

"THE MOST USEFUL CITIZEN"

Jacob A. Riis: The Man, His Long, Lone Fight with the Slum, and the New Social Dawn His Efforts Brought About

By JOHN HUBERT GREUSEL



ANYBODY who has ever circled round the edges of that social swamp, otherwise known as New York's lower East Side tenement house district, must come away with an ugly, unsocial feeling. "Dens of death," Riis calls the man traps. And Riis ought to know; for he fought here for fourteen long years to bring about forces that would tell for decency; fought here and is fighting still, because the battle with the slums is far from won.

Morning and night, again and again, I went with workers through this unwatered, unweeded human garden, and returned each time more and more perplexed.

Riis tells me that in this maelstrom of misery there are still at least one million men, women, and children housed in foul tenements and pestilent cellars.

Naturally I asked, as hundreds of onlookers have long before this day, "What are you going to do about it?"

For a sign, Riis replied, "Look forward, not backward," and he pointed to the green trees in Mulberry Bend.

For many years army after army of social crusaders has in turn battered at the doors of the dens. On the other hand, Riis made for the most part a long, lone fight; and when in the fullness of time he blew his trumpet blast the walls began to totter, the rubbish was cleared—and there stood the park.

Accountable to nobody, fighting under his own flag, serving no master except his own conscience and his outraged sense of brotherhood, Riis, the boss police reporter, became the most formidable opponent ever encountered by the slum.

His gorge was stirred every time he saw the old rookeries with their men, women, and children herded like cattle. It is all easy enough to understand when you know something of his personal history.

As a reformer, he was held in check by coldly practical training as a first rate journalist. "Facts," he says—"the power of facts,—are the mightiest power of this or any other day." So he hammered on facts, facts, facts, in the lives of the slum people.

His plan was based on coöperation. He was willing to help men, but not to carry them; and at all times he was sustained by the high courage of the true reformer, as distinguished from the zealot. No wonder, then, that Roosevelt, who too was in the thick of the fight and hence well qualified to pass judgment, once alluded to Riis as "the most useful citizen of New York"!

A Pioneer in Publicity

IT is of importance to make clear Riis's method. He used an old lever in a new way,—publicity,—and after fourteen years' killing work the reporter reformer toppled over several hundred tenement rookeries and let in the daylight. The striking fact is that Riis began without a plan. The opportunity widened as he went on; but at no time did he pose as a reformer. He simply set up certain forces which in turn reacted on the popular mind. That part is journalism, pure and simple; but it by no means explains the ultimate victory.

Yes, we must make large room for something else. Otherwise we shall never understand Riis the man, and his work in the slum. There is, I soon discerned, a subtle something in his personality. I fell under its spell as I talked with him. It floated over me, the way an actor's personality floats over the footlights.

What a man he is! Frank and open as the day; simple as a big boy; kind hearted to a fault; stubborn, yes, enough for two; proud, yes, in the best sense of this much misunderstood term; open minded, but so candid that at times his words stab like a stiletto,—such is Riis. And I am ready to believe that on a question of principle this rough and tumble fighter would crush a friendship as a wineglass would go down before the smash of a blacksmith's hammer.

You see, he kept men alive on the problem of the slum; but for all that his intellect, unaided, did not express the whole force of the movement. It needed a man behind, and that man was Riis.

I read his books, talked with him, tramped his slum district; but I still found behind everything a largeness that eluded mere definitions. That factor is Riis, the fighting man, with his hard qualities as a reformer,—courage, desire to help, and common-sense.

With his living pictures from the slums, the drink curse, the deadly moral contagion, tramps, beggars, loafers, the devil's money, outcast men and women, and the general harvest of tares and the wages of sin, Riis told plain, unvarnished facts; but, more important still, proved his own brother-

hood by dinning into the ears of the rich unpleasant facts about how the other half lives. The rich did not care to hear him, and for fourteen years Riis, the boss police reporter, was known as a man with one idea.

Things Which He Did

THESE are some of the larger things he did in those seemingly barren years: He restored to the slum children their lost rights of play. He aided in passing the briefest, wisest, and best statute on the books of New York, laying down the principle that hereafter "no school shall be built without an adequate playground." He helped with the smaller parks, and led in the tenement house reform movement. On his exposure of unsanitary conditions threatening typhoid and possibly cholera, New York purchased the whole Croton watershed. By sweeping away the practice of renting cellars to bakeshops, he made a thing of the past those dreadful midnight fires in overcrowded tenements. And he did his full share to smash the vile police lodging house system. He raised his voice to carry along the truant school plan. He brought also many other reforms, through his unique social service.

