THE PEOPLE OF THE ABYSS

The chief priests and rulers cry:-

"O Lord and Master, not ours the guilt,
We build but as our fathers built;
Behold thine images how they stand
Sovereign and sole through all our land.

"Our task is hard--with sword and flame,
To hold thine earth forever the same,
And with sharp crooks of steel to keep,
Still as thou leftest them, thy sheep."

Then Christ sought out an artisan,
A low-browed, stunted, haggard man,
And a motherless girl whose fingers thin
Crushed from her faintly want and sin.

These set he in the midst of them,
And as they drew back their garment hem
For fear of defilement, "Lo, here," said he,
"The images ye have made of me."

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

PREFACE

The experiences related in this volume fell to me in the summer of 1902.
I went down into the under-world of London with an attitude of mind which
I may best liken to that of the explorer. I was open to be convinced by
the evidence of my eyes, rather than by the teachings of those who had
not seen, or by the words of those who had seen and gone before. Further,
I took with me certain simple criteria with which to measure the life of

the under-world. That which made for more life, for physical and spiritual health, was good; that which made for less life, which hurt, and dwarfed, and distorted life, was bad.

It will be readily apparent to the reader that I saw much that was bad. Yet it must not be forgotten that the time of which I write was considered "good times" in England. The starvation and lack of shelter I encountered constituted a chronic condition of misery which is never wiped out, even in the periods of greatest prosperity.

Following the summer in question came a hard winter. Great numbers of the unemployed formed into processions, as many as a dozen at a time, and daily marched through the streets of London crying for bread. Mr. Justin McCarthy, writing in the month of January 1903, to the New York _Independent_, briefly epitomises the situation as follows:-

> "The workhouses have no space left in which to pack the starving crowds who are craving every day and night at their doors for food and shelter. All the charitable institutions have exhausted their means in trying to raise supplies of food for the famishing residents of the garrets and cellars of London lanes and alleys. The quarters of the Salvation Army in various parts of London are nightly besieged by hosts of the unemployed and the hungry for whom neither shelter nor the means of sustenance can be provided."

It has been urged that the criticism I have passed on things as they are

in England is too pessimistic. I must say, in extenuation, that of
optimists I am the most optimistic. But I measure manhood less by
political aggregations than by individuals. Society grows, while
political machines rack to pieces and become "scrap." For the English,
so far as manhood and womanhood and health and happiness go, I see a
broad and smiling future. But for a great deal of the political
machinery, which at present mismanages for them, I see nothing else than
the scrap heap.

JACK LONDON.
PIEDMONT, CALIFORNIA.

CHAPTER I--THE DESCENT

"But you can't do it, you know," friends said, to whom I applied for
assistance in the matter of sinking myself down into the East End of
London. "You had better see the police for a guide," they added, on
second thought, painfully endeavouring to adjust themselves to the
psychological processes of a madman who had come to them with better
credentials than brains.

"But I don't want to see the police," I protested. "What I wish to do is
to go down into the East End and see things for myself. I wish to know
how those people are living there, and why they are living there, and
what they are living for. In short, I am going to live there myself."

"You don't want to _live_ down there!" everybody said, with
disapprobation writ large upon their faces. "Why, it is said there are
places where a man's life isn't worth tu'pence."

"The very places I wish to see," I broke in.

"But you can't, you know," was the unfailing rejoinder.

"Which is not what I came to see you about," I answered brusquely,
somewhat nettled by their incomprehension. "I am a stranger here, and I
want you to tell me what you know of the East End, in order that I may
have something to start on."

"But we know nothing of the East End. It is over there, somewhere." And
they waved their hands vaguely in the direction where the sun on rare
occasions may be seen to rise.

"Then I shall go to Cook's," I announced.

"Oh yes," they said, with relief. "Cook's will be sure to know."

