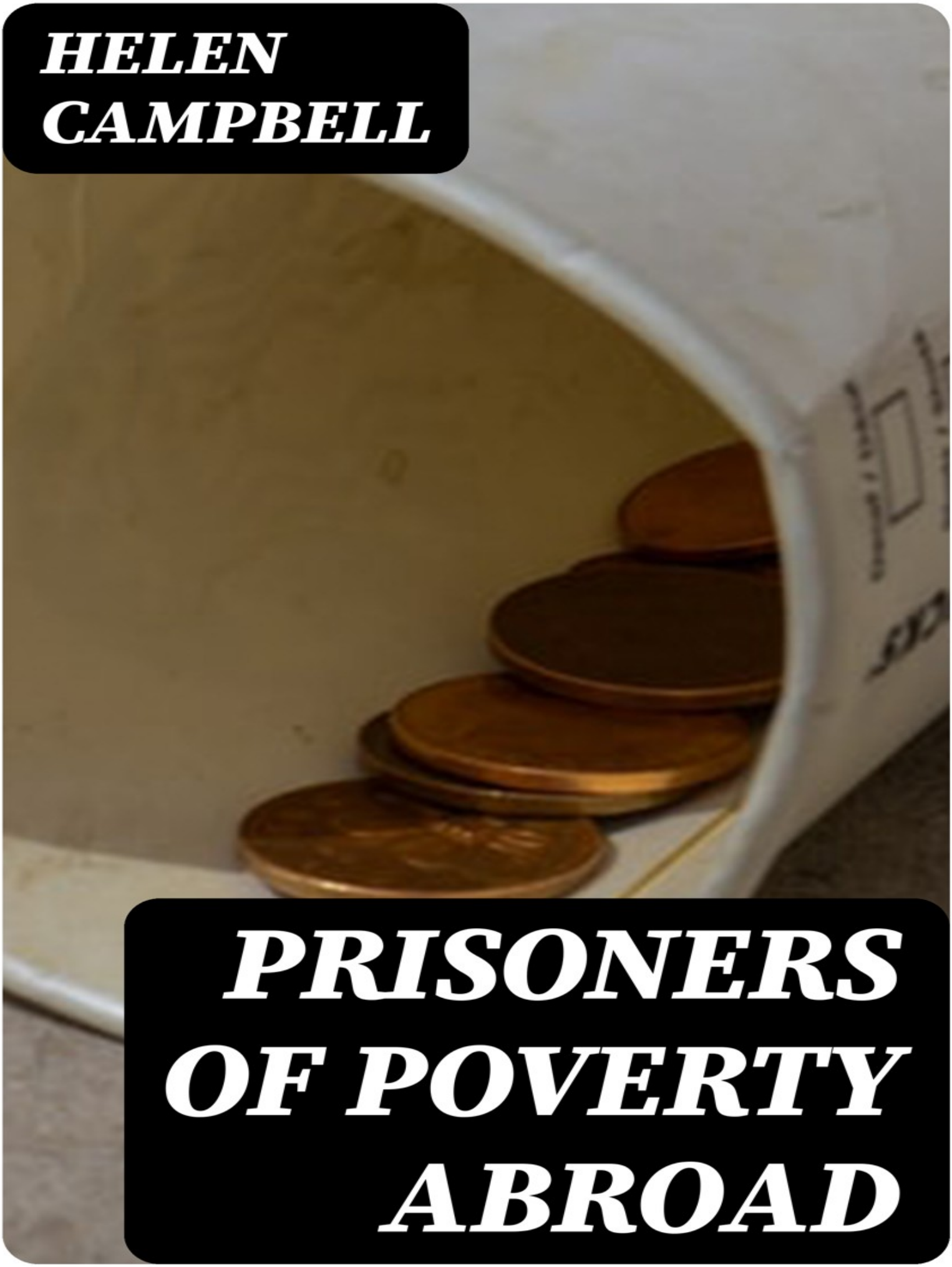
HELEN CAMPBELL



PRISONERS OF POVERTY ABROAD

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Prisoners of Poverty Abroad

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PRISONERS OF POVERTY ABROAD.

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CHAPTER I.

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BOTH SIDES OF THE SEA.

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With the ending of the set of studies among the working-women of New York, begun in the early autumn of 1886 and continued through several months of 1887, came the desire to know something of comparative conditions abroad, and thus be better able to answer questions constantly put, as to the actual status of women as workers, and of their probable future in these directions. There were many additional reasons for continuing a search, in itself a heart-sickening and utterly repellant task. One by one, the trades open to women, over ninety in number, had given in their returns, some of the higher order meaning good wages, steady work and some chance of bettering conditions. But with the great mass of workers, the wages had, from many causes, fallen below the point of subsistence, or kept so near it that advance was impossible, and the worker, even when fairly well trained, faced a practically hopeless future.

