

## A Note on Jack London and David Starr Jordan

DAVID H. DICKASON

In a recent study in this magazine of the literary interests of David Starr Jordan<sup>1</sup> the suggestion was made that this eminent authority in the field of science was of direct influence in shaping the philosophy of the American realistic writer, Jack London. Inasmuch as the three major biographers of London overlook or minimize this fact, a brief amplification of the data may be justified.

Even a casual reading of Jack London's chief autobiographical novels, *The Road*, *John Barleycorn*, and *Martin Eden*—as well as the perusal of the majority of his tales of adventure, struggle, and brute force—makes it obvious that their author was a hearty proponent of the scientific concepts of Darwin, as elaborated by Spencer and others. Time and again occur such phrases as “the iron facts of biology,” or “the savage interpretation of biological facts”; and as London rides over the peaceful acres of his ranch in the Valley of the Moon he sees even there “the merciless and infinite waste of natural selection,” and about him hears the murmur and hum of “the gnat-swarm of the living, piping for a little space its thin plaint of troubled air.” As the historian of his own mental development he mentions particularly the tremendous effect on his thought of Spencer's *First Principles*, through which “all the hidden things were laying their secrets bare” as the “master-key of life, evolution,” opened difficult doors.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Jack London elaborates upon her husband's early efforts at self-directed education<sup>3</sup> after his adventures at sea, on the road with Kelly's army, and in the Klondike. From one of his letters written in the summer of 1899 she quotes:

Spencer's “First Principles” alone, leaving out all the rest of his work, has done far more for mankind . . . than a thousand books like “Nicholas Nickleby,” “Hard Cash,” “Book of Snobs,” and “Uncle Tom's Cabin.” Why, take the enormous power for human good contained in

<sup>1</sup> See my article: “David Starr Jordan as a Literary Man,” *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXXVII (1941), 345-58.

<sup>2</sup> See especially *John Barleycorn* (New York, 1913), 319; and *Martin Eden* (Sonoma ed., New York, 1928), 107 *et seq.*

<sup>3</sup> Charmian London, *The Book of Jack London* (2 vols., New York, 1921).

Darwin's "Origin of Species" and "Descent of Man." Or in the works of Ruskin, Mill, Huxley, Carlyle, Ingersoll. . . .<sup>4</sup>

So, too, Irving Stone mentions Darwin, Huxley, Wallace, and Spencer as among the effective forces in moulding London's mind, and infers that London digested their profound ideas unaided by teachers.<sup>5</sup> But Jack London's daughter Joan, after following the lead of these two biographers in stressing the significance of her father's own reading, strikes an iconoclastic note. Particularly after his return from his "Odyssey of the North" his desires for immediate intellectual attainment coupled with brilliant literary success were so strong that he gave up any effort at independent education. "A devout believer in short cuts, and with access to the stored-up knowledge in the minds of generous friends, he postponed serious study to a time when he had begun to earn a living at writing and could slow his pace." But this leisure never came; and from his too hasty and superficial acquaintance with, and too facile acceptance of his scientific and economic authorities Jack London, in the eyes of his daughter, emerged actually "little better than half-educated"; for he had a "lifelong dependence" on expository books written, or ideas expressed by other people.<sup>6</sup>

It is at this crucial point that Jordan steps in as a highly influential intermediary in clarifying and interpreting the problems of the physical world for the young London. President David Starr Jordan of Stanford University was, in the 1890's, the leading scientist and educator in the San Francisco Bay region. Already celebrated as a research scholar and writer while at Indiana University, Jordan had gone west in 1891 on the invitation of Leland Stanford, Sr., to head his new institution. Under the aegis of his beloved mentor, Agassiz, Jordan had originally refused to accept the Darwinian theory, but had acquired from the older man the scientific attitude of questioning all authority and of keeping his mind hospitable to new ideas. So in his own serious studies in zoology and ichthyology Jordan was eventually "converted to the theory of divergence through Natural Selection," though not without some argument. In looking back on this forma-

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 304.

<sup>5</sup> Irving Stone, *Sailor on Horseback* (Boston, 1938), 106-10.

