

JACOB AUGUST RIIS

A TEN YEARS' WAR: AN
ACCOUNT OF THE BATTLE
WITH THE SLUM IN NEW
YORK

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I

THE BATTLE WITH THE SLUM

The slum is as old as civilization. Civilization implies a race, to get ahead. In a race there are usually some who for one cause or another cannot keep up, or are thrust out from among their fellows. They fall behind, and when they have been left far in the rear they lose hope and ambition, and give up. Thenceforward, if left to their own resources, they are the victims, not the masters, of their environment; and it is a bad master. They drag one another always farther down. The bad environment becomes the heredity of the next generation. Then, given the crowd, you have the slum ready-made.

The battle with the slum began the day civilization recognized in it her enemy. It was a losing fight until conscience joined forces with fear and self-interest against it. When common sense and the golden rule obtain among men as a rule of practice, it

will be over. The two have not always been classed together, but here they are plainly seen to belong together. Justice to the individual is accepted in theory as the only safe groundwork of the commonwealth. When it is practiced in dealing with the slum, there will shortly be no slum. We need not wait for the millennium, to get rid of it. We can do it now. All that is required is that it shall not be left to itself. That is justice to it and to us, since its grievous ailment is that it cannot help itself. When a man is drowning, the thing to do is to pull him out of the water; afterward there will be time for talking it over. We got at it the other way in dealing with our social problems. The doctrinaires had their day, and they decided to let bad enough alone; that it was unsafe to interfere with "causes that operate sociologically," as one survivor of these unfittest put it to me. It was a piece of scientific humbug that cost the age which listened to it dear. "Causes that operate sociologically" are the opportunity of the political and every other kind of scamp who trades upon the depravity and helplessness of the slum, and the refuge of the pessimist who is useless in the fight against them. We have not done yet paying the bills he ran up for us. Some time since we turned to, to pull the drowning man out, and it was time. A little while longer, and we should have been in danger of being dragged down with him.

The slum complaint had been chronic in all ages, but the great changes which the nineteenth century saw, the new industry, political freedom, brought on an acute attack which threatened

to become fatal. Too many of us had supposed that, built as our commonwealth was on universal suffrage, it would be proof against the complaints that harassed older states; but in fact it turned out that there was extra hazard in that. Having solemnly resolved that all men are created equal and have certain inalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, we shut our eyes and waited for the formula to work. It was as if a man with a cold should take the doctor's prescription to bed with him, expecting it to cure him. The formula was all right, but merely repeating it worked no cure. When, after a hundred years, we opened our eyes, it was upon sixty cents a day as the living wage of the working-woman in our cities; upon "knee pants" at forty cents a dozen for the making; upon the Potter's Field taking tithe of our city life, ten per cent, each year for the trench, truly the Lost Tenth of the slum. Our country had grown great and rich; through our ports was poured food for the millions of Europe. But in the back streets multitudes huddled in ignorance and want. The foreign oppressor had been vanquished, the fetters stricken from the black man at home; but his white brother, in his bitter plight, sent up a cry of distress that had in it a distinct note of menace. Political freedom we had won; but the problem of helpless poverty, grown vast with the added offscourings of the Old World, mocked us, unsolved. Liberty at sixty cents a day set presently its stamp upon the government of our cities, and it became the scandal and the peril of our political system.

So the battle began. Three times since the war that absorbed the nation's energies and attention had the slum confronted us in New York with its challenge. In the darkest days of the great struggle it was the treacherous mob; later on, the threat of the cholera, which found swine foraging in the streets as the only scavengers, and a swarming host, but little above the hog in its appetites and in the quality of the shelter afforded it, peopling the back alleys. Still later, the mob, caught looting the city's treasury with its idol, the thief Tweed, at its head, drunk with power and plunder, had insolently defied the outraged community to do its worst. There were meetings and protests. The rascals were turned out for a season; the arch-thief died in jail. I see him now, going through the gloomy portals of the Tombs, whither, as a newspaper reporter, I had gone with him, his stubborn head held high as ever. I asked myself more than once, at the time when the vile prison was torn down, whether the comic clamor to have the ugly old gates preserved and set up in Central Park had anything to do with the memory of the "martyred" thief, or whether it was in joyful celebration of the fact that others had escaped. His name is even now one to conjure with in the Sixth Ward. He never "squealed," and he was "so good to the poor"—evidence that the slum is not laid by the heels by merely destroying Five Points and the Mulberry Bend. There are other fights to be fought in that war, other victories to be won, and it is slow work. It was nearly ten years after the great robbery before decency got the upper grip in good earnest. That was when the civic conscience

awoke in 1879.

In that year the slum was arraigned in the churches. The sad and shameful story was told of how it grew and was fostered by avarice, that saw in the homeless crowds from over the sea only a chance for business, and exploited them to the uttermost, making sometimes a hundred per cent, on the capital invested,—always most out of the worst houses, from the tenants of which "nothing was expected" save that they pay the usurious rents; how Christianity, citizenship, human fellowship, shook their skirts clear of the rabble that was only good enough to fill the greedy purse, and how the rabble, left to itself, improved such opportunities as it found after such fashion as it knew; how it ran elections merely to count its thugs in, and fattened at the public crib; and how the whole evil thing had its root in the tenements, where the home had ceased to be sacred,—those dark and deadly dens in which the family ideal was tortured to death, and character was smothered; in which children were "damned rather than born" into the world, thus realizing a slum kind of foreordination to torment, happily brief in many cases. The Tenement House Committee long afterward called the worst of the barracks "infant slaughter houses," and showed, by reference to the mortality lists, that they killed one in every five babies born in them.

The story shocked the town into action. Plans for a better kind of tenement were called for, and a premium was put on every ray of light and breath of air that could be let into it. Money

was raised to build model houses, and a bill to give the health authorities summary powers in dealing with tenements was sent to the legislature. The landlords held it up until the last day of the session, when it was forced through by an angered public opinion. The power of the cabal was broken. The landlords had found their Waterloo. Many of them got rid of their property, which in a large number of cases they had never seen, and tried to forget the source of their ill-gotten wealth. Light and air did find their way into the tenements in a half-hearted fashion, and we began to count the tenants as "souls." That is one of our milestones in the history of New York. They were never reckoned so before; no one ever thought of them as "souls." So, restored to human fellowship, in the twilight of the air shaft that had penetrated to their dens, the first Tenement House Committee was able to make them out "better than the houses" they lived in, and a long step forward was taken. The Mulberry Bend, the wicked core of the "bloody Sixth Ward," was marked for destruction, and all slumdom held its breath to see it go. With that gone, it seemed as if the old days must be gone too, never to return. There would not be another Mulberry Bend. As long as it stood, there was yet a chance. The slum had backing, as it were.

