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VOL. IV.

FEBRUARY 1, 1909.

No. 22.

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## JACK LONDON.

The great writer tells "The Lone Hand" of his early struggles, when "literature was a by-product and carpet-beating his staple industry." He explains why he is a Socialist.

BY M.M.



HE man is nothing," remarked Flaubert; "the work is all."

But to those with whom the worker comes into immediate contact, the man, good, bad, or indifferent, at once asserts his supremacy in the scheme of creation. The test you apply to the man you don't know is "What has he done?" The test you apply to the man you do know is "Is he a decent sort?" If he isn't, the plaudits of the world thereafter lose much of their meaning to your ears, and, whether he be the builder of the Pyramids or Junius himself, you cease to retain any interest in his personality, though you may continue to have as lively an interest in the good work he does as you ever had.

Jack London, the writer, we all know, whether we belong to the small minority which stood spellbound when it made its way into the first sentences of "The Son of the Wolf," or to the big, noisy majority which followed in the wake of the critics when they suddenly discovered whom they imagined to be a new writer on the publication of "The Call of the Wild." Jack London, the man, few of us are privileged to know. Until recently, all that Australia knew of him personally was that he had sprung from the people, had been a newsboy, a seaman, a miner on the Klondyke, and was a Socialist. Now, London is in Australia, and some

of us have had the chance of meeting him.

In the first instance, I approached him with some misgivings. His work made him attractive; but all I had heard of his personality was against him. From America had come dark stories that London was a blustering, conceited individual, whose whole thought in contact with his fellow men was his own greatness; that he took himself with intense seriousness; that he was a *poseur* of the worst description.

However such a story came to be circulated is a mystery. It would be impossible to find a man whom the description fitted worse. He is just about the same "skiting" type of Yankee as the genial lads with the white stars on their blue collars whom we entertained a few months ago. His sense of humor is too great to allow him taking himself or anything else but the solid facts of life too seriously. His conceit, if he ever had any, was ruthlessly walloped out of his nature by his early experiences in literature and the knowledge that, as an unknown writer, he sold whole stories for prices which he now gets for sentences of less respective merit.

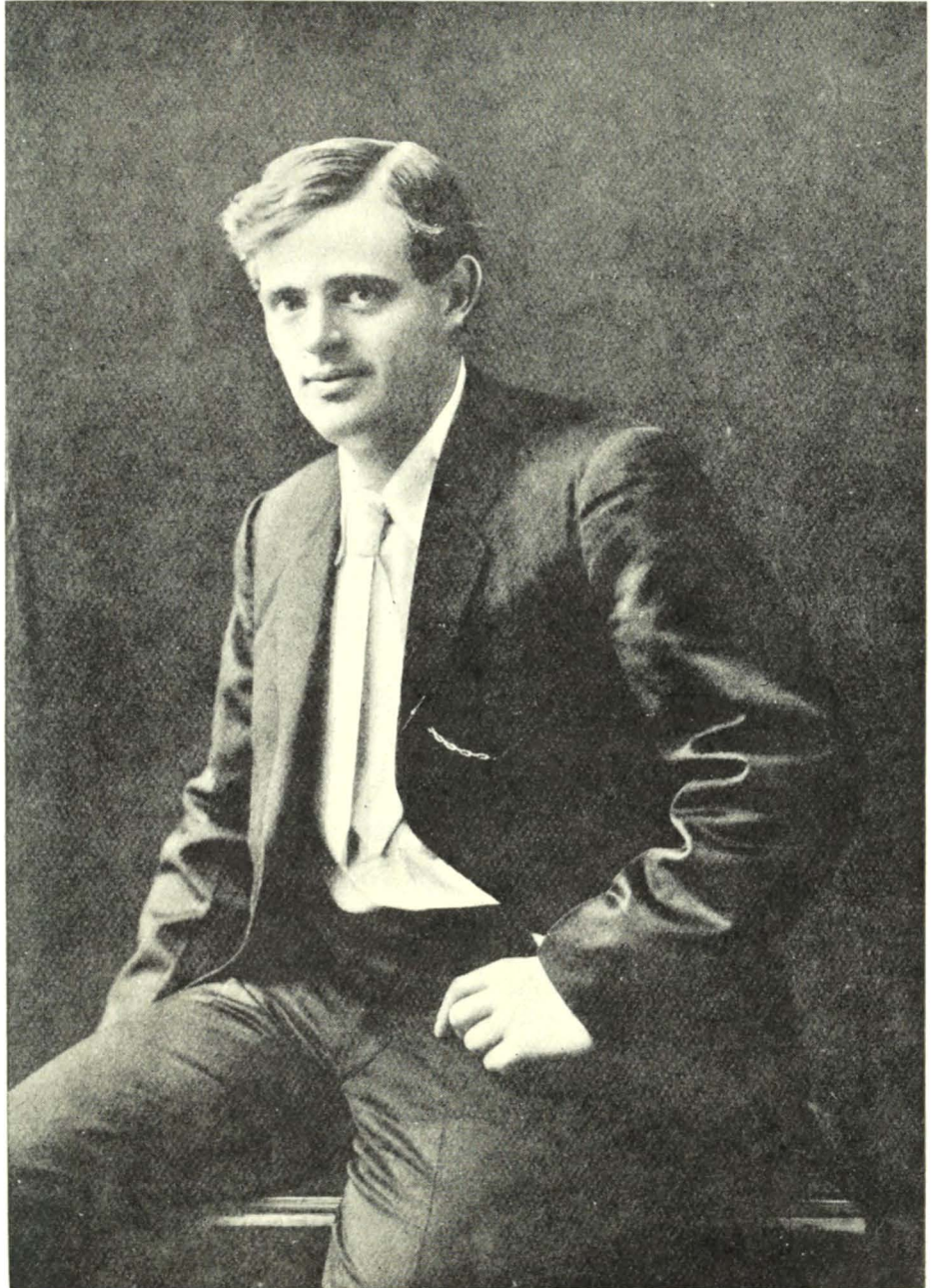
Not that London is "modest." He is a hustler all the time. The American spirit dominates all his actions. He talks continuously. The man who interviews London finds the interview over without having had an opportunity to get in any,

