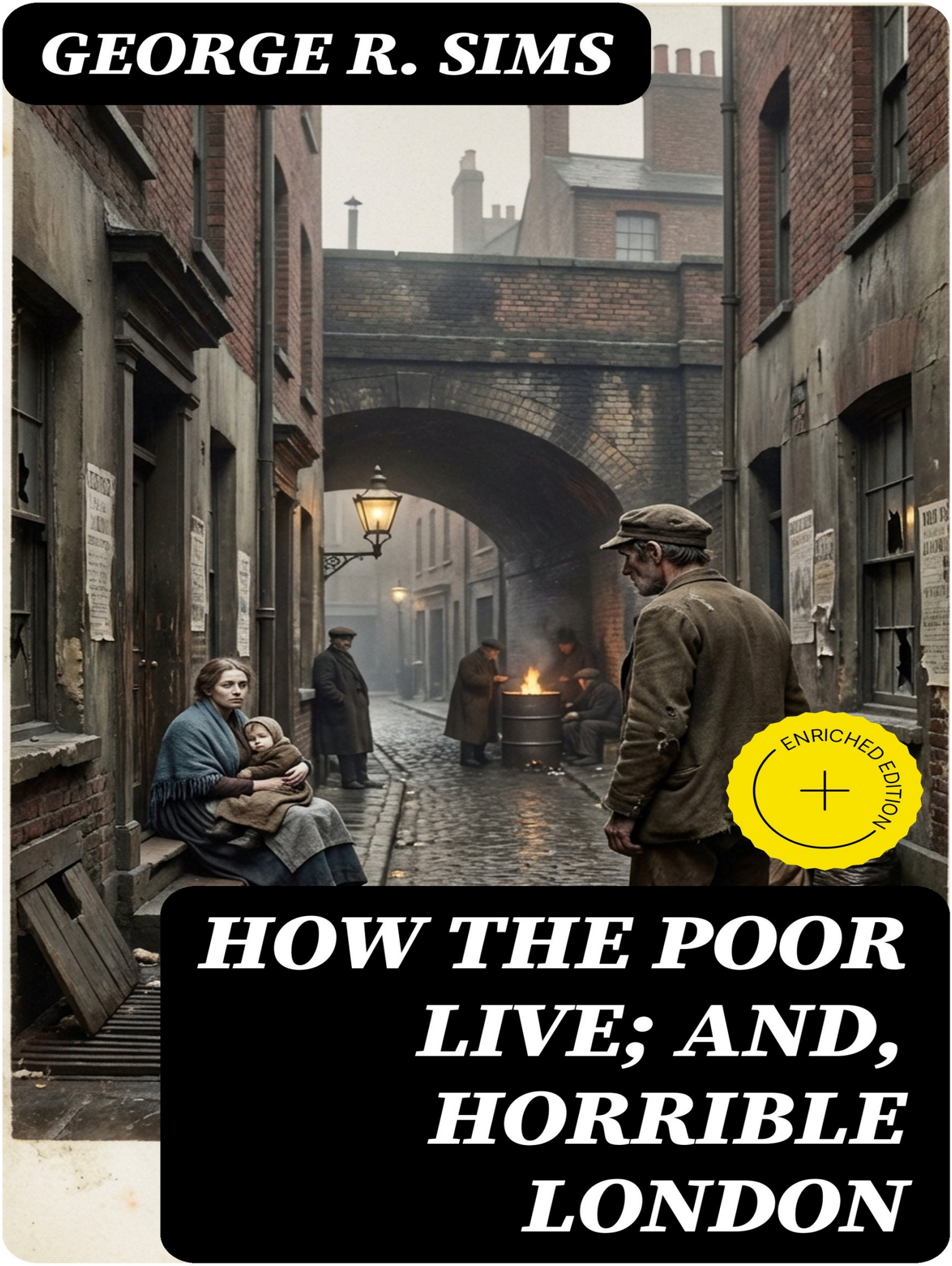
GEORGE R. SIMS



HOW THE POOR LIVE; AND, HORRIBLE LONDON

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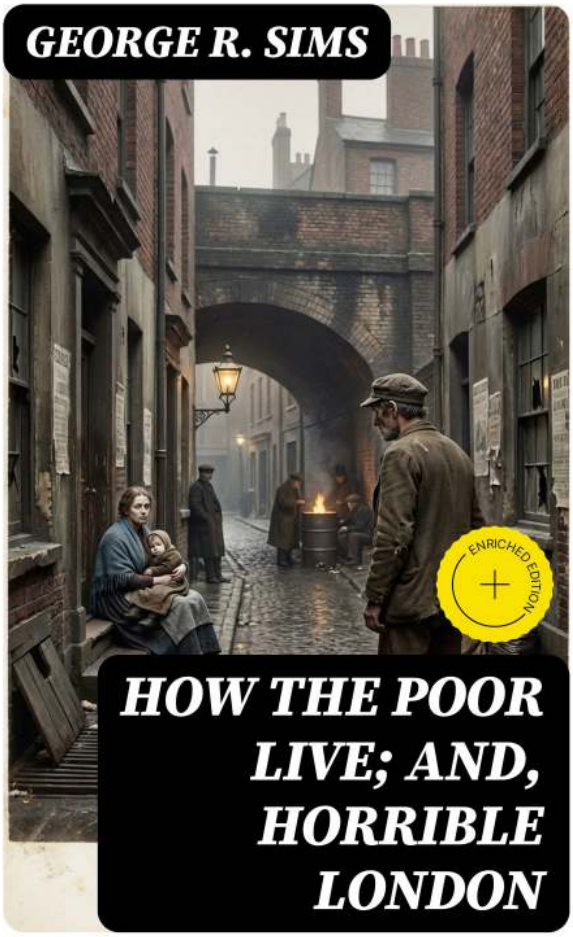

HOW THE POOR LIVE; AND, HORRIBLE LONDON

George R. Sims

How the Poor Live; and, Horrible London

Enriched edition. 1889

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Sadie Whitlock

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Introduction

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This collection presents two closely related works of social investigation by George R. Sims: How the Poor Live and Horrible London. Gathered here as a single-author volume, the texts exemplify Sims’s sustained engagement with the realities of urban destitution in Victorian London. The purpose is not to offer his complete writings but to assemble essential nonfiction focused on poverty, housing, and civic neglect. Read together, these works chart a coherent argument about the city’s failures and the human costs borne by its most vulnerable residents, while showcasing Sims’s distinctive blend of reportage, moral appeal, and vividly drawn urban observation.

The materials gathered are nonfictional in character, comprising long-form essays, chaptered investigations, and documentary inclusions. Alongside narrative reportage and descriptive sketches, the volume preserves an official communication—NOTICE.—FORM B. SCHOOL BOARD FOR LONDON.