

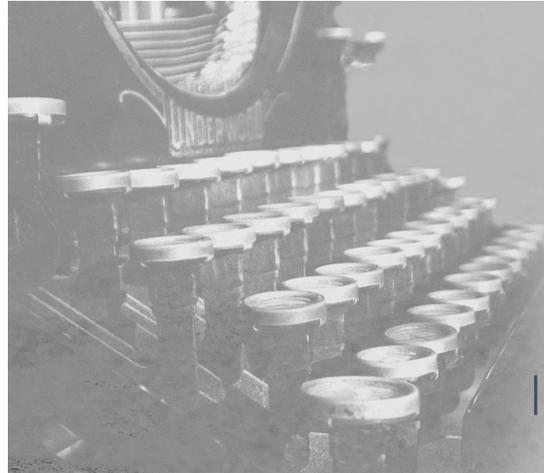
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IN DARKEST ENGLAND AND THE WAY OUT

CHAPTER 5: ON THE VERGE OF THE ABYSS

There is, unfortunately, no need for me to attempt to set out, however imperfectly, any statement of the evil case of the sufferers what we wish to help. For years past the Press has been filled with echoes of the "Bitter Cry of Outcast London," with pictures of "Horrible Glasgow," and the like. We have had several volumes describing "How the Poor Live" and I may therefore assume that all my readers are more or less cognizant of the main outlines a "Darkest England." My slum officers are living in the midst of it their reports are before me, and one day I may publish some more detailed account of the actual facts of the social condition of the Sunken Millions. But not now. All that must be taken as read. I only glance at the subject in order to bring into clear relief the salient points of our new Enterprise.

I have spoken of the houseless poor. Each of these represents a point in the scale of human suffering below that of those who have still contrived to keep a shelter over their heads. A home is a home, be it ever so low; and the desperate tenacity with which the poor will cling to the last wretched semblance of one is very touching. There are vile dens, fever-haunted and stenchful crowded courts, where the return of summer is dreaded because it means the unloosing of myriads of vermin which render night unbearable, which, nevertheless, are regarded at this moment as havens of rest by their hard-working occupants. They can scarcely be said to be furnished. A chair, a mattress, and a few miserable sticks constitute all the furniture of the single room in which they have to sleep, and breed, and die; but they cling to it as a drowning man to a half-submerged raft. Every week they contrive by pinching and scheming to raise the rent, for with them it is pay or go and they struggle to meet the collector as the sailor nerves himself to avoid being sucked under by the foaming wave. If at any time work fails or sickness comes they are liable to drop helplessly into the ranks of the homeless. It is bad for a single man to have to confront the struggle for life in the streets and Casual Wards. But how much more terrible must it be for the married man with his wife and children to be turned out into the streets. So long as the family has a lair into which it can creep at night, he keeps his footing; but when he loses that solitary foothold then arrives the time if there be such a thing as Christian compassion, for the helping hand to be held out to save him from the vortex that



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sucks him downward – ay, downward to the hopeless under-strata of crime and despair.

"The heart knoweth its own bitterness and the stranger inter-meddleth not therewith." But now and then out of the depths there sounds a bitter wail as of some strong swimmer in his agony as he is drawn under by the current. A short time ago a respectable man, a chemist in Holloway, fifty years of age, driven hard to the wall, tried to end it all by cutting his throat. His wife also cut her throat, and at the same time they gave strychnine to their only child. The effort failed, and they were placed on trial for attempted murder. In the Court a letter was read which the poor wretch had written before attempting his life:

MY DEAREST GEORGE, – Twelve months have I now passed of a most miserable and struggling existence, and I really cannot stand it any more. I am completely worn out, and relations who could assist me won't do any more, for such was uncle's last intimation. Never mind; he can't take his money and comfort with him, and in all probability will find himself in the same boat as myself. He never enquires whether I am starving or not. #3 – a mere flea-bite to him – would have put us straight, and with his security and good interest might have obtained me a good situation long ago. I can face poverty and degradation no longer, and would sooner die than go to the workhouse, whatever may be the awful consequences of the steps we have taken. We have, God forgive us, taken our darling Arty with us out of pure love and affection, so that the darling should never be cuffed about, or reminded or taunted with his heartbroken parents' crime. My poor wife has done her best at needle-work, washing, house-minding, etc., in fact, anything and everything that would bring in a shilling; but it would only keep us in semi-starvation. I have now done six weeks' travelling from morning till night, and not received one farthing for it, If that is not enough to drive you mad – wickedly mad – I don't know what is. No bright prospect anywhere; no ray of hope.