The civic conscience was not very robust yet, and required many and protracted naps. It slumbered fitfully eight long years, waking up now and then with a start, while the politicians did their best to lull it back to its slumbers. I wondered often, in those years of delay, if it was just plain stupidity that kept the

politicians from spending the money which the law had put within their grasp; for with every year that passed a million dollars that could have been used for small park purposes was lost. But they were wiser than I. I understood when I saw the changes which letting in the sunshine worked. We had all believed it, but they knew it all along. At the same time, they lost none of the chances that offered. They helped the landlords, who considered themselves greatly aggrieved because their property was thereafter to front on a park instead of a pigsty, to transfer the whole assessment of half a million dollars for park benefit to the city. They undid in less than six weeks what it had taken considerably more than six years to do; but the park was cheap at the price. We could afford to pay all it cost to wake us up. When finally, upon the wave of wrath excited by the Parkhurst and Lexow disclosures, reform came with a shock that dislodged Tammany, it found us wide awake, and, it must be admitted, not a little astonished at our sudden access of righteousness.

The battle went against the slum in the three years that followed, until it found backing in the "odium of reform" that became the issue in the municipal organization of the greater city. Tammany made notes. Of what was done, how it was done, and why, during those years, I shall have occasion to speak further in these pages. Here I wish to measure the stretch we have come since I wrote "How the Other Half Lives," ten years ago. Some of it we came plodding, and some at full speed; some of it in the face of every obstacle that could be thrown in our way,

wresting victory from defeat at every step; some of it with the enemy on the run. Take it altogether, it is a long way. Most of it will not have to be traveled over again. The engine of municipal progress, once started as it has been in New York, may slip many a cog with Tammany as the engineer; it may even be stopped for a season; but it can never be made to work backward. Even Tammany knows that, and is building the schools she so long neglected, and so is hastening the day when she shall be but an unsavory memory.

How we strove for those schools, to no purpose! Our arguments, our anger, the anxious pleading of philanthropists who saw the young on the East Side going to ruin, the warning year after year of the superintendent of schools that the compulsory education law was but an empty mockery where it was most needed, the knocking of uncounted thousands of children for whom there was no room,—uncounted in sober fact; there was not even a way of finding out how many were adrift,—brought only the response that the tax rate must be kept down. Kept down it was. "Waste" was successfully averted at the spigot; at the bung hole it went on unchecked. In a swarming population like that you must have either schools or jails, and the jails waxed fat with the overflow. The East Side, that had been orderly, became a hotbed of child crime. And when, in answer to the charge made by a legislative committee that the father forced his child into the shop, on a perjured age certificate, to labor when he ought to have been at play, that father, bent and heavy-eyed with

unceasing toil, flung back the charge with the bitter reproach that we gave him no other choice, that it was either the street or the shop for his boy, and that perjury for him was cheaper than the ruin of the child, we were mute. What, indeed, was there to say? The crime was ours, not his. That was but yesterday. To-day we can count the months to the time when every child who knocks shall find a seat in our schools. We have a school census to tell us of the need. In that most crowded neighborhood in all the world, where the superintendent lately pleaded in vain for three new schools, five have been built, the finest in this or any other land,—great, light, and airy structures, with playgrounds on the roof; and all over the city the like are going up. The briefest of our laws, every word of which is like the blow of a hammer driving the nails home in the coffin of the bad old days, says that never one shall be built without its playground. So the boy is coming to his rights.

The streets are cleaned,—not necessarily clean just now; Colonel Waring is dead, with his doctrine of putting a man instead of a voter behind every broom, killed by politics, he and his doctrine both,—but cleaned. The slum has even been washed. We tried that on Hester Street years ago, in the age of cobblestone pavements, and the result fairly frightened us. I remember the indignant reply of a well-known citizen, a man of large business responsibility and experience in the handling of men, to whom the office of street-cleaning commissioner had been offered, when I asked him if he would accept. "I have lived,"

he said, "a blameless life for forty years, and have a character in the community. I cannot afford—no man with a reputation can afford—to hold that office; it will surely wreck it." That was then. It made Colonel Waring's reputation. He took the trucks from the streets. Tammany, in a brief interregnum of vigor under Mayor Grant, had laid the axe to the unsightly telegraph poles and begun to pave the streets with asphalt, but it left the trucks and the ash barrels to Colonel Waring as hopeless. Trucks have votes; at least their drivers have. Now that they are gone, the drivers would be the last to bring them back; for they have children, too, and the rescued streets gave them their first playground. Perilous, begrudged by policeman and storekeeper, though it was, it was still a playground.

But one is coming in which the boy shall rule unchallenged. The Mulberry Bend Park kept its promise. Before the sod was laid in it two more were under way in the thickest of the tenement house crowding, and each, under the law which brought them into existence, is to be laid out in part as a playground. They are not yet finished, but they will be; for the people have taken to the idea, and the politician has made a note of the fact. He saw a great light when the play piers were opened. In half a dozen localities where the slum was striking its roots deep into the soil such piers are now being built, and land is being acquired for small parks. We shall yet settle the "causes that operated sociologically" on the boy with a lawn mower and a sand heap. You have got your boy, and the heredity of the next one, when you can order his

setting.

Even while I am writing, a bill is urged in the legislature to build in every senatorial district in the city a gymnasium and a public bath. It matters little whether it passes at this session or not. The important thing is that it is there. The rest will follow. A people's club is being organized, to crowd out the saloon that has had a monopoly of the brightness and the cheer in the tenement streets too long. The labor unions are bestirring themselves to deal with the sweating curse, and the gospel of less law and more enforcement sits enthroned at Albany. Theodore Roosevelt will teach us again Jefferson's forgotten lesson, that "the whole art of government consists in being honest." With a back door to every ordinance that touched the lives of the people, if indeed the whole thing was not the subject of open ridicule or the vehicle of official blackmail, it seemed as if we had provided a perfect municipal machinery for bringing the law into contempt with the young, and so for wrecking citizenship by the shortest cut.

Of free soup there is an end. It was never food for free men. The last spoonful was ladled out by yellow journalism with the certificate of the men who fought Roosevelt and reform in the police board that it was good. It is not likely that it will ever plague us again. Our experience has taught us a new reading of the old word that charity covers a multitude of sins. It does. Uncovering some of them has kept us busy since our conscience awoke, and there are more left. The worst of them all, that awful parody on municipal charity, the police station lodging room, is

gone, after twenty years of persistent attack upon the foul dens,—years during which they were arraigned, condemned, indicted by every authority having jurisdiction, all to no purpose. The stale beer dives went with them and with the Bend, and the grip of the tramp on our throat has been loosened. We shall not easily throw it off altogether, for the tramp has a vote, too, for which Tammany, with admirable ingenuity, has found a new use, since the ante-election inspection of lodging houses has made them less available for colonization purposes than they were. Perhaps I should say a new way of very old use. It is simplicity itself. Instead of keeping tramps in hired lodgings for weeks at a daily outlay, the new way is to send them all to the island on short commitments during the canvass, and vote them from there *en bloc* at the city's expense. Time and education must solve that, like so many other problems which the slum has thrust upon us. They are the forces upon which, when we have gone as far as our present supply of steam will carry us, we must always fall back; and this we may do with confidence so long as we keep stirring, if it is only marking time, as now. It is in the retrospect that one sees how far we have come, after all, and from that gathers courage for the rest of the way. Twenty-nine years have passed since I slept in a police station lodging house, a lonely lad, and was robbed, beaten, and thrown out for protesting; and when the vagrant cur that had joined its homelessness to mine, and had sat all night at the door waiting for me to come out,—it had been clubbed away the night before,—snarled and showed