—that Sims incorporates to illuminate the machinery of regulation affecting poor families. Readers will encounter scenes reconstructed from observation, case-based exempla, and reflective commentary intended to contextualize facts within broader civic responsibilities. The result is a composite of journalism, social criticism, and urban ethnography, unified by clear purpose and an insistence on making policy, charity, and everyday life legible to the general reader.

How the Poor Live proceeds as a guided tour through districts of concentrated hardship, moving from crowded rooms and unhealthy courts to the places where meagre wages are earned and swiftly spent. Sims follows the pathways by which families contend with rent, food, illness, and official oversight, tracing the pressures that keep them precarious. He situates individual experience within a system of housing, employment, and local governance that repeatedly fails to protect basic welfare. The chapters accumulate into a portrait of structural want, insisting that the reader confront both the material conditions and the civic arrangements that perpetuate them.

Horrible London complements and intensifies the earlier study by extending its focus beyond domestic interiors to the city’s wider fabric of danger, nuisance, and moral indifference. Sims surveys streets, institutions, and common practices that degrade or imperil the poor, drawing attention to hazards that are accepted as ordinary. The work underscores how urban organization and public tolerance combine to make misery habitual. Without recounting particular outcomes in detail, it argues that the city’s spectacle often conceals its cruelties, and that acknowledgment must be followed by practical change. As a companion piece, it sharpens the ethical imperatives implicit throughout How the Poor Live.