May God Almighty forgive us for this heinous sin, and have mercy on our sinful souls, is the prayer of your miserable, broken-hearted, but loving brother, Arthur. We have now done everything that we can possibly think of to avert this wicked proceeding, but can discover no ray of hope. Fervent prayer has availed us nothing; our lot is cast,



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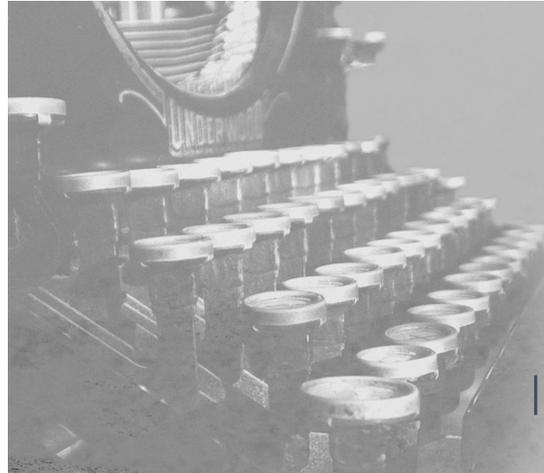
and we must abide by it. It must be God's will or He would have ordained it differently. Dearest Georgy, I am exceedingly sorry to leave you all, but I am mad – thoroughly mad. You, dear, must try and forget us, and, if possible, forgive us; for I do not consider it our own fault we have not succeeded. If you could get #3 for our bed it will pay our rent, and our scanty furniture may fetch enough to bury us in a cheap way. Don't grieve over us or follow us, for we shall not be worthy of such respect. Our clergyman has never called on us or given us the least consolation, though I called on him a month ago. He is paid to preach, and there he considers his responsibility ends, the rich excepted. We have only yourself and a very few others who care one pin what becomes of us, but you must try and forgive us, is the last fervent prayer of your devotedly fond and affectionate but broken-hearted and persecuted brother.

(Signed) R. A. O----.

That is an authentic human document – a transcript from the life of one among thousands who go down inarticulate into the depths, They die and make no sign, or, worse still, they continue to exist, carrying about with them, year after year, the bitter ashes of a life from which the furnace of misfortune has burnt away all joy, and hope, and strength. Who is there who has not been confronted by many despairing ones, who come, as Richard O---- went, to the clergyman, crying for help, and how seldom have we been able to give it them? It is unjust, no doubt, for them to blame the clergy and the comfortable well-to-do – for what can they do but preach and offer good advice? To assist all the Richard O----s' by direct financial advance would drag even Rothschild into the gutter. And what else can be done? Yet something else must be done if Christianity is not to be a mockery to perishing men.

Here is another case, a very common case, which illustrates how the Army of Despair is recruited.

Mr. T., Margaret Place, Gascoign Place, Bethnal Green, is a bootmaker by trade. Is a good hand, and has earned three shillings and sixpence to four shillings and sixpence a day. He was taken ill last Christmas, and went to the London Hospital; was there three months. A week after he had gone Mrs. T. had rheumatic fever, and was taken to Bethnal Green Infirmary, where she remained about three months. Directly after they



