

**The Call of the Wild
and White Fang
by Jack London**

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The Call of the Wild and White Fang by Jack London

With an Introduction
by Abraham Rothberg



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THE CALL OF THE WILD AND WHITE FANG

A Bantam Book

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Jack London,

American novelist and short story writer, was born in the slums of San Francisco in 1876, illegitimate son of Flora Wellman (later London) and W.H. Chaney, a man London never knew. He spent his adolescence as an oyster pirate, a seaman, a Yukon prospector and a tramp. These experiences, while giving him a lifelong sympathy with the working class, did not prevent London from acquiring an education. Ina Coolbrith, poet laureate of California and a librarian, introduced the boy to literature, lending him *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina* from her private library.

After marriage and a year at the University of California, London decided to devote himself entirely to writing. Kipling and Stevenson were his heroes. He became an enthusiastic believer in socialism. Yet at the same time he was also attracted to Nietzsche's doctrine of the superman who ruled "the slave mass"—a theory he claimed later to repudiate in *The Sea Wolf* (1904).

In 1899 the *Atlantic Monthly* published his first story, "An Odyssey of the North." *The Son of the Wolf*, a volume of stories, was published in 1900. *The Call of the Wild* made the bestseller list in 1903. A score of novels followed—*The Sea Wolf*, *White Fang* (1906), *Martin Eden* (1909)—underscoring London's personal conflict of ideals: a love of individuality matched against his growing concern for the plight of the masses. Then in 1907 he published *The Iron Heel*, a remarkable anticipation of fascism, and considered by many to be his most important work.

By 1913 Jack London was considered the highest-paid, best-known and most popular writer in the world. Despite his enormous fortune, London's last years, marked by excessive drinking, were full of despair. In 1916, at the age of forty, like his autobiographical hero, Martin Eden, Jack London committed suicide.

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INTRODUCTION

Jack London is an American myth, a combination of personal myths he created about himself and a national myth he represented in his life and work. His continued influence for almost fifty years since his death is in great measure due to the vitality of these myths. London is the Horatio Alger myth of the poor boy who became a millionaire by pulling himself up by his own bootstraps. London is also the revolutionary myth—he signed his letters, “Yours for the Revolution”—of the rebel who wanted to pull society down by its pillars. London is the red-blooded writer and war-correspondent who “went everywhere and did everything,” adopting the cloak that Hemingway would later throw over his own literary shoulders. London is the alcoholic who destroyed his own talent and who was dead at forty, already foretelling Scott Fitzgerald’s “*Babylon Revisited*” and *The Crack Up*. London is the artist who wanted desperately to be a success in business and failed in the same bitter way as had his contemporary, Mark Twain.

But London is more than the American myth, and fact, of the blighted career, the writer who makes a brilliant beginning and then cannot develop from there, the artist who cannot cope with America’s “business is business,” and the Horatio Alger success myth. Europeans have seen his life and work, and used them, to make and maintain a myth of American life and character. Europe, and the Soviet Union in particular, have made London one of their most popular and widely read American writers because they like to see him as an “American Gorky” whose view of nineteenth-century American capitalism is still a contemporary reality instead of an epoch in United States history long past and dead.

London not only showed the inherent virtues of the American character—our energy and love of action and the strenuous life, our generosity, courage, and concern for social

justice—he also portrayed our most pernicious vices—our contentiousness and violence, our recklessness, our materialism, and our love of change for its own sake. Europeans and Russians tend to overlook the virtues and concentrate on London's view of our vices. This has reinforced the caricature of the American so dear to European hearts, the "simplified husky American . . . with a check-book in one hind pocket and a revolver in the other."

Jack London was a complex man whose talent was never quite able to cope with that complexity in his work, or, for that matter, in his life. But it did succeed, through the very contradictoriness of his nature, in mirroring the conflicting forces of his time, the tumultuous America at the end of the nineteenth century known, too simply, as the Gilded Age, the Age of Horatio Alger, and the Age of the Robber Barons. If London's life and work are mythic creations, they are also realities to conjure with; they tell a very great deal not only about a tormented and talented man who burned himself out in a brief lifetime of forty years, but about the America in which London lived and worked, and whose myths he simultaneously embodied and scored.