But O Cook, O Thomas Cook & Son, path-finders and trail-clearers, living
sign-posts to all the world, and bestowers of first aid to bewildered
travellers--unhesitatingly and instantly, with ease and celerity, could
you send me to Darkest Africa or Innermost Thibet, but to the East End of
London, barely a stone's throw distant from Ludgate Circus, you know not
the way!

"You can't do it, you know," said the human emporium of routes and fares
at Cook's Cheapside branch. "It is so--hem--so

unusual."

"Consult the police," he concluded authoritatively, when I had persisted.
"We are not accustomed to taking travellers to the East End; we receive
no call to take them there, and we know nothing whatsoever about the
place at all."

"Never mind that," I interposed, to save myself from being swept out of
the office by his flood of negations. "Here's something you can do for
me. I wish you to understand in advance what I intend doing, so that in
case of trouble you may be able to identify me."

"Ah, I see! should you be murdered, we would be in position to identify
the corpse."

He said it so cheerfully and cold-bloodedly that on the instant I saw my
stark and mutilated cadaver stretched upon a slab where cool waters
trickle ceaselessly, and him I saw bending over and sadly and patiently
identifying it as the body of the insane American who _would_ see the
East End.

"No, no," I answered; "merely to identify me in case I get into a scrape
with the 'bobbies.'" This last I said with a thrill; truly, I was
gripping hold of the vernacular.

"That," he said, "is a matter for the consideration of the Chief Office."

"It is so unprecedented, you know," he added apologetically.

The man at the Chief Office hemmed and hawed. "We make

it a rule," he
explained, "to give no information concerning our clients."

"But in this case," I urged, "it is the client who requests you to give
the information concerning himself."

Again he hemmed and hawed.

"Of course," I hastily anticipated, "I know it is unprecedented, but--"

"As I was about to remark," he went on steadily, "it is unprecedented,
and I don't think we can do anything for you."

However, I departed with the address of a detective who lived in the East
End, and took my way to the American consul-general. And here, at last,
I found a man with whom I could "do business." There was no hemming and
hawing, no lifted brows, open incredulity, or blank amazement. In one
minute I explained myself and my project, which he accepted as a matter
of course. In the second minute he asked my age, height, and weight, and
looked me over. And in the third minute, as we shook hands at parting,
he said: "All right, Jack. I'll remember you and keep track."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Having burnt my ships behind me, I was now
free to plunge into that human wilderness of which nobody seemed to know
anything. But at once I encountered a new difficulty in the shape of my
cabby, a grey-whiskered and eminently decorous personage who had
imperturbably driven me for several hours about the "City."

"Drive me down to the East End," I ordered, taking my seat.

"Where, sir?" he demanded with frank surprise.

"To the East End, anywhere. Go on."

The hansom pursued an aimless way for several minutes, then came to a puzzled stop. The aperture above my head was uncovered, and the cabman peered down perplexedly at me.

"I say," he said, "wot plyce yer wanter go?"

"East End," I repeated. "Nowhere in particular. Just drive me around anywhere."

"But wot's the haddress, sir?"

"See here!" I thundered. "Drive me down to the East End, and at once!"

It was evident that he did not understand, but he withdrew his head, and grumblingly started his horse.

Nowhere in the streets of London may one escape the sight of abject poverty, while five minutes' walk from almost any point will bring one to a slum; but the region my hansom was now penetrating was one unending slum. The streets were filled with a new and different race of people, short of stature, and of wretched or beer-sodden appearance. We rolled along through miles of bricks and squalor, and from each cross street and alley flashed long vistas of bricks and misery. Here and there lurched a drunken man or woman, and the air was obscene with sounds of jangling and squabbling. At a market, tottery old men and women were

searching in the
garbage thrown in the mud for rotten potatoes, beans, and vegetables,
while little children clustered like flies around a festering mass of
fruit, thrusting their arms to the shoulders into the liquid corruption,
and drawing forth morsels but partially decayed, which they devoured on
the spot.

