

## THE DEATH OF JACK LONDON: FACT AND FICTION

### **THE BEGINNING OF THE SUICIDE RUMOR:**

According to Earle Labor, the recognized, foremost Jack London scholar, "The rumor was apparently started shortly after London's death by his erstwhile friend, George Sterling, who told Upton Sinclair among others that Jack killed himself because he was desperately torn between his love for his Mate Woman Charmian and newfound passion for a beautiful (but nameless) Hawaiian woman." A few years later C. Hartley Grattan "suggested that London had actually killed himself in despair over the tragic decline of humanity and civilization. The appearance of his article elicited vigorous denials not only from London's attendant physicians, but also from his daughter Joan." The doctors' reaction appeared in a San Francisco Call article dated February 15, 1929, titled "Doctors Deny Jack London Killed Self." Dr. Thomson is quoted saying "There is absolutely no foundation to the suicide story. Jack London died of internal poisoning brought about through kidney trouble."<sup>1</sup>

### **DEATH EVENTS:**

The death certificate was signed by Dr. William Porter, Jack London's personal doctor. It stated the cause of death was: uraemia following renal colic. Dr. Porter had diagnosed a significant kidney problem back in July of 1913.

The press bulletin issued by doctors Porter, Thomson, Hayes, and Shiels said, "At about 6:30 p.m., November 21, 1916, Mr. Jack London partook of his dinner. He was taken during the night with what was supposed to be an attack of acute indigestion. This, however, proved to be a gastro-intestinal type of uraemia. He rapidly entered coma and died at 7:45 p.m., November 22, 1916."<sup>2</sup>

### **SAILOR ON HORSEBACK**

Irving Stone's 1938 book, Sailor on Horseback, had "Biography" included in the book title, quickly changed to "A Biographical Novel" in its second printing. Stone only mentions local doctors Thomson and Hayes. He conveniently leaves out that Dr. Porter was not only there in attendance, but had been treating Jack for terminal uremia for some time and had also signed the death certificate. In his book, Stone says, "Dr. Thomson found Jack in a state of narcosis; he had apparently been unconscious for some time. On the floor of the room he found two empty vials labeled morphine sulfate and atropine sulfate; on the night table he found a pad with some figures on it which represented a calculation of the lethal dose of the drug." Doctor Thomson reports that "in conversation with me during the day Mrs. Charmian London [to whom Jack's 1911

will left his entire estate] said it was important that the now probable death of Jack London should not be ascribed to anything but uremic poisoning.”<sup>3</sup>

When Stone published the book a third time in 1978, again including “Biography” in his book title, he added something not included in the original 1938 publication. Stone said a third vial of morphine was found by Dr. Thomson. Stone added, “Dr. Allan Thomson gave me one of the morphine sulfate vials, he put it, for safekeeping. It still has four tablets in it.”<sup>4</sup> Sekine, Jack’s servant at the time of Jack’s death, said in an interview many years later that he had found one tube of morphine on the floor that morning and had picked it up and put it in his pocket.<sup>5</sup> This would mean that Dr. Thomson could not have found the container, or containers on the floor. Earle Labor writes in his paper, “A Biographical Hydra: The Myth of Jack London’s Suicide,” that Dr. Thomson declared that Stone was a liar and had put words in his mouth.

Stone did an interesting thing in 1937, the year before Sailor on Horseback was published. He visited Dr. Porter as is acknowledged in a letter from Dr. Porter to Charmian London. Here are some excerpts: “My dear friend; Yesterday a Mr. Irving Stone called on me said, he had just come from Glen Ellen where he had spent five weeks.” “He said he was to write a ‘Life of Jack London.’” He tried very hard to get me to say that death was due to other things than uremia and stones. This he was unable to do.” “I am sure he wants to write a hot sensational thing, something to startle the public and sell- I am very much upset about the matter for Jack’s memory and those near him as well as his friends. Always, Sincerely Wm. S. Porter”<sup>6</sup>

In his interview, Nakata, Jack’s servant before Sekine, said Jack had a little packet in his strong-box, and towards the end of Nakata’s years with him Jack told him about this packet. He said, “You know Nakata, I have a very powerful poison, and this poison will finish up a man quicker than anything else. If I get into an accident or anything and you think I am not going to get any more fun out of life, you give me this.” This information was not available to any of the writers who said Jack’s death was suicide. What it tells us is that Jack had the means to kill himself quickly if he chose to do so. The fact that he lasted over twelve hours indicates he didn’t choose to do this.<sup>7</sup>

#### **JACK LONDON, A BIOGRAPHY (1964)**

When writing his 1964 book, Jack London A Biography, Richard O’Connor was not allowed by Irving Shepard, Jack London’s nephew and inheritor of the ranch and the Jack London legacy, to see the extensive Jack London collection at the Huntington Library. O’Connor says he used Irving Stone’s notes for Sailor on Horseback which were in the U.C.L.A. collection plus materials in other collections. It is not surprising that O’Connor came to the same conclusion as Stone regarding suicide. He wrote “Whether the attending physicians were swayed by her (Charmian’s) pleas or not, they joined in concealing the cause of his death; it remained a secret, so far as the public was concerned, until 1938 when Irving Stone’s Sailor on Horseback was published.”<sup>8</sup>

O'Connor uses nothing beyond Stone as documentation to conclude that Jack committed suicide.