its teeth at the doorman, raging and impotent I saw it beaten to death on the step. I little dreamed then that the friendless beast, dead, should prove the undoing of the monstrous wrong done by the maintenance of these evil holes to every helpless man and woman who was without shelter in New York; but it did. It was after an inspection of the lodging rooms, when I stood with Theodore Roosevelt, then president of the police board, in the one where I had slept that night, and told him of it, that he swore they should go. And go they did, as did so many another abuse in those two years of honest purpose and effort. I hated them. It may not have been a very high motive to furnish power for municipal reform; but we had tried every other way, and none of them worked. Arbitration is good, but there are times when it becomes necessary to knock a man down and arbitrate sitting on him, and this was such a time. It was what we started out to do with the rear tenements, the worst of the slum barracks, and it would have been better had we kept on that track. I have always maintained that we made a false move when we stopped to discuss damages with the landlord, or to hear his side of it at all. His share in it was our grievance; it blocked the mortality records with its burden of human woe. The damage was all ours, the profit all his. If there are damages to collect, he should foot the bill, not we. Vested rights are to be protected, but no man has a right to be protected in killing his neighbor.

However, they are down, the worst of them. The community has asserted its right to destroy tenements that destroy life, and

for that cause. We bought the slum off in the Mulberry Bend at its own figure. On the rear tenements we set the price, and set it low. It was a long step. Bottle Alley is gone, and Bandits' Roost. Bone Alley, Thieves' Alley, and Kerosene Row,—they are all gone. Hell's Kitchen and Poverty Gap have acquired standards of decency; Poverty Gap has risen even to the height of neckties. The time is fresh in my recollection when a different kind of necktie was its pride; when the boy murderer—he was barely nineteen—who wore it on the gallows took leave of the captain of detectives with the cheerful invitation to "come over to the wake. They will have a high old time." And the event fully redeemed the promise. The whole Gap turned out to do the dead bully honor. I have not heard from the Gap, and hardly from Hell's Kitchen, in five years. The last news from the Kitchen was when the thin wedge of a column of negroes, in their uptown migration, tried to squeeze in, and provoked a race war; but that in fairness should not be laid up against it. In certain local aspects it might be accounted a sacred duty; as much so as to get drunk and provoke a fight on the anniversary of the battle of the Boyne. But on the whole the Kitchen has grown orderly. The gang rarely beats a policeman nowadays, and it has not killed one in a long while.

So, one after another, the outworks of the slum have been taken. It has been beaten in many battles; but its reserves are unimpaired. More tenements are being built every day on twenty-five-foot lots, and however watchfully such a house is planned, if it is to return to the builder the profit he seeks, it will have

that within it which, the moment the grasp of official sanitary supervision is loosened, must summon up the ghost of the slum. The common type of tenement to-day is the double-decker, and the double-decker is hopeless. In it the crowding goes on at a constantly increasing rate. This is the sore spot, and as against it all the rest seems often enough unavailing. Yet it cannot be. It is true that the home, about which all that is to work for permanent progress must cluster, is struggling against desperate odds in the tenement, and that the struggle has been reflected in the morals of the people, in the corruption of the young, to an alarming extent; but it must be that the higher standards now set up on every hand, in the cleaner streets, in the better schools, in the parks and the clubs, in the settlements, and in the thousand and one agencies for good that touch and help the lives of the poor at as many points, will tell at no distant day, and react upon the homes and upon their builders. To any one who knew the East Side, for instance, ten years ago, the difference between that day and this in the appearance of the children whom he sees there must be striking. Rags and dirt are now the exception rather than the rule. Perhaps the statement is a trifle too strong as to the dirt; but dirt is not harmful except when coupled with rags; it can be washed off, and nowadays is washed off where such a thing would have been considered affectation in the days that were. Soap and water have worked a visible cure already, that must go more than skin-deep. They are moral agents of the first value in the slum. And the day must come when rapid

transit will cease to be a football between contending forces in a city of three million people, and the reason for the outrageous crowding will cease to exist with the scattering of the centres of production to the suburb. That day may be a long way off, measured by the impatience of the philanthropist, but it is bound to come. Meanwhile, philanthropy is not sitting idle and waiting. It is building tenements on the humane plan that wipes out the lines of the twenty-five-foot lot, and lets in sunshine and air and hope. It is putting up hotels deserving of the name for the army that but just now had no other home than the cheap lodging houses which Inspector Byrnes fitly called "nurseries of crime." These also are standards from which there is no backing down, even if coming up to them is slow work: and they are here to stay, for they pay. That is the test. Not charity, but justice,—that is the gospel which they preach.

Flushed with the success of many victories, we challenged the slum to a fight to the finish a year ago, and bade it come on. It came on. On our side fought the bravest and best. The man who marshaled the citizen forces for their candidate had been foremost in building homes, in erecting baths for the people, in directing the self-sacrificing labors of the oldest and worthiest of the agencies for improving the condition of the poor. With him battled men who had given lives of patient study and effort to the cause of helping their fellow men. Shoulder to shoulder with them stood the thoughtful workingman from the East Side tenement. The slum, too, marshaled its forces. Tammany

produced her notes. She pointed to the increased tax rate, showed what it had cost to build schools and parks and to clean house, and called it criminal recklessness. The issue was made sharp and clear. The war cry of the slum was characteristic: "To hell with reform!" We all remember the result. Politics interfered, and turned victory into defeat. We were beaten. I shall never forget that election night. I walked home through the Bowery in the midnight hour, and saw it gorging itself, like a starved wolf, upon the promise of the morrow. Drunken men and women sat in every doorway, howling ribald songs and curses. Hard faces I had not seen for years showed themselves about the dives. The mob made merry after its fashion. The old days were coming back. Reform was dead, and decency with it.

A year later, I passed that same way on the night of election. The scene was strangely changed. The street was unusually quiet for such a time. Men stood in groups about the saloons, and talked in whispers, with serious faces. The name of Roosevelt was heard on every hand. The dives were running, but there was no shouting, and violence was discouraged. When, on the following day, I met the proprietor of one of the oldest concerns in the Bowery,—which, while doing a legitimate business, caters necessarily to its crowds, and therefore sides with them,—he told me with bitter reproach how he had been stricken in pocket. A gambler had just been in to see him, who had come on from the far West, in anticipation of a wide-open town, and had got all ready to open a house in the Tenderloin. "He brought \$40,000 to

put in the business, and he came to take it away to Baltimore. Just now the cashier of — Bank told me that two other gentlemen—gamblers? yes, that's what you call them—had drawn \$130,000 which they would have invested here, and had gone after him. Think of all that money gone to Baltimore! That's what you've done!"

