

CAN A WIFE WRITE HER HUSBAND'S BIOGRAPHY?

By Sydney Greenbie

DEAN CROSS of Yale says she can't, at least not at this stage of man's self-consciousness. "The relation between husband and wife is so intimate," he argues in the last "Yale Review", "that it is hazardous for either to write the biography of the other....Sometime, no doubt, the existing restraint will be removed from their pens, and then we shall have some entertaining biographies." I think that Charmian London has broken through those restraints in "The Book of Jack London". It seems that five years of widowhood have in no way lessened the strain of her grief, nor have they minimized the

ardor of her great love and devotion. And she does not hesitate to give us every fraction of her worship. But it is also certain that few wives would at the same time have laid bare the past of their husbands with the honesty, lack of false modesty, and departure from the conventional that Charmian London evinces. Nor is she playing up to people "who delight in picturesque crime", though she tells us that another Dean, Dean of American Letters, said that "Jack London was a self-confessed felon, and ought to be behind the bars today". There is nothing in her life of Jack that smacks of "good influence" and "conversion", not even as much as Jack himself confessed to in "Martin Eden" and "John Barleycorn". Jack did not become a "good" man. What Charmian London sets out to do is to show up a man who emerged from the worst type of American social conditions into a generous and noble creature simply because these qualities were always latent in the man. And she shows that even to the last day of his life Jack had to struggle against the currents of life which sought to bear him back again downstream. She is portraying, in a sense, not her individual husband but the America or the social consciousness of America which aims to give the underdog a chance. And to me she has given an accurate picture of the Jack London I was fortunate enough to know.

I have always believed that the coming and going of a really great man in the world is unaccompanied by any bluster. If there is blare of trumpet it is not of his making, but of the mob's. If of his making, he is not a great man. No one of the few great men I have known convinced me more of this than Jack London.

I had been late in making my reser-

vation for a plate at a dinner given to Jack some years ago and was in consequence placed in a corner near the door. Jack was late. As he appeared in the doorway, I said to my companion, "There he is", and looked up into his bright, smiling face. There must have been something in my look that spoke to Jack, for he put out his hand to me—a total stranger—warmly, and passed on to his seat at the other end of the room. And in that moment I felt that I knew Jack London.

A few years after that I was in San Francisco and called up Glen Ellen by phone. Jack's sister, Eliza, answered. I wanted to come out to the ranch. Without consulting Jack, she told me what train to take and that I would be met at the station. Others also drifted in as casually, and from the moment of my arrival I enjoyed a hospitality such as I have seldom known elsewhere. Thenceforward I thought I really knew Jack London. But now that I have read "The Book" I am sure I do.

"The Book of Jack London" will scandalize a good many. It is too much of a rib of its Adam not to do so. Charmian London did not march shoulder to shoulder with Jack for over ten years without becoming thoroughly imbued with his spirit. But there will be enough of those of us who stand bareheaded before man to make her story of Jack London more than worth while. It is regrettable that, carried along by her ardor and her grief, Mrs. London should have

been so unfortunate in much of her phrasing. Intensely eager to convey that which was hers through an exceptional and wondrous relationship, she seems to struggle for expression and, often unable to get exactly the word she is after, she permits herself to coin new words and new combinations of words, when all along the simpler word lies there at hand. One cannot find justification for *bepuzzlement*, *funning*, *unveracity*, *startlement*, and a tendency to hold back the reader's interest by verbosity. One regrets that, having drawn such a vivid portrait of her husband, she has not equally developed the dramatic possibilities in the men and women who affected his life and thought. Cloudsley Johns, for instance, evidently one of Jack's closest and most enduring friends, might just as well have been an inscription on the wall. I still don't know who he is and what he did.

But withal, those of us who knew Jack London ever so slightly feel that in her book Charmian London has given us a life-sized portrait of the man. More than that, as his wife she has held herself up to him as the mirror for his personality; and in her love, her devotion, her understanding, we see Jack London as it would have been impossible for us to see him through any other medium. "The Book of Jack London" will be an inexhaustible source for other studies of Jack London that may come.

"The Book of Jack London. By Charmian London. Two volumes. The Century Co.