

LIGHT IN DARK PLACES.

A STUDY OF THE BETTER NEW YORK.

By the author of «How the Other Half Lives,» «The Children of the Poor,» etc.

[NOTHING could be more in the spirit of the Christmas season than the story of the light that has come into the dark places of the metropolis of the New World through wise legislation and firm execution of the laws, nor could any one more appropriate be selected for the telling of the story than the hard-working daily journalist who has for so many years been a part of almost every important judicious and statesmanlike effort for the amelioration of the condition of the masses of the people of New York. A large portion of the legislative reforms of which he speaks have been merely the endorsement of the words «*Be it enacted*» upon the hopes of good and earnest men like Jacob A. Riis. The successful philanthropic career of Mr. Riis is indeed an exemplary object lesson, for he is not among those who let their sympathies and emotions run away with their judgment; he has worked for practicable and just measures of improvement, with «a warm heart and a cool head.»—EDITOR.]



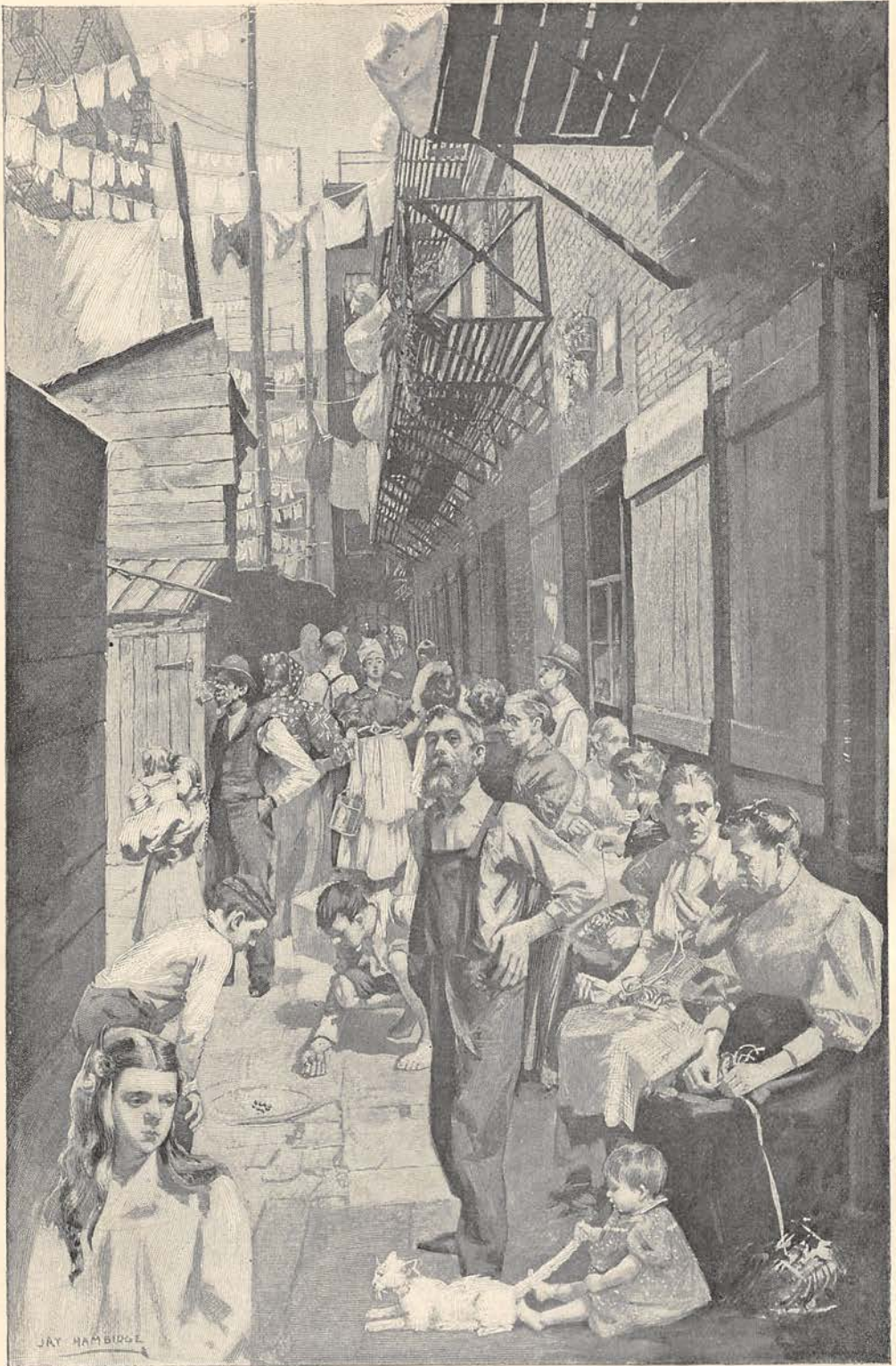
ONE summer night, ten or a dozen years ago, there was stir and excitement on the East Side. For the first time in its experience, except when ordered by Jupiter Pluvius, whose work was not thorough, Hester street was to have a bath. The newspapers had heralded it, the public had discussed it and laughed at it a little. Everybody agreed that it was time, for the offense of Hester street was rank indeed; but few believed that it would do much good. Good or bad, it was something new, and the East Side turned out, as to a circus parade, to see New York's dirtiest street washed.

