“A ‘House of Commons,’ as it was sometimes called, assembled late in the afternoon or early in the evening either on the veranda or inside the [general] store, depending on the weather” in the 1870s in his hometown of Gurleyville, Connecticut, remembered Wilbur Cross years later. “It was a variable group of men who came in for their mail and sat until somebody said it was time to go home. . . . There was no parliamentary restraint in that Yankee House of Commons.” But by the 1880s the men were aging. “The members dwindled to three and four graybeards and then all disappeared from the earth, leaving at last only their memory in the mind of a boy who sat in and listened. . . . With the passing of the graybeards . . . the old social order came to its end.”

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, propriety continued to make advances in most places. Even in the South and West raucous male behavior declined. Yet the reformation of male comportment begun in the 1820s remained incomplete. Wide-open cities were becoming less common, but urban areas still played their customary role as refuges from straight-laced village life. More novel was the easing of standards in some small towns. The battle against jolly fellowship had been won, and propriety was magnanimous in victory. Now that self-restraint, not self-indulgence, seemed more normal, the vigilant moral regime that had once seemed necessary to force men into line no longer seemed so essential. Even some reformers wondered if they had gone too far, if men were becoming too domesticated.

As disorderly male comportment declined in reality, representations of it in
literature and on stage flourished. The old connection between the comic and cruel endured. American popular culture celebrated violence. African Americans remained targets of white laughter. White jolly fellows, now often represented in the form of the mischievous “bad boy,” were an ongoing source of comedy. The jolly strain in American culture proved enduring.

*“The young man who dares to drink loses the esteem of ‘right-thinking people,’ and is ‘a nobody’”*

Drinking, gambling, and practical jokes continued to be censured and repressed. Temperance, the issue at the heart of nineteenth-century moral reform, had been largely eclipsed by abolitionism in the 1850s, but the anti-drink campaign was reenergized by the “women’s crusade” of 1873. Beginning in rural Ohio, female “visitation bands” called on saloons, general stores, and drugstores and demanded that they give up the evil trade in liquor. If the owner refused, the women would pray and sing hymns outside, often for days, to force the establishment to cease selling alcohol or close. There seems to have been a significant shift in outlook among moral reformers by this time. Governance of others now seemed to take precedence over self-governance. The two had always been connected, but there was now a sense that white, native-born, Protestant America had been to a considerable degree rehabilitated. In Chicago, crusade leader Eliza Stewart explained, opposition to prohibition was centered among the “lowest, most ignorant class of foreigners.” Sober deportment by them could only be achieved through compulsion.2

The crusade began in Hillsboro, Ohio, in late 1873 and enjoyed considerable success. In some villages, gangs of men tried to disrupt the protests by drowning out the hymns and prayers with howling and rough music, but usually to little effect. Often men aided the female crusaders. In Grant County, Indiana, in 1874, a saloon keeper who had been instructed to close his barroom “hesitated too long,” and a mob hauled him out of town on a rail. By one estimate, seventeen thousand drinking places in Ohio closed down, and much of rural Ohio became completely dry. The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was an offshoot of the crusade. Founded in Cleveland in 1874, it grew to be the largest female voluntary organization in the country. With 150,000 members by the 1890s and chapters in almost every town, the WCTU’s sponsorship of temperance lectures, pledge signings, temperance education, and prohibition laws put it at the forefront of the antiliquor campaign in the last two decades of the century.3

In 1880 Kansas became the first state since the Civil War to pass a prohibition
law; Iowa followed in 1882, Maine (again) in 1884, and Rhode Island in 1886. Public opinion remained divided, however, and progress was halting; Rhode Island repealed its ban in 1889. But even where statewide prohibition stalled, other methods of curbing drinking succeeded. One technique was to prohibit the selling of alcohol near schools—four miles was the specified distance in Tennessee. High license fees were another method. The most popular was the local option, which enabled municipalities to forbid the sale of alcohol if they wished, thus allowing the battle to be carried out at the community level. By the end of the nineteenth century, in some areas of the country, especially in the Midwest, drinking alcohol seemed to be a thing of the past, a vestige of an earlier, less enlightened age.⁴

Other moral reforms continued apace. Laws against gambling were strengthened and, more importantly, strictly enforced. The 1894 New York State constitution explicitly prohibited all forms of wagering for money. William Travers Jerome, the son of Lawrence Jerome, a member of the high-rolling Belmont clique in the 1860s and 1870s, spurned his father’s lifestyle, and as New York City district attorney, he launched an all-out campaign against gambling. The
opulent first-class casinos, a feature of New York life since the 1840s, were slowly but inexorably shuttered. Around the same time, authorities upstate were putting Saratoga’s gambling palaces and racetrack out of business. Many other states in the 1880s and 1890s passed and implemented new antigambling statutes. By the second decade of the twentieth century, betting on horse racing was legal in only three states. Even in the West the trend was the same. The perception that a territory’s chances for statehood were improved by cracking down on gambling strengthened the hand of reformers in that region. Illegal wagering went on (big-time gambler Arnold Rothstein was a celebrated figure of the 1920s), but more effective laws and enforcement made it harder and harder for men openly to place bets.5

Practical jokers previously had attracted little public criticism, but they faced mounting censure in the last thirty years of the century. Truly malicious and destructive pranks, the New York Clipper noted in 1870, had dwindled. The havoc wreckers of earlier days have been superseded by the “milder type of practical jokers” who cut bed cords and poured water in men’s boots. Even mild practical jokers were too much for the New York Times. They “show an inconsiderateness and recklessness of giving pain which should win for those who practice them contempt, and where possible, chastisement.” But, rejoiced the Times in 1873, pranks “are no longer in such vogue as they once were.” Only “very young or very uncultivated people still find a primitive delight in . . . poising pails of water over doorways to be tilted upon unsuspecting heads, or sending unwary persons off on wild-goose chases by means of fictitious messages.” In 1882 the paper returned to this theme to urge those who pulled violent practical jokes be jailed. Too often in the past, the defense that it was “all in fun” allowed pranksters to go unpunished. Only “one in a thousand . . . is brought before a court for consideration.” If they seriously feared the law, practical jokers would have to “revise some of their plans and methods.” The Times approvingly called attention to a case in which a “jolly fellow”—a waning term—was traveling on a train “in company with other jolly fellows” who bet him “that he did not dare to go through the train and kiss all the ladies.” One of the women he forcibly kissed had him arrested and he was fined. In another case in New Jersey, a newly married couple going on their honeymoon were treated to a “‘charivari’ or ‘skimmelton’” with the usual horns, drums and howling. “To heighten the impression” the revelers set off a charge of dynamite that accidentally blew the railroad depot to pieces. They also were successfully prosecuted.6

Cruel treatment of animals, which previously attracted scant attention, emerged as a significant issue. The impetus came, according to James Turner in his study
of the development of humane attitudes toward animals, from “the outgrowing of a way of thinking and feeling and the emergence of a new, distinctively, modern sensibility.” No longer were animals necessarily outside the frame of moral reference. No longer could men inflict pain on animals for pleasure without loss of respectability or fear of arrest. The movement quickly received support from a number of former abolitionists. Women, including Harriet Beecher Stowe and Lydia Maria Child, played a significant role in the campaign for animal protection. The William Lloyd Garrison of the movement was Henry Bergh, son of one of New York City’s most prominent shipbuilders, who founded the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) in 1866. Bergh “laid restraining hands on a fundamental evil,” Scribner’s magazine explained in 1879, “that blind and strangely human passion of cruelty” that vents “its cowardly malice on weak humanity and defenseless dumb animals.”

Bergh cast his net wide. Abuse of draft horses, maltreatment of circus animals, foxhunting, “swill dairies” in cities where penned cows were fed discarded brewery oats all were targets of the ASPCA. Bull- and bearbaiting had been effectively suppressed by the 1820s, but dogfighting and cockfighting had continued largely unhindered. Bergh received considerable publicity with a crusade that began in 1868 against Christopher “Kit” Burns’s Sportsmen’s Hall, New York’s most famous site of dogfights and competitions in which terriers killed rats. Acting on an ASPCA complaint, the New York police raided the establishment, and Burns, one of the cities best known sporting men, eventually was forced to close. The ASPCA developed widespread support and established chapters in other cities. Bergh was especially concerned about the West, endorsing the view of a Colorado correspondent that “the cruelty to animals in the East . . . seems insignificant to the wholesale barbarity in the West.” The ASPCA tried to halt the slaughter of buffalo and attempted to halt a widely publicized bullfight in Dodge City in 1884.

