JACK LONDON AND SOCIALISM:
A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

by

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INTRODUCTION

From April 1896 until his formal resignation on March 7, 1916, Jack London was a card-carrying member of the Socialist Party. This span of almost twenty years was also the period of London's most prolific literary activity, a time during which the theories of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Frederick Nietzsche, as well as those of Karl Marx, played an important part in London's literary efforts and in his very life.¹

It was not that London took the philosophies of each of those men in toto and made them his own, for such diverse and often mutually contradictory philosophies permit no such simple synthesis. London was an eclectic in his approach to the theories of Darwin, Spencer, Marx, and Nietzsche, and his resultant philosophy was thus perpetually in conflict and lacking in unity. And so while each of these systems of thought can indeed be found in London's writings and life, they existed only in an incomplete, transformed, and highly personalized state.

A good deal of light has already been shed concerning the influence of Darwin, Spencer, and Nietzsche upon London, while Philip S. Foner and Joan London (London's daughter by his first wife, Bessie Maddern) have made valuable studies of London's socialism. Moreover, London's social thought is especially evident in many of the letters found in the otherwise inadequate biography which was written by his second wife, Charmian K. London. Nevertheless, the influence of Marx and socialism upon London's life and art is an area which has not as yet been adequately explored.


4 For a recent and valuable critical survey of the altogether unsatisfactory works that have been written on London, see Samuel A. Shivers, "Jack London: Author in Search of a Biographer," American Book Collector, XII, vi (February 1962), 25-27.
Why did Jack London become a socialist? What was the extent of his socialism? What effect did his socialism have upon his life and literary efforts? It is the intent of this thesis to find satisfactory answers to these questions.

The first step will be to discover and clarify the factors that influenced London in his decision to become a socialist. This will be followed by an analysis of his socialism and social principles as found in his life and writings. The third step will be to demonstrate how London's social ideals and social conscience were modified and subordinated to his strong individualism and egotism. Finally, a critical evaluation will be made of London's attempt to fuse socialist thought and art in The Iron Heel and Martin Eden, the two of his major works in which his socialism played the most prominent part.

Since this is not a sociological study, Marxism itself will be discussed in brief and only in relation to London's life, writings, and thought.
CHAPTER I

THE MAKING OF A SOCIALIST

By 1903, Jack London was well on his way toward becoming one of the most successful writers of his day. Erstwhile seaman, adventurer, seeker of gold in the Klondike, the twenty-seven year old author had already published three collections of short stories (The Son of the Wolf, 1900, The God of His Fathers, 1901, and Children of the Frost, 1902), a story for juveniles (The Cruise of the Dazzler, 1902), and two novels (A Daughter of the Snows, 1902, and The Call of the Wild, 1903). Two of these works, Children of the Frost and The Call of the Wild, brought London almost immediate national acclaim.1

Since April 1896, London had been a socialist. His fame as a writer had so increased by 1903 that The Comrade, an official party

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1"The critical response to The Call of the Wild was so overwhelmingly favorable that ten thousand copies were sold the first day of publication. It was the first of London's books to be a best seller, and it remains today [1947] the best known of his writings." Foner, p. 54. Irving Stone said that London's "Children of the Frost, the Alaskan-Indian stories that were Macmillan's first publication, established him as the dominant figure in the American short story." Stone, p. 172.
publication that had been founded in 1901, asked him to contribute an article on how he had become a socialist. London's article was to be but one of a series by well-known Party members like Father McGrady, the Rev. T. H. Hagerty, William T. Brown, Joshua Wanhope, and others. It was felt that such a series would be a source of inspiration to potential socialists. Jack London was more than pleased to submit an article to a publication which he had read and enthusiastically approved of since its very inception. His essay "How I Became a Socialist" appeared in the issue of March 1903. 2

In this short article, which was unfortunately more enthusiastic than candid, London's main point was that he became a socialist almost unconsciously as a result of his realization that the same capitalistic system that had used, exploited, and then discarded or maimed so many men—men who were once as young and healthy as he—would most probably do the same thing to him. He said of his frame of mind before his "conversion":

2After reading the first issue of The Comrade, London wrote joyfully to its editor: "My congratulations on your noteworthy first number. What with The International Socialist Review and The Comrade, I really feel a respectable member of society, able to say to the most finicky: 'Behold the literature of my party!!'" The Comrade, I (November 1901), 32.
The dignity of labor was to me the most impressive thing in the world. Without having read Carlyle, or Kipling, I formulated a gospel of work which put theirs in the shade. Work was everything. It was sanctification and salvation. The pride I took in a hard days work well done would be inconceivable to you. It is almost inconceivable to me as I look back upon it. I was as faithful a wage slave as ever capitalist exploited. To shirk or malinger on the man who paid me my wages was a sin, first, against myself, second against him.

London went on to say that he considered the turning point of his life to have been when he headed east in 1894 with Coxey's Army. This "Army of the Unemployed" was to march from Masillon, Ohio, on Easter Sunday, 1894, and conduct a mass demonstration in Washington on May Day. Young Jack had gone along for a lark on what he called a "new blond-beast adventure." He said:

I found there all sorts of men, many of whom had once been as good as myself and just as blond-beastly; sailor-men, soldier-men, labor-men, all wrenched and distorted and twisted out of shape by toil and hardship and accident, and cast adrift by their masters like so many old horses. I battered on the drag and slammed back gates with them, or shivered with them in box cars and city parks, listening the while to life-histories which began under auspices as fair as mine... and which ended there before my eyes in the shambles at the bottom of the Social Pit.  

3Quoted by Foner, p. 363.


5Ibid.
In somewhat overly dramatic terms, London told how horrified he became, the more he thought about those human derelicts:

The woman of the streets and the man of the gutter drew very close to me. I saw the picture of the Social Pit as vividly as though it were a concrete thing, and at the bottom of the Pit I saw them, myself above them, not far, and hanging on to the slippery wall by main strength and sweat. And I confess a terror seized me. What when my strength failed? When I should be unable to work shoulder to shoulder with the strong men who were as yet babes unborn?  

It is interesting to note that the scientific determinism that London arrived at through studying Darwin, Spencer, and Haeckel played an important part both in visualizing and expressing his "conversion" to socialism. As London saw it, the process had been an evolutionary one and not of his own free will:

I think it is apparent that my rampant individualism was pretty effectively hammered out of me, and something else as effectively hammered in. But, just as I had been an individualist without knowing it, I was now a Socialist without knowing it, withal an unscientific one. I had been re-born, but not renamed, and I was running around to find out what manner of thing I was. I ran back to California and opened the books. I do not remember which ones I opened first. It is an unimportant detail anyway. I was already It, whatever It was, and by aid of the books I discovered that It was

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6 Ibid.

7 On March 1, 1900, London wrote to his friend, Cloudesley Johns: "In my modest opinion, Haeckel's position is yet unassailable." Quoted in Charmian London, I, 304.
a Socialist.\(^8\)

In the closing paragraph of "How I Became a Socialist," London re-emphasized the personal importance of what he had discovered when he was with Coxey's Army:

Since that day I have opened many books, but no economic argument, no lucid demonstration of the logic and inevitability of Socialism affects me as profoundly and convincingly as I was affected on the day when I first saw the walls of the Social Pit rise around me and felt myself slipping down, down, into the shambles at the bottom.\(^9\)

Although several important facts are wrenched into place in London's essay, its main offense against truth is that of omission. There were no doubt many reasons why London did not more fully explain a decision that was to have such long-lasting and serious consequences on his life and art. Although highly successful as a socialist tract, "How I Became a Socialist" merely skims the surface of London's highly complex motivation.\(^10\)

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\(^8\) Foner, p. 365.

\(^9\) Ibid.

\(^10\) London was most probably striving more for effect than for accuracy when he wrote the essay. His daughter stated: "His reputation as a Socialist grew out of his writings during those periods when he was carried away by the drama of the situation and joyously reaffirmed his belief in the social revolution." Joan London, p. 214. As for its success, "the essay brought a flood of demands for articles from the socialist press and large batches of mail from comrades all over the world. Jack responded to both." Foner, p. 55.
While he was perhaps the first to do so, Jack London himself was but one of many who have attempted to discover and explain why he became a socialist. A high school acquaintance, Georgia Loring Bamford, suggested that he became a socialist through sheer fascination. Following London's lead, Irving Stone said: "Search the records as one may, one cannot find that Jack London thought a socialistic thought or uttered a socialistic sentiment prior to the year [1894] spent among what the sociologists termed the submerged tenth." Stone then went on to say that Jack London's socialism was not due to poverty, since

11Stone, p. 65. Implicit in this statement is the idea that Jack London had no socialist leanings prior to 1894, and that he became a socialist largely as a result of what he had seen and experienced while with Coxey's Army. This implication is somewhat weakened by a statement London made to a reporter for The Western Comrade in 1916: "I became a Socialist when I was seventeen years old." Quoted in Foner, p. 122. Since he did not formally join the Party until 1896, London might have meant that he had been intellectually convinced by socialism as early as January 1893, a full year before he went with Coxey's Army at eighteen years of age. In addition, Georgia Loring Bamford wrote: "My stepfather [Dr. Thomas M. Burns], who was inclined toward Socialism, had known 'that London boy' nearly four years [since 1891] during which time he had been gaining fame as a labor agitator and street speaker." The Mystery of Jack London: Some of His Friends, Also a Few Letters: A Reminiscence (Oakland, 1931), p. 20. She also said that she had been told that London made his first street speech at Chabot Observatory Park in Oakland in 1893. Bamford, p. 69. What with London's burning curiosity and the ready availability of socialist propaganda literature, it is not inconceivable that he discussed and expressed approval of certain socialist tenets prior to 1894, despite the lack of any evidence.
"hundreds of thousands of Americans of his time who had grown up in hunger and deprivation believed in the capitalist system and went out to corner their share of the wealth." Stone then said of London:

Just as he had been wise enough to understand that a certain number of the men on the road would be waste material under any civilization, he also realized that only a portion of the hardships of his youth were a result of the unsocial structure of American capitalism, that the major part of his hunger had been caused by his mother's unbalanced business schemes that had prevented John London from earning a living.

Whether London was dimly aware of that fact or not, it remains that he consistently blamed his early hardships and his family's trials on capitalism: "My father John London was the best man I have ever known . . . too intrinsically good to get ahead in the soulless scramble for a living that a man must cope with if he would survive in our anarchical capitalist system."

According to Stone, another important factor which helped make London a socialist was the hereditary qualities he had received from William Chaney, whom Stone assumed to have been London's natural father:

Professor Chaney was inherently a socialist before Jack was born. He had an intense though intellectual interest in.

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12 Stone, p. 65.

13 Idem., p. 75.

14 Quoted by Charmian London, I, 25.
the working class and a belief in the willingness of men to work hard and to work together. For many years he lectured and wrote articles on the causes and cures of poverty. This sympathy with and interest in the workers is, for those who are not workers themselves, a matter of temperament, tied up with a warm human nature, a sensitivity to the hardships of others, a personal liberality, and an imagination sufficiently vivid to project one's self into the sufferings of conscientious men whose wives and children are starving. Professor Chaney had all these attributes; they made him a socialist; he bequeathed them to his son, and they made his son a socialist.  

This is not a very strong argument. It has never been satisfactorily proven that Chaney was in fact London's natural father and even if he were, the "attributes" which Stone mentioned are acquired characteristics that cannot be transmitted through heredity.

Stone next stated that London:

had an inexhaustible quarrel with the world: his illegitimacy. Since he could not fight with his mother about it, rectify the wrong that had been done him, nor bring it out into the light, it festered in the subterranean darkness of his unconscious. The only quarrel in the external world which had the epic proportions to match in magnitude his internal quarrel was the overthrowing of the predominant class of society by the subservient class, of which he was a member.  

15 Stone, pp. 75-76. Chaney's title of "professor" was self-bestowed.

16 Idem, p. 76.
That the possibility of his having been illegitimate had a great effect on Jack London's later life can hardly be denied. What is significant is that he did not hear of this possibility until several months after he had already joined the Socialist Labor Party. His daughter wrote:

One other event contributed to the unhappiness Jack usually associated later with this period and that was receiving the unexpected and gratuitous information that John London was not his father. Jack had never been popular with some of his numerous steprelatives, but for some reason his effort to obtain an education inspired their active dislike. They told him an ugly, garbled story and then they taunted him with it. 17

The "period" to which Joan London referred was from August 1896 to January 1897, while her father was attending the University of California at Berkeley. If we can believe Joan London when she stated that this was the first time that her father had any inkling as to the possibility of his being illegitimate, it would seem that this shocking piece of news had nothing to do with his having joined the Party in April 1896, a date which Joan London herself has established. 18


18 "In one of Jack's early scrapbooks is to be found a small red booklet, a membership card issued by the American section of the Socialist Labor party in Oakland to Jack London, signed by M. Schwind, and showing that Jack entered the party in April 1896." Ibid., pp. 128-129.
In brief, Stone believed that London became a socialist for the following reasons: (1) because of the hereditary traits he had received from William Chaney, (2) because of the experiences he underwent while with Coxey's Army, (3) because of the economic insecurity of his earlier years, (4) because of his illegitimacy, (5) because of his conviction that "socialism was a system of human, historical, and economic logic as irreparable as the multiplication table."  

Disregarding the more purely personal motives, Foner agreed with Stone that intellectual conviction and London's travels with Coxey's Army were the factors which most strongly influenced London to become a socialist. Joan London added a personal note, believing that the event that precipitated her father's entrance into the Socialist Labor Party was his dismissal from the University Academy of Alameda in 1896. 

Although these and various other attempts to explain London's decision of 1896 have no doubt been sincere ones, they have in the main been either too restricted in scope—as in the case of Stone, Foner and

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19 Stone, p. 76.

20 Discussed by Foner, pp. 21-26.

21 Joan London, pp. 128-129
Joan London—or too general, as in the case of Margaret Isabel Pope.\textsuperscript{22} A more revealing and thorough approach to the problem would perhaps be to derive the principal factors that influenced London's decision from a careful analysis of his life up until April 1896, an analysis in terms of both character and environmental influences.

Prior to this, however, a brief review of the history of American socialism from its beginnings up to 1896 will be beneficial in providing an understanding of the general nature of the movement that Jack London was so enthusiastically to join.\textsuperscript{23}

The German refugees who came to America after the abortive revolution of 1848 brought with them little of the pure Marxism that had been so passionately delineated in\textit{The Communist Manifesto}. Their lack of understanding of Marxist principles and of the complexities of the new country to which they had come seriously limited their attempts to further the movement and, "confined within their own sectarian circles, their behaviour politically was more like that of an esoteric group of scholars than of builders of a mass political party."\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22}See Margaret Pope, pp. 106-131.

