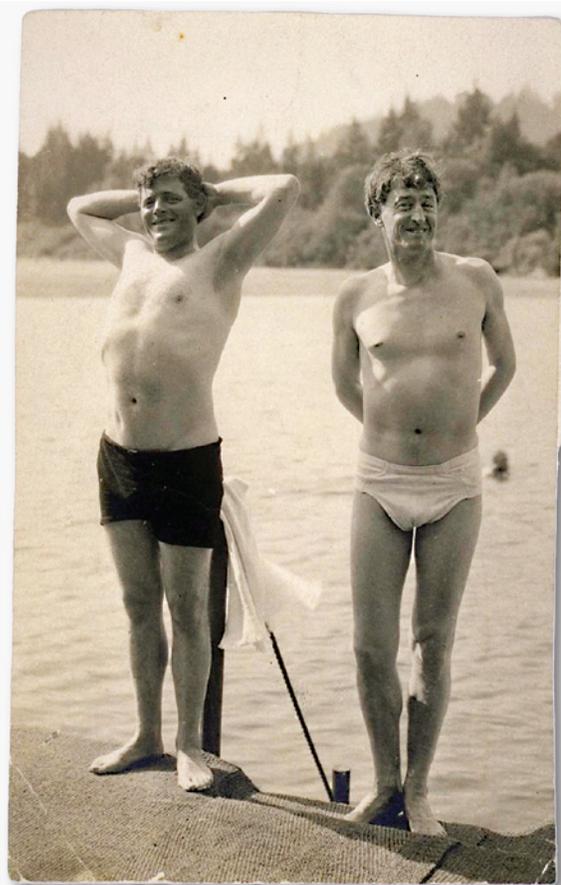


Jack London, second from right, on rare occasion, away from his typewriter with three of his closest friends, George Sterling, Mary Austin, and James Hopper at the beach in Carmel, 1907



courtesy: UC Berkeley Bancroft Library

Two wild and crazy guys: “Jack London, known to friends as ‘The Wolf’ and George Sterling, known as ‘The Greek’”



courtesy: UC Berkeley Bancroft Library

**PHOTOS BY
ARNOLD GENTHE**

JONAH RASKIN

The Valley of the Moon: Jack London’s Bittersweet Valentine to California

Half-a-dozen or so black-and-white photos of Jack London in Carmel tell a little-known story about one of California’s most exuberant literary landscapes. In one of the photos (all of them were taken by Arnold Genthe), London sits on the beach with three of his closest friends, among them the New York-born poet George Sterling, who moved to California in 1890, sold real estate, and then became a bohemian. London borrowed from Sterling’s raucous life to create the volatile character of Russ Brissenden, who commits suicide in the 1909 novel *Martin Eden* (Sterling himself would in fact commit suicide, but not until 1926). That same black-and-white photo by Genthe includes James Hopper, who attended UC Berkeley with London for a semester in 1896, and Mary Austin, the author of *The Land of Little Rain*, a paean to the wildness of the American Southwest that was published in 1903, the same year as *The Call of the Wild*, the novel that won London international renown. In another photo, London and Sterling wear goofy swimming suits and look as though they’re a couple of modern-day Merry Pranksters. Then, too, there’s the photo of London and his wife, Charmian, holding James Hopper’s college football jersey with Hopper himself and Sterling in the crowd.

Sadly, play often eluded London. Duty almost always called him. Even when he traveled, he did so as a working journalist, and even when he sailed aboard his yacht, *The Snark*, in the South Seas, he cranked out stories, essays, and novels. After the carnage of the Japanese Russian War of 1904–1905, which he wrote about for the *Examiner*, and the abysmal poverty of the East End of London, England, which he recounted in *People of the Abyss*, Carmel was playland par excellence. Getting there from the San Francisco Bay Area took just a day, even in those days without freeways and bridges.

London captured the spirit of early-twentieth-century Carmel in *The Valley of the Moon* (1913), a sprawling work of fiction that the novelist and short story writer Tilly Olsen called “Jack London at his supreme best.” In the sprightly Carmel chapters, which provide an idyllic interlude from the industrial strife of Oakland and the uncertainties of the open road, London conjures up the “cream-wet sand where land and sea met.” Here, poets and writers inhabit “woods-embowered cottages.” Lively, agile

men and women feast on crabs, mussels, and abalone—the food of the gods—and defy the town’s dull, conventional citizens. In every gesture, London tells us, they express their bohemianism. Indeed, bohemian Carmel seduces the novel’s main characters, though they also feel oppressed by the “sad children of art,” and so they pack their bags and hike off in search of a rural paradise for two.