I went over to police headquarters, thinking of the sad state of that man, and in the hallway I ran across two children, little tots, who were inquiring their way to "the commissioner." The older was a hunchback girl, who led her younger brother (he could not have been over five or six years old) by the hand. They explained their case to me. They came from Allen Street. Some undesirable women tenants had moved into the tenement, and when complaint was made that sent the police there, the children's father, who was a poor Jewish tailor, was blamed. The tenants took it out of the boy by punching his nose till it bled. Whereupon the children went straight to Mulberry Street to see the commissioner and get justice. It was the first time in twenty years that I had known Allen Street to come to police headquarters for justice; and in the discovery that the new idea had reached down to the little children I read the doom of the slum, despite its loud vauntings.

No, it was not true that reform was dead, with decency. It was not the slum that had won; it was we who had lost. We were not up to the mark,—not yet. But New York is a many times cleaner and better city to-day than it was ten years ago. Then I was able

to grasp easily the whole plan for wresting it from the neglect and indifference that had put us where we were. It was chiefly, almost wholly, remedial in its scope. Now it is preventive, constructive, and no ten men could gather all the threads and hold them. We have made, are making headway, and no Tammany has the power to stop us. She knows it, too, and is in such frantic haste to fill her pockets while she has time that she has abandoned her old ally, the tax rate, and the pretense of making bad government cheap government. She is at this moment engaged in raising taxes and assessments at one and the same time to an unheard-of figure, while salaries are being increased lavishly on every hand. We can afford to pay all she charges us for the lesson we are learning. If to that we add common sense, we shall discover the bearings of it all without trouble. Yesterday I picked up a book,—a learned disquisition on government,—and read on the title-page, "Affectionately dedicated to all who despise politics." That was not common sense. To win the battle with the slum, we must not begin by despising politics. We have been doing that too long. The politics of the slum is apt to be like the slum itself, dirty. Then it must be cleaned. It is what the fight is about. Politics is the weapon. We must learn to use it so as to cut straight and sure. That is common sense, and the golden rule as applied to Tammany.

Some years ago, the United States government conducted an inquiry into the slums of great cities. To its staff of experts was attached a chemist, who gathered and isolated a lot of bacilli

with fearsome Latin names, in the tenements where he went. Among those he labeled were the *Staphylococcus pyogenes albus*, the *Micrococcus fervidosus*, the *Saccharomyces rosaceus*, and the *Bacillus buccalis fortuitus*. I made a note of the names at the time, because of the dread with which they inspired me. But I searched the collection in vain for the real bacillus of the slum. It escaped science, to be identified by human sympathy and a conscience-stricken community with that of ordinary human selfishness. The antitoxin has been found, and is applied successfully. Since justice has replaced charity on the prescription the patient is improving. And the improvement is not confined to him; it is general. Conscience is not a local issue in our day. A few years ago, a United States Senator sought reelection on the platform that the decalogue and the golden rule were glittering generalities that had no place in politics, and lost. We have not quite reached the millennium yet, but to-day a man is governor in the Empire State who was elected on the pledge that he would rule by the ten commandments. These are facts that mean much or little, according to the way one looks at them. The significant thing is that they are facts, and that, in spite of slipping and sliding, the world moves forward, not backward. The poor we shall have always with us, but the slum we need not have. These two do not rightfully belong together. Their present partnership is at once poverty's worst hardship and our worst fault.

II

THE TENEMENT HOUSE BLIGHT

In a Stanton Street tenement, the other day, I stumbled upon a Polish capmaker's home. There were other capmakers in the house, Russian and Polish, but they simply "lived" there. This one had a home. The fact proclaimed itself the moment the door was opened, in spite of the darkness. The rooms were in the rear, gloomy with the twilight of the tenement, although the day was sunny without, but neat, even cosy. It was early, but the day's chores were evidently done. The teakettle sang on the stove, at which a bright-looking girl of twelve, with a pale but cheery face, and sleeves brushed back to the elbows, was busy poking up the fire. A little boy stood by the window, flattening his nose against the pane and gazing wistfully up among the chimney pots where a piece of blue sky about as big as the kitchen could be made out. I remarked to the mother that they were nice rooms.

"Ah yes," she said, with a weary little smile that struggled bravely with hope long deferred, "but it is hard to make a home here. We would so like to live in the front, but we can't pay the rent."

I knew the front with its unlovely view of the tenement street too well, and I said a good word for the air shaft—yard or court it could not be called, it was too small for that—which rather

surprised myself. I had found few virtues enough in it before. The girl at the stove had left off poking the fire. She broke in the moment I finished, with eager enthusiasm: "Why, they have the sun in there. When the door is opened the light comes right in your face."

"Does it never come here?" I asked, and wished I had not done so, as soon as the words were spoken. The child at the window was listening, with his whole hungry little soul in his eyes.

Yes, it did, she said. Once every summer, for a little while, it came over the houses. She knew the month and the exact hour of the day when its rays shone into their home, and just the reach of its slant on the wall. They had lived there six years. In June the sun was due. A haunting fear that the baby would ask how long it was till June—it was February then—took possession of me, and I hastened to change the subject. Warsaw was their old home. They kept a little store there, and were young and happy. Oh, it was a fine city, with parks and squares, and bridges over the beautiful river,—and grass and flowers and birds and soldiers, put in the girl breathlessly. She remembered. But the children kept coming, and they went across the sea to give them a better chance. Father made fifteen dollars a week, much money; but there were long seasons when there was no work. She, the mother, was never very well here,—she hadn't any strength; and the baby! She glanced at his grave white face, and took him in her arms. The picture of the two, and of the pale-faced girl longing back to the fields and the sunlight, in their prison of gloom and gray walls, haunts me yet.

I have not had the courage to go back since. I recalled the report of an English army surgeon, which I read years ago, on the many more soldiers that died—were killed would be more correct—in barracks into which the sun never shone than in those that were open to the light.

The capmaker's case is the case of the nineteenth century, of civilization, against the metropolis of America. The home, the family, are the rallying points of civilization. But long since the tenements of New York earned for it the ominous name of "the homeless city." In its 40,000 tenements its workers, more than half of the city's population, are housed. They have no other chance. There are, indeed, wives and mothers who, by sheer force of character, rise above their environment and make homes where they go. Happily, there are yet many of them. But the fact remains that hitherto their struggle has been growing ever harder, and the issue more doubtful.

