

## CHAPTER II

## REFORMIST WRITINGS

The Iron Heel is the name that London gives to the Oligarchy of American capitalists who seized power when there was danger of socialist victory at the polls. He describes the crushing of labour by this Oligarchy during the years between 1912 and 1932 and the terrible and bitter conflict between the socialist underground and the forces of dictatorship. In 1932, when the book ends abruptly, the Oligarchy has undermined the first revolt of the socialist revolutionaries; but they secretly plan the second revolt.

The novel purports to be derived from a manuscript discovered in the fourth century of the Era of Brotherhood which dates the final triumph of socialist democracy "when the promise of socialism is being released. It is written by Avis, the gently nurtured wife" of the leader of the second revolt, Ernest Everhard. Throughout the work are footnotes, which are intended to interpret various obsolete references for readers who live under socialism. The comments, drawn from his extensive file of newspaper clippings

and government documents, are devastating notes on conditions in Jack London's times and are set forth with so keen a satiric sense as to give them place among the most brilliant indictments of capitalism ever written. Through this medium London presented his ablest application of Marxist theory to American conditions.

He introduces his hero, Ernest Everhard as "a superman, a blond beast such as Nietzsche described, and in addition he was aflame with democracy", according to Ernest Untermann, who spent several years with London on his ranch several years after 1910. Everhard was a composite of three people: Jack London, Eugene V. Debs, and Untermann himself. Whomever London patterned his hero after he is not very important, for his characterization of him is a political one. We come to know him through his political acts, his courage, his loyalty, his comradeship and his devotion to the struggle for socialism and freedom. 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.

Everhard is introduced to the reader at a dinner at the home of John Cunningham, a distinguished physicist and professor at the University of California at Berkeley. There he first meets his future wife, Avis Cunningham, his host's daughter. A discussion develops among some ministers present about the working class and its relation to the Church. Everhard is quiet, listening. Finally he bursts out with a scathing attack on the assembled churchmen, telling them that they do not know what they are talking about, that they are merely metaphysicians, each snug in a private world, and knowing nothing of the real world about them. He goes further and charges that the church preaches in the interest of the upper class, the class that supports it. "You have nothing in common with the working class. ... Be true to your salt and your hire; guard with your preaching, the interests of your employers, but do not come down to the working class and serve as false leaders..."

Later in a separate discussion with Bishop Morehouse, Everhard asserts that the church no longer teaches Christ, and that the working men do not wish to have anything to do with an

institution which "condones the frightful brutality and savagery with which the capitalist class treats the working class". He challenges the Bishop to protest against the exploitation of labour, against children toiling in the Southern Cotton Mills, and against other evils in society, assuring him that it would cost him his post. The Bishop accepts the challenge, determined to prove that the church was not silent in the midst of human suffering. Everhard also challenges Avis Cunningham to learn the full story of a worker in the Sierra Mills, in which Cunninghams have investment, who lost his arm and was turned out without a penny. Avis, too, accepts the challenge.

Avis' awakening to the realities of life occurs first. She visits Jackson, the worker who had lost his arm, discovers that accidents in the Mills were quite common and that the maiming of hundreds of workers including children, could be traced to the negligence of the company. She also discovers that the evidence presented at the trial to prevent Jackson from collecting damages was all fixed, and she hears Colonel Ingram, the Company Lawyer, coolly admit that the injured worker

should have received damages. Then when Avis writes, "a quiet, restrained, dispassionate account" of Jackson's case in which she simply sets forth the fact, she discovers that no newspapers will publish her communication, and learns from a reporter friend that all the papers are "solid with the corporations" and that any editor who printed her material would lose his job.

Thus Avis begins "to see through the appearance of the society" in which she has lived. And the reader gets a simple but dramatic lesson on factory conditions and on the control of the courts and the press by the corporations. Later, along with Bishop Morehouse, the reader learns of the control of the church by the same forces. When the Bishop, having been shown the conditions of the working class in his community attempts to apply his Christianity literally - to feed the poor, welcome the sinful and humble, and champion the cause of the downtrodden - he is put in a madhouse.

Ernest Everhard is invited to speak before "The Philomaths", an organization of scholars to give it intellectual tone". He starts, hesitant

to disarm his listeners into believing him a shy, innocent and ignorant dreamer. He tells them of his life as a worker, and his struggle to secure an education, of his contacts with the upper class and of his consequent disillusionment. From novels he had read he had thought them all five<sup>n</sup>, noble and intelligent. Instead he found them to be crooked, rotten, selfish and stupid. He had seen Ministers of the Gospel dismissed because they refused to heed the biddings of the wealthy, and professors "broken on the wheel of university subservience to the ruling class". In disgust he joined the socialist movement, and a new world opened before his eyes.

