

JACK LONDON



WITH JACK LONDON PHOTOGRAPHS
AND DRAWINGS BY GUSTAVE DORÉ

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"Of all my books on the long shelf, I love most People of the Abyss. No other book of mine took so much of my young heart and tears as that study of the poor."

—JACK LONDON

In July, 1902, Jack London boarded a train for the East, the first leg of a journey to attend the coronation of King Edward VII in England, and after that report for the American Press Association on the effects of peace in South Africa following the ending of the Boer War. He was twenty-five, yet in a quarter century of youth placed behind him experiences as an oyster pirate, a fish patrol officer, a sealer in Japanese waters, a tramping member of Kelley's armies, a Yukon adventurer, a journalist, and a budding fiction writer. *Call of the Wild*, his second adult novel, had just come off the presses, and he had little idea of the fame it was to secure for him in history.

His real motive for the trip was escape from a troubled private life. His three-year marriage lay irreparably shattered in spite of the appearance of one young child and another full in wife Bess Maddern's belly. In the past year he had sought comfort in other women, one of whom interested him for more than a few hours' fun and pleasure. Anna Strunsky, a vivacious socialist and Stanford intellectual, excited Jack's mind, and eventually his heart, with

her extensive knowledge and quick repartee. Together they composed a philosophic treatise on love, *The Kempton-Wace Letters*, the only work Jack shared with a stated collaborator.

But Anna had sense not to reciprocate this charming, brooding man's claims of love, and knew her Jewishness to present an obstacle to any permanent affection. With Anna's resistances and three thousand dollars in debts, Jack grabbed the chance to travel at another's expense.

Upon arrival in New York, London learned that his commission to South Africa had been cancelled. To make profit of his situation, he visited his editor at MacMillan's, George Brett, and suggested the possibility of a book on the conditions in the East End of London. Brett cast his approval, and on July 30 London climbed the gangplank of the *R.M.S. Majestic*.

For those who know him only through his adventure stories, London's choice of topic, a venture into the very unnatural world of the slums may seem unconventional. The truth is otherwise. Early in his self-education, London acquired the recently-translated writings of Karl Marx, studied them in depth, and found others with whom to discuss Marx's theories. London's devotion to socialist principles led to his nomination as Mayor of Oakland in 1901 for the Social Democratic ticket. During his adolescence in the East Bay, London watched close-up the day-to-day struggles of the working class; listened in bars to men's stories; overheard on trolleys the factory women's complaints. Later he drew upon these observations to produce some of the richest working-class characters in American fiction, notably in his novels *Martin Eden* and *Valley of the Moon*.

Nor was London's topic an unusual one for the times. The emphasis in sociology, a field he knew well, was then focused upon studies of urban neighborhoods and ways to

alleviate their squalor. Furthermore, in 1890, journalist Jacob Riis published an influential book of photographs and personal commentary on the Lower East Side of New York, *How the Other Half Lives*. Bess taught London photography early in their marriage, and likely Riis' work inspired London to attempt a similar study.

Though London often used a previous book or news clipping to start him on a project, imitation was never the result. Riis was the more masterful photographer, and while *People of the Abyss* featured 77 pictures in its original edition, they fail to serve the brilliance of the text well. Many shots are poorly framed, badly focused, or too distant from their subject to be effective. Some attempts at poignancy or pathos resulted instead in maudlin, saccharine images. Other pictures, with their signs of well-swept streets and carefully arranged interiors, actually contradict the text with its visions of filth, rats, and broken beds. Still, a few shots are telling, and their inclusion here shows London at his best.

As always with London, it is the words that speak louder than a hundred photographs; it is the style that sculpts this, his masterpiece of nonfiction writing. That style, with its clipped, brisk rhythms, was radical for the time, when "purple prose" flaunted excesses of unnecessary adverbs, adjectives, and subordinate clauses. It is a style often erroneously credited to Hemingway, when in fact it took birth with journalists of the yellow presses—London, a leader among them.

London's working manner—to participate in the lives of the people studied—was another hallmark in newspaper reporting then. (Here again our age has been myopic, and deemed that this method, dubbed now the "New Journalism," was invented in the 1960s by Tom Wolfe, Hunter Thompson, and others.) In this approach, the writer's own feelings and impressions are included, dialogues with others

are reported in full, minute details of scene and personality evoke a sense of participation in the reader's mind, and events are shaped with dramatic, even fictional devices. Though the sociologists' field method is appropriated, their objective reporting is eschewed, except when bare facts offer an ironic contrast, a poignant overlay to the individual lives that have been described. It is a powerful mixing of forms that requires a mind highly trained in both analytic and narrative skills. *People of the Abyss* is a landmark of the form.

One of the secrets in London's accomplishment is his ability to convince readers of his involvement. In his opening pages, London tells us that he went into the slums, bought some old clothes, and went about as a typical resident of the area. He pretended that he was a down-and-out American merchant sailor between calls, so as to explain his physique and speech. He would have us think that he went about like this with respites at a respectable rooming house where he had made arrangements for "decent" meals, baths, and sleep. London then takes us on various treks, to doss houses, workhouses, visits with families, and general wanderings about the streets. Woven among these vividly drawn personal studies are data apparently taken from newspapers and studies of the area.