\textsuperscript{23}For a more detailed study of American socialism during this period see Joan London, pp. 113-124.

\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., p. 113.
By 1890, the character and organization of the movement in the United States had changed. From the second meeting of the Workingman's Party of the United States in 1877 emerged the Socialist Labor Party, a group which was in the next decade to split into two distinct ideological segments while retaining a surface appearance of unity. "One believed in concentrating on socialist propaganda during elections and left the trade unions to their own devices; the other centered all its activity in the trade-union movement and ignored politics." 25 There was no basic disagreement concerning the fundamental principles of socialism—the necessity of a struggle between capital and labor, the desirability of producing commodities for use rather than for profit, the eventual rise of the working class through revolution, if need be, and ultimately, the brotherhood of man. It was more a disagreement over means than ends. The man who was to attempt to provide much needed direction, unity, and discipline to the Party and end this conflict over methods was Daniel De Leon. Indeed, he might well be called the father of American Socialism.

Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* of 1888, appearing at the height of the intensive industrial conflict of the decade, gave marked

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impetus to the already growing desire of the working class and others to found a new social system. A Bellamy Club was formed in Boston and the name was soon changed to the Nationalist Club. By 1892 there were one hundred sixty-two such groups throughout the country. Bellamy was no Marxist and his utopian dream provided no principles for its attainment. With no effective practical policies, the clubs soon began to die out and many of the members gravitated naturally into the Socialist Labor Party. Among these was Daniel De Leon, a former assistant professor of International Law at Columbia University, a brilliant writer, a forceful speaker, and a man of broad culture.

After joining the Party in 1890, De Leon soon became its most prominent member. His leadership was direct and outspoken: the social revolution, with pure Marxism as its rationale, must move forward at once and by all available means.

Although the efforts of De Leon, Debs, and others were making American Socialism a force to be reckoned with, the geographically and culturally isolated West was lagging far behind the East in its social evolution. The working class was too busy attempting to battle the "yellow peril," the army of orientals who had flooded the labor market. After the stock market crash of 1893, joblessness was widespread and dissatisfaction among the working class grew to alarming proportions.
The Socialist Labor Party of California was unable to capitalize on the situation, however, because it was too disorganized, a haven for anarchists, utopians, Christian socialists, and Marxists alike.

One of the many groups that added to the confusion of the California Socialist camp were the English Socialists, a revivalistic and emotional band of latter-day pilgrims. Their bible was Robert Blatchford's *Merrie England*, which advocated "the destruction of the upper classes of landowners and industrialists and the formation of a cooperative commonwealth by the masses of the people, but neglected to suggest any means by which this might be accomplished." Of their reception, Joan London stated:

The co-operative commonwealth intrigued the California Socialists. They had come together in the Socialist Labor Party by devious ways, most of them having been members of Bellamy clubs until the collapse of the nationalist movement. Knowing little or nothing about Marx, they welcomed the British evangelical socialism with enthusiasm. As early as 1895, the Oakland group put theory into practice by opening a co-operative grocery store. The man they put in charge

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27 Ibid.
was Herman "Jim" Whitaker, a British Socialist who had come from Canada with his wife and small children after an unsuccessful attempt at homesteading. The stage was now set, for it was Jim Whitaker who was to help change the life of the intense young man that he singled out of the crowd one day at a socialist street rally at Chabot Park in Oakland. When Jim reached out an inviting hand, the youth who grasped it had already been prepared almost from his very birth to accept both it and the ideology which it represented. That young man was Jack London.

From June 11, 1874, until June 3, 1875, Flora Wellman and William Chaney, self-styled professor of astrology, had lived together in a state of common-law marriage. On January 12, 1876, some seven months after the angry separation of the two, a son was born to Flora Wellman at the home of her friend, Mrs. Amanda Slocum, at Third and Bryant Streets in San Francisco. Contrary to the more or less general belief that Jack London was born in a shanty on a sand-lot, the dwelling was a large and not inelegant one. Eight months later, on

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28 Whether Flora and Chaney broke up because she was pregnant with John London's child or whether Chaney was in fact the natural father has never been resolved. After considering the problem at length, Joan London said: "One finally gives up the enigma." P. 135. Most critics, however, have accepted the opinion that Chaney was Jack London's natural father.

September 7, 1876, Flora married John London and her son was named John Griffith London. "Flora and John London, having no formal church affiliations, the infant was never christened."\(^{30}\)

Flora Wellman was thirty-three years old at the time and the prodigal daughter of an upper middle class Ohio family. She had run away from home when she was sixteen and later appeared in San Francisco where she made her living as a piano teacher and spiritualist. Her new husband was a widower with two children, a Civil War veteran who had come to California from Missouri in 1860. This simple man with a kind and gentle heart was about fifteen years older than Flora and "had strayed from his more or less strict Methodist outlook and observances and had become enamoured of the doctrines of a spiritualistic cult."\(^{31}\) Through his spiritualism, John London had lost his faith but he had gained a wife.

During the next fifteen years the London family had almost as many different homes and John London, a carpenter by trade and farmer by inclination, was engaged in almost as many diverse occupations.

\(^{30}\) Ibid.

\(^{31}\) Idem, I, 21.
A year after their marriage, the London's moved to Bernal Heights in the farming district at the suggestion of their family doctor in an attempt to cure baby John's bowel trouble. In 1878 they moved back to the city into a three-story frame building, where they lived for two years. While Flora took in a boarder and used the rent money to pay for the services of a Chinese servant, John London worked as a carpenter, a common laborer, a sewing machine salesman. The year 1880 found the Londons in Oakland in a comfortable five-room cottage. They had been able to save a little money by this time and so they opened a grocery store on Seventh and Peralta in 1881. The store prospered and it was the first really happy period for the family.

John London took in a partner named Stovall and things were going well until London returned from a buying trip only to find that his partner had sold out the store and run off with the cash. In 1883, John London returned to the soil, his first love, and leased a farm in Alameda. Young Jack, now six years old, had no companions and began to turn

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32 Jack London told his wife that his memories went back to this store to the time when he was four years old. Charmian London, I, 31. From 1881 to 1891, there were at least six more moves.
inward on himself. If we can trust Jack London's own account, it was at this time that he got drunk for the second time in his young life at the age of seven. The occasion was a celebration held at some Italian neighbors' farm and the beverage was red wine.  

From 1884 to 1886, the London family was engaged in farming in the rich Livermore Valley east of Oakland. It was during this time that Jack, still lacking children of his own age with whom to play, began to read voraciously. The book that was to influence him throughout his life was Ouida's *Signa*. His daughter stated:

Reading and rereading, he absorbed unknowingly much of Ouida's faintly rebellious philosophy, her conviction that in society as it now exists there is no place for genius and goodness and high-mindedness, her passionate espousal of democratic ideals, and the curious mingling of extravagant romance and bleak realism which characterizes everything she wrote. His frequent mention of this story later, both in conversation and in his books, testifies to the deep impression it made upon him. For a vital youngster with a lively mind and imagination, growing up in an environment which could not nourish him, the stimulation of *Signa* cannot be underestimated.  

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33 This incident is discussed more fully in Charmian London, I, 38-42. According to Jack, the first time he became drunk was in Alameda at the age of five when he drank heavily from a bucket of beer he was taking to his father in the fields. *Ibid.*, I, 32-33.

34 Joan London, p. 24. Of special appeal to London was the rags-to-riches theme of *Signa*. *Signa* is a young Italian peasant who rises above all obstacles to reach success.
A series of financial reverses again beset the family. In 1886 they were forced to give up the Livermore ranch and move back to Oakland. Here at Garfield School young Jack, by now an introvert, soon learned he would have to fight for his rights with his own fists. His parents were learning a lesson at the same time. They had opened a boarding house for young Scotch female laborers, but this too had failed. This was the last time that the beaten John London and the erratic, frustrated Flora ever attempted to succeed in private enterprise.

John London was repeatedly out of work and it devolved upon eleven year old Jack to help support the family. He delivered papers both before and after school. He worked on an ice wagon on Saturdays and set pins in a bowling alley at night and on Sundays. His salary went intact to his mother and he was forced to become a shrewd trader of boyish trifles to secure the small personal objects he desired. Familiarity with saloons, street brawls, and local toughs soon brought him slowly out of his shell. He became rebellious and "more than once his perturbed mother was obliged to call at the schoolhouse to straighten out alleged insubordinations."

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It was at the Cole School in Oakland that he stubbornly told the teacher as she composed the class role that his name was "Jack" London, not John. It was also at the Cole School that he refused to participate in singing class for fear that the flat voice of his singing teacher would ruin his sense of pitch. The principal, Mr. Garlick, unexpectedly agreed with Jack and told the teacher that the boy was to write a composition every day in lieu of singing. Young Jack London was fast becoming a youth of strong ideas.

During this period he kept up his reading, borrowing books on all the library cards he had urged each member of his family to acquire:

The boy gorged himself on the books for which he had been famished; he read in bed, at table, as he walked to and from school, during recess while the other boys played. Possessor of a volatile imagination and nervous system, his feelings were molten and could easily be poured. . . . He consumed so many books in so short a time that he developed the jerks. To everybody he replied, "Go away; you make me nervous." From the tales of old travels and romantic voyages he gained the heady notion that Oakland was just a place to start from, that the world and its exciting adventures were awaiting him just as soon as he was able to escape.

36 These two stories are anecdotal and told by Charmian London, I, 59.

37 Stone, p. 25.
As a means of escaping the unpleasant demands of life, Jack London soon began to spend much of his precious spare time at the yacht club on the Oakland Estuary. When he was not at school, at work, or reading, he could be found doing odd jobs on the boats. "The yacht owners grew to like him because he was courageous, would crawl out on a boom in the roughest weather, and did not care how wet he got. They paid him small sums for scrubbing down decks and taught him what they knew about small boats." At thirteen he had hoarded two dollars, which was enough to buy an old boat which he patched up and enjoyed sailing in what little spare time he had. He liked to think of himself as a viking and pursued many imaginary adventures. They always ended in the same way, however, as he reluctantly tied down his boat and rushed off to sweep out saloons at night.

Jack London graduated from the Cole School in 1889. He was class historian and was chosen to give a speech at graduation, but he did not even attend the exercise. He had no decent suit of clothes in which to appear. The idea of his going on to high school was out of the question since John London was still out of work much of the time and the money which Jack could earn was too sorely needed.

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38 Ibid., p. 27.
Before Jack was fifteen, John London was struck by a train and severely injured. The family was forced to move to a community of shacks on the Oakland Estuary. Jack's clothes were ragged, the house had no modern sanitation. He was now the sole support of the family and he went to work in a vegetable cannery in an abandoned stable. He worked ten, eighteen, and even twenty hours a day for which he received ten cents an hour. The place was unsanitary, the working conditions were abominable, and as Jack London himself stated, the machines were unsafe:

We could not spare a look or a qualm from our own wariness of the machinery, when one of us was hurt. A frightened look aside, a moment's let-down of tensest attention to the thing in hand, and slap! off would go your own finger. 39

During the entire year at the cannery he had little or no time to read or to sail his boat. He despised the work and the conditions and it is little wonder that when the opportunity offered itself, he at last revolted.

While sailing on the Bay, Jack had become acquainted with the oyster pirates, "a hard-drinking crew of adventurers who raided the privately owned oyster beds in Lower Bay, and sold their booty for good prices on the Oakland docks. Jack knew that they rarely made less than twenty-five dollars for a night's work, and that a man who owned his

39 Quoted by Charmian London, I, 74.
own boat could clear two hundred dollars on a single catch."40 When
Jack heard that the Razzle Dazzle, a boat belonging to an older pirate
named French Frank, was for sale for three hundred dollars, he made
up his mind to quit his cannery job, raise the money to buy the Razzle
Dazzle, and become an oyster pirate. Jack was able to borrow the
amount needed from Jenny Prentiss, a negro woman who had been his
wet nurse and who loved him as if he were her own.41

London was becoming a man at an early age. He had already
become acquainted with sex with the girls of the cannery. When he took
possession of the Razzle Dazzle, he found that a girl a few years older
than himself, Mamie, who was called "Queen of the Oyster Pirates"
and who was formerly French Frank's girl, was now his girl. It was
a situation with which he was not unprepared to cope, for he said of
himself: "I was a husky man at sixteen, and already knew girls--my
first wondering knowledge had been presented to me by one much older

40 Stone, p. 31.

41 Because London was able to borrow three hundred dollars on
such short notice, it might be maintained that he was not as bad off
during these years as he later insisted. The answer is that while he
could borrow such a sum for an important reason, his pride would never
have allowed him to go to Mrs. Prentiss for his day to day needs.
than myself."\(^{42}\)

In the ensuing months, London learned to rob, drink, and fight with the best of the oyster pirates. He learned to bribe the police with oysters and beer. He defeated the jealous French Frank in a running sea battle. At first he drank merely to be one of the gang, but the habit became more and more compelling. Once he even wore a red shirt and helmet and carried an torch in an anarchist parade in Hayward for the free drinks that were promised at the end of the route.

The life was a dangerous one and finally, realizing that he would end up a drunkard or worse, Jack decided to try the other side of the law for a while. The former "Prince of the Oyster Pirates" (a title he had held proudly) joined the Fish Patrol and began to pursue his former comrades. Fifty percent of the fines he collected were his to keep.

It was not long before London began to realize that working with the law was every bit as dangerous as working against it, and it paid a lot less. Once it was only the gun in his hand that saved him from five angry Chinese armed with knives. Another time he had to run for his life down the Martinez wharf with angry pirates in hot pursuit.

\(^{42}\)Charmian London, I, 84.
Jack London was now seventeen. During the time he had been an oyster pirate and a member of the Fish Patrol, he had spent many hours in his bunk or on deck absorbed in some book or other. He was anxious to see some of the exciting places he had read about and so he decided to join the crew of the Sophie Sutherland, an eighty-ton schooner bound for Korea, Japan, Siberia, and ninety days of seal trapping. Jack had signed on as an able-bodied seaman and the other members of the crew were resentful at this as he had never been to sea on a real ship before. However, it was not long after their departure in January, 1893, before the entire crew accepted him as an equal because of his courage, eagerness, and sheer tenacity. During the next seven months he lived the sailor's life to the fullest. At the various ports of call he drank and fought with more enthusiasm than his elders.

