

*McClure's Magazine*  
*August, 1903*

***Jacob A. Riis***

***Reporter, Reformer, American Citizen***

IF any rich man could mark a city with as many good works as Jacob A. Riis has thrust upon New York, his name would be called good and himself great; no matter how he made his money, the man would be a philanthropist. Riis is a reporter. The evils he exposed he discovered as a reporter; as a reporter he wrung men's hearts with them; and the reporter with his "roasts" compelled indifferent city officials to concede the reforms he suggested or approved. Consider these reforms: It was Riis who exposed the contaminated state of the city's water supply, and thus brought about the purchase of the whole Croton watershed. It was Riis who forced the destruction of rear tenements, and thus relieved the hideous darkness and density of life among the poor. It was the reporter with his nagging that wiped out Mulberry Bend, the worst tenement block in the city, and had the space turned into a park. Riis spoke the word that incited Commissioner Roosevelt to abolish police station lodging-houses. Riis fought for and secured a truant school, where boys who play hooky are punished—they used to be imprisoned with juvenile criminals. Riis did the work that won small parks for bad spots in the city; he labored years for enough schools; he drove bake shops with their fatal fires out of tenement basements; he demanded light for dark tenement hallways, got it, and thus opened one hiding place of vice, crime, and filth. He worked for the abolition of child labor, and, when a law was enacted, compelled its enforcement. Playgrounds for schools and the opening of schoolrooms to boys' and girls' clubs were of his work. And he raised the cry for flowers for the healthy as well as the sick poor.

Theodore Roosevelt once said that Riis was "the most useful citizen of New York." A Harvard professor who heard the remark spoke of it as a "generous exaggeration" characteristic of Mr. Roosevelt. The man who is president never chose words more nicely. People don't realize it, but no citizen of New York ever devoted himself so completely to the welfare of the city as Riis, and truly no one has accomplished so much—so many specific, tangible reforms.

Of course he did not do all these things singlehanded, and he did not pay for them out of his own pocket. Riis was poor in pocket, but he was rich in sentiment and strength and courage. He gave facts and made the city pay. The man has cost New York City millions of dollars. According to the latest principle of public benefaction, however, this makes him all the more a philanthropist, for such men as Rockefeller and Carnegie have been giving money only on condition that the city or institution receiving the gifts should raise as much more, and Mr. Carnegie told me once that he was prouder of what he had made cities do for themselves than of all that he himself had given. So Riis, who has made his city foot the whole bill, is the greatest philanthropist of them all.

Now Riis does not care for fame; that is one secret of his success, and he used to say the elevation of his name with an account of his methods would hinder him. But his work is about

done and he has told his own story in "The Making of an American." Besides, he told me not long ago to "go ahead and expose him," so that, though I know he will denounce some of the things I am going to say, I should like to help urge the claim he has made to the titles "reporter, reformer, American citizen." Then, too, he is such a good man to know.

Riis is a lusty Danish emigrant, with a vigorous body, an undisciplined mind that grasps facts as he himself sees them, an imagination to reconstruct, emotion to suffer, and a kind, fighting spirit, to weep, whoop, laugh, and demand. As a reporter he saw straight, told about it in words hot with emotion, and, because his feeling was genuine, he was not content with the pleasant sensation of horror he gave his readers, neither could he be ordered off on some other assignment; he turned reformer, and while the man continued to pity, the reporter continued to report, and the reformer worked through despair to set the wrong right. As a citizen, public business came first in his interest, his own second. His love for his wife is such that his story of it is one of the most amazing and beautiful love stories in the world. But having given her this love of faith, passion, and imagination, he gave the rest "to God and New York."

Oh, he is a fanatic, this Riis. But he has such a laugh, and such luck. I used to remonstrate with him for neglecting his family. He had bought a home, with a mortgage all over it, and instead of hastening to pay it off, he was giving lectures free, or for ten, twenty-five, or fifty dollars, writing articles for about the same prices, and laboring for small parks or school playgrounds, or to tear down rear tenements. His lectures and his articles, he said, helped along the cause, and, besides, it was not worth more than ten dollars to stand up and talk about what he loved to tell. Thus he reasons: As for the family, "God will provide."

When I reminded him one morning that he might die and that the friends of a reformer, unlike those of the rascal, forget, he told me to get out and picked up his mail.