The transformation of male comportment over the course of the century in rural and small-town America was striking. Public opinion combined with the force of law to insure that in many villages, drinkers, gamblers, and fighters were stigmatized and often arrested. By the 1840s and 1850s heavy drinking had marked one a transgressor; by the 1880s and 1890s even a sip of liquor made a man something close to a moral leper. In the Iowa community where humorist George Ade grew up, drinking alcohol “seemed to be about as reprehensible as burning an orphan asylum.” A drinker was said to be “without shame and lost to all sense of decency. The godly residents wagged their heads at him and the women and girls avoided him as a wild and dangerous character.” Anyone in Angola, Indiana, who would even “think of using liquor as a beverage” would be “talked about”
and regarded with disdain. No longer was it enough not to gamble oneself; now respectable men had to avoid even the faintest association with wagering. Sociologist Newell Leroy Sims discovered that in Angola even the most reputable person dared not enter a pool hall, even on business, “lest they say he’s drinking or gambling.”

This did not mean that everyone had stopped consuming alcohol, of course. Many certainly had, but others, Ade remembered, learned to be discreet about imbibing, buying liquor surreptitiously and drinking at home or going on a binge in an anonymous city. Other drinkers were part of the small coterie of dropouts from decorum, found in almost every village. The nonconformists included not only drinkers and wagerers but almost anyone who displayed unconventional behavior—freethinkers, socialists, “swell dressers,” and women who went on unchaperoned dates. Some reveled in their outcast role. The scoffing village atheist was an institution, and there were barroom regulars who, Don Marquis remembered, “took a hangdog delight . . . in being called wicked and thought wicked.” The price paid, however, was significant. Once the village elite gathered openly in taverns; now in Angola and many other places, a man “who dares to drink loses the esteem of ‘right-thinking people,’ and is ‘a nobody.’”

There were still some men who gathered at general stores, barbershops, and drugstores. The “House of Commons” convened in Gurleyville, Connecticut, while “John Prien’s Standing Army” rendezvoused at Prien’s grocery in Columbus, Wisconsin. The men who assembled at Cross’s store in Gurleyville in the 1870s illuminate the changes in male conduct from the early years of the century. They discussed religion and politics, told ghost stories, swapped Civil War tales, and traded horses. But the joking was verbal, not practical; men made “what are now called wisecracks,” according to Cross. One twentieth-century study of rural society described “store porch humor” as “gentle,” an adjective seldom applied to the jests of the antebellum jolly fellows. Cross never mentions gambling or fighting. In contrast to the belligerence of men in former times, occasionally in heated arguments, “eyes flashed and fists doubled up, [but] . . . no blows were ever struck.”

In the South, as in the West, the advance of calmer male comportment had been slower. Heavy drinking, gambling, and fighting continued, especially in isolated, rural areas, into the late nineteenth century. In Milton County, Georgia, in the 1870s, “it was not considered a disgrace to get drunk,” Walter McElreath recalled. On one election day in the village of Freemansville, “dozens of men were vomiting or lying dead drunk under the trees.” During the same decade in Windsor, North Carolina, raucous turkey shoots and bearbaitings remained
popular. On Saturday, men gathered in saloons and “presently a dispute would arise . . . [and] everyone . . . would rush to the scene of the battle,” according to a fascinated onlooker. Within a few moments the street would be filled with fighters, “a half acre of them, swearing and tearing at each other’s clothes, and all about the most trifling incident. . . . To miss a part in a free-for-all fight was considered a sore disappointment.”

As in antebellum times, southern fights often turned deadly, especially when male honor was a stake. H. V. Redfield determined in *Homicide, North and South*, a pioneering 1880 investigation of patterns of criminal violence, that “bar-room affrays, street fights, and ‘personal difficulties’ in which weapons were used” were forty times more common in the South than in the North. Only a minority of fracases were interracial. Most combatants were either both white or both black, and Redfield’s statistics showed that deadly fracases were more common among whites than blacks. Middle-class blacks often complained about the failure of white police to crack down on black disorder. The cult of honor seemed to have become increasingly important among blacks, and much black violence, like white, involved liquor-fueled altercations between men, a good deal of it centered in black urban vice districts. Because southern whites made few distinctions among blacks, African American brawls discredited the entire race. After a free-for-all at a Memorial Day ceremony in Nashville in 1874, a black newspaper reported that the “better class of colored men” were outraged because “it looks like negroes cannot come together without fighting.”

Even in the South, however, there was a discernable tendency toward greater self-control. In largely white Milton County, Georgia, where, in the past, it had not been “considered a disgrace to get drunk,” a “remarkable change in sentiment occurred” in the late 1870s, McElreath recalled, and temperance societies were organized. “The drinking of liquor fell under such reprehension” that he could not remember a single case of drunkenness after that in the area. In some places in the South jolly comportment held out until the twentieth century. In Mize, known locally as Sullivan’s Hollow, in the piney woods region of Mississippi, nicknames, drinking, gambling, fighting and rough practical jokes endured. The male inhabitants were “scrupulously honest in their business dealings, fiercely loyal to friends, and courageous . . . but they would drink whiskey, and they would fight.” A brawl at a basketball game in 1922 was “the last great fight”—after that disorder ebbed, and Sullivan’s Hollow’s unruly reputation survived only as legend.

Even in the once Wild West rowdiness diminished. Many of the most uproarious communities vanished. The final western gold rush in Goldfield, Nevada,
peaked in 1906, and, as gold and silver deposits were exhausted, the inhabitants of most mining towns drifted away. Tombstone, which may have had a population of as many as 10,000 at its height in the 1880s, by 1900 had only 641 residents. As more and more land came under the plow, cattle drives north from Texas became impossible by the late 1880s, dooming Dodge City and Wichita as cow towns. The West slowly lost its demographic distinctiveness. As male nodes faded and more women moved West, the sex ratio equalized. Overall, almost as many women as men moved into the Rocky Mountain and Pacific states between 1880 and 1900. Colorado, for instance, was 66.5 percent male in 1880, but by 1900 only 54.7 percent of its population were men; Arizona in 1880 was 69.8 percent male, but by 1900 54.8 percent of its residents were men.15

The West was becoming like the rest of the country. “The time has come,” announced the territorial governor of Arizona, “when more care should be taken in our deportment . . . [than] when our towns and villages were the abodes of men chiefly, or of but few women and children,” and he urged the passing of statutes to improve the moral environment, including antigambling laws. As in “the East” (no longer “the states” or “America”), the female population aided probity’s cause. California, its unbridled days a thing of the past, passed a local option law in 1887. In some towns, temperance sentiment was as strong as in the Midwest—the barbershop in Calvert, Texas, in the 1880s had an entrance inside to an adjacent saloon so men who wanted a drink could “conceal their patronage.” Even the most uproarious places simmered down. A Harper’s Weekly reporter who visited Leadville, Colorado, in 1888 found it “as steady-going as Salem or Plymouth Rock” with seven churches. “Leadville!” one old-timer joked when questioned about the town’s placidity. “No stranger, this ain’t Leadville. It’s only some infernal Sunday-School town that ain’t named yet.”16

Physical comportment and tastes became more restrained. Photographs of men holding hands and embracing became less common by the end of the century. The American dining habit of grabbing what one wanted at mealtime that so appalled Dickens and other European visitors gave way to refined eating. Men waited their turn to serve themselves. John Habermehl was amused how men once scoffed at dining etiquette as undemocratic, but now “exchange the fork to the right hand after they had cut the meat . . . because it is fashionable.” Not only were attitudes and actions becoming more restrained but tastes were also becoming increasingly refined. Men had once taken pride in robust flavors and scents, in drinking whiskey and smoking cigars. When men now drank, their alcoholic beverage of choice was typically quite different from that of their rough-and-ready forebears. Lager beer became popular in New York City just before the Civil
War and by the 1860s and 1870s, the rest of the country was drinking it too. Although total alcohol consumption remained much below the levels of the 1820s, national beer consumption, negligible before the 1850s, rose to eighteen gallons per person in 1885. American-style lager is only 4 percent alcohol. “A man can get drunk” on lager, applauded one beer champion, “but few will.” Other habits changed as well. A “seegar,” aggressively thrust forward, had been a key part of the iconography of the b’hoys. Cigarettes were at first ridiculed as fit only for women and were considered decadent and “devitalizing” for men. When Richard “Big Dick” Butler, a New York City longshoreman, began smoking cigarettes, his fellow dockworkers taunted him as a “ciggy smoker.” Despite these effete associations, in the 1880s “mild smokes” boomed and by the twentieth century were the most popular tobacco product.17

