Jack London

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I was born in San Francisco in 1876. At fifteen I was a man among men, and if I had a spare nickel I spent it on beer instead of candy, because I thought it was more manly to buy beer. Now, when my years are nearly doubled, I am out on a hunt for the boyhood which I never had, and I am less serious than at any other time of my life. Guess I'll find that boyhood! Almost the first things I realized were responsibilities. I have no recollection of being taught to read or write--I could do both at the age of five--but I know that my first school was in Alameda before I went out on a ranch with my folks and as a ranch boy worked hard from my eighth year.

The second school were I tried to pick up a little learning was an irregular hit or miss affair at San Mateo. Each class sat in a separate desk, but there were days when we did not sit at all, for the master used to get drunk very often, and then one of the elder boys would thrash him. To even things up, the master would then thrash the younger lads, so you can think what sort of school it was. There was no one belonging to me, or associated with me in any way, who had literary tastes or ideas, the nearest I can make to it is that my great-grandfather was a circuit writer, a Welshman, known as "Priest" Jones in the backwoods, where his enthusiasm led him to scatter the Gospel.

One of my earliest and strongest impressions was of the ignorance of other people. I had read and absorbed Washington Irving's "Alhambra" before I was nine, but could never understand how it was that the other ranchers knew nothing about it. Later I concluded that this ignorance was peculiar to the country, and felt that those who lived in cities would not be so dense. One day a man from the city came to the ranch. He wore shiny shoes and a cloth coat, and I felt that here was a good chance for me to exchange thoughts with an enlightened mind. From the bricks of an old fallen chimney I had built an Alhambra of my own; towers, terraces, and all were complete, and chalk inscriptions marked the different sections. Here I led the city man and questioned him about "The Alhambra," but he was as ignorant as the man on the ranch, and then I consoled myself with the thought that there were only two clever people in the world--Washington Irving and myself.

My other reading-matter at that time consisted mainly of dime novels, borrowed from the hired men, and newspapers in which the servants gloated over the adventures of poor but virtuous shop- girls.

Through reading such stuff my mind was necessarily ridiculously conventional, but being very lonely I read everything that came my way, and was greatly impressed by Ouida's story "Signa," which I devoured regularly for a couple of years. I never knew the finish until I grew up, for the closing chapters were missing from my copy, so I kept on dreaming with the hero, and, like him, unable to see Nemesis, at the end. My work on the ranch at one time was to watch the bees, and as I sat under a tree from sunrise till late in the afternoon, waiting for the swarming, I had plenty of time to read and dream. Livermore Valley was very flat, and even the hills around were then to me devoid of interest, and the only incident to break in on my visions was when I gave the alarm of swarming, and the ranch folks rushed out with pots, pans, and buckets of water. I think the opening line of "Signa" was "It

was only a little lad," yet he had dreams of becoming a great musician, and having all Europe at his feet. Well, I was only a little lad, too, but why could not I become what "Signa" dreamed of being?

Life on a Californian ranch was then to me the dullest possible existence, and every day I thought of going out beyond the sky-line to see the world. Even then there were whispers, promptings; my mind inclined to things beautiful, although my environment was unbeautiful. The hills and valleys around were eyesores and aching pits, and I never loved them till I left them.

Before I was eleven I left the ranch and came to Oakland, where I spent so much of my time in the Free Public Library, eagerly reading everything that came to hand, that I developed the first stages of St. Vitus' dance from lack of exercise. Disillusions quickly followed, as I learned more of the world. At this time I made my living as a newsboy, selling papers in the streets; and from then on until I was sixteen I had a thousand and one different occupations-- work and school, school and work--and so it ran.

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Then the adventure-lust was strong within me, and I left home. I didn't run, I just left--went out in the bay, and joined the oyster pirates. The days of the oyster pirates are now past, and if I had got my dues for piracy, I would have been given five hundred years in prison. Later, I shipped as a sailor on a schooner, and also took a turn at salmon fishing. Oddly enough, my next occupation was on a fish-patrol, where I was entrusted with the arrest of any violators of the fishing laws. Numbers of lawless Chinese, Greeks, and Italians were at that time engaged in illegal fishing, and many a patrolman paid his life for his interference. My only weapon on duty was a steel table-fork, but I felt fearless and a man when I climbed over the side of a boat to arrest some marauder.

Subsequently I shipped before the mast and sailed for the Japanese coast on a seal-hunting expedition, later going to Behring Sea. After sealing for seven months I came back to California and took odd jobs at coal shovelling and longshoring and also in a jute factory, where I worked from six in the morning until seven at night. I had planned to join the same lot for another sealing trip the following year, but somehow I missed them. They sailed away on the Mary Thomas, which was lost with all hands.

