Lincoln Steffens on Jersey City Mayor Mark Fagan, 1906.

That Jersey City should have produced Mark Fagan is strange enough. But that Mark Fagan, grave, kind, and very brave, should have been able, as mayor, to make Jersey City what it is: a beginning of better things all over this land of ours, that is stranger still. And no man there pretends to understand it. Yet it is a simple story.

Mark—as they call him—the men, the women, and the children—was born September 29, 1869, in the fifth ward where he lives now. His parents were poor Irish, very poor. They moved over to New York when Mark was a child, and the father died. Mark sold newspapers. The newsboy dreamed dreams and fought fights. He claimed a corner, Twelfth Street and Avenue A, developed a good trade, and when competition came, appealed to the man in the store to say if he wasn't there first. The man in the store wouldn't decide; he told the boys they must fight it out among themselves, so they laid down their papers and they fought it out. Mark held his corner. "Life is one long fight for right," he says now, this very gentle man, who fights and—holds his corner. . . .

The next period made the boy a man. His uncle, an undertaker in Jersey City, offered Mark a job, and he moved with his mother and sister back there to take it. Now this business often has a demoralizing effect upon men. They see dreadful sights, and they harden or take to drink. Mark saw dreadful sights; you can see that he sees them now when he recalls those days, but they softened, they sweetened Mark Fagan. . . .

"I came," he says, in his quiet, level tone, "I came to have pity for the poor and—admiration. . . ."

One Sunday morning as he was leaving church several young fellows stopped him to propose that he run for the board of freeholders. He was "not adapted," he said, why didn't one of them run? They explained that "Bob" Davis, the Democratic boss, wouldn't let them run; wouldn't let anybody run in their party who wouldn't knuckle under to him. But Mark was a Republican. The ward, like the city and the county, was heavily Democratic, and since there was so little chance of winning, the Republican ring would let anybody have the nomination. If Mark would let them, they would arrange it, fight with him, and he might be elected. . . .

Thus Mark Fagan was started in politics. When he took the Republican nomination and his popularity showed, the fellows that got him into the fight got out. They had to; they were called off by the bosses who ran the two parties as one. That made Mark fight harder. Left high and dry by "the organization," he went to the people of his district. . . .

[H]e started at 5:45 one morning at one corner of his ward, and he went systematically through it, knocking at every door, seeing every man, woman, and child; he climbed 3,700 flights of stairs in seventeen nights; and he promised to "serve the people of his ward faithfully and honestly." Mark was elected, and dirty Jersey City was amazed. . . .

Now comes the first remarkable thing about this remarkable man. . . . When Mark Fagan had taken his oath, the other, older freeholders came to him, and they invited him into "the combine." There was no mystery about it. There was a combine and there was graft. . . . Something—[Mark] doesn't know exactly what it was—something which he thinks is religious, made him decline to go in. . . .[S]o he did not sell out the people of his ward who trusted him to serve them. And the worst of it was, he couldn't serve them. If he wouldn't "stand in," the combine wouldn't let him have anything for his ward, not even the needed rightful improvements. . . .

A Republican who can carry a Democratic city is the "logical" candidate of his party for mayor, and, in 1901, Mark Fagan was nominated. Some of the little bosses warned the big bosses that they couldn't handle him, but the big bosses pooh-poohed the fears of the little bosses. In the first place he wouldn't be elected. The railroads, the public service companies, and some of the greatest corporations in the world had offices and properties in Jersey City, and their agents there had used money so extensively that they ruled absolutely a people supposed to be utterly corrupted. Bribery at the polls, election frauds, ballot-box stuffing—all sorts of gross political crimes had made this home of "common people" and corporations notorious. "Bob" Davis was the Democratic boss, politically speaking; but Mr. E. F. C. Young, banker, leading citizen, public utility magnate, was the business boss, who, backing Davis, was the real power. . . .

An astonished city elected Mark. His quiet campaign from house to house, his earnest, simple promise to "serve you honestly and faithfully," had beaten bribery. . . .

The mayor . . . proceeded with a quiet study he was making all by himself of the city. He went about, visiting the departments, meeting officials, and asking questions. People wrote complaints to him. . . .There were lots of things for a mayor to do: Parents couldn't get their children into school; no room. Families couldn't get water above the second floor; no force. Cellars were flooded; pipes leaked. Jersey City, corrupt, neglected, robbed, needed everything. And Mayor

Fagan took its needs seriously. He must have more schools, more and better sewers, more water; and he did want to add a public bath and parks and music in the parks. . . .

Money, lots of money, was needed, and how was money to be raised for such a purpose? . . .

The policy the mayor and his corporation counsel [George L. Record] outlined was to equalize taxation. They couldn't raise the rates; the city was overburdened with taxes already, but the corporations probably dodged their share. . . .

The mayor and his expert reported that the poor paid taxes on about 70 per cent of the value of their property; privileged persons on about 50 per cent; the corporations on all the way from 30 per cent to nothing. Mark Fagan had a new purpose in life. . . . [H]e raised rates on the tax dodgers. . . .

During this, his first administration, the mayor had been able, by simply catching tax dodgers and "equalizing" the taxes of privileged individuals and corrupt corporations, to buy a site for a new high school; begin one school, finish another; put up eleven temporary schools, thus providing seats for all the children in the city; and make needed repairs in all the schools. He had built a free bath; established free dispensaries; extended one park, bought another, improved two more, and given free concerts in them all. He improved the fire, street-cleaning, and health departments, and he repaired and extended the sewerage system. . . .

I have told simply the simple story of this simple man. The mystery remains. Why did Mark Fagan do it? . . .

I'd rather write than speak it anywhere in this hard, selfish world of ours, but I do believe I understand Mark Fagan, how he makes men believe in him, why he wants to: The man is a Christian, a literal Christian; no mere member of a church, but a follower of Christ; no patron of organized charities, but a giver of kindness, sympathy, love. . . . This gentle man has found a way to solve his problems, and ours. . . . There may be other ways, but, verily, if we loved our neighbour as ourselves we would not then betray and rob and bribe him. . . . Certainly Mark Fagan has proved that the Christianity of Christ—not as the scholars "interpret" it, but as the Nazarene taught it, and as you and I and the mayor of Jersey City can understand it—Christianity, pure and simple, is a force among men and—a happiness. Anyhow, that is all there is to the mystery of Mark Fagan; that is what he means.

Source: Lincoln Steffens, "Mark Fagan, Mayor," *Upbuilders* (New York, 1909), 3-18, 24-25, 36, 45-46.