<sup>6</sup> Joan London, *Jack London and his Times* (New York, 1939), 185-89, and 209 ff.

tive stage he remarked laconically: "I sometimes said that I went over to the evolutionists with the grace of a cat the boy 'leads' by its tail across the carpet!"<sup>7</sup>

As a public figure Jordan was called upon for frequent lectures and addresses, in addition to his work as university administrator and professor. He divided his interest between scholastic and inspirational topics, and discussions of the new science which he deemed so vital in its application to life and society. Writing prolifically and speaking widely, he elaborated and popularized the doctrines of Darwin and Spencer. And while giving such a series of scientific lectures he first came in contact with Jack London:

I first met him in Oakland as an attendant at my university extension course on Evolution. He was then a stocky young fellow of great physical strength and endurance as well as of decided individuality. Being much interested in the subject of my lectures, he became in some degree an intellectual disciple, a fact he freely recognized and testified to in "The Call of the Wild" and other tales. At one time I asked him to come to Stanford to read from his Alaskan stories. His manner was both modest and effective, and awakened the kindly personal interest of his hearers.<sup>8</sup>

That Jordan made in good faith such a claim of discipleship of this "thorough master of trenchant English and picturesque incident" cannot be doubted. Jordan was a world renowned figure in the realms of education, scientific research, and pacifism at the time he wrote his memoirs, and was in no need of any derivative publicity. But it is interesting to find verification, too, in Jack London's own words.

He undoubtedly heard Jordan lecture on "Evolution: What It Is and What It Is Not," "The Elements of Organic Evolution," "The Kinship of Life," "The Evolution of the Mind," and kindred subjects. In addition he had heard Jordan as a guest speaker at the socialistic Oakland organization known as the Ruskin Club.<sup>9</sup> So it is not surprising that in July, 1899—a year after his return from Alaska—one finds Jack London writing to his friend Cloudsley Johns: "I am glad that you took Jordan in the right way. He is, to a certain extent, a hero of mine . . . Would to God he

<sup>7</sup> David Starr Jordan, *The Days of a Man* (2 vols., Yonkers-on-Hudson, 1922), I, 114.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 460.

<sup>9</sup> Joan London, *Jack London*, 215. Jack London also mentions having heard Jordan speak at the "Section"—of the Socialist Labor party in Oakland. See Charmian London, *Jack London*, I, 290.

were duplicated a few thousand times in the U. S. . . ."<sup>10</sup> These are strong words from the self-assertive and individualistic Jack London. That this admiration was intellectual as well as personal is borne out by the fact that London three months before writing this had acquired Jordan's published lectures and essays called *Footnotes to Evolution*.<sup>11</sup> Part of the material in this volume he must have already heard in the classroom; and he could also have referred to some of the essays in the form of magazine articles; the *Arena*, for example, to which Jack London was a contributor, had published three. In spite of these facts London evidently wished to own and to have constantly available Jordan's treatises on science.

There should be no exaggeration of the influence of David Starr Jordan on Jack London. Nevertheless, as a young man of boundless confidence and ambition but little actual scientific knowledge, London quite naturally revered an authoritative, practical scholar whose defense and exegesis of the newer science appealed to him in view of his own past experiences. Too, as has been pointed out, London felt so pressed for time that any digest or simplification of a body of knowledge beckoned irresistibly to him. And of such a course of lectures Jordan remarked: "Its chief quality, highly praised at the time, lay in bringing abstruse conceptions into line with the common knowledge of educated people."<sup>12</sup>

Hence it is not illogical to believe that it was Jordan with his popularization and summary of the thought of Darwin, Spencer, and Huxley, and not London's own juvenile and groping reading, that served as the most active influence in the building of Jack London's intellectual platform; and that in the realm of science and evolution, with its struggles and survivals, Jack London was indeed an "intellectual disciple" of David Starr Jordan.

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<sup>10</sup> Charmian London, *Jack London*, I, 302.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 290. Jordan's book was published in 1898, with a new edition, New York, 1919. "These [essays] were originally given as oral lectures before University Extension societies in California, having been condensed and written out in their present form after delivery." David S. Jordan, *Footnotes to Evolution*, (New York, 1898), vii.

<sup>12</sup> Jordan, *Days of a Man*, I, 526.