"I know what I'm talking about," he said. "I've been in all sorts of trouble and He always has provided. Right now, for instance, I'm broke. My oldest boy needs an overcoat and the winter is coming. How I'm going to get the money for that overcoat I don't know, but it will come because I must have—"

He stopped, intent on a letter. "What's this!" he exclaimed. Then he jumped up, and waving a check, roared the jolly laugh which all Mulberry Street knows well. "Hi, yi," he bawled, and as I quit him in disgust he yelled at my back the explanation that some man down South had paid at last a bill for an advertisement Riis wrote for him years before. Riis swore he had forgotten all about it, and I believed him. I gave him up. I scoffed at his "luck," and he jeered at me for calling it that. And I really came to believe in whatever it was myself. Besides, he has since raised his rates, wiped out the mortgage, and gone to work for his family, and, though I'd like to reform almost every other reformer I ever knew, I shouldn't change Riis, even if I could, in any particular, least of all in his roaring follies.

One winter day he asked me to go with him to a case of distress on the East Side; two lone women, mother and daughter, were starving in a rotten tenement. We found them on the top floor, where the stench was shocking. At his knock the door reluctantly opened, and from a closet-sized room, with no window, the pent-up reek burst forth like a backdraft. Riis recoiled and I halted on the top stair. A white old head stuck out, the daughter's, and said she and her mother were in dire need; they had no food, and were staying in bed to keep warm.

"But haven't I seen you before?" Riis asked after a while.

"Are you Mr. Riis? Oh!" and she was about to close the door.

"Hold on," said he; "didn't I put you and your mother on a nice farm over in Jersey a year ago, with nothing to do but enjoy the flowers and the cows—why didn't you stay there?"

“Because—well, because—because there was nothing to do; nobody to see or nothing.”

“So you’d rather starve in filth in this beastly place than do—”

“What you’d like best of all to do,” I interrupted.

“Come on,” said Riis, disgusted, and he called back that he would “see.”

I don’t know what he finally “saw” in this case; it was pretty surely a “fairly worthy case,” but he never could see how it was that city poor preferred city poverty to the green fields, etc., which he loved and recommended and often had thrown back at him. He was easily imposed upon because he believed so thoroughly in human nature and loved it, but he knew that he could be deceived, and that, I think, is why he tolerated organized charity. I have heard him denounce it in private many a time, then go right off to support it publicly with an eloquence that must have derived some of its force from the passion of his rage at it.

His worship of women is one of the most beautiful of his traits. He knew all the good women in New York, and they loved Riis as he adored them. Since they were in organized charity, organized charity must be right. I may be wrong about this, but unless I can trace a trait of Riis to his heart, I don’t feel that I have reached bottom, and I know positively that he couldn’t tell a bad woman from a good one; they were all just women to him.

“There,” he said one afternoon, as he pointed across Mulberry Street to a bleached blonde in Cat Alley. “There you have the basis of my faith in the slums. See that face!”

It was a young face, and though hard lines were coming, the general aspect still was soft and tired and very white. I had the advantage of knowing who and what the girl was, but I nodded.

“Well, as long as there are women like that in the slums,” he declared, in his vigorous, positive way, “there is hope for the slums and a rock to build on.”

“Go speak to her, Riis,” I suggested.

“I will,” he said, and he walked casually into the alley, looked around, and then remarked that he intended some day to bring his camera and take pictures of “all you people.”

The girl looked at him a moment, and her face hardened. “Ye will, will ye?” she said. “Ye will, eh? Well, say, ye — — — bring your — machine in here and we’ll break every bone in your body, and the thing besides. Go chase yerself.”

Riis staggered back, and neither of us enjoyed “the joke.” It was too practical, and I was sorry for my part in it. But it did not shake his faith even in that woman, one of the worst white women in Chinatown. He charged her up to the slums.

For is it not a wonderful thing that this man who has worked all the best part of his mature life as a police reporter, “covering” murders, suicides, burglaries, crimes, and vices of all sorts, from body snatchers down to “mixed ale” rows in brothels, should come out as sweet and clean and as full of faith and follies as his old Danish village made him? Priests and nurses have done it, but Riis was tried far more than they. He did not go about merely to see and help, he went back and reported it. When he had done that he struggled with corrupt city officials for relief. Their chicaneries he saw; he caught them red-handed at their sordid tricks. Then, too, he was fighting other reporters who had combined to “beat the Dutchman” and who were willing “to fake to do him.” Severest test of all, he was wading up to his neck in police corruption, knowing well men who lived by blackmail and profits shared with thieves, gamblers, and prostitutes. None of this soiled this man outside or in, neither himself nor his ideals nor his belief in his fellow men.