The fire-engines were turned into it, with men and hose, and the water was turned on in every hydrant. All night they pumped and squirmed, and Hester street became a black and rushing river, with mud-geysers at every corner, as the culverts were clogged with the black deposits scratched semi-occasionally for years by ineffectual brooms. The dwellers in the old tenements along the market highway of Jewtown looked on in awe and wonder; landlords whose cellars shared in the superabundance of the strange element wailed and wrung their hands; and the curious crowds hooted and ran before the advancing flood. When at length it was over, the last engine uncoupled and gone, and the morning sun shone upon the rough pavement, long hidden from the sight of man, the sneers of the scoffers were seen to be justified. The scrubbing had improved the top, but it

needed to go deeper; more drastic measures were needed to cleanse this Augean stable. The experiment, I believe, was not repeated.

The recollection of that night came back to me as I sat at my office window in Mulberry street, on one of the hot evenings of last August, and saw the block invaded by firemen bent on their merciful mission of cooling the tenement streets—where death stalked early and late in that terrible week—by washing down the pavements. They were preceded by bands of noisy youngsters, stripped to the shirt, who jumped and reveled in the streaming gutters, and came out clean, tumbling over one another with shouts of laughter, while their elders, perched on door-step and curb, cheered them on. And when the noisy procession had moved into the next street, expected and received there by fresh bands of revelers awaiting their chance for a good washing-up, the smooth roadway was already coming out clean and dry as any floor, and in the air, but now so heavy and hot, there was a fresh breath, as if a breeze from the sea, slumbering out beyond the sands, had passed that way. The girls of the block were forming for a dance. And in the attuning of Mulberry street to the better day I measured the span between then and now—a span of asphalt pavements and of unpolitical street-sweeping.

The experience of New York that it pays to provide decently paved streets for the poor tenant whose children have heretofore had no other playground, and to put a man, instead of a «voter,» behind every room, must rank among the great d



DRAWN BY JAY HAMBIDGE.

BONE ALLEY.

To be removed to make way for a new East Side small park, under the Tenement House Laws of 1895.

municipal affairs of the last decade. That it was a part of the business of the community to see to it that its masses were properly housed, had impressed itself earlier upon its consciousness by dint of much argument and the persuasion of disastrous epidemics, for which its overcrowded rookeries were justly held to blame, and nail after nail had been driven into the structure of tenement-house law, erected to neutralize as far as might be the mischief which could never be wholly undone; but it is only within a year that they have been clinched by the enactment of a law permitting the seizure and demolition of unsanitary property as a menace to the public, and the determination of the Health Board to enforce it to the letter. Thus all the most important steps which have contributed to the making over, as it were, of the metropolis on the eve of its throwing off provincial fetters, and becoming in truth the Greater and Better New York of the twentieth century, fall within the half-score years since it first undertook, in the face of much ridicule, to wash its dirtiest street.

I do not think that, as a class, New-Yorkers have taken a just pride in their city in the past, and I am sure they have thereby lost something well worth having. Perhaps, in a measure, this failure can be laid at the door of the official corruption that has disgraced it; perhaps in even a larger sense the failure is to blame for the corruption. Let that pass. I have seen some of the world's great cities, some of them famed for their beauty, and this I know, that I have come back each time more impressed with the conviction that there is none of them that can compare with New York in point of natural advantages and real attractiveness. When, two or three years ago, I had returned from a summer spent in northern Europe, I used to go every day for a month from my office in Mulberry street over to the corner of Broadway and Houston street, on purpose to look up and down Broadway, and get the view of that royal thoroughfare, to Grace Church on the north, with every detail of its beautiful gray spire standing forth clear and distinct in the sparkling October air, and south two full miles to the tall buildings about Bowling Green. I did not tire of admiring the brilliancy of the atmosphere, which seemed little less than a revelation after the heavy sultriness of London's streets, or Hamburg's, or Copenhagen's. I have never seen such sunsets on sea or land as are to be had any fine summer evening from the rear end of an East River ferry-boat, with the towers and roofs of the city, clear in outline

