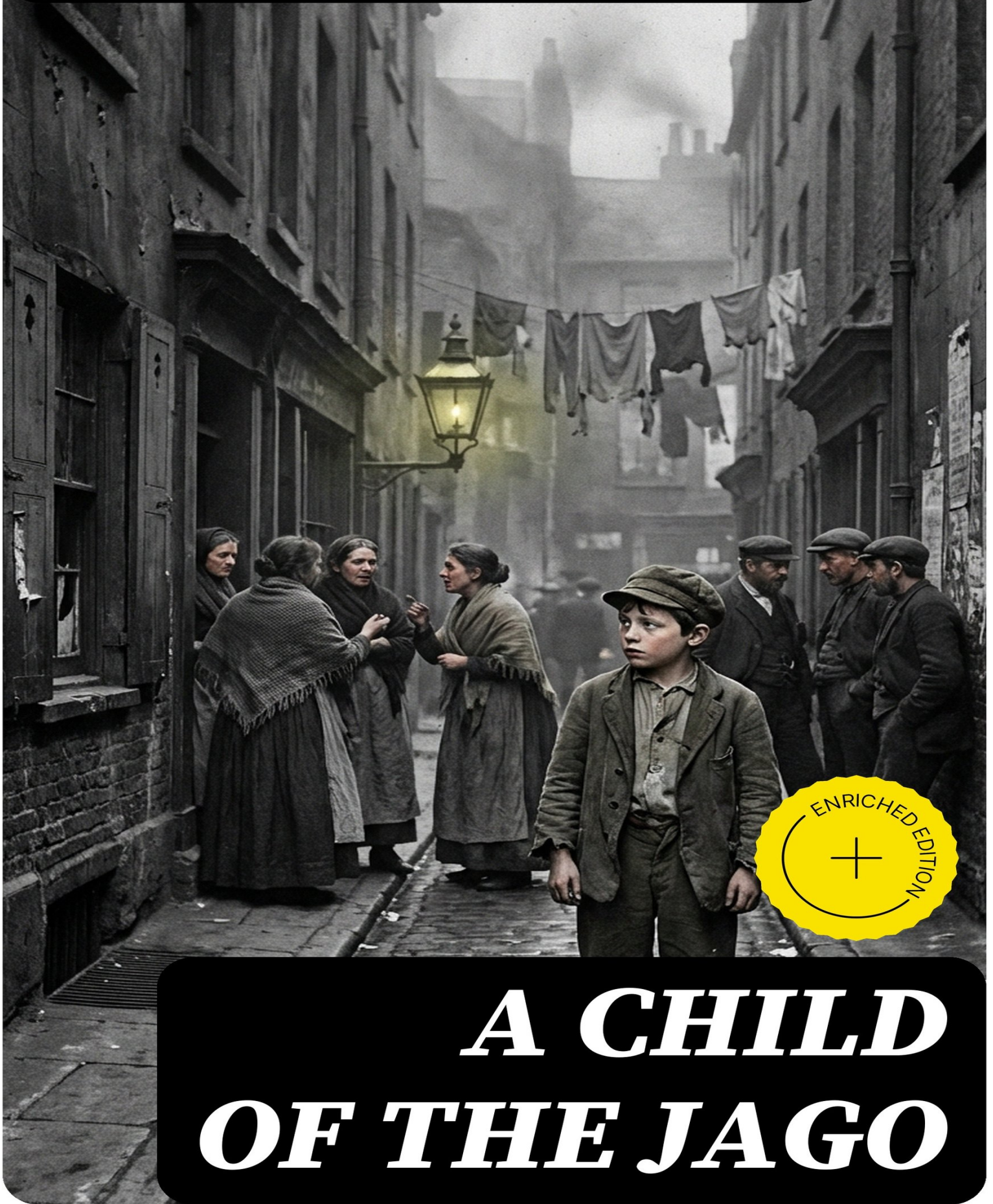


**ARTHUR MORRISON**



**A CHILD  
OF THE JAGO**

**Arthur Morrison**

# **A Child of the Jago**

**Enriched edition.**

*Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Tristan West*

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# Introduction

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At the heart of *A Child of the Jago* lies a stark conflict between the shaping force of a brutal environment and the fragile possibilities of individual choice, as a child learns that survival, belonging, and hope are negotiated on streets where poverty manufactures its own rules, charity and law arrive unevenly and often too late, and every moment presses a decision between quick gains and long-term peril, asking whether decency can germinate in soil tilled by hunger, fear, and pride, or whether the slum itself, vivid and relentless, claims even the most earnest resolve as part of its economy.

