

THE HOUSE ON HENRY STREET

BY
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Table of Contents

PREFACE

CHAPTER I THE EAST SIDE TWO DECADES AGO

CHAPTER II ESTABLISHING THE NURSING SERVICE

CHAPTER III THE NURSE AND THE COMMUNITY

CHAPTER IV CHILDREN AND PLAY

CHAPTER V EDUCATION AND THE CHILD

CHAPTER VI THE HANDICAPPED CHILD

CHAPTER VII CHILDREN WHO WORK

CHAPTER VIII THE NATION'S CHILDREN

CHAPTER IX ORGANIZATIONS WITHIN THE SETTLEMENT

CHAPTER X YOUTH

WHITHER? (To a Young Girl)

CHAPTER XI YOUTH AND TRADES UNIONS

CHAPTER XII WEDDINGS AND SOCIAL HALLS

CHAPTER XIII FRIENDS OF RUSSIAN FREEDOM

CHAPTER XIV SOCIAL FORCES

CHAPTER XV SOCIAL FORCES, Continued

CHAPTER XVI NEW AMERICANS AND OUR POLICIES

FOOTNOTES

THE HOUSE ON HENRY STREET



THE HOUSE ON HENRY STREET

TO
THE COMRADES
WHO HAVE BUILT THE HOUSE

PREFACE

Much of the material contained in this book has been published in a series of six articles that appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* from March to August, 1915. And indeed it was due to the kindly insistence on the part of the editors of that magazine that more permanent form should be given to the record of the House on Henry Street that the story was published at all.

During the two decades of the existence of the Settlement there has been a significant awakening on matters of social concern, particularly those affecting the protection of children throughout society in general; and a new sense of responsibility has been aroused among men and women, but perhaps more distinctively among women, since the period coincides with their freer admission to public and professional life. The Settlement is in itself an expression of this sense of responsibility, and under its roof many divergent groups have come together to discuss measures "for the many, mindless, mass that most needs helping," and often to assert by deed their faith in democracy. Some have found in the Settlement an opportunity for self-realization that in the more fixed and older institutions has not seemed possible.

I cannot acknowledge by name the many individuals who, by gift of money and through understanding and confidence, through work and thought and sharing of the burdens, have helped to build the House on Henry Street. These colleagues have come all through the years that have followed since the

little girl led me to her rear tenement home. Though we are working together as comrades for a common cause, I cannot resist this opportunity to express my profound personal gratitude for the precious gifts that have been so abundantly given. The first friends who gave confidence and support to an unknown and unexperimented venture have remained staunch and loyal builders of the House. And the younger generation with their gifts have developed the plans of the House and have found inspiration while they have given it.

In the making of the book, much help has come from these same friends, and I should be quite overwhelmed with the debt I owe did I not feel that all of us who have worked together have worked not only for each other but for the cause of human progress; that is the beginning and should be the end of the House on Henry Street.

LILLIAN D. WALD.

**THE HOUSE ON HENRY
STREET**

CHAPTER I

THE EAST SIDE TWO DECADES AGO

A sick woman in a squalid rear tenement, so wretched and so pitiful that, in all the years since, I have not seen anything more appealing, determined me, within half an hour, to live on the East Side.

I had spent two years in a New York training-school for nurses; strenuous years for an undisciplined, untrained girl, but a wonderful human experience. After graduation, I supplemented the theoretical instruction, which was casual and inconsequential in the hospital classes twenty-five years ago, by a period of study at a medical college. It was while at the college that a great opportunity came to me.

I had little more than an inspiration to be of use in some way or somehow, and going to the hospital seemed the readiest means of realizing my desire. While there, the long hours "on duty" and the exhausting demands of the ward work scarcely admitted freedom for keeping informed as to what was happening in the world outside. The nurses had no time for general reading; visits to and from friends were brief; we were out of the current and saw little of life save as it flowed into the hospital wards. It is not strange, therefore, that I should have been ignorant of the various movements which reflected the awakening of the social conscience at the time, or of the birth of the "settlement," which twenty-five years ago was giving form to a social protest in England and America. Indeed, it was

not until the plan of our work on the East Side was well developed that knowledge came to me of other groups of people who, reacting to a humane or an academic appeal, were adopting this mode of expression and calling it a “settlement.”

