

Literary Mine in the Gold Country

SAN FRANCISCO.

YOU HAVE your correspondent's word for it, solemnly rendered with left hand on Holy Writ and right hand in air, that he landed in this magical city with every intention of passing up that renowned magic and getting right down to work. He came here to embark on a solid, thorough essay on The Literary Life in California—one of those pieces, of which you must have read too many in your time, that wind up with a clutch of trends, portents, and all the other related standard equipment of a licensed haruspex, book division.

Somehow, though, the plan went astray. I don't know that I can explain, but I'll try.

Who, your correspondent inquired upon arriving here (the left hand then grasping notebook, the right hand a pencil), could currently be regarded as California's most significant literary figure? He was informed that Ken Kesey, on the basis of two novels, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes a Great Notion*, might be said to occupy this niche. But only a day or so later a column by the San Francisco *Chronicle's* admirable literary critic, William Hogan, quoted Mr. Kesey to the effect that Mr. Kesey no longer is a writer. "Rather than write," Mr. Hogan reported, Mr. Kesey "will ride buses, study the inside of jails, see what goes on." Probably, Mr. Hogan suggested, Mr. Kesey "will continue to write, and in his own way."

Unhappily, your correspondent lacked the time to wait around and see if Mr. Kesey really will. Anyhow, what kind of literary movement is led by a writer who decides not to write?—and he a writer who had just been introduced by a reverent professor at the San Francisco State Summer English Institute for Teachers as "the greatest novelist in America today."

Possibly there was another literary leader in the vicinity? Somebody from the old beatnik colony in North Beach? Over in Berkeley, as his contribution to a protest against jail sentences imposed on free-speech demonstrators at the University of California, Allen Ginsberg was howling a poem, though he called it a lullaby, addressed to the judge. Mr. Ginsberg wore a full beard, black pants, a red shirt. But Mr. Ginsberg is scarcely news any more. Your correspondent's hopes for the solid, thorough essay were drooping when Tom Wolfe came to town on matters not unconnected with

the publication of his *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*.

Here, it immediately transpired, was what promised to be the literary event of the year. Herb Caen, the *Chronicle* columnist, went to work on it at once in a portrait that began:

He sits there hunched over his frozen daiquiri and banana fritters at Trader Vic's, his brow pale and noble, long blond hair swept in a sort of pageboy over the right ear. His suit is gleaming white, nipped in at the waist, then flaring out. Edwardian, as it were. With REAL buttonholes on the sleeves, the kind you can actually unBUTTON so you can turn back the cuffs when you're doing the dishes, or building a master martini over a wet sink. White shoes, blue shirt, wild silk tie, blue hankie flowing out of the breast pocket. Camp, man . . . yes! . . . HIGH Camp! You can't get any higher than that without a Sherpa to show you the way. Nosebleeds, eardrums bursting, the whole high bit.

He's a wicked one, that Caen. Like a great and dreaded predecessor of his, Ambrose Bierce of the old San Francisco *Examiner*, he leaves them for dead in the middle of the ring when he walks away at the end of a round or a column. So does another *Chronicle* columnist, Charles McCabe, with whose prose your correspondent was not hitherto acquainted. The picture of Mr. McCabe that accompanies his column portrays him as a no-nonsense character under a derby set squarely on his head. He obviously fears nothing and nobody. What New York paper, I wondered, would allow a columnist to say, as Mr. McCabe did, that an eminent churchman was a publicity hound who, along with his press agent, would do well to shut up for awhile?

Indeed, it suddenly occurred to me that the best writing to come to my attention in and around San Francisco is being done in the newspapers, in particular the stylish *Chronicle* with its Hogan, McCabe, Caen, *et al.* It occurred to me also that, for all my brave notions about the Literary Scene, I really was less in-

terested in today's so-called California writers than in their elders and betters of other eras.

Once you start evoking their memory they are all around you: in San Francisco and up and down the Mother Lode country and in the Napa Valley. This city is wonderful for sundry reasons, but not least for the affectionate respect it pays to writers who, fleetingly or otherwise, lived here, enjoyed themselves, and gave joy to others.

Thus, in Portsmouth Plaza a granite shaft reminds Robert Louis Stevenson's admirers that he dreamed enduring, romantic dreams in this place. On the Post Street side of the Bohemian Club characters out of Bret Harte's stories parade in bronze relief. A memorial bench on Russian Hill recalls George Sterling, poet. Over in Oakland, on whose waterfront Jack London spent his brawling, alcoholic youth, is Jack London Square. A visitor could spend a month here, walking in the footsteps of the departed great and not retracing a step.

Presently this visitor was outward bound, on a sort of literary prow through the Gold Country. Out of one story or another there came to him, as he rode along a trail once trod by the Argonauts, an old, haunting phrase: "It had been raining in the valley of the Sacramento"—the opening line of Bret Harte's "How Santa Claus Came to Simpson's Bar." Now one who had heard that story read on Christmas Eves long past was actually there. You will, I trust, pardon the naïve pleasure this gave me. The Stanislaus River that keeps turning up in the Harte stories kept turning up along the road south from Tahoe. That sturdy little mining town, Murphys, and its ancient, charming hotel are still there, and justly prospering. Upon request you may examine the hotel register's guest list and note the eminent folk who have preceded you here, including Henry Ward Beecher, who misspelled his last name. On, then, to Calaveras County, where a town's economy—Angels Camp—can be grateful to the short story that made the reputation of a young man from Hannibal, Mo.