Not a hansom did I meet with in all my drive, while mine was like an
apparition from another and better world, the way the children ran after
it and alongside. And as far as I could see were the solid walls of
brick, the slimy pavements, and the screaming streets; and for the first
time in my life the fear of the crowd smote me. It was like the fear of
the sea; and the miserable multitudes, street upon street, seemed so many
waves of a vast and malodorous sea, lapping about me and threatening to
well up and over me.

"Stepney, sir; Stepney Station," the cabby called down.

I looked about. It was really a railroad station, and he had driven
desperately to it as the one familiar spot he had ever heard of in all
that wilderness.

"Well," I said.

He spluttered unintelligibly, shook his head, and looked very miserable.
"I'm a stryngér 'ere," he managed to articulate. "An' if yer don't want
Stepney Station, I'm blessed if I know wotcher do want."

"I'll tell you what I want," I said. "You drive along and keep your eye

out for a shop where old clothes are sold. Now, when you see such a
shop, drive right on till you turn the corner, then stop and let me out."

I could see that he was growing dubious of his fare, but not long
afterwards he pulled up to the curb and informed me that an old-clothes
shop was to be found a bit of the way back.

"Won'tcher py me?" he pleaded. "There's seven an' six owin' me."

"Yes," I laughed, "and it would be the last I'd see of you."

"Lord lumme, but it'll be the last I see of you if yer don't py me," he
retorted.

But a crowd of ragged onlookers had already gathered around the cab, and
I laughed again and walked back to the old-clothes shop.

Here the chief difficulty was in making the shopman understand that I
really and truly wanted old clothes. But after fruitless attempts to
press upon me new and impossible coats and trousers, he began to bring to
light heaps of old ones, looking mysterious the while and hinting darkly.
This he did with the palpable intention of letting me know that he had
"piped my lay," in order to bulldose me, through fear of exposure, into
paying heavily for my purchases. A man in trouble, or a high-class
criminal from across the water, was what he took my measure for--in
either case, a person anxious to avoid the police.

But I disputed with him over the outrageous difference between prices and

values, till I quite disabused him of the notion, and he settled down to
drive a hard bargain with a hard customer. In the end I selected a pair
of stout though well-worn trousers, a frayed jacket with one remaining
button, a pair of brogans which had plainly seen service where coal was
shovelled, a thin leather belt, and a very dirty cloth cap. My
underclothing and socks, however, were new and warm, but of the sort that
any American waif, down in his luck, could acquire in the ordinary course
of events.

"I must sy yer a sharp 'un," he said, with counterfeit admiration, as I
handed over the ten shillings finally agreed upon for the outfit.
"Blimey, if you ain't ben up an' down Petticut Lane afore now. Yer
trouseys is wuth five bob to hany man, an' a docker 'ud give two an' six
for the shoes, to sy nothin' of the coat an' cap an' new stoker's singlet
an' hother things."

"How much will you give me for them?" I demanded suddenly. "I paid you
ten bob for the lot, and I'll sell them back to you, right now, for
eight! Come, it's a go!"

But he grinned and shook his head, and though I had made a good bargain,
I was unpleasantly aware that he had made a better one.

I found the cabby and a policeman with their heads together, but the
latter, after looking me over sharply, and particularly scrutinizing the
bundle under my arm, turned away and left the cabby to wax mutinous by
himself. And not a step would he budge till I paid him

the seven
shillings and sixpence owing him. Whereupon he was willing to drive me
to the ends of the earth, apologising profusely for his insistence, and
explaining that one ran across queer customers in London Town.

But he drove me only to Highbury Vale, in North London, where my luggage
was waiting for me. Here, next day, I took off my shoes (not without
regret for their lightness and comfort), and my soft, grey travelling
suit, and, in fact, all my clothing; and proceeded to array myself in the
clothes of the other and unimaginable men, who must have been indeed
unfortunate to have had to part with such rags for the pitiable sums
obtainable from a dealer.