The tenement itself, with its crowds, its lack of privacy, is the greatest destroyer of individuality, of character. As its numbers increase, so does "the element that becomes criminal for lack of individuality and the self-respect that comes with it." Add the shiftless and the weak who are turned out by the same process, and you have its legitimate crop. In 1880 the average number of persons to each dwelling in New York was 16.37; in 1890 it was 18.52. In 1895, according to the police census, 21.2. The census of 1900 will show the crowding to have gone on at an equal if not at a greater rate. That will mean that so many more

tenements have been built of the modern type, with four families to the floor where once there were two. I shall not weary the reader with many statistics. They are to be found, by those who want them, in the census books and in the official records. I shall try to draw from them their human story. But, as an instance of the unchecked drift, let me quote here the case of the Tenth Ward, that East Side district known as the most crowded in all the world. In 1880, when it had not yet attained that bad eminence, it contained 47,554 persons, or 432.3 to the acre. In 1890 the census showed a population of 57,596, which was 522 to the acre. The police census of 1895 found 70,168 persons living in 1514 houses, which was 643.08 to the acre. Lastly, the Health Department's census for the first half of 1898 gave a total of 82,175 persons living in 1201 tenements, with 313 inhabited buildings yet to be heard from. This is the process of doubling up,—literally, since the cause and the vehicle of it all is the double-decker tenement,—which in the year 1895 had crowded a single block in that ward at the rate of 1526 persons per acre, and one in the Eleventh Ward at the rate of 1774.¹ It goes on not in the Tenth Ward or on the East Side only, but throughout the city. When, in 1897, it was proposed to lay out a small park in the Twenty-Second Ward, up on the far West Side, it was shown that five blocks in that section, between Forty-Ninth and Sixty-Second

¹ Police census of 1895: Block bounded by Canal, Hester, Eldridge, and Forsyth streets: size 375 × 200, population 2628, rate per acre 1526. Block bounded by Stanton, Houston, Attorney, and Ridge streets: size 200 × 300, population 2244, rate per acre 1774.

streets and Ninth and Eleventh avenues, had a population of more than 3000 each. The block between Sixty-First and Sixty-Second streets, Tenth and Eleventh avenues, harbored 3580, which meant 974.6 persons to the acre.

If we have here to do with forces that are beyond the control of the individual or the community, we shall do well at least to face the facts squarely and know the truth. It is no answer to the charge that New York's way of housing its workers is the worst in the world to say that they are better off than they were where they came from. It is not true, in most cases, as far as the home is concerned: a shanty is better than a flat in a cheap tenement, any day. Even if it were true, it would still be beside the issue. In Poland my capmaker counted for nothing. Nothing was expected of him. Here he ranks, after a few brief years, politically equal with the man who hires his labor. A citizen's duty is expected of him, and home and citizenship are convertible terms. The observation of the Frenchman who had watched the experiment of herding two thousand human beings in eight tenement barracks in Paris, that the result was the "exasperation of the tenant against society," is true the world over. We have done as badly in New York. Social hatefulness is not a good soil for citizenship to grow in, where political equality rules.

Nor will the old lie about the tenants being wholly to blame cover the ground. It has long been overworked in defense of landlord usury. Doubtless there are bad tenants. In the matter of renting houses, as in everything else, men have a trick of

coming up to what is expected of them, good or bad; but as a class the tenants have been shown all along to be superior to their surroundings. "Better than the houses they live in," said the first Tenement House Commission; and the second gave as its verdict that "they respond quickly to improved conditions." That is not an honest answer. The truth is that if we cannot check the indraught to the cities, we can, if we choose, make homes for those who come, and at a profit on the investment. Nothing has been more clearly demonstrated in our day, and it is time that it should be said so that everybody can understand. It is not a case of transforming human nature in the tenant, but of reforming it in the landlord builder. It is a plain question of the per cent. he is willing to take.

So that we may get the capmaker's view and that of his fellow tenants,—for, after all, that is the one that counts; the state and the community are not nearly so much interested in the profits of the landlord as in the welfare of the workers,—suppose we take a stroll through a tenement house neighborhood and see for ourselves. We were in Stanton Street. Let us start there, then, going east. Towering barracks on either side, five, six stories high. Teeming crowds. Push-cart men "moved on" by the policeman, who seems to exist only for the purpose. Forsyth Street: there is a church on the corner, Polish and Catholic, a combination that strikes one as queer here on the East Side, where Polish has come to be synonymous with Jewish. I have cause to remember that corner. A man killed his wife in this

house, and was hanged for it. Just across the street, on the stoop of that brown stone tenement, the tragedy was reenacted the next year; only the murderer saved the county trouble and expense by taking himself off, also. That other stoop in the same row witnessed a suicide. Why do I tell you these things? Because they are true. The policeman here will bear me out. They belong to the ordinary setting of life in a crowd such as this. It is never so little worth living, and therefore held so cheap along with the fierce, unceasing battle that goes on to save it. You will go no further unless I leave it out? Very well; I shall leave out the murder after we have passed the block yonder. The tragedy of that is of a kind that comes too close to the every-day life of tenement house people to be omitted. The house caught fire in the night, and five were burned to death,—father, mother, and three children. The others got out; why not they? They stayed, it seems, to make sure none was left; they were not willing to leave one behind, to save themselves. And then it was too late; the stairs were burning. There was no proper fire escape. That was where the murder came in; but it was not all chargeable to the landlord, nor even the greater part. More than thirty years ago, in 1867, the state made it law that the stairs in every tenement four stories high should be fireproof, and forbade the storing of any inflammable material in such houses. I do not know when the law was repealed, or if it ever was. I only know that in 1892 the Fire Department, out of pity for the tenants and regard for the safety of its own men, forced through an amendment to the building law, requiring the

stairs of the common type of five-story tenements to be built of fireproof material, and that to-day they are of wood, just as they always were. Only last spring I looked up the Superintendent of Buildings and asked him what it meant. I showed him the law, which said that the stairs should be "built of slow-burning construction or fireproof material;" and he put his finger upon the clause that follows, "as the Superintendent of Buildings shall decide." The law gave him discretion, and that is how he used it. "Hard wood burns slowly," said he.

The fire of which I speak was a "cruller fire," if I remember rightly, which is to say that it broke out in the basement bakeshop, where they were boiling crullers (doughnuts) in fat, at four A. M., with a hundred tenants asleep in the house above them. The fat went into the fire, and the rest followed. I suppose that I had to do with a hundred such fires, as a police reporter, before, under the protest of the Tenement House Committee and the Good Government Clubs, the boiling of fat in tenement bakeshops was forbidden. The chief of the Fire Department, in his testimony before the committee, said that "tenements are erected mainly with a view of returning a large income for the amount of capital invested. It is only after a fire in which great loss of life occurs that any interest whatever is taken in the safety of the occupants." The Superintendent of Buildings, after such a fire in March, 1896, said that there were thousands of tenement fire-traps in the city. My reporter's notebook bears witness to the correctness of his statement, and it has many blank leaves that are waiting to be

put to that use yet. The reckoning for eleven years showed that, of 35,844 fires in New York, 53.18 per cent. were in tenement houses, though they were only a little more than 31 per cent. of all the buildings, and that 177 occupants were killed, 523 maimed, and 625 rescued by the firemen. Their rescue cost the lives of three of these brave men, and 453 were injured in the effort. And when all that is said, not the half is told. A fire in the night in one of those human beehives, with its terror and woe, is one of the things that live in the recollection ever after as a terrible nightmare. Yet the demonstration of the Tenement House Committee, that to build tenements fireproof from the ground up would cost little over ten per cent. more than is spent upon the firetrap, and would more than return the interest on the extra outlay in the saving of insurance and repairs, and in the better building every way, has found no echo in legislation or in the practice of builders. That was the fire chief's way to avoid "the great destruction of life;" but he warned the committee that it would "meet with strong opposition from the different interests, should legislation be requested." The interest of the man who pays the rent will not be suspected in this, so he must have meant the man who collects it.

