HEN Jacob Riis was able, by saving and a little borrowing, to build a home a few years ago, he set up his rest in the country. He needed for himself the grass and the sunshine which he had fought the good fight to give to the poor of New York. His great work was now done—he had suppressed the infamous lodging rooms of the New York police stations, and torn down the tenement den of Mulberry Bend, the foulest slum of the East Side, a honeycomb of holes where, in all the years that he had hated and hacked at it, not a week had passed without a crime. Into Darkest New York he had poured the sunshine that washed and cleaned it with a river of light.

But the closing of the police lodging rooms, and the single park that now stands in place of the human hive of darkness that was the old Mulberry Bend are not the whole of his work. The gospel of parks for the slums which he preached still lives as the motive of those who are building others. Darkness is the strongest accomplice of sin. It forces crime as the light forces flowers, and it offers the criminal a hiding place. That is why, when Jacob Riis gave the poor who may never leave the city a spot where they still see something of the country, he taught the city how to save itself. This lesson which he forced on New York is his work, and his work is his own memorial.

Jacob Riis was never a man who could do his work of reform by giving money. He needed what he earned for his bread and butter, and he earned just enough for his needs by police reporting in the Mulberry Bend which he worked to save. Indeed, it was his profession even more than his poverty that made people wonder what reason he had to be doing good. At the dedication of the Jacob A. Riis House, a slum settlement named in his honor by the King's Daughters, Bishop Potter expressed this sentiment with something of the feeling of a man who can never quite understand why he has furnished reporters with so many columns of copy. He spoke of his surprise that a reporter should be a philanthropist. Perhaps he was accustomed to think of philanthropists always as millionaires.
THE philanthropy of Mr. Riis can only be understood in the light of his profession. He worked without money and without price, for money and the price were tools that never happened to be included in his kit. But he made a tool of his reporting; he improvised a lever out of the power of the news column—a lever with which he tilted over tenements and ousted a corrupt police. He wrote what he saw, and he not only wrote it, but told it by word of mouth to the Mayor and men of influence interested in charity. And when his story seemed to have no effect—when he was set down as a reporter seeking a yellow “sensation,” and told that his talk about the corruption and crowding of the tenements and the police lodging rooms was fake, he found, almost by a miracle of chance, a new weapon for his war.

One morning, as he was scanning the paper at the breakfast table, he lighted on a four line dispatch from Germany announcing a method of taking pictures in the dark. It was the invention of the flashlight for photography. “Seeing is believing,” and here, he knew on the instant, was a way to make people see that he had spoken only the truth. Armed with a camera and a flashlight, he returned to the inveterate dens. He had to go accompanied by police for protection, for in those days the flashlight was fired from a pistol and when the poor folk heard the shot, they thought they were being murdered. But he got the pictures, and when he published them in the papers he proved to the world what the world had never believed—that the people living in the tenements were “better than the houses.” He proved that in the lodging-room of the Oak Street police station alone, six boys, not one of whom would come out unscathed, were herded with forty tramps and thieves. He proved that in two tenement rooms that should at most have held four or five sleepers, fifteen were crowded together, one of them a week-old baby. He proved, too, how the crowds slept in the tenements literally at “five cents a spot.” These and various other things he proved with his paper and his pictures, and the world began to believe at last.

A friend of Mr. Riis, who had reported for years with him in the Police Station in Mulberry Bend, summed him up the other day as an “enthusiast.” Perhaps it was his enthusiasm that made people believe him a journalistic Quixote attacking windmills. Perhaps it was his enthusiasm that made him believe, himself, when he saw
how his attacks were telling for good, that reporting is “the noblest of all callings.” Certainly, with his enthusiasm for the truth, he succeeded in making his own reporting very nearly what he thinks of the whole profession. One day when he returned to his desk in the office of the New York “Sun,” he found the card of Theodore Roosevelt. He had “come to help,” as he put it on the back of his card. Thereafter they helped each other. Roosevelt was then the President of the New York Police Board, and from that time on, night after night between midnight and sunrise, they prowled the slums together incognito, on tours of investigation that earned for the President the name of Haroun al Roosevelt. The result of these tours was an experience of the corruption of the police and of the inhumanity of the tenements that made the Lexow Investigating Committee such an engine of reform.