Earlier reformers boasted about having driven drinkers, gamblers and fighters “into a corner,” and the corners only became fewer. At the turn of the twentieth century, traditional male disorder could be found only in the interstices of American society, in a waning number of ostentatiously masculine settings. “The West Side dockworkers of New York City that Big Dick” Butler’s describes sound much like men in the city decades earlier: it is a drinking, brawling, joking, nicknamed-filled world. “A real longshoreman is never so happy as when he is using his fists. . . . If he has a principle to fight for, all the better,” Butler explained. Folklorist Richard Dorson discovered a “Lumberjack Code” in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan “that stressed the ability to brawl and the necessity to get insensibly drunk.” As recently as the early twentieth century, “belligerent jacks for little reason flailed each other with bruising fists as long as a man could stand.”18

“EVERY INDIVIDUAL TASTE, EVERY NATURAL APPETITE, WAS BRIDLED WITH CAUTION”

The advance of rectitude seemed so relentless that it appeared to some that joy was being squeezed out of ordinary life. A group of poets and novelists emerged that protested the reign of unbending propriety in the name of personal freedom and happiness. In “The Revolt from the Village,” an influential 1921 Nation essay, Carl Van Doren critically scrutinized what had become by then a literary genre. Books like Edgar Lee Masters’s Spoon River Anthology, Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio, and Sinclair Lewis’s Main Street exposed what Van Doren called the “pitiless decorum” of small-town life. Although these works differ significantly from each other, they all portray how individual growth is stunted by the prudery, conformity, and mendacity of the midwestern village. Free spirits
of every sort were regarded with suspicion: not just drinkers and card and billiard players but also theatergoers, socialists, women who crossed their legs, and anyone who did not attend church—all were targets of censure. Such impossibly high moral standards—“puritanical” in the parlance of the day—led to expansive hypocrisy. Inhabitants struggled to break through the emotional repression to communicate their feelings to others. “Too many inhibitions can distort human spirit into grotesque forms,” was Van Doren’s summary of these works.  

Edgar Lee Masters’s Spoon River Anthology (1915) suggests how suffocating small-town life might have been for some people. Masters’s village of Spoon River is based on Lewistown, the central Illinois village where he grew up. Spoon River Anthology consists of a single stanza in verse about each of the men and women who lie buried in the town cemetery. Virtually all the characters and many of the events in the poem are based on real people and incidents that Masters remembered growing up in the 1880s. Lewistown was, as Masters later explained in a magazine article, divided into two groups—the conservatives, largely from New England, Republican, and very moralistic, and a more easy-going and permissive faction who were mostly southern Democrats. “The annual issue with Lewistown was saloons or no saloons,” Masters recalled, and the two sides battled bitterly over it. Edgar’s father, Hardin Masters, was a “rollicking man” who loved playing poker and “made no bones about the fact” that he “believed in drink in moderation,” strolling into barrooms through the front door. Hardin became a leader of the indulgent faction and thus the bane of the dominant conservatives. The conflict between these two groups, and their opposing worldviews, is a central theme of Spoon River Anthology. “The eternal struggle,” Edgar Lee Masters explained to an interviewer, is between “those who want to enjoy this world and those who want to make a hallway to another one.”

In Spoon River, Jefferson Howard is modeled on Hardin:

Stealing odd pleasures that cost me prestige,  
And reaping evils I had not sown;  
Foe of the church and its charnel darkness,  
Friend of the human touch of the tavern.

The villains of the poem are the conservative leaders, Thomas Rhodes, and A. D. Blood, apparently both modeled on Hardin’s real-life nemesis, Henry Phelps, president of the local bank, village council chairman, and superintendent of the Presbyterian Sunday school. Blood boastfully asks “who closed the saloons and stopped all playing at cards . . . / In many a crusade to purge the people of sin?” When the drunken Oscar Hummel mistakes Blood’s house for his
own and pounds on the door, Blood bursts out “roaring about the cursed saloon, and the criminals they made,” and bludgeons Hummel to death. The conservatives ostracize drinkers, radicals, dancers, divorcees, even attendees of an *H.M.S. Pinafore* performance. The Spoon River Social Purity Club forces Jim Brown to remove a breeding colt from his farm on the edge of town so as not to corrupt public morals.21

The poem concludes with the mock-heroic “Spooniad,” which recounts events from the 1880s that culminated in a key local election. Throughout the poem, the conservatives’ moral standards prove flexible when their own interests are involved, and they hire “Hog-eyed Allen, terror of the hills,” to intimidate antiprohibition voters at the polls. Liberal leader Kinsey Keene (also seemingly based on Hardin Masters) recruits Bengal Mike who kills Allen in an epic brawl. But the conservatives win anyway and hire a new town marshal:

> They wanted a terrible man,  
> Grim, righteous, strong, courageous,  
> And a hater of saloons and drinkers,  
> To keep law and order in the village.

Spoon River becomes dry; “the regimen of gloom” has triumphed.22

To Masters and other writers critical of small-town life, the decades-long campaign of moral reformation had eradicated not only licentiousness and disorder but almost everything natural, festive, and free. As he walks at night down the deserted main street of Black Hawk, Jim Burden in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia* feels like he is living under tyranny. “People’s speech, their voices, their very glances, became furtive and repressed. Every individual taste, every natural appetite, was bridled with caution.” Inhabitants had little choice but to conform, become a social outcast, or like the Revolt authors themselves, flee to Chicago or another city.23

So much had male conduct changed in the course of the century that there began to emerge a concern that American men had become “overcivilized,” a word coined in the late nineteenth century. Perhaps reformers and moralists had done their work too well. The worry here was less about village comportment than about the allegedly enervated urban, middle-class male, and it was a concern that had been aired as early as the 1850s. Raised by women, cooped up in city offices, men became reserved in conduct, sober in mien, polite in manners. American men, critics charged, were growing soft. The passing of the Civil War generation, men forged in battle, added to the unease. Indeed, Victorian culture itself, with its feminized sentimental Protestantism and genteel fiction, seemed to
many to be effeminate. Henry Childs Merwin gave expression to these concerns in an 1897 essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* titled “On Being Civilized Too Much.” Merwin lamented overeducated, “over-sophisticated and effete” men in whom all natural impulses, all spontaneity, have been stifled. Such men lacked two key primal instincts. Most obviously, they were bereft of “the instinct of pugnacity,” which “is or may be weakened by the process of civilization,” and he, like a number of others in this era, mourned its passing. Intriguingly, Merwin also was troubled by the more subtle, and perhaps more worrisome, way that instinctual, natural pity was muted by calculating conscientiousness. How many middle-class men actually fit this bloodless stereotype is unclear—the gruff, hardheaded man of business seems an equally prevalent archetype—but the concern was real.24

The solution was for middle-class men to remasculinize themselves. In the late nineteenth century, historian John Higham observed, a “new activist mood” began “to challenge the restraint and decorum of the ‘Gilded Age’. . . . In many instances, the activists’ rhetoric affirmed a continuity with an older, pre-modern culture.” No one advocated a return to two-fisted jolly fellowship. But self-control, it was hoped, was firmly established enough that men could find ways to invigorate their manly nature without lapsing into full-fledged disorderly behavior. Athletic activities seemed one key way this might be achieved. Churchmen and reformers had once scorned sports as a diversion from the serious business of life. Slowly, attitudes began to change. “The sage leaders of morality,” marveled the *Clipper* in 1879, “have come to look leniently, even admiringly, upon muscle, . . . the barriers of prejudice have been swept away.”25

Respectable society had once looked askance at pugilism, but in the last decades of the century, fighting began to be viewed more affirmatively by high-minded men. Not bloody, dusty, rough-and-tumble fighting, but scientific boxing and sparring: a restrained fighting. Duffield Osborne sounded the call in “A Defense of Pugilism,” published in the *North American Review* in 1880. “Civilization and refinement,” Osborne explained, “are excellent things, but they must not be confused with mere womanishness, nor must men learn to faint at the sight of blood as proof of their refinement.” He attacked boxing’s critics, who, “unmanly themselves,” are “caught by such specious watchwords as ‘progress,’ ‘civilization,’ and ‘refinement.’” The solution was for “thinking men who value their manhood” to “regulate and control pugilism.” Reputable men must wrest control of this virile pastime from the unsavory characters who presently dominate it and strictly enforce rules to eliminate its most brutal elements. Once fighting’s reputation is restored, a boy can, “as of old,” settle “his petty disputes with his fists,” and “we shall die leaving men behind us, not a race of eminently respectable female
saints.” The new, clearly spelled out, Marquis of Queensberry regulations mandating gloves and timed rounds made the sport less gory and seemed to reduce the bedlam that had often accompanied fights. Sparring became a respectable form of exercise. In 1884 the elite New York Athletic Club hired Mike Donovan, a former prizefighter who had fought at Harry Hill’s, as an instructor in the manly art of self-defense. Other clubs followed suit, and men of standing began lacing up the gloves.

