

CHAPTER II--JOHNNY UPRIGHT

I shall not give you the address of Johnny Upright. Let it suffice that he lives in the most respectable street in the East End--a street that would be considered very mean in America, but a veritable oasis in the desert of East London. It is surrounded on every side by close-packed squalor and streets jammed by a young and vile and dirty generation; but its own pavements are comparatively bare of the children who have no other place to play, while it has an air of desertion, so few are the people that come and go.

Each house in this street, as in all the streets, is shoulder to shoulder with its neighbours. To each house there is but one entrance, the front door; and each house is about eighteen feet wide, with a bit of a brick-walled yard behind, where, when it is not raining, one may look at a slate-coloured sky. But it must be understood that this is East End opulence we are now considering. Some of the people in this street are even so well-to-do as to keep a "slavey." Johnny Upright keeps one, as I well know, she being my first acquaintance in this particular portion of the world.

To Johnny Upright's house I came, and to the door came the "slavey." Now, mark you, her position in life was pitiable and contemptible, but it was with pity and contempt that she looked at me. She evinced a plain desire that our conversation should be short. It was Sunday, and Johnny Upright

was not at home, and that was all there was to it. But I lingered, discussing whether or not it was all there was to it, till Mrs. Johnny Upright was attracted to the door, where she scolded the girl for not having closed it before turning her attention to me.

No, Mr. Johnny Upright was not at home, and further, he saw nobody on Sunday. It is too bad, said I. Was I looking for work? No, quite the contrary; in fact, I had come to see Johnny Upright on business which might be profitable to him.

A change came over the face of things at once. The gentleman in question was at church, but would be home in an hour or thereabouts, when no doubt he could be seen.

Would I kindly step in?--no, the lady did not ask me, though I fished for an invitation by stating that I would go down to the corner and wait in a public-house. And down to the corner I went, but, it being church time, the "pub" was closed. A miserable drizzle was falling, and, in lieu of better, I took a seat on a neighbourly doorstep and waited.

And here to the doorstep came the "slavey," very frowzy and very perplexed, to tell me that the missus would let me come back and wait in the kitchen.

"So many people come 'ere lookin' for work," Mrs. Johnny Upright apologetically explained. "So I 'ope you won't feel bad the way I

spoke."

"Not at all, not at all," I replied in my grandest manner, for the nonce investing my rags with dignity. "I quite understand, I assure you. I suppose people looking for work almost worry you to death?"

"That they do," she answered, with an eloquent and expressive glance; and thereupon ushered me into, not the kitchen, but the dining room--a favour, I took it, in recompense for my grand manner.

This dining-room, on the same floor as the kitchen, was about four feet below the level of the ground, and so dark (it was midday) that I had to wait a space for my eyes to adjust themselves to the gloom. Dirty light filtered in through a window, the top of which was on a level with a sidewalk, and in this light I found that I was able to read newspaper print.

And here, while waiting the coming of Johnny Upright, let me explain my errand. While living, eating, and sleeping with the people of the East End, it was my intention to have a port of refuge, not too far distant, into which could run now and again to assure myself that good clothes and cleanliness still existed. Also in such port I could receive my mail, work up my notes, and sally forth occasionally in changed garb to civilisation.

But this involved a dilemma. A lodging where my property would be safe

implied a landlady apt to be suspicious of a gentleman leading a double life; while a landlady who would not bother her head over the double life of her lodgers would imply lodgings where property was unsafe. To avoid the dilemma was what had brought me to Johnny Upright. A detective of thirty-odd years' continuous service in the East End, known far and wide by a name given him by a convicted felon in the dock, he was just the man to find me an honest landlady, and make her rest easy concerning the strange comings and goings of which I might be guilty.

His two daughters beat him home from church--and pretty girls they were in their Sunday dresses; withal it was the certain weak and delicate prettiness which characterises the Cockney lasses, a prettiness which is no more than a promise with no grip on time, and doomed to fade quickly away like the colour from a sunset sky.

They looked me over with frank curiosity, as though I were some sort of a strange animal, and then ignored me utterly for the rest of my wait. Then Johnny Upright himself arrived, and I was summoned upstairs to confer with him.

"Speak loud," he interrupted my opening words. "I've got a bad cold, and I can't hear well."

Shades of Old Sleuth and Sherlock Holmes! I wondered as to where the assistant was located whose duty it was to take down whatever information I might loudly vouchsafe. And to this day, much as I have seen of Johnny

Upright and much as I have puzzled over the incident, I have never been quite able to make up my mind as to whether or not he had a cold, or had an assistant planted in the other room. But of one thing I am sure: though I gave Johnny Upright the facts concerning myself and project, he withheld judgment till next day, when I dodged into his street conventionally garbed and in a hansom. Then his greeting was cordial enough, and I went down into the dining-room to join the family at tea.

"We are humble here," he said, "not given to the flesh, and you must take us for what we are, in our humble way."

The girls were flushed and embarrassed at greeting me, while he did not make it any the easier for them.

"Ha! ha!" he roared heartily, slapping the table with his open hand till the dishes rang. "The girls thought yesterday you had come to ask for a piece of bread! Ha! ha! ho! ho! ho!"

This they indignantly denied, with snapping eyes and guilty red cheeks, as though it were an essential of true refinement to be able to discern under his rags a man who had no need to go ragged.

And then, while I ate bread and marmalade, proceeded a play at cross purposes, the daughters deeming it an insult to me that I should have been mistaken for a beggar, and the father considering it as the highest compliment to my cleverness to succeed in being so mistaken. All of

which I enjoyed, and the bread, the marmalade, and the tea, till the time came for Johnny Upright to find me a lodging, which he did, not half-a-dozen doors away, in his own respectable and opulent street, in a house as like to his own as a pea to its mate.