Inside my stoker's singlet, in the armpit, I sewed a gold sovereign (an
emergency sum certainly of modest proportions); and inside my stoker's
singlet I put myself. And then I sat down and moralised upon the fair
years and fat, which had made my skin soft and brought the nerves close
to the surface; for the singlet was rough and raspy as a hair shirt, and
I am confident that the most rigorous of ascetics suffer no more than I
did in the ensuing twenty-four hours.

The remainder of my costume was fairly easy to put on, though the
brogans, or brogues, were quite a problem. As stiff and hard as if made
of wood, it was only after a prolonged pounding of the uppers with my
fists that I was able to get my feet into them at all. Then, with a few
shillings, a knife, a handkerchief, and some brown

papers and flake
tobacco stowed away in my pockets, I thumped down the stairs and said
good-bye to my foreboding friends. As I paused out of the door, the
"help," a comely middle-aged woman, could not conquer a grin that twisted
her lips and separated them till the throat, out of involuntary sympathy,
made the uncouth animal noises we are wont to designate as "laughter."

No sooner was I out on the streets than I was impressed by the difference
in status effected by my clothes. All servility vanished from the
demeanour of the common people with whom I came in contact. Presto! in
the twinkling of an eye, so to say, I had become one of them. My frayed
and out-at-elbows jacket was the badge and advertisement of my class,
which was their class. It made me of like kind, and in place of the
fawning and too respectful attention I had hitherto received, I now
shared with them a comradeship. The man in corduroy and dirty
neckerchief no longer addressed me as "sir" or "governor." It was "mate"
now--and a fine and hearty word, with a tingle to it, and a warmth and
gladness, which the other term does not possess. Governor! It smacks of
mastery, and power, and high authority--the tribute of the man who is
under to the man on top, delivered in the hope that he will let up a bit
and ease his weight, which is another way of saying that it is an appeal
for alms.

This brings me to a delight I experienced in my rags and tatters which is
denied the average American abroad. The European

traveller from the
States, who is not a Croesus, speedily finds himself reduced to a chronic
state of self-conscious sordidness by the hordes of cringing robbers who
clutter his steps from dawn till dark, and deplete his pocket-book in a
way that puts compound interest to the blush.

In my rags and tatters I escaped the pestilence of tipping, and
encountered men on a basis of equality. Nay, before the day was out I
turned the tables, and said, most gratefully, "Thank you, sir," to a
gentleman whose horse I held, and who dropped a penny into my eager palm.

Other changes I discovered were wrought in my condition by my new garb.
In crossing crowded thoroughfares I found I had to be, if anything, more
lively in avoiding vehicles, and it was strikingly impressed upon me that
my life had cheapened in direct ratio with my clothes. When before I
inquired the way of a policeman, I was usually asked, "Bus or 'ansom,
sir?" But now the query became, "Walk or ride?" Also, at the railway
stations, a third-class ticket was now shoved out to me as a matter of
course.

But there was compensation for it all. For the first time I met the
English lower classes face to face, and knew them for what they were.
When loungers and workmen, at street corners and in public-houses, talked
with me, they talked as one man to another, and they talked as natural
men should talk, without the least idea of getting anything out of me for
what they talked or the way they talked.

And when at last I made into the East End, I was gratified to find that
the fear of the crowd no longer haunted me. I had become a part of it.
The vast and malodorous sea had welled up and over me, or I had slipped
gently into it, and there was nothing fearsome about it--with the one
exception of the stoker's singlet.

CHAPTER II--JOHNNY UPRIGHT

I shall not give you the address of Johnny Upright. Let it suffice that
he lives in the most respectable street in the East End--a street that
would be considered very mean in America, but a veritable oasis in the
desert of East London. It is surrounded on every side by close-packed
squalor and streets jammed by a young and vile and dirty generation; but
its own pavements are comparatively bare of the children who have no
other place to play, while it has an air of desertion, so few are the
people that come and go.

