

How the Other Half Lives

Jacob Riis

The first tenement New York knew bore the mark of Cain from its birth, though a generation passed before the writing was deciphered. It was the "rear house," infamous ever after in our city's history. There had been tenant-houses before, but they were not built for the purpose. Nothing would probably have shocked their original owners more than the idea of their harboring a promiscuous crowd; for they were the decorous homes of the old Knickerbockers, the proud aristocracy of Manhattan in the early days

It was the stir and bustle of trade, together with the tremendous immigration that followed upon the war of 1812 that dislodged, them. In thirty-five years the city of less than a hundred thousand came to harbor half a million souls, for whom homes had to be found [The original owners'] comfortable dwellings in the once fashionable streets along the East River front fell in to hands of real estate agents and boarding-house keepers.... [T]he necessities of the poor became the opportunities of their wealthier neighbors, and the stamp was set upon the old houses ... "their large rooms were partitioned into several smaller ones, without regard to light or ventilation, the rate of rent being lower in proportion to space or height from the street; and they soon became filled from cellar to garret with a class of tenantry living from hand to mouth, loose in morals, improvident in habits, degraded, and squalid as beggary itself...."

Still the pressure of the crowds did not abate, and in the old garden where the stolid Dutch burgher grew his tulips or early cabbages a rear house was built, generally of wood, two stories high at first. Presently it was carried up another story, and another. Where two families had lived ten moved in. The front house followed suit, if the brick walls were strong enough. The ... old buildings were "often carried up to a great height without regard to the strength of the foundation walls." It was rent the owner was after; nothing was said in the contract about either the safety or the comfort of the tenants....

Worse was to follow. It was "soon perceived by estate owners and agents of property that a greater percentage of profits could be realized by the conversion of houses and blocks into barracks, and dividing their space into smaller proportions capable of containing human life within four walls.... Blocks were rented of real estate owners, or 'purchased on time,' or taken in charge at a percentage, and held for underletting." With the appearance of the middleman ... began the era of tenement building.... The tenement-house population had swelled to half a million souls by [1855], and on the East Side ... still the most densely populated district in all the world, China not excluded, it was packed at the rate of 200,000 to the square mile.... The utmost cupidity of other lands and other days had never contrived to herd much more than half that number within the same space. The greatest crowding of Old London was at the rate of 175,816.... [T]he Senators, who had come down from Albany to find out what was the matter with New York, reported that 'there are annually cut off from the population by disease and death enough human beings to people a city, and enough human labor to sustain it.' " And yet experts had testified that, as compared with uptown, rents were from twenty-five to thirty percent higher in the worst slums of the lower wards....

Lest anybody flatter himself with the notion that these were evils of a day that is happily past and may safely be forgotten, let me mention here [two] very recent instances of tenement-house life that came under my notice. One was the burning of a rear house in Mott Street, from appearances one of the original tenant-houses that made their owners rich. The fire made homeless ten families, who had paid an average of \$5 a month for their mean little cubby-holes. The owner himself told me that it was fully insured for \$800, though it brought him in \$600 a year rent. He evidently considered himself especially entitled to be pitied for losing such valuable property. Another was the case of a hard-working family of man and wife, young people from the old country, who took poison together in a Crosby Street tenement because they were "tired." There was no other explanation, and none was needed when I stood in the room in which they had lived. It was in the attic with sloping ceiling and a single window so far out on the roof that it seemed not to belong to the place at all. With scarcely room enough to turn around in they had been compelled to pay \$5 and a half a month in advance. There were four such rooms in that attic, and together they brought in as much as many a handsome little cottage in a pleasant part of Brooklyn....

The climax had been reached. The situation was summed up by the Society for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor in these words: "Crazy old buildings, crowded rear tenements in filthy yards, dark, damp basements, leaking garrets, shops, outhouses, and stables converted into dwellings, though scarcely fit to shelter brutes, are habitations of thousands of our fellow-beings in this wealthy, Christian city...."