Another sport that allowed for regulated violence was football. In the late nineteenth century, football was basically a college game played “solely by gentlemen’s sons,” according to the Police Gazette. College officials had never been able to completely suppress undergraduate fighting, and football offered a means, they hoped, of channeling unruliness into an activity that could be controlled and manipulated in ways that would enhance college solidarity and encourage in participants both self-mastery and athletic masculinity. Academic authorities were not at first completely successful. Early football relied heavily on brute force and was often little more than a controlled brawl and, at worst, an uncontrolled brawl when fans joined the battle. John Heisman, who played football at Brown in the late 1880s, remembered how players fought it out one on one: “You didn’t stand much of a chance of making the line in those days unless you were a good wrestler and fair boxer.” The sport quickly came under attack as unmanageable and dangerous. The Police Gazette pointed out the incongruity of men of alleged refinement celebrating football—“It takes real hard rough-and-tumble fighting to satisfy the delicate needs of the upper classes.” But others defended football not on the grounds that it was not brutal but because it was. Two Ivy League medical professors championed the sport in the North American Review in 1894. People who went to football games and saw players carried off on stretchers did not realize most injuries were minor, and an injury “not severe enough to leave permanent traces is not necessarily an evil but often even a positive good by building manliness,” they believed.

Football’s most powerful defender was Theodore Roosevelt, the self-proclaimed embodiment of respectable fin-de-siècle manliness. An advocate of the “strenuous life,” TR seemed bursting with masculine energy. The word “bully,” which except among jolly fellows used to have a negative connotation, was TR’s favorite term for something splendid. American men were once sturdy but now had become delicate. In our “perfectly peaceful and commercial civilization,” Roosevelt worried, “there is always a danger of laying too little stress upon the more virile virtues,” virtues for which “no amount of refinement and learning, of gentleness and culture can possibly atone.” The one section of the country where
such virtues still survived, he believed, was the West. The primitive condition of the region encouraged “vigorous manliness.” TR often visited the West and eventually bought a ranch in southern Dakota. The epigraph for his *Ranch Life and Hunting Trail* (1888), one of three books he wrote about his western experiences, was taken from Robert Browning: “Oh our manhood’s prime vigor!” Western life, remote from civilized society, cultivated the fighting virtues. Roosevelt relished stories of shooting affrays and recounted them in some detail. The West remained for Roosevelt, as in the American imagination, a place where red-blooded male vitality and honor still survived, and TR urged that undeveloped areas be preserved in their primitive, uncivilized splendor.28

Sports, Roosevelt hoped, could harden the American white middle-class male to face challenges to national greatness, especially in the Darwinian struggle with other races. Weak male bodies needed strengthening, and the era saw a rage for body building. A weight lifter himself, TR also favored more violent sports. He loved boxing and fought as an amateur at Harvard, and when he was governor of New York he sparred with Mike Donovan. John L. Sullivan was an acquaintance and occasional guest at Sagamore Hill. But, Roosevelt believed, “there is no better sport than football.” Collegiate football built character, and TR staunchly defended it from critics, “persons who are by nature timid, [and] shrink from the exercise of manly and robust qualities if there is any chance of its being accompanied by physical pain.” True, there was a risk of injury, Roosevelt admitted, but that was a small price to pay if colleges turned out “vigorous men” instead of “mollycoddles,” and, anyway, football was certainly safer than polo or foxhunting. In 1905, after a highly publicized series of football injuries and deaths and muckraking accounts of “tramp” players who competed for two and even three colleges in a season, Roosevelt convened a White House meeting of college officials and coaches that eventually led to reform of the rules, which included the introduction of the forward pass.29

“THE DENIAL OF THE DENIAL OF SELF-INDULGENCE”

Roosevelt and other commentators who lamented that civility had gone too far need not have been so worried. A significant countertrend had already begun that was loosening strict Victorian standards of comportment. Cities, one of “the extremes of social life” that William Alcott had worried about in 1836, had long been the bane of moralists. Urban places were certainly less disorderly than they had been earlier in the century, but they still fell short of the righteous consensus that characterized much of small-town life. Fighting had dramatically
diminished. Once tavern brawls and even minor riots had been common; now bystanders intervened and halted fights. Gambling and drinking, however, had not been eliminated. The closing of casinos and gambling halls was eliminating public gambling, but illegal wagering continued. And in most cities, saloons remained open. The fate of the women’s crusade of 1873–74 in urban areas suggests the difficulties reformers faced. From the beginning the saloon protesters had been warned that “the praying plan will do well enough for small towns, but when it comes to the large cities . . .—why it’s folly to think about it!” Cincinnati, with its three thousand saloons and large German population, greeted the antidrink crusaders with intense and sustained hostility. When women prayed outside of saloons, they were hooted and jeered. Unsympathetic police arrested them for blocking the sidewalk, and the campaign soon fizzled out. Even in villages there were signs that the moral crusade might be beginning to wind down. Growing real incomes, shorter working hours, and new and popular varieties of entertainment made it harder to convince people of the value of self-denial. In midwestern small towns where the triumph of propriety had been relatively recent, stern respectability was still firmly in the saddle, but in villages in the East where decorum had been long established, there was a perceptible easing of standards.30

That cities were never as mobilized as the countryside in the campaign against male disorder is an old story. What was new is what was happening in small towns in the East. In Waterville, in Oneida County, New York—the upstate village studied by sociologist James M. Williams in the 1890s—the story was quite different from the one told by revolt-from-the-village authors. The first part of Williams’s analysis of Waterville life is familiar enough. A moral reformation transformed the disorderly comportment of the community in the 1840s. The “austere party” came to dominate, and drinking, fighting, and “animal spirits” waned. But then around 1875 a new phase began. “The principle underlying all customs, in the first period, was the denial of self-indulgence. This has changed to the denial of the denial of self-indulgence.” Williams argues that this denial of self-denial was due to both the influence of city life and to a rising standard of living. The battle against jolly fellowship had been won, and once won, the exceptionally strict standard of propriety, “the cult of self-control,” that had characterized the first period of struggle no longer seemed imperative. Not that self-control was no longer essential; rather it was now internalized. It had become second nature.31

The change was played out in Waterville’s churches. The Episcopal church, which allowed its members to drink, dance, and play cards, represented the surging “convivial party,” according to Williams. The Baptists were the hub of the austere faction. The Episcopalians and the increasingly convivial Presbyterians
gained members in the 1880s and 1890s, while the Methodists and Baptists lost them. Where once most of Waterville’s leading citizens had embraced rigorous personal constraint, many now cut themselves, and others, some slack. The more relaxed standards were obvious in many areas of village life. Excessive drinking was still shameful, but moderate social drinking was no longer cause for reproach. Leisure became part of everyday life. All-male socializing waned, and heterosexual mingling grew. The Grange began to hold dancing and card parties. An opera house was built and theatergoing boomed. Bowling and roller skating, both condemned by the austere element, became fashionable. “Stock gambling” became unobjectionable. In contrast to the narrow-minded, almost totalitarian, villages depicted by the revolt authors, Waterville was now easygoing.32

Waterville’s history suggests that, at least in the East, the moral revolution had essentially succeeded. There now was confidence that self-control, not impulsiveness, was normal. Restraint was taken for granted. It seemed that a person could have a glass of beer and not become a drunkard, play a hand of cards and not be transformed into a gambler, go to a boxing match and not become a brawler. There were those who had not become party to this consensus who still needed to be reformed, but for most men and women, the stern, unyielding code of propriety that the moral revolution had brought in its wake now seemed outdated and unnecessary, even rather silly. In Gurleyville, Connecticut, in the 1880s, a new minister who excoriated playing cards as “painted demons” and “hellspots” and later assailed parishioners who had attended a circus was regarded as little short of a madman. Only the forceful intervention of the church elder saved the cleric from being forced to resign. Even in the Midwest, things may have been changing. Edgar Lee Masters depicts Lewistown, Illinois, in Spoon River as under the authority of an unyieldingly moralistic regime. Perhaps that had been true in the 1880s, but the 1890s told a different story. In that decade, the liberals became the dominant faction in the village. Hardin Masters, whose fictional persona in the poem is a martyr to the conservatives’ intolerance, was elected mayor and reopened the saloons.33

The sweeping reform movement that had begun in the early nineteenth century—what Edward Jarvis called a “moral and intellectual epidemic”—had peaked. Reformers believed that more still needed to be done, but there was, in fact, much for them to be proud of. Jolly behavior, which once seemed to be an inherent male trait, now was looked on as deviant. Self-governance was the new standard. The very success of civility allowed it to moderate. People who remembered the raucous “old social order” of former days looked back at the transformation in male comportment with amazement. William Lynch, a railroad engineer,
marveled at the alteration in male conduct he had witnessed over the course of his life. In “former times, the first place to go after putting away the train was to the saloon and tank up with booze and play cards, get drunk and fight. But now we hardly ever hear of a railway man getting drunk. They all seem to be sober and perfect gentleman.”