Sims’s stylistic signature is unmistakable: urgent yet controlled prose, close-up scenes that place the reader at the threshold of a door or the edge of a pavement, and a steady alternation between concrete particulars and general inference. A dramatist as well as a journalist, he applies

narrative pacing and character sketch to nonfiction ends, while deploying comparisons and contrasts to expose complacency. He uses the authority of observed detail, the clarity of plain statement, and the cadence of public address to move from description to indictment, asking readers not merely to sympathize, but to recognize civic responsibility in the face of visible need.

These works belong to a tradition of Victorian urban inquiry that regarded the city as both an engine of prosperity and a generator of preventable suffering. Their continuing significance lies in the precision with which they connect private hardship to public systems—housing, education, sanitary oversight, and charity—and in their insistence that evidence must be converted into policy and practice. They inform historical understanding of London’s social landscape while remaining relevant to contemporary debates about inequality, governance, and the ethics of representation in reporting on poverty.

This edition preserves the internal architecture of Sims’s writings: sequential chapters that build a cumulative argument, documentary insertions that show bureaucracy at work, and closing sections that return the reader to the city’s streets with renewed urgency. It is offered as an essential gathering of his social journalism, not as a comprehensive survey of his plays or verse. Readers new to Sims may begin anywhere, yet the progression from How the Poor Live to Horrible London clarifies how observation, analysis, and advocacy reinforce one another, and how a city reveals itself when its most neglected residents are given sustained attention.

Historical Context

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George R. Sims composed his urban exposés amid the late-Victorian metropolis, when London expanded explosively and social contrasts sharpened. Between 1861 and 1891 the capital grew from roughly 3 million to over 5.5 million inhabitants, with new arrivals from rural England, Ireland, and, after 1881, Jewish refugees settling in Whitechapel. As a popular journalist and dramatist, known to readers as Dagonet, Sims adapted the vivid, street-level inquiry pioneered by Henry Mayhew to the temper of the 1880s. The sketches gathered in How the Poor Live and the companion tract Horrible London harnessed this reportage to dramatize overcrowding, hunger, and insecurity for a mass middle-class audience.

These works emerged after decades of sanitary reform had mitigated disease without solving congestion. The Metropolitan Board of Works, led by Sir Joseph Bazalgette, had completed London’s main sewers in the 1860s, and the Public Health Act 1875 codified local responsibilities. Yet rookeries in Bethnal Green, Spitalfields, and Southwark endured. The Artisans’ and Labourers’ Dwellings Improvement Act 1875 enabled clearance but often scattered tenants. Philanthropic landlords such as the Peabody Trust and Octavia Hill demonstrated alternatives while rents still strained wages. Sims’s descriptions joined wider pressures culminating in the Royal Commission on the

Housing of the Working Classes (1884–85) and, later, the Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890.

In the same neighborhoods, employment patterns bred uncertainty that both narratives expose. East End tailoring, cabinetmaking, and box-making exemplified the sweated trades, criticized by reformers and investigated by parliamentary committees in the 1880s. Casualism on the docks left families dependent on irregular day hires, culminating in the 1889 London Dock Strike, which ushered in New Unionism. Earlier, the 1888 matchgirls' strike at Bryant & May had made child and female labor conditions a national issue. Sims's portraits of hunger, pawnshops, and eviction mirrored these cycles of insecurity and helped readers connect household distress to broader market structures rather than to individual failings.

Underlying many episodes is the Victorian Poor Law system, still governed by the deterrent principles of the 1834 Amendment Act. Workhouses, casual wards, and outdoor relief were unevenly administered across metropolitan unions, provoking constant controversy. The Charity Organisation Society, founded in 1869, sought to rationalize aid and discourage indiscriminate almsgiving, while the Salvation Army, created by William and Catherine Booth in 1865, offered spiritual and material assistance in the East End. Sims moved between these institutions, reporting on their effects and limits. His emphasis on dignity and humane treatment chimed with broader debates over whether relief should punish, rehabilitate, or empower the poor.

