate, lust, scorn and suspicion, as from a deadly headlight to shrivel the world.

Everyone feared Louis; he carried a gun. He had killed men, and was touchy as a cat. The State had turned a moody unhappy boy into this evil rattlesnake, that struck a deathblow at the slightest touch of man.

He had built a large coop for his pigeons, and twice a day let them out to fly. We watched him secretly from behind a chimney.

He stood on a cornice, sinister against the sky. From other roofs, other quadrilles of pigeons were wheeling and maneuvering, as though it were a heartbreaking joy. They seemed so free and beautiful, we envied them.

But then Louis One Eye waved his long bamboo pole. He whistled the long mysterious signal known to pigeon fanciers. From the glimmering sky the pigeons descended like a heavenly chain gang, and returned meekly to their prison. They were not free. We children always marvelled at this, but now the secret is known to me; pigeons, like men, are easily tamed with food.

#### 4. MY AUNT LENA

At that time I was in love with my Aunt Lena. Then, as much as now, one suffered on the sexual cross. It was painful, when we walked down the street, that men stared familiarly after my dear Aunt Lena, and winked, and tried to pinch her legs, or said nasty things. And I couldn't fight back. Once a pimp grabbed her arm and tried to kiss her, and she slapped his face, and made a cop laugh.

There were always men about her. A fresh young girl is marked anywhere, she creates a fever, she is a magnet. Life has been drab or hopeless, and then she comes, like a false Messiah, and even the brutes dream.

Klemm the Ox, a young German baker who worked on our street, brought her a baker's homage of new rolls every morning. He stole these at his job. Aaron Katz the cloakmaker took her to the Yiddish vaudeville theatres. Louis One Eye caught me watching him at his pigeon flying one dusk. He didn't wallop me, to my surprise, but what was worse, asked questions about my Aunt Lena.

#### 5. LITTLE COLUMBUS

She had arrived from Hungary in a dark hour, in a bad winter, when my father was out of a job, my mother bitter with worries. It had snowed for weeks, the slush filled the streets like wet poison, all of us were miserable with colds. On every street there was an eviction; my father groaned, "our turn is next."

But my Aunt Lena was not affected by this all. She was sixteen years old, it was her first great adventure, this immigration. She was so happy when she first came.

Who could help loving the beautiful little "greenhorn" girl? She had rosy peasant cheeks, and shiny black hair that was her pride, and that she spent hours braiding as she sang. She was formed like a woman, but her eyes were like a child's, they were so clear, so pure of guile, so happy and wonderful.

Lattered about our house like a sparrow, her Jewish eyes glowed, she clapped her hands like a delighted baby. How crazy she was about America, about the common things we knew so well! The language, the big houses, the people, everything fascinated her. She could scarcely sleep for excitement when she first arrived. She sprang out of bed, and sang as she cooked the breakfast, waking us all. She wanted to be off. Breakfast over, she put on her red Hungarian shawl, and set forth on the second discovery of America.

Sometimes she took me along. We walked all over the city, from the Battery to Central Park, we rode the glorious horse-cars, we marvelled at the dignity of the supermen on Fifth Avenue, we watched the busy little tugboats on the East River, we shared in the pushcart battles on Orchard Street.

Everything was wonderful to my Aunt Lena. But my mother feared for her, the pimps hunted for beautiful greenhorn girls, she might be kidnapped or lost. But my Aunt Lena was afraid of nothing, she just laughed, and all of us laughed with her. Oh, how happy she was at first, it really made us all happy.

Then everything came to an end.

#### 6. EVERYONE WORKS IN AMERICA

One night at supper, my mother said, quietly:

"Lena, listen."

"Yes, Katie."

"Lena, what's to be done? We can't pay the rent again."

"No?" my Aunt Lena said in alarm.

"Little sister, we're so poor. What's to be done? If I didn't have to cook and sew and take care of the children, I'd look for a job myself. Don't you think you could begin to work, Lena?"

My Aunt Lena looked up in surprise.

"Me, Katie?" she said, her lips curling mournfully like a child's. "Must I work? In the old country I didn't work!"