“THE MORE OFTEN HE IS BEATEN THE MORE WE LAUGH”

If, as Wilbur Cross believed, the raucous “old social order” had come to an end, the old cultural order proved more enduring. The dimming of jolly fellowship does not seem to have been accompanied by any significant reduction in its cultural significance. The violent humor that characterized the Mose plays, southwestern literature, and minstrelsy continued to hold an important, perhaps even central, place in American popular culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As before, New York City played a key role in this process. The level of violence both in comic literature and popular theater increased to a frenzied level, but mayhem became more stylized, often inflated to levels that clearly moved it into the realm of fantasy.

In the last three decades of the nineteenth century, vaudeville theater had evolved into a tremendously diverse and vital popular entertainment. A vaudeville show consisted of a sequence of acts, ten or fifteen minutes long, featuring singers to trapeze artists, dancers to ventriloquists, magicians to dog acts, and comedians to regurgitators. More women attended the shows than in earlier decades, but audiences still were predominantly male. Comic violence remained a staple. The aggressive strain in vaudeville was general, but increasingly stage violence came to be associated with Irish and African Americans. Many Irish entertainers, male and female, cultivated a combative persona. Among the most popular was Maggie Cline, “the supreme Irish comedienne of the nation,” according to the New York Herald-Tribune. Said to have gotten her start singing at Harry Hill’s sporting theater, she weighed two hundred pounds, and her blaring voice led her to be dubbed the “Brunhilde of the Bowery.” Cline had many hits, including “Pitcher of Beer,” “Down Went McGinty” and “Choke Him, Casey, Choke Him,” but her signature song was “Throw Him Down, McCloskey” (1890). She would stride on stage and announce, “Now ladies and gentleman I will sing the dainty and pathetic little ballad that drove me into the business.”

’Twas down at Dan McDevitt’s at the corner of the street,
There was to be a prize fight, and both parties were to meet;
To make all the arrangements, and see ev’rything was right.
McCloskey and a naygur were to have a finish fight.

The chorus went:

Throw him down, McCloskey, was to be the battle cry,
Throw him down, McCloskey, you can lick him if you try;
And future generations, with wonder and delight,
Will read on hist’ry’s pages of the great McCloskey fight.

The “naygur” does not show up, but “McCracken” agrees to fight, “stand up or rough-and-tumble, if McCloskey didn’t bite.” The fight goes forty-seven bloody rounds until “McCloskey got a mouthfull of poor McCracken’s jowl. / McCracken hollered ‘murther,’ and his seconds hollered ‘foul.’” A free fight breaks out. The song ends by cataloging the carnage, noting that “McCloskey lost an upper lip, McCracken lost an eye.” As Cline sang, she shadowboxed. “Throw Him Down, McCloskey” was an smash hit. The New York Herald-Tribune recorded in her obituary that she sang the song “not less than 6,000 times, not only for the gallery boys, but for Grover Cleveland, William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt.” Cline was so identified with the song that she tried to drop it from her act, but this only set off “a loud clamor for the classic” from the audience.

Blacks, even more than Irish, were the embodiment of comic violence in vaudeville, continuing a theme begun in minstrelsy. “Coon songs” that comically mocked blacks became hugely popular in the 1880s. Songs caricaturing African Americans had been popular since the 1830s, and coon songs fall squarely within the minstrel tradition, but with their catchy syncopated rhythms they became a fad. May Irwin, a white vaudeville star who had made a specialty of coon songs, achieved a huge hit in 1896 with her “‘Bully’ Song,” also known as “The New Bully” and “The Bully of the Town.” The exact genesis of the song is unclear. The flourishing black sporting subculture had provided African American folklore with a panoply of outsized bad men of whom Stagolee was only the most famous, and “The ‘Bully’ Song” may have begun as a black folk song. In Irwin’s version a new brawler shows up in town, and “he’s round among de niggers a layin’ their bodies down.” The narrator, the reigning town bully, boasts “I’m a Tennessee nigger and I don’t allow, no red-eyed river roustabout with me to raise a row.” He vows to find the new bully and “make him bow.” After a long search—the stirring chorus goes “As I walked dat levee round, round, round, round . . . , I’m lookin’ for dat bully an’ he must be found”—the inevitable confrontation occurs: “When I got through with bully, a doctor and nurse, / Wa’nt no good to dat nigger, so they
put him in a hearse.” “Dere’s only one boss bully, and dat one is me,” the song concludes. With its truculent lyrics, similar to those of antebellum minstrel hits about black brawlers such as “Jim Crow” and “Old Dan Tucker,” and its infectious tune, “The Bully Song” was a sensation, and like “Old Dan Tucker,” it long remained popular in the folk tradition.36

Irwin’s success sparked a rage for bully songs. The violence was deadlier than in the Irish brawler songs—rather than merely having an eye gouged out, Irwin’s new bully is killed. Jim Crow only used his fists; blacks in coon songs, by contrast, were armed. The razor became the hallmark of their alleged propensity for violence—“took along my trusty blade to carve that nigger’s bones,” Irwin’s bully relates. When the sheet music for “The ‘Bully’ Song” was published in the cartoon supplement to the New York Journal, a razor was prominently featured. Even armed with razors or guns, blacks could still be figures of fun. The bully on the cover of Irwin’s song is a grotesque caricature of a black urban dandy with colossal lips and prominent heels, standard features of black caricatures for decades, who looks too dopey to be really dangerous. Bully songs reflected and reinforced white fears about murderous black men, yet at the same time they could remain comic since those sliced up and killed were African Americans.37

The Irish and blacks took center stage among vaudeville brawlers, but the battling b’hoys was not forgotten. Real b’hoys had long since disappeared from New York streets. Mose too was gone, having departed Manhattan for the West. But belligerent New Yorkers continued to tread the stage. In the 1870s the b’hoys stereotype was brilliantly updated and renewed in the “Dan Mulligan” sketches of Edward “Ned” Harrigan. Harrigan’s career suggests the endurance of the New York–San Francisco axis. Born, as was Thomas “Jim Crow” Rice, in New York’s waterfront Seventh Ward, Harrigan worked as a ship caulker. In 1867 he left for the Pacific Coast. Harrigan had performed as a minstrel during amateur nights at the Bowery Theater, and, after a short stint caulking in San Francisco, he became a full-time vaudevillian. “In the West,” the New York Times explained, “he found his mission in life—that of making others laugh.”38

Teamed with Tony Hart, an outstanding farceur, he returned to New York in 1872. Their breakthrough came in the series of rollicking Mulligan plays that made Harrigan and Hart among the most celebrated theater performers of the era. Featuring such popular songs as “The Mulligan Guards March” and “I Never Drink Behind the Bar (but I Will Take a Mild Cigar),” the act was immediately successful and played to packed houses not only in Manhattan but throughout the country. The plots usually focused on the very Irish Dan Mulligan (played by Harrigan) and his family’s relations with their tenement neighbors, especially
Dan’s German nemesis, Gustav Lochmuller, a butcher. If Lochmuller shared Mose’s occupation, it was Mulligan who shared Mose’s comportment. A jolly Clipper-reading, Fourteenth Ward grocer and saloon keeper, Mulligan was always ready for a drink, fight or practical joke.39

Harrigan’s plays owed a good deal to minstrelsy. Characters were ethnic and racial caricatures. Blackface roles were important in almost all of Harrigan’s sketches. Usually played by Hart or Billy Gray, a veteran of Bryant’s Minstrels, Harrigan’s “nagurs” talked in the comically pompous speech of the minstrel stage and were prone to pull razors. A recurrent motif was the rivalry between Mulligan’s Irish volunteer militia company, the Mulligan Guards, and the black Skidmore Guards. In the Mulligan Guard Ball (1891), the formal dances of both the Mulligan Guards and Skidmore Guards are by mistake booked at the same hall.
at the same time. A free-for-all ensues. Eventually the Skidmores are prevailed on to take an upstairs room, but in the climax the floor collapses, spilling them down onto the Mulligan Guards. The “coons came down in chunks,” and the icewagon had “to take ten of ’em to de hospital.”