There was always something personal in the hatred that Mr. Riis showed against the evil he fought. He was never a dreamer. He never wanted to do more than to accomplish something specific—to hit a hard blow. And though his work brought him in constant touch with the very corruption of humanity, he never lost faith that in the corruption some redeeming seed still lived. “Over against the tenement that we fight in our cities,” he says in “The Making of an American,” “ever rises in my mind the fields, the woods, God’s open sky, as accuser and witness that his temple is being so defiled, man so dwarfed in body and soul.” One unexpected spark of humanity he tells of finding one night in a notorious den for women tramps. Camped on the stone floor were a dozen old hags, rum-sodden and foul, and in their midst lay a young girl, with the look of innocence still on her face. She was weeping bitterly with shame of being in the place, and as he stooped to look at her, wondering how she ever came there, one of the hags misunderstood his purpose. Springing up like a tigress, she pushed him back.

“Not her,” she cried, shaking her fist; “not her! It is all right with us. We are old and tough. But she is young, and don’t you dare!”

It was just such incidents as this that gave him the heart to keep up the fight when the fight seemed hopeless. If he fought something specific, it was always something specific that set him on. Perhaps
the most curiously dramatic of all was the story of the dog who saved his life, and then, the same night, lost its own in trying to protect its new master in a fight. His desire to revenge the death of that dog never left him for twenty-five years. "The whole battle with the slum," he said long after, "evolved out of the effort to clean one pig sty, and, as for my own share in it, to settle for one dead dog." But before we come to the story of the dog, we must see how Mr. Riis happened to come to New York.

JACOB RIIS was born on the outskirts of the ancient town of Ribe, on the north sea coast of Denmark, in 1849; and it is characteristic that one of his recollections of early boyhood is connected with Rag Hall, which was what that Danish town had to offer in the way of a tenement. He was hardly twelve years old when the general untidiness of Rag Hall offended his sense of fitness, and when on the Christmas of that year he received a silver "mark," he hurried to the place and shared it with the poorest family there, on the one condition that they would tidy things up.

His father was a poor but well educated man who eked out his living by doing hack writing for the local paper. He was ambitious that his son should also be an educated man. But Jacob then had different ideas. He hated Latin, and when he announced, one day, that he was going to give up school and become a carpenter, he seemed to put an end to all his father's hopes. And little Jacob might still, a big Jacob, be planing and sawing and hammering, if he had not happened, very audaciously, to fall in love with the daughter of his employer. The little girl lived in the "Castle," and according to her parents and the village gossips, she was never born to be the wife of a carpenter. When Jacob learned the lesson of social distinctions, he came to America. He was determined to win the little girl, even if he had to win a fortune and make himself an American in the attempt.

When the young Dane landed in New York, his life became, for years, one of those hopeless Odysseys for food that have been the fate of thousands of other emigrants. First to western Pennsylvania as a mill worker, then to Buffalo in a medley of "parts," he drifted from place to place, unable anywhere to get the right start. When he heard at last that his old home country was preparing for war, there must have
been something of all the loneliness of his new life that mingled with his determination to go home and fight. Such, at any rate, was his decision, and he succeeded in trudging as far homewards as New York.

In New York, however, he was stalled. Quite without money even for food, let alone enough for the passage, he was forced to pick up stray jobs in the fields near the city. One night he crawled, exhausted, into a wagon shed along the roadside near Mount Vernon. About the middle of the night he was wakened by a loud cry and the glare of a light in his face. It was the light of a carriage that had been driven into the shed where he had been sleeping, and he found himself lying under the horse’s feet, unhurt. A man sprang from the carriage and leaned over him. When he found that no harm was done, he held out a piece of money.

“Go,” he said, “and drink it up.”

“Drink it up yourself,” Riis answered angrily. “What do you take me for?”

The stranger looked at him in surprise, then shook him by the hand. “I believe you,” he said; “yet you need it, or you would not sleep here. Now will you take it from me?”

And the hungry lad took the money.

His pride was always a part of him. All this time that he was starving, he carried letters of introduction to friends in the city who would have been happy to help him. But he wanted to go to them only as an equal, and to rid himself of the temptation to go in his weakness, he destroyed the letters.

It was only the same quality that came out in him a few days later, when he read in the New York “Sun” that a volunteer regiment was being sent out for the war from New York. Here seemed to be his chance, so he called at once on the editor, Mr. Dana, the man who, long years after, was to be his chief on the same paper. Dressed in top-boots and a ragged linen duster, he was ushered into the editorial presence, and demanded to be sent to the war. He had read about the regiment in the “Sun,” and believed, accordingly, that the “Sun” would send him. Mr. Dana only smiled. But when the lad turned to go, the editor called him back.
"Have you had your breakfast?" he asked kindly. The answer was obvious enough, and Mr. Dana pulled out a dollar.

"There," he said, "go and get your breakfast; and better give up the war."

"I came here to enlist, not to beg money for breakfast," the lad answered at last, and strode out of the office. And he went to a pawn broker's and pawned his top-boots for the price of a sandwich.