Riis was never really “wise.” When I first met him we all were busy exposing further the Tammany police system of corruption from which Dr. Parkhurst first lifted the veil. We had just

written one day something about the divulgences of the Lexow Committee, and Riis's article was as vigorous as anybody's. Yet when he had written it he came into my office and closed the door.

"Do you know," he said, "I don't believe it."

"What?"

"Why, what we've been writing."

"You know it's true," I said, astonished.

"I suppose I do; I suppose I ought to," he said thoughtfully. Then he broke out with force. "But I don't believe it. I can't. I don't believe, for instance, that Captain —"

At that name I sprang up. The man he was about to cite was a sanctimonious rascal, "smooth," but one of the very worst offenders; Tammany had trusted him; Roosevelt trusted him then; Devery has trusted him since; Commissioner Partridge trusted him. But everybody who knew anything about police affairs knew that Captain — was the brains of the whole police syndicate, the most hypocritical, the most intelligent, and the most grasping of corrupt police officials. Riis found him out later, five or six years later, but at that time Riis had known this man for fifteen years, and was discrediting his own ears and eyes.

The power to conceive evil in its vicious form failed Riis always. He has a brilliant imagination. He has gathered with the cleverest reporters in New York the facts of a news story, and, by grasping them with his sympathy and his imagination, has so written them that his paper appeared to have a "beat." His imagination was that of a child or a genius. If this hadn't been so he never would have done his great work, which, indeed, all came out of his imagination and feeling. The evils of the slums lay before the other reporters' eyes; they too had to pass and re-pass the Bowery; they too had to dive into Mulberry Bend night and day. They got the murders, as Riis did, but he got something else, which finally blew the Bend off the face of the city. Riis realized and visualized where ordinary men "faked."

Far deeper than any intellectual faculty lay his sympathy. His life, as you can see in "The Making of an American," has been one long stretch of emotional excitement. The world has played upon his sensibilities as it does upon the soul of a musician, and since his feelings found no expression in art, they went off, not as with most men of his temperament in weird dissipations or lay sermons, but in action. A natural shrewdness guided his conduct and directed his impulses. Loose and careless as I have shown him in his personal affairs, when it came to his work for others, whether for his newspaper or his town, he could wait, plot, pull wires!—yes, he could even play tricks; and a successful trick gave him the most robust enjoyment.

A story he used to tell with great gusto was of the defeat of a sanitary expert who had written a report of an especially important investigation. All the reporters wanted that report; none could get it from the expert, least of all Riis, his friend. The commissioner had forbidden its publication. There was no other reason than the form of the thing for withholding it, and Riis made up his mind to get it. He worked long in vain till one day a committee of women from a charity organization called on Riis for an address.

"Very well," he said. "But no, I won't. You ask Dr. — to talk to you about overcrowding in the tenements; he's full of it and will talk well."

They did, the doctor was glad to overflow, and Riis, who was a member of the women's organization, sat in the committee room off the main room and wrote down the gist of that report, and to hear Riis tell about it, especially if the defeated official were by, was to get as much fun out of Riis's "deviltry" as he got out of the "beat."

Indeed it was this roaring humor as much as his shrewdness that kept his sentimentality within bounds, and turned into a working force his human sympathies. The evils he suffered and