Carmel is too settled and too clearly defined as a cultural landscape to be the endpoint in a novel that’s about pioneers, pioneering, and the pioneer spirit. The intrepid characters must move on from Carmel, where they’re told that American pioneers “destroyed everything—the Indians, the soil, and the forests” along with the buffalo and the passenger pigeon. They must find a home where they can feel like they’re Adam and Eve in a near-pristine environment. For London, Carmel was too open to ocean and sky.

Something in his dark nature demanded redwood forests with a sense of the primeval. He might have been happy there, but he often sabotaged his own happiness. Moreover, he wouldn’t have been the sole literary king in Carmel; he would have had to share the crown with George Sterling, and while he loved Sterling as deeply as he loved any man, he couldn’t bring himself to share glory and renown with anyone else. Bohemian Carmel was too tribal for a Nietzschean-Marxist-Darwinian who felt he had to be the top dog and the fittest of the fit. It was also too competitive even for his competitive nature. The bohemians of Carmel could swim, walk, and frolic with as much if not more vitality than he could. They gave him a real run for the money, and he ran away from them.

The Valley of the Moon, London’s quintessential California novel—and his last major work of fiction—is often lost in the sheer number of the author’s books. It’s also misunderstood, even in Jack London circles, where it has been described an “innocuous love story.” By 1913, London had already published nearly forty works of fiction and nonfiction. He would write several novels after *Valley* was published, including *The Star Rover*, which is about astral projection and time travel, and *The Scarlet Plague*, which is about a pandemic that wipes out nearly all of humanity. In 1916, he would die at the age of forty, burned up and burned out. A kind of last gasp before his final descent into alcoholism, drug addiction, despair, and sentimentality, too, *Valley* is a hefty novel that London wisely divided into three self-contained parts that can be read as separate works of fiction or—more fittingly—as a trilogy that unfolds against a kaleidoscopic backdrop of the California landscape.

I think of *Valley* as Jack London’s heartfelt valentine to his wife, Charmian, and to his native Golden State, much as I think of D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* (which was published the same year as *Valley*) as a bittersweet valentine to his mother and to the green English countryside that he loved. London’s most mature, modern love story, *Valley* offers a lyrical odyssey about a man-boy and a fiercely independent woman on an epic journey together, dreaming the California Dream and inviting readers to dream with them.

In college lit classes these days, English teachers can’t seem to help but pounce on issues of ethnicity, class, and gender, all of which do apply to *Valley* perfectly. But there are less pedantic ways to approach the novel, such as focusing on the mouth-watering food that London describes. At an Oakland picnic, he enumerates an “array of ham and chicken sandwiches, crab salad, hard-boiled eggs, pickled pigs’ feet, ripe olives and dill pickles, Swiss cheese, salted almonds, oranges and bananas, and several pint bottles of beer.” When Billy and Saxon, the main characters, are penniless, they live on potatoes. When times are flush in Oakland, they enjoy steak and onions. “Don’t they smell good . . . Um-um m-m-m,” Billy says. They have that same meal on the road when Saxon cooks over an open fire. “Um-um m-m-m,” he says again, expressing the novel’s infectious joie de vivre that mutes its tragedies.

Saxon does all the cooking, but she doesn’t take orders, and she can dish out as much if not more than she takes from Billy. She knows, too, that her ideas will be easier for him to swallow if she makes them appear to be his ideas, and while he wants to be the provider and protector, he learns to relinquish his desire to be the controller. The heart of the book is brutally honest and one hundred percent unsentimental. London describes the “industrial tragedy” that sweeps across the city of Oakland and taints their marriage, leaving them with zero love life.

Tillie Olsen—who was born in Nebraska but came of age in San Francisco in the 1930s—grew up on London’s work. The author of *Silences*, a literary study, *Yonondio*, a novel, and *Tell Me a Riddle*, a collection of short stories, Olsen came from the working class and wrote about working people in poetic prose. *Valley* is her kind of book. A depiction of workers in crisis, it’s written with a kind of poetry that’s rarely extended to workers. I suspect that Olsen also praised it because the women in the book—Saxon Brown; her mother, Daisy; and two other characters, Mrs. Higgins and Mrs. Mortimer—are its lifeblood, and because its aesthetics are matriarchal, by which I mean that the emotional nexus is the work of women from different generations.

