ARTHUR MORRISON

TO LONDON TOWN

Arthur Morrison

To London Town

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TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

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By the same Author,

TALES OF MEAN STREETS	1 vol.
A CHILD OF THE JAGO	1 vol.

TO LONDON TOWN

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BY

ARTHUR MORRISON,

AUTHOR OF “A CHILD OF THE JAGO,” ETC. ETC.

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LEIPZIG
BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ
1899.

TO

LADY DOROTHY NEVILL.

Footnote

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I designed this story, and, indeed, began to write it, between the publication of *Tales of Mean Streets* and that of *A Child of the Jago*, to be read together with those books: not that I pretend to figure in all three—much less in any one of them—a complete picture of life in the eastern parts

of London, but because they are complementary, each to the two others.

A. M.

TO LONDON TOWN.

I.

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THE afternoon had slumbered in the sun, but now the August air freshened with an awakening breath, and Epping Thicks stirred and whispered through a myriad leaves. Far away beyond the heaving greenwoods distant clouds floated flat on the upper air, and a richer gold grew over the hills as the day went westward. This way and that, between and about trees and undergrowth, an indistinct path went straggling by easy grades to the lower ground by Wormleyton Pits; an errant path whose every bend gave choice of green passes toward banks of heather and bracken. It was by this way that an old man and a crippled child had reached the Pits. He was a small old man, white-haired, and a trifle bent; but he went his way with a sturdy tread, satchel at side and butterfly-net in hand. As for the child, she too went sturdily enough, but she hung from a crutch by the right shoulder, and she moved with a jog and a swing. The hand that gripped the crutch gripped also a little bunch of meadowsweet, and the other clasped tight against her pinafore a tattered old book that would else have fallen to pieces.

Once on the heathery slade, the old man lifted the strap over his head and put the satchel down by a tree clump at the wood's edge.

“’Nother rest for you, Bess,” he said, as he knelt to open his bag. “I’m goin’ over the pits pretty close to-day.” He packed his pockets with pill-boxes, a poison bottle, and a battered, flat tin case; while the child, with a quick rejection of the crutch, sat and watched.

The old man stood, slapped one pocket after another, and then, with a playful sweep of the net-gauze across the child’s face, tramped off among the heather. “Good luck, gran’dad!” she cried after him, and settled on her elbow to read.

The book needed a careful separation, being open at back as at front; likewise great heed lest the leaves fell into confusion: for, since they were worn into a shape more oval than rectangular, the page numbers had gone, and in places corners of text had gone too. But the main body of the matter, thumbed and rubbed, stood good for many a score more readings; and the story was *The Sicilian Romance*.

Round about the pits and across the farther ground of Genesis Slade the old man pushed his chase. Now letting himself cautiously down the side of a pit; now stealing softly among bracken, with outstretched net; and again running his best through the wiry heather. Always working toward sun and wind, and often standing watchfully still, his eye alert for a fluttering spot amid the flood of colour about him.

Meantime the little cripple conned again the familiar periods of the old romance. Few, indeed, of its ragged leaves but might have been replaced, if lost, from pure memory; few, indeed, for that matter, of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* or of *Susan Hopley*, or of *The Scottish Chiefs*: worn volumes all, in her grandfather’s little shelf of a dozen or

fifteen books. So that now, because of old acquaintance, the tale was best enjoyed with many pauses; pauses filled with the smell of the meadowsweet, and with the fantasy that abode in the woods. For the jangle of a herd-bell was the clank of a knight’s armour, the distant boom of a great gun at Waltham Abbey told of the downfall of enchanted castles, and in the sudden plaint of an errant cow she heard the growling of an ogre in the forest.

The western hillsides grew more glorious, and the sunlight, peeping under heavy boughs, flung along the sward, gilt the tree-boles whose shadows veined it, and lit nooks under bushes where the wake-robin raised its scarlet mace of berries. The old man had dropped his net, and for awhile had been searching the herbage. It was late in the day for butterflies, but fox-moth caterpillars were plenty among the heather; as well as others. Thus Bessy read and dreamed, and her grandfather rummaged the bushes till the sunlight was gathered up from the turf under the trees, and lifted from the tallest spire among the agrimony, as the sun went beyond the hill-tops. Then at last the old man returned to his satchel.

