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*My Life in the Underworld*

*A Reminiscence and a Confession*

“Speakin’ in general, I ’ave tried ’em all,  
The ’appy roads that take you o’er the world.  
Speakin’ in general, I ’ave found them good  
For such as cannot use one bed too long,  
But must get ’ence, the same as I ’ave done,  
An’ go observin’ matters till they die.”

—*Sestina of the Tramp-Royal*

*EDITOR’S NOTE*—“*My Life in the Underworld*” is not fiction, but an autobiographical narration of one of the most exciting periods of Mr. London’s remarkable career.

THERE is a woman in the state of Nevada to whom I once lied continuously, consistently, and shamelessly, for the matter of a couple of hours. I don’t want to apologize to her. Far be it from me. But I do want to explain. Unfortunately, I do not know her name, much less her present address. If her eyes should chance upon these lines, I hope she will write to me.

It was in Reno, Nevada, in the summer of 1892. Also, it was fair-time, and the town was filled with petty crooks and tin-horns, to say nothing of a vast horde of hungry hoboes. It was the hungry hoboes that made the town a “hungry” town. They “battered” the back doors of the homes of the citizens until the back doors became unresponsive.

A hard town for “scoffings,” was what the hoboes called it at that time. I know that I missed many a meal, in spite of the fact that I could “throw my feet” with the next one when it came to “slamming a gate” for a “poke-out” or a “set-down,” or hitting for a “light piece” on the street. Why, I was so hard put in that town, one day, that I gave the porter the slip and invaded the private car of some itinerant millionaire. The train started as I made the platform, and I headed for the aforesaid millionaire with the porter one jump behind and reaching for me. It was a dead heat, for I reached the millionaire at the same instant that the porter reached me. I had no time for formalities. “Gimme a quarter to eat on,” I blurted out. And as I live, that millionaire dipped into his pocket and gave me—just precisely a quarter. It is my conviction that he was so flabbergasted that he obeyed automatically, and it has been a matter of keen regret ever since, on my part, that I didn’t ask him for a dollar. I know that I’d have got it. I swung off the platform of that private car with the porter maneuvering to kick me in the face. He missed me. But I got the quarter! I got it!

But to return to the woman to whom I so shamelessly lied. It was in the evening of my last day in Reno. I had been out to the race-track watching the ponies run, and had missed my

dinner (*i. e.*, the mid-day meal). I was hungry, and, furthermore, a committee of public safety had just been organized to rid the town of just such hungry mortals as I. Already a lot of my brother hoboos had been gathered in by John Law, and I could hear the sunny valleys of California calling to me over the cold crests of the Sierras. Two acts remained for me to perform before I shook the dust of Reno from my feet. One was to catch the blind baggage on the west-bound overland that night. The other was first to get something to eat. Even youth will hesitate at an all-night ride, on an empty stomach, outside a train that is tearing the atmosphere through the snow-sheds, tunnels, and eternal snows of heaven-aspiring mountains.

But that something to eat was a hard proposition. I was “turned down” at a dozen houses. Sometimes I received insulting remarks and was informed of the barred domicile that would be mine if I had my just deserts. The worst of it was that such assertions were only too true. That was why I was pulling west that night.

“Of course I want work,” I bluffed.

“Don’t believe it,” he snorted.

“Try me,” I answered, warming to the bluff.

“All right,” he said. “Come to the corner of blank and blank streets”—I have forgotten the address—“to-morrow morning—you know where that burned building is—and I’ll put you to work tossing bricks.”

“All right, sir, I’ll be there.”

He grunted and went on eating. I waited. After a couple of minutes he looked up with an I-thought-you-were-gone expression on his face, and demanded,

“Well?”

“I—I am waiting for something to eat,” I said gently.

“I knew you wouldn’t work!” he roared.

He was right, of course; but his conclusion must have been reached by mind-reading, for his logic wouldn’t bear it out. But the beggar at the door must be humble, so I accepted his logic as I had accepted his morality.

“You see, I am now hungry,” I said, still gently. “To-morrow morning I shall be hungrier. Think how hungry I shall be when I have tossed bricks all day without anything to eat. Now, if you will give me something to eat, I’ll be in great shape for those bricks.”

He gravely considered my plea, at the same time going on eating, while his wife nearly trembled into propitiatory speech, but refrained.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” he said, between mouthfuls. “You come to work to-morrow, and in the middle of the day I’ll advance you enough for you dinner. That will show whether you are in earnest or not.”

“In the meantime—“ I began; but he interrupted.

But to return to the woman in Reno who opened her door to me in the deepening twilight. At the first glimpse of her kindly face I took my cue. I became a sweet, innocent, unfortunate lad. I couldn’t speak. I opened my mouth and closed it again. Never in my life before had I asked anyone for food. My embarrassment was painful, extreme. I was ashamed. I, who looked upon begging as a delightful whimsicality, thumbed myself over into a true son of Mrs. Grundy, burdened with all her bourgeois morality. Only the harsh pangs of the belly-need could compel me to do so degraded and ignoble a thing as beg for food. And into my face I strove to throw all the wan wistfulness of famished and ingenuous youth of mendicancy.

“You are hungry, my poor boy,” she said. I had made her speak first.

I nodded my head and gulped. “It is the first time I have ever—asked,” I faltered.

“Come right in.” The door swung open. “We have already finished eating, but the fire is burning, and I can get something up for you.” She looked at me closely when she got me into the light. “I wish my boy were as healthy and strong as you,” she said. “But he is not strong. He sometimes falls down. He fell down this afternoon and hurt himself badly, the poor dear.”

