Jack London's Delayed Discovery of Fatherhood

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> Dear Daddy
> Why did you not write me a letter. Mamma said you were too busy. Lilie [?] printed a letter for Irving. He does not know I can write. Bess [Becky] and I send you a big kiss and a hug.
> Your loving little girl.
> Joan.

On 13 October 1906, at the age of five, Joan London started a correspondence with her famous father, now divorced from her mother. Preoccupied with both his writing and preparations for his anticipated trip around the world on the *Snark,* he would not reciprocate for several years. Yet this first letter set the stage for a relationship that was to build gradually and persist despite repeated disruptions caused by the father. This pattern of affection and rejection was to leave the daughter enthralled by her father's memory, thus still attempting to understand him to her dying day. His impression upon her younger sister, Becky, who did not develop a relationship with him, would be more idealized.

To date, information about these relationships has come from two sources, neither of which is complete. First, several of London's letters to Joan and her mother have been published, while virtually none of hers have been.[1] Based on this one-sided evidence, commentators generally excuse London's episodes of mean-spiritedness. For example, Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin concludes on the basis of incomplete evidence that Bess was to blame for London's inadequacies as a father.[2] Similarly, Russ Kingman argued, "At no time did Jack try to dominate Bessie.... She was a shallow person with set ways. Jack's sense of responsibility caused him to do everything in his power to keep Bessie from

1. All of the London letters quoted here may be found in Jack London, *The Letters of Jack London,* ed. Earle Labor, Robert C. Leitz III, and I. Milo Shepard, 3 vols. (Stanford, Calif., 1988). Most are also in *Letters from Jack London,* ed. King Hendricks and Irving Shepard (New York, 1965).

2. See Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin, "A Daughter's Last Message," *Thalia: Studies in Literary Humor* 12, nos. 1 and 2 (1992): 91–100. The author lacked access to the full correspondence between Joan and Jack London and accepted uncritically Jack's views of events. Furthermore, while questioning the credulity of Joan's memory, she accepts as totally valid that of Becky London. My own analysis of the latter's accounts of her mother and sister has uncovered a number of statements belied by contemporary evidence from the period she was discussing.

ruining the lives of their daughters."[3] Accordingly, he posits that Jack was generous in his financial arrangements but does not analyze the amount of child support in light of Jack's income or expectations of the day. Only Andrew Sinclair suggests that Jack's treatment of his first wife and daughters was otherwise, "a sad story of bullying."[4]

The other major sources are the two books Joan wrote about her father. *Jack London and His Times* is slanted by Joan's Trotskyite beliefs of the 1930s, which found her father's socialism lacking.[5] *Jack London and His Daughters* as published is incomplete and was written, not for London scholars or students, but for the purpose of warning divorced parents not to fight over their children.[6] (Its original, more accurate title was *Visiting Rights Only.*) Since she knowingly shaped her material toward that thesis, the book cannot be taken as a complete account. Significantly, she died before covering a key resolution of their relationship, which occurred between July 1915 and his death in November 1916.

To ferret out the particulars of this father-daughter relationship, I collated from several sources the most complete set of correspondence available concerning the exchanges among Jack, his ex-wife Bess, and their daughters Joan and Becky. Jack's and Bess's letters are in the two main London collections at Utah State University and the Huntington Library. Following his death, Charmian returned what she thought was all their correspondence separately to each daughter. (Several of Joan's letters to her father ended up at Utah State University as part of Irving Shepard's gift, and two are at the Huntington Library.) When she died in 1971, her only child, Bart Abbott, sold these, which ended up with a private collector, Waring Jones. Fortunately, while Joan was still alive, London researchers Jim Sisson and Tony Bubka photocopied the correspondence, and I was able to obtain these from Bart's widow, Helen Abbott. Joan's surviving letters to her father total sixty-nine, covering the period between 13 October 1906 and 1 November 1916.[7]

Becky's relationship with her father is more problematic. Only two letters surfaced. Winnie Kingman, who best knew Becky in old age, believes that Becky most likely threw out what she had received from Charmian. She describes Becky as "the most unsentimental person she ever met," who did not

3. Russ Kingman, *A Pictorial Life of Jack London* (Glen Ellen, Calif., 1979), p. 208.

4. Andrew Sinclair, *Jack: A Biography of Jack London* (New York, 1977), p. 149.

5. Joan London, *Jack London and His Times: An Unconventional Biography* (New York, 1939). See also my paper "From Daddy to Hubby to Trotsky? Joan London's Male-Identified Socialism," presented at the annual conference of the Western Association of Women Historians, Henry E. Huntington Library, May 1996.