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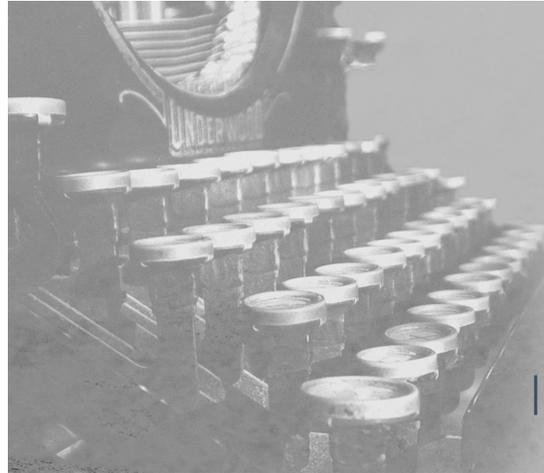
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had been taken ill, their furniture was seized for the three weeks' rent, which was owing. Consequently, on becoming convalescent, they were homeless. They came out about the same time. He went out to a lodging-house for a night or two, until she came out. He then had twopence, and she had sixpence, which a nurse had given her. They went to a lodging-house together, but the society there was dreadful. Next day he had a day's work, and got two shillings and sixpence, and on the strength of this they took a furnished room at tenpence per day (payable nightly). His work lasted a few weeks, when he was again taken ill, lost his job, and spent all their money. Pawned a shirt and apron for a shilling; spent that, too. At last pawned their tools for three shillings, which got them a few days' food and lodging. He is now minus tools and cannot work at his own job, and does anything he can. Spent their last twopence on a pen'orth each of tea and sugar. In two days they had a slice of bread and butter each, that's all. They are both very weak through want of food.

"Let things alone," the laws of supply and demand, and all the rest of the excuses by which those who stand on firm ground salve their consciences when they leave their brother to sink, how do they look when we apply them to the actual loss of life at sea? Does "Let things alone" man the lifeboat? Will the inexorable laws of political economy save the shipwrecked sailor from the boiling surf? They often enough are responsible for his disaster. Coffin ships are a direct result of the wretched policy of non-interference with the legitimate operations of commerce, but no desire to make it pay created the National Lifeboat Institution, no law of supply and demand actuates the volunteers who risk their lives to bring the shipwrecked to shore.

What we have to do is to apply the same principle to society. We want a Social Lifeboat Institution, a Social Lifeboat Brigade, to snatch from the abyss those who, if left to themselves, will perish as miserably as the crew of a ship that flounders in mid-ocean.

The moment that we take in hand this work we shall be compelled to turn our attention seriously to the question whether prevention is not better than cure. It is easier and cheaper, and in every way better, to prevent the loss of home than to have to re-create that home. It is better to keep a man out of the mire than to let him fall in first and then risk the chance of plucking him out. Any Scheme, therefore, that



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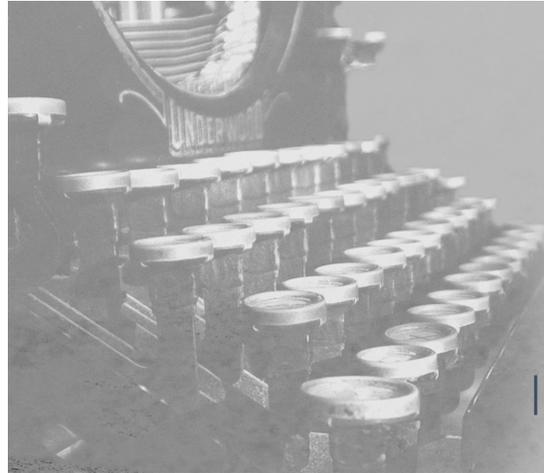
attempts to deal with the reclamation of the lost must tend to develop into an endless variety of ameliorative measures, of some of which I shall have somewhat to say hereafter. I only mention the subject here in order that no one may say I am blind to the necessity of going further and adopting wider plans of operation than those which I put forward in this book. The renovation of our Social System is a work so vast that no one of us, nor all of us put together, can define all the measures that will have to be taken before we attain even the Cab- Horse Ideal of existence for our children and children's children. All that we can do is to attack, in a serious, practical spirit the worst and most pressing evils, knowing that if we do our duty we obey the voice of God. He is the Captain of our Salvation. If we but follow where He leads we shall not want for marching orders, nor need we imagine that He will narrow the field of operations.

