

Eleven-year-old Jack London stared in awe at the towering masts of the Arctic whalers, flat-bottomed Chinese junks with square sails and trading schooners that rocked at anchor at the Oakland, California, waterfront. He wished he could jump aboard one and sail away to find adventure.

Jack loved to read adventure books and sea stories. From the age of 10, he had worked to help earn money for his family. Reading gave him hope that someday he'd find a better life for himself, like some of the characters in the books he had read.

Young Jack read mornings, afternoons, and nights. "I read as I walked to and from school," he once said, "and read at recess when the other boys were playing."

Jack quit school after the eighth grade to work in a cannery. He stuffed pickles into jars for 12 to 15 hours day and was paid 10¢ an hour. The job made him feel like a "work-beast" who would never get ahead.

Eventually, Jack saved up enough money to buy a leaky boat, and taught himself to sail. Whenever he could, he sailed away alone, with a sack full of books.

The Call of the Sea

When Jack was 17, he joined a seal-hunting expedition headed for the coast of Japan. The threemaster schooner *Sophia Sutherland* ran into a typhoon during Jack's turn at the wheel. He battled the swift-running seas and kept the ship on course.

When he returned home from his adventure, his mother persuaded him to enter a writing contest for young people. The contest

Adventure's Call

By Jan Burns

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Books fired a hunger for adventure in Jack London that he had to feed.

offered a \$25 first prize. Jack vividly described how the schooner had heaved, shuddered, and rolled, and how the prow had pushed through the typhoon. He won the contest. This prompted him to consider becoming a writer.

To increase his vocabulary, he tried to memorize 20 new words every day. He wrote words and their meanings on slips of paper. Then he tucked them around his mirror frame or clipped them to a wire strung over his bed. This way he could read them the first thing in the morning and the last thing at night.

Jack tried to read all of the books written by successful writers of his day, especially Rudyard Kipling. He studied Kipling's *Just*

So Stories and *The Jungle Book*, and copied pages of the books by hand so he could get a feel for

the way Kipling put words and sentences together.

Despite his efforts to improve his vocabulary and writing style, editors and publishers rejected everything Jack wrote. If he could not publish his work and earn money, he knew he would have to return to manual labor to make his living.

Striking Gold

The 1897 Klondike gold rush changed Jack's life. He joined the stampede to the Yukon Territory in Canada with others seeking wealth and adventure. When winter set in and the lakes and rivers froze over, he and other gold seekers were forced to stay close to their cabins.

At night men gathered together and talked. Jack was good at drawing people out, getting them to tell their stories of digging for old and traveling by dog team, and of their



Illustrated by Denny Bond

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Jack and his wife, Charmian, aboard their yacht, the *Snark*.

run-ins with howling wolves. He also met Louis Bond, and learned about a special dog named Buck.

When Jack realized he wasn't going to find any gold, he decided to write and sell stories based on his Yukon experiences.

People in the United States seemed hungry for stories about that harsh land. He went home and established a lifelong routine of writing at least one thousand words every morning.

"Don't loaf and invite inspiration," he once wrote. "Light out after it with a club, and if you don't get it you will nonetheless get something that looks remarkably like it."

Jack worked hard, mining his Yukon experiences for stories. One of the stories he started was about a dog named Buck that was stolen, then forced to become a sled dog in the frozen north. Jack I became so absorbed in his writing that the work grew to book size. He tried to write in such a way that his readers could see, feel, and hear the story. He wrote about the singing of the sled runners on the icy

trails, the white snow, the black forests, and the flaming aurora borealis. He titled his book *The Call of the Wild*.

Jack's book became one of the best-selling books in American literary history. It has been in print continuously since 1903.

Jack wondered why his earlier writing hadn't succeeded. He finally reasoned, "I left out the most important thing—some of my own heart and blood—a part of myself."

Though Jack London died at age 40, his adventures live on through his vibrant and realistic writing. During his life he wrote more than fifty books and hundreds of short stories. His words still call readers to follow him into the wild.

