

Comment by the Editor

AN IMPULSIVE YOUTH

One morning just as Jack London shot a hard-folded newspaper into the hallway of a squalid Oakland tenement the fragrant odor of coffee drifted out to the hungry boy. Without a moment's hesitation he traced the appetizing aroma along the narrow passage to the kitchen at the rear. But his friendly greeting, as he followed his nose through the doorway, produced a startling response. The slatternly woman who stood by the stove seized a butcher knife and jumped at the unsuspecting lad. Up an uninviting flight of stairs raced Jack with the woman at his heels. Bursting into a bedroom, he snatched the covers off an abruptly awakened elderly couple just in time to throw the smother of blankets over the head of his angry pursuer and escape.

Boy and man, Jack London ever acted on impulse. Let a notion enter his head and at once he proceeded with the project. There were times, to be sure, when duty held him to irksome tasks, when the business of earning a living repressed his natural inclinations; but the course of his career, the leading events of his kaleidoscopic life, were determined by the whim of the moment.

Thirsting for adventure, he spent his allotted forty years experiencing the romance that most people are content to read about. He enjoyed "living in the concrete" so intensely that ever and anon he thrust distasteful duty behind him and put to sea with the salt spray in his face and the golden light of the western sun in his eyes.

Perhaps the questing spirit was innate in his nature. John London, his father, had started rail-roading in Pennsylvania, married the daughter of an officer of the road, moved to Wisconsin, then to Illinois, and thence to Missouri where he enlisted in the Union army. He returned from the war broken in health to find a home at Moscow, Iowa, where he superintended the construction of a bridge over the Cedar River and tried his hand at farming. For a season or two he gypsied over the prairies in a covered wagon vainly hoping that his wife's health would improve. After she died he moved westward until the ocean stopped his migration at San Francisco. There he married again, and there Jack was born in January, 1876. The years which followed, during the boyhood and youth of Jack London, were filled with hard work, mismanagement, and poverty.

The boy began to learn the worst of life too young. Before he was eight years old he had been made drunk by some Irish and Italian neighbors at a holy-week party. At ten he was selling papers on the streets of Oakland early in the morning and

long after dark at night, catching furtive glimpses of the lurid underworld. He thought of home as the place where he slept. His few hours of leisure were spent in a tiny sailboat on the bay. Perched high on the windward rail of his skiff, with the free west wind in his lungs, he fled from sordid existence ashore and yearned to go to sea.

Having finished school at thirteen, he went to work in a cannery; but the long hours of unrelaxing, mechanical labor were unendurable. Down to the bay he went one day in an insurrectionary mood when he was fifteen, bought a sloop with some borrowed money, and joined the oyster pirates of San Francisco Bay. There was no dull routine aboard the *Razzle Dazzle*, but the traffic she engaged in was a crime and the winds of adventure carried her master far into the realm of human debauchery. Never content in a static condition and disillusioned of romantic glamour by the crude brutality of pirate life, he turned to the dangerous service of the fish patrol—sworn enemy of his former companions. Meanwhile the lure of the open sea grew irresistible. On the day he was seventeen he signed as able seaman on a sealing schooner bound for Japan and Bering Sea.

Back from the voyage, he was persuaded to "settle down" at hum-drum, ill-paid toil in a jute mill. He even took pride in his work for a time. Winter came, and he found a job shoveling coal for better wages, but when he learned that he was

doing two men's work he quit, resenting the merciless exploitation of his strength. Besides cheapening the price of labor, he had been depriving two men of the opportunity to earn a living. Sickened by his orgy of overwork, his revulsion for steady employment returned and he decided to enlist in Kelly's army of weary rebels like himself.

ADVENTURING ON THE ROAD

The vagrant thought was parent to the deed. Youth, zest for experience, and surcease from tedious routine combined to prompt his lark of loafing across the continent. Being a tramp appealed to him as a "delightful whimsicality." So off he went on the Overland Limited in pursuit of Kelly's army of the unemployed.

The diary he kept on his odyssey is a vivid portrayal of the famous "campaign" from the viewpoint of a rear-rank private. He would have thoroughly enjoyed the march from Council Bluffs to Des Moines if his feet had not been so sore. "The hospitable Iowa farmer folk!" he exclaimed thirteen years later in his story of "The March of Kelly's Army." "They turned out with their wagons and carried our baggage and gave us hot lunches at noon by the wayside; mayors of comfortable little towns made speeches of welcome and hastened us on our way; deputations of little girls and maidens came out to meet us, and the good citizens turned out by hundreds, locked arms, and marched with us down their main streets. It

was circus day when we came to town, and every day was circus day for us, for there were many towns." But for "Sailor Jack" the fun began when the army started on its "colossal picnic" down the Des Moines River in flatboats which were "made by the mile and sawed off" ten feet long.

At Hannibal, Missouri, he deserted and went to Chicago to see the World's Fair. After visiting an aunt in Michigan he hopped a freight train and continued "on the bum." At Niagara Falls he was "pinched" for vagrancy and summarily sentenced to thirty days of hard labor in the Erie County prison. Free again, he "beat his way" to Washington, thence to New York, and from there to Boston where cool weather sent him, tramp-royal that he was, "hustling" homeward through Canada, bent upon going to college.

The story of Jack London's ten-thousand-mile tour on blind baggage cars, in side-door Pullmans, and underneath on the rods is told in *The Road*. His character was scarred and his judgment warped by what he saw of social injustice; but he cherished the experience of vagabondage, never ashamed of the alms he asked. He paid for his food with entertainment. "My coming to sit at their table," he said of two pink and white maiden ladies who fed him toast and demi-tasse, "was their adventure, and adventure is beyond price, anyway."

Perhaps he acquired his rare gift for "spinning

a yarn" while "throwing his feet" for "set-downs" and "hand-outs"—for the success of a beggar depends much upon his ability to tell a good story. "In the instant that he is sizing up the victim he must begin his story. Not a minute is allowed for preparation. As in a lightning flash he must divine the nature of the victim and conceive a tale that will hit home. The successful hobo must be an artist. He must create spontaneously and instantaneously—and not upon a theme selected from the plentitude of his own imagination, but upon the theme he reads in the face of the person who opens the door, be it man, woman, or child, sweet or crabbed, generous or miserly, good-natured or cantankerous, Jew or Gentile, black or white, race-prejudiced or brotherly, provincial or universal, or whatever else it may be." In order to live Jack London was compelled to tell tales that rang true. "Out of inexorable necessity," he developed the technique of the short story—one vivid, unforgettable episode; one slice of life, clear and convincing. It made him a realistic romancer, for "realism constitutes the only goods one can exchange at the kitchen-door for grub."

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