The search began with a bias against rather than for the worker, and the determination to do strictest justice to employer as well as employed. Long experience had taught what was to be expected from untrained, unskilled laborers, with no ambition or power to rise. Approaching the subject with the conviction that most of the evil admitted to exist must be the result of the worker's own defective training and inability to make the best and most of the wages

received, it very soon became plain that, while this remained true, deeper causes were at work, and that unseen forces must be weighed and measured before just judgment could be possible. No denunciation of grasping employers answered the question why they grasped, and why men who in private relations showed warm hearts and the tenderest care for those nearest them became on the instant, when faced by this problem of labor, deaf and blind to the sorrow and struggle before them.

That the system was full of evils was freely admitted whenever facts were brought home and attention compelled. But the easy-going American temperament is certain that the wrong of to-day will easily become righted by to-morrow, and is profoundly sceptical as to the existence of any evil of which this is not true.

"It's pretty bad, yes, I know it's pretty bad," said one large employer of women, and his word was the word of many others. "But we're not to blame. I don't want to grind 'em down. It's the system that's wrong, and we are its victims. Competition gets worse and worse. Machinery is too much for humanity. I've been certain of that for a good while, and so, of course, these hands have to take the consequences."

Nothing better indicates the present status of the worker than this very phrase "hands." Not heads with brains that can think and plan, nor souls born to grow into fulness of life, but hands only; hands that can hold needle or grasp tool, or follow the order of the brain to which they are bond-servants, each pulse moving to the throb of the great engine which drives all together, but never guided by any will of brain or joy of soul in the task of the day. There has been a time in the story of mankind when hand and brain worked together. In every monument of the past on this English soil, even at the topmost point of springing arch or lofty pillar, is tracery and carving as careful and cunning as

if all eyes were to see and judge it as the central point and test of the labor done. Has the nineteenth century, with its progress and its boast, no possibility of such work from any hand of man, and if not, where has the spirit that made it vanished, and what hope may men share of its return? Not one, if the day's work must mean labor in its most exhausting form; for many women, fourteen to sixteen hours at the sewing machine, the nerve-force supplied by rank tea, and the bit of bread eaten with it, the exhausted bodies falling at last on whatever may do duty for bed, with no hope that the rising sun will bring release from trial or any gleam of a better day.

With each week of the long search the outlook became more hopeless. Here was this army crowding into the great city, packed away in noisome tenement houses, ignorant, blind, stupid, incompetent in every fibre, and yet there as factors in the problem no man has yet solved. If this was civilization, better barbarism with its chance of sunshine and air, free movement and natural growth. What barbarism at its worst could hold such joyless, hopeless, profitless labor, or doom its victims to more lingering deaths? Admitting the almost impossibility of making them over, incased as they are in ignorance and prejudice, this is simply another count against the social order which has accepted such results as part of its story, and now looks on, speculating, wondering what had better be done about it.

The philanthropist has endeavored to answer the question, and sought out many devices for alleviation, struggling out at last to the conviction that prevention must be attempted, and pausing bewildered before the questions involved in prevention. For them there has been active and unceasing work, their brooms laboring as vainly as Mrs. Partington's against the rising tide of woe and want and fruitless toil, each wave only the forerunner of mightier and more

destructive ones, while the world has gone its way, casting abundant contributions toward the workers, but denying that there was need for agitation or speculation as to where or how the next crest might break. There were men and women who sounded an alarm, and were in most cases either hooted for their pains, or set down as sentimentalists, newspaper philanthropists, fanatics, socialists—any or all of the various titles bestowed freely by those who regard interference with any existing order of things as rank blasphemy.

Money has always been offered freely, but money always carries small power with it, save for temporary alleviation. The word of the poet who has sounded the depths of certain modern tendencies holds the truth for this also:—

> "Not that which we give, but what we share,
> For the gift without the giver is bare;
> Who bestows himself, with his alms feeds three,
> Himself, his hungering neighbor and me."

Yet it is the Anglo-Saxon conviction, owned by English and American in common, and unshaken though one should rise from the dead to arraign it, that what money would not do, cannot be done, and when money is rejected and the appeal made for personal consideration of the questions involved, there is impatient and instantaneous rejection of the responsibility. Evolution is supposed to have the matter in charge, and to deal with men in the manner best suited to their needs. If the ancient creed is still held and the worshipper repeats on Sunday: "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth," he supplements it on Monday and all other days, till Sunday comes again, with the new version, the creed of to-day, formulated by a man who fights it from hour to hour:

"I believe in Father Mud, the Almighty Plastic;
And in Father Dollar, the Almighty Drastic."