Arthur Morrison's novel, first published in 1896, belongs to the late-Victorian tradition of urban realism and social critique. It is set in the East End of London, in a densely packed slum nicknamed the Jago, widely understood as a fictionalized version of the Old Nichol rookery in Shoreditch. The book's tightly observed detail and unflinching focus on alleyways, courts, and tenements connect it to naturalist writing that tests characters against the pressure of circumstance. Written during heated debates over slum clearance, charity, and crime, the novel occupies the uneasy border between documentary intensity and crafted narrative, compelling readers to confront uncomfortable proximities.

The story follows Dicky Perrott from early boyhood as he navigates the customs and economies of his neighborhood,

where quick-witted small hustles, petty theft, and fierce loyalties map the path to survival. Dicky encounters adults who embody conflicting codes—street professionals, household strivers, and well-meaning outsiders—and he begins to measure his options by the rhythms of hunger, risk, and pride. Morrison builds the narrative in compact episodes that accumulate momentum: bustling marketplaces, shadowed courtways, and tense interiors, rendered with compressed, propulsive prose. Without moralizing, the book invites readers to feel the allure and cost of choices that appear, in such a place, painfully limited.

Morrison writes in a controlled, unsentimental voice, alternating panoramic description with swift, staccato action, and punctuating scenes with idioms and cadences drawn from the streets he records. The dialogue carries the tang of local speech without turning into caricature, while the narration keeps a watchful distance that emphasizes pattern over spectacle. Violence is never sensationalized, only presented as one more predictable consequence of scarcity and competition. The chapters turn like trapdoors, dropping the reader from communal bustle into sudden intimacy, then back into the press of the courts, until the setting feels less like a backdrop than a system exerting measurable force.

Key themes emerge with unsettling clarity: the tension between determinism and agency; the inheritance of reputation and the burden of belonging; the blurred lines between protection and predation; and the role of institutions—family, charity, police, church—in shaping or constraining a child's horizon. The Jago functions as both place and process, producing behaviors that outsiders condemn without recognizing their roots. Morrison's realism

refuses easy consolation, but it also resists fatalism by tracking how small decisions reverberate. The novel matters now because it interrogates narratives that frame poverty as moral failure, insisting instead on close attention to structure, opportunity, and the costs of survival.

For contemporary readers, the book speaks to debates about urban inequality, youth vulnerability, and the ethics of representation. Arguments that swirl today around policing, mutual aid, and redevelopment echo the concerns that animate Morrison's pages. Reading it alongside current discussions of housing precarity, neighborhood stigma, and social mobility clarifies how public language shapes policy and how policy reshapes lives. The novel's period attitudes and terminology demand critical awareness, yet its core questions—what a child owes a community that can endanger him, and what a community owes its children—remain urgent, challenging readers to rethink responsibility across class and institutional lines.

Approached as both historical artifact and living story, *A Child of the Jago* offers a demanding but engrossing experience: swift scenes, lean transitions, flashes of tenderness amid hazard, and a persistent sense of moral friction. Morrison does not guide reactions with overt commentary; instead he sets evidence in motion and trusts readers to draw inferences. The early chapters lay the groundwork for conflicts that tighten without announcing where they will end, sustaining tension while preserving the dignity of uncertainty. Attentiveness to detail—objects pawned, routes taken, glances exchanged—enriches the reading, because in the Jago, even the smallest choices carry disproportionate weight.

