

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

London was born in 1876. It was the end of the nineteenth century. The nation i.e., America was in a state of great political and social unrest. It found rise of the labour movement, rift between labour and capital and the political conflict between farmers, workers and small businessmen on the one hand and the powerful monopolies on the other.

Yet there was a strange division between literature and life. No writer brought literature and life in a meaningful relation.¹ It was Jack London who first broke the ice that was congealing American letters.

It is in fact the prime and holy duty of writers to protect the harshness, rudeness and roughness of life together with the scenic or romantic description. But writers did not write about the dark side of humanity. They only wrote for pleasure. Hence anyone would have obtained the most confused and inaccurate idea of the life led by more than sixty millions of Americans and the problems facing them.

¹ Jack London: American Rebel. Philip S. Foner.
The Citadel Press, New York, 1964.

Upon this scene there stepped several young writers who at the turn of the century blazed new trials in American literature. Chief among them were Crane, Norris.

Stephen Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets was published in 1893. In 1899 Norris laid plan to write Epic of the Wheat in three novels. Unfortunately he completed only two books, The Octopus, The Pit and died before he could start the third. Norris had planned to write about the mission of feeding India's starving millions during a famine.

Crane and Norris were no doubt pioneers of realism in modern American literature, but their writings did not reflect the most important issue confronting the American people in their day - the furious battle between labour and capital.

But another American writer was emerging, who was interested not only in exposing cruelties and oppressions in the economic system, but in remaking it and building a new and better social order. This was Jack London.

He was also a socialist, and from his belief in Marxism as a philosophy of history he drew the ability to describe, better than any of his predecessors or his contemporaries and most of those who followed him, the modern social struggle out of which would inertiably come the regeneration of mankind.

London knew the life which he wrote; he knew how the workers lived and talked and how to transfer the details of their lives to the printed page with an amazing fidelity.

In the January 1929 issue of New Masses, Martin Russak wrote: A real proletarian writer must not only use his proletarian life as material; his writing must burn with the spirit of revolt. Jack London was the real Proletarian writer - the first and so far the only proletarian writer of genius in America. Workers who read, read Jack London. He is the one author they have all read, he is the one literary experience they all have in common. Factory workers, farm hands, seamen, miners, newsboys read him and read him again. He is the most popular writer of the American

working class.

Before Jack London fiction dealing with the working class was characterized by sympathy for labour and the underprivileged, but chiefly in the spirit of Christian principles of brotherhood, proclaiming as its message that if only labour and capital could be persuaded to follow the teachings of Christ, all social and economic problems would be solved.

But life itself led Jack London to reject this approach in his writing. As a newsboy, sailor, mill-hand, stoker, tramp, and janitor, he came to know all there was to know about the life of the underdog. He knew what it meant to be one of disinherited, to be chained to the deadening routine of the machine and to soul destroying labour for an insufficient reward.

Consequently he put aside the literature that pretended that ours is a society of sweetness and light. He did not oppose labour organization nor balk at the strike as a weapon of labour; rather he took his heroes and heroines from the labour movement and wove his plots within their

struggles. His own proletarian background had taught him that the individual worker was powerless in the face of the greed of the working class. He was not content to appeal for the end of poverty and ignorance and disease; he called for the destruction of the system which was responsible for these evils.

He poured into his writings all the pain of his life, the fierce hatred of the bourgeoisie that it had produced in him, and the conviction it had brought to him that the world could be made a better place to live in it if the exploited would rise up and take the management of society out of the hands of exploiter.

Even after he had established his fame and money-making power in the popular magazines, he did not forget his proletarian origins. He risked the rewards of his years of labour on the road up from poverty and obscurity to write socialist or reformist essays and revolutionary stories and novels.

Jack London became the most successful writer of his day, but he remained the most radical writer in American literature.