* * *

Jack London was born on January 12, 1876. He was the illegitimate son of Flora Wellman and an itinerant astrologer named William Henry Chaney. Only in September of the same year, when Flora married John London, was John Chaney's name changed to the one he was to make famous: John Griffith London. His mother was a driving woman in whom the remains of the pioneer spirit had become a fly-by-night restlessness. She was constantly plunging into schemes for making a fortune overnight. Jack's stepfather, a quiet, gentle man with a love of the soil and animal breeding, was unable to cope with either her ambition or her terrible fits of temperament. As a result she drove him into a series of business fiascos all over the San Francisco Bay area—Alameda, San Mateo, Livermore, Emeryville, and Oakland—desperately striving to improve their condition and inevitably making it worse. This pattern of failure and flight was to scar London permanently.

Not only was Flora temperamentally unsuited for motherhood, but hard work, spiritualist meetings and business scheming left her little time or energy for her first-born. Possibly her resentment of Chaney and the circumstances of Jack's birth also tainted her love for the boy. Added to the precarious place he held in his mother's affections was the knowledge of his illegitimacy, of which Jack was soon to become aware. This knowledge weighed heavily on him and was one of the most important factors in shaping his personality.

In his reactions to his parents and to the conditions of his childhood can be seen some of the origins of London's dilemmas and concerns. In Flora, the boy could see and respect driving and overbearing individualism, the first impulse toward adopting the Nietzschean superman; in his sympathy for the kindly and beaten John London lay the roots of his concern for the people and socialism. For many years a marginal middle-class family, in Oakland the Londons were finally and definitely forced into the working class by a combination of John London's aging and illness, Flora's continued financial irresponsibility, and the economic conditions of the late 1880's. As Flora's grandiose schemes were to influence London's later wild flyers in business, so John London's love of farming and animal husbandry was instilled in the boy. As a man, Jack London was to make them his chief preoccupations on his Valley of the Moon Ranch.

The contrast between their working-class conditions and Flora's middle-class values intensified Jack's own Horatio Alger aspirations; in spite of his position in the economic cellar of society, London was determined to succeed. In this urge to escape from the working class lay another anchor for London's individualism; in his actual position in the working class was the foundation for his sympathy for the masses and for socialism. The way to climb the social ladder was, of course, through business, enterprise and individualism; the way to eliminate the cellar of society was through revolutionary socialism.

London's shame and guilt about his poverty and illegitimacy worked with these conflicting impulses and led him to try to convert his liabilities into assets. And so he created

the myths with which he was gradually to wrap his life and eventually to make into his shroud. Jack exaggerated and distorted the facts of his early struggles into a background of overwhelming poverty. Thus inflated, the circumstances made London appear all the more superior an individual for having overcome them; in so doing he had tempered his steel and proved his mettle. And, under the influence of his mother's racist bias, he could also boast that he was a blond-beast Anglo-Saxon (which he was not), thus substituting pride of racial lineage for the shame of illegitimacy.

For London, life's choices were swiftly polarized: he could be either beast of prey or beast of burden; he could either escape from civilization to its more primitive outer edges, or involve himself in society and succeed in its terms. In "The Tramp," an essay published many years later, London astutely pointed out that the tramp is either a discouraged worker or a discouraged criminal—or both, delineating the alternatives London had seen for himself, felt and personally explored. Desperate to escape from the social pit, filled with rebellious aggressiveness and self-destruction, London alternated between trying to be a "work beast" or a beast of prey, between flight from the society and aggression against it.

From a back-breaking job as a work beast in a cannery, London switched to being a "burglar in a boat," or an oyster pirate; then he turned on the oyster pirates by joining the state Fish Patrol which policed them. At 17, London signed on a ship as an able-bodied seaman and fled to the sealing grounds off Japan, only to find when he returned home that the depression of 1893 forced him back to being a work beast in a jute mill, and then a coal-heaver in a power plant. In revolt and out of revulsion, London became a tramp and hit the road. After joining "Kelly's Army," the Western branch of Jacob Coxey's army of unemployed who were then marching on Washington to protest economic conditions, Jack not only had become part of a mass-social protest group, but also lived off the countryside begging from the farmers. In addition, with a group of cronies, he also tried to get the cream of the provisions that sympathetic farmers donated by going ahead of the Army and stealing it.