the evils he saw moved his pity, but, his emotions stirred, turned him not to tears, but to imprecations and strife. Christian though he was, he was a heathenish Viking, first and last, and his life has been one long fight. He wanted always to be a soldier, and three times he tried hard to enlist for the wars. Human misery, however, was his born enemy, and the struggle with that began in his childhood. That's the spirit of the man. Things never were matters of course with him, and he "never could mind his own business." Willful and combative, he has been a bother to many a man. His father, a teacher, wanted him to be a scholar; he became a carpenter. He loved a girl who didn't love him, quarreled with her father, came to America, continued to love the girl, starved, peddled flatirons, starved again, fought with a French consul who wouldn't send him to France to enlist against Denmark's ancient enemy — Germany; slept in police station lodging-houses; quarreled with a German bum because he was for Germany against France, with the police sergeant who killed his dog; edited a paper and turned its editorials against the owners who were in politics; won his girl; got a job as a reporter and was promoted for knocking down the city editor; was sent to police headquarters because all the reporters there had combined against his paper, which needed a fighter. Well, he fought. A foreigner, he didn't write very good English; it was vigorous, but not always correct. (He learned to write and to speak with eloquence, not by study, but by sheer force of the necessity to express his ideas and his feelings.) Mixed with his facts were his opinions on them, and these editorial expressions were often in conflict with his editors', who interdicted them, but Riis kept on writing them, and at last the editors either cut them out or let them go. "They gave me up as a bad job," Riis says. And beaten at first, Riis soon was beating his rival reporters. They went to work at noon, he came down at eleven; they came at eleven, he at eight; they came at eight, Riis was soon covering the town from the time the morning papers went to press at 2.30 o'clock in the morning, and to that "crazy" extreme the others would not follow.

"I was in a fight not of my own choosing," he says in his book, "and . . . I hit as hard as I knew how, and so did they." And I know that he enjoyed it.

One of his great public benefactions, the most costly to New York, was a newspaper "beat," and typical of the shrewdness and intelligence of the man. Riis picked up in the Health Department one day the weekly analysis of the Croton water, and read "a trace of nitrites." "What are nitrites?" he asked. Getting an evasive answer, he went off and found out what nitrites were, published the news, explaining that they meant sewage contamination, and advising people to boil the water. Then, while the other papers were pooh-poohing the news, he went up through the Croton watershed with a camera and took pictures of towns sewerage into the streams, public dumps on their banks, people and animals washing in the water. He made good his case. The other papers belittled the conditions, saying running water purifies itself; but Riis inquired how long it took the water to come down from the worst town, sixty miles away. The answer was, four days. He asked the experts how long a cholera germ might live in running water; "seven days" was the answer. New York had to buy up that watershed, and the cost ran into the millions; but Riis had his "beat" and New York has pure water.

"Beat" though it was, however, and insist as I do and as Riis himself does always that he accomplished all his best work as a reporter, the rivalry of journalism was not the source of his power, nor its triumphs his leading motive. Keen, fresh-minded observation discovered for him the facts of abuses, and the reporter gloried in the discovery, but it was the man that raised the reporter to a reformer. There was nothing professional in his observation that truant boys sent among criminal children in the reform schools soon began to turn up as criminals. Any of the men who crossed on his ferry with him might have brought flowers gathered by their children to

throw to the children of the poor, and, discovering that they loved them, any man might have appealed to the public for flowers for the slums; any of the reporters might have seen any of the evils Riis saw as they went for crime and accident stories among the tenements. Riis saw and reported; then Riis, after many years, obtained a separate school for truants. When the flowers poured into Mulberry Street by the wagon load, so that he, with the help of all the other reporters, a special detail of police, and volunteers, couldn't distribute them, Riis founded a society of women to attend to this pleasant business, and that society, with Riis as vice-president, does this work to this day. The tenements were a larger task, but he went at them in the same way, hand and head and heart. With all his newspaper work and its fights on his mind, he studied and counseled and made notes, then wrote "How the Other Half Lives," which created a sensation. Investigating committees were appointed, and "The Children of the Poor" came out to show that Riis was still at work, and would let the awakened public conscience have no rest. Ten years followed of fighting, of despair, but of no relaxation for Riis, till in the end he won his victories and wrote "The Ten Years' War."

Now how did Riis win these victories? An effective reformer is so rare that he should be accounted for; a bold exposition of the methods by which an obscure reporter wrought so many reforms might make useful some of the well-meaning meddlers who never get anywhere. I fear not, however. Riis was simply a good citizen; the big, jolly, sentimental Dane took his adopted citizenship literally, and literally "worked for the public good"—"worked" like a political rascal.

His methods were much like those of a boss. In the first place he kept himself in the background, sought no office, indulged no vanity and no self-glorification. In the second place he worked all the time. "The churches may close, the saloons and the slums are open all day and all night, all week and the year round," he said once to me. In the third place he played upon men, used them, and women too, and while he preached he pulled wires. In the fourth place he bided his time, to strike when the right iron turned up hot.