Here is a block of tenements inhabited by poor Jews. Most of the Jews who live over here are poor; and the poorer they are, the higher rent do they pay, and the more do they crowd to make it up between them. "The destruction of the poor is their poverty." It is only the old story in a new setting. The slum landlord's profits

were always the highest. He spends nothing for repairs, and lays the blame on the tenant. The "district leader" saves him, in these days of Tammany rule come back, unless he is on the wrong side of the political fence, in which case the Sanitary Code comes handy to chase him into camp. A big "order" on his house is a very effective way of making a tenement house landlord discern political truth on the eve of an important election. Just before the last, when the election of Theodore Roosevelt was threatened, the sanitary force displayed such activity as it has not since, up to the raid on the elevated roads, in the examination of tenements belonging very largely, as it happened, to sympathizers with the gallant Rough Rider's cause; and those who knew did not marvel much at the large vote polled by the Tammany candidate in the old city.

The halls of these tenements are dark. Under the law, there should be a light burning, but it is one of the rarest things to find one. The thing seems well-nigh impossible of accomplishment. Two years ago, when the Good Government Clubs set about backing up the Board of Health in its efforts to work out this reform, which comes close to being one of the most necessary of all,—such untold mischief is abroad in the darkness of these thoroughfares,—the sanitary police reported 12,000 tenement halls unlighted by night, even, and brought them, by repeated orders, down to less than 1000 in six months. I do not believe the light burns in 1000 of them all to-day. It is so easy to put it out when the policeman's back is turned, and save the gas.

We had a curious instance at the time of the difficulties that sometimes beset reform. Certain halls that were known to be dark were reported sufficiently lighted by the policeman of the district, and it was discovered that it was his standard that was vitiated. He himself lived in a tenement, and was used to its gloom. So an order was issued defining darkness to the sanitary police: if the sink in the hall could be made out, and the slops overflowing on the floor, and if a baby could be seen on the stairs, the hall was light; if, on the other hand, the baby's shrieks were the first warning that it was being trampled upon, the hall was dark. Some days later, the old question arose about an Eldridge Street tenement. The policeman had reported the hall light enough. The president of the Board of Health, to settle it once for all, went over with me, to see for himself. The hall was very dark. He sent for the policeman.

"Did you see the sink in that hall?" he asked.

The policeman said he did.

"But it is pitch dark. How did you see it?"

"I lit a match," said the policeman.

Four families live on these floors, with Heaven knows how many children. It was here the police commissioners were requested, in sober earnest, some years ago, by a committee of very practical women philanthropists, to have the children tagged, so as to save the policemen wear and tear in taking them back and forth between the Eldridge Street police station and headquarters, when they got lost. If tagged, they could be

assorted at once and taken to their homes. Incidentally, the city would save the expense of many meals. It was shrewdly suspected that the little ones were lost on purpose in a good many cases, as a way of getting them fed at the public expense.

That the children preferred the excitement of the police station, and the distinction of a trip in charge of a brass-buttoned guardian, to the Ludlow Street flat is easy enough to understand. A more unlovely existence than that in one of these tenements it would be hard to imagine. Everywhere is the stench of the kerosene stove that is forever burning, serving for cooking, heating, and ironing alike, until the last atom of oxygen is burned out of the close air. Oil is cheaper than coal. The air shaft is too busy carrying up smells from below to bring any air down, even if it is not hung full of washing in every story, as it ordinarily is. Enterprising tenants turn it to use as a refrigerator as well. There is at least a draught of air, such as it is. When fire breaks out, this draught makes of the air shaft a flue through which the fire roars fiercely to the roof, so transforming what was meant for the good of the tenants into their greatest peril. The stuffy rooms seem as if they were made for dwarfs. Most decidedly, there is not room to swing the proverbial cat in any one of them. In one I helped the children, last holiday, to set up a Christmas tree, so that a glimpse of something that was not utterly sordid and mean might for once enter their lives. Three weeks after, I found the tree standing yet in the corner. It was very cold, and there was no fire in the room. "We were going to burn it," said the little

woman, whose husband was then in the insane asylum, "and then I couldn't. It looked so kind o' cheery-like there in the corner." My tree had borne the fruit I wished.

It remained for the New York slum landlord to assess the exact value of a ray of sunlight,—upon the tenant, of course. Here are two back-to-back rear tenements, with dark bedrooms on the south. The flat on the north gives upon a neighbor's yard, and a hole two feet square has been knocked in the wall, letting in air and sunlight; little enough of the latter, but what there is is carefully computed in the lease. Six dollars for this flat, six and a half for the one with the hole in the wall. Six dollars a year per ray. In half a dozen houses in this block have I found the same rate maintained. The modern tenement on the corner goes higher: for four front rooms, "where the sun comes right in your face," seventeen dollars; for the rear flat of three rooms, larger and better every other way, but always dark, like the capmaker's, eleven dollars. From the landlord's point of view, this last is probably a concession. But he is a landlord with a heart. His house is as good a one as can be built on a twenty-five-foot lot. The man who owns the corner building in Orchard Street, with the two adjoining tenements, has no heart. In the depth of last winter, I found a family of poor Jews living in a coop under his stairs, an abandoned piece of hallway, in which their baby was born, and for which he made them pay eight dollars a month. It was the most outrageous case of landlord robbery I had ever come across, and it gave me sincere pleasure to assist the sanitary

policeman in curtailing his profits by even this much. The hall is not now occupied.

The Jews under the stairs had two children. The shoemaker in the cellar next door has three. They were fighting and snarling like so many dogs over the coarse food on the table before them, when we looked in. The baby, it seems, was the cause of the row. He wanted it all. He was a very dirty and a very fierce baby, and the other two children were no match for him. The shoemaker grunted fretfully at his last, "Ach, he is all de time hungry!" At the sight of the policeman, the young imp set up such a howl that we beat a hasty retreat. The cellar "flat" was undoubtedly in violation of law, but it was allowed to pass. In the main hall, on the ground floor, we counted seventeen children. The facts of life here suspend ordinary landlord prejudices to a certain extent. Occasionally it is the tenant who suspends them. The policeman laughed as he told me of the case of a mother who coveted a flat into which she well knew her family would not be admitted; the landlord was particular. She knocked, with a troubled face, alone. Yes, the flat was to let; had she any children? The woman heaved a sigh. "Six, but they are all in Greenwood." The landlord's heart was touched by such woe. He let her have the flat. By night he was amazed to find a flock of half a dozen robust youngsters domiciled under his roof. They had indeed been in Greenwood; but they had come back from the cemetery to stay. And stay they did, the rent being paid.

