

# 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

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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.

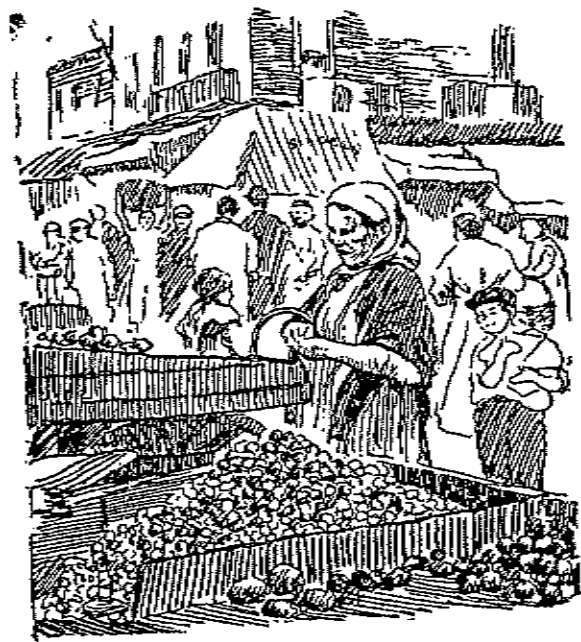
From the schoolroom where I had been giving a lesson in bed-making, a little girl led me one drizzling March morning. She had told me of her sick mother, and gathering from her incoherent account that a child had been born, I caught up the paraphernalia of the bed-making lesson and carried it with me.

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,—I 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 crowd which thronged them, intensifying the odor.

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 un-screened 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.

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 sick-room 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 citi-