The *Mulligan Guard Ball* is not unusual in its uproarious climax. “ Melee” and “general melee” were two of Harrigan’s favorite stage directions. Blowing up things was a jolly-fellow favorite, and Harrigan made explosions something of a trademark. *The Major* (1881) ends with the protagonist getting drunk and accidentally dropping his cigar in a fireworks factory. “Explosion[,] . . . Fireworks seen through the windows of factory[,] . . . the front of the factory sinks through the stage and the debris of the roof crashes.” In a scene that recalls the dismemberment of blacks in Henry Clay Lewis’s stories, African Americans conveniently sitting on the roof of the factory are blown to bits. The stage directions call for “heads, limbs, and bodies . . . seen by audience descending from the sky,” presumably to howls of laughter. So mangled are the remains that a surviving black remarks that “you couldn’t tell whether you were burying a relative or friend.”

The violent strain in vaudeville reached a kind of culmination in the celebrated comedy routines of Weber and Fields. Both Lew Fields (whose real name was Moses Schoenfeld) and Joe Weber were Jews from the Lower East Side of New York. At the height of their fame in the 1890s, the pair was making an incredible $4,000 a week. Their Broadway theater was, according to the *Dramatic Mirror*, “the most popular music hall in America,” and some of the top stars in the country, including Lillian Russell, were part of their troupe. They were the most famous two-man act in the history of vaudeville—and one of the roughest. A “double Dutch knockabout act” in vaudeville taxonomy, Weber and Fields were inspired by earlier “rough” acts in which performers traded “bumps,” stage jargon for blows to the head and upper body. Their first professional performance was at the Chatham Museum on the Bowery in 1877, and they later worked for Harry Hill, who believed their raucous performances would appeal to the patrons of his famed establishment. “Scenes at a Boxing School” was one of their popular early sketches.

In their act, Fields played Meyer and Weber played Mike; they mangled English and each other. In the slapstick manner of the day, their sketches concluded with Fields pummeling Weber. “All the public wanted to see was Fields knock the hell out of me,” Weber recalled. Injuries were common, and the pair learned an important lesson in an 1885 Providence performance. Weber’s skull protector slipped, and when Fields hit him over the head with a walking stick, blood
spurted out. The crowd screamed with laughter; by the end of the act the theater was in an uproar, and the pair had to take an extra curtain call before Weber could receive medical attention. The harder Weber was hit, the more people laughed, and “when we bled audiences seemed to like us all the better,” Fields remembered.43

In 1912 Weber and Fields wrote a newspaper article that summed up some of the lessons they learned performing in vaudeville for thirty-five years. It was entitled “Adventures in Human Nature” because they believed their decades on stage had given them insight into the popular mind. Audiences, they had discovered, took intense delight in seeing others hoodwinked, humiliated, and hurt. “As the chance of pain, the portion of physical misery, the proportion of tragedy becomes diminished . . . so does the proportion of laughter become less and less.” This “may seem mean—anything you may care to call it;—but it is true.” The one caveat was that the pain not be accompanied by a permanently crippling injury. Weber and Fields over the years learned exactly what audiences most enjoyed. At the top of the list, they determined, was “to see two friends fight.” Second in pleasure was watching the underdog get the worst of it, especially in “a one-sided fight with the weaker man consistently losing.” Human nature, they believed, required that we laugh at seeing a man beaten, “and the more often he is beaten the more we laugh.” The pair became connoisseurs of cruelty and discovered that the loudest laughter came when someone was poked in the eye, when “a man choke[d] another man and shake[d] his head from side to side” and when a victim was kicked.44

As they learned what got the biggest audience response, their act evolved. It was always the bigger Fields who assaulted the five-four Weber. Weber was strangled, hit over the head, and had his eyes gouged. (Apparently it was Weber and Fields who made the poke in the eye a vaudeville staple. Two fingers got a bigger laugh than one finger they learned.) What elevated Weber and Fields above earlier knockabout acts was their clever dialogue, exquisite timing, and especially the brilliant conceit that the pair were not enemies but close friends. In one of their most popular early routines, “The Choking Sketch,” Weber (Mike) asks Fields (Meyer) why he keeps attacking him.

“Why? Why? Because I like you! Mike when I look at you—I have such a—feeling that—oh, I can’t express myself! Such a — oo— oo— oo— oo! (Chokes him [Weber], then turns to the audience) Why do I go with him? (Pointing at Weber) When I look at him my heart goes out to him. (To Weber) When you are away from me, I can’t keep my heart off you. When you are with me I can’t keep my
hands off you. (Chokes him) But sometimes I feel that you do not return my affection. You do not feel—something that—oo—oo—oo—oo! (Chokes him again, etc.)"

On stage this would have been delivered with a “Dutch” accent. The sight of Fields strangling Weber, Weber’s eyes popping out as they staggered around, Fields insisting all the while that “I luff you, Mike,” proved irresistible to audiences. The homoerotic and the violent were bound together, and Mike and Meyer alternated between them capriciously in a way quite similar to an older style of male relationships. Weber and Fields’s costumes reinforced this archaic quality: they wore outlandish outfits, loud baggy pants, and jackets several sizes
too small. Their makeup was equally absurd, and they wore preposterously fake beards. This was the appearance favored by comedians decades earlier, but it was passé by the 1890s. The pair seem to have made a conscious decision to continue in the manner of classic Dutch acts. The dated features of their act likely made their mayhem more acceptable to audiences—it was clearly situated in the past.45

“The ‘guy’ is inferior to you and deserves everything he is stupid enough to take”

Laughable violence was also found in late nineteenth-century literature. Just as southwestern literature had situated disorder in the past and minstrelsy located it among blacks, a body of writing emerged that centered tumult on male children, on the “bad boy.” A degree of unruliness had long been tolerated, even admired, among young men as a sign of spunk. One rather remarkable example of the indulgence boys received came from the pen of Lydia Maria Child who in 1853 wrote Isaac T. Hopper: A True Life, a biography of her Quaker friend who championed a wide variety of antebellum reform causes. She devotes considerable attention to Hopper’s boyhood pranks. Here is what he did. He tied “the boughs of trees together in narrow paths, that people traveling in the dark might hit their heads against them.” He sawed a footbridge almost in half, then said something “very impertinent” to the schoolmaster who chased him over the bridge, and when the bridge broke the schoolmaster only “with difficulty saved himself from drowning.” Hopper threw gunpowder into the schoolhouse stove and the resulting explosion “did some injury to the master.” But, Child cheerfully concluded, “there was no malice in his fun.”46

Hopper’s “pranks” seemed to have been regarded merely as evidence of high spirits and were taken as good jokes. With the increasing emphasis on decorous behavior, however, it was “self-conquest” that was becoming valued. Although admiration for unruly boys remained, moralists argued that literature for young people should be uplifting and present children who were models of Protestant virtue. Jacob Abbott, in his series of Rollo stories, the first of which was published in 1835, essentially created American juvenile fiction. Abbott, a Congregational minister and teacher, explained that the books were written “to awaken and cherish the spirit of humble and unobtrusive but heartfelt piety” in youth. In Rollo in France (1854), Rollo, traveling with friends of his parents, kept the Sabbath, even in roistering Paris. It was tempting to go sightseeing, but Rollo concludes that “it was not right” and would be “displeasing to God . . . to spend any part of the day
which God had consecrated for his own service and to the spiritual improvement of the soul in ordinary... amusements.” Instead Rollo spends Sunday afternoon reading the Bible to his little sister.47

Such impossibly good boys inspired a backlash, in part because of the suspicion that few real youths could take the saintly Rollo very seriously but also perhaps because of the growing fear that American men were becoming overly refined. Boys needed something that was more cultivated than dime novels but more robust than Sunday-school tales. Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s bestselling The Story of a Bad Boy (1869) fit the bill, and its success, along with that of John Habberton’s Helen’s Babies in 1876, transformed bad-boy stories into a literary genre. Many of these bad boys were “bad” only in comparison to the angelic heroes that appeared in earlier children’s fiction. The bad boy in Bailey’s book, like others in this type of literature, gets into schoolyard fights, sets off firecrackers, and pulls some mild pranks. These boys are not really evil but simply headstrong, playful, and inquisitive; they are good at heart. The older idea that a propensity for mischief in boys was a sign of spirit, which had never entirely waned, revived.48

If most literary bad boys are merely mischievous, some are truly mean. “The Christmas Fireside” (1865), one of Mark Twain’s earliest stories, turns the good boy tale completely on its head. It portrays a boy who, unlike the youths in didactic literature, not only does bad deeds but does not regret them and gets away with them. “Once he climbed up in Farmer Acorn’s apple tree to steal apples, and the limb didn’t break, and he didn’t fall and break his arm... and repent and become good. Oh, no—he stole as many apples as he wanted, and came down all right, he was ready for the dog, too, and knocked him endways with a rock.” The story concludes in Twain’s characteristic cynicism: “He grew up, and married, and raised a large family, and brained them all with an axe one night, and got wealthy by all manner of cheating and rascality; and now he is the infernal, wickedest scoundrel in his native village, and is universally respected, and belongs to the Legislature.” Twain, of course, was to brilliantly develop the bad boy into a character of complexity and meaning in Tom Sawyer (1876) and Huckleberry Finn (1885).49