“The flies ain’t much,” he observed, as Bessy looked up, “but for trade it’s best not to miss anything: it’s always what you’re shortest of as sells; and the blues was out late to-day. But I’ve got luck with caterpillars. If they go all right I ought to have a box-full o’ Rosy Marbled out o’ these!”

“Rosy Marbled! It’s a late brood then. And so long since you had any!”

“Two year; and this is the only place for ’em.” The old man packed his bag and slung it across his back. “We’ll see

about tea now,” he added, as the child rose on her crutch; “but we’ll keep open eyes as we go.”

Over the slade they took their way, where the purple carpet was patterned with round hollows, black with heather-ash and green with star-moss; by the edges of the old gravel-pits, overhung with bramble and bush; and so into more woods.

A jay flew up before them, scolding angrily. Now and again a gap among the trees let through red light from beyond Woodredon. Again and again the old man checked his walk, sometimes but to drop once more into his even tramp, sometimes to stop, and sometimes to beat the undergrowth and to shake branches. To any who saw there was always a vaguely familiar quality in old May’s walk; ever a patient plod, and, burdened or not, ever an odd suggestion of something carried over shoulder; matters made plain when it was learned that the old man had been forty years a postman.

Presently as they walked they heard shrieks, guffaws, and a discordant singing that half-smothered the whine of a concertina. The noise was the louder as they went, and when they came where the white of a dusty road backed the tree-stems, they heard it at its fullest. Across the way was an inn, and by its side a space of open ground whereon some threescore beanfeasters sported at large. Many were busy at kiss-in-the-ring, some waved branches torn from trees, others stood up empty bottles and flung more bottles at them; they stood, sat, ran, lay, and rolled, but each made noise of some sort, and most drank. Plainly donkey-riding

had palled, for a man and a boy had gathered their half-dozen donkeys together, and were driving them off.

The people were Londoners, as Bessy knew, for she had often seen others. She had forgotten London herself—all of it but a large drab room with a row of little beds like her own, each bed with a board on it, for toys; and this, too, she would have forgotten (for she was very little indeed then) but that a large and terrible gentleman had come every day and hurt her bad leg. It was the Shadwell Hospital. But these were Londoners, and Bessy was a little afraid of them, and conceived London to be a very merry and noisy place, very badly broken, everywhere, by reason of the Londoners. Other people, also, came in waggonettes, and were a little quieter, and less gloriously bedecked. She had seen such a party earlier in the day. Probably they were not real Londoners, but folk from parts adjoining. But these—these were Londoners proper, wearing each other's hats, with paper wreaths on them.

"Wayo, old 'un!" bawled one, as the old man, net in hand, crossed toward the wood opposite; "bin ketchin' tiddlers?" And he turned to his companions with a burst of laughter and a jerk of the thumb. "D'year, Bill! 'Ere's yer ole gran'father ketchin' tiddlers! Why doncher keep 'im out o' mischief?" And every flushed face, doubly reddened by the setting sun, turned and opened its mouth in a guffaw. "You'll cop it for gittin' yer trouseys wet!" screamed a woman. And somebody flung a lump of crust.

Bessy jogged the faster into the wood, and in its shadow her grandfather, smiling doubtfully, said, "They like their joke, some of 'em, don't they? But it's always 'tiddlers'!"

It grew dusk under the trees, and the sky was pale above. They came to where the ground fell away in a glen that was almost a trench, and a brook ran in the ultimate furrow. On the opposing hill a broad green ride stood like a wall before them, a deep moss of trees clinging at each side. Here they turned, and, where the glen widened, a cottage was to be seen on sloping ground, with a narrow roadway a little beyond it. A whitewashed cottage, so small that there seemed scarce a score of tiles on its roof; one of the few scattered habitations holding its place in the forest by right of ancient settlement. A little tumult of garden tumbled about the cottage—a jostle of cabbages, lavender, onions, wallflowers and hollyhock, confined, as with difficulty, by a precarious fence, patched with wood in every form of manufacture and in every stage of decay.

