



JACK LONDON

A SHORT, WILD LIFE

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By mid-winter, darkness was deep across the Yukon. Rivers were bound in ice. The woods were silent, and the sky was as brooding as the Klondikers themselves. The previous August, thousands of men had hiked into the Canadian wilderness to hunt for gold. Then winter came, locking down the land and blanketing it in darkness. Now, the men huddled in cabins, living on bread and beans, waiting for the sun. When - or if ever - spring came, they would pour into the creeks, pans in hand, hoping to find small nuggets of gold, stake their claims, and go home rich. But, first, they had to survive another glacial night. During one especially frigid stretch, when their former lives seemed as fugitive as the northern lights, a few miners in a cabin near Henderson Creek shivered in their bunks and listened to their cabin mate.

The man wore a dark cap pulled low. In the flickering candlelight, his beard looked like a bear's fur. He did not speak often, passing hours locked in silence. But when he spoke, he astounded his new friends. Most Klondikers were lucky to have read the Bible, but this man knew philosophy and could explain it. He recited poetry. His soft blue eyes glowed as he spoke about socialism and the coming revolution. Only twenty-one, he could tell tales from a lifetime of adventures. He had been a hobo riding the rails, a wage slave in fish canneries, and an oyster pirate in San Francisco Bay. Now, he claimed to be a writer. He hadn't published anything yet, he admitted, but one day everyone would know the name he carved on the cabin wall: "Jack London - Author/miner."

Today - more than a century after Jack London journeyed to the Yukon - adventure is pitched in package tours. Cruise ships plow the Alaskan waters he paddled by canoe, and resorts dot the South Seas where he sailed his boat, *The Snark*. In our time, London is often dismissed as a mere adventure writer,

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but, in his time, it was different. He was *the* American author of the young twentieth century - bold, scandalous, and self-assured. Before his sudden death at forty, London lived in perpetual motion. Constantly sighting another point on his compass, he wrote fifty books and traipsed across six continents. Yet, of all his voyages, his longest was not on a map but on the social ladder. With sheer will, he drove himself up from anonymous poverty to become the most popular American author in the world. Only a few of London's books remain widely read, but, for many a dreamer bound by time and space, his remains the life.

"The greatest story Jack London ever wrote," said the critic Alfred Kazin, "was the story he lived."

London was the child of deceit and mystery. The former was his father, William Chaney, a first-rate charlatan who roamed the United States lecturing on "free love" and "Astro-Theology." The latter was his mother, Flora Wellman, a spiritualist given to frenzied séances. In the 1870s, the two came together in San Francisco, a city known for its eccentrics. When Flora got pregnant, Chaney ordered her to have an abortion. Flora, however, preferred suicide. Laudanum failed to kill her, so she shot herself in the head. The bullet glanced off her forehead, but the shot was heard all over San Francisco. Newspapers denounced Chaney, who published a pamphlet proclaiming he was not the father.

Into this cauldron, on January 12, 1876, Jack Chaney was born. When his father fled to Oregon, his mother soon married a kind, hard-working carpenter who gave her son his last name - London.

For Jack's first dozen years, the Londons moved all over the Bay Area. Ranching on the Pacific Coast, farming, running a

grocery store, John London labored to provide for Jack and two daughters from a previous marriage. Flora continued her spiritualism, whooping, screaming, and sometimes levitating Jack on the living-room table. His wild childhood filled him with a relentless appetite for adventure. "I never had a boyhood, and I seem to be hunting for that lost boyhood," he later wrote. "My environment was crude and rough and raw. I had no outlook, but an uplook rather."

His first steps upward were taken in books. He read dime novels while walking to school, adventure novels at recess, and Herman Melville's South Seas tales late into the night. But when he was thirteen, Flora lost her savings in a real-estate scam. To support the family, Jack became a "work beast," toiling endless hours in canneries, mills, and factories. "I worked every night till ten, eleven, and twelve o'clock," he wrote. "My wages were small, but I worked such long hours that I sometimes made as high as \$50 a month. Duty - I turned every cent over. Duty - I have worked in that hell hole for thirty-six straight hours, at a machine, and I was only a child." Toughened by toil, he began roaming in gangs on Oakland's wharf. Yet, even while carousing with men, he nurtured the boy inside him, sailing San Francisco Bay in a small skiff called the *Razzle Dazzle* and dreaming of escape.

"Don't you sometimes feel you'd die if you didn't know what's beyond them hills?" asks a boy in London's novel *The Valley of the Moon*. "There's the Pacific Ocean beyond, an' China, an' Japan, an' India . . . I've lived in Oakland all my life, but I'm not going to live in Oakland the rest of my life, not by a long shot. I'm goin' to get away." At seventeen, he got away. Seaman Jack London, five feet seven inches and broad shouldered, shipped out aboard the *Sophia Sutherland*, a sealing ship bound for the Bering Sea. Before the mast, he saw

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nature in the rough and met brutish men who bet their lives against it. He might have remained a mariner had he not discovered his talent for turning nature's power into prose. Returning to live with his mother, London heard of an essay contest sponsored by a newspaper. Though he had written only school reports, he somehow got an old typewriter, banged out 4,000 words in three nights, and won the contest, beating students from Stanford and Berkeley. The \$25 prize, equal to a month's wages in the jute mill where he was working, showed him a new horizon.

One night in 1895, a neighbor knocked on the door of Flora London's Oakland home. Did Flora know that a light was burning all night in her upstairs window? Had she forgotten to turn it off? But the light was only Jack's. He had just returned from a year tramping around the country. Just turned eighteen, he had set out to follow Coxe's Army, a ragtag group of unemployed men who planned to assemble in Washington, D.C., to protest their plight. London hopped freights, lived in hobo camps, and once served a month in jail for vagrancy. Behind bars, he read socialist tracts and was fired with dreams - of revolution and of writing. "If I could not live on the parlor floor of society, I could, at any rate, have a try at the attic," he remembered. "So I resolved to sell no more muscle and to become a vender of brains. Then began a frantic pursuit of knowledge."

Years later, after he became famous, London offered advice to young writers. Study, he advised. Develop a "philosophy of life." And, above all, work. "Spell it in capital letters, WORK. Work all the time. Find out about this earth, this universe, this force and matter." Hard work and cosmopolitan curiosity were to be his lifelong trademarks.