

Death of a Child, 1890

Life in the City

He arrived on America's shores in 1870 virtually penniless. Twenty-one-year-old Jacob Riis had traveled from his native Denmark to find a better life. He spent the next few years on the brink of starvation as he went from job to job, never finding anything lasting. His big break came in 1877 when he was hired as a police reporter by the New York *Tribune* newspaper.

Riis's press office was located on Mulberry Street across from the police station in the heart of the city's tenement district - an area that included the notorious five points. The densely populated neighborhoods were riddled with poverty and crime. Riis devoted the rest of his life to exposing the misery, starvation, crowding, graft and political corruption that invested the area.

In 1887 Riis learned of a new photographic method that ignited flash powder to provide enough illumination to take photos in darkness. Soon he was incorporating this method in his coverage of the city, first employing other photographers and then taking the photos himself. His objective was to document the conditions he saw in order to change them. In 1891 he published *How the Other Half Lives*. The force of his words combined with the stark reality of his photos did much to sway public opinion to cleaning up the squalled conditions in the tenements

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"That ignorance plays its part, as well as poverty and bad hygienic surroundings, in the sacrifice of life is of course inevitable. They go usually hand in hand.

A message came one day last spring summoning me to a Mott Street tenement in which lay a child dying from some unknown disease. With the 'charity doctor' I found the patient on the top floor stretched upon two chairs in a dreadfully stifling room. She was gasping in the agony of peritonitis that had already written its death-sentence on her wan and pinched face. The whole family, father, mother, and four ragged children, sat around looking on with the stony resignation of helpless despair that had long since given up the fight against fate as useless.

A glance around the wretched room left no doubt as to the cause of the child's condition. 'Improper nourishment', said the doctor, which, translated to suit the place, meant starvation.

The father's hands were crippled from lead poisoning. He had not been able to work for a year. A contagious disease of the eyes, too long neglected, had made the mother and one of the boys nearly blind. The children cried with hunger. They had not broken their fast that day and it was then near noon. For months the family had subsisted on two dollars a week from the priest, and a few loaves and a piece of corned beef which the sisters sent them on Saturday.

The doctor gave direction for the treatment of the child, knowing that it was possible only to alleviate its sufferings until death should end them, and left some money for food for the rest.

An hour later, when I returned, I found them feeding the dying child with ginger ale, bought for two cents a bottle at the peddler's cart down the street. A pitying neighbor had proposed it as the one thing she could think of as likely to make the child forget its misery. There was enough in the bottle to go round to the rest of the family. In fact, the wake had already begun; before night it was under way in dead earnest."

References:

Riis Jacob, *How the Other Half Lives* (1891); Lane James B., *Jacob A Riis and the American city* (1974).

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