“I expect mother and Johnny finished tea long ago,” Bessy remarked, her eyes fixed on the cottage. “Why there’s a light!”

The path they went by grew barer of grass as it neared the cottage, and as they trod it, men’s voices could be heard from within, and a woman’s laughter.

“Sounds like visitors!” the old man exclaimed. “That’s odd. I wonder who . . . ”

“There you are then, father!” came a female voice from the door. “Here’s Uncle Isaac an’ a gentleman come to see us.” It was Bessy’s mother who spoke—a pleasant, fresh, active woman in a print dress, who stood in the doorway as the old man set back the gate.

The door opened into the living-room, where sat two men, while a boy of fourteen squeezed, abashed and a trifle

sulky, in a corner. There was a smell of bad cigar, which had almost, but not quite, banished the wonted smell of the room; a smell in some degree due to camphor, though, perhaps, more to caterpillar; for the walls were hidden behind boxes and drawers of divers shapes and sizes, and before the window and in unexpected places on the floor stood other boxes, covered with muslin, nurseries for larvæ, pupæ, and doomed butterflies. And so many were these things that the room, itself a mere box, gave scant space to the three people and the little round table that were in it; wherefore Bessy's mother remained in the doorway, and Uncle Isaac, when he rose, took a very tall hat from the floor and clapped it on his head for lack of other safe place; for the little table sustained a load of cups and saucers. Uncle Isaac was a small man, though with a large face; a face fringed about with grey wisps of whisker, and characterised by wide and glassy eyes and a great tract of shaven upper lip.

"Good evenin', Mr. May, good evenin'!" said Uncle Isaac, shaking hands with the air of a man faithful to a friend in defiance of the world. "This is my friend Mr. Butson."

Mr. Butson was a tall, rather handsome man of forty or thereabout, with curly hair and whiskers, and he greeted the old man with grum condescension.

"Mr. Butson," Uncle Isaac continued, with a wave of the hand, "is a gentleman at present in connection with the steamboat profession, though above it by fam'ly and inclination. Mr. Butson an' me 'as bin takin' a day's 'olludy with a seleck party by name of beanfeast, in brakes."

“O yes,” responded old May, divesting himself of his bag; “we passed some of ’em by the Dun Cow, an’ very merry they was, too, with concertinas, an’ kiss-in-the-ring, an’ what not—very gay.”

“O damn, no,” growled the distinguished Butson. “Not that low lot. He means that coster crowd in vans,” he added, for Uncle Isaac’s enlightenment. “I ain’t fell as low as that. Lor, no.” He sucked savagely at the butt of his cigar, found it extinct, looked vainly for somewhere to fling it, and at last dropped it into a teacup.

“No, Mr. May, no; not them lot,” Uncle Isaac said, with a touch of grave reproof. “As a man of some little property meself, an’ in company of Mr. Butson, by nature genteel-disposed, I should be far from mixin’ with such. We come down with the shipwrights an’ engineers from Lawsonses. That was prob’ly Mr. May’s little joke, Mr. Butson. Mr. May is a man of property hisself, besides a man of science, as I think I told you. This ’ere land an’ residence bein’ in pint. If any man was to come an’ say to Mr. May, ‘Git out o’ that property, Mr. May,’ what would the lawr say to that man? Nullavoid. That’s what the lawr ’ud say. It ’ud say, ‘Git out yerself, your claim’s nullavoid.’” Uncle Isaac, checking a solemn thump at the table just in time to save the tea-cups, took his hat off instead, and put it on again.

Mr. Butson grunted “Ah!” and Mrs. May, taking the net, squeezed in, with Bessy behind her. “I’ll put a few o’ these boxes on the stairs, an’ make more room,” she said. “The kettle’s still boiling in the backhouse, an’ I’ll make some more tea.”