6. See Joan London, *Jack London and His Daughters* (Berkeley, 1990).

7. I am grateful to Helen Abbott for permission to quote from Joan's letters. The content of some of Jack's letters to Joan, particularly after 1913, suggests he received other ones that I have not been able to locate and may be destroyed.

keep personal keepsakes or treasures other than her favorite books.[8] Given the extent to which Joan discussed Becky's activities in her letters, Becky probably did not correspond much with her father. Also, she was an infant when he left the family and, as will be seen, had few and brief encounters with him, always accompanied by Joan. These usually involved outings to an amusement park or a restaurant, pleasantries for a child.

For further understanding of the relationships, Charmian's diaries offer a useful chronology, for she often recorded when Jack visited his daughters in Oakland. While these records cannot be held as full accounts, when combined with the contents of the letters a pattern emerges concerning both the quantity and quality of Jack's fathering.

Of Bess, too, scarcely any primary sources exist, less than a dozen letters to anyone. Rather, virtually all that has been written about her has been gleaned from the material London wrote *after the separation.* Characteristic are his notes for the unwritten "A Great Novel," which was to concern his marriage to Bess and relationship with Joan. (That Becky is absent is itself telling.) There, Bess is an "egomaniac . . . peasant mind. In her talk, it was always about . . . her sacrifices; how she had slaved for her husband; how he lacked consideration."[9] Nowhere does he reflect upon his duplicity and infidelity, nor his own contribution to their incompatibility. Most London scholars (including me) have uncritically accepted his descriptions of Bess as accurate.

To appreciate London's views and evaluate his actions even-handedly, one must examine the role of fathering in *fin-de-siècle* America. Masculinity was under threat. The changing nature of work and the demands of urban life clashed with the popular fictional image of the powerful blond beast in charge of his destiny. Women challenged patriarchal rule in all areas of life, through marching for the vote, riding on the commuter ferries, competing for time on the tennis courts, and adopting such shocking masculine habits as smoking. Despite the improved standard of living and growing economy, the rate of divorce so increased as to place the United States at the top of Western nations in that statistic. It is only in the context of these shifting roles that one can measure in what ways Jack London's behavior was typical of other middle class men and in which ways unique. Otherwise, one is using personal allegiance or modern standards to judge Jack's actions.

8. Personal conversation with Winifred Kingman, 9 Jan. 1996.

9. Jack London, notes for "A Great Novel: A Study of Marriage, in Two Parts," Cresmer collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

Fatherhood in America has always been Janus-faced.[10] From the first British settlers forward, fathers were to head the family, which was a miniature model of state authority. It was thus their role to keep social order. At the same time, stern rule was to be tempered by compassion and affection. From the Puritan father to the antebellum father, patriarchy was to be conciliatory; discipline was not to result in bullying. Discovering the appropriate mix of kindness and control naturally introduced tension into the father-child relation. Practicality assisted for several centuries, for most fathers were farmers who needed and valued their children's labor. Case studies suggest fathers were particularly close with their sons, who not only carried the family name and inheritance, but the family trade as well. These circumstances were similar among the elite. The histories of the key men of the Revolution, for example, have them accompanied on their political and diplomatic duties by their sons, not their wives, and these intimate connections lasted long into adulthood.

The Industrial Revolution eroded this relation. Father and child were separated spatially and temporally, both by the father leaving the household to work, and by the child going off to school. The generational passing of skills from father to child decreased. For example, as machines eliminated the need for craftsmen, sons had to find their own source of income, ones very different from their father's. Similarly, children of men who had made a hardscrabble existence on the frontiers found little use in small towns and cities for their fathers' physical survival skills. Thus fathers lost parental authority, as a result of both their relative absence and the lesser value of their knowledge for the next generation.

At the same time, during the nineteenth century parenthood was redefined to be virtually entirely the mother's role. The Cult of True Womanhood venerated women as crucial for child development, and in particular for shaping young men into responsible citizens and workers. Thus one finds in the biographies of the great Robber Barons resilient and determined mothers who cradled them in capitalism. Consequently, by 1900, custody patterns following divorce had changed. Where children were once placed with the father, because women had so few legal rights or economic opportunities, now children under the age of twelve were almost always placed with the mother.

10. For an introduction to this literature on manhood, marriage, and fatherhood during this period, see E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York, 1993); *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America,* ed. Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffin (Chicago, 1990); Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America* (Chicago, 1980); Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York, 1996); Joe L. Dubbert, *A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1979).

As cultural historians of the period have noted, the dearth of prescriptive literature on fatherhood during the nineteenth century is truly striking. Advice books such as William Alcott's best-selling 1839 *The Young Husband* virtually ignore children's presence. Apart from leading the family in prayers, fathers left the raising of children to their wives. Thus, as long as a man provided for his family, he had done his job well. Conforming to this simple dictum was complicated by the boom-and-bust cycles following the Civil War. Men of the small yet growing middle-class could not be certain that their earnings would persist. Laborers' employment and incomes were variously dashed by bank failures, competition from women and children, and factory accidents, themes familiar to Jack London in life and as expressed later in his fiction.

