

# The American Worker in Country and Town

By Theodore Roosevelt

## I

### A Visit to the Tenements

ON February 13 I spent the afternoon in company with Mr. Alfred T. White, Mr. Darwin R. James, Mr. J. J. Murphy (Tenement-House Commissioner), and one or two other gentlemen in visiting a number of tenement-houses in Brooklyn, our purpose being to see the difference between the old tenement-houses and the new, so as to do what was possible in hastening the day when the old type of tenement-house would entirely disappear. Thirty years ago, when I was a member of the Albany Legislature, hardly so much as a beginning in the movement for tenement-house reform had taken place. At that time, with considerable difficulty, we passed a law providing for the abolition of tenement-house cigar factories. When the law was under consideration, I visited a number of the tenement-houses in which these cigars were being made, and it was what I then saw that first waked me to a full realization of how much there was to be done in the way of making things better in the tenement-house districts; although it was not until I became Police Commissioner and got into touch with Jacob Riis that I became actively interested in the movement for tenement-house reform. We passed a bill to do away with the tenement-house cigar factories, but neither public opinion nor judicial opinion had been educated up to the proper point. It was still the period when educated men prided themselves on their acceptance of the hard futilities of the *laissez faire* school of political economy.

On the whole, I think that educated public opinion approved the action of the State Court of Appeals in declaring the bill unconstitutional, and thereby delaying for twenty years the cure of the festering misery which it in part sought to prevent.

Fortunately, year by year we have grown away from the destructive system of social philosophy which found expression in this decision. What I saw on my brief trip through the tenement-houses that afternoon was enough to show the really extraordinary good that had been done by legislative interference with the conditions of tenement-house life. The struggle has been hard, because the owners of the property involved have fought the improvement laws at almost every step; and they have been helped throughout by the wooden inability of so many estimable citizens both in public and in private life to understand the needs of the situation and to adopt the necessary means for meeting those needs.

We first visited a number of old tenement-houses, built before there was any thought of meeting hygienic requirements—before, in fact, there was any thought that it was to the interest of the whole public that the conditions of life should everywhere be decent. Mr. Murphy does not have an adequate force of inspectors, but he is doing all that can be done with the force he has. His aim is to do all that the law permits in making these old tenements more habitable, by giving better opportunities for light and air, preventing overcrowding, and providing for the cut-

ting of windows ; and gradually, as from natural causes the old tenement-houses are pulled down, the new tenements, built under the new law and representing an immense improvement, will take their places.

Some of the tenement-houses we first visited showed very bad conditions. They were for the most part tenanted by recently arrived Italians. In one ground floor below the level of the street we found a rear room in which thirteen people had been sleeping, in addition to a baby. It is hardly necessary to point out that thirteen people of both sexes, some married and some unmarried, some kin to one another and others not, cannot live in a dark room with any expectation of having the children grow up fitted for the very exacting duties of American citizenship. The authorities were already working an improvement in this room. They had cut a window through one wall and had forced a reduction by over a half of the number of people who slept there, but at best it was melancholy to think that children had to grow up under such surroundings of darkness, dirt, foul air, and overcrowding. It is hard to arouse the public on a matter like this to the need of law. Without law only a few exceptional men will act. The owners of tenement-house property include some hard men who care nothing for the welfare of poor people ; others are themselves unaware of how bad the conditions are ; while there are small owners, themselves brought up in tenement-houses, who do not understand that the conditions really are bad. All of these fight bitterly against any legislative change which would reduce, and perhaps even do away with, their profits. Mr. Murphy mentioned also the difficulty he had with some of the magistrates in securing the punishment of offenders guilty of overcrowding and the like. His bureau does not proceed against the offenders until it has become impossible to get them to reform save by duress. But when the case comes up, the magistrate naturally does not realize this, and the kindly qualities of the judge are enlisted on the side of the offender, who is often a very poor man struggling against misery, and the Court's reluctance to punish him by for the moment increasing his misery often results in the perpetuation of the conditions which breed the misery.

We saw several such tenement-houses. The stairways were narrow, the halls dark and dirty. In one place we found living-rooms in the basement below the level of the rear yard, which itself contained an old stable. The room in which the people spent the day was only partially lighted, and the two bedrooms were closets, without windows, and absolutely without light save such as penetrated when the doors into the other room were open. The ceiling was about seven feet from the floor, and the rooms were about eight feet by ten feet inside. Each contained all the members of one family and two or three outsiders. Again it is unnecessary to point out that under such conditions it is well-nigh impossible for children to grow up into men and women of the type that should exist in a democracy. It was a tribute to the efficiency of the authorities, however, that, shortly before our visit, these conditions had been found out, and the particular rooms in question were being closed against human habitation.