On his return to Oakland in September, 1873, he was ready to settle down to a job, books, and study. He found his family in debt, although John London now had a steady job as a constable for Brooklyn township. With his wages from his voyage, Jack paid the family bills, bought himself a second-hand suit, and set out to find work.

Because of the financial panic of 1893, this was a very poor time to look for a job. Many businesses had failed and unemployment was widespread.
The only job he could find was in a jute mill at ten cents an hour, one dollar for a ten-hour day. The mill was filled with long rows of machines, their bobbins revolving rapidly. The air was warm, moist, thick with flying lint, and the noise so terrific that he had to shout at the top of his lungs to be heard. At the machines were children from eight years of age up, some crippled, many consumptive, all undernourished and suffering from rickets, earning their two dollars for a sixty-hour week. 43

Although he worked long and hard, London was now at an age where he knew he must study to get ahead. He did not spend his spare time sailing, but at the library. He also felt the need of companionship and would visit the Salvation Army and the Y. M. C. A., but he soon found that he did not fit in. His daughter says of this period:

The public library saw him again, and the Y. M. C. A., whither he was drawn before long in search of companionship. Here he found good, serious-minded boys who worked hard and found ample enjoyment in the physical exercise and other recreation offered by the "Y." Very earnestly he strove to adapt himself to them but failed. From both life and books he had learned infinitely more than most of them would ever know. In their company he was bored and even lonelier than before. 44

43 Stone, p. 45.

Discouraged by hard work, and lonely, London immediately reacted to a suggestion of his mother that offered him the possibility of success and recognition. The San Francisco Call was having a contest and Flora thought Jack should write a composition and submit it to the paper. It was a pleasant surprise when he won first prize and got a check for twenty-five dollars.

The appearance of his article, "Typhoon Off the Coast of Japan" in the November 12, 1893 edition of the Call was a triumph for the young man. This writing business seemed a lot easier than working in a jute mill and it certainly paid well. He dashed off several more stories, but met with no further success.

Meanwhile he had quit his job at the jute mill after the management failed to keep its promise to increase his salary to a dollar and a quarter a day. He now decided that electricity was the up and coming thing, so he got himself a job at the power plant of the Oakland Street Railway.

His job was to pass coal to the firemen, who fed it to the furnaces. He had to pass the coal for the day and night shifts, so that despite working through his lunch hour he rarely finished before nine at night, making it a thirteen-hour day. This brought his wage under eight cents an hour, less than he had earned at the cannery when he was fourteen. 45

45 Stone, p. 48-49.
London was willing to work hard because he hoped he could work his way up and become a practical electrician, but since he was young and strong, he could not understand why the job was so tiring. He soon found out:

... one of the firemen took pity on him and told him that there had always been two coal-passers, one for the day shift, one for the night. Each of these men had received forty dollars a month. When Jack had come along, young and eager to learn, the superintendent had fired the two coal-passers and put him in to handle both jobs. 46

Angry at having discovered that he had been exploited, London was nonetheless too proud and stubborn to quit. A few days later the same fireman showed him an article in an Oakland paper which stated that one of the former coal passers whose job Jack had unwittingly taken, a man with a wife and three children, had killed himself because he could not find work. London walked off the job in disgust.

It now seemed to London that a man must be either a slave or a vagabond. There was no middle ground. Adventure again beckoned and he responded; he decided to join Kelly's Army (a western contingent of Coxey's Army) in the march on Washington.

The purpose of Coxey's Army was to demonstrate against the

46 Idem, p. 49
unemployment that had been widespread since the previous year.

London did not join this group through any idealistic motives, however. His desire was for adventure, pure and simple. His wife said of this and of other later adventures undertaken on the spur of the moment:

In all the vivid plannings of his adult years, adventure was the prime factor. . . . That his present unmitigated lark of loafing across the continent made him into a socialist philosopher was but an inevitable sequence in a passionately adventuring intellect. As he put it: "Sociology was merely incidental. It came afterward, in the same manner that a wet skin follows a dunking."47

In the ensuing months, London found more adventures than even he had bargained for as he traveled over ten thousand miles across the country and back.48

Kelly's Army left Oakland at approximately 2:00 A. M. on April 6, 1894. They were scheduled to depart at 7:00 A. M., but they had been forced to leave at an earlier hour by the police. Thus London and his friend Frank Davis were four hours behind the Army when

47 Charmian London, I, 149.

48 Many of the details of this trip can be found in The Road (New York, 1907), a collection of short stories London wrote which were based on a diary he kept during his travels of 1894.
they arrived at the freight yard at 6:00 A. M. 49 They followed the Army to Sacramento and Ogden, Utah. Frank turned back, but London finally caught up to its rear detachment on about the sixteenth of April at the summit of the Rockies. He remained with the Army until the twenty-fifty of May, when he deserted at Hannibal, Missouri.

The reasons for London's desertion are rather simple. Living conditions among the men of Kelley's Army had been extremely poor. "As long as there had been excitement and fun he had remained. But the prospect of pushing on under more and more unpleasant conditions did not attract him."50 In addition:

Jack found it difficult to accept discipline and act as part of an organization. He was still too much of an individualist to work with others for the common good, and after all he was out for adventure, not for Congressional legislation for the unemployed. 51

Jack London's travels next took him to the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, to St. Joseph, Michigan, where he spent several weeks visiting his mother's sister, Mary Everhard, and to the city of New York, where he was dismayed by the slums and struck over the


50 Joan London, p. 82.

51 Foner, p. 19.
head with a club by a policeman for no apparent reason. 52

In late June, London visited Niagara Falls and in Buffalo underwent an experience that left its mark on him for the rest of his life. He was arrested for vagrancy and "after witnessing the complete disregard of the legal rights he had assumed were his, was sentenced to thirty days in the Erie County Jail." 53 He said later of this incident:

I had been denied my right of trial by jury. I had been denied my right to plead guilty or not guilty. I had been denied a trial even... I had not been allowed to communicate with a lawyer or anyone, and hence had been denied my right of suing for a writ of habeas corpus. 54

Through this experience, London lost what little respect he still had for the law. His daughter wrote:

He would obey the law, not because it was the law, but because it was stronger than he and because he knew at first hand the penalties of disobedience. His contempt included all who were associated with the law—policemen, detectives, district attorneys, judges, guards and jailors—and because they did the bidding of forces antagonistic to him and all who belonged to the propertyless class, he regarded them as enemies. 55

52 Stone, p. 62.

53 Joan London, p. 84.


London was also convinced by his prison term of the terrible evils of capitalism and the horrors of the class struggle. "He saw prisoners throw fits, go mad; be whipped down eight tiers of stone steps; beaten to death; indescribable horrors in a torture chamber of helpless derelicts. "56 If this was the way capitalism treated his own class, he would not tolerate such a system.

After his release from prison, London tramped his way westward across Canada to Vancouver, working his way back to San Francisco as a seaman aboard the Umatilla. He was now determined to continue his education and become a writer. Of his motivations and feelings at this time, his wife stated:

The vaunted dignity of labor, as he had heard it expounded by teacher and preacher and politician, suffered a total eclipse. He had informed himself as to the doings in the cellar-pit of society. These had shown him that the men without trades were helpless, and the ones with trades were obliged to belong to unions to work at those trades. . . . Therefore, no trade for him—and no criminality either. He would work up out of the pit, but not with his muscles. . . brain, and brain only, would he sell. 57

56 Stone, p. 63.

57 Charmian London, I, 186.
When London entered Oakland High School in January '1895, he soon found that he was something of a misfit. He was years older than the other students, who "thought that he was unsociable and never guessed that, although he would have died before he admitted it, their own unfriendliness had cut him to the quick. Sometimes he would stand on the outskirts of a small group, listening to their talk, his eagerness to be included visible even to them." 58 Looking elsewhere for companionship, he joined the Henry Clay Debating Society, a group of intellectual progressives.

It was during this time that he first read Marx's Communist Manifesto. He underlined the following lines, with which he was especially impressed:

The socialists disdain to conceal their aims and views. They openly declare their ends can be attained only by a forcible overthrow of all existing conditions. Let the ruling class tremble at the socialistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to gain. Working men of all countries, unite! 59

Nor did London disdain to conceal his aims and views. In December 1895, he served as a debater at the Oakland High graduation exercises. The actual subject of the debate is now forgotten but the subject of London's startling digression has been recorded for us by

58 Joan London, p. 94.

59 As found in Foner, p. 25.
one of his fellow students:

... before people knew it their ears were being assailed by the most truculent Socialistic diatribe that I have ever heard. He was ready to destroy society and civilization; to break down all resistance with any force and commit the most scientific atrocities. He even suggested the use of the guillotine as desirable. I do not remember all he said but the terrible impression of his words will never leave me. 60

London soon left Oakland High School. His radical views were not appreciated there and he was impatient to attend the University.

With the financial support of his older sister, Eliza, he entered Anderson's University Academy in Alameda, a "cramming joint" which prepared young men for the university exams. 61

Jack London did well at Anderson's, in fact, he did too well. For five weeks he studied night and day:

He covered ground so rapidly that he was well on the way to completing two years' work in one semester. But the director, fearing that his progress would be cited by the Universities as proof of the loose methods of preparatory schools, returned Jack's fees in full. 62

60 Bamford, p. 23. Mrs. Bamford is not always reliable. What she says here is found also in Stone, pp. 79-80.


62 Foner, p. 28.
Anderson was also aware that most of the other students, mainly from well-to-do families, resented the shabby yet successful scholar:

Like everyone else, Anderson had his living to make, and he could not lose his wealthy clientele for the sake of one threadbare student. But at the time, bitterness was uppermost. . . . Defiance of the dictum that sought to prevent his entrance into college in August, and of a society which permitted such criminal frustration of abilities and willingness to work for its achievement—flared up almost at once.  

Jack London joined the Socialist Labor Party in Oakland that same month, April, 1896.

For months previous London had attended an occasional meeting of the Oakland Chapter of the Socialist Labor Party. He admired and liked Jim Whitaker, who was a man's man, an accomplished fencer and boxer. He also admired Frank Strawn-Hamilton for his intellect and his profound grasp of Marxism. They and others had frequently urged him to join the Party, but he had always demurred because "he did not feel ready yet to join the party; he was too busy, and he knew too little."  

Why did London change his mind so quickly? Despite his hesitancy at the thought of becoming an active socialist, the factors that influenced his decision had been working on his intellect and will

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63 Joan London, p. 128.

64 Idem, p. 127.
for a number of years and it took only his dismissal from the Academy to spur him on to do by impulse what he most probably would not have done through calm judgment.

To summarize, the foregoing analysis of London's life up until April 1896, clearly indicates that the following environmental factors were of paramount importance in influencing his decision to become a socialist:

1) The frequent moves and poor economic status of his family in his earlier years. -- Frequent moves and poverty caused London to feel rootless, to become an introvert and then an extreme individualist through a lack of friendship and security. Socialism offered him a sense of belonging and the companionship of equals in opposition to a capitalist class which he had begun to distrust.

2) His long hours of arduous physical labor. -- His years of toil gave him compassion for the worker and an increased disillusionment with the existing social structure and with laws that did not protect the weak. 65

65 London "had little respect for laws which allowed little boys and girls of eight to be put to work in factories at a penny an hour. The law, as he saw it, was to keep the rich rich and the poor poor." Arthur Calder-Marshall, Lone Wolf: The Story of Jack London (London, 1961), p. 38.
3) **His lack of formal academic and religious education.** London was indeed ripe for socialism as he did not have sufficient formal education to understand the history of his country and of its economic evolution. He could not see the inconsistencies of socialism, nor could he understand the relative merits of a capitalism that had not yet reached its maturity. The Christian ethic properly understood would have shown him how man had a right to private property and would have offered effective remedies for the evils he observed. As it was, socialism filled the void where religion was lacking.

4) **His adventures as an oyster pirate, member of the Fish Patrol, and seaman.** These activities added to London's individualism, self-confidence, and courage. In the first two cases, they also showed him the great danger that existed in a life outside or inside a legal and social system which to him seemed basically unfair. These adventures also contributed to his early maturity.

5) **The experiences of his cross-country trip of 1894.** The human derelicts of Coxey's Army and of the big city slums, as well

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66 London realized later in life that capitalism had not yet run its course and was quick to overlook those facets of socialism which he found contradictory.

67 Spencer vigorously defended man's right to private property, but London had not read much of Spencer.
as his prison term, increased his compassion for his fellow man, his belief in the class struggle, and his contempt for the law. Perhaps the most important result of his arrest and jail term was his realization that he himself was of the working class and was not immune to the torments and injustices which it suffered. His arrest, therefore, was a strong blow to his ego, as well as to his patriotism and idealism.

6) His exposure to socialism, with its messianic character and promise of revolution. — London had grown up side by side with socialism in Oakland. He had heard it discussed on the road and later admired the fervor and sincerity of Karl Marx. Although he did not understand socialism fully, it offered an outlet for his feelings, frustrations, and opinions, and promised to right all the wrongs he had observed. His shattered idealism found a new and more militant ideal, the nearest thing to religion he was ever to know. 68

7) His dismissal from the University Academy of Alameda in 1896. — This humiliating and frustrating experience provided all the impetus needed to break down whatever resistance he felt internally

68 His wife says of London's attitude to the economics of socialism: "At least, it appealed to him as the most applicable of any he had found to the anarchic social scheme that had arisen and persisted through Capitalism, and which he could contemplate only as man's shame to man under the free light of heaven." Charmian London, I, 180.
toward joining the Socialist Labor Party at a time when he was not yet ready to accept socialism intellectually.

In the final analysis, it was Jack London's reactions to the preceding occurrences in his life that influenced him to become a socialist, reactions which in turn were dictated by the strengths and weaknesses of his character that had resulted from both his environment and his heredity. His early maturity and curiosity led him to seek an answer to the economic evils he had witnessed and his idealism and optimism convinced him that socialism could set the world right again. His courage, individualism, and enthusiasm, made it possible for him to join an extremely unpopular movement. His compassion for his fellow man, on the social side, and his own need for a sense of belonging, on the personal side, also contributed to his decision. Furthermore, London's ambition and egotism told him that he could free himself and then others from the "Social Pit"—and he could be a leader. Finally, his pride and impulsiveness caused him to react instinctively to his dismissal from the University Academy.

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69 "The people of Oakland believed that being a socialist not only proved that there was something wrong with a man's mind, but with his morals as well." Stone, p. 77.
While it is extremely difficult to gauge the relative importance of all the previously mentioned factors as influences upon London's decision to become a socialist, it is obvious from his lack of intellectual conviction and his visualization of social problems always in terms of himself first, and then in terms of his fellow man, that his motivation was primarily of a personal rather than a social nature. He did not approach the movement with both eyes open, nor with a spirit of humility and self-sacrificing service to mankind.