By the late nineteenth century, men's attachment to the family, and to parenting in particular, clearly weakened. Rates of desertion, physical abuse, and alcoholism all increased, with the result that children faced severe psychological separation from their fathers. Recognition of these trends resulted in some of the Progressives' efforts on behalf of temperance, settlement houses, and child welfare. Distress over working conditions spurred the growth of socialism with its demand for a ten-hour day, increased pay, and safe work environments. In religion, the notion of muscular Christianity urged a brawny, even aggressive version of Jesus as a spur to a life valuing action more than passive brainwork. A subtext of all three movements was to return the man to the household, though less as patriarch, while assuring him that his virility would not suffer from participation in domesticity.

Jack London's own childhood takes special meaning in light of this context. That his mother Flora was not maternal would be emotionally devastating to any sensitive child confronting the mass of media propaganda on the all-loving, "angelic" mother. Though Flora was unable to form a warm emotional bond with her son, she did encourage the substitution of Virginia Prentiss, and London himself acknowledged the value of that replacement. Consequently, his later conventional views on mothering can be understood through his experiences growing up as the sometimes spoiled substitute son of a black woman, and his resentment towards a mother who failed to do her duty. As he explained in *The Kempton-Wace Letters,* marriage is the "whole life of the woman, while to the man it is rather an episode."[11] For him, sex differentiation required that woman more than man pass on the heritage of the race, that her maternal role prevail even over the connubial one.

However, London was born fatherless, son of a man with the desertion habits of others of the day. His stepfather, John London, was sickly as a result of Civil War wounds, and ill-suited for supporting a family in an urban setting. He could pass some of his frontier skills onto his stepson, such as shooting a rifle

11. Jack London and Anna Strunsky, *The Kempton-Wace Letters* (New York, 1903), p. 90.

and fishing, but for the most part he represented ineffectual masculinity. He was at times unable to support his family on his own, which led to rancor from his wife, who had to bake bread, teach piano, mend others' clothes, and even sell goods from a street booth in downtown Oakland. A man who accompanied his whiskey with stories, John London may also have stimulated the boy's fascination with narrative. Though Jack recalled his stepfather to be a kind man, most notably he recalled him little at all. And worse, as a young adult he would be rejected by William Chaney, the man he believed to be his father. Consequently, Jack London approached his own fatherhood with examples of unreliable paternity.

London's situation was not unique, however, and by the turn-of-the-century the popular culture attempted to redress the disappearance of dad from the hearth. Reformers, ministers, and advice experts had to convince men that they could be more active in the home without challenging their brawny masculinity.[12] In addition to providing food and shelter for his family, the father was to meet other duties. First, he should provide allowances and use these to motivate achievement. Second, he should be the disciplinarian, but not use physical punishment. Third, he should express warmth and kindness, that is, incorporate some of the emotions previously attributed to mothers alone into his own expressive vocabulary. And finally, when the child reached adolescence, his special contribution was to prepare it for work and adult responsibilities. In other words, the concept of fatherhood reincorporated the affectionate guide and companion of early America. Stories in popular magazines condemned fathers who failed to meet these responsibilities, and mocked those who bumbled in their attempts. As a master of the popular media of the day, London must have been familiar with this literature, which challenged the Spencerian philosophy expressed in *The Kempton-Wace Letters.*

Initially, London found parenthood easy. He accepted the Victorian view that his role was to provide materially, his wife's to rear the children. He and Bess referred to one another, even years after the divorce, as "Mother-girl" and "Daddy-boy." London felt assured that he was meeting his side of the bargain. In 1901, the year of his marriage, he earned over $1100, a solid middle-class income for the day, and one that would grow annually. Thus he could rent comfortable homes in Oakland and hire help to assist Bess with child care and the more odious jobs, such as laundry. When Joan was born, he put together a charming photo album for her as proof of his affection. By his standards, he was a successful husband and father.

12. For an overview of the literature, see Margaret Marsh, "Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity, 1870–1915," in *Meanings for Manhood.*

What more could a woman want? Like many women of her class, Bess wanted more, namely, authority over activities in her home. As moral overseer, her duty was to protect her children from exposure to dissolute behaviors, what seemed to her the excess drinking and wild partying that went on when the Crowd came on the scene. Since London worked at home too, so the usual standards guaranteeing the wife more primacy in the home did not hold. Also, Bess was exacting, serious, shy, and restrained, where Jack was ebullient, gregarious, and enthusiastic. Had he worked away from home, their differing temperaments might have clashed less.