and color, without the smudge of Chicago or London or Cincinnati, against a background of orange and pink and purple, blending in warm and changing tints as the sun sinks deeper behind the Palisades. And where is there a view like that of our matchless harbor, sailing up through the Narrows on a bright morning? The vaunted waterways of foreign ports become tame beside this majestic stream, in which the navies of the world might lie at anchor, with elbow-room and to spare. The picture is not without its reverse, of course,—where is there one that has none?—and it may be that in our new eagerness to render it tolerable we have not given ourselves time sufficiently to admire that which is really admirable. If so, we have at least the knowledge to comfort us that the effort has borne fruit. The Better New York is already a creditable and gratifying fact.

Go back the span of a man's life. Charles Dickens had come and gone, and the smart of his strictures lingered yet. How well deserved they were only those who have delved in the musty legislative records of forty and fifty years ago can know. «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,» reported a Senate committee sent down to find out what ailed New York. The death-rate had risen, under the fearful crowding and uncleanness of the tenements, from one in 41.83 in 1815 to one in 27.33 in 1855, a year when no unusual epidemic afflicted the city. The Society for Improving the Condition of the Poor printed in its annual report: «Crazy old buildings crowded with 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.» The city, says its historian, Mrs. Martha Lamb, «was a general asylum for vagrants.» The Health Department was not yet organized. It is thirty years since it began its campaign of education. In very truth it was that, and the beginning had to be made with the a-b-c. One of its ordinances of that first winter of 1867 prohibited owners of swine from letting them forage in the streets. Up to that time they had roamed unmolested. As late as 1879,—only seventeen years ago,—official reports, read in the churches, sought to trace the cause of the juvenile crime that was rampant to the wretched tenement homes of children brought up in «an atmosphere of actual darkness, moral and physical»; and

one of the famous physicians of the day, speaking of the heavy infant mortality, exclaimed indignantly that if one could only see the air breathed by these unfortunates in their tenements, «it would show itself to be fouler than the mud of the gutters.» Those were the days when slums like Mulberry Bend and Gotham Court, worse in degree but not in kind than Bone Alley and the Mott street barracks in the picture, flourished practically unchecked, though they figured in the health-reports with reason as «dens of death.» The time had not yet come when they could be dealt with as their record warranted. The rights of property were yet held superior to the life of the community, and the battle of reform had to be fought warily against heavy odds of prejudice and indifference, lest the labor of years be upset in a day by legislatures and courts, which had yet to be brought into line with the new way of thinking. The slum landlord's day was not yet at an end.

But the appeal to the public conscience told at last. With that attack in the churches, which had not been without blame, the new era began. That year a public competition evolved the present type of tenement, far from perfect, but an immense improvement upon the wicked old barracks. The sanitary reformers got the upper hand, and their work told. The death-rate came down slowly. It is to-day, at the end of thirty years, quite twenty-five per cent. lower than it was when the Health Department was organized, and New York has been redeemed from a reproach for which there was no excuse, for no city in the world has such natural opportunities for good sanitation. The immense stride it has taken was measured by the mortality during the unprecedented hot spell of last summer. It was never so great, as, indeed, there never was an emergency like it since records were kept. During the ten days it lasted the heat craved many more victims than the last cholera epidemic during its whole season. Yet, beyond those killed by the direct effects of the sun, the mortality was singularly low; the infant mortality—ever the finger that points unerringly to the sore spots in a community, if any there be—was so noticeably low as to cause a feeling almost of exultation among the sanitary officials. And it was shown, by comparison with earlier hot spells, that the population yielded more slowly to the heat. Where it had taken two or three days to reach the climax of sunstroke, it now took five. The people, better housed, better fed, and breathing clean air in clean

streets, had acquired a power of resistance to which the past had no parallel. The sanitarians had proved their case.