Although nominally a socialist in April 1896, London was still a neophyte, a mere novice. It was in the following years that his social principles were to mature and develop, and in such a way that he was to become one of the strangest socialists in the movement's history.
CHAPTER II
LONDON'S SOCIAL PRINCIPLES

During the almost twenty years that Jack London was an avowed socialist, there was a change both in his social principles and in the intensity with which he stated them. These principles had begun to take shape early in his life, and largely as a means of fulfilling the demands of his personality. As Pope said: "It is interesting, though not surprising, to note that the most tenaciously maintained of his ideas and theories take their inception from his reaction toward childhood experiences, or from the compensating needs of his expanding ego."2

After joining the Socialist Labor Party in April 1896, London had the opportunity to learn more about socialism from men like Austin Lewis and Frank Strawn-Hamilton, the most intellectual members of the Oakland local. He did not benefit fully from their deep knowledge of Marxism partly because, as Lewis said, London "could not be classified as an intellectual in any real sense" for "his brain was not of the rapid

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1 London was a socialist from April 1896 until March 7, 1916.
2 Margaret Pope, p. 2.
or active variety. "3 In addition, although London could indeed listen to these men, he was not by nature a disciple. It was characteristic of London that during the next few years—a time when he was consciously to seek a philosophy of life and a clearer view of socialism—he should be, in fact, his own master.

From 1896 to 1900, the period during which his major social principles began to take their final form, London read, among others, the works of Darwin, Spencer, Nietzsche, and Karl Marx. Of these four, long considered the greatest influences on London, his daughter stated:

As a matter of fact these four thinkers did not influence Jack London as greatly as has been supposed. He read very little of any of them and studied none. Darwin and Spencer were gobbled in one excited reading, although he later returned to Spencer and read him more carefully. His knowledge of Nietzsche was derived largely from listening to Strawn-Hamilton, and when he did turn to Nietzsche's own pages he was so enchanted by the philosopher's vocabulary and jargon that he noted little else. . . . As for Marx, only the first volume of Das Kapital was then available in English. 4

There is no evidence, however, to indicate that London studied even that one volume. Although Stone said that London took a copy of Das Kapital into the Klondike with him in 1897, unfortunately he gives no evidence to

3Quoted by Joan London, p. 185.

to support that contention. 5

Whether he ever read Das Kapital or not, the work of Marx
and Engels that was to leave an indelible impression upon London was
the revolutionary Communist Manifesto of 1848. According to Foner,
"Jack London may have read little else of Marx and Engels, but it was
from the Manifesto, with its inimitable clarity, that he obtained the
fundamental concepts of his socialism."6 Those "fundamental concepts"
were the abolition of private property, the collective ownership of the
means of production and distribution, and the inevitability and final
triumph of the class struggle. London not only never got beyond those
fundamentals, but "the principles of Marxism that went counter to his
own preconceived prejudices, he either ignored, shunted aside or dis-
torted so that often he would mar the insight that he obtained from the
Manifesto with absurdities."7

The real importance of Darwin, Spencer, and of Nietzsche in
the development of London's social principles lies in the fact that his
exposure to their tenets forced him to re-evaluate his socialistic beliefs.

5 Stone, p. 89.

6 Foner, p. 25.

7 Idem, pp. 25-26.
"It appeared to him that 'evolution' and 'biology' might upset the whole edifice of Marxian thought."\(^8\) Indeed, more than once in the years 1899 to 1901 he was to confess: "No, I am not a revolutionist or Marxist. I've read too much Spencer for that."\(^9\) At other times, unwilling to abandon his belief entirely, he would qualify it: "I am still a Socialist, but an evolved product, possessing a faith in humanity equaled only by a conception of its frailties and faults."\(^10\)

In the years that followed, London managed to quiet his doubts somewhat by submerging himself in writing and speaking on behalf of the socialist cause. He decried the exploitation and wretchedness of the poor in *The People of the Abyss* (1903) and "The Apostate" (1906). In *The Iron Heel* of 1908, London said that education, religion, and the press were the tools of capitalism, a charge that he repeated in "South of the Slot" (1914). In 1910, he condemned Wall Street and its practises in *Burning Daylight*. London claimed that the arts, especially literature, were commanded by the moneyed interests in *Martin Eden* (1909) and in "The Dignity of Dollars" of 1910. In *The Star Rover* of 1915,

\[^8\] Joan London, p. 207.

\[^9\] Quoted by Joan London, p. 207.

\[^10\] Idem.
London came out very strongly against the denial of due process of law and the "railroading" of accused persons. Indeed, difficult as it sometimes is to discover what London himself believed in, no such difficulty arises in regard to what it was he deplored.

London's complaints against society were also repeated throughout these same years in essay form. These essays served several very useful purposes: they reached a larger audience than could London's fiction alone, they could be printed and given mass circulation very cheaply, and they were used by London himself on the lecture platform.  

One of London's earliest essays, "The Question of the Maximum" of 1899, predicted that great wars would arise as mighty industrialized nations fought for new markets and colonies. Eventually, capitalism must needs give way to socialism because "the procession of ages has marked not only the rise of man, but the rise of the common man." The people would rise up and take over the means of production and

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11 London was a self-conscious speaker and felt at home on the lecture platform only when he had a carefully prepared, familiar speech in his hand. Joan London, p. 136, p. 208.

12 Quoted by Foner, pp. 37-38.
distribution and put an end to the economic rivalries that lead to war. This essay was purchased by an Eastern magazine but not published because the editor became frightened by its radical theme.  

The first of London's essays to receive national circulation was "What Communities Lose by the Competitive System," which appeared in the November 1900 issue of Cosmopolitan. London's essay had won a two hundred dollar prize for being the best piece of writing submitted on the theme "Loss by Lack of Co-operation." This essay, while a logical and calm appraisal of many of the inherent defects of the competitive system, "hardly breathes the revolutionary fervor to be found in his other essays." In the essay's strongest section, London wrote: "The old indictment that competitive capital is soulless, still holds. Altruism and industrial competition are mutually destructive. They cannot exist together." This was the problem as he saw it. His

13 This essay later appeared in London's War of the Classes (New York, 1905).

14 On December 22, 1900, London wrote to Cloudesley Johns: "Yes, after much delay, I captured the Cosmopolitan prize. I flatter myself that I am one of the rare socialists who have ever succeeded in making money out of their socialism." Quoted by Charmian London, I, 346-347.

15 Foner, p. 41.

16 Quoted by Foner, p. 428.
solution, that "internal competition must be minimized and industry yield more and more to the cooperative principle," would fulfill man's physical needs and thus give the entire community sufficient leisure time to enjoy the arts and the finer things of life. ¹⁷ This view was held by many non-socialistic reformers, as well as by a number of far-sighted industrial leaders, and its inclusion in London's essay did not therefore serve to identify the article as a piece of socialistic propaganda, which in fact it was not.

This particular essay was written at a time when London was trying desperately to make a name for himself as an author. He also wanted very much to earn the prize money; therefore it is not surprising that the article completely lacked any clearly stated socialistic principles that might have alienated London's readers. And "although he soon began to write other socialist essays, it can be truthfully said that their prime purpose was never to make money." ¹⁸

Also of interest in the development of London's social thought is his short story "The Minions of Midas," which appeared in the May 1901 issue of Pearson's Magazine. ¹⁹ Although hailed by Stone as the

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Joan London, p. 204.

¹⁹ It later appeared in London's Moon-face and Other Stories (New York, 1906).
first proletarian story "to have been published in a magazine of national importance and distribution," this story portrayed the working class as materialistic assassins. In fact, "it is anything but 'proletarian' in content and orientation and is more revealing of some of London's limitations as a socialist than of his contribution to socialist fiction." Among these limitations was London's belief that the working class should attempt to beat the capitalists at their own game. London told his friend Anna Strunsky (a fellow socialist, in collaboration with whom London wrote The Kempton-Wace Letters) that by becoming a successful writer, he could disprove the common belief that socialists were failures, weaklings, and incompetents, and thus do a real service to the cause. Miss Strunsky was repelled by this and believed that no real socialist could harbor such a thought. London felt that it was his own particular mission to help make socialism respectable, but this feeling was largely motivated by a desire to remain respectable himself and to justify his driving ambition.

In the August 1902 issue of The International Socialist Review,

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20 Stone, p. 155.

21 Foner, p. 46.
London discussed the rise and the problems of labor and the rise of socialism in a highly detached manner in "Wanted: A New Law of Development." One would never suspect that the author of this essay was a socialist, so restrained was its tone. He stated: "Barely a century old, capitalism is ripening so rapidly that it can never live to see a second birthday. There is no hope for it, the Socialists say. It is doomed."  

That may indeed have been what the socialists were saying, but it was not what London himself believed. Only a year before, he had written to Cloudesley Johns:

I should like to have socialism; yet I know that socialism is not the next step; I know that capitalism must live its life first. That the world must be exploited to the utmost first; that first must intervene a struggle for life among the nations, severer, intenser, more widespread than ever before. I should much more prefer to wake tomorrow in a smoothly-running socialistic state; but I know I shall not; I know it cannot come that way.  

One of the important principles that London insisted upon and emphasized in this essay was his belief in the existence of and the need for the class struggle at a time when many of the upper class would not even recognize the existence of classes, much less any struggle between

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22 Quoted by Foner, p. 439.

23 Quoted by Charmian London, I, 351.
them. Typical of the attitude was that of Irving M. Scott, a man of wealth, who wrote to London's socialist friend Frederick Bamford on August 13, 1901:

Your letter of August 3rd. at hand. Contents noted but not fully understood. I do not assume to be competent to criticize the many phases of Socialism, neither do I know what phase you have sworn to as a 'sacred cause.' Neither do I belong to any Class--nor do I know of Classes in our form of Government--nor any privilege not free to all. 24

One of London's fondest hopes was that he would be able to make such people very much aware of the class struggle.

In August of 1902, London stopped off in England while enroute to South Africa to do a series of articles on post-war conditions for the American Press Association. When his assignment was unexpectedly cancelled, he decided to disappear into the slums of London's East End and write about the conditions he would find there. The result was his book The People of the Abyss.

In this grim study of miserable men and women who were forced by their economic situation to live in the sheerest squalor, London reversed an earlier opinion and urged a socialistic commonwealth as the only adequate remedy for all the abuses and human indignities which he

24 Quoted by Georgia Bamford, p. 115.
had observed. It was his hope that a reorganization of society on the basis of production for use and not for profit would eliminate both the slums and the evil conditions which bred them. His solution was so lightly touched upon in his book, however, that London was later to deny that he had ever suggested one at all.

The People of the Abyss is an interesting book from several points of view. It is not a work of art, nor was it meant to be, and yet sections of it are highly artistic. And while it graphically illustrates the plight of the lowest of the lower classes, it also reveals London's complete naiveté in his belief that socialism would be capable of transforming human nature, which was the real force that had placed the

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25 On June 7, 1899, London wrote to Cloudesley Johns: "Yes; the time for Utopias and dreamers is past. Cooperative colonies, etc., are at best impractical." Charmian London, I, 294.

26 "Always he was made wroth from a technical standpoint when this work was ignorantly and maliciously termed a 'socialistic treatise.' 'I merely state the disease, as I saw it,' he would explain. 'I have not, within the pages of that book, stated the cure as I see it.'" Charmian London, I, 381.

27 Margaret Pope said of the book: "It is a terrible, and not in the least artistic, book. . . . It is not a cool and objective treatment, but rather an indictment against society turned out white-hot from the boiling reservoirs of his indignation." Page 47. Roger Sprague would have disagreed with Margaret Pope. He thought London's contrast of a coronation with the poverty of the people was extremely well done. "Contrast as a Device: Description of Coronation Day in London," Saturday Review of Literature, VI (October 26, 1929), 320.
people in London's abyss. This same naivete' was evidenced in a letter which London wrote to Cloudesley Johns on May 18, 1899, wherein he was discussing how socialism, once achieved, would provide a renewed moral atmosphere from which noble leaders would emerge:

But have you ever figured how much of this fawning and low twisting, etc., is due to party politics; and with the removal of party politics and the whole spoils system from the field, cannot you figure a better class of men coming to the fore as political leaders—men, whose sterling qualities today prevent them crawling through the muck necessary to attain party chieftanship?28

As in the case of his earlier essays, London's power in The People of the Abyss was in exposing—not in resolving. But that his power was relatively great was attested by the fact that his book was read throughout England and the United States and Jack London, whether he meant to or not, gained international fame as a socialist.

London's next essay was "The Class Struggle," which appeared in The Independent of November 5, 1903. Once again, London was detached as he discussed socialism, capitalism, and the class struggle. Nowhere in the essay did he associate himself with the socialist movement. The strongest charge he levelled against capitalism was its lack

28Quoted by Charmian London, I, 293.
of organization in the class struggle, while he admitted that the socialists may well have been "fanatics and dreamers." And while "The Class Struggle" was the most forceful, the most impartial, and the most effective of all London's essays, it was also the least socialistic. It was a call to arms for capitalists as well as socialists, warning the former against the intentions and the strength of the latter. "It remains to be seen," London stated, "how promptly the capitalist class will respond to the call to arms. Upon its promptness rests its existence, for if it sits idly by, soothfully proclaiming what ought not to be cannot be, it will find the roof beams crashing about its head. . . . It is no longer a question of whether or not there is a class struggle," he concluded. "The question now is, what will be the outcome of the class struggle?"

Margaret Pope severely criticized London's ability as an essayist. She stated:

Jack London never mastered the essay form; indeed I strongly suspect that he failed to realize that it was a form. Of all the types of literary expression, the essay demands, more than any other, the qualities in which Jack London was lacking: intellectual detachment, an interest in ideas for themselves, and a cultivated prose style which presupposes

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29 Quoted in Foner, p. 453.

30 Ibid.
a fine sense of form. The London ego is stiflingly ever-present in his essay attempts... the style--forceful, picturesque, and perfectly adequate at times, tending to be uneven, and often ever-emphatic. 31

While her comment was a valid one in a general way, the faults which she described are not to be found in "The War of the Classes."

In "The Scab" and "The Tramp" of 1904, London again discussed social conditions in a manner that made the upper class uncomfortable while at the same time it left the socialists dissatisfied. The latter felt that in "The Scab" London should not have alienated labor union dissenters, but rather should have tried to win them over. In "The Tramp" London had stressed the misery of the hobo and his helplessness at the hands of the upper class, whereas the socialists felt that London should have laid more emphasis on the class struggle and the tramp's ability to better himself by participating in that struggle. For missing such golden opportunities, Jack London was not yet considered a qualified propagandist.

