
*At the turn of the nineteenth century, millions of immigrants lived hopeless lives in the teeming, filthy tenements of American cities. Social crusaders, such as photographer and journalist Jacob Riis, sought to open the eyes of the American public to the suffering of these people. The following passage, from Riis' book *How the Other Half Lives*, provides an example of the development of America's social consciousness discussed in Chapter 1 of *Sociology and You*.*

There are tenements everywhere. Suppose we look into one on Cherry Street. Be a little careful, please! The hall is dark and you might fall over the children pitching pennies back there. Not that it would hurt them. Kicks and punches are their daily diet. They have little else. Here, where the hall turns into complete darkness, is a step, and another, and another. A flight of stairs. You can feel your way if you cannot see it. Stifling? Yes! What do you expect. All the fresh air that ever enters these stairs comes from the hall door that is forever slamming, and from the windows of dark bedrooms.

That was a woman filling her pail you just bumped against. The sinks are in the hallway, so that all the tenants may get to them—and all smell horrible in the summer. Hear the pump squeak! It is the lullaby of tenement-house babies. During the summer, when a thousand thirsty throats want a cooling drink in this block, the pump is worked in vain. But the saloon, whose open door you passed in the hall, is always there. The smell of it has followed you up.

Here is a door. Listen! That short hacking cough, that tiny, helpless cry—what do they mean? They mean that the soiled bow of white you saw on the door downstairs [when someone died, a bow was hung on the door—black for an adult, white for a child] will have another story to tell—oh, a sadly familiar story—before the day ends. The child is dying

with measles. With half a chance it might have lived. But it had none. That dark bedroom killed it.

“It was took all of a sudden,” says the mother, smoothing the little body with trembling hands. There is no unkindness in the rough voice of the man in overalls who sits by the window grimly smoking a clay pipe, while he watches his child die, bitter as his words sound: “Hush, Mary! If we cannot keep the baby, need we complain—such as we?”

“Such as we!” What if the words ring in your ears as you grope your way up the stairs and down from floor to floor, listening to the sounds behind the closed doors—some of quarreling, some of coarse songs, more of cursing. They are true. When the summer heat comes with its suffering, its meaning is more terrible than words can tell. Come over here. Step carefully over this baby—it is a baby, in spite of its rags and dirt—under these iron bridges called fire escapes. They are loaded down, despite the warnings of the firemen, with broken household goods, with washtubs and barrels, which no one could climb over to escape from a fire.

This gap between dingy brick walls is the yard. That strip of smoke-colored sky up there is the heaven of these people. Do you wonder that the name does not attract them to the churches? That baby's parents live in the back tenement here. This tenement is much like the one in front we just left, only fouler and darker.

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A hundred thousand people lived in back tenements in New York last year.

What sort of answer, do you think, would these tenement-dwellers give to the question, "Is life worth living?"

Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, (New York: Dover Publishing, 1971).