

4. Jacob Riis Goes Slumming (1890)

Police reporter jacob A. Riis, a Danish-born immigrant who had known rat-infested tenements in Denmark, aimed his talented pen at the scandalous slums of New York. He was shocked by the absence of privacy, sanitation, and playgrounds, and by the presence of dirt, stench, and vermin. One tenement area in New York was known as the "Lung Block" because of the prevalence of tuberculosis. Despite the opposition of heartless landlords, who worked hand in glove with corrupt politicians, Riis helped to eliminate some of these foul firetraps, especially the dark "rear tenements." What does he regard as the chief obstacles to good health and good morals in these slums?

Suppose we look into one? No.-Cherry Street. Be a little careful, please! The hall is dark and you might stumble over the children pitching pennies back there. Not that it would hurt them; kicks and cuffs are their daily diet. They have little else.

Here where the hall turns and dives into utter darkness is a step, and another, another. A flight of stairs. You can feel your way, if you cannot see it. Close? Yes! What would you have? All the fresh air that ever enters these stairs comes from the hall-door that is forever slamming, and from the windows of dark bedrooms that in turn receive from the stairs their sole supply of elements God meant to be free, but man deals out with such niggardly hand.

That was a woman filling her pail by the hydrant you just bumped against. The sinks are in the hallway, that all the tenants may have access-and all to be poisoned alike by their summer stenches.

Hear the pump squeak! It is the lullaby of tenement-house babes. In summer, when a thousand thirsty throats pant for a cooling drink in this block, it is worked in vain. But the saloon, whose open door you passed in the hall, is always there. The smell of it has followed you up.

Here is a door. Listen! That short hacking cough, that tiny, helpless wail-what do they mean? They mean that the soiled bow of white you saw on the door downstairs will have another story to tell-oh! a sadly familiar story-before the day is at an end. The child is dying with measles. With half a chance it might have lived; but it had none. The dark bedroom killed it.

"It was took all of a suddint," says the mother, smoothing the throbbing little body with trembling hands. There is no unkindness in the rough voice of the man in the jumper, who sits by the window grimly smoking a clay pipe, with the little life ebbing out in his sight, bitter as his words sound: "Hush, Mary! if we cannot keep the baby, need we complain-such as we?"

Such as we! What if the words ring in your ears as we grope our way up the stairs and down from floor to floor, listening to the sounds behind the closed doors-some of quarreling, some of coarse songs, more of profanity. They are true. When the summer heats come with their suffering, they have meaning more terrible than words can tell.

Come over here. Step carefully over this baby-it is a baby, spite of its rags and dirt-under these iron bridges called fire-escapes, but loaded down, despite the incessant watchfulness of the firemen, with broken household goods, with washtubs and barrels, over which no man could climb from a fire.

This gap between dingy brick walls is the yard. The strip of smoke-colored sky up there is the heaven of these people. Do you wonder the name does not attract them to churches?

That baby's parents live in the rear tenement here. She is at least as clean as the steps we are now climbing. There are plenty of houses with half a hundred such in. The tenement is much like the one in front we just left, only fouler, closer, darker-we will not say more cheerless. The word is a mockery. A hundred thousand people lived in rear tenements in New York last year.