JACOB RIIS: FRIEND OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

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In adding our tribute to the many that have been offered Jacob Riis by the thinking public of America, we feel that its value lies in its personal quality. We shall not attempt to sum up all that has been said of Jacob Riis as a great citizen, as a contributor to the literature of America, but rather we wish to dwell upon his friendship and the intimate side of his inspiration to us. In writing of this man, of our love of him, his friendship for us, there is so much to say, so much gratitude for all that he gave to us, so many good memories of his enjoyment of life, his enthusiasm for good deeds, so wide a variety of achievement to put down to his credit, that we realize afresh what a real privilege it was to know well this great and good man. He often dropped in to talk over articles for the magazine and just as often only to wish us Godspeed or to tell us of some new adventure in living or work that had come his way. During the years of our acquaintance, I cannot recall his uttering one single word of complaint or criticism. He was a human enough man, human in his likes and dislikes, in his happinesses and disappointments, but a man who always brought to his friends the optimistic side of his interest in living. He was a man whom America could ill have spared in the story of her spiritual progress. Although a foreigner, not born in this country, coming here very poor, very lonely, very young, yet we shall always think of him as a friend of America and especially a friend of the young American. He worked for our city boys from the beginning of his days of power and strength, and yet he was not a philanthropist through a sense of duty, but through imagination and suffering. He was a man also of great loyalty. The beauty of his own home, the love of his mother, the greatness of his own land he never forgot. An interesting story is told which brings this vividly to one’s mind.

Years ago at the College Settlement he spoke of the meadows and fields near the old town of Ribe where he was born, where his little boy days were spent, and suddenly it seemed as though his audience had disappeared from view and in its place he saw the great northern seacoast. The students were breathless as they heard him.

“Over against the tenements that we fight in our cities,” he said, “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. How little we have of the making of ourselves. I was born on the edge of the moor, and once its majesty has sunk into a human soul that soul is forever after attuned to it.”

I think the image of Jacob Riis will always come back to my mind as one really possessing majesty in his soul. He seemed to have the big quality, the great enthusiasm, the fearless creative spirit that did not count the cost where achievement loomed in his path. When the chance came to him to work for others, to inspire others or help others he always seemed to me to respond with a fine gladness of spirit that never stopped to calculate. He did eagerly for the world, without thinking just what return the world could make him, and it seems to me always that this quality of buoyant enthusiasm is the spirit that accomplishes the great things; in other words, it is one manifestation of genius and is the possession of the man who has vision and who must see to the end of it, and not waste his sight and his efforts on the little difficulties along the way. I could never picture Jacob Riis fretting, but if an anxiety became too great I could always imagine him overcoming the torture of it by a fresh adventure out in the world of achievement. And although today we sum up all that he accomplished in a mighty array of good deeds, yet in the actual effort to do these things surely often his spirit must have travailed and his soul sorrowed deeply.

The memories of his early home days seem to have survived all his first terrible years in America, when he was tramping and starving and sleeping in lodging houses and all but breaking his eagar, tender, loving young heart. And yet how much the boys of today, especially the poor city boys, owe to those three hard years of Mr. Riis’ early life in America. He knew by experience all the suffering and the hardship and the heartbreak that so often make criminals of the normal worth while lad. As he said in “The Making of an American”: “In nine cases out of ten they are lads of normal impulses whose resources have all been smothered by the slum, of whom the street and its lawlessness and the tenement that
is without a home, have made ruffians. With better opportunities they might have been heroes."

But these hard days never hardened Jacob Riis’ spirit. They brought him closely in touch with humanity and made him long to do for humanity. But even in the work for the Police Courts years ago when he made out reports there was a certain kindness and humor in them. “We must have,” he said, “a good sprinkling of fun to keep our dreams from spoiling. The longer I live the more I think of humor as in truth the saving sense.”

When Mr. Riis was working with the Police Court he lived in some poor little rooms almost as poor as you could find in New York, down on Henry Street. His old tumbledown house was within a stone’s throw of a doorway in which he sat friendless and forlorn trying to hide from the police, who would not let him sleep during those first wretched boy days in the great city.

