

## Slum Life

Enough of them [tenements] everywhere. Suppose we look into one? . . . Be a little careful, please! The hall is dark and you might stumble over the children pitching pennies back there. Not that it would hurt them; kicks and cuffs are their daily diet. They have little else. Here where the hall turns and dives into utter darkness is a step, and another, another. A flight of stairs. You can feel your way, if you cannot see it. Close? Yes! What would you have? 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 by the hydrant you just bumped against. The sinks are in the hallway, that all the tenants may have access . . . In summer, when a thousand thirsty throats pant for a cooling drink in this block, it is worked in vain . . . Here is a door. Listen! That short hacking cough, that tiny, helpless wail—what do they mean? . . . Oh! a sadly familiar story—before the day is at an end. The child is dying with measles. With half a chance it might have lived; but it had none. That dark bedroom killed it.

—Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, 1890

## The Workplace

The management assured me that no lead was used in the coatings and invited me to inspect the workroom, where I found six Polish painters applying an enamel paint to metal bathtubs . . . I [later] learned that the air is thick with enamel dust and that this may be rich in red oxide of lead . . .

Lead is the oldest of the industrial poisons except carbon monoxide . . . It is a poison which can act in many different ways, some of them so unusual and outside the experience of the ordinary physician that he fails to recognize the cause . . .

A young Italian, who spoke no English, worked for a month in a white-lead plant but without any idea that the harmless looking stuff was poisonous. There was a great deal of dust in his work. One day he was seized with an agonizing pain in his head which came on him so suddenly that he fell to the ground. He was sent to the hospital, semiconscious, with convulsive attacks, and was there for two weeks; when he came home, he had a relapse and had to go back to the hospital. Three months later he was still in poor health and could not do a full day's work.

—Alice Hamilton, *The Poisonous Occupations in Illinois: Physician Alice Hamilton Explores the "Dangerous Trades" at the Turn of the Century*, 1943

## Unsafe Products

And then there was “potted game” and “potted grouse,” “potted ham,” and “devilled ham”—de-vyled, as the men called it. “De-vyled” ham was made out of the waste ends of smoked beef that were too small to be sliced by the machines; and also tripe, dyed with chemicals so that it would not show white; and trimmings of hams and corned beef; and potatoes, skins and all; and finally the hard cartilaginous gullets of beef, after the tongues had been cut out. All this ingenious mixture was ground up and flavored with spices to make it taste like something.

—Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 1906

## The Landscape

Many of nature’s five hundred kinds of wild trees had to make way for orchards and cornfields. In the settlement and civilization of the country . . . the early settlers . . . regarded God’s trees as only a larger kind of pernicious [harmful] weeds, extremely hard to get rid of. Accordingly . . . trees in their beauty fell crashing by millions, smashed to confusion, and the smoke of their burning has been rising to heaven more than two hundred years. After the Atlantic coast from Maine to Georgia had been mostly cleared and scorched into melancholy [depressed] ruins, the overflowing multitude of bread and money seekers poured over the Alleghanies into the fertile middle West, spreading ruthless devastation ever wider and farther over the rich valley of the Mississippi and the vast shadowy pine region about the Great Lakes. Thence still westward the invading horde of destroyers called settlers made its fiery way over the broad Rocky Mountains, felling and burning more fiercely than ever, until at last it has reached the wild side of the continent, and entered the last of the great aboriginal forests on the shores of the Pacific.

—John Muir, *American Forests*, 1897

## Natural Resources

Laborers were dumping the coal into chutes. The huge lumps slid slowly on their journey down through the building, from which they were to emerge in classified [sorted] fragments. Great teeth on revolving cylinders caught them and chewed them. At places there were grates that bid each size go into its proper chute. The dust lay inches deep on every motionless thing, and clouds of it made the air dark as from a violent tempest. A mighty gnashing sound filled the ears. With terrible appetite this huge and hideous monster sat imperturbably [steadily] munching coal, grinding its mammoth jaws with unearthly and monotonous [repetitive] uproar.

—Stephen Crane, “In the Depths of a Coal Mine,”  
McClure’s Magazine, August 1894

## Pollution

One of the striking features of our neighborhood . . . was the presence of huge wooden garbage boxes fastened to the street pavement in which the undisturbed refuse [garbage] accumulated day by day. The system of garbage collecting was inadequate throughout the city but it became the greatest menace in a ward such as ours, where the normal amount of waste was much increased by the decayed fruit and vegetables discarded by the . . . fruit peddlers, and by the residuum [residue] left over from the piles of filthy rags which were fished out of the city dumps and brought to the homes of the rag pickers for further sorting and washing.

—Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, 1912

## Political Machines and Bosses

And it is corruptible, this citizenship. “I know what Parks is doing,” said a New York union workman, “but what do I care. He has raised my wages. Let him have his graft!” And the Philadelphia merchant says the same thing: “The party leaders may be getting more than they should out of the city, but that doesn’t hurt me. It may raise taxes a little, but I can stand that. The party keeps up the protective tariff. If that were cut down, my business would be ruined. So long as the party stands pat [firmly] on that, I stand pat on the party.”

—Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities*, 1904

## Local and State Politics

The typical business man is a bad citizen; he is busy. If he is a “big business man” and very busy, . . . he is busy with politics, oh, very busy and very businesslike. I found him buying boodlers [frauds] in St. Louis, defending grafters in Minneapolis, originating corruption in Pittsburgh, sharing with bosses in Philadelphia, deploring reform in Chicago, and beating good government with corruption funds in New York. He is a self-righteous fraud, this big business man. He is the chief source of corruption . . .

The spirit of graft and of lawlessness is the American spirit.

—Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities*, 1904

## National Politics

The Senators are not elected by the people; they are elected by the “interests” . . .

The greatest single hold of “the interests” is the fact that they are the “campaign contributors”—the men who supply the money for “keeping the party together,” and for “getting out the vote.” Did you ever think where the millions for watchers, spellbinders, halls, processions, posters, pamphlets, that are spent in national, state and local campaigns come from? Who pays the big election expenses of your congressman, of the men you send to the legislature to elect senators? Do you imagine those who foot those huge bills are fools? Don’t you know that they make sure of getting their money back, with interest . . . ?

—David Graham Phillips, “The Treason of the Senate,”  
*Cosmopolitan*, March 1906

## Social Class

The world’s workers have always been and still are the world’s slaves. They have borne all the burdens of the race and built all the monuments along the track of civilization; they have produced all the world’s wealth and supported all the world’s governments. They have conquered all things but their own freedom. They are still the subject class in every nation on earth and the chief function of every government is to keep them at the mercy of their masters . . .

They [workers] looked about them and saw a land of wonderful resources; they saw the productive machinery made by their own hands and the vast wealth produced by their own labor, in the shadow of which their wives and children were perishing in the skeleton clutch of famine . . .

Poverty, high prices, unemployment, child slavery, widespread misery and haggard [tired] want in a land bursting with abundance; prostitution and insanity, suicide and crime, these in solemn numbers tell the tragic story.

—Eugene V. Debs, “Speech of Acceptance,”  
*International Socialist Review*, October 1912

## African Americans

For nearly twenty years lynching [hanging] crimes . . . have been committed and permitted by this Christian nation. Nowhere in the civilized world save the United States of America do men, possessing all civil and political power, go out in bands of 50 and 5,000 to hunt down, shoot, hang or burn to death a single individual, unarmed and absolutely powerless. Statistics show that nearly 10,000 American citizens have been lynched in the past 20 years. To our appeals for justice the stereotyped reply has been that the government could not interfere in a state matter . . . We refuse to believe this country, so powerful to defend its citizens abroad, is unable to protect its citizens at home. Italy and China have been indemnified [condemned] by this government for the lynching of their citizens. We ask that the government do as much for its own.

—Ida B. Wells-Barnett, petition to President William McKinley,  
*Cleveland Gazette*, April 9, 1898

## Women

To the man, the whole world was his world; his because he was male; and the whole world of woman was the home; because she was female. She had her prescribed sphere, strictly limited to her feminine occupations and interests; he had all the rest of life; and not only so, but, having it, insisted on calling it male.

This accounts for the general attitude of men toward the now rapid humanization of women. From her first faint struggles toward freedom and justice, to her present valiant efforts toward full economic and political equality, each step has been termed “unfeminine” and resented as an intrusion upon man’s place and power.

—Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Man-Made World:  
Or, Our Androcentric Culture*, 1911

## Families

I could not do that work and live, but there were boys of ten and twelve years of age doing it for fifty and sixty cents a day. Some of them had never been inside of a school; few of them could read a child's primer [reading textbook]. True, some of them attended the night schools, but after working ten hours . . . the educational results from attending school were practically nil . . .

Boys twelve years of age may be *legally* employed in the mines of West Virginia, by day or by night, and for as many hours as the employers care to make them toil or their bodies will stand the strain. Where the disregard of child life is such that this may be done openly and with legal sanction [approval], it is easy to believe what miners have again and again told me—that there are hundreds of little boys of nine and ten years of age employed in the coal mines of this state.

—John Spargo, *The Bitter Cry of Children*, 1906