The overall impact of the writing is a dark, dank inferno on earth. London's clever logic surprises the reader, as in the conclusion where he suggests that the poor Aleut Indians are better off than most civilized persons. The chapter entitled "Property Versus Person" summarizes without comment a series of court cases, allowing the reader to draw the obvious conclusion that crimes against property, such as the stealing of food, are punished more severely than crimes against fellow members of the slum community. On the surface, the book succeeds as a powerful statement of personal outrage.

Yet it is obvious that London's actions did not exactly match those he tells the reader. Several years later, in a letter to Bailey Millard, he said the following, with the admonition that it "was not to be passed on": "I have a tremendous confidence, based upon all kinds of work I have already done, that I can deliver the goods. Anybody doubting this has but to read *The People of the Abyss* to find the graphic, reportorial way I have of handling things. . . . I gathered every bit of the material, read hundreds of books and thousands of pamphlets, newspapers, and Parliamentary Reports, composed *The People of the Abyss*, and typed it all out, took two-thirds of the photographs with my own camera, took a vacation of one-week off in the country—and did it all in two months. That's going some now, isn't it?"

It certainly is some going, and no wonder London did not want the details made public. To do so would be to destroy the fantasy he had given readers; and it is this fantasy, that of going about the slums alone and unnoticed, that provides the essential appeal of the book. London is no social worker, no welfare advocate, no sociologist out to offer his haughty expertise in a sermon to us. He is one of us, and so we receive his outrage as though it were that of a close friend.

Very likely London spent as much of his time in the British Museum as walking the streets. He quotes from the major research documents of the time, such as Henry Mayhew's four-volume, *London Labour and the Poor* (1861-62), and Charles Booth's nine-volume, *Life and Labour in London* (1892-97). The photographs further belie London's activities. Cameras then were large, not suited to unobtrusive snapshots. And London's very compositions give hint that he was uncertain, timid, distant. There is no doubt that he saw what he reported, but his direct contact was not so continual as the book suggests.

London himself was at a time of struggle in his self-definition. Though indebted, his growing public recognition as a socialist and a writer pulled him out of his working-class roots into middle-class respectability and comfort. The powerful tensions in the book, the shifts from first person to third, mirror his own placement toward the poor. He had lived among them, but his talent was drawing him away. As he wrote in a letter to Anna from the ship to Liverpool, "A week from today I shall be in London. I shall then have two days in which to make my arrangements and sink down out of sight in order to view the Coronation from the standpoint of the London Beasts. That's all they are—beasts—if they are anything like the slum people of New York—beasts shot through with stray flashes of divinity." It is odd for one devoted to socialism to borrow a bourgeois epithet, "beast," to describe the impoverished. This telling slip of the tongue suggests his ambivalence and hesitation over returning to the people he knew so well.

In the end, of course, his humanity won out. Soon he wrote her: "The whole thing, all the conditions of life, the immensity of it, everything is overwhelming. I never conceived such a mass of misery in the world before." A week later: "Am rushing, for I am made sick by this human hell-hole called London Town. I find it almost impossible to believe that some of the horrible things I have seen are really so."

Instead of grabbing the sensational, reaching for the grotesque example, London restrained his great emotion to use understatements to expose the divinity of the people. Thus we move from episode to episode, wondering the fates of the men on Frying Pan Alley, the starving couple on the bench Coronation Day, Bert the hop picker, and the Sea Wife. The intermittent drone of facts relating to disease, court dispositions, suicide rates, and the price of bread impresses starkly upon us the bleak ends for the inhabitants.

Though *People of the Abyss* was London's personal favorite, it reached few readers. Good first edition copies are rare finds today. Some of his public mislabeled the work a "socialistic treatise," while others, impatient for more stories of adventure, simply ignored it. It did produce one direct literary offspring. In the early thirties, a young civil servant, who was to change his name to George Orwell, was so moved by the book that he took his own trip into the darker areas of the cities to produce *Down and Out in Paris and London*. But mostly the book was forgotten.

Before turning to this compelling essay, one last comment on the style requires explanation—the poetry. London was an admirer of poetry all his life. He clipped and filed verses, and read his favorites aloud to friends by the fireplace after dinner. The opening epigraph is from James Russell Lowell's *A Parable*, an objection to the materialistic tendencies of capitalism among a supposedly Christian people. Longfellow's *Challenge*, printed in full at the end, is the perfect pillar for the bridge London moves us across. He hoped we readers could never again enjoy our comforting rooms and meals without some haunting memory of the poor. They have, alas, not fallen in number nor condition since his time. For that reason *People of the Abyss* is not a historical museum piece, but a forceful reminder of a large part of the human condition. London would have hoped that by this age it were the former.