After leaving the Army and hoboing around the country, London was finally imprisoned for vagrancy in the Erie County Penitentiary near Niagara Falls, New York.

Throughout, however, facts were always interwoven with fantasy, and it remains impossible to disentangle the two. Whether London was actually an oyster pirate or worked for the Fish Patrol is open to question, as are the myths of his physical and alcoholic prowess, his attempts at suicide, and his sailor-in-port spurring and generosity. But if London warped facts into myths, he lived the myths in turn, and made them facts to feed new myths.

The events of 1894 were crucial in London's life. The penitentiary, the road and Kelly's Army reinforced the lessons of his early experiences and their philosophy of dog-eat-dog and devil-take-the-hindmost. His hostility for and rebellion against society increased because of the cruelties and injustices he had seen and endured. London had been frightened so badly that he felt he needed a new way to deal with it all. Out of that fright, developed an interest in socialism which became superimposed on his assertive individualism. The two contrary impulses were to co-exist for the rest of his life. In addition, so terrifying had those experiences been that London decided to chance his own style of life. He had decided that brawn wore out too quickly and was paid for too cheaply; if one wanted out of the social pit, one had to sell brain power: it lasted longer and paid better.

As a result, London decided to return home to become a "brain merchant." Earlier, two positive things had influenced him, his voracious if undisciplined reading in the Oakland Public Library, and writing. In 1893, Jack had won first prize in a contest run by the San Francisco Call for the best descriptive article submitted. In 1895, after returning to Oakland from Erie Penitentiary, London decided that writing was the way to climb the success ladder out of society's cellar. He went back to school, first to Oakland High School and then to the University of California; but the normal academic pace and curriculum did not give him the practical tools for success as a writer that he was searching for, nor at the swift gait he required.

Never a patient man, London quit the University and,

after another stint as a work beast in a boarding-school laundry, he was seized by the gold fever of 1897 and headed for Alaska and the Klondike. Back in Oakland a year later, penniless, he had nonetheless found a mine of literary ore more precious than gold, a vein which was to make him rich and famous.

London now threw himself into a serious effort to become a writer, studying and working with energy and purpose. Rejection slips and failures thwarted him, two unhappy love affairs scarred him further, but slowly and surely he pulled himself up. Though poorly schooled, his education was rounded out by wide if shallow reading, and by talking to the Socialists of Oakland and San Francisco who were then his friends. From them he got his equivalent of a university education. Dogged by too much haste and impatience to apply himself to developing his best as a writer, and lacking in the caution and detachment necessary to use his newly acquired learning responsibly, London was nevertheless soon to make his first successes.

By 1902, the year his first novel, *A Daughter of the Snows*, was published, he was married, had two children, a house, and more income than he had ever dreamed of. But satisfaction eluded him. The days of his youth haunted him with their struggle and privation, and gave rise to exaggerated pessimism, despair and self-pity. But London could not accept responsibility for anything but his successes. For his other actions, feelings and circumstances he blamed external things: books, alcohol and its "White Logic," and "the system." As his marriage began to founder, he took a journalist's assignment abroad. When the assignment fell through, and Jack found himself in London, he decided to go into the city's slums, the East End, dressed like a beached American sailor, taking with him only "certain simple criteria with which to measure the life of the underworld. That which made for more life, for physical and spiritual health was good; that which made for less life, which hurt, and dwarfed, and distorted life, was bad."

What he saw in the London slums brought back memories of the Oakland slums, and of the road and the penitentiary. It frightened him with its misery and hopelessness. He

was only too recently out of the abyss himself and still too uncertain about remaining out of it to be detached. The system that produced such squalor and wretchedness he hated, but the more he saw of the abyss, the more certain he became that its inhabitants could not change their circumstances. Not only did he lose much of his faith in the working classes in the East End, he lost much of his faith in civilization itself.