# Synopsis

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A Child of the Jago (1896) by Arthur Morrison presents a stark, closely observed portrait of life in a notorious East End slum. The Jago, a fictional district modeled on London's Old Nichol, is depicted as a self-contained world governed by scarcity, violence, and an ingrained economy of theft. Morrison's naturalistic approach follows the rhythms of the courts and alleys, where lodging-house pressures, hunger, and opportunism condition every decision. Rather than tracing a heroic arc, the narrative studies how an environment shapes its inhabitants, particularly children, and how local customs—lookouts, street trades, and fences—form an education that competes with any offered by institutions beyond the court walls.

At the story's center is Dicky Perrott, a quick, resourceful boy growing up in a one-room home with a chronically strained family. His father, Josh Perrott, moves in petty criminal circles, while his mother manages the day-to-day struggle of feeding and sheltering the children. The cramped interior, perpetual arrears, and the ever-present threat of eviction compress the household into a state of crisis-as-routine. Morrison's focus on Dicky's perceptions keeps the social canvas immediate: neighbors' arguments, hurried flights down stairwells, and the quiet calculations that determine whether a day ends with bread or goes to bed hungry.

Dicky's informal schooling arrives in the streets. Older hands school him in the practicalities of lifting small items, slipping through markets, and spotting policemen, while the receiver Weech sits at the heart of a transactional web. Weech's pawnbroker-like premises provide cash for stolen goods and, with it, obligations that pull boys deeper into risk. As Dicky's petty successes accumulate, they also entangle him: debts accrue, temptations grow, and each errand requires greater nerve. Morrison keeps the focus on the material triggers—hunger, rent, immediate need—so that moral choices appear less like abstract principles than calculations hammered out under pressure.

Violence is not an exception in the Jago but a recurring punctuation. Two entrenched factions, the Ranns and the Learys, periodically erupt into brawls that spill through courts and across roofs, asserting loyalties and settling old scores. Dicky witnesses these clashes as part spectacle, part instruction: survival demands quick judgment, a sense of when to run, and whom to trust. Domestic scenes echo the same volatility, turning quarrels into calamities with little warning. Amid this, Josh Perrott's ventures oscillate between cunning and desperation, teaching Dicky techniques while exposing him to the dangers of betrayal, arrest, and sudden reversals of fortune.

Against this current stands Father Sturt, a clergyman whose mission and clubs offer a conditional refuge: warmth, food, schooling, and a vocabulary of duty and hope unfamiliar to the Jago's economy. He treats Dicky with steady attention, introducing routines foreign to the court's improvisations—cleanliness, punctuality, and the idea of futures planned in days rather than minutes. Yet charity has to contend with skepticism and jeers from neighbors, as well as with the arithmetic of empty cupboards. Morrison neither

romanticizes philanthropy nor dismisses it; he stages an uneven contest between an institution's narrow supports and an environment's comprehensive claims.

As Dicky grows into his skills, the stakes rise. Family crises sharpen, Weech tightens his hold, and the need for quick money pushes opportunities that promise a way out at the cost of greater peril. Dicky vacillates between Father Sturt's path—thin, demanding, and slow—and the Jago's—immediate, lucrative, and lethal. Josh's example complicates any clean break, and minor triumphs carry hidden costs. What follows is a sequence of choices that narrow rather than expand, charting how courage, affection, and ambition can be redirected by want. Morrison sustains tension without melodrama, maintaining focus on causes and consequences rather than sensational revelations.

The novel's enduring force lies in its unsentimental clarity. By binding Dicky's fate to the structures surrounding him, Morrison advances a critique of conditions that make wrongdoing rational—and reform precarious—without reducing individuals to ciphers. The book's meticulous street-level detail fed contemporary debates about slum clearance, charity, and policing, while its restrained style keeps polemic in the background. *A Child of the Jago* remains resonant for its study of how environment, opportunity, and power intersect in a child's life, posing questions about responsibility and change that outlast its specific time and place without requiring a revelatory ending to make them felt.