By 1906, London was sufficiently well established as an author to align himself with socialism in a far more outspoken manner than he had employed theretofore. Prior to this time, London very carefully

31 Margaret Pope, p. 139.
toned down his social principles in most of his writings, and his more revolutionary ideas—if they appeared in print at all—were only in publications of very limited circulation. London may have succeeded in justifying such a course of action to himself and to others with the fact that his reportorial style and disciplined detachment had added to the impartiality of his essays, which they in fact did. At any rate, in "What Life Means to Me," which appeared in the March 1906 Cosmopolitan, London changed his approach and admitted to a national readership that his strongest desire was to help topple society and then build a new one founded on socialism. This literary increase in fervor on London's part mirrored a similar personal re-dedication, for "the years 1905-1907 marked the period of Jack London's greatest activity for the socialist movement."32

In his later and perhaps most famous essay, "Revolution," which appeared in the Contemporary Review of January 1908, London went even further and stated that the socialist revolution must be achieved, even if blood must be spiled as it was by the Russian assassins whom he called his "comrades." Although his statistics as to the number of international socialists were exaggerated and the feeling of the

32 Foner, p. 63
immediacy of the revolution which he imparted was unwarranted by the facts, his sincerity rang through and his message was both startling and infectious.

It is obvious that London believed deeply in the class struggle and in its ultimate success. He stated:

The revolution is a fact. It is here now. Seven million revolutionists, organized, working day and night, are preaching the revolution—that passionate gospel, the Brotherhood of man. Not only is it a cold-blooded economic propaganda, but it is in essence a religious propaganda with a fervor in it of Paul and Christ. The capitalist class has been indicted. It has failed in its management and its management is to be taken away from it. Seven million men of the working-class say that they are going to get the rest of the working-class to join with them and take the management away. The revolution is here, now. Stop it who can. 33

In the foregoing essays, London "states with passion but without philosophic depth the position of the American social revolutionist and his faith in the rise of the working class." 34 He was indeed a socialist, "but the tenets of London's revolutionary socialism were very different from the intellectual or 'leisure class socialism' in, say, the later works of William Dean Howells." 35

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33 Quoted in Foner, p. 504


One of the most striking differences between London and his fellow socialists was his belief in the supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon. In one of the rare instances that he permitted himself to become philosophical about socialism, London became obsessed by a doctrine that was opposed to the primary Marxian principle of the equality and brotherhood of man under socialism.

London's mother, Flora Wellman, used to say that "she and hers, were 'old American stock' and not 'Dagoes' nor immigrant Irish." London knew that his mother was of English-Welsh extraction, and whether his father was the English John London or the Irish William Chaney, he considered himself an Anglo-Saxon in his own broad meaning of the term.

And so while at times London would invoke the brotherhood of man under the banner of socialism both in print and from the podium, such occasions were rare and arose out of enthusiasm rather than conviction, for London himself believed firmly in the supremacy of his own race.

36 Charmian London, I, 38.

37 London said: "Anglo-Saxon stands for the English speaking people of all the world, who, in forms and traditions, are more peculiarly and definitely English than anything else." Quoted by Joan London, p. 212.

38 London often carried his preference for the Anglo-Saxon over into his fiction. As has been demonstrated in Virve S. Garfield's "Jack London's Literary Treatment of Women" (unpublished Master's thesis, Dept. of English, University of Arizona, 1962), his major heroines were all of Anglo-Saxon extraction.
That London's socialistic ideals had been early tainted by his belief in race supremacy is evidenced by his letter to Cloudesley Johns of June 23, 1899:

Socialism is not an ideal system, devised by man for the happiness of all life... but is devised for the happiness of certain kindred races. It is devised so as to give more strength to these certain kindred favored races so that they may survive and inherit the earth to the extinction of the lesser, weaker races. The very men who advocate socialism may tell you of the brotherhood of all men, and I know they are sincere; but that does not alter the law—they are simply instruments, working blindly for the betterment of these certain kindred races, and working detriment to the inferior races they would call brothers. It is the law; they do not know it, perhaps; but that does not change the logic of events.\(^{39}\)

His final word on the subject to Cloudesley Johns was in his letter of December 12, 1899: "You mistake, I do not believe in the universal brotherhood of man... I believe my race is the salt of the earth."\(^{40}\)

In his essay "Revolution" of 1908, London had extolled the comradeship of socialism and the brotherhood of man. Into the mouths of Japanese socialists he had put the words: "For us socialists there are no boundaries, race, country, or nationality."\(^{41}\) London's own personal position had been made far clearer in a dispatch which

\(^{39}\)Quoted by Charmian London, I, 297.

\(^{40}\)Idem, I, 317. \(^{41}\)Quoted in Foner, p. 489.
appeared in the **New York American** and **Journal** of July 12, 1904, written by London while he was a correspondent during the Russo-Japanese War. He told of his sensations at the sight of a group of Russian prisoners:

There was a man, a white man, with blue eyes, looking at me. He was dirty and unkempt. He had been through a fierce battle. But his eyes were bluer than mine, and his skin was as white. And there were other white men in there with him, many white men. I caught myself gasping. A choking sensation was in my throat. I found myself suddenly and sharply aware that I was an alien among the brown men who peered in through the windows at me. And I felt myself strangely alone with those other men behind the window, felt that my place was there inside with them in their captivity rather than outside in freedom among the aliens.  

Many of London's socialist friends back in Oakland were aghast at this denial of the brotherhood of man. His retort to them was: "What the devil! I am first of all a white man and only then a socialist."  

Another of London's radical departures from socialistic doctrine was his view of the place of individualism in the socialistic scheme. He wrote to Cloudesley Johns on April 30, 1899:

But I don't agree with you regarding the death stroke to individuality coming with the change of the system. There will always be leaders and no man can lead without fighting for his position—leaders in all branches. Sometimes I feel

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43 *Idem*, p. 59.
as you do about it, but not for long at a time. 44

The idea of becoming a leader and real force within the Socialist Party appealed greatly to London. He ran for Mayor of Oakland on the Socialist ticket in 1901 and again in 1905, but he was the popular candidate with the unpopular cause and received only a few hundred votes. It was not long before he realized that he had been nominated to run because he was well known—not because he was considered a model socialist. In the years that followed, he quite often felt that he was being exploited by the Socialist Party. He was being used, but not listened to. And so it was that his real power as a socialist always consisted in his reputation and ability as a writer—not in his position in the Socialist Party.

From 1908 until his resignation from the Party in 1916, socialism, from his point of view, began to drift away from London. His reason for resigning was very clearly stated in his letter to the Party leadership of March 7, 1916:

Trained in the class struggle, as taught and practised by the Socialist Labor Party, my own highest judgment concurring, I believed that the working class, by fighting, by never fusing, by never making terms with the enemy, could emancipate itself. Since the whole trend of Socialism in the United States during

44 Quoted by Charmian London, I, 289.
recent years has been one of peaceableness and compromise, I find that my mind refuses further sanction of my remaining a party member. Hence my resignation.  

Eugene V. Debs and others had also decried the same tendency in the Party. In 1911, Debs had warned that the Party was in danger of becoming "permeated and corrupted with the spirit of bourgeois reform to an extent that will practically destroy its virility and efficiency as a revolutionary organization."  

London told a reporter for The Western Comrade in 1915:

I do not believe that Socialists should soften and yield, eventually becoming mere reformers whose greatest desire is economy in government and low taxes, and the like. They should take upon themselves the task of doing away with the robbing capitalist system, do away with the profit system and place the workers in possession of the industries.  

By 1916, the fear of Debs, London, and others had become a reality as the Socialist Party went to great lengths to de-emphasize its less popular features, such as the class struggle, in an attempt to gain political reform through opportunism and expediency.

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45 Quoted by Foner, p. 123.

46 Ibid., p. 124.

47 Ibid.
And so Jack London, revolutionary socialist, was something of an anachronism. His belief in an intense and uncompromising class struggle made it impossible for him to work with the more conservative element in the Party, while his equally strong belief in the justice of the war that the Anglo-Saxons (the Americans and the English) were waging against imperialistic Germany made it impossible for him to align himself with the few revolutionists who still remained in the Party but who at the same time so vehemently opposed the war. And so he could see no recourse but to resign from the Socialist Party almost as impulsively as he had joined it almost twenty years earlier.

During those twenty years, his greatest contribution to social progress was in the keenness of his perception of social evils and his ability to expose those evils with clarity and compassion. "In his alertness to change and movement in society, his faith in humanity, and in his live interest in the results of advancing science, not to mention the progressivism of his personal views, he is a stimulating social critic." 48

What was lacking in London was the ability to help solve the many problems that he raised. In the end, all that he had to offer as a

48 Margaret Pope, p. 130.
solution was "a benevolent anarchy of Anglo-Saxon supremacy that would allow both social harmony and complete individualism."\textsuperscript{49} It was a solution that satisfied not even himself.

Moreover, his abrupt severance of the only bond he had ever been capable of maintaining with his fellow man, his socialism, marked the disintegration of his personality and contributed, as will be seen, to his tragic death.

\textsuperscript{49} Spiller, p. 1035.
CHAPTER III

THE SUPERMAN AND THE SOCIALIST

According to T. K. Whipple, Jack London was about ten per cent a socialist and at least ninety per cent individualistic.¹ Such a concise and categorical statement is valid only if applied to London in the closing months of his life, for prior to his resignation from the Socialist Party, the relative proportion of socialism and individualism in Jack London's psyche was in almost a constant state of flux.

From his earliest years, London strove to balance his obligation to his fellow man with the claims of his own personality, a process of maturing which every man must needs undergo. Even before his exposure to the philosophy of Nietzsche in the closing years of the nineteenth century, he believed he could rise above his class by sheer drive and ambition. It is no wonder that the man whose motto was "Dig can move more mountains than faith ever dreamed of" was to incline more toward Nietzsche than Marx in the conduct of his personal life.²


²Quoted by Stone, p. 119.
London tended to remember his childhood as having been even more unpleasant than it actually was. In a letter of November 30, 1898, he wrote to Mable Applegarth:

Do you know my childhood? When I was seven years old at the country school of San Pedro, this happened. Meat, I was that hungry for it I once opened a girl's basket and stole a piece of meat—a little piece the size of my two fingers. . . . In those days, like Esau, I would have literally sold my birthright for a mess of pottage, a piece of meat. . . . Great God! when those youngsters threw chunks of meat on the ground because of surfeit, I could have dragged it from the dirt and eaten it; but I did not. Just imagine the development of my mind, my soul, under such material conditions. This meat incident is an epitome of my whole life. 3

His mother stated to his second wife, Charmian: "He didn't go hungry in our house! . . . Why, you know, his father always had vegetables, and if meat was ever scarce, there were plenty of chickens." 4 London's own extreme sensibility and imagination, then, were largely responsible for his creation of a miserable childhood from which he sought to escape at all costs through sheer self-discipline and creative activity that was all too often and of necessity forced. 4

Several times in his earlier life, London had run away from

3 Quoted in Charmian London, I, 36-37.

4 London's older sister, Eliza, agreed with Flora on this point. Ibid., I, 37.
responsibility by becoming a member of Coxeys army, an oyster pirate, a seaman, and a prospector in the Klondike. After each excursion he would return home and go back to work to support himself and his family, but the coarse collar of common labor never rested comfortably on his neck.

London thought himself destined for better things and believed that he could become a leader among men. In Alaska in 1897 he "visioned a certain type of white man who could equal the physical prowess of the finest specimens of primitive men and outdo them, as well as his legs favored white brothers, in intellectual power and achievement."\(^5\)

London's individualism was maturing, and his acquaintance with the writings of Nietzsche was to give it sanction. Stone said of this:

In Nietzsche too he discovered the theory of the superman who was bigger and stronger and wiser than all his fellows, who could conquer all obstacles and rule the slave mass. Jack found the philosophy of the superman much to his taste, because he conceived of himself as a superman, able to conquer all obstacles, a giant who would end by ruling (teaching, leading, directing) the masses. The fact that his philosophy of the reign of the superman over the slave masses made Nietzsche detest socialism as a government of the weak and inefficient, and led him to cry down trade unions as making the workers dissatisfied with their lot, did not seem to disturb Jack. He was going to believe in the superman and socialism at one and the

\(^5\) Joan London, p. 143.
same time, even if they were mutually exclusive. All his life he remained an individualist and a socialist; he wanted individualism for himself because he was a superman, a blond-beast who could conquer... and socialism for the masses who were weak and needed protection.  

There is good reason to believe that it was London's belief in his illegitimacy that led him to attempt to overcompensate by his excessive egotism. According to C. Hartley Grattan:

London had a passion to dominate--men, women, things. He had many of the characteristics which Dreiser attributes to his financiers. The drive of his personality was in the direction of domineering individualism, which is hostile to collectivism.

This drive and passion was not a completely conscious compulsion on London's part, however, which perhaps makes it all the more tragic. "His mind rejected the Nietzschean doctrine of the superman, but his temperament accepted it with a deeper logic." Thus were the foundations laid for the struggle that was to occupy London for his entire life as he was to attempt to ride "two intellectual horses, each of which was pulling in an opposite direction," individualism and socialism.

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6Sailor on Horseback p. 110.


8Spiller, p. 1035.

9Stone, p. 110.
It is very likely that London would have abandoned socialism completely in 1899, had it not been for the fact that his association with it was already beginning to open what had previously been unfriendly doors. Kenneth S. Lynn felt that "the conversion of Jack London to the philosophy of Marx had more to do with rising in the world than the world revolution." Socialism soon became a social entree for London; it afforded him intellectual camaraderie and gave him recognition at a time when he so sorely needed it. It was not so much that he was "using" socialism. His belief in it simply would not have been strong enough to secure him to it, had not socialism offered other incentives. As his daughter stated: "The sincerity of his socialist convictions, especially at this time, is unquestionable. But the sections of the Socialist Labor party in San Francisco and Oakland would scarcely have held him long had they not also offered what was bread and meat to his career."11

Indeed, the beneficial results of London's early exposure to socialism were many and varied:

The first volumes of Jack London's short stories reveal the slow deepening and strengthening of his powers during


11 Joan London, p. 179.
these years [1898-1901]. The little group of socialist intellectuals did their work well. More than that, they bound him with ties of friendship more closely and for a longer time to the movement than would otherwise have been the case. On the surface at least his life showed a unity of interests—work, friends, ideas, and ideals—which had never existed before and would not again. He never learned much socialism, it is true, and politically he remained an ignoramus, but he gained a perspective which was to prove more valuable than he knew. The experiences of these years contributed so richly to his development that their vitality was not exhausted until long after replenishment from the source had ceased.\(^\text{12}\)

The opposite side of the coin was that the adulation that London received as a socialist began to wreak havoc on his personality as "the flattery of those who attended his lectures, and particularly the flattery of the feminine portion of his audiences, aroused in him a new sort of egotism and developed a personal vanity which had not heretofore disclosed itself."\(^\text{13}\) The nature of that egotism was perhaps best described by London's socialist friend, Austin Lewis:

This public admiration of the personal kind was the origin of a curious sort of snobbery which he afterward developed to an extraordinary degree... the conscious snobbery of one who has found himself an object of personal attention, and, who, at the same time, has a notion that people who are admiring him are, in some

\(^\text{12}\)Ibid., p. 190.