Out of the experience came his book, *The People of the Abyss*, in which London compares capitalist civilization with that of the Innuït Indians in Alaska. Civilization comes off a poor second-best. London rejected Rousseau's solution to social problems, calling "back to nature" an atavism and a waste of the fine machinery of civilization. But he was attracted to it because he was both terrified and appalled by the picture of society as he had seen it. Somehow, he had to escape it. In his life, the escape was manifested in his gradual separation from cities and urban life, and in the wanderlust which drove him to the primitive places on earth—Alaska, the South Seas, Hawaii, around Cape Horn. In his books, the escape was apparent in the locales, situations and characters he chose, and in part accounted for his constant deprecation of civilized people as well as his sharpened critique of American society and its values.

Back in California in the winter of 1903, London began the short story which was to run away from him and become a novel, *The Call of the Wild*. In it, the meaning of Buck's attempt to survive in the hostile northland was deeply influenced by what London had so recently seen in the East End. London was unaware of the book's allegorical dog-eat-dog principle in human affairs, and admitted that he was, but it and the escape motif were plainly there.

Not only was *The Call of the Wild* an allegory, it was a kind of autobiography as well. London's close identification with the wolf and the dog, in his life and in his books, is everywhere evident. He was delighted when friends called him "Wolf" or "Shaggy Wolf," he signed his letters "Wolf," had his bookmarks engraved with the picture of a big wolf-dog's face, and went so far as to call his baronial manor the "Wolf House." London was not only telling the story of

Buck's life, but of his own, demonstrating the principles of success and survival he had learned. He had seen civilization—the East End, the Oakland slums, the road, and jail, and had chosen savagery—the Alaskan wilds. The reality of the capitalism he could not cope with was abandoned for a simpler, more primitive world; the complexities of human behavior were jettisoned in favor of the more fundamental behavior of dogs and wolves. And the fittest who survived there were those who employed individual strength, cunning and violence against nature, man and society, not those who employed socialist mass action against institutionalized injustice. Nor did they succeed by revolutionary assertion; they survived by adapting to the "law of club and fang."

The Call of the Wild was a great success and London rode the crest of its popularity until submerged again by personal difficulties. Depression and suicidal feelings returned, and his work suffered; involved in a difficult love affair, his marriage fell finally apart and he was divorced. A period of profound unhappiness ensued that London melodramatically called (after Nietzsche) his "Long Sickness," the psychological bog he had stumbled into after climbing the success ladder out of society's cellar only to find its parlor still left him dissatisfied.

Though London had gradually begun to move out of the cities, he now actually forsook them entirely to make the country his permanent home. He began to write again, another story called *White Fang*, a study of a wolf-dog who became domesticated. Ironically, after the horrors of the East End, London still had the energy, will and courage to return to civilization *in fact*, while at the same time in fiction writing *The Call of the Wild*, a study in devolution, showing a dog's relapse into a savage wolf. Now, in actually leaving civilization in life, London fictionalized *White Fang's* evolution from wolf to civilized dog.

* * *

With his second novel, London became an important writer; *The Call of the Wild* is the most perfectly realized novel he ever wrote. Out of his fearful plunge into the

London abyss and his consequent retreat in fiction to the primitive world of dogs and Alaska came an allegory of human life. A study of atavism, or reversion to type, it was also an allegory of man's conditions in the society of London's time as well as a revelation of the deepest emotions London felt about himself and that society.

The novel has three levels, the first and narrative one the story of a dog, Buck, who reverts to type, learns to survive in a wolf-like life, and eventually becomes a wolf. The second, or biographical level, reveals what London himself lived and felt in climbing out of the abyss of poverty and deprivation to prestige as a writer and wealth. Buck was symbolically Jack London struggling for success and domination, learning the law of club and fang, "put into harness," and finally becoming the shaggy wolf rampant. The third level is political and philosophical, exemplifying the doctrines of social Darwinism in fictional form. The fittest survive by adaptation to the man with the club (the stronger individual) and the strength of the herd (the power of the masses). By this adaptation man or dog may be temporarily defeated but ultimately will triumph. Man or dog becomes hardened to nature physically and also hardened spiritually to greed, thievery, cunning, violence, and individualism in society and nature. Finally, when man or dog has gained sufficient strength and craft, he may prey on those weaker than himself, knowing that, as London saw it, "Mercy did not exist in the primordial life. It was misunderstood for fear, and such misunderstanding made for death. Kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, was the law."