A recurring strand involves children’s welfare, schooling, and truancy enforcement, reflecting reforms launched by the Elementary Education Act 1870. The elected London School Board built hundreds of board schools and, after the Acts of 1876 and 1880, enforced compulsory attendance; by 1891, fees for elementary education were abolished in England and Wales. Forms, notices, and school visits in Sims’s pages echo this machinery. Yet poverty kept many children in street trades or home piecework, and charitable efforts, including Dr. Barnardo’s homes, founded in the late 1860s, supplemented official schemes. By situating families within this apparatus, Sims highlighted both progress and persistent barriers to social mobility.

The collection also belongs to the era of New Journalism, which married crusading investigation to dramatic narrative. W. T. Stead’s 1885 Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon campaign in the Pall Mall Gazette demonstrated how exposés could mobilize Parliament, contributing to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of that year. Sims, writing for mass-circulation weeklies, blended statistics with pathos to similar effect. The 1888 Whitechapel murders intensified public fascination with the East End as a site of danger and neglect, a backdrop his pages invoke without sensational cruelty. Readers encountered moral urgency tethered to policy demands, rather than purely lurid entertainment.

Administrative change formed another context. The Metropolitan Board of Works, riven by scandals in the 1880s, was abolished in 1889 and replaced by the London County Council, which advanced municipal reform and systematic slum clearance. The Old Nichol rookery in Bethnal Green,

notorious to social investigators, was razed in the 1890s to create the Boundary Estate, an emblem of new housing policy. Sims’s insistence on official responsibility aligned with this shift from piecemeal charity to coordinated urban governance. By tracing alleys, lodging houses, and police courts, he mapped the very spaces local authorities would increasingly regulate, rebuild, and subject to inspection.

Contemporaries read Sims alongside other investigators who quantified and pictured urban misery. Charles Booth’s Life and Labour of the People in London (begun 1886) produced color-coded poverty maps that corroborated journalistic testimony; John Thomson and Adolphe Smith’s Street Life in London (1877) supplied photographic antecedents. Novelists such as Arthur Morrison later fictionalized similar zones in A Child of the Jago (1896). Within this milieu, Sims’s emotive yet concrete prose helped galvanize donations, parliamentary questioning, and municipal initiatives. His collections thus reflect a moment when statistics, storytelling, and reform coalesced, shaping how late-Victorian readers imagined, and sought to transform, the capital’s poorest districts.

Synopsis (Selection)

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PREFACE.

Sims declares his aim to expose the daily realities of London’s poorest districts and to galvanize readers toward practical reform.

The tone is earnest and investigative, framing the ensuing sketches as evidence-based appeals that blend firsthand observation with figures and official context.

How the Poor Live (Chapters I–XIII; includes Notice—Form B and School Board for London)

Across slum visits and case sketches, Sims documents overcrowded housing, precarious labor, hunger, disease, and the burdens borne by women and children.

Combining compassionate reportage with documentary inserts (such as Notice—Form B and School Board materials), he argues that charity is inadequate without structural change, returning to motifs of filth, pawnshops, rent, and gin as symptoms of systemic neglect.

Horrible London (Chapters I–V)

This companion sequence ranges through the city’s darker streets and trades, heightening grotesque and sensational details to shock complacent readers into attention.

Its brisk, panoramic style shifts from close-up misery to the anonymity of the crowd, emphasizing motifs of fog, noise, danger, and indifference while sharpening the work’s polemical edge.

THE END.

A brief concluding appeal distills the investigation into an urgent call for accountability and tangible remedies.

It reiterates the collection’s ethical refrain—witness and action—closing on moral urgency rather than new narrative detail.

How the Poor Live; and, Horrible London

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HOW THE POOR LIVE

AND

HORRIBLE LONDON

By GEORGE R. SIMS

AUTHOR OF 'THE DAGONET RECITER,' 'MARY JANE'S MEMOIRS,' ETC.

London

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1889

Original

PREFACE.

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The papers which form this volume appeared originally in *The Pictorial World* and *The Daily News*. The interest now evinced in the great question of Housing the Poor leads me to hope that they will be of assistance to many who are studying the subject, and would desire to have their information in a convenient form for reference. Much that I ventured to prognosticate when 'How the Poor Live' was written has happened since, and I have the permission of the author of 'The Bitter Cry of Outcast London' to say that from these articles he derived the greatest assistance while compiling his famous pamphlet. I have thought it well, all circumstances considered, to let the work stand in its original form, and have in no way added to it or altered it.