\(^\text{13}\)Ibid., p. 208. Joan London discusses her father's early lectures on pp. 207-209.
respects at least, his social superiors. The whole of his life later at his country house in the Valley of the Moon is eloquent of this state of mind. Of course, the tendencies manifested themselves slowly, but the seeds were sown during those early lectures and public appearances.\textsuperscript{14}

After 1899, London could have gone on to become the complete individualist he embodied in Wolf Larsen in \textit{The Sea Wolf}, or the forceful spokesman for the proletariat he created in Ernest Everhard of \textit{The Iron Heel}. He attempted both, and in addition "succumbed to the temptation of large checks, and often wrote to please the bourgeoisie that he affected to despise so heartily."\textsuperscript{15} London stated in 1899:

\begin{quote}
It's money I want, or rather the things money will buy; and I can never possibly have too much. As to living on practically nothing, I propose to do as little of that as I possibly can. \ldots\, More money means more life to me. The habit of getting money will never become one of my vices, but the habit of spending money, ah God! I shall always be its victim. If cash comes with fame, come fame; if cash comes without fame, then come cash.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

It is ironic that in the years that followed "the habit of getting money" was to become one of his more obvious vices.

By early 1900, London had begun to sell a few stories. He knew what he wanted and believed that he had an adequate philosophy of

\textsuperscript{14}Quoted by Joan London, p. 208.

\textsuperscript{15}Russell Blankenship, \textit{American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind} (New York, 1931), p. 568.

\textsuperscript{16}Quoted in Stone, p. 134.
of life and sufficient personal drive to reach his goal and become a wealthy and successful writer. The only thing he lacked was a wife and the stability of marriage. Accordingly, he married Bess Maddern on April 7, 1900, not through love—not did he delude either himself or her that it was because of that—but through sheer strategy. His motive is clarified by a letter he wrote to Ninetta Eames (wife of the publisher of the Overland Monthly, which had begun to publish London's writing) on April 3, 1900, concerning his impending marriage:

... I shall be steadied and can be able to devote more time to my work. ... I shall be a cleaner, wholesomer man because of a restraint being laid upon me in place of being free to drift wheresoever I listed. 17

Indeed, in the next two years London devoted so much more time to his work and to entertaining acquaintances that he had very little time left to give to socialism. He was not yet a successful writer, but the many people who sat at his table, ate his food, and slept in his beds, made him feel as if he were. The pride of being a host was still fresh when he wrote: "I have been isolated so much, that I can no longer bear to be torn away for long at a time from city life." 18 By December


18 Ibid., I, 283.
1901, the pleasure was already beginning to pale as he wrote: "I am rotting here in town. Really, I can feel the bourgeois fear crawling up and twining around me. If I don't get out soon I shall be emasculated. The city folk are a poor folk anyway. To hell with them."\(^{19}\)

By February 1902, London had moved to Piedmont in Alameda County in an unsuccessful attempt to escape his creditors and erstwhile friends. By this time he had a daughter to support, as well as his wife, his mother, and John London's grandson, Johnny Miller, whom Flora had adopted and on whom she showered more affection than she ever had on Jack. Late in July he received an offer from the American Press Association to go to South Africa to report the Boer War. He was over three thousand dollars in debt and Bess was pregnant again, but he welcomed the call of adventure.

London returned from England in November 1902. While there he had written *The People of the Abyss* after the cancellation of his South African trip. The book made him famous, and *The Call of the Wild* of 1903 made him a success.

\(^{19}\)Ibid., I, 358.
With success in his profession, however, came disorder in his life. The disciplined, dependable love of Bess Maddern had left London unfulfilled. She did not sufficiently praise his accomplishments nor was she particularly happy to receive all the friends who were again beating a path to his door. London's rational, planned marriage soon gave way to romantic love, a kind of love which London had always criticized, as he fell in love with Charmian Kittredge, the niece of Ninetta Eames. His attraction to the sensuous Miss Kittredge and the freedom which she represented could not be denied:

He was caught in the grip of such a shattering compulsion that he was walking out on his wife and babies just as he had walked out on Flora and John London when he was younger and emotionally unstable. A tender human being, a socialist who had compassion for all of humanity, who was willing to give the best in him, without hope of reward, to better the lot of the masses, his social and moral consciousness was shoved aside by the conflicting Nietzschean ideal, the strange but constant bedfellow of his socialism, which told him that he was the superman who could wrestle from life whatever he wished, that he had no need to concern himself with slave morality, or the feelings of the slave-mass, of which Bessie was an unfortunate member.²⁰

Thus it was that in the summer of 1903, Jack London left his wife and children, his responsibilities, to seek his newer and hence more

²⁰Stone, pp. 184-185.
attractive vision of happiness.  

London had begun *The Sea Wolf* shortly before he fell in love with Charmian Kittredge. In 1915 he wrote to Mary Austin that the book had been intended as an attack upon the Nietzschean superman concept (Foner, p. 63). This otherwise effective work was weakened by the introduction of a female character toward the end of the book. Of this London stated: "I was in love with a woman, and I wrote her into my book, and the critics tell me that the woman I love is unbelievable."  

To read *The Sea Wolf* is to see vividly illustrated the effect of London's capitulation to romantic love on what otherwise might have been his finest work.

In January of 1904, London went off to Japan to cover the Russo-Japanese War for the Hearst syndicate. He was thus able to escape a press that had become suddenly hostile to him because of his separation from his wife and satisfy his need for adventure at the same time.

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21 London also separated from Bess Maddern because of her failure to provide him with a male heir and because of her resentment of his extra-marital sexual activities. He had an affair with a woman on the train to New York in July 1902, and had relations with several other women before his separation. Stone, p. 176. London was a hedonist to his dying day and even his marriage to Charmian did not curtail his activities along this line. Stone, p. 317.

22 Quoted in Stone, p. 207.
Upon his return from Japan, London found his fellow socialists displeased at the racism he had exhibited in his war articles and the public elated over his new novel, *The Sea Wolf*. Once again he was lionized and since he had the time and freedom, he began once again to speak on behalf of socialism. In October 1905 he departed on a lecture tour of the East and on November 19, 1905, he married Charmian Kittredge in Chicago almost before the ink on his divorce decree was dry.

The haste of London's marriage infuriated the press and filled the socialists with chagrin:

> Because of the conduct of their leader, the socialists of America took severe punishment. The capitalist press utilized the weapons at hand: 'There's socialism for you! Deserts its wife and babies... sanctions immorality... would bring about chaos... socialism is anarchism, would destroy our civilization...!' It was bootless for his comrades to protest, 'You cannot blame London's erratic conduct on socialism!' Socialism disapproves of this sort of thing as vigorously as does capitalism!! Their leader had violated certain codes, and their Cause consequently had to suffer.\(^{23}\)

London was dismayed at all the criticism his re-marriage had provoked, but attempted to shrug it off. When he was accused by his comrades of retarding the socialist revolution in America by at least five years, he remarked laconically: "On the contrary, I believe I still have accelerated the revolution by at least five minutes."\(^{24}\)

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\(^{23}\) Stone, p. 218.  
\(^{24}\) Ibid.
The socialists were further embarrassed in 1905 and 1906 by London's outspoken lectures which he presented at Harvard and Yale. The revolutionary ideals which he stated so vehemently in his essay-lecture "Revolution" also brought a decided slump in the sale of his books. London, however, did not much care that the middle-class leaders of the Socialist Party had begun to wash their hands of him as they stated that he did not speak for the Party. He was being listened to and applauded—the superman was waxing strong.

From this point on until his death, London had to contend with more and more criticism from capitalists and socialists alike as he continued to indulge in ever more diversified excesses of self-gratification and misguided attempts at social reform.

According to Joan London:

During, roughly, the years 1906 to 1910 his work, his interests and the man himself underwent great changes as the more compelling of the desires and ambitions he had acknowledged years earlier inexorably established their ascendancy over the weaker. Not all at once did he permit the latter to give way and fall back. He could not believe that all things were not possible for him, nor admit that making a great deal of money and living accordingly would not affect him in fundamental ways.25

It was during this period that he was too busy earning money to develop

25 Jack London and His Times, p. 316.
his Glen Ellen ranch to write an article for a large Eastern magazine on
the child labor situation in the Southern cotton mills. He also became
obsessed with the idea of sailing around the world on his new boat, the
Snark, which he was having built from keel to mast to his own specifi-
cations at tremendous cost.

Work had begun on the Snark in June 1906, and it took almost
two years to complete the vessel. Finally, after many costly delays,
London and his wife set sail for Hawaii on April 23, 1907. Joan London
wrote of this adventure:

Not the least of Jack's annoyances connected with the Snark
trip were the jibes from all quarters at his status as a Socialist
in relation to the expensive and dangerous undertaking. One of
the gentlest of these from a socialist source was quoted by Jack
in an article: "Many of my brother Socialists objected to my
making the cruise, of which the following is typical: 'The
Socialist cause, and the millions of oppressed victims of capita-
alism, has a right and claim upon your life and services. If,
however, you persist, then, when you swallow the last mouthful
of salt chuck you can hold before sinking, remember that we at
least protested.'"

The capitalist view of his trip was perhaps stated best by an article in
the Bookman:

While the Socialists are gloating over the gruesome picture
of the impending struggle that Jack London painted in The Iron
Heel, and the powers that be are fixing his status once for all
in the class of undesirable citizens, the irresponsible London
himself appears to be taking matters very calmly. The

26 Ibid., p. 320.
photograph that we present herewith does not indicate that he is spending his days brooding over the cataclysm. On the contrary, he looks remarkably well-fed, happy and contented—for a socialist. But there are socialists and socialists.

London finally returned from his voyage on July 23, 1909, more than two years after he had left on what was to have been a seven year trip. His return was prompted by his mounting debts and by his poor physical condition, the result of malaria and a strange undiagnosable disease he had contracted in the South Seas. When he arrived in San Francisco he was disillusioned, sick, and in a highly nervous condition. It did not help matters much when he soon found that he was almost forgotten by the newspapers and magazines.

London retired to his ranch at Glen Ellen in Sonoma County, California, which he had purchased in the fall of 1905. His socialist comrades were outspokenly disappointed that he had failed to expose the exploiting of natives during his South Sea voyage, and both they and the capitalists were strangely united in their objections to The Iron Heel, which had been published while he was away.

The capitalists were frightened and angry at the message of revolt which rang throughout The Iron Heel. For their part, the

27"Jack London at Sea," Bookman, XXVIII (September 1908), 5.
socialists accused London of betraying the Cause, of antagonizing the public through his preaching of violence, and of alienating the party membership, which was peaceful and wanted socialism to come to power gradually by means of education, legislation, and democratic process, not by death at the barricades.

Once Jack London was back in the country, his health greatly improved and his returning energy enabled him to put his chaotic business affairs back in some semblance of order. In this he was greatly aided by his sister, Eliza, who came to live with him in 1910 and to whom he entrusted the management of his farm and business affairs. With the publication of *Burning Daylight* in the same year, his star once again began its ascent.

In the years that followed, London's self-gratification increased in direct proportion with the decline of his social sense. He wrote feverishly to earn the thousands of dollars he was to pour into his ranch and his Wolf House, the dream mansion wherein he hoped to live like a wealthy squire—and once again entertain his ever growing retinue of hangers-on.

Charmian had lost a girl baby in 1910. This sad event marked the return of London's old drinking habit, which grew stronger as his need for a crutch increased. How else could he face each new frustration?

Criticism from the socialists concerning the palatial home he
was building was met by his answer that he was earning all the money it required by his own labor. One of London's publishers, William W. Ellsworth, gave this account of London's attempts to gain money to fulfill his grandiose schemes:

His place at Glen Ellen was a great money-absorber, and his publishers were asked with growing frequency to make advances from future royalties for one purpose and another. . . . A roof of Spanish tile for his new house would cost $3500, and must be paid for. . . . A fine stud horse was needed for the farm, price $2500. Gradually we grew apart; the stud horse was the end. 28

In June of 1911, realizing that it would take another two years to complete the Wolf House, London bought ten acres of the nearby Kohler vineyards and enlarged an already existing dwelling there, into which he, his wife, his mother, and sister then moved. At the Ranch House, as it was called, he soon found satisfactions to compensate for the frustrations of the Snark voyage and the many sufferings he had undergone at the hands of his fellow socialists:

He thrived and gloried in being the host, the benevolent patriarch, the squire, in seeing his friends and associates enjoy themselves as they ate at his table, rode his horses across his mountains, slept in his beds. 29

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28 Golden Age of Authors (Boston, 1919), p. 102.

29 Stone, p. 271.
London's socialist activities were now confined to heated discussions at the Overton Bar in nearby Santa Rosa, or in his own home. A Santa Rosa real estate man who was an occasional drinking partner of his from 1911 to 1914, Ira Pyle, gave an interesting picture of the Jack London of those years:

Jack stood in a class by himself. He was really two-fisted; he took four or five drinks to my one. Funny thing, though: eighty-five per cent of his conversation at the bar was about socialism. He came into Santa Rosa because he could get the best arguments there. People didn't like him because he would say things in the presence of judges, chamber of commerce executives and business men about how corrupt the capitalist system was. In all the years he came into Santa Rosa, I never heard anyone agree with him. When I asked him a stickler about the new socialist state, he would think for a moment, shake his head, and say, 'Wait until I get another drink under my belt, and then my mind will flow more freely.' The next drink always did it, and he would be off on a discourse about how little commodities would cost the consumer when they were produced for use and not for profit.30

On August 18, 1913, the magnificent Wolf House, on which London had spent over seventy thousand dollars, was at last completed. That same night it burned to the ground as the result of a mysterious fire. From that blow he never recovered. "The outer stone shell of the house, which was all that remained of the magnificent mansion, was a symbol of what was left of Jack London."31 Added to his despair over

30 Quoted in Stone, p. 279.

31 Foner, p. 111.
the destruction of a dream into which he had poured so much of his labor, so much of himself, was his resentment toward the attitude of the socialists toward the tragedy, who felt that it was "a judgment from heaven against a socialist for building a castle." 32 Reluctantly, he himself soon became convinced that the house had been fired by the hand of a fate that did not want him to enjoy the fruits of his labor, that did not consider it fitting for a socialist to live in such luxury.