The men in the book box for fun and money and brag about their exploits; women knit the culture together and carry it forward. Infused with a sense of earthly beauty, *Valley* ventures into the stormy world of love and marriage, and it does so with a cinematic eye. In the last section, it offers a series of documentary-like snapshots of early-twentieth-century California when immigrants from around the world poured into the Golden State and changed its ethnic composition. London wasn’t sure what to make of that radical transformation, and in *Valley* he explores his divided feelings.

In 1911, two years before the novel was published, London explained in two detailed letters—the first to his long-time publisher, George Brett at Macmillan, the second to the associate editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, Roland Phillips—that the central motif of the book was “back to the land.” Yes, there was a back-to-the-land movement in California at the start of the twentieth century, and London knew about it from personal experience. He and Charmian had gone back to the land in 1905 and weren’t

sorry they did, though they never stayed put for long, traveling to Hawaii and around the world. To write *Valley*, London also conducted research on the back-to-the-land movement, as his files at the Huntington Library attest.

In his letters to Brett and Phillips, London added that his new novel would “begin as a love story” and “end as a love story.” He didn’t elaborate, though he often thought deeply about the form and content of love stories. In *Martin Eden*, the main character, a wannabe writer from the working class, learns about love by reading about love and discovers that almost all love stories have a three-part formula. In part one, “a pair of lovers are jarred apart; in part two by some deed or event they are reunited; in part three “marriage bells.” In *Valley*, London reinvents the formula. His lovers are brought together at the beginning; they get married soon thereafter, and then deeds and events divide them from one another. Wedding bells don’t mark the end but rather the beginning of their relationship.

In his letters to Phillips and Brett, London kept most of his ideas for *Valley* up his sleeve. What he didn’t mention to either of them was that his characters don’t actually make it back to the land until the end of the book. He also didn’t let on that in its long middle section the novel isn’t about love but about hate, violence, and class warfare, a subject he had written about in essays with titles like “The War of the Classes” and “Revolution.” In fact, *Valley* is a novel about revolution and social upheaval couched as a love story. London was a cagey fellow. He had to be to survive in the wild literary marketplace.

His novel would be “offensive to none,” and certainly not to “bourgeois morality and bourgeois business ethics,” he assured Brett and Phillips, though he didn’t explain how he would achieve that miracle. After all, *Martin Eden*, which ends with the hero committing suicide, had been denounced as immoral from the pulpit. *The Iron Heel*, which describes the establishment of a dictatorship in the United States, had also rankled readers and critics. Hell, even Teddy Roosevelt accused London of “nature faking.” Then, too, what London himself didn’t seem to notice and what he never mentions in his letters is that *Valley* is about that all-American subject: the self. Earlier, in *Martin Eden*, he had explored his hero’s tormented sense of self. “Who are you?” Eden asks when he looks into the mirror. “What are you? Where do you belong?” Martin concludes

that he belongs nowhere, and, while Saxon and Billy share a sense of dislocation with him at their lowest point, they find a sense of self precisely at the moment they acquire a sense of place—that all-important thing to London, who lived in twenty-three different houses before he was twenty years old.

Valley may well have changed its very shape as London began to write it. It could also be that the more he wrote, the more the plot and the characters took him into controversial territories. And it seems likely that to receive the money he wanted from his publisher, he made the novel sound innocuous.

Valley starts out seductively in Oakland, a city London knew from the inside out, with the introduction of the two young, attractive Californians. Saxon Brown is described as a descendant of pioneers who is endowed with “spontaneity of vivacity,” while Billy Roberts is characterized as a boxer and a teamster whom London describes as “royally young” and as “a great big man-boy.” London had written about boys in *The Cruise of the Dazzler* and *John Barleycorn*, though he had never before written about a boy in love with a grown-up woman who becomes his wife. He had also written about girls and young women in *A Daughter of the Snows*, *The Sea-Wolf*, and *Martin Eden*, but he had not created a realistic, down-to-earth working-class female character before. And he had never before created a married couple the likes of Saxon and Billy, both of whom are orphans who identify themselves as white Americans in a California that’s increasingly overrun by immigrants from around the world. It’s “fillin’ up with all kinds of foreigners,” Billy exclaims.

