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- - -  
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With respect (I'll say "love"  
in a few years)  
H. H. H.

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With love  
from  
E. H.

## JACK LONDON AS PHOTOGRAPHER:

PEOPLE OF THE ABYSS

by Clarice Stasz

In July, 1902, Jack London was asked by the American Press Association to write a series of articles on the Boer War. He stopped in New York on the way and discussed with George Brett of Macmillan the possibility of doing a series of articles on the London slums which would portray Britain from the workingclass point of view. He wrote Anna Strunsky (July 31, 1902):

A week from to-day 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 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.

This short paragraph is a key to understanding People of the Abyss, the book that resulted.

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, work houses, visits with families, and general wandering about the streets. Woven among these vividly drawn personal adventures are data obviously taken from newspapers and statistical studies of the area. The overall impact of the writing is stark and incisive. 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 much more severely than crimes against fellow members of the slum community. On the surface, the book succeeds as a powerful statement of outrage.

Yet it is obvious that London did not do what he claims to have done. Several years later, in a letter to Bailey Millard (February 18, 1906) he said the following, which "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 these details made public. To do so would be to destroy the fantasy he had given the readers; and it is this fantasy, that of going about the slums alone and unnoticed, that provides the basic structural 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.

If London's description of his activities is a correct one, then it is likely that he spent much of his time, perhaps like his mentor Marx, in a place like the British museum. This is clear from the amounts of secondary data woven through the narrative. And when he did go into the slums, it is unlikely that he always did so, to use the vernacular, to "slum it". Why? Because he was busy taking many photographs. People of the Abyss is unique among London books because it is his only visual social documentary. The visual feature of the work has been ignored in all discussions I have seen. Indeed, most mentions of the book fail even to include the fact that it contains London's photographs. London was proud of his photography, and said so to Millard:

I am a good photographer (you know my photographs of the Japanese-Russian war for the Hearst newspapers). And so far as the magazine public is concerned, the story of the trip will be enhanced tremendously by its being adequately and sympathetically illustrated with photographs taken by the writer.

London is correct here. He was more than a snapshot photographer, an amateur. He has a definite style that pervades both this volume and his travel photographs. He preferred sharp images, much depth of field, and had a good sense of classical composition. He eschewed still-lives, close-ups, or detail shots. He liked to show the full surround of an activity, rather than isolate it from its environment for dramatic purposes. Incidentally, such a shooting style also reflects a distancing of the photographer from the subjects. Seldom does one sense the photographer's presence in his photographs.

The photographs are strikingly different in style from Jacob Riis'. Riis, a New York journalist, had spent several decades studying and photographing the lower East Side slums. His volume, How the Other Half Lives, published in 1890, is an obvious model for London's work. London's book begins, like Riis', with a poem by James Russell Lowell. On the surface, both discuss the same topics: street activities, family housing, crime, sanitation, work houses, children's activities, and so on. Riis complements his text with numerous photographs. But here the similarities end. Riis' style is quite different. He foregoes sharp images and depth of field. Faces blur in many of his images, so as to remind us that the persons within them are really alive. Most strikingly, Riis' images are

compellingly intimate, so that no distancing is evident. The photographer was clearly right in the midst of the activity, participating with the camera subjects. They stare at us, dishevelled, sickly, filthy, yet with dignity. Though much dirtier and real than London's East Enders, they are much less beasts in our eyes. Riis did not live with these people, but he spent years with them, and his familiarity and acceptance of them is clear in each photographic image.

Riis' book is striking for the way the photographs complement the text, verify its verbal description. London's photographs, on the other hand, fit the text more superficially, in a way that eventually discredits it. On the surface, they are like Riis'. Where there is a discussion of a doss house, several photographs of the sleeping quarters are included. But many of the photographs, studied carefully, do not substantiate London's discussions. He talks of the poor sanitation, yet some streets are spotless, nothing like Riis' endless pages of trash-ridden streets, yards, and houses. The people appear clean, and several interior photographs of a parlour make it seem downright affluent. Some of the illustrations, notably of women fighting outside a pub, appear staged. These may be part of the one-fourth illustrations London was alluding to in his letter. Consequently, London's photographs, while satisfying in their own, discredit the book as a whole, and weaken it.

