Also by John Seed:

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*Transit Depots* (Ship of Fools, London 1993)
*Interior in the Open Air* (Reality Street, London 1993)
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The illustrations in this volume are all drawn from Henry Mayhew’s London Labour and the London Poor.

For the student of history.

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NOTE: Every word in the pages that follow is drawn from Henry Mayhew's writings on London published in the *Morning Chronicle* from 1849 to 1850, then in 63 editions of his own weekly paper, *London Labour and the London Poor* between December 1850 and February 1852 and then in the four volume work of the same title. The visual images are taken from the latter. An afterword provides further information.

JS
A cab-driver
PREFACE I

If you was to go to
the raffle tonight sir they’d say
directly you come in who’s this
here swell what’s he want they’d
think you were a cad or
spy come from the police but
they’d treat you civilly some would
fancy you was a fast kind
of a gentleman come there for
a lark but you need have
no fear though the pint pots
does fly about sometimes
I know who you are well enough
take you for? why
for a bloody
spy you

here from the Secretary of
State you know you do
to see
how many men I’ve got in the
house & what kind they are by

God if you ain’t soon mizzled I’ll
crack your bloody skull open for you
I

1
It’s no use asking for it
if you wish to keep it
unless you can
lift a horse up
when he’s down

2
it’s the devil’s place of
all you ever saw in your life
standing there before them retorts
with a long heavy rake
pullin out the red-hot coke for the bare life
the rake red-hot in your hands
& the hissin & the bubblin of the water
& the smoke & the smell
it’s fit to melt a man like a
roll of fresh butter

3
as we go up the ladder we
very often scrunch our teeth the work’s
so hard the coal keeps us from
biting the tongue that’s one use the
other is by rolling it along in
the mouth it excites the spittle moistens
the mouth all I want when I’m
at work is a bit of coal
We carry the coals in sacks of 2 cwt. the sack usually weighs from 14 lb. to 20 lb. so our load is mostly 238 lb. we carry up a ladder from the hold of the ship 16 to 20 feet deep over four barges over planks to the waggon 60 to 80 feet with the sacks on our backs each man will ascend this height & travel this distance 90 times in a day he will lift himself with 2 cwt. of coals on his back 1,460 feet or upwards a quarter of a mile high three times the height of St. Paul’s in 12 hours & besides will travel 6,300 feet or 1¼ mile carrying the same weight as he goes the labour is very hard even the strongest cannot continue for three days together

a black nigger slave was never slaved as I was
I’ve worked all night when it’s been very moonlight loading a barge
& I’ve worked until three
& four in the morning
& then me & another man
slept an hour or two in a
shed as joined his stables
& then must go at it again
I hadn’t a rag left to my back
everything was worn to bits
in such hard work
& then I got the sack

6
When I goes
home I just
smokes a pipe
& goes to
bed that’s all
I sell chickweed & grunsell &

turfs for larks a few nettles

that’s ordered they’re for tea I

gets chickweed at Chalk Farm out

of the public fields every morning

about seven I goes for it

the grunsell a gentleman gives leave
to get out of his garden
down Battle-bridge way in the

Chalk-road leading to Holloway I

gets there every morning about nine

I gets the nettles at Highgate

after I’ve gathered my things enough

of each to make up a
dozen halfpenny bunches I puts them

in my basket slings ’em at

my back & starts round London

Low Marrabun I goes to always

of a Saturday & Wednesday I

goes to St. Pancras on a

Tuesday I visit Clerkenwell & Russell

Square & round about there on

a Monday I goes down about

Covent Garden & the Strand on

a Thursday I does High Marrabun

on a Friday I say chickweed

& grunsell as I goes along

I don’t say for young singing
birds I’m out in usual till
about five in the evening I
never stop to eat I’m walking
all the time 15 miles every
day of my life I has
my breakfast afoore I starts &
my tea when I comes home
III

1
Mother’s been dead a long time
Father gets drunk
sometimes but I think
not so oft as he did

& then he lies in bed
gets up & gets more drink
& goes to bed again

two or three days
& nights at a time

he never uses me badly
when he’s drinking
& has money he gives me some

now & then
to get bread & butter with
or a halfpenny pudding
he never eats anything

in the house
when he’s drinking
he’s a very quiet man
2
when I’ve been at the worst
I’ve been really glad I hadn’t no one depending on me

I’ve smoked a pipe
when I was troubled in mind
& couldn’t get a meal

but if I’d had a young daughter now
what good would it have been
my smoking a pipe to comfort her?

when there’s others
as you must love
what must it be then?