With other men of his day, London was of course more than a material provider. Photographs attest to his comfortable interaction with his small daughters, both of whom recalled his comforting presence when they were toddlers. But when home he was often working or entertaining adult friends, and his work also took him away on trips. As he grew unhappy with his marriage, he also took to gallivanting in the evenings and was probably unfaithful to Bess even before the fateful union with Charmian Kittredge. Key to later conflicts between Bess and Jack was Charmian's duplicity. During the affair, she offered herself to Bess as a sympathetic ear and encouraged the falsehood that Jack's mystery lover was Anna Strunsky. When Bess learned the truth, she determined never to allow her daughters in the presence of "the Deceiver."

London's decision in 1904 to leave his wife and daughters was met with great moral outcry across the country. "Grant perfect family life and the majority of philanthropic and reformatory institutions would close their doors," was a popular belief.[13] For the middle class, the home was the fortress protecting youth from materialism and such temptations as pool halls, dance halls, and saloons. The ascetic Gilded Age domicile with its absence of men was replaced by a private hideaway where all in the family could meet their emotional and leisure needs in a moral setting. Bess London's own shock over his desertion of her and the girls is often interpreted as a hangover of Victorianism. In fact, she was actually expressing the latest, post-Victorian ideas concerning family life. London's action challenged new notions of fatherhood, which required him to be a participant in his girls' upbringing and sacrifice his own happiness for their sake.

With regard to material support following the divorce, by standards of the day, the 1905 agreement guaranteed a continued standard of middle-class living.[14] London agreed to build a home (while retaining ownership), carry insurance policies with his first family as beneficiaries, and provide $75 a month financial support. Because the girls were so young, Bess received full custody,

13. Dana Bartlett, *The Better City* (Los Angeles, 1907).

14. For an introduction to costs of living for the day and comparable family budgets, see Thomas Schlereth, *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life, 1876–1915* (New York, 1991), pp. 79–85.

with the proviso that Jack have unspecified visitation rights. Yet compared to London's income when the divorce was finalized, the grants were not large. For example, in just two weeks of stumping his "Revolution" speech across the mid-West in early November of 1905, London earned $1805, and *Outing Magazine* sent him a check for $3700. Earlier that year he told George Sterling he had earned over $15,000 in royalties from *The Sea-Wolf* alone.[15] Furthermore, California is a community property state, yet London convinced Bess to give up her share. Of actual property, for example, she had only some of the furniture to use in the house he owned. As he reminded her several years later, she signed away her rights to any of his royalties because she knew he "held the club over [her]" and that she "knew me well enough to realize that you would get nothing at all out of me."[16]

The truth is that London was a wealthy man who consistently outspent his income. Macmillan readily advanced him the amounts needed to buy the first parcel of his Glen Ellen ranch ($7000), as it would later advance funds for the *Snark* venture and ranch expansion. Despite his high income, he would not increase support payments for his children until just before his death in 1916. He would pay more for two farm animals than he gave to his daughters in an entire year. Although he did pay for some extras beyond the contract, such as allowances for the girls and house repairs, his contributions were trivial in light of his own "I want," and as will be seen, he quibbled over pennies. In the court of public opinion of the day, were these facts known London would not have scored high points as a father.

Like many men who grow rich on their own, London was niggardly about his money when it came to others. On the one hand, he did provide not only for his first family but also for his mother, his childhood nurse, his step-sister Eliza and nephew, and even Charmian's aunt. He often referred to these responsibilities with little grace, however, as though they, not his appetites, were the reason for his continual financial problems. He never stinted Charmian, whom he indulged with jewels, clothes of precious fabrics, and a new Steinway. Yet even she was beholden to him for money and was paid for her labors on his behalf in manuscripts, not cash. Although he once taunted Bess that Charmian earned fifty cents of every dollar that went to her and the girls, Charmian never saw that portion in cash. Despite London's admiration for strong, accomplished women, when it came to finances he preferred to play the *padrone* and forced his female relations (save stepsister Eliza Shepard, perhaps) into subservient relationships.

Following the divorce, Jack's relationship with his "Mother-girl" was coolly cordial. His visits to his daughters were few, widely spaced, and often

15. These and other figures on London's earnings can be found in Kingman, *Jack London: A Definitive Chronology* (Glen Ellen, Calif., 1992); see especially pp. 56, 59.

16. Jack London, letter to Bessie London, 27 Oct. 1908, *The Letters of Jack London*, p. 765.

rushed.[17] Once he took sail on the *Snark* in 1907, he would see them only once, during a brief return stateside, before the end of the trip two and a half years later. It was during this hiatus that letters from Joan may have set off the first of several fierce reactions from London that were aimed at Bess yet would have long-term consequences for the girls. In one, Joan described how "Uncle Charley" had built them a coaster that both she and Becky enjoyed riding; in another, how he was teaching her to swim. Joan's reference was to Charles Milner, a longtime friend of the Maddern family. A warm, patient man, he understood little girls and how to entertain and instruct them.[18] London had reason to be jealous, for as Joan later recalled, Charles Milner was "for a brief time, more of a father to us than Daddy would ever be."[19] Indeed, Milner represented the new ideals of fatherhood, and Joan looked forward to his becoming a stepfather. He would never replace her Daddy, she believed, but he was a presence she treasured.