### **JACK LONDON AND HIS DAUGHTERS (1990)**

Joan London started to write Jack London and His Daughters in the 1950's. Progress was slow and Joan London died in 1971 before finishing the book. Her son, Bart Abbott, finished the book for publication in 1990. In his introduction to the book he says that his mother's book was somewhat short of being finished and that the "last section of the book appears as a synopsis, written by Joan, but with the intention of later expanding it." On the next to last page is an interesting statement: "He died on November 22; mercifully, we did not know for some time that he had taken his own life."<sup>9</sup> In Joan London's Jack London and His Times, published in 1939, she mentions two small vials which had contained morphine sulfate and atropine sulfate, just as Irving Stone had mentioned in 1938. She then said, "He had taken a lethal dose, but who could say whether it had been with suicidal intention, or merely an overdose miscalculated in the midst of his agony?"<sup>10</sup>

In a newspaper article, dated September 8, 1938, which appeared in the Times Star of Alameda, California, an article was published based on an interview with Joan London. Here are some excerpts: "Disappointed is Joan London, daughter of the famous novelist and socialist, Jack London, in the biography of her father as recently completed in the Saturday Evening Post." "Miss London dug into an old trunk and came up today with the last letter written by her famous father, Jack London, the author, in refutation of a recent biography intimating London committed suicide. It told of plans for a picnic and a sail on Lake Merritt in Oakland the following Sunday and also announced London's plans to leave California on a trip the following week. The letter showed no indication of despondency, the daughter said. "...and it indicated to me that he had no intention of committing suicide." In regard to writing a book on her father's life herself, which was to be published in the Spring of 1939, Joan said "Although my book can hardly help contradicting other works about my father, it is in no sense a retaliation or reply to them. I'm disappointed, not retaliating in my book."

What we know is that Joan London did not herself publish Jack London and His Daughters, since she had died nineteen years prior to its publication. We know that Joan London had disagreed with Stone's suicide conclusion in 1938. She also wrote a letter to Earle Labor in 1969, thirteen months prior to her death, thanking him for writing "An Open Letter to Irving Stone," in which Labor took issue with Stone's assertion that London had died an unnatural death. She said she hoped Irving Stone had read Labor's letter. So, if Joan London did change her mind in her last year of life, what possible reason could she have to do so? We may never find the answer to this question.

### **MEDICAL STUDIES:**

Alfred Shivers, pharmacist, in the Spring of 1969, published an article titled "Jack London: Not a Suicide." Shivers discounts Irving Stone's assertion that Jack London

committed suicide. Shivers states that Stone left no documentation, plagiarized many passages from John Barleycorn and the short story, "The Apostate," and asserted that London had calculated the lethal dose of morphine on a pad of paper. Shivers, after consulting a physician and two pharmacists could not find a precise figure for what a toxic dose of morphine might be. He also said that Jack London had a severe kidney disease that would have slowed down the excretion of metabolized morphine, even a normal dose taken that last night of consciousness could have easily cumulated dangerously in his body.<sup>11</sup>

Andrew S. Bomback, M.D. and Philip J. Klemmer, M.D., in their paper titled "Jack London's chronic interstitial nephritis: A historical differential diagnosis" state that the main factor leading to Jack London's death was likely mercury poison. While on the voyage of the Snark through the Solomon Islands, Jack London acquired the bacterial disease, yaws, that invaded his body through open sores and cuts. London's treatment in a time before anti-biotics was mercury chloride. During the five months spent in the Solomon Islands, there was ample time to accumulate a significant amount of mercury that would mostly settle in his kidneys. "Neurological, gastrointestinal, and renal systems are the most commonly affected organ systems in mercury exposure." Over the next eight years, after abandoning the Snark voyage, Jack London suffered declining kidney function, a severe dermatitis with swelling and irritation of hands, feet, cheeks, and nose. Regarding Irving Stone's claim of a calculation of an overdose of morphine, the doctors state that with London's use of morphine for possibly as long as three years, he would have developed a tolerance, thereby making a calculation nearly impossible.<sup>12</sup>

In April, 2011, Philips Kirk Labor, M.D., published a paper, "Jack London's Death: The Homicide of the Suicide Theory" that presents a broad perspective. He mentions that in addition to London's intake of mercury during the Snark voyage and the possibility that he suffered from systemic lupus erythematosus as suggested by Charles Denko, M.D., there is also a very real possibility that he may have suffered from both cardiovascular and cardiopulmonary disease brought on by his history of tobacco, alcohol, and poor diet. Labor suggests that London may have been afflicted with polyarticular gout due to his protein rich diet. This would explain the many joint problems that afflicted him during the last eight years of his life. This rheumatologic disorder also afflicts the kidneys. The mercury and possible lupus support the claim that he had renal disease. London's heavy use of tobacco would have had an adverse effect on his cardiovascular and cardiopulmonary systems as well as contributing to hypertension. Lastly, alcohol can negatively act on the cardiovascular system and also contribute to hypertension which can cause deterioration of kidney function. Regarding the use of morphine before Jack London went into a coma, Labor states that a dose that normally might have been therapeutic, might easily have been rendered toxic by his weakened renal condition with the kidneys slowing down of metabolism.<sup>13</sup>

Another possible factor that has not yet been studied is the use of water pipes containing significant amounts of lead during London's time. The Centers for Disease

Control states that the effects of lead in adults can cause progressive nephron loss leading to renal failure, gout, and hypertension.

So, with all the health factors presented by these men in the medical profession, it would seem that Jack London really did not have a chance to survive and was probably fortunate to last his forty years and ten months.

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