High rents, slack work, and low wages go hand in hand in the

tenements as promoters of overcrowding. The rent is always one fourth of the family income, often more. The fierce competition for a bare living cuts down wages; and when loss of work is added, the only thing left is to take in lodgers to meet the landlord's claim. The Jew usually takes them singly, the Italian by families. The midnight visit of the sanitary policeman discloses a state of affairs against which he feels himself helpless. He has his standard: 400 cubic feet of air space for each adult sleeper, 200 for a child. That in itself is a concession to the practical necessities of the case. The original demand was for 600 feet. But of 28,000 and odd tenants canvassed in New York, in the slumming investigation prosecuted by the general government in 1894, 17,047 were found to have less than 400 feet, and of these 5526 slept in unventilated rooms with no windows. No more such rooms have been added since; but there has come that which is worse.

It was the boast of New York, till a few years ago, that at least that worst of tenement depravities, the one-room house, too familiar in the English slums, was practically unknown here. It is not so any longer. The evil began in the old houses in Orchard and Allen streets, a bad neighborhood, infested by fallen women and the thievish rascals who prey upon their misery,—a region where the whole plan of humanity, if plan there be in this disgusting mess, jars out of tune continually. The furnished-room house has become an institution here, speeded on by a conscienceless Jew who bought up the old buildings as fast as they came into

the market, and filled them with a class of tenants before whom charity recoils, helpless and hopeless. When the houses were filled, the crowds overflowed into the yard. In one case, I found, in midwinter, tenants living in sheds built of odd boards and roof tin, and paying a dollar a week for herding with the rats. One of them, a red-faced German, was a philosopher after his kind. He did not trouble himself to get up, when I looked in, but stretched himself in his bed,—it was high noon,—responding to my sniff of disgust that it was "sehr schoen! ein bischen kalt, aber was!" His neighbor, a white-haired old woman, begged, trembling, not to be put out. She would not know where to go. It was out of one of these houses that Fritz Meyer, the murderer, went to rob the poorbox in the Redemptorist Church, the night when he killed policeman Smith. The policeman surprised him at his work. In the room he had occupied I came upon a brazen-looking woman with a black eye, who answered the question of the officer, "Where did you get that shiner?" with a laugh. "I ran up against the fist of me man," she said. Her "man," a big, sullen lout, sat by, dumb. The woman answered for him that he was a mechanic.

"What does he work at?" snorted the policeman, restraining himself with an effort from kicking the fellow.

She laughed scornfully. "At the junk business." It meant that he was a thief.

Young men, with blotched faces and cadaverous looks, were loafing in every room. They hung their heads in silence. The

women turned their faces away at the sight of the uniform. They cling to these wretches, who exploit their starved affections for their own ease, with a grip of desperation. It is their last hold. Women have to love something. It is their deepest degradation that they must love these. Even the wretches themselves feel the shame of it, and repay them by beating and robbing them, as their daily occupation. A poor little baby in one of the rooms gave a shuddering human touch to it all.

The old houses began it, as they began all the tenement mischief that has come upon New York. But the opportunity that was made by the tenant's need was not one to be neglected. In some of the newer tenements, with their smaller rooms, the lodger is by this time provided for in the plan, with a special entrance from the hall. "Lodger" comes, by an easy transition, to stand for "family." Only the other night I went with the sanitary police on their midnight inspection through a row of Elizabeth Street tenements which I had known since they were built, fifteen or sixteen years ago. That is the neighborhood in which the recent Italian immigrants crowd. In the house which we selected for examination, in all respects the type of the rest, we found forty-three families where there should have been sixteen. Upon each floor were four flats, and in each flat three rooms that measured respectively 14 x 11, 7 x 11, and 7 x 8-1/2 feet. In only one flat did we find a single family. In three there were two to each. In the other twelve each room had its own family living and sleeping there. They cooked, I suppose, at the one stove in the kitchen,

which was the largest room. In one big bed we counted six persons, the parents and four children. Two of them lay crosswise at the foot of the bed, or there would not have been room. A curtain was hung before the bed in each of the two smaller rooms, leaving a passageway from the hall to the main room. The rent for the front flats was twelve dollars; for that in the rear ten dollars. The social distinctions going with the advantage of location were rigidly observed, I suppose. The three steps across a tenement hall, from the front to "the back," are often a longer road than from Ludlow Street to Fifth Avenue.

They were sweaters' tenements. But I shall keep that end of the story until I come to speak of the tenants. The houses I have in mind now. They were Astor leasehold property, and I had seen them built upon the improved plan of 1879, with air shafts and all that. There had not been water in the tenements for a month then, we were told by the one tenant who spoke English that could be understood. The cold snap had locked the pipes. Fitly enough, the lessee was an undertaker, an Italian himself, who combined with his business of housing his people above and below the ground that of the padrone, to let no profit slip. He had not taken the trouble to make many or recent repairs. The buildings had made a fair start; they promised well. But the promise had not been kept. In their premature decay they were distinctly as bad as the worst. I had the curiosity to seek out the agent, the middleman, and ask him why they were so. He shrugged his shoulders. With such tenants nothing could be done, he said. I have always held

that Italians are most manageable, and that, with all the surface indications to the contrary, they are really inclined to cleanliness, if cause can be shown, and I told him so. He changed the subject diplomatically. No doubt it was with him simply a question of the rent. They might crowd and carry on as they pleased, once that was paid; and they did. It used to be the joke of Elizabeth Street that when the midnight police came, the tenants would keep them waiting outside, pretending to search for the key, until the surplus population of men had time to climb down the fire escape. When the police were gone they came back. We surprised them all in bed.

Like most of the other tenements we have come across on our trip, these were double-deckers. That is the type of tenement that is responsible for the crowding that goes on unchecked. It is everywhere replacing the older barracks, as they rot or are torn down.

This double-decker was thus described by the Tenement House Committee of 1894: "It is the one hopeless form of tenement construction. It cannot be well ventilated, it cannot be well lighted; it is not safe in case of fire. It is built on a lot 25 feet wide by 100 or less in depth, with apartments for four families in each story. This necessitates the occupation of from 86 to 90 per cent. of the lot's depth. The stairway, made in the centre of the house, and the necessary walls and partitions reduce the width of the middle rooms (which serve as bedrooms for at least two people each) to 9 feet each at the most, and a narrow light

and air shaft, now legally required in the centre of each side wall, still further lessens the floor space of these middle rooms. Direct light is only possible for the rooms at the front and rear. The middle rooms must borrow what light they can from dark hallways, the shallow shafts, and the rear rooms. Their air must pass through other rooms or the tiny shafts, and cannot but be contaminated before it reaches them. A five-story house of this character contains apartments for eighteen or twenty families, a population frequently amounting to 100 people, and sometimes increased by boarders or lodgers to 150 or more."