Bessy had a habit of shyness in presence of strangers, and Uncle Isaac ranked as one, for it was two years at least since he had been there before. Indeed, what she remembered of him then made her the shyer. For he had harangued her very loudly on the gratitude she owed her grandfather, calling her a cripple very often in course of his argument, and sometimes a burden. She knew that she was a cripple and a burden, but to be held tightly by the arm and told so, by a gentleman with such a loud voice and such large eyes as Uncle Isaac, somehow inclined her to cry. So now, as soon as might be, she joined her brother, and the two retreated into the shadowy corner between the stairfoot and the backhouse door.

The old butterfly-hunter, too, was shy in his more elderly way. Beyond his widowed daughter-in-law and her two children he had scarce an acquaintance, or at least none more familiar than the naturalists in London to whom he sold his specimens. So that now, in presence of this very genteel Mr. Butson, who, he feared, was already disgusted at the humble character of the establishment, he made but a hollow meal. A half-forgotten notion afflicted him, that it was proper to drink tea in only one of two possible ways; but whether from the cup or from the saucer he could not resolve himself. Mr. Butson had finished his tea, so that his example was lacking: though indeed the lees in his saucer seemed to offer a hint—a hint soon triumphantly confirmed by Uncle Isaac, who was nothing averse from a supplementary cup, and who emptied it straightway into his saucer and gulped ardently, glaring fearfully over the edge. Whereat his host drank from the saucer also, and took heed

to remember for the future. Still he was uncomfortable, and a little later he almost blushed at detecting himself inhospitably grateful for signs that Mr. Butson began to tire of the visit. Meanwhile he modestly contributed little to the conversation.

“No,” said Mr. Butson gloomily after a long pause, and in reply to nothing in particular, “*I* ain’t a man of property. I wish I was. If people got what they was brought up to—but there!” He stuck his hands lower in his pockets and savagely regarded vacancy.

“Mr. Butson’s uncle,” said Uncle Isaac, “is a mayor. A mayor. An’ ’is other relations is of almost equal aristocracy. But ’e won’t ’ave nothin’ to say to ’em, not a word. It’s jist blood—pride o’ breedin’. But what I say is, it may be proper self-respeck, but it ain’t proper self-justice. It ain’t self-justice, in my way o’ puttin’ it. Why ’e won’t even name ’em! Won’t name ’em, Mr. May!”

“Won’t he?” the old man answered, rather tamely, “dear, dear!” Mr. Butson laid his head back, jerked his chin, and snorted scorn at the ceiling.

“No—won’t as much as name ’em, such is ’is lawfty contemp’. Otherwise, what ’ud be my path of dooty? My path of dooty on behalf of self-justice to Mr. Butson would be to see ’em an’ put a pint o’ argument. ’Ere, I puts it, is ’im, an’ ’ere is me. ’Ere is Mr. ’Enery Butson, your very dootiful relation of fash’nable instinks, an’ a engineer than which none better though much above it, an’ unsuitably enchained by worldly circumstances in the engine-room of a penny steamer.” (Here Mr. Butson snorted again.) “Likewise ’ere is me, a elderly man of some small property, an’ a shipwright

of practical experience. Them circumstances bein’ the case, cons’kently, what more nachral an’ proper than a partnership—*with* capital. That’s ’ow I’d put the pint; a partnership *with* capital.”

“Jus’ so,” said old May. And seeing that the other still paused, he added “Of course.”

“But ’e’s proud—proud!” said Uncle Isaac, shaking his head plaintively.

“P’raps I am proud,” Mr. Butson admitted candidly, “I s’pose I got my faults. But I wouldn’t take a penny from ’em—not if they was to beg me on their knees. Why I’d sooner be be’olding to strangers!”

“Ah, that ’e would,” sighed Uncle Isaac. “But it ain’t self-justice. No, it ain’t self-justice!”