The role of the photographs in this regard is all the more striking when one considers Riis' restrictions. Riis' camera was a large cumbersome view camera that required the use of magnesium flashes for interior lighting. No one can use such a camera and be unobtrusive. London's camera was probably one of the large negative Kodak bellows models. They allowed for more mobility, and were more adaptable to difficult light conditions. Yet these cameras cannot be used in a stealthy manner either. Thus London must have been visible about the East End as a stranger during the times of his photographic work. He could have used the camera, as Riis did, for what anthropologists call a "device for entry." That is, he could as a photographer be trusted and accepted by the East Enders. His photographs, with their considerable distancing between photographer and subject, belie this. London was either trapped by his previous photographic style with its preference for long shots, or he was genuinely uncomfortable with his subjects. From my experience teaching photography, I would argue that his lack of ease with his subjects provided a rationale for taking the sort of images he did. The camera is very convenient this way. One rationalizes one's personal feelings about the shooting with technical explanations. In spite of his socialist rhetoric, his personal discomfort with the East Enders has a reasonable base. He was at the transition point in his life in his mobility from working class to middle class. The possibility of success was showing itself with the recent publication of his first books. He had received important assignments as a journalist from Hearst. His personal life reflected proper middle class domesticity.

London's powerful verbal outrage may then be partly a function of the conflict this adventure must have incurred. He needed no reminders of life among the working class--he had lived it for years. It is characteristic of persons who are socially mobile to turn upon their original class as a way of dissociating their identity from it. Personal stability during successful mobility requires this rejection.

The People of the Abyss allowed London to reject his class experiences in the guise of an attack on British capitalism. He was relieved to be free of the slum life, as is evident by his actual research activities, library research and photography, and his stated need for returns to the lodging house with its warm baths and clean linens.

In rejecting his class ties, in distancing himself, London rejected all but the negative aspects of slum life. Again the contrast with Riis is apparent. Riis' slums are seemingly worse than those of London, both visually and in terms of factual data. But they also are places where unschooled children are taught by parents, where people sing in the streets, where ethnic culture provides the rituals for personal security, where families work together supportively. There are bums, drunks, prostitutes; there are filth and disease. Yet a viable social order supports the lives of most residents in spite of their physical wretchedness. London sees none of the community arrangements that soothe lives. Life for everyone in his East End is hopeless. He correctly interprets the reasons for the big rates of suicide, but he fails to recognize that the vast majority of East Enders do not die that way. In making this omission, London was doing what many sociologists have done until recently, so he cannot be faulted too much. It was several more decades before observers of the slums noted, as Riis implied, that such communities are not disorganized, but indeed utilize a wealth of human resources, qualities not captured by statistics, to provide a life of personal dignity and meaning for their inhabitants. (This is obviously not to imply that the physical problems of such environments be ignored.)

London's report should not then be placed with sociological studies or volumes such as Riis'. Given only two months of study, he could not discover the patterns that knit apparently disorganized communities into a fabric of rich, well-ordered, secure social life. As a single young male, he could not in so short a time obtain entry into the more typical, regular activities of the area. Instead, he saw the slums from the viewpoint of a poor unemployed young male, a view that naturally exaggerated the amount of disorder. His book should more properly be called a journalistic report, and I think he would prefer it called such. Evaluated on this level, it does not matter whether London exaggerated the extent of degradation and suffering. That any such suffering occurred is sufficient to validate his thesis, and there is no doubt in this regard. Read on this level, the book clearly presages the politically committed journalism of today, some of the so-called New Journalism.

To conclude, London went to the East End thinking of its inhabitants as beasts, and that is what he found. He was not at a point in his life where he could allow himself psychological intimacy with the working class; indeed, most forces in his life were pushing against such empathy. This suggests that his Socialism may have been another way of dealing with his social mobility. It allowed him to retain some ties with his history, though on an intellectual level, and thus was less threatening psychologically. His Socialism, then, may have played a crucial role in his psychological stability in that it provided a place to deal with his working-class origins while retaining middle-class status.

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