With what toil and infinite patience only those who stood near watching the fight can know. Often they were accused of faint-heartedness, charged by men hot for results with indifference, even with treachery. They might have been at times over-cautious, but they gained their end. It took them twenty long years to persuade the ash-bins and barrels that befouled street and landscape to come off the sidewalk out of sight, while Colonel Waring cleared the streets of trucks in a week, riding rough-shod over the supposed rights of a thousand truckmen, and Mayor Grant made an end of the disfiguring telegraph-poles—in the teeth of the experts' declaration that it could not be done—by a curt command. It seems incredible to-day, hardly a year after the great street-sweeper wrought his monumental reform, that there were times when the firemen could not get at burning buildings because of the trucks with which the streets were barricaded at night. Yet I have known personally more than one such instance. It is to be remembered, however, in making such comparisons, that but for the slower methods of the health-officers in the days when every step was a lesson to be learned by a half-hostile community, those later iconoclasts might not have commanded to such purpose. Public opinion had first to be made. Sanitary methods of to-day are not slow. They are quite up to the mark.

The point of submitting New York's case to a jury was reached a dozen years ago. The judgment of the first Tenement-House Commission (1884)—two thirds of the people of the metropolis by this time lived in tenements—was reversed to some extent by the landlord, the courts, and the legislature, though it was far from intemperate; but for all that its work set the community a long step ahead. By the time the laws recommended by the latest commission were enacted the change wrought in public sentiment was complete. The earlier commission had suggested the opening of a street through the worst tenement block in the city as a means of letting the air and the sunlight into it. The legislature amended this by condemning the whole block as unfit to stand. The second Commission (1894) unhesitatingly demanded the seizure of enough property to make at least two small parks in the thickest crowd on the East Side, without reference to the character of the property, as but scant and tardy justice to

the poor tenant; and it put on the statute-book the declaration that a house unfit to live in was a threat to the community, and that as such the community had a right to destroy it in self-defense. All the power of the landlord was exerted against it in vain. While I am writing this he is making his last stand in the courts against what he loudly bewails as robbery, forgetting that, if the case of unfitness is fairly made out, it was he who all along was the despoiler, alike of his tenant and of his city's fair fame. The Board of Health has seized, for condemnation, a hundred of the worst rear tenements, which the Commission denounced as veritable infant slaughter-houses, and the end of the slum is in sight.

For upon the road which New York has been treading this half-score years there is at last no turning back. The streets evacuated by the trucks have been occupied by the children, the truckman's with the rest, for the want of better playgrounds, and the truckman has abandoned the fight; and where they crowd thickest, playgrounds of their own are being fitted up for them in school and park. «Hereafter no school-house shall be constructed in the city of New York without an open playground attached to or used in connection with the same,» says one of the briefest but most beneficent laws ever enacted by the people of the State of New York. It is all there is of it, but it stands for a good deal. No child of New York, poor or rich, shall hereafter be despoiled of his birthright—a chance to play; and as for the streets, does any one imagine that New-Yorkers will ever be persuaded to barter away their clean and noiseless pavements and pure air for the whirling dust-clouds, the summer stench, and the winter sloughs of old, seasoned with no matter what mess of political pottage? If so, he is grievously mistaken. Colonel Waring has shown us that the streets of New York can be cleaned, and any future city government, no matter how corrupt or despotic, will have to reckon with him. And right well the enemy knows it: he may not refrain from picking our pockets in future, but he will at least have to do it with due regard to the decencies of life.

Mulberry Bend is gone, and in its place have come grass and flowers and sunshine. Across the Bowery, where 324,000 human beings were shown to live out of sight and reach of a green spot, four of the most crowded blocks have been seized for demolition, to make room for the two small parks demanded by the Tenement-House Commis-

sion. Bone Alley, redolent of filth and squalor and wretchedness, is to go, and the children of that teeming neighborhood are to have a veritable little Coney Island, with sand-hills and shells, established at their very doors. Who can doubt the influence it will have upon young lives heretofore framed in gutters? I question whether the greatest wrong done the children of the poor in the past has not been the esthetic starvation of their lives rather than the physical injury. Against the latter provision has been made by stringent tenement-house laws, by the vigorous warfare upon child-labor, by the extension of the law's protection to stores as to factories, and by the restriction of the sweat-shop evil. In the park to be laid out by the Schiff fountain, in the shadow of the Hebrew Institute,—one of the noblest of charities,—a great public bath is to rise upon the site of the present rookeries, harbinger of others to come. All about, new school-houses are going up, on a plan of structural perfection and architectural excellence at which earlier school-boards would have stood aghast. The first battle for the schools has been fought and won, and though there be campaigning ahead without stint on that score, the day is in sight when every child who asks shall find a seat provided for him in the public school, and when that scandal of the age, the mixing of truants and thieves in a jail, shall have finally ceased, even as it is now forbidden by law.