His audience remains unmoved; neither his denunciation of the greed and stupidity of the upper class nor his exposition of the spirit of the working class has touched them. Then Ernest tells them about the revolution; he indicts the entire capitalist class, charging it with mismanagement for compelling people to live in poverty when the productive forces of society can provide all with a decent standard of living. He tells them, too, of the determination of the

working class to take over the management of society from the capitalist class, and he ends, as did London so often in his own lectures, with the words: "This is the revolution, my masters. Stop it if you can".

The audience is instantly in an uproar. One after another they seek to demolish Everhard's arguments, but he answers them with pitiless logic and they resort to personal invective. Then one of the capitalists who has remained cool throughout the heated exchange rises and says:

*This then is our answer. We have no words to waste on you. When you reach out your vaunted strong hands for our palaces and purpled ease, we will show you what strength is. In roar of sharpnel and shell and in whine of machine-guns will your answer be couched. We will grind you revolutionists down under our heel, and we shall walk upon your faces. The world is ours, we are its lords, and ours shall it remain.*

Everhard replies that the working class will triumph through the power of the ballot. "What if you do get a majority, a sweeping majority,

on election day", comes the immediate response. "Suppose we refuse to turn the government over to you after you have captured it at the ballot box". Then, retorts Everhard, the answer of the working class on that day will come "in roar of sharpnel and in whine of machine guns. ...".

At another meeting, this time of small businessmen and farmers, Everhard calls the middle class "The Machine Breakers". They know that their existence as a class is rapidly coming to an end, and in their desperate desire for survival are bent on turning back the wheels of progress by breaking up the trusts. He tells them that they are tilting against windmills, that they cannot turn back the tides of economic evolution which made inevitable the rise of the trusts and utilize their abilities for the benefit of all the people rather than for a handful of capitalists. Then he gives them a lesson in Marxism, presenting arguments to prove that capitalism will inevitably break down under its own contradictions and will give way to socialism. He bases this on a mathematical formulation of the Marxist theory of surplus value. Since capitalists do not pay



their workers enough to buy back all that they produce, a large surplus of manufactured goods is piled up each year. The surplus must be exported. Yet soon every nation under capitalism will be in the same predicament, each having its own surplus to export. What then, he asks, and answers that in order to keep prices up and profits secure, it will be necessary to throw the surplus in the sea: "Throw every year hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of shoes and wheat and clothing and all the commodities of commerce in the sea".

Finally, Everhard warns his middle class audience that if they do not soon unite with the workers to achieve socialism, the entire population "will be crushed under the iron heel of despotism as relentless and terrible as any despotism that has blackened the pages of the history of man. It does not take long for Everhard's warning to be realized. The Oligarchy starts to crack down, using the entire force of the state to repress rebels and to still all voices which threaten its wealth and power. Social ostracism is the first weapon; then loss of jobs, finally bare faced and brutal persecution. Vigilantic groups,

waving American flags and singing patriotic songs, destroy the socialist presses and break up the meetings of labour and radical groups. Strikes are viciously smashed by the police, the militia and the army; workers are wounded and killed and thousands of strikers are herded into concentration camps. The mass of the population is gradually enslaved, but no protests are uttered by the moulders of public opinion, the press, the church and the educators. Anyone who dares to lift his voice in behalf of freedom is deprived of his livelihood or imprisoned.

And while all this transpires the progressive groups are scarcely aware of the powerful forces they are combating and, because of the step by step character of the repression, are unable to foresee the ultimate goal of the Oligarchy - the complete overthrow of all democratic processes and the institution of dictatorship. The socialists and the trade unionists still pin their faith on the ballot box as the solution. But Everhard warns that the Iron Heel will trample the peoples' right to vote and that they must be prepared for revolutionary action to prevent it. "In this",



writes London, "he was in advance of his party". His fellow socialists could not agree with him. They still insisted that victory could be gained through the elections.

Ernest could not get them seriously to fear the coming of the Oligarchy. They were stirred by him, but they were too sure of their own strength. There was no room in their theoretical revolution, social evolution. They would send him to Congress and all would be well.

Then the Plutocracy of America clashes with the German Plutocracy in competition for the same markets. The press and other agencies whip up the war spirit since the ruling class hopes to divert the workers of both countries are not so easily fooled. They call a general strike, and the war is stopped before a shot is fired. But the Oligarchy still has a hidden weapon. It buys out the key unions by granting them concessions in the form of higher wages, shorter hours and better working conditions. The solidarity of labour is thereby broken and the better unions crushed.