During a brief return to Oakland in 1908, Jack signed an agreement with Bess and Charley that upon their marriage they could buy the 31st Street house for $4500. Afterwards, he wrote from the *Snark* that if they were to sell the house, he was to get the profits. In a rare act of self-assertion, on 24 March 1908 Bess held him to account, yet made a counteroffer, where she would give him $1000 cash and give up all claims to $4000 in life insurance. This letter did not reach him for six months. By that point, Bess and Charley had decided to build their own home and had no interest in buying Jack out.

London's subsequent actions are so focused on money as to suggest other reasons than finances for the almost paranoid vindictiveness that followed. He was feeling financial strain at the time, but he was also very sick throughout the period involved. Haranguing the couple that they were out to "drag money" from him and "rob" him, he countered that he would "fight, fight, fight until there is not a penny left for anybody to get."[20] He added that due to the *Snark* expenses, he was cutting his monthly contribution back to $65 a month (which he found out he could not do legally). Several months later, he ordered Ninetta Eames to change his insurance policies, such that all those naming Bess as beneficiary would now substitute his daughters, while all those naming his daughters would now substitute Charmian.[21] He ordered his properties homesteaded in Charmian's name. On 24 February 1909 he informed his sister

17. Joan London poignantly describes her and her sister's expectations as their father's promised visits approached, and how "business" curtailed them. See *Jack London and His Daughters*, p. 35.

18. For more on Milner from Joan's perspective, see Joan London, *Jack London and His Daughters*, p. 105.

19. Ibid., p. 105.

20. Jack London, letter to Bessie London, 27 Oct. 1908, *The Letters of Jack London*, p. 767.

21. Jack London, letter to Ninetta Eames, 5 Feb. 1909, *The Letters of Jack London*, p. 789.

Eliza that he had not heard anything from Bess or his daughters since sending the "hot letter," and added that he would "make things warm for [Bess]" when he returned home.[22]

Once Jack and Charmian had resettled in Glen Ellen, he followed through on his promise. In the course of visits to his daughters, he pressured Bess such that she broke up with Charles Milner. When it came to arguments, Joan recalled, her mother would quickly give in, and she never provided her daughters a satisfactory explanation as to why she deferred to Jack on this very private and painful decision. Significantly, having broken up the engagement, he visited his daughters less frequently. While he would have no other man in his place, he did not rush to fill that vacant space.

Somehow, out of all this rancor it was agreed that nine-year-old Joan become the conduit for requests for monies additional to the monthly support. There began a series of remarkable letters from the girl, who, it seems, socialized her father to be more than a mere material provider. (It may not be coincidental that her efforts developed following the death in June, 1910 of Charmian's baby Joy.) Through increasingly long and revealing letters, Joan introduced her father to the daily facts of her and her sister's lives—their success at school, their dancing classes, their travels.

Yet in early 1911 when Bess asked again that Jack raise the monthly allowance to $100, he struck out spitefully. True, Bess refused to allow the girls to visit the ranch where they might encounter Charmian. Nonetheless, Jack had not visited them often during 1910, even during frequent trips to the Bay area for other purposes. Obviously projecting, he warned Bess on 8 January 1911 that she was the basis for his alienation from the children. Accusing her of being a "jealous sexually-offended, unmotherly, peasant-minded female," he once again cowed her into submission.[23]

Several weeks later, during a visit with the girls, an accident occurred that marked their memories. London was challenging them to prove their mettle, and eager-to-please Becky welcomed her father swinging her about. In the process, he smashed her leg through a window. Enclosing the bill for the glazier several days later, Joan reminded her father how she was "a tiger," that is, the courageous sort he demanded. (He had no use for crybabies, Becky later recalled.) Although Becky later claimed the incident was minor, Joan did not. The point is not whose memory was correct—the psychological consequence of the event upon each is valid.

Still resentful of Bess's refusal to let the girls go to the ranch, in May of that year, Jack rewrote his will to leave Bess $5 and the girls $25 monthly support each until remarriage. Anything else to his daughters was to come from

22. Jack London, letter to Eliza Shepard, 24 Feb. 1909, *The Letters of Jack London*, p. 792.

23. Jack London, letter to Bessie London, 8 Jan. 1911, *The Letters of Jack London*, p. 971.

the benefice of Charmian, who inherited his whole estate. It was then, too, that he ordered that Joan's music lessons be ended.[24] Joan's letters during this year were less chatty. She asked that he spend Christmas with them, but he appeared for a few hours on Christmas Eve, having scheduled a train to New York that evening. This timing is further evidence of his priorities, for there was no deadline to prevent him from leaving Oakland after Christmas day.