If an occasional lightness of treatment seems to the reader out of harmony with so grave a subject, I pray that he will remember the work was undertaken to enlist the

sympathies of a class not generally given to the study of 'low life.'

GEORGE R. SIMS

HOW THE POOR LIVE.

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CHAPTER I.

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I commence, with the first of these chapters, a book of travel. An author and an artist have gone hand-in-hand into many a far-off region of the earth, and the result has been a volume eagerly studied by the stay-at-home public, anxious to know something of the world in which they live. In these pages I propose to record the result of a journey into a region which lies at our own doors—into a dark continent that is within easy walking distance of the General Post Office. This continent will, I hope, be found as interesting as any of those newly-explored lands which engage the attention of the Royal Geographical Society—the wild races who inhabit it will, I trust, gain public sympathy as easily as those savage tribes for whose benefit the Missionary Societies never cease to appeal for funds.

I have no shipwrecks, no battles, no moving adventures by flood and field, to record. Such perils as I and my fellow-traveller have encountered on our journey are not of the order which lend themselves to stirring narrative. It is unpleasant to be mistaken, in underground cellars where the vilest outcasts hide from the light of day, for detectives in search of their prey—it is dangerous to breathe for some hours at a stretch an atmosphere charged with infection and poisoned with indescribable effluvia—it is hazardous to be hemmed in down a blind alley by a crowd of roughs who have had hereditarily transmitted to them the maxim of John Leech, that half-bricks were specially designed for the

benefit of 'strangers;' but these are not adventures of the heroic order, and they will not be dwelt upon lovingly after the manner of travellers who go farther afield.

My task is perhaps too serious a one even for the light tone of these remarks. No man who has seen 'How the Poor Live' can return from the journey with aught but an aching heart. No man who recognises how serious is the social problem which lies before us can approach its consideration in any but the gravest mood. Let me, then, briefly place before the reader the serious purpose of these pages, and then I will ask him to set out with me on the journey and judge for himself whether there is no remedy for much that he will see. He will have to encounter misery that some good people think it best to leave undiscovered. He will be brought face to face with that dark side of life which the wearers of rose-coloured spectacles turn away from on principle. The worship of the beautiful is an excellent thing, but he who digs down deep in the mire to find the soul of goodness in things evil is a better man and a better Christian than he who shudders at the ugly and the unclean, and kicks it from his path, that it may not come between the wind and his nobility.

But let not the reader be alarmed, and imagine that I am about to take advantage of his good-nature in order to plunge him neck-high into a mud bath. He may be pained before we part company, but he shall not be disgusted. He may occasionally feel a choking in his throat, but he shall smile now and again. Among the poor there is humour as well as pathos, there is food for laughter as well as for tears, and the rays of God's sunshine lose their way now and

again, and bring light and gladness into the vilest of the London slums.

His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, in his speech at the opening of the Royal College of Music some years ago, said: 'The time has come when class can no longer stand aloof from class, and that man does his duty best who works most earnestly in bridging over the gulf between different classes which it is the tendency of increased wealth and increased civilization to widen.' It is to increased wealth and to increased civilization that we owe the wide gulf which to-day separates well-to-do citizens from the masses. It is the increased wealth of this mighty city which has driven the poor back inch by inch, until we find them to-day herding together, packed like herrings in a barrel, neglected and despised, and left to endure wrongs and hardships which, if they were related of a far-off savage tribe, would cause Exeter Hall to shudder till its bricks fell down. It is the increased civilization of this marvellous age which has made life a victory only for the strong, the gifted, and the specially blest, and left the weak, the poor, and the ignorant to work out in their proper persons the theory of the survival of the fittest to its bitter end.

There are not wanting signs that the 'one-roomed helot' and his brood are about to receive a little scientific attention. They have become natural curiosities, and to this fact they may owe the honour in store for them, of dividing public attention with the Zenanas, the Aborigines, and the South Sea Islanders. The long-promised era of domestic legislation is said to be at hand, and prophets with powerful telescopes declare they can see the first faint signs of its