"No," said my mother, "but here we're very poor, sister. Here we have no cows and chickens as in Hungary. Here everyone works, even the children."

"But I want to see things, Katie!"

My Aunt Lena looked as if she were about to cry. It made me sad, I could scarcely eat my goulash. And then she suddenly laughed.

"Katie, I'm so foolish," my aunt said. "Of course I'll work. It will be fun! I'll work by day, and then at night, I can still see things. I'll go to the river at night, and see the boats, won't I, Katie?"

"Yes, little sister, at night you will see the boats," said my mother quietly.

So my Aunt Lena went to work in a clothing shop, where the youth, the charm and ecstasy of the East Side were buried then. But she was tired at night, and had to wash and iron her blouses for the next day, and do many other things. So we rarely went to see the tugboats work like fat little angry elephants on the river.

#### 7. A PROPOSAL

But there were the men, always men calling at our house. It kept me in a state of anxiety.

"Aunt Lena," I said, "you'll be sure to marry me when I grow up, won't you?"

"Yes, Mikey, dear, it's you I'll marry."

"Do you swear it?"

"Yes, see, Mikey; I kiss my little finger and swear it. You'll grow up and be a famous rich doctor, and then I'll marry you. You, only you, Mikey!"

She kissed me, and my heart beat wildly. A new body was waking, that was to live its hour on earth, a mystery in feeling and pain. What a queer happiness!

#### 8. ANOTHER PROPOSAL

He was slow, he never spoke, that's why the quick, voluble Jews had nicknamed the blonde young German baker: Klemm the Ox. The old world Jews have a dogma that every Gentile is a peasant, and is both stupid and cruel.

Klemm really was slow-witted. You could make fun of him before his face, and he wouldn't know it. He'd stare at you with his doll's blue eyes, and smoke his large meerschaum pipe, on which a fat-bellied old bearded man was carved.

He came every morning, white and sleepy after a hot night's labor. Under his apron he had a bunch of rolls he had stolen. He'd stand there regularly in the doorway, shuffle his large feet, and blunder, and stammer:

"Well, Missus," he'd say to my mother, "I don't want to bother nobody, but if you don't want Christians in your house, I'll just leave these rolls and go."

My mother always reassured him, she said kind things and invited him for coffee. He'd come in, eat silently like an ox, never take his large staring eyes from my Aunt Lena's face. No one had to talk to him, or notice his presence, all he seemed to want was to stare at my Aunt Lena.

One time he asked her to marry him. She refused him. She told my mother, and everyone laughed at the idea.

Klemm kept on coming, and never mentioned the subject again. But he was mulling it over, in his slow cudlike way.

One morning he arrived at the door, bringing no rolls in his apron, but dressed in his best Sunday suit and box shoes. He stood at the door as usual, and shuffled his feet. He cracked his white knuckles, and seemed nervous.

"I am going to the hospital, Missus," he announced. "Good-bye."

"Are you sick, Klemm?" my mother asked sympathetically.

"No, Missus," Klemm said in his solemn way, staring at my aunt. "I have been thinking why Lena would not marry me. It is because I am a Christian. So I have decided to become a Jew." This was an astounding bit of information. Jews do not proselyte, they discourage converts; in fact, a convert seems humorous to them, for some reason.

"Yes, Missus," Klemm went on, "I am going to the hospital to be circumcised. It costs thirty dollars."

No one could argue him out of it, the notion had stuck in his slow obstinate mind, and he was circumcised that day. He was of course amazed when my Aunt again refused him in marriage a week later. He grew so bewildered and sad, he threw up his baker's job, and went to sea. I remember his chromo postcards from the ports of the world. "Dear Lena—this is a fine place and I wish you were here."

#### 9. POPULAR SONGS

My Aunt Lena lay sick in our bedroom. There had been a rush season in the ship, and she had worked too hard. The sweatshops were run on piece-work then, a system of Egyptian slavery under which the strongest crumpled, as though it were the bubonic plague.