Despite his coolness, Joan once again sought to increase her father's interest in her life. She described her efforts at writing, her entering contests in *Woman's Home Companion* and *St. Nicholas*, her competing in a Sunday school writing competition. She set up a sewing table in the attic to use as a desk where she wrote her stories, and found a chest where she kept her "manuscripts, as I call them." She sent him copies of her stories for his comment, asking that he be hard on her in response. But in particular, "However busy you are, never forget Bess and I," she reminded him on 10 February 1912.

Late in 1912, Joan fell deathly ill with typhoid, still a common killer, and her father often visited her bedside. Possibly this encounter, with its potential loss of another child, chastened London to pay more attention to his daughters. He had a three-story brown shingle built for them on a vista overlooking the entire Bay area, although once again he retained ownership.[25] He sent them allowances of $2 a month, a good sum for that day. Joan once again loosened her caution, for she sought his counsel further. What to take in high school, she asked? When despite her pleading he failed to appear at her grammar school graduation, she wrote a nineteen-page description of the event. (Nothing in Charmian's diaries provides a good reason why he could not have attended.) Yet she was still required to explain in detail small requests for money. For example, unhappy with the charges for her school books, Jack asked Joan to pass them on to Becky when she was done with them. At a later date she had to explain that the books saved for Becky were no longer in use. This tension over money was the one constant in their correspondence.

One more episode was to rend the father-daughter relationship. Following the burning of Wolf House, Jack's despondency colored all his relationships. When he heard nothing from Joan, whose hearing of the news was delayed, he attacked her with "am I dirt under your feet? Am I beneath your contempt in every way save as a meal ticket?"[26] Forgive me, she replied: "You are the goal which I sometimes hope to reach. The goal which is attained only after years of

24. Not having both sides of the correspondence, Tavernier-Courbin misdates this event as occurring in 1916. Her mistake was logical in light of the scant material available to her.

25. This house remains relatively unchanged with a new address, 206, not 606 Scenic in the Piedmont region of Oakland. To London's credit, he hired one of the best Arts and Crafts builders in the area. The house is also just around the corner from the bungalow at 575 Blair where he and Bess first lived. Unfortunately, that home has been so renovated as to be a different structure today.

26. Jack London, letter to Joan London, 24 Aug. 1913, *The Letters of Jack London,* p. 1218.

hard work like you have done." The shocking news had "brought my period sooner. I did want to write more, honest I did, but my head was swimming." And could he not understand, she pleaded, that were she to come to the ranch she could see only him. She wrote two long letters on subsequent days, enclosing a poem she had written, which he called "dandy! splendid!" Chastened, he responded how he wished he had the opportunity to teach her rhythm and form, and in a postscript placed his most loving remark to her, "I used to write for the *Aegis* long ago, ere I dreamed a daughter would write for it."[27]

But when he came to visit in September, he pressed her hard regarding her refusal to go against her mother's wishes and visit the ranch. Urging her to invoke the truth, she did so. In a poignant letter, she recounted how Bess had hidden the fact of the divorce from the girls and led them to believe he was on a long journey. Eventually they learned that another woman had intruded in their mother's place, and they had suffered embarrassment at school when classmates taunted them for being children of divorce. "Bess [Becky] and I feel that we have one of the best Mothers in the whole wide world," she emphasized (13 September 1913). London did not understand and warned Joan that "the less I see of you and Bess [Becky], the less I would be bound to be interested in you." He accused her of adopting her mother's "sex jealousy." He reminded her that he knew his valet "ten thousand times better" than he knew his girls.[28] What he did not consider was his own complicity. This would be a difficult letter for a mature adult to receive, let alone a twelve-year-old girl, and further documents his sheer lack of understanding of youth, its sensitivities, its needs.

Nonetheless, Joan reiterated her loyalty to her mother and begged him to quit forcing her to write "these awful letters."[29] Instead, London once again used money to punish. He responded that he could send no extra Christmas money, which the girls used to buy presents for others, nor would he send tickets for them to see *Little Women.* Following a trip fraught with business disappointments, on 24 February 1914, he wrote his ruined colt letter. Whenever they needed money, he said, then go ahead and write, and if he had it, he would send it to her. Joan did send brief notes, to him and Eliza Shepard, who was similarly demanding in her accounts.[30]

27. Jack London, letter to Joan London, 31 Aug. 1913, *The Letters of Jack London,* p. 1221.

28. Jack London, letter to Joan London, 11 Oct. 1913, *The Letters of Jack London,* p. 1258, 1259.

29. Joan London, letter to Jack London, 28 Oct. 1913, *The Letters of Jack London,* p. 1260 n. 2.

30. Joan's letters to Eliza Shepard are in box 351, Jack London Collection, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.; hereafter abbreviated HEH. They are clearly on Bess's directives, filled with phrases such as "Mother asked me...." or "Mother wanted me to tell you...." Eliza was Jack's representative concerning the new house on Scenic, so Joan had to deliver messages concerning the construction and later repairs. Eliza also questions Joan concerning small amounts of expenses, such as school car fare.