Soon after they meet, Billy Roberts tells Saxon Brown, as Jack London might well have told his wife, Charmian, that he doesn’t know the identity of his biological father. Roberts isn’t his real last name, he explains. A man named Roberts adopted him, he says, and called him Billy. In turn, Saxon talks about herself, including her unusual first name, and her ancestors, especially her pioneer mother, Daisy. The Saxons, her forefathers, she boasts using the slang of the day, were “wild, like Indians, only they were white . . . and not Dagoes and Japs and such.” Her language doesn’t seem to have shocked readers in 1913, though it would be offensive to readers today. In the first part of the book, London describes his young lovers as they meet,

court one another, and begin their romantic relationship. The opening scene, which depicts Saxon and her friend, Mary, ironing clothes at a laundry, surely delighted Tillie Olsen, who was famous for the short story “I Stand Here Ironing.” It’s 1907, a year after the big earthquake, and cracks and uneven surfaces are visible nearly everywhere. Social and political earthquakes will quickly follow.

Indeed, the romance between Saxon and Billy unfolds in turbulent Oakland. For the most part, London tells the story from Saxon’s point of view. Soon after she meets Billy, she asks breathlessly, “Is this the man?” Before she knows it, she falls for him hard; what woman wouldn’t? Though he’s boyish, he’s also “God’s own impetuous lover,” and, not surprisingly, Saxon is eager to kiss him, London writes, “as she had never wanted to kiss a man.” *Valley* offers kissing, touching, and a few erotic passages. In one notable scene, after they’re married, Billy puts his arms around Saxon and embraces her while she’s cooking. London slows down the action and describes the scene minutely so that readers can visualize the characters as though watching a movie screen. “He came behind her, passed his arms under her armpits with down-dropping hands upon her breasts, and bent his head over her shoulder till cheek touched cheek,” London writes. “Un—um—um-m-m!” Billy murmurs.

Then he looks at the stove and adds, “Fried potatoes and onions like mother used to make.” Saxon plays a kind of maternal role in his life. She’s older than he and wiser, though she’s far more than just a maternal figure. London offers a radiant image of Saxon’s “love-lavished body.” Beautiful and smart, she’s also an earthy pilgrim on a journey from which she won’t turn back. In the Carmel section of the novel, she emerges as a kind of California goddess. For the first time in her life, she comes into her own as an independent woman and not simply as a married woman who has toiled in a laundry. Saxon plays the ukulele, sings Hawaiian songs, and sheds her own Puritan background. Her grace and physical beauty prompt the Carmelites to call her “Venus” and to gaze at her in adoration.

Billy adores her, too, and follows her loyally across the landscape of California, though he’s his own man, and London pulls out all the stops when he describes Billy. He has “bleaknesses as cold and as far as the stars, savagery as keen as a wolf’s and clean as a stallion’s, wrath as implacable as a destroying angel’s, and youth that was fire

and life beyond time and place.” A natural fighter with a streak of violence, he speaks the colorful language of comic book heroes: “Biff! Bang! Bigo! Swat! Zooie! Ker-slam-bango-blam!” Billy’s violence finds expression in the boxing ring and in the class warfare that engulfs Oakland, though Saxon aims to undermine his innate pugnacity. As a newly married man, and in the thrall of his wife’s femininity, he hangs up his boxing gloves and takes on a new gentleness. He, in turn, influences her when they move into a cottage next to the Southern Pacific railroad yards and begin life as a couple. With a husband to support her, Saxon is no longer, London explains, a prisoner of the laundry. She has freedom, he writes, “from the suffocating slavery of the ironing board.” It’s well worth reminding readers that for London slavery was almost always wage slavery not chattel slavery. In his view, men who worked in factories were unfree and as much in need of liberation as African Americans on Southern plantations.

For Billy, marriage provides companionship and tenderness. For Saxon, it provides a modicum of economic freedom and protection from street thugs and louts. Still, even as a happy newlywed who is liberated from toil, Saxon wants more than a life in a cramped cottage behind the railroad yards. Moreover, just as life begins to look rosy, her happiness evaporates. As London explained before he began to write *Valley*, his novel was to be about “the trials and tribulations of . . . a marriage in the working class.” Some of the trials and tribulations are distinctly of the working class. Other trials and tribulations might be shared by a couple in any social class. Saxon wants to work for herself and earn her own money. Billy has a traditional idea of marriage and feels that his wife shouldn’t have to work. He intends to support the two of them and lays down the law about employment and money. So, Saxon works secretly, making sexy lingerie that she sells to feisty, sinister Mercedes Higgins, another of the novel’s strong, independent women characters. Part Peruvian and part Irish, Mercedes adds to *Valley*’s volatile mix.