My aunt's peasant face was pale now, the intense beautiful eyes I loved were languid with pain. She smiled and kissed me when I came from school:

"Mikey," she said, "after you eat your coffee and butter-bread, I want you to do something for me."



drawn by Otto Soglow

## ON THE TENEMENT STOOPS IN SUMMER

(Always Room For One More)

"Yes, Aunt Lena."

"Here is ten cents, and I want you to go to the music store, and get the words of these songs for me. And I will sing them, and we will forget piece-work."

She had written the names on an old envelope; my aunt had quickly learned English. I ate my afternoon lunch, and went to the music store, and brought her the song sheets.

She always loved to hear her sing. I sat there, while she stroked my hair, and was filled with a painful delight. My mother came from the kitchen to listen, and my aunt explained those strange English songs to her.

One was called "She's Only a Bird in a Gilded Cage." It was the story, my aunt said, of a poor girl who had married a rich man to help her family, but had regretted the slavery and hypocrisy it brought, and had grown sadder and sadder, and died.

My mother shook her head in sympathy, and said, in Yiddish: "Alas, alas! How pitiful!"

The other song, I remember, was called "The Rabbi's Daughter." It was the story of a stern and upright old Rabbi whose daughter had fallen in love with a Christian youth, and had married him. Her heartbroken father performed the awful Hebrew rite in such cases; he held a funeral service for her, she was dead to him and Israel.

He tried to forget, but could not. He, too, grew sadder and sadder, and finally died of grief. And then his daughter died of grief of him.

My mother shook her head again, and tears were in her eyes.

"Ai, how sad that is, how sad and beautiful!" she said. "It is just like life."

I look back at that moment, and cannot laugh at it. I know a cynic or Broadway clown must have written those songs, with tongue in cheek, maybe, for money. It is sophisticated now to laugh at such songs, but they are holy to me. I remember my Aunt Lena, sickened by piece-work slavery in the shop, singing them in her deep voice, I remember my mother's tears. No song is cheap into which millions of humble people have poured their souls, their love, their despair and yearning. All songs are made holy when a folk sings them. Do not laugh; these cheap ballads will be remembered some day, as the "spirituals" sung by the slaves of New York.

## 10. THE GANGSTER'S MOTHER

About that time a poor little grocery storekeeper was shot by some cheap young thieves a few blocks away. It was in all the papers. I heard whispering among the indignant neighbors that Louis One Eye's gang had done the job.

Then a child was raped in a cellar, a poor little screaming girl.

Then someone set off a bomb in an Italian's house. We heard the boom one night; it started a panic. We scuttled down in our underwear at three in the morning; the tenement had rocked; the

frightened old Jew who had wandered like ourselves into that savage Christian land.

## 11. LOUIS DEFEATED

One hot night, after work, my Aunt Lena and I climbed on the roof for air. My aunt was in her kimono; she had just washed her long black hair, and it hung down her back. There was no one on the roof but Louis; he was flying his pigeons in the hot twilight.

When I saw him, I was frightened, and wanted to go back. But my Aunt Lena reassured me, and we spread newspapers as far away from him as possible, and sat down.

Then he saw us. My heart beat as he walked over slowly, a sardonic gleam in his big single eye. I think he tried to smile, but that sneer was not to be wiped out so easily.

"Listen, kid," he said to my aunt, "come over here and lookit my pigeons."

I could feel my Aunt Lena stiffen; now she was frightened, too.

Louis came nearer. "Listen," he said, out of the corner of his sneering mouth, "I got some fine pigeons, kiddo. Listen, I got a fantail worth twenty dollars. And I got six rubies I pulled down from another guy's flock on Forsythe Street. He came around and tried to shoot me for them."

Louis bent over, and touched my aunt's hair with his hot stubby hand. She sat there paralyzed.

"Nice hair," he said. "Run along, Mike, I want to talk to her."

I stared at him, and couldn't move. In a moment I felt that I would fling myself at his legs, and bite them, do anything to save my Aunt Lena. Then he put his hands on my aunt's kimono, and tried to tear it open. It was then she sprang up, screaming, and clawed at his face with her nails. He grabbed her. I ran to the roof door and yelled down the hallway.

Suddenly, I don't know how or why, the roof was filled with all the neighbors. I don't know how they came so soon, crowds always sprang up on the East Side like dynamite explosions.

