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The Value of Playgrounds to the Community.

BY MR. JACOB A. RIIS.*

AT the last regular luncheon of the Canadian Club, for the season of 1912-13, held on the 21st April, Mr. Jacob A. Riis said:

Mr. Chairman, Your Grace, friends and neighbours across the line,—They say that a man and a people live in their ideals. If I should apply that to myself, I must begin very far back. For my own ideal, and that of the friend here on the right who has been telling me of your housing movement in Toronto, is the man in the garden. I suppose that conception goes back to the Garden of Eden. We take it for granted that if a man is planted in a garden on his own plot of soil he cannot go far away from what is right. As a theory that is all right; in practice the ideal has been knocked on the head several times in my own home, for one thing in the case of Philadelphia, which is a city of homes, yet for years held the evil reputation of being the worst governed city in the land. But the hardest blow it received on this side of the line, and I will risk telling you how. I used to come with a couple of friends to spend part of the summer in your beautiful and wonderful wilderness of the north. We came year after year, and we enjoyed ourselves tremendously. We always had the same old man for our cook and his son for guide. The old man,—I will call him Donald,—that is not his name, but I want to save his feelings, was a Scotch Presbyterian, of the most uncompromising kind. He would discuss infant damnation and foreordination and the other grim old doctrines in the way that was distinctly good and whole-

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some for us. I gloried in that man and his splendid piety. Aleck was just a scallawag of the frontier with no principles to speak of. One day Aleck and I were fishing, and he fell to telling me how the votes in the little hamlet on the edge of the wilderness in which they lived were all bought by one party or the other, I never knew which. It seemed to me a ridiculous and scandalous waste of money, to buy *all* the votes, when a little more than one half would have done! (Laughter.) And I said to Aleck, "Aren't you drawing the long bow?" "Oh, I guess not," he replied. "I ought to know, I held the bag." "Does it occur to you," I asked, "that when you said you were buying all the votes you implied that you were buying your own father's too?" "Why not?" he said, "shouldn't he have his two dollars the same as the rest?" (Laughter.)

I said no more, but when I saw the old man that evening, I took him to task. Donald was much annoyed, shrugged one shoulder, then the other, and said, "Those young fellows' tongues are too long! They talk too much." "That is not the point," said I, "did you or did you not take the two dollars?" He looked at me as if lost. "Why, yes," said he, "the money was there, I might as well have it as the rest of them." And then he saw something in my face, and reassured me: "But that is all right Mr. Riis. I took the money, but I voted for the other man!" (Laughter.) And I thought of the definition given by Matt Quay, chief of corruptionists, of an honest man, as "one who would stay bought!" (Laughter.) Ever since I have stood in awe of the Presbyterian conscience.

But if the man in the garden proved a delusion, it must be because we didn't begin far enough back. Hence we have taken our stand with the boy in the playground. That is solid ground! (Applause.) And I think I shall prove it.

It was not always so. It is not more than thirteen or fourteen years since I went before the Board of Education of my city, begging them to open one playground at least for the boys, to take them off the street after school hours. When after half an hour's plea I had finished, they thanked me and said they were glad I had taken all that trouble, "but you have not told us where there is anything educational in all this. (Laughter.) If you can show us that, perhaps we will do it." That was at the outside fifteen years ago! Last week, or the week before last, I met Dr. Maxwell, the Superintendent of our schools, and asked him, "How many school playgrounds did you maintain last year in connection with the

schools, not in school hours but in the long vacation." "Two hundred and twenty-two," he said. (Applause.) And he might have added, "In another five years we shall have four hundred and forty-four, in all probability!" and not have been far out of the way.