She mothered him with her voice, with an ineffable tenderness in it that I yearned to appropriate. I glanced at him. He sat across the table, slender and pale, his head swathed in bandages. He did not move, but his eyes, bright in the lamplight, were fixed upon me in a wondering stare.

“Just like my poor father,” I said. “He had the falling sickness. Some kind of vertigo. It puzzled the doctors.”

“He is dead?” she queried gently, setting before me half a dozen soft-boiled eggs.

“Dead,” I gulped. “Two weeks ago. I was with him when it happened. We were crossing the street together. He fell right down. He was never conscious again. They carried him into a drug store. He died there.”

And thereat I developed a pitiful tale of my father—how, after my mother’s death, he and I had gone to San Francisco from the ranch; how his pension (he was an old soldier), and the little other money he had, was not enough; and how he had tried book-canvassing. Also, I narrated my own woes during the few days after his death that I had spent alone and forlorn on the streets of San Francisco. While that good woman warmed up biscuits, fried bacon, and cooked more eggs, and while I kept pace with her in taking care of all that she placed before me, I enlarged the picture of that poor orphan boy and filled in the details. I became that poor boy. I believed in him as I believed in the beautiful eggs I was devouring. I could have wept for myself. I know the tears did get into my voice at times.

It was very effective. In fact, with every touch I added to the picture that kind soul gave me something else. She made up a lunch for me to carry away. She put in many boiled eggs, pepper and salt, and other things, and a big apple. She provided me with three pairs of thick red woolen socks. She gave me clean handkerchiefs and other things which I have since forgotten. And all the time she cooked more and more, and I ate more and more. I gorged like a savage; but then it was a far cry across the Sierras on a blind baggage, and I knew not when nor where I should find my next meal. And all the while, like a death’s-head at the feat, silent and motionless, her own unfortunate boy sat and stared at me across the table. I suppose I represented to him mystery and romance and adventure—all that was denied the feeble flicker of life that was in him. And yet I could not forbear, once or twice, from wondering if he saw through me down to the bottom of my mendacious heart.

“But where are you going?” she asked.

“Salt Lake City,” said I. “I have a sister there, a married sister. Her husband is a plumber, a contracting plumber.”

Now, I knew that contracting plumbers were usually credited with making lots of money. But I had spoken. It was up to me to qualify.

“They would have sent me the money for my fare if I had asked for it,” I explained, “but they have had sickness and business troubles. His partner cheated him. And so I wouldn’t write for the money. I knew I could make my way there somehow. I let them think I had enough to get me to Salt Lake City. She is lovely, and so kind. She was always kind to me. I guess I’ll go into the shop and learn the trade. She has two daughters. They are younger than I. One is only a baby.”

Of all my married sisters that I have distributed among the cities of the United States, that Salt Lake sister is my favorite. She is quite real, too. When I tell about her I can see her and her two little girls and her plumber husband. She is a large, motherly woman, just verging on beneficent stoutness—the kind, you know, that always cooks nice things and that never gets angry. She is a brunette. Her husband is a quiet, easy-going fellow. Sometimes I almost know him quite well. And who knows but some day I may meet him?

On the other hand, I have a feeling of certitude within me that I shall never meet in the flesh my many parents and grandparents—you see, I invariably killed them off. Heart disease was my favorite way of getting rid of my mother, though on occasion I did away with her by means of consumption, pneumonia, and typhoid fever.

I hope that woman in Reno will read these lines and forgive me my gracelessness and unveracity. I do not apologize, for I am unashamed. It was youth, delight in life, zest for experience, that brought me to her door. It did me good. It taught me the intrinsic kindness of human nature. I hope it did her good. Anyway, she may get a good laugh out of it, now that she learns the real inwardness of the situation.

To her my story was “true.” She believed in me and all my family, and she was filled with solicitude for the dangerous journey I must make ere I won to Salt Lake City. This solicitude nearly brought me to grief. Just as I was leaving, my arms full of lunch and my pockets bulging with fat woolen socks, she bethought herself of a nephew, or uncle, or relative of some sort, who was in the railway mail service, and who, moreover, would come through that night on the very train on which I was going to steal my ride. The very thing! She would take me down to the station, tell him my story, and get him to hide me in the mail-car. Thus, without danger or hardship, I would be carried straight through to Ogden. Salt Lake City was only a few miles further on. My heart sank. She grew excited as she developed the plan, and with my heart sinking I had to feign unbounded gladness and enthusiasm at this solution of my difficulties.

Solution! Why, I was bound west that night, and here I was being trapped into going east. It *was* a trap, and I hadn't the heart to tell her that it was all a miserable lie. And while I made believe that I was delighted, I was busy racking my brains for some way to escape. But there was no way. She would see me into the mail-car—she said so herself—and then that mail-clerk relative of hers would carry me to Ogden. And then I would have to beat my way back over all those hundreds of miles of desert.

But luck was with me that night. Just about the time she was getting ready to put on her bonnet and accompany me, she discovered that she had made a mistake. Her mail-clerk relative was not scheduled to come through that night. His run had been changed; he would not come through until two nights afterward. I was saved, for of course my boundless youth would never permit me to wait those two days. I optimistically assured her that I'd get to Salt Lake City quicker if I started immediately, and I departed with her blessings and best wishes ringing in my ears.

But those woolen socks were great. I know. I wore a pair of them that night on the blind baggage of the overland, and that overland went west.