

THEODORE
DREISER

AT THE GATES OF THE CITY
1871—1907

Richard Lingeman

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS / NEW YORK

only take a carriage and ride home to one of their wonderful lamplit mansions that lined the great streets of the city." (Dreiser's biographer Dorothy Dudley, who grew up in Chicago and played with Hibbard's grandchildren, recalled the "enormous red brick house" with a stone fountain and the drawing room "dressed in pale green and gold brocade" with marble statues and black teakwood cabinets and a baronial dining room with elk heads and mounted trout on the walls and dark pictures everywhere.)

Though he needed the job, it was harming his health. The dust he breathed daily was playing havoc with his lungs. He also had a nervous stomach and suffered from constipation. He was tortured by the fear that his sexual excesses had rendered him impotent. With all this turmoil in mind and body, he became languid, rising with difficulty each morning, dragging through the day, and returning home exhausted.

But then Miss Fielding turned up at Hibbard, Spencer. She had left her job in Warsaw to become principal of a school in a Chicago suburb. Having saved some money, she wanted to use it to give Theodore a year at Indiana University. This was to be an experiment; perhaps he had an aptitude for something better, which college training would help him discover; perhaps not. At any rate, she wanted him to try. Theodore snatched at the lifeline. He had little idea of what college was like and read books like *Dink Stover at Yale* to find out. Miss Fielding knew the president of Indiana University and arranged for Theodore to be admitted as a special student. She would pay his two-hundred-dollar tuition and provide him with a monthly allowance of fifty dollars for room, board, and expenses.

He had no idea of what he would study (there were no courses for Great Men, after all), only a vague notion that in an industrializing, commercial society a young man who wanted to get ahead should acquire "technique"—a professional skill.

The time came to say goodbye to his fellow hardware stackers and box rustlers. They envied him his escape from drudgery. Aaberg would miss his disciple most of all: "I am glad for you, but that leaves me here with no one to talk to but these swine! God damn!"

mended him to her husband, Frank Nesbit, whose business was selling clocks, rugs, lampshades, and other bric-a-brac of garish taste and shoddy workmanship on the installment plan. In need of a collector, Nesbit sent for Theodore, liked his looks, and hired him on the spot. The work was enjoyable, for it enabled him to study exotic species of humanity in their native habitats. His duties were simple: he and a half dozen other collectors fanned out through the meaner streets, picking up weekly payments from the purchasers of Nesbit's gimcracks. Most paid up, though occasionally a hulking man would answer the door and dare him to collect. Hard cases like these Theodore wrote off as bad debts. He found he could complete his rounds by two in the afternoon, leaving him the rest of the day to spend at the library or the art museums.

The job took him to slums where he knocked at the doors of mean shanties with rubble-strewn yards. Fat black women leered invitingly at him; blowsy widows told him how lonely they were; strumpets rose naked from their beds and slouched, yawning, to the mantel to get the money to pay him—or offered him their services instead. He walked down streets paved with cedar blocks that had splintered and rotted, emblems of the city's heedless growth. In middle-class neighborhoods housewives sometimes signaled him to go around to the back door so their neighbors wouldn't see they were buying on time. Pictures registered in his brain: "The palls of heavy manufacturing smoke that hung low over the city like impending hurricanes; the storms of wintry snow or sleety rain; the glow of yellow lights in little shops at evening; mile after mile, where people were stirring and bustling over potatoes, flour, cabbages. . . ." Scenes like Goose Island in the Chicago River, its black muck littered with abandoned boats and shanties; the new Masonic Temple, which at twenty-two stories was the tallest building in the world; the volcanic din of factories, such as the vast Pullman yards, where grimy workers toiled like ants, fabricating the machines of this new, dynamic age.

He began to paint word portraits in his mind of what he saw. Sometimes he would chant these "word-dreams" as he walked, fancying himself an orator like the Reverend Frank W. Gunsaulus, a prominent evangelist spellbinder of the day. He began writing them down, and when he had a respectable number of them, sent them to Eugene Field, whose "Sharps & Flats" column in the *Chicago Daily News* printed verse and short items by outside contributors. Field never replied, but Theodore hardly expected him to: the act of sending them was communication enough.

Although his college days seemed a dream, the intellectual interests

kindled there were still vibrant. Miss Fielding invited him to visit her in Highland Park, the suburb where she was principal, and on those occasions she dinned into him the importance of developing his mind. Mind—that was the passport to the world of wealth, fame, and love. His college friend Ratliff had turned up, still an idealist and a Tolstoyan. Ratliff had been doing charitable work among the poor, and was becoming convinced that the Tolstoyan model of one who gives up his wealth and seeks to change poor people was wrong. Such efforts had little effect over the long run; they were just tinkering with one part of the social engine. Rather, one should devote one's efforts to overhauling the engine completely by working for sound reform measures.

As it happened, Theodore was searching for a religious faith that was relevant to the modern world, an alternative to his father's ingrown Catholic dogmatism. The social gospel—a movement to engage Christianity in the solution of contemporary problems—appealed to his idealistic side. He read the best-selling novels of Mrs. Humphry Ward, particularly *Robert Elsmere*, which described a minister's crisis of faith which leads him to challenge the comfortable pieties of his parishioners. The message could be found in popular novels like William T. Stead's *If Christ Came to Chicago!* and Charles M. Sheldon's *In His Steps*, which asked what would happen if people applied Christ's teachings in their everyday lives. The settlement house movement, which Jane Addams had sparked in Chicago in the nineties, reflected these religious concerns. The city also spawned a notable group of dissident preachers—men like Gunsaulus and H. W. Thomas, a fiery old man who had been expelled from the Methodist ministry for his radical views. They demonstrated to Theodore the possibility of a nondoctrinal, rational religion. He listened to Thomas's sermons at McVickar's Theater and attended meetings of the Ethical Culture Society.

Accompanying him to these affairs was a new love, a friend of Claire's at The Fair named Lois Zahn. Claire had brought her home at Christmastime, and although Lois was seeing another man regularly, a thirty-five-year-old clerk with a steady job who wanted to marry her, she was attracted to Theodore and flirted with him. She admired his height, now a gangling six feet, and his soft, light brown hair which he combed in a pompadour.

During that Christmas of 1891, Theodore felt a growing pressure to make some decision about his future, to choose some profession in which he was at least interested, rather than continue working at jobs he loathed. What precipitated these thoughts was the loss of his position with the