And while we have done that, two great sovereign States, Massachusetts on the Atlantic seaboard and Washington on the Pacific, have passed laws requiring cities of ten thousand inhabitants or over to maintain playgrounds at the public expense. That law was referred by Massachusetts to the people themselves to confirm, and there was something to me of grim humour in the fact, when last year I was campaigning in that State, and saw the dread sane good people had of the referendum. They had themselves wielded that power a little while before to the great and lasting advantage of the commonwealth. And now we have come to the pass where at a playground congress the cry was raised: "Rather a playground without a school than a school without a playground!" That time the pendulum swung too far, as it is apt to do. We want them both and so hitched together as to do the boy and us all good.

Now what does all this mean? It means that we are at last awake to the fact that the boy is father of the man, of the citizen of the to-morrow, and that there is no shorter way that you can possibly take to the corruption of that citizen than to deny the boy his childhood. For, friends, you can't make a whole man out of half a boy! (Applause.) No boy is ever more than half a boy who has not had his chance to toss a ball across the lot unchallenged. There is an unsuspected connection between lack of play in young years, child labour, and trampery. It is a surprise to many people, yet it is perfectly natural. Take a boy, and jam him into a factory, —at thirty you have a spent man! 'The boy without a playground is the father of the man without a job.' Force him into a shop in his young years, when he should be out at play, and he will be the father of the man who doesn't want a job!

Seventy-five years ago, Friedrich Froebel, of whom you all know, but of whom the Board of Education of my city did not know fifteen years ago, laid down as the foundation pillars of his system of common sense education, whether of rich or poor two rules: one, that play is the normal occupation of the child, through which he gets his first grip on moral relations—that is: grows character—what in all the world could be more "educational" than that which gives the

image of God in him a chance to grow into manhood? (Hear, hear.) The other is that you learn by doing and not much in any other way.

What does the boy learn whose playground is always set between two gutters; and whose only game is "getting arrested?" Take your own city. A man who is here to-day told me of a boy who came to this city from Scotland, where he had lived in a village, and in a few weeks appeared in the Juvenile Court charged with mischief, smashing street lamps and windows. They found out that he lived in a dark cellar that palled on the boy who was used to outdoor life, had lived in the hills; so he took to the street, and of course he got into trouble with the police. Unconsciously that gentleman told me the whole story of the slum and the hoodlum. He was sent up to the Industrial School for three years. I hope your Industrial School is better than some I know of, for otherwise you may have done yourselves and that lad an irreparable injury. (Hear, hear.)

He goes to play in the street; he does not mean to break lamps and windows, but a ball has ways of its own, and damage is done. Naturally the storekeeper kicks, and the policeman is not to blame; he has his orders. What those orders ground in, you may understand when I tell you that I happened across the figures of street traffic accidents in New York City for the year before last: between two and three hundred persons were killed, and between ten and eleven thousand maimed. So there is good cause to deny him that playground. But the boy does not know it. He breaks a window, is chased by a policeman, and he runs. His little legs can go faster than the policeman's and he gets away. And while he runs with his heart hammering up under his shirt, he swells with pride at having beaten the policeman. That is the beginning of outlawry. The policeman chased him over the line.

Forty years ago the Earl of Meath, on the other side of the sea who has thrown much light on this question of juvenile delinquency, pointed out that crime in our large cities is to the greatest extent simply a question of athletics, of giving the boy a chance. What is a boy anyway but a little steam boiler, with steam always up! (Laughter.) I pity the boy who is not built that way, who has not the steam boiling and bubbling in him! The boy has a safety valve: it is his play. You can sit on the safety valve of a boiler with steam up if you want to, but you are an awful fool if you do! Something is bound to happen! And what else have we done in our large cities? We see signs, "Keep off the grass!" The grass is sacred in our cities, but the boy is not! He can go to the devil if he chooses, and he has been going there, hot-foot.

We had a small Parks Commission in our city, and I was the secretary. I was a police reporter at that time in New York, and I stood at the wicket gate where the whole procession of rapscallions passed through. I had a map drawn of the city, and where the worst gangs were which made trouble I stuck pins. We called in the police captains of those districts, and asked them how they accounted for the lawlessness there and what made the trouble. As one man their answer was, "The boys haven't any chance to play!"