“It’s self-respect, any’ow,” said Mr. Butson sullenly. “If they like to treat me unnatural, let ’em.”

“Ah,” observed Uncle Isaac, “some fam’lies is unnachral an’ some is nachral, an’ there’s a deal o’ difference between ’em. Look at Mr. May now. ’E ain’t altogether in my family, though my niece’s father-in-law by marriage. But what nachralness! His son was a engineer in yer own trade, Mr. Butson,—fitter at Maidment’s. ’E left my niece a widder, cons’kence of a coat-tail in a cog wheel. What does Mr. May do? Why ’e shows ’is nachralness. ’E brings ’er an’ ’er children down ’ere on ’is own free’old residence, an’ cons’kently—’ere they are. Look at that!”

It was a principle with Uncle Isaac to neglect no opportunity of reciting at large the excellences of any person of the smallest importance with whom he might be acquainted; or the excellences which that person might be

supposed to desire credit for: if in his actual presence, so much the better. Nothing could be cheaper, and on the whole it paid very well. At worst, it advertised an amiable character; and there remained off-chances of personal benefit. Moreover the practice solidified Uncle Isaac's reputation among his acquaintances. For here, quoth each in his turn, was plainly a man of sagacious discernment. The old postman, however, was merely uneasy. To his mind it was nothing but a matter of course that when his son died, the widow and children should come under his own roof, and it was as a matter of course that he had brought them there. But Bessy's mother said simply:—"Yes, gran'dad's been a good one to us, always." She, as well as the children, called him "gran'dad."

"Yes," proceeded Uncle Isaac, "an' 'im with as much to think about as a man of edication too—wonderful. Why there's nothink as 'e don't know in astronomy an'—an'—an' insectonomy. Nothink!"

"No, not astronomy," interjected old May, a little startled by both counts of the imputation. "Not astronomy, Mr. Mundy."

"I say yes," answered Uncle Isaac, with an emphatic slap on the knee. "Modesty under a bushel's all very well, Mr. May, all very well, but I know—I know! Astronomy, an' medicamedica an' all the other classics. I know! Ah, I'd give best part o' my small property, sich as it is, for 'alf your edication, Mr. May!"

It was generally agreed in the family that Uncle Isaac was very "close" as to this small property of his. Nothing could induce him to speak of it with any particularity of detail, and

opinions varied as to its character. Still, whatever it was, it sufficed to gain Uncle Isaac much deference and consideration—the more, probably, because of its mysterious character; a deference and a consideration which Uncle Isaac could stimulate from time to time by cloudy allusions to altering his will.

“Well,” observed Mr. Butson rising from his chair, “education never done me much good.”

“No, unforchnately!” commented Uncle Isaac.

“An’ I’d prefer property meself.” Mr. Butson made toward the door, and Uncle Isaac prepared to follow. At this moment a harsh female voice suddenly screamed from the darkness without. “Lor’! I almost fell over a blessed ’ouse!” it said, and there was a shrill laugh. “We’ll ask ’em the way back.”

Old May stepped over the threshold at the sound; but the magnificence was stricken from the face of Mr. Butson. His cheeks paled, his mouth and eyes opened together, and he shrank back, even toward the stairfoot. Nobody marked him, however, but the children, for attention was directed without.

“Djear! which way to the Dun Cow?”

“See the lane?” answered the old postman. “Follow that to the right an’ you’ll come to it. It’s a bit farther than through the wood, but ye can’t go wrong.”

“Right!” There were two women and a man. The screaming woman said something to the others in a quieter tone, in which, however, the word “tiddlers” was plain to hear, and there was a laugh. “Good-night, ole chap,” she bawled back. “Put ’em in a jam-pot with a bit o’ water-creese!”

“Full o’ their games!” remarked the old man with a tolerant smile, as he turned toward the door. “That was the person as said I’d catch it for gettin’ my clothes wet, as we came past the Dun Cow.”