And still the socialists and the trade union leaders cling to their faith in the ballot. Only Everhard shakes his head "How many rifles have you got? Do you know where you can get plenty of lead?" he asks when the socialists tell him they will triumph at the polls.

Events drew swiftly to a head. Fifty socialist congressmen are elected. But they are powerless, being in the minority. Slowly the work of destruction proceeds. The labour movement, split and weakened, is crushed; its leaders are arrested, jailed and secretly executed. Finally, labour wakes up and makes a stand. But it is hopeless, for it has come too late. The Iron Heel wreaks on the workers the most awful vengeance. The Mercenaries, a professional soldiery, mow down the revolutionists. In Chicago where a Commune is formed the bloody warfare reaches its height. The city is left in a shambles. Labour fights to the last ditch, but to no avail. The socialists, led by Everhard, resort to individual terrorism in their effort to fight back.

And through it moved the Iron Heel, impassive

and deliberate, shaking up the whole fabric of the social structure in its search for the comrades, combing out the Mercenaries, the labour castes, and all its secret services, punishing without mercy and without malice, suffering in silence all retaliations that were made upon it, and filling the gaps in its fighting lives as fast as they appeared.

The book ends on this first defeat of the working class. This was followed by a second revolt, as crushingly defeated as was the first, but the events of the book deal only with the first revolt. Everhard was executed by the Oligarchy sometime during the year 1932, while making plans for the second revolt. He dies convinced that in the end the Iron Heel will be crushed: "We have lost a battle, we shall win the war. Lost for this time, but not for ever! We have learned many things. Tomorrow the cause will rise once more, stronger in wisdom, and in discipline.

The book bearing the title "The Iron Heel" was published in 1907, and describes the struggle that one day will break between Plutocracy and the People, should the fates in their fury allow

it.

The people of the Abyss, published by Macmillan in November 1903, received mixed reactions from the critics. The Nation commented that London describes the East End of London as Dante might have described the Inferno had he been a yellow journalist. The Atlantic Monthly considered it "deficient in the firmness and dignity of mood and touch which might have made it literature". While the Bookman accused the author of snobbishness because of his profound consciousness of the gulf between the poor denizens of the Abyss and the favoured class of which he is the proud representative. ...".

Why is it, London asked, that as civilization increased its producing power misery increased in direct ratio? The cause was mismanagement; the answer a socialist commonwealth. The profit motive must go. Society must be compelled to better the lot of the average man, capable as it is of a production of abundance. Society must be reorganized on a basis of production for use and not for profit. Once capitalist mismanagement is wiped out, the evil of the slums, of slow

starvation, of disease, of death from malnutrition, will be wiped off the face of the earth.

This picture of the slums was obtained, moreover, in what was considered "good times", when business was prosperous, when the factory hands and the clerks were "normally" unemployed. "The starvation and lack of shelter I encountered", London wrote, "constituted a chronic condition of misery which is never wiped out, even in the periods of greatest prosperity".

London was not content simply to point a devastating picture of the life of the poor. As a socialist he drew conclusions which the ordinary social worker or academician was wont to ignore. He compared the inhabitants of the British isles with the primitive Indians of Alaska. Among the Innuits folks who lived along the banks of the Yukon river, he pointed out, chronic starvation is unknown. When there was lack of food, all suffered; when there was plenty, all ate their fill. But in the civilized world one had too much and another too little. One man lived in a fine mansion, another slept in some dark doorway. Everywhere there was a starvation in the midst

of the plenty.

London was extremely critical of the workhouses. For a cot and a bit of supper and breakfast consisting of food unfit for human consumption, they worked the wretched men nearly to death. Small wonder so many of these destitute men and women would go without food for days on end. Many became ill as their resistance to the rampant slum diseases was lowered. Once ill, their chances for recovery were negligible.

Throughout these investigations London sought answer to the question, why are these people in the slums? Not by choice and not through laziness, he discovered, but old age, disease, or accidents which had reduced their labour value. Escape from the slums was difficult, for the tiny wages of these people simply did not permit them to live elsewhere. Then when they were thrown on society's scrap heap, through illness, age, accident, they had no resources on which to draw. Slow starvation was the common end.

The people of the Abyss brought Jack London to the attention of the entire socialist movement in the United States. Previous to its appearance



he was known, only well known, on the coast. Then Wiltshires printed the People of the Abyss serially, beginning with the March 1903 issue and running it through January, 1904. Thus several months before Macmillan released the book, socialists all over the country were reading London's burning indictment against capitalism, and overnight his name became a household word among Party members.