London was now over a hundred thousand dollars in debt. He went through the motions of attempting to rebuild the Wolf House, but his heart was not in it. Once again, he submerged himself into his work. He was bitter toward everyone. Charmian, a charming enough companion in fair weather, was very little help or support in time of storm. Even his daughter Joan became the object of his wrath. He wrote to her:

What do you feel for me? Am I a fool who gives much and receives nothing? I send you letters and telegrams, and I receive no word from you. Am I beneath your contempt in every way save as a meal ticket? My home is destroyed. You have no word to say. The world does not belong to the ones who remain silent, who by their very silence lie and cheat and make a mock of love and a meal ticket of their father. Don't you

32 Foner, p. 111.
think it is about time I heard from you? Or do you want me to cease forever from caring to hear from you? 33 These are very hard words for a girl of thirteen to receive from her father.

Despite the success of John Barleycorn, The Valley of the Moon, and The Mutiny of the Elsinore, all published after the burning of the Wolf House, Jack London should not shake off his despair and feelings of persecution. In April 1914, he eagerly accepted an offer from Collier's Weekly to go to Mexico and cover the revolution.

In February 1911, he had written a letter to the Mexican revolutionists in support of their uprising, but the articles he sent out of Mexico in 1914 were highly critical of the revolutionists and even pleaded for the United States to intervene and put down the revolt. This was a position the socialists would and could not tolerate. It was even hinted that London had been bribed by American and British oil interests whose profits were threatened by the revolution. "This veiled charge of subsidization... evoked furious comment from Jack and heightened his growing bitterness against the socialist movement in the United States." 34

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33 Quoted in Stone, pp. 308-309.

London returned from Mexico in the summer of 1914, sick from dysentery and mentally exhausted. His land now became everything to him. He said:

I am weary of everything. I no longer think of the world or the movement or of writing as an art. I am a great dreamer, but I dream of my ranch, of my wife. . . . And I write for no other purpose than to add to the beauty that now belongs to me. I write a book for no other reason than to add three or four hundred acres to my magnificent estate. I write a story with no other purpose than to buy a stallion. . . . Socialism has cost me hundreds of thousands of dollars. When the time comes I'm going to stay right on my ranch at Glen Ellen and let the revolution go to blazes. I've done my part. . . . I'm a pessimist. I admit it.\(^{35}\)

Bitter as he then was, his bitterness was to increase in the next six months. His relations with his daughter were shattered. Charmian was extremely jealous of him and went to great lengths to prevent him from seeking consolation from other women.\(^{36}\) In addition, things went very badly at his ranch. His registered pigs caught pneumonia and died. His prize bull slipped in its pen and broke its neck.

London soon began to feel that he was losing his literary abilities and feared that he was going insane. He was now too exhausted to

\(^{35}\) Quoted in Joan London, pp. 336-337.

\(^{36}\) As rumors of divorce flew about Oakland, Charmian knew she was in grave danger of losing him. "She suffered constantly from insomnia, told everyone at the Ranch that the night after Jack's death she enjoyed her first sleep in many months." Stone, p. 325.
work, to create, and yet he had to work every day to pay his ever mounting debts and feared that he would break under the constant and heavy pressure. Several times he begged his sister Eliza to promise him that she would care for him on the Ranch and not put him in an institution, should he lose his mind. 37

In February 1915, London went to Hawaii, hoping the sun would cure his illnesses of mind and body. He was so well received by the social and business interests in Honolulu that on his return to California he spoke approvingly of their charities on behalf of the natives, a practise which he had hitherto always condemned in his socialist writings. Again he was roundly criticised by his fellow socialists. His uremia became worse and in January 1916, he returned to Hawaii. His body was bloated with disease and he was miserable and wracked with pain. In March 1916, he resigned from the Socialist Party.

The resignation of so prominent a figure very much angered the socialists, who took every opportunity to criticize him and make little of what he had actually done for them and their movement. In reaction to these attacks he wrote bitterly:

37 Stone, p. 324.
... because the socialists and I disagreed about opportunism, ghetto politics, class consciousness, political states, and party machines, they too, have dismissed all memory, not merely of my years of fight in the cause, but of me as a social man, as a comrade of men, as a fellow they ever embraced for having at various times written or said things they described as doughty blows for the Cause. On the contrary, by their only printed utterances I have seen, they deny I ever struck a blow or did anything for the Cause.  

Approximately six months later, London was dead, most probably by his own hand, and the obituary which appeared in the New York Times made no mention of the fact that he had ever been a socialist.

It is difficult to pinpoint the primary cause of London's personal disintegration in the closing years of his life. The contributing factors are many. His main problem, perhaps, was the intellectual indigestion which resulted from his inability to reconcile his personal needs to those of the society in which he lived and—perhaps what is even more important—to those of his own conscience, as he attempted to find security in philosophies that were as contradictory as they were attractive.

That he had been able to cling to socialism for so many years when he was so often and so bitterly at odds with his comrades illustrates

38 Quoted in Foner, pp. 127-128.

the desperation of his need to believe—to belong—and of the sincerity of his belief in socialism as he saw it.

In December 1912, Jack London stated: "As I said in John Barleycorn, I am Martin Eden. Martin Eden died because he was an individualist, I live because I am a socialist and have social consciousness." Once he became aware that he no longer had social consciousness, that he had subordinated most of the significant values of his life to his own egotism and Nietzschean individuality, London lost both the desire and the need to live.

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40 Quoted in Stone, p. 326.
CHAPTER IV

SOCIALISM AND ART: AN ATTEMPT AT SYNTHESIS

In addition to the many essays he had written to further socialism and the socialist principles—whether implicitly or explicitly stated—that were scattered here and there throughout the entire body of his fiction, Jack London also made a conscious attempt to propagate and justify his social beliefs in two of his major works of fiction, The Iron Heel (1908) and Martin Eden (1909).

These two novels, not usually thought of as being related, are found to have much in common when seen in the framework of London's life and socialism. Both works were written at the end of what might be considered London's middle period (1904-1909), the half decade of his greatest creative achievements, a time when he was most sincerely active in his socialism and less egotistically motivated in his efforts to gain money by his writing than he was to become in later years.  

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1Joan London wrote: "From the time he wrote Martin Eden all his work had been done primarily for the ranch." Pp. 359–360. Foner stated that after 1909, "never again was Jack London to attain the literary height of The Sea Wolf and Martin Eden or the class-consciousness of The Iron Heel." Pp. 110–111.
Another similarity between the two novels is that they were both conceived and written shortly after London's highly controversial lecture tour of 1905-1906, a tour which had resulted in London's being misquoted by several newspapers and his works being banned from certain libraries. 2

London was only too well aware that he was rapidly gaining a reputation as an anarchist as well as a revolutionary and that he was being criticized by people who did not understand his views—or so it seemed to him—in both the capitalist and socialist camps. It was obvious that his lectures were not making his position sufficiently clear. What was worse, those very same lectures were subject to being misquoted by what London considered—and in some respects was—a capitalist-controlled press.

In 1899, London had written to his friend Johns:

I doubt if even you would consider the novel avowedly with a purpose to be real literature. If you do, then let us abandon fiction altogether and give the newspaper its due, for the fixing or changing of public opinion especially on lesser things. But Spencer's "First Principles" alone, leaving out all the rest of his work, has done more for mankind, and through the ages will have done far more for mankind than a thousand books like "Nicholas Nickleby," . . . "Book of Snobs," and "Uncle Tom's Cabin." 3

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3 Quoted in Charmian London, II, 304.
By 1905, London's idea of the place of the novel in the field of propaganda had already begun to undergo a change. In praising Upton Sinclair's newly published work *The Jungle*, London stated:

Here it is at last! The book we have been waiting for these many years! The "Uncle Tom's Cabin" of wage slavery! Comrade Sinclair's book "The Jungle!" and what "Uncle Tom's Cabin" did for black slaves, "The Jungle" has a large chance to do for the wage-slaves of today.⁴

By 1906, London, no doubt encouraged by Sinclair's success, began to feel that the most effective way he could reach and influence the public was through his fiction, a literary field which was far more his forte and far less subject to misinterpretation—or so he thought—than the essay. The results of this conviction were *The Iron Heel* and *Martin Eden*.

Although *The Iron Heel* is a novel of the future not unlike Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, its point of view and graphic portrayal of violence relates it far more closely to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or George Orwell's *1984*.

The heart of the book is the Everhard Manuscript, which was ostensibly written by one Avis Everhard, wife of the socialist leader, Ernest Everhard. The manuscript deals with the period from 1912 to

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⁴Quoted in Foner, p. 80.
1932, the period during which the capitalist class, the "Iron Heel," rose to absolute power in the United States. Quite obviously, the book is the fictionalization of London's belief that capitalism must run its course before socialism can be realized.

In the Foreword we learn that the manuscript was found in the heart of an ancient oak tree and is being published for the first time in the year 419 B.O.M. (ca. 2650 A.D.). Socialism has been in power now for over four centuries and, as the editor of the manuscript, Anthony Meredith, tells us, the work is especially valuable in communicating "the feel of those terrible times" before world socialism was a reality.

During the twenty years described by Avis Everhard, capitalism gains control of the press, the courts, the very government. The First Revolt in 1918 is crushed under the Iron Heel and thousands of poor slaves from the ghettos are slaughtered in the streets of Chicago. Avis' husband is killed prior to the unsuccessful Second Revolt of 1932, but that their cause finally triumphs is evident both from the Foreword

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5 B.O.M. stands for Brotherhood of Man.

and the many footnotes included by Meredith.

It is rather surprising that The Iron Heel has been the object of so little literary criticism, for the work is not without certain artistic merit. London's very method of projecting the story into the future--the simple finding and editing of an old manuscript--is far more effective than the strained device of Edward Bellamy's Looking Backward, in which Julian West is hypnotized and left in an underground apartment in 1887 and then discovered--still alive--in the year 2000.7

Also no mean accomplishment in The Iron Heel is London's ability to bounce the reader into accepting his point of view. In addition, the framing device of the Everhard Manuscript, the Foreword and the footnotes, adds greatly to the realism and dramatic effect of the work. His sympathy for the oppressed is sincerely and movingly expressed.8 His description of the bloody Chicago revolt is done in pure reportorial style that is highly reminiscent of his masterful reporting of the San Francisco fire and earthquake of 1906.9


8"The earlier portion of the book is the most impressive, the most unanswerable impeachment of the capitalist system to be found in all the voluminous sociological literature of our times," stated an anonymous sociologist. Quoted by Charmian London, II, 138.

On the whole, the plot is episodic and is composed of what Leon Trotsky chose to call "magnificent frescoes." This technique—used so effectively in *The Call of the Wild*, *The Sea Wolf*, and even *Martin Eden*—seems somehow better suited to novels of action. And *The Iron Heel*, except for the last hundred pages or so, is rather the exposition of London's own social views presented by his mouthpiece, Ernest Everhard, than a novel of adventure. Moreover, London's use of vignettes rather than a smoothly developed plot would perhaps be less offensive to the reader's aesthetic sense if he did not allow his characters to drift from one "fresco" to another merely for the sake of propaganda and an attempt at neatness. It is quite amazing that so many of the characters all manage to end up on the scene of the Chicago revolt. It is even more amazing that Avis Everhard, wandering around the bloody streets and stumbling over bodies in a state of shock, is rescued, by one socialist agent after another—and finally by Ernest—always in the nick of time.

Especially interesting is London's character portrayal in *The Iron Heel*. In no other of his works do such real and unreal

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characters go through the motions of a story in such intimate proximity. Among the better developed characters are Bishop Morehouse, Avis' father, John Cunningham, and Avis herself. As for Ernest Everhard, he has the distinction of being the most clearly drawn and yet the most uninteresting character in the entire book. Philip Foner said of him:

He starts as a wooden image rather than a real character, but as the story unfolds he grows in reality until at the end we begin to get close to him in a personal and intimate way.\(^{11}\) Ernest, on the contrary, is never more than a type and begins to fade away as the book progresses.

As Kenneth Lynn has observed, Ernest Everhard is the typical London hero: muscular, intellectual, of medium height, and Anglo-Saxon.\(^{12}\) Ernest is atypical, however, inasmuch as he is a thinker rather than a doer. He has little or nothing to do with the plot and has neither the extreme egotism of Wolf Larsen of *The Sea Wolf* nor the inherently tragic nature of Martin Eden. His primary function is to speak for Jack London, and to make much more of him than that is to tread on dangerous ground.

\(^{11}\) Foner, p. 90.

\(^{12}\) *The Dream of Success*, p. 99.
Indeed, Ernest is far too insufficiently developed as a character to lend validity to the opinion of Eugene Kerstiens that he "exemplifies, more than any other, the discordant amalgam of Nietzschean and non-Nietzschean traits in one character." Ernest is placed in his proper perspective by the words of Anthony Meredith in the Foreword:

Yet we smile, indeed, and forgive Avis Everhard for the heroic lines upon which she modelled her husband. We know today that he was not so colossal, and that he loomed less largely among the events of his time than the Manuscript would lead us to believe. We know that Ernest Everhard was an exceptionally strong man, but not so exceptional as his wife thought him to be. Kerstiens's statement could far better be applied to Martin Eden--or even to London himself--than to Ernest Everhard, for his Nietzschean and non-Nietzschean traits are surprisingly in harmony, rather than discordant.

In his portrayal of Everhard, London must be defended from the charge that he gloried in Ernest's Anglo-Saxon heritage. He indeed says of Everhard that "he was a descendant of the old line of Everhards that for two hundred years had lived in America." In a footnote to this

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14 The Iron Heel, p. vii.

15 Ibid., p. 25.
statement of Avis, the editor of the manuscript says: "The distinction between being native born and foreign born was sharp and invidious in those days." This footnote indicates that one's origin was of little importance in the perfect socialist state of 419 B.O.M. In both the reference to Ernest, and when London later describes John Cunningham as being of "stout old Mayflower stock," he was most probably emphasizing the fact that socialists were not all foreigners, but could come from the ranks of the best American families, as well. London's racism thus plays little part in The Iron Heel.