The voices of the beanfeasters abated and ceased, and now Mr. Butson left no doubt of his readiness to depart. “Come,” he said, with chap-fallen briskness, “we’ll ’ave to git back to the others; they’ll be goin’.” He took leave with so much less dignity and so much more haste than accorded with his earlier manner that Mr. May was a trifle puzzled, though he soon forgot it.

“Good-night, Mr. May, I wish you good-night,” said Uncle Isaac, shaking hands impressively. “I’ve greatly enjoyed your flow of conversation, Mr. May.” He made after the impatient Butson, stopped half-way to the gate and called gently:—“Nan!”

“Yes, uncle,” Mrs. May replied, stepping out to him. “What is it?”

Uncle Isaac whispered gravely in her ear, and she returned and whispered to the old man. “Of course—certainly,” he said, looking mightily concerned, as he re-entered the cottage.

Mrs. May reached a cracked cup from a shelf, and, turning over a few coppers, elicited a half-crown. With this she returned to Uncle Isaac.

“I’ll make a note of it,” said Uncle Isaac as he pocketed the money, “and send a postal-order.”

“O, don’t trouble about that, Uncle Isaac!” For Uncle Isaac, with the small property, must not be offended in a matter of a half-crown.

“What? Trouble?” he ejaculated, deeply pained. “To pay my—”

“’Ere—come on!” growled Mr. Butson savagely from the outer gloom. “Come on!” And they went together, taking the lane in the direction opposite to that lately used by the noisy woman.

“Well,” old May observed, “we don’t often have visitors, an’ I was glad to see your Uncle Isaac, Nan. An’ Mr. Butson, too,” he added impartially.

“Yes,” returned Bessy’s mother innocently. “Such a gentleman, isn’t he?”

“There’s one thing I forgot,” the old man said suddenly. “I might ha’ asked ’em to take a drop o’ beer ’fore they went.”

“They had some while they was waitin’ for tea. An’—an’ I don’t think there’s much left.” She dragged a large tapped jar from under the breeding-box at the window, and it was empty.

“Ah!” was all the old man’s comment, as he surveyed the jar thoughtfully.

Presently he turned into the back-house and emerged with a tin pot and a brush. “I’m a goin’ treaclin’ a bit,” he said. “Come, Johnny?”

The boy pulled his cap from his pocket, fetched a lantern, and was straightway ready, while Bessy sat to her belated tea.

The last pale light lay in the west, and the evening offered up an oblation of sweet smells. All things that feed by night were out, and nests were silent save for once and again a sleepy twitter. Every moment another star peeped, and then one more. The boy and the old man walked up the

slope among the trees, pausing now at one, now at another, to daub the bark with the mixture of rum and treacle that was in the pot.

“It’s always best to be careful where you treacle when there’s holiday folk about,” said Johnny’s grandfather. “They don’t understand it. Often I’ve treacled a log or a stump and found a couple sittin’ on it when I came back—with new dresses, and sich. It’s no good explainin’—they think it’s all done for practical jokin’. It’s best to go on an’ take no notice. I’ve heard ’em say:—’Don’t the country smell lovely?’—meanin’ the smell o’ the rum an’ treacle they was a-sittin’ on. But when they find it—lor, the language I *have* heard! Awful! . . . ”

The boy was quiet almost all the round. Presently he said, “Gran’dad, do you *really* like that likeness I made of mother?”

“Like it, my boy? Why o’ course. It’s a nobby picture!”

“Uncle Isaac said it was bad.”

“O!” There was a thoughtful pause while they tramped toward the next tree. “That’s only Uncle Isaac’s little game, Johnny. You mustn’t mind that. It’s a nobby picture.”

“I don’t believe Uncle Isaac knows anything about it,” said the boy vehemently. “I think he’s ignorant.”

“Here, Johnny, Johnny!” cried his grandfather. “That won’t do, you know. Not at all. You mustn’t say things like that.”

“Well, that’s what I *think*, gran’dad. An’ I know he says things wrong. When he came before he said that ship I drew was bad—an’ I—I very near cried.” (He did cry, but that was in secret, and not to be confessed.) “But now,” Johnny went