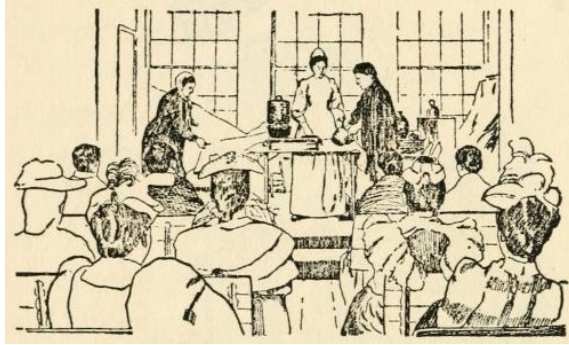
Two decades ago the words “East Side” called up a vague and alarming picture of something strange and alien: a vast crowded area, a foreign city within our own, for whose conditions we had no concern. Aside from its exploiters, political and economic, few people had any definite knowledge of it, and its literary “discovery” had but just begun.

The lower East Side then reflected the popular indifference—it almost seemed contempt—for the living conditions of a huge population. And the possibility of improvement seemed, when my inexperience was startled into thought, the more remote because of the dumb acceptance of these conditions by the East Side itself. Like the rest of the world I had known little of it, when friends of a philanthropic institution asked me to do something for that quarter.

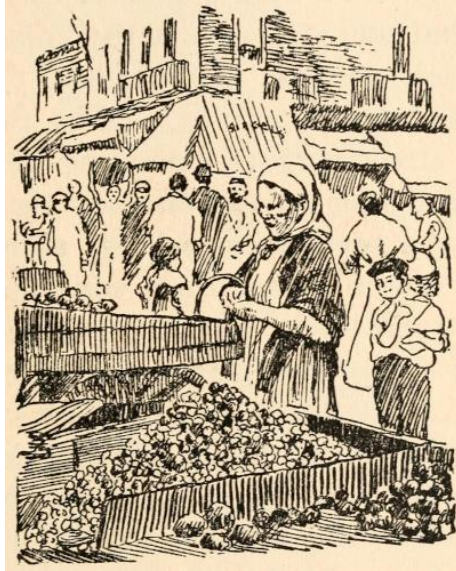


Remembering the families who came to visit patients in the wards, I outlined a course of instruction in home nursing adapted to their needs, and gave it in an old building in Henry Street, then used as a technical school and now part of the settlement. Henry Street then as now was the center of a dense industrial population.

From the schoolroom where I had been giving a lesson in bed-making, a little girl led me one drizzling March morning. She had told me of her sick mother, and gathering from her incoherent account that a child had been born, I caught up the paraphernalia of the bed-making lesson and carried it with me.



The child led me over broken roadways,—there was no asphalt, although its use was well established in other parts of the city,—over dirty mattresses and heaps of refuse,—it was before Colonel Waring had shown the possibility of clean streets even in that quarter,—between tall, reeking houses whose laden fire-escapes, useless for their appointed purpose, bulged with household goods of every description. The rain added to the dismal appearance of the streets and to the discomfort of the crowds which thronged them, intensifying the odors which assailed me from every side. Through Hester and Division streets we went to the end of Ludlow; past odorous fish-stands, for the streets were a market-place, unregulated, unsupervised, unclean; past evil-smelling, uncovered garbage-cans; and—perhaps worst of all, where so many little children played—past the trucks brought down from more fastidious quarters and stalled on these already overcrowded streets, lending themselves inevitably to many forms of indecency.



The child led me on through a tenement hallway, across a court where open and unscreened closets were promiscuously used by men and women, up into a rear tenement, by slimy steps whose accumulated dirt was augmented that day by the mud of the streets, and finally into the sickroom.

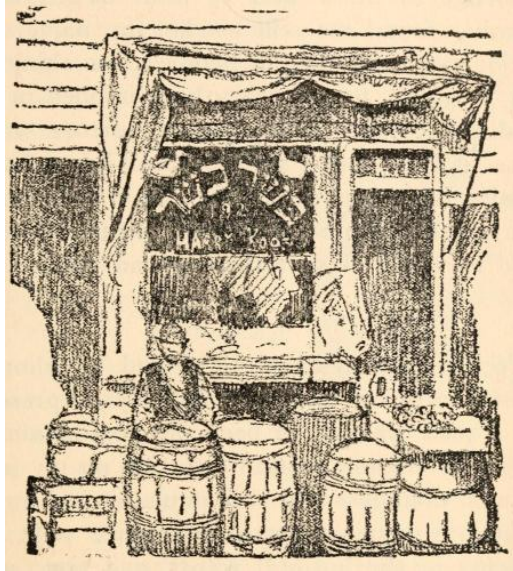
All the maladjustments of our social and economic relations seemed epitomized in this brief journey and what was found at the end of it. The family to which the child led me was neither criminal nor vicious. Although the husband was a cripple, one of those who stand on street corners exhibiting deformities to enlist compassion, and masking the begging of alms by a pretense at selling; although the family of seven shared their two rooms with boarders,—who were literally boarders, since a piece of timber was placed over the floor for them to sleep

on,—and although the sick woman lay on a wretched, unclean bed, soiled with a hemorrhage two days old, they were not degraded human beings, judged by any measure of moral values.



