Excerpts from *How the Other Half Lives*

By Jacob Riis

Bottle Alley is around the corner in Baxter Street; but it is a fair specimen of its kind, wherever found. Look into any of these houses, everywhere the same piles of rags, of malodorous bones and musty paper, all of which the sanitary police flatter themselves they have banished to the dumps and the warehouses. Here is a “flat” of “parlor” and two pitch-dark coops called bedrooms. Truly, the bed is all there is room for. The family tea-kettle is on the stove, doing duty for the time being as a wash-boiler. By night it will have returned to its proper use again, a practical illustration of how poverty in “the Bend” makes both ends meet. One, two, three beds are there, if the old boxes and heaps of foul straw can be called by that name; a broken stove with crazy pipe from which the smoke leaks at every joint, a table of rough boards propped up on boxes, piles of rubbish in the corner. The closeness and smell are appalling. How many people sleep here? The woman with the red bandanna shakes her head sullenly, but the bare-legged girl with the bright face counts on her fingers—five, six! “Six, sir!” Six grown people and five children. “Only five,” she says with a smile, swathing the little one on her lap in its cruel bandage. There is another in the cradle—actually a cradle. And how much the rent? Nine and a half, and “please, sir! he won’t put the paper on.” “He” is the landlord. The “paper” hangs in musty shreds on the wall.

Well do I recollect the visit of a health inspector to one of these tenements on a July day when the thermometer outside was climbing high in the nineties; but inside, in that awful room, with half a dozen persons washing, cooking, and sorting rags, lay the dying baby alongside the stove, where the doctor’s thermometer ran up to 115°! Perishing for the want of a breath of fresh air in this city of untold charities! Did not the manager of the Fresh Air Fund write to the pastor of an Italian Church only last year that “no one asked for Italian children,” and hence he could not send any to the country?

“Bottle Ally” *Jacob Riis*

1. **In your own words describe the living conditions of the “flats” in New York City.**

….The metropolis is to lots of people like a lighted candle to the moth. It attracts them in swarms that come year after year with the vague idea that they can get along here if anywhere; that something is bound to turn up among so many. Nearly all are young men, unsettled in life, many–most of them, perhaps–fresh from good homes, beyond a doubt with honest hopes of getting a start in the city and making a way for themselves. Few of them have much money to waste while looking around, and the cheapness of the lodging offered is an object. Fewer still know anything about the city and its pitfalls. They have come in search of crowds, of “life,” and they gravitate naturally to the Bowery, the great democratic highway of the city, where the twenty-five-cent lodging-houses take them in. In the alleged reading-rooms of these great barracks, that often have accommodations, such as they are, for two, three, and even four hundred guests, they encounter three distinct classes of associates: the great mass adventurers like themselves, waiting there for something to turn up; a much smaller class of respectable clerks or mechanics, who, too poor or too lonely to have a home of their own, live this way from year to year; and lastly the thief in search of recruits for his trade. The sights the young stranger sees, and the company he keeps, in the Bowery are not of a kind to strengthen any moral principle he may have brought away from home, and by the time his money is gone, with no work yet in sight, and he goes down a step, a long step, to the fifteen-cent lodging-house, he is ready for the tempter whom he finds waiting for him there, reinforced by the contingent of ex-convicts returning from the prisons after having served out their sentences for robbery or theft. Then it is that the something he has been waiting for turns up. The police returns have the record of it. “In nine cases out of ten,” says Inspector Byrnes, “he turns out a thief, or a burglar, if, indeed, he does not sooner or later become a murderer.” *As a matter of fact, some of the most atrocious of recent murders have been the result of schemes of robbery hatched in these houses, and so frequent and bold have become the depredations of the lodging-house thieves, that the authorities have been compelled to make a public demand for more effective laws that shall make them subject at all times to police regulation.*

“Five Cents a Spot” *Jacob Riis*

1. **According to the author what kind of men arrive in New York? What are they looking for?**
2. **Riis says 3 kinds of men live in the lodging-houses; describe these men, (in your own words).**
3. **What is meant by the last sentence?**

  
Inspector Byrnes observes that in the last two or three years at least four hundred young men have been arrested for petty crimes that originated in the lodging-houses, and that in many cases it was their first step in crime. He adds his testimony to the notorious fact that three-fourths of the young men called on to plead to generally petty offences in the courts are under twenty years of age, poorly clad, and without means. The bearing of the remark is obvious. One of the, to the police, well-known thieves who lived, when out of jail, at the Windsor, a well-known lodging-house in the Bowery, went to Johnstown after the flood and was shot and killed there while robbing the dead.

An idea of just how this particular scheme of corruption works, with an extra touch of infamy thrown in, may be gathered from the story of David Smith, the “New York Fagin,” who was convicted and sent to prison last year through the instrumentality of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Here is the account from the Society’s last report:

“The boy, Edward Mulhearn fourteen years old, had run away from his home in Jersey City, thinking he might find work and friends in New York. He may have been a trifle wild. He met Smith on the Bowery and recognized him as an acquaintance. When Smith offered him a supper and bed he was only too glad to accept. Smith led the boy to a vile lodging-house on the Bowery, where he introduced him to his ‘pals’ and swore he would make a man of him before he was a week older. Next day he took the unsuspecting Edward all over the Bowery and Grand Street, showed him the sights and drew his attention to the careless way the ladies carried their bags and purses and the easy thing it was to get them. He induced Edward to try his hand. Edward tried and won. He was richer by three dollars! It did seem easy. ‘Of course it is,’ said his companion. From that time Smith took the boy on a number of thieving raids, but he never seemed to become adept enough to be trusted out of range of the ‘Fagin’s’ watchful eye. When he went out alone he generally returned empty-handed. This did not suit Smith. It was then he conceived the idea of turning this little inferior thief into a superior beggar. He took the boy into his room and burned his arms with a hot iron. The boy screamed and entreated in vain. The merciless wretch pressed the iron deep into the tender flesh, and afterward applied acid to the raw wound.

“Bandit’s Roost” *Jacob Riis*

“Thus prepared, with his arm inflamed, swollen, and painful, Edward was sent out every day by this fiend, who never let him out of his sight, and threatened to burn his arm off if he did not beg money enough. He was instructed to tell people the wound had been caused by acid falling upon his arm at the works. Edward was now too much under the man’s influence to resist or disobey him. He begged hard and handed Smith the pennies faithfully. He received in return bad food and worse treatment.”

1. **Why is the story of Edward Mulhearn told?**
2. **Why is Riis’ piece called *How the Other Half Lives*? Who is/are “the other half”?**

**\*\*\*There are other photographs (quite chilling many of them) from *How the Other Half Lives* on the web.** [**This**](http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2008/02/27/nyregion/20080227_RIIS_SLIDESHOW_index.html) **link will take you to a slide show**