# Historical Context

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A Child of the Jago (1896) by Arthur Morrison is set in the late-Victorian East End of London, in the Old Nichol slum fictionalized as the Jago. Morrison, born in Poplar in 1863, worked as a journalist and became known for uncompromising urban realism after *Tales of Mean Streets* (1894). The period saw the newly created London County Council (1889) expand municipal oversight. Parish churches, Poor Law boards of guardians, school board officers, police divisions, and missions structured everyday life in districts like Bethnal Green and Shoreditch. Morrison draws on reportage and observation to depict how these institutions framed survival at the city's margins.

The Old Nichol had long been notorious for overcrowding, dilapidated courts, and precarious livelihoods. The Housing of the Working Classes Act (1890) empowered the London County Council to clear slums; its Boundary Street Improvement Scheme targeted the Nichol. Demolition began in the early 1890s, and the model Boundary Estate opened in 1900. While sanitary standards improved, higher rents and stricter tenancies displaced many former residents to other poor streets. Writing during this transition, Morrison fixated on the conditions that clearance sought to erase, recording the maze of alleys, lodging houses, and rack-rented rooms, and questioning whether rebuilding alone could remedy entrenched poverty.

Public debate about outcast districts predated the novel. Andrew Mearns's pamphlet *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883) galvanized church and political leaders and helped prompt a Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes (1884–85). Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People in London*, begun in 1889, mapped poverty street by street and marked the Nichol as black, signifying the lowest, vicious, semi-criminal class. Earlier, Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* catalogued precarious occupations. Morrison's book intersects this investigative tradition, translating maps and inquiries into the daily experience of families navigating precarious work, rent, and stigma.

Philanthropy and social work formed a conspicuous backdrop. Toynbee Hall (1884) in Whitechapel pioneered university settlement work; Oxford House (1884) in Bethnal Green offered Anglican outreach and clubs; and the Salvation Army, founded in the East End in 1865, ran shelters and missions. The Ragged School Union and later school-board classes pursued basic instruction, while the Charity Organization Society (1869) promoted casework and scientific relief. The People's Palace opened in the late 1880s as an educational and cultural center. In Morrison's milieu, such agencies met mixed receptions, reflecting both genuine assistance and distrust of intrusive moralizing in a cash-poor neighborhood.

Schooling and child protection were changing quickly. The Elementary Education Act (1870) created the School Board for London; the 1880 Act made attendance compulsory; and from 1891 elementary schooling became effectively free through state grants. Truant officers and magistrates enforced standards as many children supplemented family income by hawking, running errands,

or doing piecework. The Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act (1889) strengthened legal protections; the London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (founded 1884, later the NSPCC) pursued prosecutions. Morrison's setting reflects these pushes and pulls, as institutional duty meets the economic necessity of the street.

Policing and punishment structured daily risk. The Metropolitan Police, founded in 1829, operated local divisions across the East End, and petty cases were heard at magistrates' courts such as Worship Street. Serious crimes went to the Central Criminal Court at the Old Bailey. Nineteenth-century laws against receivers of stolen goods and habitual criminals, together with vagrancy provisions, tightened surveillance of the poor. Workhouses and prisons stood as ever-present sanctions. Within this framework, the Jago's residents bargain with constables, court days, and landlords, illustrating how law-and-order policy often collided with subsistence and how reputation could harden into a near-inescapable label.

The local economy ran on insecurity. The East End's sweated trades—tailoring, bootmaking, cabinet work, and home-based finishing—paid by the piece and fluctuated with orders. Casual dock labor meant dawn musters for daywork; the 1889 London Dock Strike briefly expanded union power but left many workers precarious. Migration, including Eastern European Jewish arrivals in the 1880s, altered the labor market and housing demand. Pawnbroking, street markets, and credit from shopkeepers bridged shortages at a cost. Morrison portrays how scant wages, high rents, and seasonal slackness narrow choices, making informal or illicit earnings tempting when legal work cannot sustain families.