Our own knowing of Mr. Riis and our love of him came in the later years of his life, which were, however, still young years if one reckons from spirit and soul. When he told us that he had bought a farm we felt that he would get more from this living in the country than the mere building of a house or the cultivating of land. And when finally he wrote for The Craftsman his description of his farm life in the articles called “Happy Valley” we knew how wonderful this life really had been to him, how he was realizing in it the lovely ideals of his youth, of his manhood, of his fullest maturity. Living and working with him in Happy Valley was his companion, friend and wife. It would be hard to imagine a serener real friendship than existed between these two lovers of the beautiful in life, whether in the city or in the country.

In the last letter which Mr. Riis wrote to The Craftsman and which is possibly the last letter he wrote except to his family, we felt then the foreshadowing of the end of his fine and beautiful life. He was at the time out at the Battle Creek Sanitarium, where several months were passed before his return to Happy Valley to die in his own home, amidst those people and those surroundings which he loved best. The letter read:

"Good Friday, 1914.

"Dear Friends: God help us, not this year will I probably be able to speak for you, much as I should love to. I am so weak after my illness and so short of breath that I cannot walk a hundred feet without sitting down. And next week I am to begin a course of lectures on which my whole life depends. How I can do it I don’t know. I am simply praying that the strength may come. Once I am on the farm, it will come, in course of the summer, but until then—

"Give my warm regards to all. As soon as I can get around, I will come in and see you all. I have been sicker than any one knew, and sometimes it seems just as if it were the last of me.

"However, I guess I am tougher than that, and will yet be around. Hope so!

"Ever yours, Jacob A. Riis."

It was only a few days after this letter came that we saw in the papers that his strength was failing rapidly and that he was returning to Happy Valley even at the risk of losing several weeks of life through the trip. Indeed this return to his beloved home at the possible sacrifice of a few of the very last days of his life was in keeping with the whole character of the man’s spiritual existence. Always he was willing to give liberally for those good things that counted. And if some days’ toll must be paid for the joy of being at home at the very end, then those hours were given gladly and freely without a murmur. Fortunately for those who loved him best, he actually reached the farm and went to rest near the sunrise and sunset of his own beautiful living place.

It would take no little space to catalogue the many helpful movements for humanity which were born in the golden heart of this lover of all suffering, sorrowing human beings. We have, for instance, grown in New York to accept the Playground Association as a matter of course, as one of the good things our children must have. We do not often stop to think how much of its success we owe to Jacob Riis, his love of the schoolchildren, his desire that something good and normal should be given to them.

In the last two or three years in New York all of the city has joined in the great Christmas Eve festival in Madison Square, where the great northern pine tree stood sixty feet above the singers and a flood of electric light and music filled the square from north to south and east to west. Here again the spirit of Jacob Riis’ longing for the festivals of his early life, believing
that people should come together in music and good fellowship at the holiday season, helped to develop this beautiful metropolis.

T HEIR efforts awakened throughout the city the desire for a feast of good fellowship at least once a year outdoors, among the people. The reorganization of lodging houses for immigrants also came about, in Roosevelt's time as Police Commissioner, through Jacob Riis' efforts.

Although Mr. Riis was an indefatigable writer and lecturer, all of his articles, his books, his lectures were along the line of public betterment. He never wasted an hour preparing material for the public that was not for the public good. The merely spectacular, or dramatic or popular or profitable seemed to have no meaning to him. He did not self-consciously decide always to be a humanitarian. What he did, what he thought and wrote was inevitably for the good of the public just as he inevitably gave a warm handclasp to a friend, a rich smile to those needing him.

I think it is not widely known that Mr. Riis once refused a cabinet position because he felt himself drawn so closely to the work of helping the New York boys at that time. Indeed, there were many superficial honors which the world would have been glad to lavish upon him, but which he barely had time to withdraw from, and I doubt if he ever remembered that he had given them up, or in fact that they had existed in the minds of his friends. His dreams were either for the future of youth in America or tenderly of his own youth. On one hand he realized we must fight for childhood, for its playgrounds, for its chance for happiness; on the other he said to a friend, "In my dreams I listen to the whisper of the reeds in the dry moats about the green castle hill, and hear my mother call me once more her boy, and I know that I shall find them with my lost childhood, when we all reach home at last."

Here at The Craftsman we mourn the loss of a rich friendship and we cherish the memory of a man whose life was wise, kind, full of inspiration and always at the service of those who were suffering the worst or striving for the best.

Old subscribers of The Craftsman will find a long and interesting article about Jacob Riis published in June, 1905.