All the time he was an overworked police reporter, his strength and ingenuity taxed with the daily grind of accidents, fires, and crimes in Mulberry and elsewhere. On supreme occasions he had to



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Riis the Reporter Became Riis the Leader.

rise far beyond routine efforts in lending his brain to solve such great crimes as the Stewart grave robbery, the abduction of Charlie Ross, and the celebrated Manhattan bank robbery. But he never for one instant forgot his self appointed one-handed fight with the slum.

Perhaps you do not like the word "providential"; but choose your own word. In the light of the facts, it is otherwise inexplicable that Riis the reporter became Riis the leader. Morning after morning as he trudged through Mulberry Bend on his way home after his night's police work, he was the first to see the darkness break chill and cold, but break just the same. And he was there when

the hideous night in the lives of the poor finally came again.

Jacob A. Riis has, you see, the courage for the long losing game.

His editors threatened him with discharge unless he changed his style; he was "too editorial," they said. Riis, who is stubborn, had his wars with his editors. Though he was restrained in his work, somehow he managed to inject into his reports an indescribable air of individual liberty, checked but not nullified by the policy of the paper.

The fact is that the "boss police reporter's" work was of that high type which, swinging away from routine, contained a large element that may be defined as accurate observation, breadth, and virility. His "page brighteners" and ephemeral newspaper sketches lived finally in book form.

Whatever Riis may have done as a helper, his victory in the slums of New York is a monument to the constructive power of journalism, as exemplified by Riis's police work for "The New York Tribune," and later for "The New York Sun." This man Riis, the Danish lad, whose fitness for journalism was so long questioned by men who for the moment had the authority to direct his activities, somehow, somewhere, in the early days got hold and clung fast to the idea that journalism might be made a wide field for the daily exercise of good citizenship; and in addition to writing his news items, little by little he worked out and applied a philosophy of society. In a word, he called men to account.

Behind all this is a man,—a stalwart man. It must be so, or Riis would have failed; for there are many police reporters in America to-day, all doing excellent work; but Riis somehow linked this day's work with yesterday's, and made to-day, somehow, a footnote to to-morrow. So I tell you that Jacob A. Riis is bigger than anything he ever wrote. His work is larger than his life; will keep on growing after he is gone; has already been taken up by dozens of other willing workers, who in their respective ways have made the Riis conception of brotherhood—that practical, helpful, commonsense brotherhood—the basis of new social meanings, in directions Riis never dreamed of.

Riis was ready for hammer blows, and he also dealt them, right and left. He had no sympathy for the fat, well nourished loafers of the slums; but his heart went out to the honest poor. Riis knew for that best of reasons,—he himself had lived in the slums, and the night policeman had ordered him "Move on!" from these very doorways.

The Hard School of Experience

WHAT dark days they were! The slum was the first place in which, as a Danish immigrant, young Jacob had gone in his extremity, to find bare board in a police lodging house. He was poor, and his luck was down. He was glad, when night came, to gnaw meat bones secretly handed out to him by a kind hearted cook's helper through Delmonico's back window; so poor that at last, with winter coming on, he found himself too shabby to get a job if one had been offered—and you know what that condition means. So he became one of those ghosts that you see under the lamplight, in the dreadful panorama of low life, drifting from one noisome Bowery lodging house to the next, and finding one and all hopelessly bad. Then, with a curse at man's inhumanities to the poor, Riis started walking miles out in the country, anywhere to get away from that human hellhole; striking a job wheeling ballast on a railroad, peddling fluting irons, trapping mink and muskrat; and losing again and again his few dollars; then an outcast sleeping in barns, with dogs snapping at his heels; and one dreadful night, in heroic scorn of man's pitiful ways, finding a bed on the smooth flat stone in a cemetery, preferring, as he said, to rest with the dead than fight with the cold hearted living; and with that large innocence, that simple minded way that shows Riis's practical mind, he added, "And, you know, after sundown stones retain their heat for quite awhile."

Then back to the slums, in spite of its miseries, and all the while sympathizing with the sorrows of others. In these mysterious workings of Fate, Jacob A. Riis's lifework was created for him; for in the years to come he was to be the living voice that would speak for the slums that refused to house him decently; that stoned him, and starved him.

All these facts he remembered when, later, he began his successful work as a police reporter. As a matter of course, the exercise of his profession enabled him to add to his social knowledge. He never forgot, for example, the night the police ruffian in uniform, years before, killed the homeless cur dog. It was like this: Riis, utterly worn out, had gone down to the river brooding on his miseries. He had made up his mind that life was not worth the struggle; when a homeless dog came