The book belongs to a moment when naturalism and urban realism challenged genteel fiction. Influenced by

continental models and paralleled in Britain by writers like George Gissing, such work emphasized environment, pressure, and cause-and-effect rather than uplift. Sensational coverage of the 1888 Whitechapel murders had already fixed public attention on the East End's violence and squalor. Morrison, already noted for austerely observed *Tales of Mean Streets*, rejects sentimental rescue plots in favor of close social observation. *A Child of the Jago* condenses contemporary debates on housing, crime, charity, and class into a critique of Victorian governance and its limits.

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... Woe unto the foolish prophets, that follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing!...

Because, even because they have seduced my people, saying, Peace; and there was no peace; and one built up a wall, and lo, others daubed it with untempered mortar:

Say unto them which daub it with untempered mortar, that it shall fall: there shall be an overflowing shower; and ye, O great hailstones, shall fall; and a stormy wind shall rend it.

Lo, when the wall is fallen, shall it not be said unto you, Where is the daubing wherewith ye have daubed it?—

Ezekiel xiii. 3 ... 10 12.

# PREFACE

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I AM glad to take this, the first available opportunity, to acknowledge the kindness with which *A Child of the Jago*<sup>[1]</sup> has been received: both by the reading public, from which I have received many gratifying assurances that what I have tried to say has not altogether failed of its effect: and by the reviewers, the most of whom have written in very indulgent terms.

I think indeed, that I am the more gratified by the fact that this reception has not been unanimous: because an outcry and an opposition, even from an unimportant minority, are proofs that I have succeeded in saying, however imperfectly, something that was worth being said. Under the conditions of life as we know it there is no truth worth telling that will not interfere with some hearer's comfort. Various objections have been made to *A Child of the Jago*, and many of them had already been made to *Tales of Mean Streets*. And it has been the way of the objectors as well as the way of many among the kindest of my critics, to call me a 'realist.' The word has been used sometimes, it would seem, in praise; sometimes in mere indifference as one uses a phrase of convenient description; sometimes by way of an irremediable reproach. It is natural, then, not merely that I should wish to examine certain among the objections made to my work, but that I should feel some interest in the definition and description of a realist. A matter never made clear to me.

Now it is a fact that I have never called myself a 'realist,' and I have never put forth any work as 'realism.' I decline the labels of the schoolmen and the sophisters: being a simple writer of tales, who takes whatever means lie to his hand to present life as he sees it; who insists on no process; and who refuses to be bound by any formula or prescription prepared by the cataloguers and the pigeon-holders of literature.

So it happens that when those who use the word 'realist' use it with no unanimity of intent and with a loose, inapprehensive application, it is not easy for me, who repudiate it altogether, to make a guess at its meaning. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the man who is called a 'realist' is one who, seeing things with his own eyes, discards the conventions of the schools, and presents his matter in individual terms of art. For awhile the schoolmen abuse him as a realist; and in twenty years' time, if his work have life in it, he becomes a classic. Constable was called a realist; so was Corot. Who calls these painters realists now? The history of Japanese art affords a continuous illustration. From the day when Iwasa Matahei impudently arose and dared to take his subjects from the daily life of the people, to the day when Hiroshigé, casting away the last rag of propriety, adventurously drew a cast shadow, in flat defiance of all the canons of Tosa and Kano—in all this time, and through all the crowded history of the School of Ukiyó, no artist bringing something of his own to his art but was damned for a realist. Even the classic Harunobu did not escape. Look now at the work of these men, and the label seems grotesque enough. So it goes through the making of all art. A man with the courage of his own vision interprets what he sees in fresh terms, and gives to things a new reality and an immediate presence. The schoolmen peer

with dulled eyes from amid the heap of precedents and prescriptions about them, and, distracted by seeing a thing sanctioned neither by precedent nor by prescription, dub the man realist, and rail against him for that his work fits none of their pigeon-holes. And from without the schools many cry out and complain: for truth is strong meat, and the weakling stomach turns against it, except in minim doses smothered in treacle. Thus we hear the feeble plea that the function of imagination is the distortion of fact: the piteous demand that the artist should be shut up in a flower-garden, and forbidden to peep through the hedge into the world. And they who know nothing of beauty, who are innately incapable of comprehending it, mistake it for mere prettiness, and call aloud for comfits; and among them that cannot understand, such definitions of the aims of art are bandied, as mean, if they mean anything, that art finds its most perfect expression in pink lollipops and gilt boxes. But in the end the truth prevails, if it be well set forth; and the schoolmen, groaning in their infinite labour, wearily write another prescription, admit another precedent, and make another pigeon-hole.