LILLIAN D. WALD MARY M. BREWSTER
In hospital uniform, 1893

In fact, it was very plain that they were sensitive to their condition, and when, at the end of my ministrations, they kissed my hands (those who have undergone similar experiences will, I am sure, understand), it would have been some solace if by any conviction of the moral unworthiness of the family I could have defended myself as a part of a society which permitted such conditions to exist. Indeed, my subsequent acquaintance with them revealed the fact that, miserable as their state was, they were not without ideals for the family life, and for society, of which they were so unloved and unlovely a part.



That morning's experience was a baptism of fire. Deserted were the laboratory and the academic work of the college. I never returned to them. On my way from the sickroom to my comfortable student quarters my mind was intent on my own responsibility. To my inexperience it seemed certain that conditions such as these were allowed because people did not *know*, and for me there was a challenge to know and to tell. When early morning found me still awake, my naïve conviction remained that, if people knew things,—and “things” meant everything implied in the condition of this family,—such horrors would cease to exist, and I rejoiced that I had had a training in the care of the sick that in itself would give me an organic relationship to the neighborhood in which this awakening had come.

To the first sympathetic friend to whom I poured forth my story, I found myself presenting a plan which had been developing almost without conscious mental direction on my part. It was doubtless the accumulation of many reflections inspired by acquaintance with the patients in the hospital wards, and now, with the Ludlow Street experience, resistlessly impelling me to action.

Within a day or two a comrade from the training-school, Mary Brewster, agreed to share in the venture. We were to live in the neighborhood as nurses, identify ourselves with it socially, and, in brief, contribute to it our citizenship. That plan contained in embryo all the extended and diversified social interests of our settlement group to-day.



We set to work immediately to find quarters—no easy task, as we clung to the civilization of a bathroom, and according to a legend current at the time there were only two bathrooms in tenement houses below Fourteenth Street. Chance helped us here. A young woman who for years played an important part in the life of many East Side people, overhearing a conversation

of mine with a fellow-student, gave me an introduction to two men who, she said, knew all about the quarter of the city which I wished to enter. I called on them immediately, and their response to my need was as prompt. Without stopping to inquire into my antecedents or motives, or to discourse on the social aspects of the community, of which, I soon learned, they were competent to speak with authority, they set out with me at once, in a pouring rain, to scour the adjacent streets for "To Let" signs. One which seemed to me worth investigating my newly acquired friends discarded with the explanation that it was in the "red light" district and would not do. Later I was to know much of the unfortunate women who inhabited the quarter, but at the time the term meant nothing to me.

After a long tour one of my guides, as if by inspiration, reminded the other that several young women had taken a house on Rivington Street for something like my purpose, and perhaps I had better live there temporarily and take my time in finding satisfactory quarters. Upon that advice I acted, and within a few days Miss Brewster and I found ourselves guests at the luncheon table of the College Settlement on Rivington Street. With ready hospitality they took us in, and, during July and August, we were "residents" in stimulating comradeship with serious women, who were also the fortunate possessors of a saving sense of humor.

Before September of the year 1893 we found a house on Jefferson Street, the only one in which our careful search disclosed the desired bathtub. It had other advantages—the vacant floor at the top (so high that the windows along the entire side wall gave us sun and breeze), and, greatest lure of

all, the warm welcome which came to us from the basement, where we found the janitress ready to answer questions as to terms.

Naturally, objections to two young women living alone in New York under these conditions had to be met, and some assurance as to our material comfort was given to anxious, though at heart sympathetic, families by compromising on good furniture, a Baltimore heater for cheer, and simple but adequate household appurtenances. Painted floors with easily removed rugs, windows curtained with spotless but inexpensive scrim, a sitting-room with pictures, books, and restful chairs, a tiny bedroom which we two shared, a small dining-room in which the family mahogany did not look out of place, and a kitchen, constituted our home for two full years.

The much-esteemed bathroom, small and dark, was in the hall, and necessitated early rising if we were to have the use of it; for, as we became known, we had many callers anxious to see us before we started on our sick rounds. The diminutive closet-space was divided to hold the bags and equipment we needed from day to day, and more ample store-closets were given us by the kindly people in the school where I had first given lessons to East Side mothers. Any pride in the sacrifice of material comfort which might have risen within us was effectually inhibited by the constant reminder that we two young persons occupied exactly the same space as the large families on every floor below us, and to one of our basement friends at least we were luxurious beyond the dreams of ordinary folk.

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