There were the tenements with the biggest crowds, that means with the largest number of boys. Also, they were the newest tenements. Within my own recollection there had been vacant lots. Don't I still hear that objection, "What is the use of playgrounds? We have vacant lots?" But the city grows, and the lots are built upon, until there is not one left. And as these playgrounds are narrowed there is more peril to windows, and the trouble with the policeman begins, and the trouble with the storekeepers. The boys feel that they have been imposed upon. The Constitution of my country says that every man is entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The boy's play is his happiness. It is in these neighbourhoods the trouble begins. When we tore down blocks of tenements and made playgrounds, the "gang" disappeared. Those playgrounds cost us a million dollars a block of three acres. One thing we have learned is that it is cheaper,—and I give this advice to you for what it is worth,—it is much cheaper to make playgrounds when the ground costs a thousand dollars than to wait till it costs a million. (Hear, hear, and applause.) We not only paid a million dollars for playgrounds when we pulled down the tenements, but we also took a million dollars' worth of property off the tax books, so that it hurt both ways. And still it was cheap.

The "gang" is the outcrop of the fact that there are no playgrounds. In Chicago, whenever they put down playgrounds in a disorderly neighbourhood, twenty-five to thirty per cent. of the juvenile delinquency of that neighbourhood ceased! The President of the Board of Police Commissioners of St. Louis wrote this very pregnant sentence: "Ninety per cent. of habitual criminals start their careers before they are ten years of age." That is the whole story in a nutshell! Speaking out of my own experience as a police reporter I would say the same. The pregnant hours of a boy's day are

between seven and nine o'clock in the evening; between supper and bedtime. If you know where your boy is then, and what he is doing, you have got your boy; if you do not, look out!

That, in brief, is the story of the playgrounds, which we have learned in our big city. Of course we needed to learn it more than any other city in the world, for we have the biggest crowding, and in an "environment that made all for unrighteousness and tended to corrupt the young," the Tenement House Commissioner said that indictment woke us up and since then we have been paying for our past neglect, paying hard and high! Now we have learned that lesson. See what has come in the track of it: the war on child labour, juvenile courts, probation officers, "Big Brothers"—the biggest and best part of the probation officer movement! and what are all these but plain justice to the community?

Other things have come, are coming. Ten or a dozen years ago I used to come across the despairing wail that "the cities are the peril and the scandal of our democracy." An author whose book I came across the other day piped a new note: "the cities are the hope of our democracy," he wrote, and the man was right. We have turned the corner as to that. (Applause.)

Look at our new way of dealing with our school houses. We are using them not only as civic centres, but as social and political centres as well. Last year I spoke in more than one big beautiful schoolhouse in the Bull Moose campaign, if you please. Ten years ago when I proposed that, I was called a hopeless crank. To-day we are actually rediscovering the lost neighbour. They used to wail that the town-meeting, that was the simplest and most direct expression of our democracy, was gone. Yes, it went, for it could no more exist in our day of city crowding than the old-fashioned mechanic in our age of steam industry. But with the schoolhouses become social centres, with neighbour meeting neighbour in their own house for the discussion of public problems, the old town meeting has come back in a way that fits into our city civilization as the old one did not, and could not. So that grief is gone.

The need of playgrounds is everywhere realized. The Vice Commissions point out that the young seek bad pleasures very largely because good ones are denied them. Of course the city fathers are slow to provide these, because they are the guardians of the public funds; but they will learn, too, that it is cheaper to pay $1,000 than $1,000,000. Only absolute

ignorance protests. Last summer I was surprised to find a man rise up and protest against this "interference with the rights of the boys," as he put it, "to sow a few wild oats." His objection was not only to the playgrounds, but to the juvenile court and to the probation officer. He said: "First thing we know, we shall have these probation officers gathering in the children because they fail to attend school!" (Laughter.) That would interfere, he thought, with the inalienable rights of poor children! That is only one of the shadows that throw the lights of the picture into greater relief.