But the worst came a few days later, when, worn out by lack of food, he had grown too shabby to get work. A cold October rain had been storming all day, and when night came, he knew how hopeless it would be to try to find sleep in any of the doorways along the street where the police patrolled with their periodic "Get up there! Move on!" With nowhere to sleep, he was sitting on a bulwark down by the North River, forlorn and discouraged. As he watched the water, he slipped nearer to the edge of the bulwark and thought of the "inclusive sinecure" that he could find in it. "What if——?" he wondered.

BUT even in his temptation his help came. A wet and shivering body was pressed against his own, and he heard a whine. It was a little outcast black-and-tan who had nestled up against him as a companion in misery. He bent down and caressed the cur, and the cur licked his face in pure affection. That affection seemed the one bright spot in all his hard life. It was enough to give him heart to turn his back on the river.

Together they went at midnight, two homeless waifs, to the Church Street police station and asked for lodging. But the sergeant spied the dog under the boy's coat, and in spite of all pleading, the boy had to leave the dog outside. There, on the stoop, for the last time in its life, it curled up and waited for its new found friend.

In the lodging room inside the air was foul with a crowd of tramps. In the middle of the night he woke with a suspicion that something was wrong. Instinctively he felt for a little gold locket that he wore under his shirt. It was gone. When the boy went in tears with his complaint to the sergeant, he was called a thief himself for possessing such a thing as a gold locket. How else but by theft could a tramp of his condition get possession of anything valuable? The door keeper seized him, threw him out of the door, and followed after to kick him down the stoop.
AFTER TWENTY-FIVE YEARS. MR. RIIS AND HIS WIFE.
FROM "THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN"

By courtesy of the Macmillan Company
THE MULBERRY BEND AS IT WAS. FROM "THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN"

By courtesy of the Macmillan Company

THE MULBERRY BEND PARK AS IT IS NOW, WITH SITE OF FOUNTAIN MARKED
WOMEN'S MUNICIPAL LEAGUE FOUNTAIN, DESIGNED BY MR. CHARLES LAMB. TO BE ERECTED IN MULBERRY BEND PARK AS SOON AS THE NECESSARY SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE SECURED
MY LITTLE ONES GATHERING DAISIES FOR "THE POORS." FROM "THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN"

By courtesy of the Macmillan Company
But when the little dog, who had never taken its eyes from the door, saw the scuffle it flew at the doorman and planted its teeth in his leg. With a howl of pain the doorman seized the brute and dashed out its brains on the stone steps.

The rage that rose in the heart of the outcast boy never left him. He stood on the street and stormed the windows of the police station with rocks till two policemen, afraid to arrest him, dragged him down the street to the ferry. Then and there he swore that he would avenge the death of his dog. “The outrage of that night,” says Mr. Riis in the story of his life, “became, in the providence of God, the means of putting an end to one of the foulest abuses that ever disgraced a Christian city, and a mainspring in the battle with the slum as far as my share in it was concerned. My dog did not die unavenged.”

The revenge came twenty-five years later. One night—he was a man now with much of his good work done, and already known for his book on the slums, “How the Other Half Lives”—he was leading Roosevelt, then President of the Police Board, on one of their famous midnight prowls of inspecting the police and their lodging rooms. It was two in the morning when he led the way down the cellar steps to the lodging room of the Church Street station, the place where he had slept and been robbed. It seemed just as he had left it. Among the tramps sleeping on dirty planks were two young lads from the country. And as Roosevelt peered into the gloomy, squalid room, he told him of his own adventure there so many years before.

“Did they do that to you?” he asked.

For answer, Riis pointed to the sleeping lads. “I was like this one,” he said.

Roosevelt clenched his fists and struck them together. “I will smash them to-morrow,” he exclaimed.

Roosevelt had said it and the battle was won. The very next day he brought the matter up before the Police Board. One week later, on the recommendation of the chief of police, the order was issued to close the doors of the police lodging rooms forever. Meantime, temporary arrangements were made for the homeless on a barge on the East River. The homeless dog was avenged at last.
But the way that led to this victory through twenty-five years was a long one, too long for us to go over in detail. The one thread that winds through all the diversity of these years, through all their ups and downs, their bad and growing good fortunes, was his newspaper work. He put his life into his stories of Mulberry Bend, for he knew, as no one else, how they would work together for good. But the entrance into his chosen profession was narrower, for him, than the eye of the needle. On one of his first attempts to squeeze through, he came to the office of a certain paper, fresh from the shipyard where he had been working.

The editor looked at the lad with his horny hands and his rough coat.

"What are you?" he asked.

"A carpenter."