At this point—nearly midway in the plot—the novel moves in two opposite directions: toward the masculine world of strife and the class struggle, and, at the same time, toward the feminine world in which sex and relationships are pronounced. Mercedes provides Saxon with a crash course in the witchcraft of marriage: “A wife must be many

wives,” she explains. “If you would have your husband’s love you must be all women to him.” A cynic, Mercedes expresses a dark view of human nature and an elitist view of democracy as “the dream of the stupid people.” Saxon also meets another minor character, albeit with an uplifting message. He’s a boy named Jack, one of several characters in the book inspired by London himself, who urges her to get out of the city fast. “Oakland’s just a place to start from,” he declares.

Saxon knows now what she has to do, though she and Billy are pushed further and further apart, and further away from their dream. By the end of Book II, she falls into a “morass of pessimism,” becoming lost to herself in much the same way that *Martin Eden* is lost from himself. In a hauntingly beautiful image, London writes that Saxon “was like a linnet, caught by small boys and imprisoned in a cage.” He adds, “She rebelled. She fluttered and beat her soul against the hard face of things.” Meanwhile, Billy is also caught like a bird in Oakland’s labor struggles. The Oakland police, the Pinkerton detectives hired by the bosses, and the militia are all armed, and so are the workers. There’s bloodshed on both sides, though the strikers get the worst of it and are slaughtered in the streets. London presents the bloody scenes from Saxon’s point of view. “The rapid horror before her eyes,” he writes, “flashed along like a moving picture film gone mad.” He had learned to tell a story by going to the movies and by watching how moviemakers in the era of silent pictures created narratives through images and the briefest of words flashed at the bottom of the screen. About the bloody strike, London

means to be fair and accurate, though he explains, “In Sacramento was a railroad Governor who might reprieve or even pardon bank-wreckers and grafters, but who dared not lift his finger for a workingman.”

In the thick of the battle, Billy becomes a stranger to his wife. When she looks at him, Saxon no longer sees the man she loves. “So radical was the change in him that he seemed almost an intruder in the house,” London writes. “Another man looked out of his eyes.” Billy turns into a “brute beast” and abuses Saxon physically. He also becomes the proletarian Everyman crucified by the cause to which he has pledged his loyalty. At about the same time, Saxon sees a doctor, who tells her how to abort the child she’s carrying; he whispers the information in her ear and she acts on it secretly.

At the very end of Book Two—the novel’s darkest point—Billy and Saxon go to a movie theater, where they see three short films: a cowboy picture, a French comedy, and a “rural drama.” As the rural drama ends, Saxon says to Billy, “I know where we’re going when we leave Oakland.” “Where?” he asks. “There,” Saxon answers. Billy replies, “I’ve always had a hankerin’ for the country myself.”

In Book Three, London’s couple meet a large cast of California farmers, immigrants, wise old women, and young cynics. Nearly everywhere they go they find abandoned farms and discover that younger generations have fled to cities. The book loses much of its dramatic intensity and turns into a kind of Technicolor travelogue. But on the road, Billy and Saxon draw closer to one another. They also become increasingly angry and bitter; immigrants, they insist, have stolen their own country. Not Indians, but whites are the endangered species, London suggests. “We’re the last of the Mohegans [sic],” a white man proudly proclaims.

Billy resents the Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Armenians, Italians, Portuguese, and French that he and Saxon encounter. “Almost every nationality save Americans,” he complains. The former California State Librarian, Kevin Starr, has criticized what he calls London’s racism, citing a quotation from London. “What the devil!” London is supposed to have said. “I am first of all a white man and only then a Socialist.” Unlike London, who belonged to the Socialist Party for twenty years, Billy is no Socialist. In fact, he refuses to join the cause of socialism in Oakland when

he’s offered the chance. “When you catch me in a socialist meeting’ll be when they can talk like white men,” he says. Throughout the period that London writes about in Valley, laboring men in California often thought of themselves as white men first and Socialists second, if at all. Billy identifies as a white man, though he doesn’t like all white men. “I for one won’t stand for a lot of fat Germans an’ greasy Russian Jews tellin’ me how to run my country when they can’t speak English yet,” he complains. At times, he also rises above his prejudices, though Professor Starr doesn’t seem to notice. Billy is inspired, London writes, by “this new tide of life, amazingly industrious, that was flooding in from Asia and Europe.”