It was interesting to come across several cases where even under the adverse conditions offered by tenements of this kind self-respecting families were leading self-respecting lives. We came on one tenement where, on the ground floor, there was a kitchen in the rear and a living-room in the front, these being connected through a line of three bedrooms, in not one of which was there a window or any natural light save what might filter in through the door that opened into the next room. The surroundings were not encouraging ; yet the family that lived in these rooms was obviously a thoroughly good family. The mother was away at a funeral, but the daughter who received us was taking care of her little brother, and showed a courtesy, good breeding, and lack of self-consciousness, shyness, or embarrassment which would have been creditable anywhere. Her business was that of a telephone operator, and she possessed those good manners which are themselves the outward signs of a good heart. There were several such cases. One, for instance, was where the proprietress, a widow, was a dressmaker and seamstress, and the most casual acquaintance was sufficient to make one respect

her. A very nice-looking young fellow, by the way, was calling upon her at the time of our visit, and I could not help hoping that she was not to remain a widow long!

The people who in these tenement-houses were leading lives of this character were generally the children of German, Irish, or other immigrants, or occasionally of native American stock; and it was significant and cheering to see that the tenement-house dwellers as a whole were obviously rising and not falling. Of course there were many exceptions, but, on the whole, it seemed to me evident that not only were the surrounding conditions being made better, but that the people themselves were steadily tending toward a higher level; and I may add that among the people who were rising we saw representatives of practically every race that comes to the United States. In all of these houses we were received in very friendly fashion, and at one of them twenty or thirty of the boys and girls seized the opportunity to have me photographed in their company, all jammed together on the steps of the tenement-house.

Having finished our tour of the older tenement-houses, we then visited several of the newer tenement-houses. The first series of the latter which we saw were new in type but not very new in years. They were built by Mr. White, who has been a practical pioneer in the work of raising tenement-house conditions. When he built them, there was no law requiring him to do anything else than erect another vile rookery designed merely to get the utmost possible return for the least expenditure of money. But Mr. White, without any compulsion, built his tenements practically along the lines now demanded by enlightened legislation. They were so constructed that it was an easy matter for the persons who dwelt there to keep them clean and to lead healthy and self-respecting lives. Each set of rooms was isolated from every other set of rooms, and each room was lighted by a window opening on to the outer air. Moreover, each group of buildings opened on to a large yard. In these tenements, which have always paid a moderate profit, it would be purely the fault of the family itself if there were overcrowding, foul air, and

uncleanliness. As a matter of fact, we found none such. The dwellers had taken advantage of the favorable conditions. The children were being brought up in a way which tended toward good citizenship. There was no reason why any family could not live in these tenements with all the essentials of decency and comfort and self-respect.

My next visit was to a row of tenement-houses which were familiarly alluded to as "the Incubators." They were in a Jewish neighborhood, and owed their name, I found, to the size of the families which they contained—I was being taken there in a spirit of humorous deference to my liking for large families. This was one of the most interesting experiences, for the tenements had been built, not by philanthropists, but by business men who wished in good faith to meet the requirements of the new tenement-house law and at the same time to get as good a return as was possible upon their investments. At the door of the house we selected we met a pretty girl, very well dressed, evidently about to go off for a pleasure walk. She was a Jewess, born on this side of parents who came from Russia; and it was fairly startling to realize how far upward she had moved from the status of the hunted fugitives who had first come hither from Russia. She was a pretty, well-dressed, good-natured, and good-mannered girl, just like any other American girl. She was most friendly, and at once undertook to show us around the tenement-house. The first suite of rooms we entered was typical of all the rest. It was on the ground floor, and consisted of a kitchen, a living-room, two bedrooms, and a bathroom. The family included a father, mother, and, I believe, five or six children. Everything was as neat as possible, and it was a really attractive apartment; the older people prosperous and contented, the children growing up under good conditions, which represented an immeasurable advance over those in which their ancestors had lived for untold generations, and an almost equally great advance over the conditions of tenement-house life in New York a generation ago. As elsewhere, I looked carefully into the bathroom. Like every one else, I had heard many stories told to the discredit of the

inmates of the new tenements by those worthy persons who always object to any effort to better conditions; and chief among these stories was the statement that wherever bath-rooms were put in, the tenants used the bath-tubs for storage of coal or other goods. In each case I found the bath-room well cared for, the bath-tub used for its normal purpose, and, as I was assured by every one, regularly used, too. Inquiry developed the fact that when bath-tubs were first put in tenement-houses a score of years ago or so the inmates at first knew nothing about them, did not use them for their legitimate purposes, and did often use them as receptacles for coal and other things. But the use of the bath has spread in tenement-houses very much as it has spread elsewhere through the country; and now all the better-class people demand bath-tubs and will not go to tenement-houses that do not contain them. Even a short visit among tenement-houses of the new type shows that the movement for them has been more than abundantly justified by its fruits; and that its opponents and detractors have spoken absolutely without warrant.