Upon returning from the Mexican revolution trip in mid-1914, Jack received a long letter from Joan, but it was not until mid-1915 that their correspondence became regular. That summer they met for the first time in two years. At this point the relationship would finally have met the popular standards of the day. To be good fathers, went the prescription, men were "urged to restrain tempers and develop an active loving sense," particularly once their children reached adolescence. Proud of her many achievements in high school, London wrote in his most lyrical tones:

> Now I want to sing you a song:
> You are my daughter
> You do not know, yet, what that means
> Have you no intellectual stir, no mental prod, no heart throb
> Impelling you to get acquainted with your dad?
> Oh, my dear, I am very old, and very wise, and I can set you four-square to this four-square world.
> I have nothing to offer you in the way of dollars and what dollars can buy.
> I have everything to offer you and show you in the way of the spirit and what the spirit never buys, but commands.[31]

Indeed, he did try to respond to her needs, with less fuming about her expenses, through instruction on her grammar (where he blamed her teachers for her failings), directions on how to swim better (remembrances of Uncle Charley?), and warnings to take pride in her bodily appearance. When she showed serious interest in following her Maddern relatives onto the stage, he replied that the only thing worse he could imagine would be for her to become a teacher. In other words, do not be like her mother, who tutored mathematics as a way of adding to the family income. Anxious to please, Joan followed his lead, and as a she consequence absorbed a set of values different from her mother. One can trace both her political radicalism and her feminism to London's influence, whereas Becky, who had less of a private relationship with him, adopted Bess's more passive-aggressive stance toward life.

One of Jack's most poignant letters to Joan arrived in the summer of 1916.[32] He said he was ordering Eliza to send the girls wraps they wanted, as well as theatre ticket money and vacation money. He wrote of his love for Hawaii, his hope to move there and bring her over to introduce her to his wonderful friends there. He asked if she would learn two songs to sing for him when they

31. Jack London, letter to Joan London, 4 Feb. 1915, *The Letters of Jack London,* p. 1420.

32. I discovered a typescript of this letter, dated 28 June 1916, in Helen Abbott's files. I have not found the location of the holograph at any of the likely libraries. It is typed the same way and on the same typewriter as letters transcribed for Irving Shepard and King Hendrick's volume of letters, so there is no reason to doubt its authenticity as an accurate transcription.

next met, "Sing Me to Sleep" and "The Perfect Day." He warned her about her poor grammar in a letter, and complained that her parcel had arrived with nine cents due. The overall tone is sweet and relaxed.

Unfortunately, in his final months of life the matter of money interfered once more. Joan began to show the feisty, demanding side of her personality that would serve her well in later years as a political activist, though serve as a detriment in her private life. She wanted a new piano, but when Eliza offered her old one, Joan demurred, explaining that its appearance would not fit the Mission golden oak in the family living room. She wanted a grand piano one day (like Charmian's?) and would save years if necessary to have one, she declaimed proudly.[33] This letter stands out for its exceptional defiance, and the unwritten reasons are clear. The girls were older and required more expenses, and inflation reduced the value of the monthly support. What served a comfortable income in 1905 would not go far in 1916. Joan was worried about the health of her mother, who had been ordered to stop tutoring, work she did to supplement the family income.

Desiring to reduce the strain on her mother, that September Joan argued over lunch with her father concerning the need for an increase in the $75 allotment. She gave him a detailed account of the family expenses, which were approaching $1700 a year. Although he balked and niggled over the girls' excessive purchase of erasers, he did agree to send each girl $37.50 a month on top of the $75 to their mother. However, Bess was to sign papers signing over the endowment of two life insurance policies worth a thousand dollars. In the process, he once again raised the ghost of the "usurer," Charley Milner, and sent a copy to his daughters without considering its emotional impact upon them.[34]

Even in death the terrible inconsistency remained. On the one hand, the girls soon learned that their father had written a note to remind them of his visit with them before leaving for the East. Here was proof of his love. On the other, they would learn of his will, which undercut California law that would have granted a portion of the estate to them. The legacy of his penury continued as late as 1918, when Bess discovered that Jack had never paid years of the girls' doctor bills.[35] Thus a man confused about his own father, a writer who omitted

33. Joan London to Eliza Shepard, 24 Aug. 1916, JL 15446, HEH. Jack wrote on top of the letter, "Guess music doesn't mean as much to her as color scheme. Now I won't have to pay for her music lessons." It was this note that misled Tavernier-Courbin to misdate the actual period in which London cancelled Joan's lessons. Also, the tone of this letter is so different from those surrounding it that one wonders how much Bess's hand was behind turning down the instrument, which after all, belonged to Eliza.