Each house in this street, as in all the streets, is shoulder to shoulder
with its neighbours. To each house there is but one entrance, the front
door; and each house is about eighteen feet wide, with a bit of a brick-
walled yard behind, where, when it is not raining, one may look at a
slate-coloured sky. But it must be understood that this is East End
opulence we are now considering. Some of the people in this street are

even so well-to-do as to keep a "slavey." Johnny Upright keeps one, as I
well know, she being my first acquaintance in this particular portion of
the world.

To Johnny Upright's house I came, and to the door came the "slavey." Now,
mark you, her position in life was pitiable and contemptible, but it was
with pity and contempt that she looked at me. She evinced a plain desire
that our conversation should be short. It was Sunday, and Johnny Upright
was not at home, and that was all there was to it. But I lingered,
discussing whether or not it was all there was to it, till Mrs. Johnny
Upright was attracted to the door, where she scolded the girl for not
having closed it before turning her attention to me.

No, Mr. Johnny Upright was not at home, and further, he saw nobody on
Sunday. It is too bad, said I. Was I looking for work? No, quite the
contrary; in fact, I had come to see Johnny Upright on business which
might be profitable to him.

A change came over the face of things at once. The gentleman in question
was at church, but would be home in an hour or thereabouts, when no doubt
he could be seen.

Would I kindly step in?--no, the lady did not ask me, though I fished for
an invitation by stating that I would go down to the corner and wait in a
public-house. And down to the corner I went, but, it being church time,
the "pub" was closed. A miserable drizzle was falling, and, in lieu of
better, I took a seat on a neighbourly doorstep and

waited.

And here to the doorstep came the "slavey," very frowzy and very perplexed, to tell me that the missus would let me come back and wait in the kitchen.

"So many people come 'ere lookin' for work," Mrs. Johnny Upright apologetically explained. "So I 'ope you won't feel bad the way I spoke."

"Not at all, not at all," I replied in my grandest manner, for the nonce investing my rags with dignity. "I quite understand, I assure you. I suppose people looking for work almost worry you to death?"

"That they do," she answered, with an eloquent and expressive glance; and thereupon ushered me into, not the kitchen, but the dining room--a favour, I took it, in recompense for my grand manner.

This dining-room, on the same floor as the kitchen, was about four feet below the level of the ground, and so dark (it was midday) that I had to wait a space for my eyes to adjust themselves to the gloom. Dirty light filtered in through a window, the top of which was on a level with a sidewalk, and in this light I found that I was able to read newspaper print.

And here, while waiting the coming of Johnny Upright, let me explain my errand. While living, eating, and sleeping with the people of the East End, it was my intention to have a port of refuge, not too far distant,

into which could run now and again to assure myself that good clothes and
cleanliness still existed. Also in such port I could receive my mail,
work up my notes, and sally forth occasionally in changed garb to
civilisation.

But this involved a dilemma. A lodging where my property would be safe
implied a landlady apt to be suspicious of a gentleman leading a double
life; while a landlady who would not bother her head over the double life
of her lodgers would imply lodgings where property was unsafe. To avoid
the dilemma was what had brought me to Johnny Upright. A detective of
thirty-odd years' continuous service in the East End, known far and wide
by a name given him by a convicted felon in the dock, he was just the man
to find me an honest landlady, and make her rest easy concerning the
strange comings and goings of which I might be guilty.

His two daughters beat him home from church--and pretty girls they were
in their Sunday dresses; withal it was the certain weak and delicate
prettiness which characterises the Cockney lasses, a prettiness which is
no more than a promise with no grip on time, and doomed to fade quickly
away like the colour from a sunset sky.

They looked me over with frank curiosity, as though I were some sort of a
strange animal, and then ignored me utterly for the rest of my wait. Then
Johnny Upright himself arrived, and I was summoned upstairs to confer
with him.

"Speak loud," he interrupted my opening words. "I've

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