I am labouring under no delusions as to the possibility of inaugurating the Millennium by any social specific. In the struggle of life the weakest will go to the wall, and there are so many weak. The fittest, in tooth and claw, will survive. All that we can do is to soften the lot of the unfit and make their suffering less horrible than it is at present. No amount of assistance will give a jellyfish a backbone. No outside propping will make some men stand erect. All material help from without is useful only in so far as it develops moral strength within. And some men seem to have lost even the very faculty of self-help. There is an immense lack of common sense and of vital energy on the part of multitudes.

It is against Stupidity in every shape and form that we have to wage our eternal battle. But how can we wonder at the want of sense on the part of those who have had no advantages, when we see such plentiful absence of that commodity on the part of those who have had all the advantages.

How can we marvel if, after leaving generation after generation to grow up uneducated and underfed, there should be developed a heredity of incapacity, and that thousands of dull-witted people should be born into the world, disinherited before their birth of their share in the average intelligence of mankind?

Besides those who are thus hereditarily wanting in the qualities necessary to enable them to hold their own, there are the weak, the disabled, the aged, and the unskilled;



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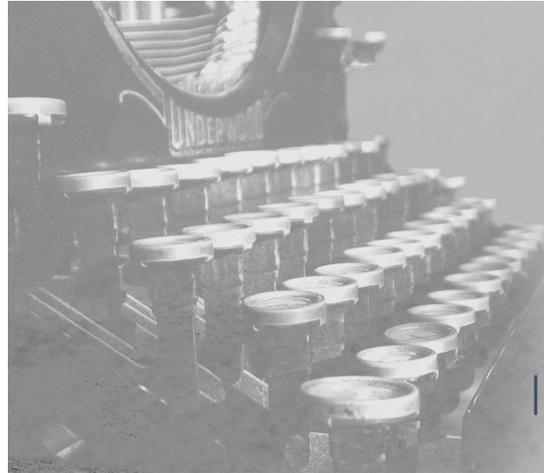
worse than all, there is the want of character. Those who have the best of reputation, if they lose their foothold on the ladder, find it difficult enough to regain their place.

What, then, can men and women who have no character do? When a master has the choice of a hundred honest men, is it reasonable to expect that he will select a poor fellow with tarnished reputation? All this is true, and it is one of the things that make the problem almost insoluble. And insoluble it is, I am absolutely convinced unless it is possible to bring new moral life into the soul of these people. This should be the first object of every social reformer, whose work will only last if it is built on the solid foundation of a new birth, to cry "You must be born again."

To get a man soundly saved it is not enough to put on him a pair of new breeches, to give him regular work, or even to give him a University education. These things are all outside a man, and if the inside remains unchanged you have wasted your labour. You must in some way or other graft upon the man's nature a new nature, which has in it the element of the Divine. All that I propose in this book is governed by that principle.

The difference between the method which seeks to regenerate the man by ameliorating his circumstances and that which ameliorates his circumstances in order to get at the regeneration of his heart, is the difference between the method of the gardener who grafts a Ribstone Pippin on a crab-apple tree and one who merely ties apples with string upon the branches of the crab. To change the nature of the individual, to get at the heart, to save his soul is the only real, lasting method of doing him any good. In many modern schemes of social regeneration it is forgotten that "it takes a soul to move a body, e'en to a cleaner sty," and at the risk of being misunderstood and misrepresented, I must assert in the most unqualified way that it is primarily and mainly for the sake of saving the soul that I seek the salvation of the body.

But what is the use of preaching the Gospel to men whose whole attention is concentrated upon a mad, desperate struggle to keep themselves alive? You might as well give a tract to a shipwrecked sailor who is battling with the surf which has drowned his comrades and threatens to drown him. He will not listen to you. Nay, he cannot hear you any more than a man whose head is underwater can listen to a



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sermon. The first thing to do is to get him at least a footing on firm ground, and to give him room to live. Then you may have a chance. At present you have none. And you will have all the better opportunity to find a way to his heart, if he comes to know that it was you who pulled him out of the horrible pit and the miry clay in which he was sinking to perdition.