34. See Jack London, letter to Bessie London, 12 Oct. 1916, *The Letters of Jack London,* pp. 1586–88.

35. See Bess Maddern to Eliza Shepard, c. Apr. 1918, JL 9402, HEH.

fathers and children from his mass of fiction, never resolved that confusion with regard to his own daughters. His hubris blinded him and would scar both his girls in very different ways.

Psychologists today argue that fathers are a major spur to a daughter's independence and achievement. So in a curious way, while failing on some grounds, London's inconsistency and criticisms did send Joan onto a path of her own. She easily entered the 1920s with its new freedom for women and insisted on working while married. She continued her father's legacy of left-leaning political and social activism. But given her intense curiosity and intelligence, she was obsessed throughout her life to touch and feel and sense this man, this Daddy, who denied her and her sister so much, and seemed to punish them even after death. Why did he never rewrite the 1911 will, she wondered, given that they had resolved so many differences that final year? Joan never comprehended Jack's main reason, his utter devotion to and defense of Charmian. He had made up his mind in 1911 that Charmian came before all others, and he trusted she would do well by the girls in the event he died first, which after all, was not a probable event to him at the time.

If Joan never found a satisfactory answer to that question, she did achieve an emotional and intellectual resolution late in life. She acknowledged her mother's complicity in being so stubborn about the girls' visitation away from home. She felt compassion for the many tragedies and struggles in her father's later years. Friends who knew her in the 1960s felt relief that she was no longer enthralled by her father's ghost. She befriended many London scholars and enjoyed attending celebrations in his behalf.

Unlike Joan, who spent a lifetime studying her father, Becky avoided mention of him until very late in life. Acquaintances from her earlier years, such as when she was a member of the Trotskyite Worker's Party, recall she refused to discuss her father, that he was a taboo topic.[36] They were surprised when in old age she recounted charming memories to audiences and spoke of her father in glowing terms. Her idealization fits with her more limited experience of her father. She did not benefit as Joan did from the formation of a deep attachment, but neither did she have to play the role of money grubber and suffer his abuse. Joan's role as interceder also colored the girls' relationship, for Becky could be jealous of Joan's special connection to her father and also angry that apparently as a result of Joan's letters their vacation money was not forthcoming. Puzzling nonetheless is why Becky never initiated her own correspondence.

To conclude, except for around 1915–16, London would not score high on expectations of fatherhood of the day. He was too patriarchal and preoccupied with his role as provider, too Victorian, in other words. His ability to

36. I have been conducting oral interviews with various people who knew Joan and Becky when they were younger, including family, friends, and members of organizations they joined.

express love and tenderness is well evidenced in his writings to Charmian, yet he seldom wrote so in his letters to his daughters, and even then almost as an afterthought. Much of his involvement was initiated by Joan, who prodded and pushed and forced the issues. Only in several of his later letters to her does one sense his sincere expression of counsel, a wistful regret he does not do more.

When culture does not point the way, then psychology becomes the guide. Denied by his mother, London much repeats the tale. The script is uglier though, because it is based upon a twisted projection of responsibility for his own misbehavior. London, who deserted the marriage, casts all blame on Bess and her surrogate, Joan. He is so convincing that the real Bess London is totally masked by his powerful language, and even today she remains a cipher. And what is all the preoccupation with money, this man who would send $25 to complete strangers then quarrel with a daughter over the purchase of erasers? Significant too is the total absence of apology or hint of having behaved precipitately. (Perhaps he did so in private to the girls, but nothing in the letters or their memoirs suggests such.)

The tragedy is familiar, though mysteries remain. For example, Jack's demonizing of Bess has no truth value with regard to her thoughts and behaviors. Was she a victim? Was she a provocateur? Was she inept? While it is tempting to fill her silences with a formula narrative, the only conclusion until more evidence appears is "don't know."

If some of London's letters and actions are repugnant, they remind one of the depth and subtlety of feeling great artists bear each day. A hand caress turns into passion. The small grudge bloats into a rampage. London clearly underestimated the impact of his eloquent, crystalline rhetoric. Words like razors to the reader may have seemed a shaking of a finger to him. And herein may be the clue to Charmian's hold, for unlike literal Bess, she understood the key to translation, the dampening down of the message. Late in life, Jack seemed to understand this, too, and left at least one daughter a loving stroke down her cheek.