It is because these men and women must be made to understand; because they must be reached and made to see and know what life may be counted worth living, and how far they are responsible for failure to make better ideals the ideal of every soul nearest them, that the story of the worker must be told over and over again till it has struck home. To seek out all phases of wretchedness and want, and bring them face to face with those who deny that such want is anything but a temporary, passing state, due to a little over-production and soon to end, is not a cheerful task, and it is made less so by those who, having never looked for themselves, pronounce all such statements either sensational or the work of a morbid and excited imagination. The majority decline to take time to see for themselves. The few who have done so need no further argument, and are ready to admit that no words can exaggerate, or, indeed, ever really tell in full the real wretchedness that is plain for all who will look. But, even with them, the conviction remains that it is, after all, a temporary state of things, and that all must very shortly come right.

Day by day, the desire has grown stronger to make plain the fact that this is a world-wide question, and one that must be answered. It is not for a city here and there, chiefly those where emigrants pour in, and so often, the mass of unskilled labor, always underpaid, and always near starvation. It is for the cities everywhere in the world of civilization, and because London includes the greatest numbers, these lines are written in London after many months of observation among workers on this side of the sea, and as the prelude to some record of what has been seen and heard, and must still be before the record ends, not only here, but in one or

two representative cities on the continent. London, however, deserves and demands chief consideration, not only because it leads in numbers, but because our own conditions are, in many points, an inheritance which crossed the sea with the pilgrims, and is in every drop of Anglo-Saxon blood. If the glint of the sovereign and its clink in the pocket are the dearest sight and sound to British eyes and ears, America has equal affection for her dollars, in both countries alike chink and glint standing with most, for the best things life holds. It remains for us to see whether counteracting influences are stronger here than with us, and if the worker's chance is hampered more or less by the conditions that hedge in all labor. The merely statistical side of the question is left, as in the previous year's work, chiefly to those who deal only with this phase, though drawn upon wherever available or necessary. There is, however, small supply. Save in scattered trades-union reports, an occasional blue book, and here and there the work of a private investigator, like Mr. Charles Booth, there is nothing which has the value of our own reports from the various bureaus of labor. The subject has until now excited little interest or attention, save with a few political economists, and the band of agitators who are the disciples, not of things as they are, but things as they ought to be. One of the most admirable and well-officered organizations in New York, "The Workingwoman's Protective Union," which gave invaluable assistance last year, has only a small and feeble imitation in London, in the Woman's Protective Union, founded by Mrs. Peterson, and now under the admirable management of Miss Black, but still struggling for place and recognition.

Thus it will be seen that the work to be done here is necessarily more sketchy in character, though none the less taken from life in every detail, the aim in both cases being the same—to give, as far as possible, the heart of the problem as it is seen by the worker, as well as by the eyes

that may have larger interpretation for outward phases. The homes and daily lives of the workers are the best answers as to the comfort-producing power of wages, and in those homes we are to find what the wage can do, and what it fails to do, not alone for the East End, but for swarming lanes and courts in all this crowded London. The East End has by no means the monopoly, though novelists and writers of various orders have chosen it as the type of all wretchedness. But London wretchedness is very impartially distributed. Under the shadow of the beautiful abbey, and the towers of archiepiscopal Lambeth Palace; appearing suddenly in the midst of the great warehouses, and the press of traffic in the city itself, and thronging the streets of that borough road, over which the Canterbury pilgrims rode out on that immortal summer morning—everywhere is the swarm of haggard, hungry humanity. No winter of any year London has known since the day when Roman walls still shut it in, has ever held sharper want or more sorrowful need. Trafalgar Square has suddenly become a world-wide synonym for the saddest sights a great city can ever have to show; and in Trafalgar Square our search shall begin, following one of the unemployed to the refuge open to her when work failed.

CHAPTER II.

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IN TRAFALGAR SQUARE.

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To the London mind nothing is more certain than that Trafalgar Square, which may be regarded as the real focus of the city, is unrivalled in situation and surroundings. "The finest site in Europe," one hears on every side, and there is reason for the faith. In spite of the fact that the National Gallery which it fronts is a singularly defective and unimpressive piece of architecture, it hardly weakens the impression, though the traveller facing it recalls inevitably a criticism made many years ago: "This unhappy structure may be said to have everything it ought not to have, and nothing which it ought to have. It possesses windows without glass, a cupola without size, a portico without height, pepper boxes without pepper, and the finest site in Europe without anything to show upon it."