In my fitful school-days I had written the usual compositions, which had been praised in the usual way, and while working in the jute mills I still made an occasional try. The factory occupied thirteen hours of my day, and being young and husky, I wanted a little time for myself, so there was little left for composition. The San Francisco Call offered a prize for a descriptive article. My mother urged me to try for it, and I did, taking for my subject "Typhoon off the Coast of Japan." Very tired and sleepy, knowing I had to be up at half-past five, I began the article at midnight and worked straight on until I had written two thousand words, the limit of the article, but with my idea only half worked out. The next night, under the same conditions, I continued, adding another two thousand words before I finished, and then the third night I spent in cutting out the excess, so as to bring the article within the conditions of the contest. The first prize came to me, and the second and third went to students of the Stanford and Berkeley Universities.

My success in the San Francisco Call competition seriously turned my thoughts to writing, but my blood was still too hot for a settled routine, so I practically deferred literature, beyond writing a little gush for the Call, which that journal promptly rejected.

I tramped all through the United States, from California to Boston, and up and down, returning to the Pacific coast by way of Canada, where I got into jail and served a term for vagrancy, and the whole tramping experience made me become a Socialist. Previously I had been impressed by the dignity of labour, and, without having read Carlyle or Kipling, I had 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 day's work well done would be inconceivable to you. I was as faithful a wage-slave as ever a capitalist exploited. In short, my joyous individualism was dominated by the orthodox bourgeois ethics. I had fought my way from the open west, where men bucked big and the job hunted the man, to the congested labour centres of the eastern states, where men were small potatoes and hunted the job for all they were worth, and I found myself looking upon life from a new and totally different angle. I saw the workers in the shambles at the bottom of the Social Pit. I swore I would never again do a hard day's work with my body except where absolutely compelled to, and I have been busy ever since running away from hard bodily labour.

In my nineteenth year I returned to Oakland and started at the High School, which ran the usual school magazine. This publication was a weekly--no, I guess a monthly--one, and I wrote stories for it, very little imaginary, just recitals of my sea and tramping experiences. I remained there a year, doing janitor work as a means of livelihood, and leaving eventually because the strain was more than I could bear. At this time my socialistic utterances had attracted considerable attention, and I was known as the "Boy Socialist," a distinction that brought about my arrest for street-talking. After leaving the High School, in three months cramming by myself, I took the three years' work for that time and entered the University of California. I hated to give up the hope of a University education and worked in a laundry and with my pen to help me keep on. This was the only time I worked because I loved it, but the task was too much, and when half-way through my Freshman year I had to quit.

I worked away ironing shirts and other things in the laundry, and wrote in all my spare time. I tried to keep on at both, but often fell asleep with the pen in my hand. Then I left the laundry and wrote all the time, and lived and dreamed again. After three months' trial I gave up writing, having decided that I was a failure, and left for the Klondike to prospect for gold. At the end of the year, owing to the outbreak of scurvy, I was compelled to come out, and on the homeward journey of 1,900 miles in an open boat made the only notes of the trip. It was in the Klondike I found myself. There nobody talks. Everybody thinks. You get your true perspective. I got mine.

While I was in the Klondike my father died, and the burden of the family fell on my shoulders. Times were bad in California, and I could get no work. While trying for it I wrote "Down the River," which was rejected. During the wait for this rejection I wrote a twenty-thousand word serial for a news company, which was also rejected. Pending each rejection I still kept on writing fresh stuff. I did not know what an editor looked like. I did not know a soul who had ever published anything. Finally a story was accepted by a Californian magazine, for which I received five dollars. Soon afterwards "The Black Cat" offered me forty dollars for a story.

Then things took a turn, and I shall probably not have to shovel coal for a living for some time to come, although I have done it, and could do it again.

My first book was published in 1900. I could have made a good deal at newspaper work; but I had sufficient sense to refuse to be a slave to that man-killing machine, for such I held a newspaper to be to a young man in his forming period. Not until I was well on my feet as a magazine-writer did I do much work for newspapers. I am a believer in regular work, and never wait for an inspiration. Temperamentally I am not only careless and irregular, but melancholy; still I have fought both down. The discipline I had as a sailor had full effect on me. Perhaps my old sea days are also responsible for the regularity and limitations of my sleep. Five and a half hours is the precise average I allow myself, and no circumstance has yet arisen in my life that could keep me awake when the time comes to "turn in."

I am very fond of sport, and delight in boxing, fencing, swimming, riding, yachting, and even kite-flying. Although primarily of the city, I like to be near it rather than in it. The country, though, is the best, the only natural life. In my grown-up years the writers who have influenced me most are Karl Marx in a particular, and Spencer in a general, way. In the days of my barren boyhood, if I had had a chance, I would have gone in for music; now, in what are more genuinely the days of my youth, if I had a million or two I would devote myself to writing poetry and pamphlets. I think the best work I have done is in the "League of the Old Men," and parts of "The Kempton-Wace Letters." Other people don't like the former. They prefer brighter and more cheerful things. Perhaps I shall feel like that, too, when the days of my youth are behind me.