It's all pretty obvious and commercial, and you have to wonder what Mark Twain would think if he could see now what his celebrated jumping frog hath wrought: nothing less than an annual three-day jubilee at something called Frogtown, where 600 frogs jump, and 30,000 visitors gape, and dine at a restaurant called, as God is my judge, the Frogeteria. Mark would mutter, I suppose; but still he might not be too unhappy about that statue of him in the town park at Angels Camp, with its suitable inscription. It isn't every ex-newspaperman who winds up on a pedestal in such pleasant surroundings.

About the good taste with which his



native state has honored Jack London there can be no question whatever. The most interesting news from California's literary front could be the fact that Jack London, who died in 1916, may be still the most popular of California writers, and very much a living presence there, thanks to the Jack London State Historic Park to which 100,000 pilgrims come yearly.

Under the expert guidance of the *Chronicle's* Mr. Hogan, your correspondent approached the London Park in faultless style. What better preparation for a call at the sometime ranch of the author of *John Barleycorn* than an inspection of the pioneering Charles Krug Winery in the Napa Valley? The inquiring tourist is offered not only invaluable information—viz., “the pulp of red wine grapes being white, the color is extracted from the skins during the first few hours of fermentation”—but is invited to sample the results. It is inspiring. So is an hour at Mike and Louise Paskow's Off the Square Arts in Sonoma, surely one of the most extraordinary art and book shops in all the land. Mr. Paskow sells only books that he himself has enjoyed. His gallery features local painters and sculptors, among them being the proprietor. It would be a cultural asset in any town at all.

Then, in half an hour or so, there was the Valley of the Moon. There, London exulted in *John Barleycorn*, “I found my paradise”—and there, too, he found much anguish, and his death, about the circumstances of which the official Park brochure is unnecessarily misleading. The house in which the London memorabilia are stored was built after his death, but somehow he seems to occupy it now, with his manuscripts, letters, desk, dictating machine, books, editions of his works in many languages, pictures of the vibrant, reckless, out-giving man he was, sailor, miner, fighter, Socialist, and, always, storyteller. A reader could do far worse, a visitor thought to himself, than to go back soon to the autobiographical *Martin Eden*.

Meanwhile, with a look over his shoulder at that original idea of a piece about more recent Californians, your correspondent went down to the Big Sur, widely known as the fiefdom of Henry Miller. Mr. Miller, perhaps, could be induced to talk off a couple of thousand words of wisdom for his devotees among SR readers. Alas, Mr. Miller, who is now up to here in the profits of his once-banned books, is currently living it up in the fleshpots of Southern California. Your correspondent likes to travel, but he wasn't going down there for any reason whatever, not even to ask Henry how it feels to have been a tree that grew in Brooklyn and wound up in the eucalyptus country.

—JOHN K. HUTCHENS.

Life Was Always Worth the Living

Letters from Jack London, edited by King Hendricks and Irving Shepard (Odyssey. 512 pp. \$10), makes available for the first time an extensive selection from the enormous correspondence of this controversial popular writer whose work has been generally neglected by modern critics. Earle Labor, chairman of humanities at Adrian College, is editor of a forthcoming collection of Jack London's Northland fiction.

By EARLE LABOR

IF SCHOLARLY interest is an accurate gauge of literary significance, Jack London should probably be listed among the faded ranks of such writers as Rex Beach, Richard Harding Davis, and Robert Service. Members of today's literary in-group remember him only dimly as a blood-and-guts figure who wrote some wonderful stories about the supermen and superdogs of the Far North—stuff that we properly laid aside, on coming of age, along with Richard Halliburton's books and our merit-badge sashes.

But, among a wider audience, there is little sign that London is fading. *Paperbound Books in Print* includes a dozen Jack London titles; the Macmillan Company continues to sell a half dozen of his works in hardbound editions; Bodley Head is now issuing for British readers a uniform series that places London alongside authors like Ford Madox Ford and Scott Fitzgerald; and two major (if out-group) biographies, one American and one Russian, have appeared in the last year. The long-delayed publication of his personal correspondence must therefore be regarded as an important literary event.

Professor Vil Bykov, the Russian biographer, has attributed London's popular durability to the “incomparable atmosphere of heroism and inspired struggle, [the] deep belief in man's abilities in the face of overwhelming odds, [the] optimistic tone [and] life-asserting force” of his fiction. These same qualities are apparent in his personal letters. His agonizing, lonely struggle to master the delicate instruments of literary craftsmanship, with little formal education and without the help of tutor or patron, was nothing less than heroic and inspired. That he achieved spec-



Jack London: “I have been true.”

tacular success against such odds is an indication of his courage and talent; it is likewise a reminder that for his generation the American Dream was a viable reality, not merely a formalized myth. London's letters not only provide insights into the personality of a writer; they also disclose what we have lost in growing up.

The editors have exercised discretion in selecting 400 letters from the mountain of London's correspondence. The man and the writer are allowed to speak for themselves, resolving the many seeming contradictions that have puzzled biographers and intellectual historians. London was a crusading Socialist with enough common sense to perceive inequalities among races as well as individuals; he professed himself a materialistic monist, but was sensitive enough to believe in the soul; he was generous to the point of bankruptcy, but refused to be short-changed by his publishers; he was a sentimental friend and lover, but a vicious fighter when he suspected that he had been used unfairly; he detested the physical coward, but loved the underdog.

Mythically speaking, London incarnated the American Adam as self-made man. In the winter of 1898—his family and friends pressing him to get a steady, respectable job, while editors were rejecting his manuscripts faster than he could pawn his bike and typewriter for postage stamps—he wrote to Mabel Applegarth, his first great love: “I don't care if the whole present, all I possess, were swept away from me—I will build a new present; if I am left naked and hungry to-morrow—before I give in I