The committee, after looking in vain through the slums of the Old World cities for something to compare the double-deckers with, declared that, in their setting, the separateness and sacredness of home life were interfered with, and evils bred, physical and moral, that "conduce to the corruption of the young." The statement needs no argument to convince.

Yet it is for these that the "interests" of which the fire chief spoke rush into battle at almost every session of the legislature, whenever a step, no matter how short and conservative, is to be taken toward their improvement. No winter has passed, since the awakening conscience of the people of New York city manifested itself in a desire to better the lot of the other half, that has not seen an assault made, in one shape or another, on the structure of tenement house law built up with such anxious solicitude. Once a bill to exempt from police supervision, by withdrawing them from the tenement house class, the very worst

of the houses, whose death rate threatened the community, was sneaked through the legislature all unknown, and had reached the executive before the alarm was sounded. The governor, put upon his guard, returned the bill, with the indorsement that he was unable to understand what could have prompted a measure that seemed to have reason and every argument against it, and none for it. But the motive is not so obscure, after all. It is the same old one of profit without conscience. It took from the Health Department the supervision of the light, ventilation, and plumbing of the tenements, which by right belonged there, and put it in charge of a compliant Building Department, "for the convenience of architects and their clients, and the saving of time and expense to them." For the convenience of the architect's client, the builder, the lot was encroached upon, until of one big block which the Tenement House Committee measured only 7 per cent. was left uncovered for the air to struggle through; 93 per cent. of it was covered with brick and mortar. Rear tenements, to the number of nearly 100, have been condemned as "slaughter houses," with good reason, but this block was built practically solid. The average of space covered in 34 tenement blocks was shown to be 78.13 per cent. The law allowed only 65. The "discretion" that pens tenants in a burning tenement with stairs of wood for the builder's "convenience" cut down the chance of life of their babies unmoved. Sunlight and air mean just that, where three thousand human beings are packed into a single block. That was why the matter was given into the charge of the health

officials, when politics was yet kept out of their work.

Of such kind are the interests that oppose betterment of the worker's hard lot in New York; that dictated the appointment by Tammany of a commission composed of builders to revise its code of building laws, and that sneer at the "laughable results of the late Tenement House Committee." Those results made for the health and happiness and safety of a million and a half of souls, and were accounted, on every humane ground, the longest step forward that had yet been taken by this community. For the old absentee landlord, who did not know what mischief was afoot, we have got the speculative builder, who does know, but does not care so long as he gets his pound of flesh. Half of the just laws that have been passed for the relief of the people he has paralyzed with his treacherous discretion clause, carefully nursed in the school of practical politics to which he gives faithful adherence. The thing has been the curse of our city from the day when the earliest struggle toward better things began. Among the first manifestations of that was the prohibition of soap factories below Grand Street by the act of 1797, which created a Board of Health with police powers. The act was passed in February, to take effect in July; but long before that time the same legislature had amended it by giving the authorities discretion in the matter. And the biggest soap factory of them all is down there to this day, and is even now stirring up a rumpus among the latest immigrants, the Syrians, who have settled about it. No doubt it is all a question of political education; but are not a hundred years

enough to settle this much, that compromise is out of place where the lives of the people are at stake, and that it is time our years of "discretion" were numbered?

And, please God, the time is at hand. Here, set in its frame of swarming tenements, is a wide open space, some time, when enough official red tape has been unwound, to be a park, with flowers and grass and birds to gladden the hearts of those to whom such things have been as tales that are told, all these dreary years, and with a playground in which the children of yonder big school may roam at will, undismayed by landlord or policeman. Not all the forces of reaction can put back the barracks that were torn down as one of the "laughable results" of that very Tenement House Committee's work, or restore to the undertaker his profits from Bone Alley of horrid memory. It was the tenant's turn to laugh, that time. Down half a dozen blocks, among even denser swarms, is another such plot, where football and a skating pond are being planned by the children's friends. We shall hear the story of these yet, and rejoice that the day of reckoning is coming for the builder without a soul. Till then let him deck the fronts of his tenements with bravery of plate glass and brass to hide the darkness within. He has done his worst.

We can go no further. Yonder lies the river. A full mile we have come, through unbroken ranks of tenements with their mighty, pent-up multitudes. Here they seem, with a common impulse, to overflow into the street. From corner to corner it is crowded with girls and children dragging babies nearly as big as

themselves, with desperate endeavor to lose nothing of the show. There is a funeral in the block. Unnumbered sewing-machines cease for once their tireless rivalry with the flour mill in the next block, that is forever grinding in a vain effort to catch up. Heads are poked from windows. On the stoops hooded and shawled figures have front seats. The crowd is hardly restrained by the policeman and the undertaker in holiday mourning, who clear a path by force to the plumed hearse. The eager haste, the frantic rush to see,—what does it not tell of these starved lives, of the quality of their aims and ambitions? The mill clatters loudly: there is one mouth less to fill. In the midst of it all, with clamor of urgent gong, the patrol wagon rounds the corner, carrying two policemen precariously perched upon a struggling "drunk," a woman. The crowd scatters, following the new sensation. The tragedies of death and life in the slum have met together.

Many a mile I might lead you along these rivers, east and west, through the island of Manhattan, and find little else than we have seen. The great crowd is yet below Fourteenth Street, but the northward march knows no slackening of pace. As the tide sets uptown, it reproduces faithfully the scenes of the older wards, though with less of their human interest than here where the old houses, in all their ugliness, have yet some imprint of the individuality of their tenants. Only on feast days does Little Italy, in Harlem, recall the Bend when it put on holiday attire. Anything more desolate and disheartening than the unending rows of tenements, all alike and all equally repellent, of the

uptown streets, it is hard to imagine. Hell's Kitchen in its ancient wickedness was picturesque, at least, with its rocks and its goats and shanties. Since the negroes took possession it is only dull, except when, as happened last summer, the remnant of the Irish settlers make a stand against the intruders. Vain hope! Perpetual eviction is their destiny. Negro, Italian, and Jew, biting the dust with many a bruised head under the Hibernian's stalwart fist, resistlessly drive him before them, nevertheless, out of house and home. The landlord pockets the gate money. The old robbery still goes on. Where the negro pitches his tent, he pays more rent than his white neighbor next door, and is a better tenant. And he is good game forever. He never buys the tenement, as the Jew or the Italian is likely to do, when he has scraped up money enough to reënact, after his own fashion, the trick taught him by his oppressor. The black column has reached the hundredth street on the East Side, and the sixties on the West,² and there for the present it halts. Jammed between Africa, Italy, and Bohemia, the Irishman has abandoned the East Side uptown. Only west of Central Park does he yet face his foe, undaunted in defeat as in victory. The local street nomenclature, in which the directory has no hand,—Nigger Row, Mixed Ale Flats, etc.,—indicates the hostile camps with unerring accuracy.

² There is an advanced outpost of blacks as far up as One Hundred and Forty-Fifth Street, but the main body lingers yet among the sixties.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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