Billy gives the “foreigners”—he’s reluctant to call them Americans—credit for their “intensive cultivation” of the land. When he vents his hostility toward them, Saxon rebukes him. In a derogatory tone, he sneers at the “Porchugeeze’s,” and she explains, “Portuguese, Billy, not Portuguesee.” When he laughs at small farms, she tells him that he reminds her of a greedy uncle who owned a thousand acres, wanted a million, and ended up with no acres. “That’s . . . the trouble with all us Americans,” she says. “Everything large scale.” In Valley, small is beautiful, which seems appropriate for a novel that ends in the Valley of the Moon, a relatively small valley as California valleys go.

Valley offers one last reference to the movies. Saxon and Billy don’t go back to a theater to see a film, but Billy observes, perhaps narcissistically, “Movin’ pictures! Huh! We’re living movin’ pictures these days.” He has boxed against heavyweight champions, Jim Jeffries and Jack Johnson, so it’s not surprising that he thinks of himself as the costar, with Saxon, in their own movie much as London thought of himself as a Hollywood matinee idol. In fact, he was. *Martin Eden* and *The Valley of the Moon* were both made into movies, and he was as much of a celebrity as the cinematic stars of the day.

Jack London makes a dramatic appearance near the end of the book in the guise of the writer Jack Hastings, a war correspondent with a wife named Clara. Like London, Hastings owns a yacht named the *Roamer*, and like London he leaves California to cover the Mexican Revolution. “We live in a wicked age,” he tells Billy and Saxon, seeming to speak for London himself, who looked at the United States at the start of the twentieth century and saw a loss

of individual freedoms and the growth of an American oligarchy. Still, Billy and Saxon are happy in a wicked age, much as Jack and Charmian were happy in the Valley of the Moon—as happy as they could have been in 1913, when their dream house burned down. In the novel, Billy continues to be pugnacious even in his idyllic valley. “I just gotta stick my fist in somebody’s face once in a while,” he says. But he also realizes that he’d be lost without Saxon, much as Jack knew he’d be lost without Charmian.

Jack London belonged to the same generation as D. H. Lawrence—he was only four years older than Lawrence. Both men broke away from their origins and wrote about defiant individuals, though they also believed in and insisted on the controlling force of circumstances. London read *Sons and Lovers*—the first novel by Lawrence to be published in the United States—and praised it because it’s about a young man from the working class who becomes an artist. In Lawrence’s hero, Paul Morel, London saw reflections of himself. In a telegram to Lawrence’s English-born American publisher, Mitchell Kennerley, London wrote of *Sons and Lovers*: “No book like it. Splendid, sad, tremendous, true. It sweeps one off his feet with the powerful human impact of it.”

About Valley one could use the same words that London applied to *Sons and Lovers*: splendid, sad, tremendous, true, sweeps you off your feet. Like Lawrence, who lifted English literature out of the Victorian age in *Sons and Lovers*, London said goodbye in Valley to the American version of Victorianism. In the ecstatic section of the novel that takes place on the coast and among the Carmelites, London celebrates the human body and the joys of the intellect, too. Indeed, in Carmel, there’s a near-perfect marriage of mind and body, art and nature, that’s missing from the Valley of the Moon.

In the novel’s closing scenes, Saxon and Billy find the paradise that they have long sought. She’s pregnant and expects to give birth to a child. He’s delighted to learn that he’ll soon be a father. But they’re also on their own and without the fellowship and sense of community that they relished in Carmel. In Glen Ellen, where Jack London lived with Charmian from 1905 until 1916, he led a productive life as a writer and became a pioneering farmer and experimental rancher, too. At their cottage, they entertained guests from around the world and from Carmel,

but they were often isolated from friends and family, and Jack felt profoundly lonely.

Without the camaraderie of George Sterling, Mary Austin, and James Hopper, he was left alone to write and write and write, and yet a certain spark of living—eating, drinking, talking, and playing—was extinguished. From Glen Ellen, he reached out by mail to the Carmelites. To Mary Austin, he extended an open invitation to visit, promising her a room of her own and plenty of heartfelt conversation. To Sterling, he apologized for his failure to keep up his end of their long, passionate correspondence, but he reassured his closest male friend that he felt as passionately about him as ever. “I’m a rotten letter-writer,” he exclaimed and added in his own inimitable way, “My love for you increases.” Reading their letters, you can see that London’s Carmel connection carried him through to the gloom and the doom of his last days. Carmel lifted him above his lonely life on the edge and provided a link to the California bohemian crowd that romped in the sun, wrote books, recited poetry, and feasted on the food of the gods.

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