In spite of all this, to which the pilgrim must at once agree, the Square itself, with the Nelson Pillar and the noble lions at its base, nobler for their very simplicity; its fountains and its outlook on the beautiful portico of St. Martin's, the busy Strand and the great buildings rising all about, is all that is claimed for it, and the traveller welcomes any chance that takes him through it. Treasures of art are at its back, and within short radius, every possibility of business or pleasure, embodied in magnificent hotels, theatres, warehouses, is for

the throng that flows unceasingly through these main arteries of the city's life.

This is one phase of what may be seen in Trafalgar Square. But with early autumn and the shortening days and the steadily increasing pressure of that undercurrent of want and misery through which strange flotsam and jetsam come to the surface, one saw, on the long benches or crouched on the asphalt pavement, lines of men and women sitting silently, making no appeal to passers-by, but, as night fell, crouching lower in their thin garments or wrapping old placards or any sack or semblance of covering about them, losing memory in fitful sleep and waking with dawn to a hopeless day. This was the sight that Trafalgar Square had for those who passed through it, and who at last began to question, "Why is it? Who are they? They don't seem to beg. What does it mean?"

The Square presently overflowed, and in any and every sheltered spot the same silent lines lay down at night along the Thames Embankment, in any covered court or passage, men rushing with early dawn to fight for places at the dock gates, breaking arms or dislocating shoulders often in the struggle, and turning away with pale faces, as they saw the hoped-for chance given to a neighbor, to carry their tale to the hungry women whose office was to wait. The beggars pursued their usual course, but it was quite plain that these men and women had no affinity with them save in rags. Day by day the numbers swelled. "Who are they? What does it mean?" still sounded, and at last the right phrase was found, and the answer came: "They are the 'unemployed.' There is no longer any work to be had, and these people can neither get away nor find any means of living here."

For a time London would not believe its ears. There must be work, and so food for whoever was willing to work; but

presently this cry silenced, and it became plain that somebody must do something.

Food was the first thought; and from the Limehouse district, and a refuge known as the Outcasts' Home, a great van loaded with loaves of bread came in two or three times a week, taking back to the refuge in the empty cart such few as could be induced to try its mercies. Coffee was also provided on a few occasions; and as the news spread by means of that mysterious telegraphy current in the begging fraternity, suddenly the Square overflowed with their kind; and who wanted to work and could not, and who wanted no work on any consideration, no man could determine.

With the story of this tangle, of the bewilderment and dismay for all alike, and the increasing despair of the unemployed, this chronicle has but indirectly to do. Trafalgar Square was emptied at last by means already familiar to all. Beggars skulked back to their hiding-places like wharf-rats to the rotten piles that shelter them; the unemployed dispersed also, showing themselves once more in the files that registered when the census of the unemployed was decided upon; and then, for the most part, were lost to public sight in the mass of general, every-day, to-be-expected wretchedness which makes up London below the surface.

Scores of wretched figures crouched on the icy asphalt of the Square on a pouring night early in November, before its clearing had been ordered. The great van was expected, but had not appeared, and men huddled in the most sheltered corners of this most unsheltered spot, cowering under any rag of covering they had been able to secure. In a corner by the lions a pair had taken refuge—a boy of ten or so, wrapped in two newspaper placards, and his bare feet tucked into a horse's nose-bag, too old and rotten for any further service in its own line of duty; over him crouched a

girl, whose bent figure might have belonged to eighty, but whose face as she looked up showed youth which even her misery could not wipe out. She had no beauty, save soft dark eyes and a delicate face, both filled with terror as she put one arm over the boy, who sprung to his feet. "I'll not go where Nell can't," he said, the heavy sleep still in his eyes; "we're goin' to keep together, me an' Nell is."

"'Tain't the van," the girl said, still holding him; "they tried to take him back to the Refuge the other night, and he's afraid of 'em. They don't take any over sixteen, and so I can't go, an' he's afraid somehow they'll take him in spite of me. I'd be willin' enough, for there's no more I can do for him, and he's too little for this sort of life; but he won't go."

The girl's thin clothing was soaked with rain; she shivered as she spoke, but sat there with the strange patience in look and manner that marks the better class of English poor. "But is there nobody to give you a shelter on such a night? You must have somebody. What does it mean?"

"I had a bit of a place till last Wednesday, but the rent was far behind and they turned me out. I was home then a day or two, but it's worse there than the streets. There was no work, and father drunk, and beating mother and all of us, and Billy worst of all; so the streets were better. I've tried for work, but there's none to be had, and now I'm waiting. Perhaps I shall die pretty soon, and then they can take Billy into the Refuge. I'm waiting for that."

"But there must be work for any one as young and strong as you."

The girl shook her head. "I've walked the soles off me shoes to find it. There's no work in all London. I can go on the streets, but I'd rather do this. My mother did her best for us