3
a scurf what he earned
I never knew he gave
me what he liked sometimes
nothing in May last he gave me 2s. 8d. for the whole month & two children they trembled when they heard his step I can’t tell how we lived then some days that May we had neither bite nor sup the water was too bad to drink cold they were afraid of
their lives he knocked them about so drink made him a savage took the father out of him his children was starving but I durstn’t say that aloud when his mates was by

4
Then I was always thirsty & when I got up of a morning I used to go stalking round to the first public-house was open my mouth was dry parched as if burning a fever I was ashamed to be seen out clothes ragged shoes take the water in one end let it out the other I keep my old rags at home to remind me I call them the regimentals of the guzzler

5
Bad as I’m off now if I had only a careful partner I wouldn’t want for anything
A friend gave me half
a sovereign to bury my
child the parish provided me
a coffin it cost me
about 3s. besides we didn’t
have her taken away from
here not as a parish
funeral exactly I agreed that
if he would fetch it
& let it stand in
an open place near his
shop until the Saturday which
was the time I would
give the undertaker 3s. to
let a man come with
a pall to throw over
the coffin so it should
not be seen it was
a parish funeral I had
to give 1s. 6d. for a
pair of shoes before I
could follow my child to
the grave & we paid
1s. 9d. for rent all out
of the half sovereign
IV

1
At Woolwich we were all on the fuddle
at the Dust Hole I went to beg
of a Major whose brother was in Spain
he’d himself been out I said I
was a sergeant in the 3rd Westminster Grenadiers
you know & served under your brother oh
yes that’s my brother’s regiment says he where
was you then on the 16th of October
why sir I was at the taking of
the city of Irun says I in fact
I was with the costermongers in St. Giles’s
calling cabbages white heart cabbages oh then said
he what day was Ernani taken on why
said I a little tipsy & bothered at
the question that was the 16th of October
too very well my man says he tapping
his boots with a riding whip I’ll see
what I can do for you the words
were no sooner out of his mouth when
he stepped up to me & gave me
a regular pasting he horsewhipped me up &
down stairs along the passages my flesh was
like sassages I managed at last to open
the door & get away
I became a turnpike sailor & went out
as one of the Shallow Brigade wearing Guernsey
shirt & drawers or tattered trowsers there was
a school of four we only got a
tidy living 16s or £1 a day among
us we used to call every one that
came along coalheavers & all sea-fighting captains
now my noble sea-fighting captain we used
to say fire an odd shot from your
larboard locker to us Nelson’s bull-dogs but
mind we never tried that dodge on at
Greenwich for fear of the old geese the
Shallow got so grannied in London the supplies
got queer shipwrecks got so common in the
streets I quitted the land navy

In wet weather I used to dress tidy
& very clean for the respectable broken-down
tradesman or reduced gentleman caper I wore a
suit of black generally & a clean dickey
& sometimes old black kid gloves & I
used to stand with a paper before my
face as if ashamed:

TO A HUMANE PUBLIC
I HAVE SEEN BETTER DAYS

This is called standing pad with a fakement
it’s a wet-weather dodge & isn’t
so good as screeving but I did middling
& can’t bear being idle

4
I’ve done the shivering dodge too gone out
in the cold weather half naked one man
can’t get off shivering now Shaking Jemmy went
on with his shivering so long he couldn’t
help it at last he shivered like a jelly
like a calf’s foot with the ague on
the hottest day in summer it’s a good
dodge in tidy inclement seasons it’s not so
good a lurk by two bob a day
as it once was it’s a single-handed job
if one man shivers less than another he
shows it isn’t so cold as the good
shiverer makes it out then it’s no go