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WALTER BESANT AND EAST LONDONERS.

This noted novelist is described by an interviewer in a recent number of Cassell's, as a short, sturdy, pleasant-faced and pleasant-voiced man, full of sympathy and common sense, with a brisk, bright, business-like manner, which puts one quite at ease immediately.

The writer questioned him with regard to the great East End of London, the stories about which have won him world wide fame.

"It is practically an undiscovered country," said Mr. Besant. "We know a good deal about Timbuctoo, and the Falkland Islands, and the Himalayan recesses, but we know little or nothing about the East End. It is a world, a great, weary, heart-breaking and heart-broken world in itself. Let us divide it into its natural sections. First of all, let me observe how new it is. Only a hundred and forty years ago the vast great city we now call the East End didn't exist at all. There was no East End; all was open country, with an occasional village or cluster of houses.

Now—well, you know what the East End of London is quite as well as I can tell you. But what, perhaps, you don't know so well as I do who have made a life-long study of it is the marvellously varied types of life which you find in different parts of the East End. There is the riverside at Shadwell, where you meet with scarcely any but sailors: 'Seven men from all the world, just come home to-day,' and reeling joyously about the streets, as Rudyard Kipling so graphically depicts them after having 'brought the "Bolivar" safe across the bay.' Shadwell, in which there are now so many streets, with a fine, breezy, free-and-easy, roystering, drinking, singing, dancing, roaring, fighting, love-making, stabbing, robbing, murdering, press-ganging kind of life going on in them—the short and merry life, the live to-day and die to-morrow life—the devil-may-care life. And there, in Execution Dock, just below Wapping New Stairs, are quantities of ships lying off either bank, where, when the pay is gone—which takes very little time—and the man is sobered down, he may find a craft for any port he pleases in the whole world. And there are Ratcliffe and Poplar, with the dockers; all sorts and conditions of men there, I can tell you," emphatically cried Mr. Besant: "the simple rustic, the university graduate, the broken-down tradesman, the farmer who has failed, you will find them all there, making up with the regular native East Ender a whole world of itself. Then there is the world of the Sweaters and the Sweated. That extends all over London, I fear. There is the foreign element, and the element of those who were once foreigners, but who now probably know of no life, except by tradition, but the hard, weary, grinding life of the East. Hackney resolves itself into a collection of dull villas, inhabited by the apparently well-to-do. Then there are Bromley and Mile End, with their houses running from twenty-five pounds to forty pounds per annum, and which are inhabited by that class—that very large class—of the Respectable. A dreary, weary monotony pervades it all—pervades and permeates the whole of this vast district, in which two millions of people are living out a monotonous existence."

"Held down and crushed under the heel of the Giant of the Commonplace," I interpolated.

"Exactly," replied Mr. Besant, with an eager vivacity: "you have described it to the life. It was that terrible monotony that had so fatal a fascination for me, and which really drove me to the writing of those books. Far more than the poverty. I often think there is more poverty in the West end than in the East. There you

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have miles and miles of streets, the long, unlovely streets: a hideous sameness, which, more than anything else, crushes the life out of the inhabitants. And all this vast city is a city without a centre. That was what struck me as being so remarkable. No government, no municipality, no mayor and aldermen, no resident gentry, and at first sight no institutions, no newspapers in a city of two millions, except, perhaps, a little local sheet here and there, no magazine, no booksellers, except a few second-hand shops, no public school, no public buildings, no old buildings, except Bow church and Stepney church: nothing, in short, to hold the city and the people together—no focus, no lighthouse, no place of assemblage. It beat into my brain. I was not satisfied until I sat down and wrote 'All Sorts and Conditions of Men,' and rose from it to help to build in real bricks and mortar the People's Palace I had so airily dreamed of on paper. Of course, when I speak of no centres and no institutions, I speak with a certain reservation. I don't mean there were no churches and chapels—and what the East End would have done but for the church I don't know, I really don't know," said Mr. Besant. "The church has been her salvation. I quite frankly own," he continued, "that the churches and chapels had their little institutions which brought the people together, but there was no centre; you had to go and find these little places of assemblage for yourself. What was most wanted was the element of organized amusement. I mean people working with people for recreation of the Higher Kind."

"Above all, I was struck with the total absence of literary ambition. I have since discovered that there are ambitions in that direction in the East end, but not a tenth part in the whole of that great region which you would find in an American city a tenth part the size."

"And now about the people themselves in your novels, Mr. Besant."

"Well," he replied, "generally speaking, they are all drawn from life. For instance, the old figure-head carver in 'All Sorts,' is taken from a man I know well. He is now dead. The American candidate for the Peerage and the wife were acquaintances of mine. I have described them with certain differences, so as to avoid giving offence. I should think they are long dead, poor dears!"

"Miss Messenger, my heroine, was not real; she was purely fictitious. The Almshouses can be recognized by all. I think the original of Captain Sorenson died about five years ago. The brewery is not Charrington's, as has been suggested, but Barclay and Perkins', which I visited years before I had any thought I should use it in a novel. The Salvation Army man is from life."

I remember what Mr. Besant had once before said to me on the subject of General Booth and his schemes, and his remarks are worth repeating.

"He talks," said he, "of the submerged tenth; I do not think it is more than the submerged thirtieth. The result of his plan will be that he will rescue that proportion of the population worth raising. The secret of his success is personal sympathy. But then, the Church of England has that. The East End would have been lost but for the Church. I have, however, no patience with the people who run down Booth, and who ask sarcastically what he makes out of his army. He does not touch for himself one penny of its vast funds."

To return to our present conversation, Mr. Besant told me that practically all his small characters were portraits.

"I made notes," said he, "wherever I went. I talked to everybody; on a steamer, in the street, behind a counter, coming out of chapel. I would tackle them as best I might. A 'bob' went a long way sometimes, but a pleasant smile went further. The factory girls I found very difficult to deal with."

"Yes," I replied, "they are dreadful. I used to have a class of factory girls in an East End parish for reading and writing, and I would infinitely prefer their brothers."

"Exactly," said Mr. Besant; "the young men are more get-at-able, and more easily influenced for good, and more persevering in the Good Path, when once they are directed into it. The girls wander about and are like shy birds: difficult to get hold of. There is better soil in the young men. We ought to get hold of them between fourteen and eighteen. There the Church has been so successful. She has certainly saved many of them from barbarism. But you want young and vigorous clergymen and ministers for the East."

To which I heartily assented as we drifted into a dissertation on the extraordinary influence which the East End exerts upon all sorts and conditions of men; how even the most refined, the most cultured, the most highly moral man can hardly escape a certain blunting of the perceptive faculties and an undefinable rubbing off, if I may so term it, of the fresh bloom which once characterized his views of life and his outlook upon life.

"East End life, it appears to me, always eats into a clergyman's soul, and sometimes, almost unconsciously, a man is apt to deteriorate," said I.

"Precisely," agreed Mr. Besant. "I know of a fine fellow who feels this so terribly that he leaves his curacy every year

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