I have been asked, in print, if I think that there is no phase of life which the artist may not touch. Most certainly I think this. More, I know it. It is the artist's privilege to seek his material where he pleases[1q], and it is no man's privilege to say him nay. If the community have left horrible places and horrible lives before his eyes, then the fault is the community's; and to picture these places and these lives becomes not merely his privilege, but his duty. It was my fate to encounter a place in Shoreditch, where children were born and reared in circumstances which gave them no reasonable chance of living decent lives: where they were born fore-damned to a criminal or semi-criminal career. It

was my experience to learn the ways of this place, to know its inhabitants, to talk with them, eat, drink, and work with them. For the existence of this place, and for the evils it engendered, the community was, and is, responsible; so that every member of the community was, and is, responsible in his degree. If I had been a rich man I might have attempted to discharge my peculiar responsibility in one way; if I had been a statesman I might have tried another. Being neither of these things, but a mere writer of fiction, I sought to do my duty by writing a tale wherein I hoped to bring the conditions of this place within the apprehension of others. There are those who say that I should have turned away my eyes and passed by on the other side: on the very respectable precedent of the priest and the Levite in the parable.

Now, when the tale was written and published it was found, as I have said, to cause discomfort to some persons. It is needless to say more of the schoolmen. Needless, too, to say much of the merely genteel: who were shocked to read of low creatures, as Kiddo Cook and Pigeony Poll, and to find my pages nowhere illuminated by a marquis. Of such are they who delight to read of two men in velvet and feathers perforating each other's stomachs with swords; while Josh Perrott and Billy Leary, punching each other's heads, present a scene too sickening and brutal to consider without disgust. And it was in defiance of the maunderings of such as these that Charles Lamb wrote much of his essay *On the Genius and Character of Hogarth*. But chiefly this book of mine disturbed those who had done nothing, and preferred to do nothing, by way of discharging their responsibility toward the Jago and the people in it. The consciousness of duty neglected is discomfiting, and personal comfort is the god of their kind. They firmly believe

it to be the sole function of art to minister to their personal comfort—as upholstery does. They find it comfortable to shirk consideration of the fate of the Jago children, to shut their eyes to it, to say that all is well and the whole world virtuous and happy. And this mental attitude they nickname optimism, and vaunt it—exult in it as a quality. So that they cry out at the suggestion that it is no more than a selfish vice; and finding truth where they had looked for the materials of another debauch of self-delusion, they moan aloud: they protest, and they demand as their sacred right that the bitter cup be taken from before them. They have moaned and protested at *A Child of the Jago*, and, craven and bewildered, any protest seemed good enough to them. And herein they have not wanted for allies among them that sit in committee-rooms, and tinker. For your professed philanthropist, following his own spirit, and seeing nothing, honestly resents the demonstration that his tinkering profits little. There is a story current in the East End of London, of a distracted lady who, being assailed with a request for the loan of a saucepan, defended herself in these words:—‘Tell yer mother I can’t lend ‘er the saucepan, consekince o’ ‘avin’ lent it to Mrs Brown, besides which I’m a-usin’ of it meself, an’ moreover it’s gone to be mended, an’ what’s more I ain’t got one.’ In a like spirit of lavish objection it has been proclaimed in a breath that I transgress:—because (1) I should not have written of the Jago in all the nakedness of truth; (2) my description is not in the least like; (3) moreover, it is exaggerated; (4) though it may be true, it is quite unnecessary, because the Jago was already quite familiar, and everybody knew all about it; (5) the Jago houses have been pulled down; and (6) there never was any such place as the Jago at all.