George W. Peck’s famed bad boy, did not, unlike Twain’s Huck, transcend the bad-boy genre, but Peck’s fictional protagonist was more than a gentle riposte to priggish Rollos. “Hennery,” the bad boy, is a real hellion. George Peck was a Wisconsin newspaperman and Democratic politician, a mayor of Milwaukee and two-term governor of Wisconsin. His bad boy tales began as newspaper sketches and were later expanded into a series of bad-boy books. The most popular was Peck’s Bad Boy and His Pa (1883), which was to remain in print until the end of the
next century. Its phenomenal popularity generated Peck’s Bad Boy songs, Peck’s Bad Boy plays, and even, two decades later, a Peck’s Bad Boy comic strip. The setting of the stories is middle class; Peck realized that the trappings of respectability made the chaos that Hennery caused all the more disruptive. “The boy,” as he is called, is no child, and the book does not seem to have been intended solely, or perhaps even primarily, for children. Hennery is finished with school and is working; in one story he is a “teller” in a livery stable: “When a man comes into hire a horse I have to go down to the saloon and tell the livery man.”

The central narrative of the book is the recounting of Hennery’s practical jokes, one after another. “The boy” displays the true character of the prankster, as E. F. Bleiler explains in his introduction to a 1958 edition of the stories: “The ‘guy’ is inferior to you and deserves everything he is stupid enough to take.” Once the conditions for playing a good prank materialize, Hennery cannot rest until the prank is accomplished. He puts castor oil in the maple syrup pitcher, kerosene in the vinegar jug, and pepper into the stove at Sunday school. He is “a terror to cats.” “Dynamiting a Dog” in Peck’s Red Headed Boy (1903) recalls the savage humor of southwestern literature. “A man had a dog he wanted killed” and hires some boys to do it. They decide “to get a stick of dynamite and blow the dog sky-high.” The explosive is tied to the dog’s tail, and after some anxious moments when the dog, a friendly creature, runs after them, it detonates. “Pieces of dog, blood [and] hair” were everywhere, and “nearly every boy was covered with blood.”

The most developed and important character in the stories, however, is not the boy, but Pa, who strains to live up to the tenets of middle-class propriety but never entirely pulls it off. After a few months of decorous behavior, Pa begins to exhibit the classic symptoms: drinking, betting on horse races, going to prizefights, and playing practical jokes. Peck admires Pa’s failure, for respectability is a racket. In Peck, as in Twain, the bad-boy tale becomes a work of social criticism. Pranks become a weapon against gentility. Members of the church are pious hypocrites, and businessmen cheat customers whenever they can. In one memorable incident, Hennery soaks his father's handkerchief in liquor and folds a deck of cards into it before Pa goes to church. His father takes out the handkerchief while testifying at the service, the cards go flying into the air, and the smell of whiskey permeates the building. Pa is being punished, in Peck’s view justly so, for his attempts to put on airs, to become a part of that sanctimonious fraud known as the middle class. He is better off being himself, a bibulous, disheveled, fun-loving dreamer.

The bad boy and the Bowery Boy intersected in the 1890s in what became an enduring legacy of the jolly vein in American culture—the newspaper comic
strip. Cartoons were nothing new—they had been appearing in newspapers and magazines throughout the nineteenth century—but what Ohio-born artist Richard Outcault drew for the Sunday *New York World* in 1895 was innovative: it was in color and appeared weekly. Outcault, like other early comic artists, was indebted to vaudeville humorists. Journalist Roy L. McCardell, writing in 1905, noted that “the knock-about comedians of the old-time music-halls might easily have posed for most of the pictures” printed in the Sunday comic supplements of newspapers. Outcault entitled his comic *Hogan’s Alley*, after the location of “Maggie Murphy’s Home,” a popular song in Ned Harrigan’s *Reilly and the Four Hundred*, which played on Broadway in 1890–91. Hogan’s Alley was in New York City’s tough Fourth Ward, and its inhabitants, a panoply of ethnic, racial, and social types, struggled, very much in the tradition of Harrigan’s Mulligan plays, to get along with each other. The adults were coarse caricatures, but the tenement waifs that were really the focus of the cartoon were realistically drawn, inspired apparently by Jacob Riis’s photographs.

The newspapers in which *Hogan’s Alley* appeared, Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* and later William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal*, were not genteel newspapers, and *Hogan’s Alley* was not a genteel place. Prominently featured in the front of each cartoon was a child with a shaved head who was dressed in a yellow nightshirt and who commented on events in New York dialect—this was bad boy Mickey Dugan, the famous Yellow Kid. Outcault’s original cartoon was a single tableau. Some were simply poignant depictions of slum children playing by organizing a tea party or staging their own circus, but in others, the youngsters mimicked public events such as political conventions and prizefights, giving Outcault a chance to remark on the news of the day. It was a cartoon about children but not a cartoon for children. Even after criticism forced Outcault to tone down the mayhem, he still infused brutality into his work. One scholar wrote that Outcault saw “comedy in violence and casual cruelty.” Eyes are gouged, dogs kicked, and, in an Outcault trademark, people fall from tenement fire escapes. Blacks take an incredible pounding in early comics and *Hogan’s Alley* was no exception: in Outcault’s cartoon, African Americans are punched in the face, butted by billy goats, hit in the head with golf clubs, and have their hair pulled out.

The Yellow Kid was a spectacular success and likely inspired the name “yellow journalism.” Outcault was part of the famous group of newspapermen that Hearst in 1896 hired away from the *World* to the *Journal*, and for a while both papers ran versions of *Hogan’s Alley*. In 1900 Outcault began drawing a new cartoon for the *New York Herald* about a black boy called *Poor Lil Mose*. (That name again!) Mose lasted for a little over a year, and in 1902 Outcault created his most
popular comic strip, *Buster Brown*. It differs in a number of ways from *Poor Lil Mose*, but the name “Brown” perhaps creates a suggestion that Buster’s unruliness is analogous with that of blacks. Buster is a bad boy, a very bad boy. Outcault realized, as Peck had before him, that placing the bad boy within a respectable, in Buster’s case upper-class, household only multiplies the possibilities for comic destruction. Like Hennery, Buster was an unfettered prankster, and Outcault was given a full page to elaborate on his practical jokes. Before a formal dinner, Buster blacks up the faces of the portraits on the dining-room wall and pulls off the tablecloth sending the formally set china and silverware flying. No motive is given for Buster’s pranks; they seem simply to stem from a love of destroying order and creating chaos. In one Sunday strip Outcault answered the question of what Buster had done during the rest of the week: “On Monday he painted the kitchen with stove blacking. Tuesday he accidentally set the house on fire. Wednesday he put kerosene in the soup. Thursday he put ink in the wash tub.” Usually in the last panel, Buster apologizes, but often with a sardonic observation that seems intended for the strip’s many adult readers. “Children are human. They don’t become inhuman until they grow up,” went one. Buster Brown was even more popular than the Yellow Kid, touching off a rage for Buster Brown plays, Buster Brown suits, and Buster Brown shoes.55

The second founding father of American comics was Rudolph Dirks who began drawing *The Katzenjammer Kids* in the *New York Journal* in 1897. “Katzenjammer” in German literally means the yowling of cats, or in slang, a hangover. The German-born Dirks, an accomplished painter, took the idea of the Katzenjammer Kids from *Max und Moritz*, a series of illustrated books by Wilhelm Busch, inspired in part by the Till Eulenspiegel tales, featuring two prank-playing boys that were wildly popular in Germany in the 1860s. Dirks also drew heavily on the bad-boy stereotype and on vaudeville “Dutch” humor. All the characters speak in German dialect. The agitated turbulence of the Kids, Hans and Fritz, plays comically against the popular stereotype of the stolid Dutchman. The plot is basically one prank per strip, mostly played on Mama or the Captain (her male companion).56