of his own fine work. The questions he meant to put have been drowned in the torrent of London's uninterrupted, well-phrased, clear-cut, aggressive eloquence. But the talk is seldom of himself, and, when it is, it doesn't contain a suggestion of self-glorification. It is narrative such as might be related by an unprejudiced third person—narrative introduced only to give point to argument. For London is the arguer splendid. He will argue about anything—Socialism, of course, first, with all that bears on it—biology, the tariff, the British in India, the prospects of the coming prize fight. On every subject that appeals to man, London has made up his mind, and can give you reasons for having done so, and is eager to show you where his views are right and everybody else's views are wrong. To this extent, London is egotistical. But, all through, his argument is that of the man who respects the views of his antagonist, and is willing to hear him out and demolish him afterwards.

It doesn't require three minutes' conversation with Jack London to make you forget that he had ever written a book. There is nothing of the air of the great author about him. His appearance would cause a panic in any of the London literary clubs, where the house steward has a stop-watch on the belltoppers, and reports any member who is five minutes behind fashion. London did Sydney in a soft shirt and a small cap, and might have been mistaken for a shearer or horse-breaker from Brewarrina or Walgett

but for his unmistakably American type of face—a fact that was brought home to him on the night he landed. In the interval of "The Girl of the Golden West," London was standing alone at the entrance to the Theatre Royal, when a youngster approached, "Here y' are, sir; American matches."

London laughed. "Now, how did he



JACK LONDON—A PORTRAIT STUDY.

know that I was an American?" he asked an acquaintance who came up. "I never opened my mouth."

\* \* \*

While many men who start life as Socialists and Democrats "listen to reason" as they acquire wealth, it was London's success that opened his eyes most widely to the facts of modern society. The story

of his entrance into literature only shows what an immense part the goddess of Chance played in it. The odds at every point were against London becoming a writer; and, even after he had qualified

she said, 'here's your chance.' And she reminded me of what I'd done at school. Now, at that time, I was working in a jute-factory—doing 11 hours a day of real hard work. When it was over, I



JACK LONDON AND HIS WIFE AT HONOLULU.

and proved himself capable of turning out copy emitting fire like a diamond at every facet, it was just the toss of a coin whether he ever wrote another line.

"At school I was good at composition," he yawns. "I could always beat the other youngsters in writing essays, but that never gave me any idea of becoming a writer. A boy must be better at one subject, and it was just the same to me as if I'd been the class champion at geography or history. When I left school and started out earning my own living—I was pretty young then—I forgot all about being the star composition boy. It was my mother who remembered. Like most men, I date everything from the action of my mother. One day she noticed that one of the San Francisco papers was offering a prize of 20 dollars for the best article by an amateur writer. 'Jack,'

didn't feel very fit to sit down to more work. I wanted to get out and enjoy myself. But mother kept at me, and at last I took on the job and sent in the story of a typhoon I'd passed through in the Sea of Japan when I was a sailor. Sure enough, I got the first prize, and the second and third were taken by undergraduates of Stanford University and the University of California.

