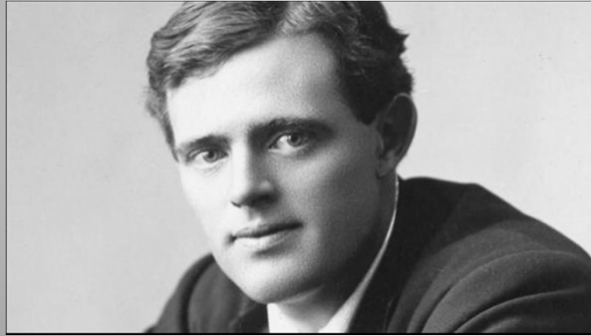


'I Put on My Knockabout Clothes and Went out for a Walk': Jack London and Turn-of-the-Century Slum Tourism

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Jack London (1876-1916)

'The Writing Game'

Jack London: Short Bibliography

The Son of the Wolf (1900)

The Call of the Wild (1903)

The Sea-Wolf (1904)

White Fang (1906)

Martin Eden (1909)

The Kempton-Wace Letters (1903)

The People of the Abyss (1903)



The People of the Abyss (1903)



Whitechapel (1902)



Jack London in the East End (1902)

London, England
Aug. 22, 1902

Dear George and Carrie:—

How I often think of you, over there on the other side of the world! I have heard of God's country, but this country is the country God has forgotten that he forgot.

I've read of misery, and seen a bit; but this beats anything I could even have imagined. Actually, I have seen things and looked the second time in order to convince myself that it was really so. This I know, the stuff I'm turning out will have to be expurgated or it will never see magazine publication. I won't write to you about the East End and I am in the thick of it. You will read some of my feeble efforts to describe it some day.

I have my book over one-quarter done and am bowling along in a rush to finish it and get out of here. I think I should die if I had to live two years in the East End of London. Love and regards to everybody.

Jack London

Letters from Jack London, ed. King Hendricks and Irvine Shepard (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1966), 137.

The experiences related in this volume fell to me in the summer of 1902. I went down into the underworld 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 underworld. 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.

Jack London, "Preface," *The People of the Abyss* (London: Hesperus, 2009), 5.



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 lurked 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.

Jack London, *The People of the Abyss*, 10.



I have spoken with women in Whitechapel who receive right along less than twenty-five cents for a twelve-hour day in the coat-making sweat shops; and with women trousers finishers who receive an average princely and weekly wage of seventy-five cents to one dollar.

[...]

Another case Mr Holmes visited was that of a young girl, twelve years of age, charged in the police court with stealing food. He found her the deputy mother of a boy of nine, a crippled boy of seven, and a younger child. Her mother was a widow and a blouse-maker. She paid \$1.25 a week rent. Here are the last items in her housekeeping account: Tea, one cent; sugar, one cent; bread, 0.5 cent; margarine, two cents; oil, three cents; and firewood, one cent. Good housewives of the soft and tender folk, imagine yourselves marketing and keeping house on such a scale, setting a table for five, and keeping an eye on your deputy mother of twelve to see that she did not steal food for her little brothers and sisters, the while you stitched, stitched, stitched at a nightmare line of blouses, which stretched away into the gloom and down to the pauper's coffin a-yawn for you.

Jack London, *The People of the Abyss*, 148, 150.

The application of the golden rule determines that East London is an unfit place in which to live. Where you would not have your own babe live, and develop, and gather to itself knowledge of life and the things of life, is not a fit place for the babes of other men to live, and develop, and gather to themselves knowledge of life and the things of life. It is a simple thing, this golden rule, and all that is required. Political economy and the survival of the fittest can go hang if they say otherwise. What is not good enough for you is not good enough for other men, and there's no more to be said.

Jack London, *The People of the Abyss*, 152-53.



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 when coal was shoveled, a thin leather belt, and a very dirty cloth cap.

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.

Jack London, *The People of the Abyss*, 13.



A shop where old clothes are sold



A view of Petticoat Lane

No sooner was I out on the street than I was impressed by the difference in status effected by my clothes. All servility vanished from the demeanor 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-elbow 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.

In my rags and tatters I escaped the pestilence of tipping, and encountered men on a basis of equality.

Other changes I discovered were wrought with 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.

Jack London, *The People of the Abyss*, 14.



Jack London and Bert, a cobbler, ready to go hopping (1902).



True, the sanitation of the places I visited was wretched. From the imperfect sewage and drainage, defective traps, poor ventilation, dampness, and general foulness, I might expect my wife and babies speedily to be attacked by diphtheria, croup, pneumonia, erysipelas, blood poisoning, bronchitis, pneumonia, consumption, and various kindred disorders. Certainly, the death rate would be exceedingly high. But observe again the beauty of the adjustment. The most rational act for a poor man in East London with a large family is to get rid of it; the conditions in East London are such that they will get rid of the large family for him.

Jack London, *The People of the Abyss*, 22-23.

‘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, pathfinders and trail-clearers, living signposts 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 Tibet, but to the East End of London, barely a stone’s throw distant from Ludgate Circus, you know not the way!

Jack London, *The People of the Abyss*, 7.



The food this managing class eats, the wine it drinks, the shows it makes, and the fine clothes it wears, are challenged by eight million mouths which have never had enough to fill them, and by twice eight million bodies which have never been sufficiently clothed.

[...]

It is inevitable that this management, which has grossly and criminally mismanaged, shall be swept away. Not only has it been wasteful and inefficient, but it has misappropriated the funds. Every worn-out, pasty-faced pauper, every blind man, every prison babe, every man, woman, and child whose belly is gnawing with hunger pangs, is hungry because the funds have been misappropriated by the management.

[...]

There can be no mistake. Civilization has increased man's producing power an hundred-fold, and through mismanagement the men of civilization live worse than the beasts, and have less to eat and wear and protect them from the elements than the savage Innuite in a frigid climate who lives today as he lived in the Stone Age ten thousand years ago.

Jack London, *The People of the Abyss*, 224-25.