London must likewise be defended from Kenneth Lynn's charge that he did not adequately describe what life in the perfect socialist state of 419 B.O.M. would be like. Although this was not one of his primary aims in writing the book, London does manage to give an impressionistic and suggested picture of that ideal world through the use of the footnotes and by negating many of the evils of the capitalist society of 1912-1932. This use of the suggestive was a technique in which London

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16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., p. 177.

18 Kerstiens, who inferred that London's racism is mirrored in Everhard, incorrectly described Ernest as being of "Mayflower stock," rather than Cunningham. Page 77.

19 The Dream of Success, p. 105.
usually excelled, as has been pointed out by Henry Meade Bland. 20

What is more, far greater realism and aesthetic effect is gained by London in utilizing this method, since the task of editing a document such as the Everhard Manuscript would more logically result in a clearer picture of the past (1912-1932) than of the present (in this case, 419 B.O.M.).

In evaluating The Iron Heel it is necessary to avoid the two extremes which are perhaps best represented by R.H.S. Crossman (who called London's book "worthless literature and crude sociology") on the one hand, and by sociological critics like Victor F. Calverton, Philip Foner, and Thomas K. Whipple, on the other. 21

London's social beliefs—-that a handful of individualistic leaders would be the driving force in the future achievement of socialism, that revolution would be essential because capitalism would not give in to defeat at the polls, but that socialism would eventually conquer—are clearly stated in The Iron Heel. Quite naturally, those who agreed with London regarded the book as a masterpiece of proletarian literature.


One of those who agreed with London was Leon Trotsky, who stated concerning The Iron Heel:

The book produced upon me—I speak without exaggeration—a deep impression. Not because of its artistic qualities: the form of the novel here represents only an armor for Social analysis and prognosis. The author is intentionally sparring in his use of artistic means. He is himself interested not so much in the individual fate of his heroes as in the fate of mankind.²²

The reaction of the more conservative socialists was typified by John Spargo who, while admitting that there was a certain literary skill in "this ingenious and stirring romance," disagreed violently with those socialists who hailed The Iron Heel as a great addition to the literature of socialist propaganda. Spargo commented:

The picture he [London] gives is well calculated it seems to me, to repel many whose addition to our forces is sorely needed; it gives a new impetus to the old and generally discarded cataclysmic theory; it tends to weaken the political Socialist movement by discrediting the ballot and to encourage the chimerical and reactionary notion of physical force, so alluring to a certain type of mind.²³

To those who thought The Iron Heel a pessimistic prophecy, London was to reply in vain:

Study Out the Land (Berkeley, California, 1943), pp. 93-104, for exaggerated praise of The Iron Heel.

²²Quoted in Joan London, p. 313.

²³Quoted in Foner, p. 96.
I didn't write the thing as a prophecy at all. I really don't think these things are going to happen in the United States. I believe the increasing socialist vote will prevent--hope for it, anyhow. But I will say that I sent out in "The Iron Heel" a warning of what I think might happen if they don't look to their votes. 24

And while The Iron Heel is a highly significant book, "a key work--perhaps a classic work--of American radicalism," it made London's position no clearer and, on the whole, far less acceptable to his fellow socialists than did his lectures or essays. 25 Moreover, it displayed many of the inherent weaknesses of London's social principles more clearly and more widely than they had ever been displayed before. 26

Although it is difficult to assign The Iron Heel its rightful place in the ranking of socialist literature, it seems not too unfair to describe it as mediocre at best as a work of art. Despite the fact that at times the book moves forward with immense, driving energy, and

24 Quoted in Charmian London, II, 139.


26 Among these weaknesses was London's strong dependence on secondary sources which "serves as further evidence that London was not deeply versed in the works of Karl Marx, that he either preferred or found it necessary to obtain much of his knowledge of socialism indirectly." Sam S. Baskett, "A Source for The Iron Heel, AmLit, XXVII (May 1955), 270.
exhibited intelligent concern over social evils—two qualities which, according to Walter F. Taylor, are always present when London is at his best—it fails as a work of art for the simple reason that the form is always subservient to the matter in an all too obvious and aesthetically deadening attempt at propaganda.  

London's second attempt to synthesize socialism and art was in his highly autobiographical novel Martin Eden, which Irving Stone considered "perhaps the finest novel he ever wrote, and one of the greatest of all American novels."  

London had begun Martin Eden early in 1907, during his ill-fated Snark voyage. While The Iron Heel was meant to justify socialism politically and for the people as a whole, London's approach in Martin Eden was to depict the tragedy that would result when an otherwise gifted man turns his back on social consciousness and goes the way of extreme individualism. London's purpose was to demonstrate that personal and social salvation was not to be found in a middle class that


\[\text{\footnotesize 28} \] Sailor on Horseback, p. 239.

\[\text{\footnotesize 29} \] Charmian London, I, 63.
he considered shallow and selfish, but in socialism.  

As the story opens we meet Martin Eden, a young sailor who is widely travelled and naturally quick, but unschooled. Martin is in many ways the typical London hero; he is of medium height, powerfully built, and possesses an almost animal magnetism. Having saved Arthur Morse from a gang of toughs, he is introduced to Arthur's sister Ruth, and is immediately taken with the girl. The Morses are of the upper middle class—well read—impressive. A whole new world seems to be opening up for the coarse young sailor, a higher, more satisfying society of which he yearns to become a part. Ruth Morse is the living symbol of this society, a girl unlike any he had ever met in all his travels. He is especially impressed by her knowledge of art and literature. Martin resolves to make himself worthy of her, realizing that to do this he must change his mannerisms, his speech, his ambitions—his very life.

While at sea, Martin Eden had read voraciously. His subsequent visits with Ruth Morse, who is studying English at the university, and his natural inclinations and talents help him to decide to become a writer. The two young people fall in love, and Martin persuades Ruth

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30 London wrote to Johns on February 17, 1908: "Have just finished a 145,000 word novel that is an attack upon the bourgeoisie and all that the bourgeoisie stands for. It will not make me any friends." Quoted by Charmian London, II, 169.
to wait for him until he is a successful author. Martin's road is long and hard, but he manages to reform his speech, his mannerisms, and his dress. He is not so fortunate in his writing, for he soon learns that what he is convinced is his best work will not sell. Martin does, however, attain a modicum of success by copying the plots and techniques of more materially successful writers.

It is soon evident that the external changes in Martin Eden mirror a much more drastic internal change. Little by little, he begins to realize that the society which he was so eager to join is one of only superficial value. Ruth, whom he thought so intelligent, is found to be a sham. Her apparent culture is a mere social grace, no more genuine or meaningful than is her musical talent or her ability to dress properly.

Martin soon becomes a displaced person, a man with no social roots. He is disillusioned with the middle class and dissatisfied with the lower. His work catches on and he is lionized, but he gets no pleasure from this, for "he cannot tolerate the fact that the bourgeoisie do not love him for himself, but only for his success." 31

The same men who had avoided him while he was struggling and literally starving are now very eager to court his opinions and invite him to dinner. The very same books that had been so often rejected are now snapped up by the publishers at almost any price, merely because he, Martin Eden, had written them. Ruth, who had rejected him during his years of struggle, now comes to him shamelessly, but he no longer wants her. All the things for which he had suffered and denied himself are now his, but they become as ashes in his mouth. Heartsick, although at the peak of success and wealth, Martin Eden drowns himself.

Early in the novel appears this highly significant passage:

An oil painting caught and held him. A heavy surf thundered and burst over an outjutting rock; lowering storm clouds covered the sky; and, outside the line of surf, a pilot schooner, close-hauled, heeled over till every detail of her deck was visible, was surging along against a stormy sunset sky. There was beauty, and it drew him irresistibly. He forgot his awkward walk and came closer to the painting, very close. The beauty faded out of the canvas. His face expressed his bepuzzlement. He stared at what seemed a careless daub of paint, then stepped away. Immediately all the beauty flashed back into the canvas. "A trick picture," was his thought, as he dismissed it, though in the midst of the multitudinous impressions he was receiving he found time to feel a prod of indignation that so much beauty should be sacrificed to make a trick. 32

In this effective bit of symbolism, London indicated unmistakably what was to happen to Martin Eden. Society is not so shallow as it is later to appear to Martin. His view of it becomes too tragically similar to his view of the oil painting. He gets too close to it, scrutinizes it too completely, but he never steps back to get the proper perspective. Disillusioned, he turns his back on life just as he had turned his back on the painting that had first so enthralled him.

Concerning Martin Eden's spiritual exhaustion and despair, Grant C. Knight stated: "Although one can believe in Martin Eden's exhaustion, it is not easy to accept the soul sickness of one so young."33 This assertion (which could be equally applied to Shakespeare's Hamlet) is refuted by the fact that London very skillfully portrays Martin as so extremely sensitive and so deeply dedicated to his earlier values that his despair is the inevitable result of the shattering of those values. This type of despair is no respecter of age.

After the publication of Martin Eden, London became immediately aware that the book had not fulfilled all his expectations. He wrote to Upton Sinclair on November 23, 1909: "One of my motifs, in

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this book, was an attack on individualism (in the person of the hero). I must have bungled, for not a single reviewer has discovered it." It is little wonder that the reviewers of London's day did not consider Martin Eden an "attack on individualism," for the critics of our own day, even with the benefit of London's explanation, find no evidence in the novel to indicate that Martin Eden's tragic end was due to his excessive individualism, or that "had Martin Eden been a socialist he would not have died."  

London's purpose is thwarted both by the imperfection of his hero's individualism and by the unfavorable light in which socialism and socialists are presented to both Martin and the reader. For although Martin Eden is an individualist, he is also a warmly human, generous, and extremely likable young man, and the few socialists he encounters are either, like Brissendon, unconvincing and thus unconvincing ones, or like the unnamed Jew at the Oakland Local, a symbol of "the whole miserable mass of weaklings and inefficients who perished according to biological law on the ragged confines of life." And while Brissendon tells Martin: "I'd like to see you a socialist before I'm gone," because


35 Words of Jack London as quoted by Foner, p. 104.

he feels that socialism will give Martin a sanction for his existence, it is not surprising that Martin follows his friend's example rather than his advice after Brissendon himself dies a suicide, despite his socialism. 37

There is no doubt that Martin Eden failed as social propaganda. Foner wrote that the book was in many ways one of London's least successful works, "for it has been seized upon time and time again to prove exactly the opposite of what the author said he wished to demonstrate." 38 Written as an indictment of individualism, it was accepted as an indictment of a socialism that was too unappealing and unconvincing to save Martin Eden.

And while Martin Eden did not fulfill its author's intention, it is perhaps Jack London's finest work of art. Grant C. Knight wrote that the book exerted "the great charm of a boyish eagerness for life as experienced through action." 39 Upton Sinclair thought the book one of London's best novels. 40 Even Foner was grudgingly forced to admit: "Martin Eden is today [1947] regarded by many critics to be Jack

37 Ibid., p. 306.


39 Knight, p. 193.

London's most mature work. ⁴¹

The critics, however, have not been unanimous in their approval. Margaret Pope said of Martin Eden:

> The characters are real, the episodes interesting; but the only piece of distinctive writing, or genuinely moving narrative, is the end of the story where Martin slips down through the cold, many-colored water to oblivion. ⁴²

Mrs. Pope's criticism can perhaps be explained by the fact that she, like so many critics of London's work, was too consciously aware of the autobiographical elements in the book to consider it on its own merits as a work of art. The same can be said of Kenneth Lynn, who dismissed it as a mere autobiography, "the first of a series of books that says a plague on both socialism and success." ⁴³ It is fortunate that modern criticism can treat London's works more objectively, now that the passage of time has removed them from the overwhelming shadow of the fascinating life of their author.

When, for example, Martin Eden is considered primarily as a work of art, a fiction, one discovers a tightly knit and fundamentally tragic plot that appeals on several levels of significance.

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⁴¹ Foner, p. 105. ⁴² Pope, p. 145.

⁴³ The Dream of Success, p. 107.
On the psychological level, London portrays with great skill and effectiveness his hero's motivations, frustrations, and final anguish. From the ethical viewpoint, the novel dramatically illustrates the inevitably tragic end of a man who has no faith to sustain him in the face of deep disillusionment. Sociologically, London's portrayal of the shallowness of society, as seen through the eyes of Martin Eden, is quite poignant. He did not sentimentalize when dealing with the lower classes in the novel, and his description of Martin working in a sweatshop laundry is subtly effective, showing as it does that long hours of physical labor leave even the ambitious Martin Eden too exhausted to write, thus implying that the lower classes are often limited by their circumstances, rather than by their talent. What to London was to have been central in Martin Eden—the misery and hardship of the lower class and the sham and artifice of the upper—serve as effective background in the development of his hero and his story.

Martin Eden also functions quite well on the mythical or archetypal level, for the innocent Martin's tragedy closely parallels that of the first man, Adam, who went from innocence to the loss of Eden because of the knowledge he had received through the promptings of a woman.
Grace Isabel Colbron maintained that Joseph Conrad was a greater artist than Jack London because he was more detached in his relationship to his material. 44 This kind of detachment is precisely one of London's greatest strengths in Martin Eden, which is perhaps as fine a work of art as Conrad's Heart of Darkness—which likewise has a message—or as James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man—which is likewise autobiographical.

In conclusion, The Iron Heel and Martin Eden strangely complement one another. The former, while something of a failure as a work of art, was highly significant as a social writing. As for Martin Eden, it is ironic that Jack London's failure as a conscious socialist is embodied in the same work in which he triumphed as an unconscious artist.

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

Any attempt to understand Jack London as an author or as a human being must take into account the important part that socialism played in the major portion of his creative and adult life.

Although he originally became a socialist more for personal reasons than idealistic ones, London strove sincerely for many years to attain a social consciousness that would harmonize with his own individualism and allow him to maintain a balance in his human and creative efforts. He was successful in this attempt for several years and his social writings, interpretative of Marxism rather than descriptive, practical rather than theoretical, succeeded in making socialism better known to the common man.

As London's social consciousness did constant battle with his expanding ego, both his art and his life were consumed in the struggle.

And although his attempt to fuse socialism and art in The Iron Heel and Martin Eden must be adjudged a failure, it was a failure that resulted in what was perhaps London's most fully realized novel.
When applied to the author of Martin Eden, the following statement, one of which London himself would no doubt have approved—stated as it is in terms of determinism—is both valid and movingly descriptive:

Jack London was not really a Socialist any more than he was a writer for money, though he claimed to be both of these things. He was what he refused ever to acknowledge, an artist unconsciously following his blind destiny.¹

¹Calder-Marshall, p. 112.
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