The Mott street barracks are on their last legs. The rear houses were cleared by order of the Board of Health last June, and even the saloon-keeper who collected the rents admitted to me, when it was well over, that it was a good thing. These tenements were among the first to be seized under the sanitary expropriation law. They were nearly the worst in the city, and hopeless from structural defects. The rift between the front and rear buildings—it hardly deserves the name of gap—is just six feet ten inches wide. Through it came whatever of sunlight and air reached the rear houses, for they backed up against the rear tenements on Elizabeth street, so that one could put his hand through the dark little windows on the stairs, and touch the wall of the neighbor's house, hardly a foot away. The rent rose as one went up, instead of the reverse, for the good reason that there was some air at the top, while down at the bottom there was none, nor light either. In this rookery lived 360 tenants, all Italians except two families, when the police census of 1888 was taken. Forty of them

were babies. The infant death-rate of the barracks that year was 325 per thousand; that is to say, nearly one third of the forty babies died. The general infant death-rate for the whole tenement-house population that year was 88.38. By 1891, by persistent nagging, the number of tenants had been reduced to 238,—the barracks were directly under the windows of the Health Board, and gave the officials much concern by their open defiance of health laws,—but there were more babies than ever. That year the infant death-rate in the barracks was 106.38; in the whole tenement population, 86.67. In the interval of four years, fifty-one funerals had gone out from the barracks, thirty-five of them with white hearses. The old houses had been touched up with much paint and whitewash and a gorgeous tin cornice with the year 1890 in raised letters a foot long, and had changed owners; but it was all of no avail. The same summer that saw a conference of experts and philanthropists gathered in New York to discuss better means of housing the propertyless masses, and saw plans evolved that look toward grappling with the whole problem in a humane and liberal spirit, witnessed also the seizure of the barracks as typical of the worst devised by a heedless past. It was as it should be. The tenant was having his innings at last. The undertaker had had his, and made the most of it.

With the stale-beer dives gone, the police-station lodging-rooms, awful parody on municipal charity, closed for good and all,¹ and the tramp on the run; with the almshouse successfully divorced from the jail at last, poverty from crime on the official register; with the new gospel of enforcement of law preached in high places, our youth taught that laws are not made only to be broken when their restraint is felt, their elders drilled in Jefferson's lesson that «the whole art of government consists in the art of being honest» until they grasp its meaning fully; and with the business of city government slipping slowly but surely out of the grasp of politics in this groove, the Better New York is coming—has come—to stay, we may hope, for all time.