Once, as he has told, when he was out of work and starving, he sat in the cold rain beside the river, contemplating a dive out of it all, when a little cur he had befriended crept up under his arm. That saved him and he moped off to a station lodging-house. There it was he got into his row with a German tramp over the Franco-Prussian war, and the next morning a German sergeant wouldn't heed Riis's complaint that a locket his mother had given him was stolen from his neck. Riis "kicked" and they put him out. As he appeared his little dog jumped toward him, a police boot kicked it, and, when Riis remonstrated, a police brute caught the dog, swung it up in the air, and down on the stone step, crushing its head.

Police station lodging-houses had to go; but Riis waited years and years till Roosevelt came. One night he took the commissioner up to the old station house, showed him the filthy place, unchanged, and told him his dog story. The next day the lodging-houses were condemned.

Not all reform officials were "right irons," however, and few were ever "hot" long enough to hit. Riis wrung many changes out of the Strong Administration, but only by dint of much scheming and wire pulling, and by those means he won reforms out of Tammany as well. He worked when his side was out of power just as he did when it was in, and there was nothing partisan about his associations. His method was in general the same in all cases. When he knew all about an evil—like the Bend, for instance—he would get some prominent men or women to form a committee. Having described the inhuman conditions of the place, with photographs, he furnished the material to his committee, who signed an address Riis wrote, gave it to Riis to publish, and went off with it to the mayor or legislature. Riis was there to take down and print the "promises." Every time a murder occurred in the Bend, Riis recalled the promises, and after a while he sent his

committee off to make more urgent demands, while he happened along to collect more emphatic promises. Meanwhile, he would start other organizations—the Academy of Medicine, the Chamber of Commerce, etc.—to resolution-making. With these he would go, as a reporter, to “hold up” the mayor for an interview. “Done anything?” “Why not?” “Then you still intend to?” “Well, when?” “All right.” So he bored and bothered until he got a commission appointed to condemn property. This commission he pursued in the same way. The property condemned, Riis went after the Public Works Commissioner. Riis saw that the officials did not forget, and he saw that it didn’t matter if his reform committee forgot or went away. If the members were at the seashore, Riis was capable of getting out a protest in their names, or of uttering an interview for some good citizen, who had to “stand for” Riis’s ideas, feelings, and hot wrath.

“Everything takes ten years,” said ex-Mayor Hewitt, who was one of Riis’s most active fellow-conspirators. The Bend, the small parks, the rear tenements, each took ten years, and though many men and women did excellent service in those causes at one time or another, Riis alone worked on them from beginning to end; he alone never despaired or got tired or rested. Riis was the backbone of these reforms and many others with which his name was hardly ever connected.

I shall never forget the day Mulberry Bend Park was opened. There was to be a formal dedication with speeches that evening, and Riis and I walked together down there in the afternoon to see it. Where the old criminal block with its squalor and death had stood, were free air and sunshine; where later the wreck had lain, while Riis fought for its removal, were smooth sodded soil and curving walks. While we stood there Riis related again the story of his ten years’ fight with the Bend, and he told it with humor, sentiment, even pathos; then some of his old rage at it came back, and he cursed some of the traits of his species. To distract him I said:

“I’m coming down to hear what’ll say tonight, Riis.”

“But I’m not going to speak.”

“Why not?”

“Not invited.”

“So they forgot you?”

“Ye—es,” he said, and it was plain he was hurt; but he added vigorously, “and that’s the greatest success of all. Nobody would help me if I were ‘It’; if I were the chairman of this, and the chief speaker of that. As it is, so long as I let others have the glory, I can get these things done, things like this, like tearing down that beastly old Bend and having a park made where the children can step on the earth; dirt, dirt, like this, the children and I too.”

And he stamped out upon the sward, sinking his feet deep into the tender sod, rejoicing. A policeman came running up shouting, “Keep off’n th’ grass, ye bum.” He seized Riis by the coat and gave him a resounding whack across his seat. Riis said never a word, and we walked on through the park, keeping “off the grass,” Riis to his office, I to the City Hall to find out who were going to dedicate Mulberry Bend Park. They were all prominent men and women, most of them excellent folk, “reformers,” too. But reformers are not so thoughtful as the professional politicians, not so kind; they forget.