The editor turned on his heel with a loud laugh, and shut the door in his face. "In that hour it was settled," says Mr. Riis, "that I was to be a reporter. I knew it as I went out into the street."

Gradually he worked his way in. In the course of time he became the editor of a little paper in Brooklyn, and then, at last, he had money enough to return to his home in Denmark and bring back to his home in America the little girl who lived in the "Castle." When Mr. Riis married, his troubles were ending. After a while he left his Brooklyn paper for a place on the New York "Tribune," and then when he had worked himself weary for wages that were not enough for a living, the great change came. The change was such news that he couldn't wait till the end of the day—he telegraphed it home to his wife:—

"Got staff appointment. Police Headquarters. $25 a week. Hurrah!"

The chance to be at Police Headquarters as a reporter was the chance, as he made use of it, to change for good both the police and the slums. For the press was his power, and the Police Headquarters was on Mulberry Bend, the most notorious slum of New York. It was here, to use a figure that he often used himself to his fellow workers, that he walked seven times around the walls of Jericho and blew his horn till the walls fell.

The great friendship of Mr. Riis' life has been his friendship for
Theodore Roosevelt. It began in the time when Roosevelt “came to help,” and as Mr. Riis says, “no man ever helped as he did. For two years we were brothers in Mulberry Street. When he left, I had seen its golden age.” It was Mr. Riis, as the friend of Roosevelt, who wrote the life of the President. He wrote it honestly and enthusiastically, and through all political changes, the friendship that prompted the “life” has remained disinterested. When, through growing age he abandoned his police reporting, he remained a private citizen. It was Roosevelt who referred to him as the most useful citizen in New York.

The result of all Mr. Riis’ stirring was the Lexow Investigating Committee, the Citizens’ Seventy, and a series of Tenement House Commissions and committee on child-labor, small parks, and civic reform that still carry out the spirit that he did so much to rouse. One sign of the improvement was the fact that the death rate of the living in New York came down from 26.32 per thousand in 1887 to 19.53 per thousand in 1897. In the Mott Street Barracks the infant death rate among the three hundred and fifty Italians they harbored had been three hundred and twenty-five per thousand. These barracks and the possibility of anything like them were destroyed when the Health Board destroyed sixteen of the worst rear tenements in the city. Ninety-four of these tenements in all were seized at the same time. In them there had been 956 deaths in four years—a rate of 62.9 while the average death rate for the whole city had been 24.63. Such were the results of the campaign.

“The ‘isms,’” says Mr. Riis in “The Making of an American,” “have no place in a newspaper office, certainly not in Mulberry Street. I confess I was rather glad of it. I had no stomach for abstract discussions of abstract social wrongs; I wanted to write those of them that I could reach. I wanted to tear down the Mulberry Bend and let in the light so that we might the more readily make them out.”

Yet when the Bend was torn down at last and the park that stood in its place was dedicated with holiday speeches, Mr. Riis was not invited to a seat among those who had worked. He stood and looked on like any one else in the crowd. It took the papers a long time to get over wondering why.

But a few years later the King of Denmark sent him a decoration
of knighthood in recognition of the work that had been forgotten by the program committee at the dedication.

One of the things that Mr. Riis likes as well as another is a good story “on” himself. He seems to remember most of the blows that struck him in the day’s work with about as much pleasure as the blows he landed himself on somebody else. Perhaps it is this zest for life in the making that gave him his courage. Certainly this is the spirit of fighting optimism that he expressed in a comment on the stories of his life. “To those,” he says, “who have been asking if they are made-up stories, let me say here that they are not. And I am mighty glad that they are not. I would not have missed being in it all for anything.”

“I DREAMED a beautiful dream in my youth, and I awoke and found it true. My ‘silver bride’ they called her just now. The frost is upon my head indeed; hers the winter has not touched with its softest breath. Her footfall is the lightest, her laugh the merriest in the house. The boys are all in love with their mother, the girls tyrannize and worship her together. Sometimes when she sings with the children I sit and listen, and with her voice there comes to me as an echo of the long past the words in her letter,—that blessed first letter in which she wrote down the text of all my after life: ‘We will strive together for all that is noble and good.’ So she saw her duty as a true American, and aye! she has kept the pledge.”

*From “The Making of an American,” by Jacob A. Riis.*

“THE world moves. The Bend is gone; the Barracks are gone; Mulberry Street itself as I knew it so long ago is gone. The old days are gone. I myself am gone. A year ago I had warning that ‘the night cometh when no man can work,’ and Mulberry Street knew me no more. I am still a young man, not far past fifty, and I have much I would do yet. But what if it were ordered otherwise? I have been very happy. No man ever had so good a time. Should I not be content?”

*From “The Making of an American,” by Jacob A. Riis.*