"Then I got in a pile of paper and started out. I worked for 16 hours a day, solid work all the time, with no breaks except for meals, and I never enjoyed anything so much in my life. I revelled in writing those stories, and I can tell you that, just as I've got on in literature, doing my work has become more trouble to precisely the same degree. This stuff I turned out was fiction, and I sent it in to every magazine and newspaper within a radius of

100 miles ; but none of them was doing business. It came back—all of it. I didn't sell a single line, and when I look at it now I don't wonder at it. Unload it since? I wouldn't dare show it to anybody. It was lunacy—sheer lunacy. I've never seen anything worse. When I got tired of trying and it was all back, it was me for the jute works again for a time. Then I managed to save a little money, and studied at the University of California as long as the money held out. That wasn't long enough to finish my Freshman year, and I had to change the class-room for hard work again, finally landing at the Klondyke. I was one of the first there, and went through all the pioneering and got experience in every emotion the field could give, except that that comes of striking rich gold.

“Just as I thought I was getting along nicely I went under with an attack of scurvy, and had to beat south for all I knew. While I was on my way down back to California my father died, and I got home with very little money of my own to find things anyhow. My mother had to look after a grandchild—a little nephew of mine—and as my father hadn't left anything to speak of, she was in a pretty bad way financially. To make it worse, I hit California in what was absolutely its worst time since the place started in '49. I shook off the scurvy ; but when I started out to look for work, people said I was trying to be funny. You know how it is in bad times? There's no work to be got anywhere. I spent all I had in advertising for jobs. We kept the house going on credit for a time. Then the credit was gone, the rent wasn't paid, and I can tell you we were pretty near starvation. I got a dollar or two occasionally cutting people's lawns or shifting away rubbish or beating carpets. I was strong on beating carpets, and, if I'd stuck to it, I believe I'd have made a real expert carpet beater, with a

bit of practice. But there are not many people who can afford to pay a man to beat their carpets in bad times. They let their carpets go dirty, and let the grass grow knee deep on their lawns, and let their yards get lumbered up with all sorts of rubbish, sooner than give a man a quarter in the interests of order.

“I used to hustle round for every job of the sort there was ; but, when the locality was worked out and there was nothing in sight, I thought that I'd try my hand at writing again, rather than let the time pass doing nothing. This time I thought I'd turn my Klondyke experiences into copy, and I went at it good and hard. But I never lost sight of the main chance. Literature was only a by-product of my establishment. Lawn mowing and carpet beating were the staples. I never let certain business slip by because I happened to be interested in the story I was writing.

“I remember once I had to leave Malemute Kid in a most critical situation, while I raced round two blocks to get at the job of cleaning out a fowlhouse ahead of another man.

“All this time I reckoned out that if I

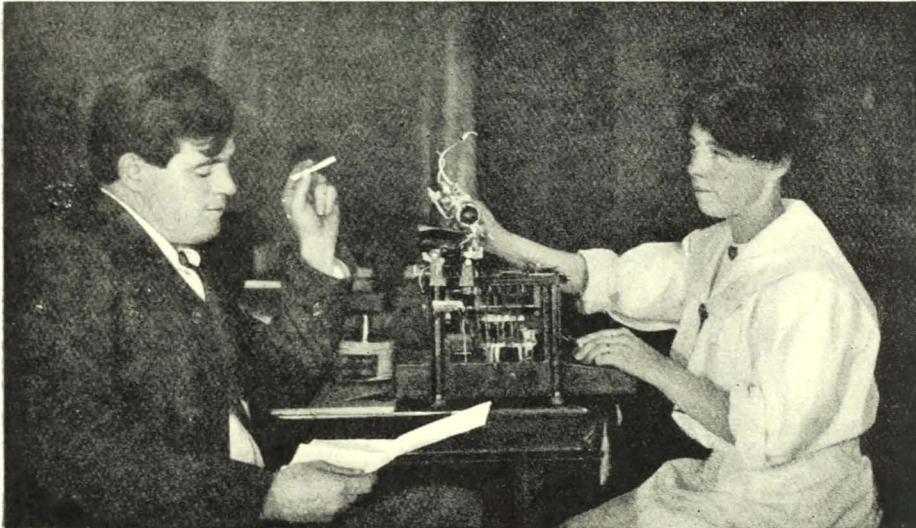


THE SNARK—JACK LONDON'S BOAT.