Apropos of schools, let me give you a point. When we could not buy ground space for play, we put the playgrounds on the roof, four stories up, and invited the children in. And they came. We were busy with many things and assumed as a matter of course that they were hard at play up there, when one day there comes before the Board of Education a petition from the janitors of all the schools which had roof playgrounds, asking the Board to discontinue them because "they were not much used!" That was a very astonishing thing, and I said to the President of the Board of Education, "Let us go to-night and see what this means." We went to one of the schools and found hundreds of children swarming in front of it. They came up to us, pleading, "Won't you take me in?" "Sure! Come right in!" we said. But as we approached the door, they began to hang back. Suddenly out from the doorway rushed a man with a big stick,—"B-r-r-r-r!"

We asked him what that meant, and he said it was the janitor's orders. The President held a court martial right there, and we found that the janitor, not desiring to clean up after so many little feet, had placed his assistant at the door, with orders to hit the children on the head with a stick when they tried to get in. So he was enabled to report after a while that "the playgrounds were not much used."

As a result of that night's work, the Board ordered the stringing of electric lights on the roof, and there in the long summer evenings there comes a band to play to the children, and if you saw them, three or four thousand of them, dancing to the tune of "Money Musk" or "Way Down Yonder in the Cornfield" (applause), you would think the millennium had come. And so it has. My point is: "don't forget to enlist the janitor."

We spend a fortune for music and play, hundreds of thousands of dollars, and it is well spent. In Chicago they provided 27,000 plates of ice cream for the school play-

grounds, at five cents a plate. When I think of what that means, I feel that life is really worth living.

I talked of supervision. One word more: When you achieve, your playgrounds, friends, make up your minds that they are not going to be cheap. The cost of the ground is by no means all there is to it. Face that boldly. You have to have supervision. Not enough to spoil it. The instinct of the pedagogue insists on classifying, and organizing the play into team play and group play, and heaven knows what, and to what grave scholastic ends; to fill it full of views and aims, until the boy won't know it for his own. Let him alone. Let him kick up his heels and run in the sunshine like a young colt. If he comes home bringing back a bruised nose and a black eye, all right!—a black eye may be a prime moral agent! But let the play be guided and overseen; let there be a mature intelligence behind it, that helps the child to his needs. Don't put a policeman in charge! (Laughter.) That is bad. To put nobody in charge is worse.

Then, when you have done all this, be sure that it will repay you a thousand times in the days coming, in good citizenship. Don't you know, that at a certain age every boy in the world is on the fence, and doesn't know which way to jump? When my boy was six years old I used to see this little man slyly feeling of his muscles, and one day he had got hold of a household ammonia bottle and torn off part of the label. When I passed his room I found he had pasted on his chamber door "William Riis, VERY STRONG!" (Laughter.) That lad was coming into his rights. One day he said to his beloved mother, "Mamma, would you be very mad if I should be a burglar when I grow up?" "A burglar," she exclaimed, "Why Billy! and be arrested! why, the police would get you!" He thought soberly a minute, then said, "Well, then I will be a sailor?" And his mother pleaded with him not to leave her for the dark and cruel sea. "Well," he said, "what shall I be then? A boy can't always be nothing at all!" She put in her plea for the ministry. She would so like him to be a little minister. (Laughter.) The Archbishop will forgive me for this reference, I am sure, he was such a little boy—well! he didn't like it a bit. His face was like a thunder cloud; but at last he surrendered. "All right," he said. "If I can't be a burglar, and you won't let me be a sailor, then I will be a minister, when Mr. Evans goes away!" Mr. Evans is our rector, and every time I feel he needs chastening, I tell him that story, how my boy took to the ministry as third choice! (Laughter.)

The point I want to make is: this lad was on the fence; every boy of his age is on the fence, if he is the kind of boy that is worth his salt! (Hear, hear.) Now, our function is, to help him get off on the right side of the fence! (Applause.) And the very best way of doing that is to give him the play he needs and hankers and yearns for! (Long applause.)