We visited a couple of other blocks of tenement-houses built under the new law, one of them being the property of a friend of mine, a first-class citizen who is an alderman, and who took the keenest pride in having us see just what he had been able to do. In these tenement-houses the inmates were for the most part of Irish, English, German, Scandinavian, and native American ancestry; practically all having been born on this side of the water. I could say nothing but praise of these tenement-houses and of their inmates. The latter—men and women, boys and girls—were thoroughly good citizens, and they made one pleased to think that they were his fellow-citizens. All the conditions were good; the rooms as neat and clean as possible. In one tenement, for instance, there were three rooms and a hall. They were small, but they were well lighted, well aired, and not only neatly but prettily furnished. The inmates consisted of two brothers and a sister. In the sister's little room there was a piano. The kitchen served also as dining-room, and all the fittings were conditioned upon getting the

most use out of the least space. For instance, the arrangements for washing were such that the board on which the basin stood, when lifted up, disclosed two wash-tubs, and when the partition between these was lifted up there remained a bath-tub. The name of one of the brothers, by the way, began with "Grover Cleveland," and in another portion of the same house I was shown with pride a picture of a small brother who had been given my own name. In these houses the conditions were such as to render it easy to secure cleanliness, neatness, comfort, and attractive surroundings; and the character of the people was such that they took full advantage of the conditions.

In one of these houses, incidentally, I suddenly encountered an old friend, who was in charge of the fire station a few steps down on the other side of the street; and nothing would do but that I must visit the fire station and see "the boys." So over I went, shook hands with the strapping firemen, as lithe and muscular as so many panthers, and saw the trained horses rush out with instantaneous rapidity to take their places by the pole when the alarm rang. What fine fellows these firemen are! There are plenty of conditions in modern life that warrant our feeling alarm, and among these conditions are those which tend to produce rather enervated types of men, lacking in the robuster moral and physical qualities. It is therefore a real source of pleasure to see such a body of men as the firemen, or, for that matter, the railway men, the policemen, and many other groups of workers which have been produced by our modern civilization, the members of which in point of bodily vigor and address, and in point of courage, initiative, and power of instant decision and readiness to accept responsibility, are the equals of the men of any group or kind who have existed at any stage in the development of the peoples of the past.

This trip through the tenement-house regions was, perhaps, particularly interesting when compared with the trip previously taken through the remoter hill country of certain of the counties of New York in which the farming population has shrunk, and where not only many farms but some small villages are practically

abandoned. There was a striking and evident contrast between the way in which conditions had been studied and difficulties met and overcome in the tenement-house regions and the lack of such study and effort in the farming regions. There were no farms that I saw where the conditions were quite as bad as in the worst tenements, and on the best farms the people were living in surroundings better than those in the best tenements. Nevertheless, the impression left by visiting the tenement-houses was, on the whole, more favorable than that left by the outworn farming districts. In the districts of outworn and partially abandoned farming land there were large tracts where there had been no advance, but sometimes even retrogression.<sup>1</sup> In the tenement-house region, however, the marked facts were that the tenement-house population was generation by generation improving, and that the conditions under which they lived were also improving. Each problem is a very complex problem, and no simple solution for it can be found; as Tom Reed used to say, "Nothing is simpler than a half-truth, whereas the whole truth is usually one of the most complex things in crea-

tion." Doubtless all kinds of causes have been at work both to retard the full development of farm life in many places and to better the conditions of those living in tenement-houses in the cities; but one of the main reasons is unquestionably to be found in the fact that the problems of tenement-house life have been the subject of unceasing and patient study for over a generation, while the problems of farm life have only just begun to attract wide attention. The State has acted for the betterment of the tenement dweller, along various lines, far more freely and intelligently than it has worked for the betterment of the farming districts. Very much remains to be done in order fully to remedy evil conditions in the tenement-house districts, but more remains to be done in order to put the farming regions on their proper level; yet this last is the most important task before our Government, for the men of the open country have always been the real backbone of the Nation, and it will be a National calamity of the very gravest sort if they are permitted to sink in moral and physical well-being relatively to the dwellers of the cities.

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<sup>1</sup> I need hardly say that I am not speaking of the fertile farming districts.