did score with any of my stories I would be in funds. I'd read an article somewhere about the earnings of magazine writers, and remembered that one of them had got two cents a word. That two cents a word—that's about £4 a thousand—dogged me, and somehow I got the idea that that was the regular price paid for magazine work. In my innocence I didn't realise that the unknown

writer, no matter how good he is, is an entirely different proposition to the proprietors of a magazine from the man whose name sells. So I went on believing that if I did strike it I'd revel in my two cents a word. Every morning the mailman used to pass my window, and he'd shove through any letters for me, so that I got them as soon as I awoke. Generally they'd wake me. They were

"A month or two previous to this, I'd registered for a position in the Government. I went up for the examinations, passed them, and after that lived in hopes that some day my turn 'd come to be appointed. The job was letter delivery. Well, just after I heard from THE OVERLAND, and was close on quitting, along came another letter from the mail department. My turn had come. I was appointed a letter-carrier. That was the turn of my luck. I almost jumped with joy; but, before I could reply and get measured for my uniform, another magazine sent along accepting a second story and paying me £12, spot cash, for it. That made me shake on the mailman idea, and while I was still hesitating, more of my stories sold. I decided



JACK LONDON AND HIS WIFE AT WORK.

nearly all long, heavy envelopes, full of manuscript I'd sent to some publication. I got to know them well, and whenever I saw a long envelope I'd just throw it aside and turn over to sleep again, cursing my iuck. At last, one morning something light tumbled through the open window on the bed. I was sitting up in an instant and tore it open. My first look was for a cheque, but there wasn't any. Then I opened the note. It was from the OVERLAND MONTHLY, a Californian publication I'd been reading since I was big enough to spell out the words. I rushed through the typewriting. They were pleased to receive my story, 'The Son of the Wolf,' of which they thought highly. Accordingly they would accept it and pay me for it—five dollars—on publication. Five dollars! That story was about three or four thousand words long, and I'd been figuring on handling at least £12 if it won out. I tell you I made up my mind to throw up writing for good, and very nearly made up my mind to cut my throat at the same time.

to stick to writing then; and things went along well for me in the literary world from that date.

"I haven't forgotten the time when I was unknown. And I realise now, as well as I did when I was in the carpet-beating industry, the difficulties the unknown man has to overcome. To start with, the reader looks for the work of the man he likes. That's the reason the proprietor pays the man the big prices, and anything by an unknown writer that's going to impress a reader must necessarily be, not only as good as, but better than the work of the man with the reputation.

"When some half-baked economists read about the prices I'm understood to get to-day—some of them masterpieces of fiction by the newspaper man—they say: 'How on earth can this man be a Socialist? By the very nature of things he's an Individualist, and he doesn't know it.' Like the rest of the anti-Socialists who're sincere, they see only one side of the story. They see London, the successful

author, with a little money he's got together by hard work and good luck and a lot of nice paragraphs in the literary reviews, and the thrilling story of his life in WHO'S WHO, with all the nasty parts left out. If they've ever heard of my working before the mast, with long hours and small pay and bad food, working in factories in an atmosphere that means certain death to the man and woman who stick to it, working up to my knees in snow and ice for gold that wasn't there, they look on those as nice little excursions into a land of adventure that are just the thing for a literary man. But they weren't excursions to me. That's the difference; I lived them.

"When I think of defining my position, I remember my return from Klondyke. I remember my mother and the kid, the house with the rent man threatening, and the storekeepers who'd got tired of living on hope—our hope. I remember the carpets I beat, and the chicken houses

I cleaned, and the work I hunted for day after day to hear always the same reply. I remember that I sold the story that gave me a standing in the literary world for something like five shillings a column of one of your daily papers. And the half-baked economist wonders why I'm not an Individualist!

"Why, if you took these stout gentlemen who tell you all about the sweetness of the uses of adversity, and gave them a year of the life of the average unskilled laborer, they wouldn't be Socialists. Half of them would be hoboos, beer-soddened wrecks who would just occasionally get together sufficient dignity to commit small, unprofitable thefts, or act as scabs at strike time. The other half—the ones who didn't quit—would be full-fledged graduates in anarchy, whose principal trouble in life was that they couldn't get sixpenn'orth of picric acid to blow up your Parliament House."