Hans and Fritz are a perfect match, so attuned to mischief that rarely is it necessary for them to plot a practical joke. Both instantly understand that a bear in a cage is to be let out of the cage. Even when they know they will be caught and disciplined, they play pranks—they can’t help themselves. Usually, the strip ends with the boys crying as they are spanked. As with Buster Brown, however, the sheer delight they take in havoc outweighs the pain of punishment; typically they execute their pranks grinning fiendishly from ear to ear. Their love of
pandemonium is palpable; for Christmas 1903 Hans and Fritz excitedly ask for a battleship and a tiger. The pair achieved popularity, Roy McCardell sarcastically explained, by “their habit of setting their dear old mother on fire, hitting her with clubs . . . [and] tying ropes across her path to trip her.” Hans and Fritz are masters of devastation. As in the Mulligan plays, explosions often cap the action. The Kids are demolition experts, using fireworks, flash powder, gunpowder, gasoline, and dynamite. “‘Is it powder Hans?’ ‘No, it is dynamite,’” Hans’s practiced eye determines before the inevitable detonation in “The Katzenjammer Kids Explode a Ship” from 1902. “Mit dose kids, society iss nix!” blurs out the Inspector (a truant officer) in one strip. Writes cartoon historian Richard Marschall, “they live to destroy and reduce, and no characters in the comics or in all fiction take more undiluted delight in such mayhem.” Sut Lovingood actually might have an edge here, but there is no doubt that anarchic violence has rarely been more fondly depicted.57

The Katzenjammer Kids was the longest running and probably the most popular American comic strip in history. In 1914 Dirks had a falling out with Hearst and went to the World where he continued to draw the strip under the title The Captain and the Kids. The Journal, which retained the copyright for the title Katzenjammer Kids, then hired another cartoonist to draw it. Even though the strips over the years became more constrained, the jolly thrust remained. In 1907 Dirks introduced Sandy the butcher boy into his version of the Katzenjammer Kids. Sandy is recognizably the type, perhaps the last of a long line of brawling butchers going back to Mose. Sandy talks tough in a Bowery dialect—”Don’t gimme me no back-talk nieder”—and beats Fritz up.58

The ferocity of the early comics strips outraged many. Ralph Bergengren, writing in the Atlantic Monthly, was dismayed that “physical pain is the most glaringly omnipresent” of cartoon motifs. Much of what passes for humor in the supplements is merely “the crude brutality of human nature, mocking at grief and laughing boisterously at physical deformity.” Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine found the comics to be nothing less than “a national peril.” Were someone to enter a home and “induce the young people to indulge in malicious practical jokes,” that person would be thrown out of the house, but every Sunday parents let their children read cartoons, which almost invariably end with some poor victim “being maltreated, blown to pieces or battered to a jelly.” Comics overturn any conception of right and wrong by appealing to “one of the basest traits in human nature—joy at another’s misfortune.” Cartoon scholars in later decades were not so much outraged by early comic strips as puzzled by them. As with southwestern writers like Henry Clay Lewis, commentators wondered what read-
ers found amusing in this decimation. What exactly was funny about the funnies? Colton Waugh, in his history of comic strips, could only conclude that “it would seem that readers like to see simple, helpless people beaten, kicked, [and] cuffed around.”59

Among the first commercial animated cartoon shorts was a Katzenjammer Kids adaptation, “Policy and Pie” (1918), and animation continued the unabashed mayhem that had characterized comic strips. It became, indeed, one of the most distinctive features of the new form of entertainment. Finding ways to “bludgeon someone on paper” was, according to Norman M. Klein in his history of cartoons, the formula for success for early animation artists. The first generation of cartoonists, virtually all of whom worked in New York City, learned not only from comic strips but from vaudeville. Dave Fleischer, who teamed with his brother Max on the popular Out of the Inkwell series and later Betty Boop and Popeye, attributed the comic timing of their cartoons in part to his watching Weber and Fields while working as a theater usher. Early cartoons displayed a strong partiality for jolly action; not only fighting and violence but also pranks and drinking were common themes.60

E. G. Lutz’s landmark book Animated Cartoons (1920) explained so clearly and precisely how cartoons were made that almost anyone who could draw could produce them, including the young Walt Disney, who repeatedly checked the book out of the Kansas City public library. Lutz believed that the archetypal comic cartoon plot was a clash between two antagonists, “growing in violence.” “It is indispensable, for the sake of an uninterrupted animation,” that there be “a cumulative chain of actions, increasing in force and resultant misfortune.” A man having his hat knocked off by a brick, “one of the most primitive of practical jokes,” would be an ideal incident, humorous in both anticipation and execution. Disney learned the lesson well. The Mickey Mouse of Steamboat Willy (1928), the first cartoon made for synchronized sound, “was only partly civilized.” Audiences used to the tamer Mickey of later decades would be surprised watching his early performances, advised New York Times writer Jesse Green. The primordial Mickey was “uninhibited, bare-chested, rough-and-ready to the point of sadism. . . . Like most cartoon characters of the period, he blithely trafficked in fistfights, drownings, [and] dismemberments.”61

The fascination with jolly comportment in late nineteenth-century popular culture stands in juxtaposition to jolly fellowship’s waning significance in society at large. Propriety had made significant progress. Self-control, not impulsiveness, now was beginning to seem natural. That jolly male behavior ebbed at the same time cultural mayhem thrived raises the question of whether the violence and
278 JOLLY FELLOWS

pranks found in books, stage productions, and cartoons played a role in curbing real social disorder. Could the psychological pleasure that men once received from actually drinking, fighting, and playing practical jokes be obtained to some degree by reading about and watching characters doing these things? Perhaps the brutal comedy on display in vaudeville and in the comic strips was part of the refinement of comportment. But it remains an open question whether cultural
depictions of unruly conduct actually diminish real violence or only provide a re-
hearsal for it and perhaps even intensify it. There is no evidence that the ferocious
 treatment of blacks in popular culture led to less real violence being inflicted
 against African Americans. Indeed, jolly fellowship may have played a small but
 significant role in the post–Civil War wave of intimidation and violence against
 blacks.

In Pulaski, Tennessee, in the spring of 1866 a group of six men gathered to
found a social club. All had been in the Confederate army, and four were lawyers.
The association seemed to have been originally intended as a burlesque of frater-
nal orders like the Freemasons in which the members would wear fantastic cos-
tumes and the leaders would have preposterous titles. They chose for the club’s
name Ku Klux Klan. According to Allen W. Trelease, the Klan’s historian, “all the
evidence” indicates “that the Klan was designed purely for amusement and for
some time after its founding it had no ulterior motive or effect.” Membership was
by invitation, and rejected members were given “the old snipe-hunting dodge” or
stuffed into a barrel and rolled downhill. Trelease surmised that “it may be that
the playing of practical jokes on each other broadened into playing them on outs-
siders, especially Negroes.” Some commentators have expressed puzzlement how
playing jokes could mutate so quickly into menace and coercion, but pranks in
the nineteenth century were, as has been seen, often mean spirited, even vicious.
The Klan’s transformation into a white terrorist group was remarkably similar to
the transformation of the Hounds in 1849 San Francisco from a company of men
originally devoted to parading “in fantastic or ridiculous dresses” and committing
“pranks of a character calculated to amuse the community” to the leaders of a
vicious mob attack on Chileans and other foreigners, and it suggests how easily
jolly fellowship could be turned to purposeful violence.62

If calculated motives could at times be found in the jolly fellows’ pranks, may
it also be that even obviously instrumental violence was sometimes infused with
a love for disorder and senseless destruction for its own sake? W. J. Cash wrote
in The Mind of the South (1941) that “I do not think it is true . . . that anybody
was ever lynched in the land simply because the Southerners counted it capital
fun.” “Simply” is a key word here, because Cash believed what he called “the
old frolic tendency” was, in fact, a key part of the gruesome “spectacle lynch-
ings” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many observers have
remarked on the carnival atmosphere that surrounded these events, and Cash
noted the “disposition to revel in the most devilish and prolonged agonies,” which
seemed especially apparent in “Negro barbeques” in which victims were tortured,
burned, and mutilated. Lynching was a complex phenomena that encompassed
a wide range of motives: it terrorized and intimidated the black population, expressed white sexual fears, conveyed raw notions of justice, was an outlet for white economic frustration, and unified the white community in time of crisis. But is it not also possible to see lurking in the background the sheer elemental pleasure in total power, in inflicting pain on others, especially others of a different race, that has been seen so often in this book? If northern audiences could watch blacks being dismembered on stage, southern whites could enjoy the real thing.⁶³

Central to the “old social order” of the early nineteenth century was the constant fighting among both individual men and groups of men. This type of essentially voluntary violence sharply diminished by the turn of the twentieth century. But as the Klan and lynching make obvious, violence remained central to the American experience. Although the connection between literary and theatrical representations of disorder and real violence remains unclear, the cultural importance of jolly fellowship was substantial. It exerted a powerful influence on American culture from its first appearance in minstrelsy and southwestern literature in the 1830s and 1840s to the comic strips and cartoons of the twentieth century.