To objections thus handsomely variegated it is not easy to reply with the tripping brevity wherewith they may be stated; and truly it is little reply that they call for, except, perhaps, in so far as they may be taken to impugn the sincerity of my work and the accuracy of my picture. A few of the objectors have caught up enough of their wits to strive after a war in my own country. They take hold of my technical method, and accuse me of lack of 'sympathy'; they claim that if I write of the Jago I should do so 'even weeping.' Now, my technical method is my own, and is deliberately designed to achieve a certain result, as is the method of every man—painter, poet, sculptor, or novelist—who is not the slave and the plaything of his material. My tale is the tale of my characters, and I have learned better than to thrust myself and my emotions between them and my reader. The cant of the charge stares all too plainly from the face of it. It is not that these good people wish me to write 'even weeping': for how do they know whether I weep or not? No: their wish is, not that I shall weep, but that I shall weep obscenely in the public gaze. In other words, that I shall do their weeping for them, as a sort of emotional bedesman: that I shall make public parade of sympathy in their behalf, so that they may keep their own sympathy for themselves, and win comfort from the belief that they are eased of their just responsibility by vicarious snivelling.

But the protest, that my picture of the Jago is untrue, is another thing. For the most part it has found very vague expression, but there are instances of rash excursion into definiteness. Certain passages have been denoted as exaggerations—as impossibilities. Now, I must confess that, foreseeing such adventurous indiscretions, I had, for my own diversion, set *A Child of the Jago* with traps. For certain years I have lived in the East End of London, and have been,

not an occasional visitor, but a familiar and equal friend in the house of the East-End in all his degrees; for, though the steps between be smaller, there are more social degrees in the East End than ever in the West. In this experience I have seen and I have heard things that persons sitting in committee-rooms would call diabolical fable; nevertheless, I have seen them, and heard them. But it was none of my design to write of extreme instances: typical facts were all I wanted; these, I knew, would be met—or shirked—with incredulity; so that, whenever I saw reason to anticipate a charge of exaggeration—as for instance, in the matter of faction fighting—I made my typical incident the cold transcript of a simple fact, an ordinary, easy-going fact, a fact notorious in the neighbourhood, and capable of any amount of reasonable proof. If I touched my fact at all, it was to subdue it; that and no more. The traps worked well. Not one definite charge of exaggeration has been flung but it has been aimed at one of the normal facts I had provided as a target: not one. Sometimes the effect has had a humour of its own; as when a critic in a literary journal, beginning by selecting two of my norms as instances of ‘palpable exaggeration,’ went on to assure me that there was no need to describe such life as the life in the Jago, because it was already perfectly familiar to everybody.

Luckily I need not vindicate my accuracy. That has been done for me publicly by independent and altogether indisputable authority. In particular, the devoted vicar of the parish, which I have called the Jago, has testified quite unreservedly to the truth of my presentation. Others also, with special knowledge, have done the same; and though I refer to them, and am grateful for their support, it is with no prejudice to the validity of my own authority. For not only

have I lived in the East End of London (which one may do, and yet never see it) but observation is my trade.

I have remarked in more than one place the expression of a foolish fancy that because the houses of the Old Jago have been pulled down, the Jago difficulty has been cleared out of the way. That is far from being the case. The Jago, as mere bricks and mortar, is gone. But the Jago in flesh and blood still lives, and is crowding into neighbourhoods already densely over-populated.

In conclusion: the plan and the intention of my story made it requisite that, in telling it, I should largely adhere to fact; and I did so. If I write other tales different in scope and design, I shall adhere to fact or neglect it as may seem good to me: regardless of anybody's classification as a realist, or as anything else. For though I have made a suggestion, right or wrong, as to what a realist may be, whether I am one or not is no concern of mine; but the concern (if it be anybody's) of the tabulators and the watersifters.

A. M.

*February 1897*