London was not only treating animals like human beings, but treating human beings like animals, recognizing no essential difference between man and animal. In *The Call of the Wild* he equated men with dogs and wolves, and equated the harshness of the trail with the harshness of society, implying that force, savagery and cunning were equally the ways to success in both areas. London's vocabulary also carried and reinforced his meaning. Buck is "put into harness," the human phrase for working. He becomes "lead-dog," or in man's parlance, "top-dog." He is forced to meet and bow to "the man with the club," an almost cliché expression for

power and authority. Buck leads the "wolf pack," to which he finally reverts, a predatory term still in use in our own day. The very fact that London deals with a "dog's life"—Humankind's frequent comment on its own condition is that "It's a dog's life."—indicates how thoroughgoing was his view.

Beneath man's veneer of civilization, London saw a prehistoric beast who fought and conquered through might and deceit, whose nature was fierce and cruel in the extreme. Scratch the veneer, and the prehistoric beast shone through, atavism took place, and man reverted to the "wolf." Buck, the civilized dog, devolves to where he not only kills but enjoys killing. London's love of violence and bloodshed is here, and elsewhere, rendered as a "wine-of-life," "strength-through-joy," emotion, and to Buck he gives it as a lust "to kill with his own teeth and wash his muzzle to the eyes in warm blood."

The only thing that keeps Buck from the wild is his love of man, just as love had held London, and just as love as well as fear holds most of mankind from the war of all against all, in spite of Hobbes' dictum that "Man is as a wolf to man." In life, however, love eventually dies or is killed, as John Thornton is killed by the Yeehats, and then Buck (and therefore man) reverts to the savagery of the wolf-pack, following the primordial call of the wild.

With *White Fang*, his fifth novel, London returned to the dog-eat-dog life. Though once more in fictional retreat from human life, London was still writing about human problems. As *The Call of the Wild* had been a study in regress, so London intended to make *White Fang* a study in progress, a case history of evolution not devolution, of civilization rather than of atavism. This book, too, is three-tiered. On the surface or narrative level it is the story of the wolf-dog, *White Fang*, who comes up from savagery to civilization. On a biographical level, the novel reiterates Jack London's childhood struggles and fight for life in a hostile environment. Like London's childhood, *White Fang's* puppyhood is miserable. Different from the other dogs in camp because he is three-quarters wolf, he becomes an outcast. The other dogs sense that he is "different" and "instinctively felt for him the

enmity the domestic dog feels for the wolf." They all join in persecuting him and because "the tooth of every dog was against him, the hand of every man," White Fang becomes a fighting dog. London's illegitimacy, his quasi-paranoia, and his own hostility and aggression against people and society are, in this fiction, subjected to his myth-making and converted from unpleasant compulsions to necessary virtues. Even White Fang's love for his mother, Kiche, and her subsequent rejection of him are described in emotional terms similar to those London used to describe his relationship to Flora London.

The final philosophical level was meant to convey mankind's ascent from bestiality to civilization. Love regenerates the wolf by making him a domesticated dog, and the logical inference is that if a dog can listen to the "call of the tame" because of love, then why not man? White Fang is transformed by his love for Weedon Scott; in short, London has the wolf-dog change his whole mode of life by an act of will and for nonmaterial motives. Such a revolutionary change, according to London, gives the lie to the "very law of life," which London maintains is self-assertion not self-sacrifice, material motives—money, meat, power, not idealist ones like love. In addition, the materialist-determinist London introduces idealism and will as the means not only of regenerating a wolf-dog, but by extension, of remodeling society.

Unfortunately for London's express intention, the novel's most forceful sections are devoted to the war of all against all, which London portrays with fidelity and power. Individual assertion and adaptation remain the best methods of survival. Not only is the law of the wilderness depicted as eat or be eaten, but London explicitly makes it the law of society as well: "Had the cub [White Fang] thought in man-fashion, he might have epitomized life as a voracious appetite, and the world as a place wherein ranged a multitude of appetites, pursuing and being pursued, hunting and being hunted, eating and being eaten, all in blindness and confusion, with violence and disorder, a chaos of gluttony and slaughter, ruled over by chance, merciless, planless, endless." Once White Fang has gone to live with the Indians and so begun his evolution, he soon discovers that the