The mob of neighbors faced Louis, grumbling and cursing sullenly; he backed up against his pigeon coop in surprise.

"What happened?" Morris, a husky young clothing worker asked. My aunt told them. They glared at Louis threateningly. But he had gotten his nerve back, and before she was through explaining, he began pushing the crowd.

"Get off my roof!" he snarled, his face hateful as a gorilla's.

The crowd moved away slowly, muttering. Suddenly someone in back threw an old wooden box at Louis. It hit him in the face; and a projecting nail tore a gash under his one eye, and it bled.

Louis was furious. He frothed like a madman, rushed up and down.

"Who done that?" he screamed, pulling out his gun. "I'll kill the bastard who done it." We watched him frozen with horror, as we might an escaped madman.

And then, from somewhere, his poor old mother appeared. She hobbled up to her son, and peered at him with her sad old eyes.

"Are you hurt, Louis?" she said, feebly. "Why are you bothering my Louis," she said to the neighbors, "my Louis is a good boy, he doesn't harm anyone."

She hadn't even seen his gun. Louis slipped it into his pocket, and patted her on the back.

"It's all right, momma," he said, "go back in the house."

She took his handkerchief, and wiped the blood from his eye, mumbling feeble patient complaints against the bad world. And the neighbors drifted away, looking a little ashamed, as if they were in the wrong. And Louis' pigeons, that he had neglected all this time, flew down in a great whirl of wings on their coop, prisoners, like all of us, of the East Side.

All of us went on hating Louis One Eye, and I hated him terribly, too. But now I hate more those who took a moody, passionate, loyal East Side boy and turned him into a monster useful to the bosses in strikes, and to politicians on election day.



drawn by Feigá Blumberg

## A Girl of the Sweatshops

street was crowded with mad-eyed people in underwear; it was like the Day of Judgment.

It was only the Black Hand again, but the neighbors whispered it was Louis One Eye.

They blamed everything on Louis. He didn't care, but swaggered about, and pushed people off the sidewalks as if he were a king. He never had a friendly word for anyone. Some of his thieving was as open as a politician's. He forced storekeepers to buy tickets to imaginary picnics and dances. He ate fruit off pushcarts and didn't pay, as calmly as though he were a cop.

The neighbors hated him, they wanted the janitor to force him to move out with his pigeons.

"He has taken the roof to himself; who is he, anyway, a Kaiser?" they asked, indignantly.

The fat janitor was very profound about the matter. "You can't make him move; you can't touch Louis," said the janitor sagely. "Louis is under the protection of Tammany Hall."

He never worked, of course; he went to jail several times; he was a bad egg. Even if you felt strong, you couldn't afford to fight him; for he had a gun. And even if you grabbed his gun, and beat him up, his gang would get you in the end. He ruled the tenement; and all hated him, and blamed him for everything.

But his poor old mother, half-crippled and hunched over in an old shawl, like some feeble, humble dwarf, loved Louis. She hobbled about, and on the street and in the grocery store, would stop people and stare into their faces with her sad, patient eyes, and say over and over: "Why do they say my Louis is a bad boy? My Louis is a good boy. Why can't they leave him alone? My Louis is a good boy."

And Louis must have loved his mother; he tenderly helped her up the stairs; he shopped every morning for the groceries, to save her poor rheumatic legs the pain of walking; he gave her money every week, and bought her dresses.

Once there was an Italian *fiesta* a few blocks away. The lamps were lit in arches between the tenements; a band played; chestnuts and candy were on sale; the Italians pinned dollar bills on the shrine of their saint.

Suddenly there was a riot, and I saw Louis, singlehanded, beat up three Italian roughnecks who had pulled the beard of a

## Booze Runners

*Below the canadian Rockies  
the booze is run with cadillac jockeys  
over the line past the tape  
of the border;  
hang your chin on the steering gear  
and ride the engine harder—  
This is the one that won the laure's  
in Calgary for spurring sorrels,  
his mouth is redder for spitting blood  
but we'll hit Great Falls,  
BY GOD.*

NORMAN W. MacLEOD,