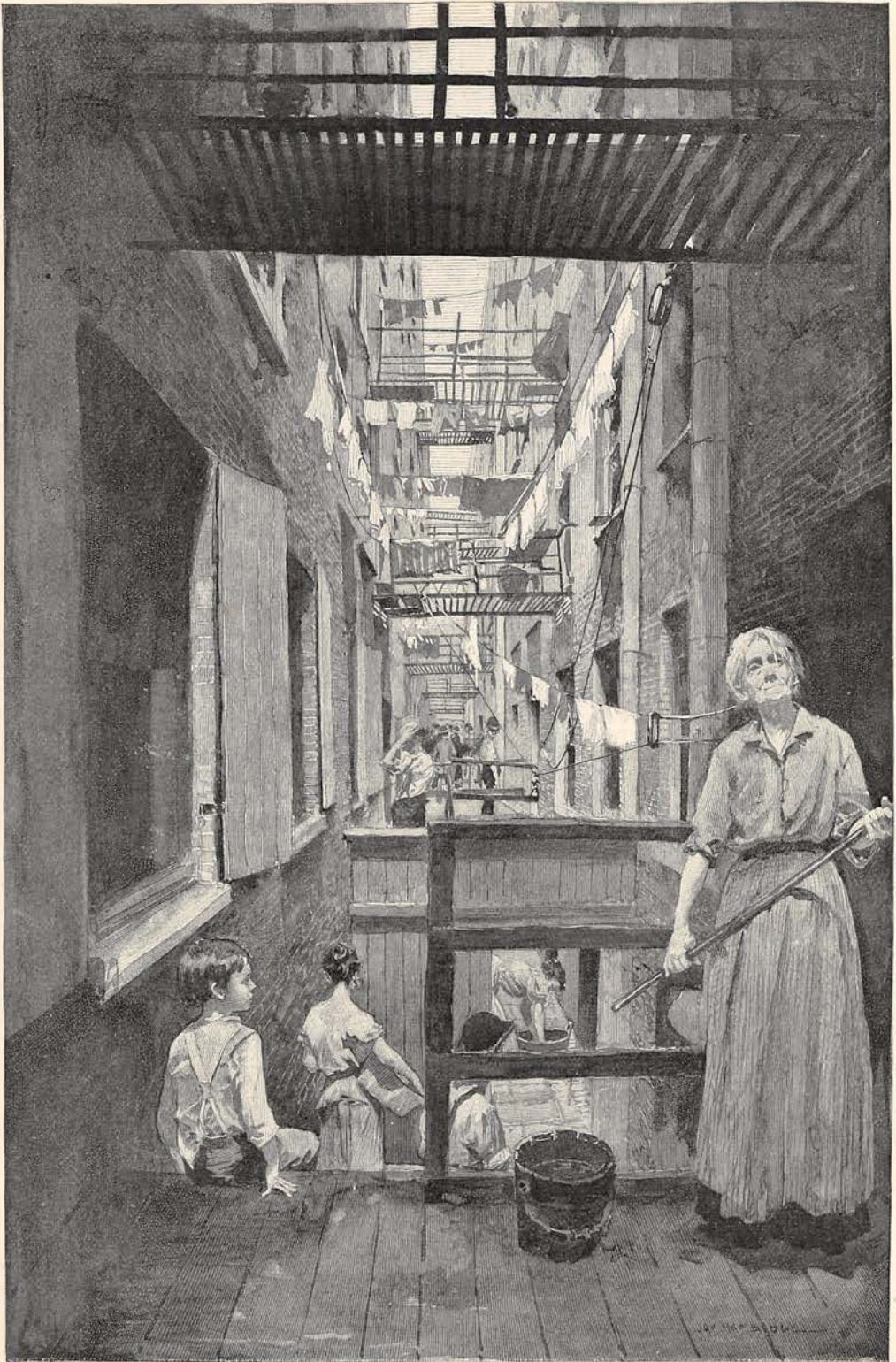
Has anything been lost in the change—anything of picturesqueness, of originality? Nothing that was worth the keeping. New

World poverty is not often picturesque. It lacks the leisurely setting, the historic background. Starvation by steam is not popular. Tenement-house squalor never had other interest than the human one, demanding instant remedy in action. The tragedy of life is as eloquent in rags as in silk, but the rags are not indispensable. A patch here and there will do no harm. The poor we shall have with us still, even though we improve their homes, and with them their chances. Nothing has been lost, but something has been gained besides this. So much thought and effort has not been bestowed upon improving the part of the community that could not help itself without reacting upon the part that could. The gentler feelings have appealed to the gentler arts, and, it may be, have been wrought upon in their turn. The esthetic has blossomed on the avenue, as philanthropy delved, ever more determined, in the slums. Better architectural ideals obtain. Up-town the hideous monotony of the all-pervading brownstone high-stoop residence of our fathers is being relieved by graystone and granite, with individuality in the design, by peaked roofs, even by tiles. An organization of citizens, among whom is counted the Mayor of New York, is formed in a night to plant shade-trees in our home streets, the while the reformer down-town is busy letting light into dark halls, and finding ways and means of diverting the surplus from the congested districts to homes in the country lanes of the Greater New York. Our public gardens blossom forth season after season with a wealth of color and of fragrance unsurpassed, and into the tall unsightliness of some of the tower-like structures that have shot up in their sky-scraping ambition all over town, there is coming, here and there, hint of character and design. Even the twenty-five-foot lot has found its mission; the nightmare of earlier architects has become the opportunity of their successors.

So moves the world. The task is not finished, the transformation not yet complete. But much has been done—so well done that no New-Yorker of to-day need hang his head for his home city, but may hold it up proudly, and proclaim, with Saul of Tarsus, that he is indeed «a citizen of no mean city.»

Jacob A. Riis.

¹ The introduction of the beer-pump into general use contemporaneously with the downfall of Mulberry Bend, closed the dives by depriving them of their stock in trade—the dregs left in the kegs by the old way of tapping them. The Police Board closed the lodging-rooms. There was not much choice between them. What there was, was rather in favor of the dives.



DRAWN BY JAY HAMBIDGE.

THE MOTT STREET BARRACKS.

The rear buildings on the right have been condemned by the Board of Health under the Tenement House Laws of 1895. The death-rate from 1890-1895, inclusive, was 45.87.