

**THE SECRET JOURNEYS
OF JACK LONDON**

Book One: The Wild

by

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“The function of man is to live, not to exist.”

Jack London

I've never been much of a writer, but I've always been able to tell a tale. Got Jack London to thank for that. He made me realize that stories are all about heart and soul, not words and spelling, and he had heart and soul aplenty.

Jack saved my life many times. Once, he did it for real, beating off two evil men who were ready to kidnap me and take me off into slavery. There were other times down through the years, and for most of them he wasn't even there. It was the thought of Jack that helped me. The idea of his courage, his outlook, his philosophy that life is for living, and that there are so many unknown things that can never be fully explored in one single life.

I became an explorer because of Jack, of the spiritual as well as the physical, and I like to think I helped him in his own journeys.

We all know what became of him. One of the greatest writers we've ever had, he could spin a yarn like no one else, and imbue it with a power that was almost ... well, supernatural. But much as some thought what he wrote about was the life he'd lived, I knew the truth all those years, because he'd told me: he could never, ever tell of his own real adventures. They were too terrible, and too personal for him ever to put down on paper.

He never told me I couldn't, though.

Jack died far too young, but in his few years he lived the lives of many men. And he died knowing there's more here in this world than we can know, or could possibly understand.

That's part of the reasoning behind me writing this down at last. I'm an old man, now. Who will it hurt to learn the truth? Will anyone even believe? In these modern times when the fantastic doesn't seem so fantastic anymore, and the wilds aren't quite so wild, I think these stories need telling.

I think we need reminding.

These, then, are the true stories of Jack London.

His secret journeys.

Hal Sawyer

San Francisco

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Chapter One

into the wild

Jack London stood on the deck of the *Umatilla* and looked out upon the docks of San Francisco, wondering how long it would be before he saw the city again. He had been born with a wandering heart, and embraced adventure, unafraid to face the dangers often presented by journeys into unknown places. When the *Umatilla* sailed out of the port of San Francisco, he would be bound for the Yukon, leaving civilization behind for the wilds of the frozen north, where rumor claimed vast quantities of gold awaited discovery and any man could become King Midas.

Yet gold represented only one part of the Yukon's allure for Jack. Given the chance, he'd have gone purely for the sake of going, dared all for the sake of daring.

Now he leaned against the *Umatilla*'s railing and breathed in the smells, took in the sights, and listened to the sounds of chaos and excitement around them. Never had he seen such a mixed group of people. Every race, every nationality, every creed was represented here. Even with the scent of the ocean so strong, dozens of other odors drifted on the breeze. On the dock, a vendor sold roasted nuts. A man at Jack's shoulder reeked of cheap whiskey. Others gave off the strong smell of spices or smoke or food, and several stank from need of a bath. Jack had been a tramp, oyster pirate and convict, and had been friends with men who hadn't bathed properly in decades, but he shuddered to think what the ship's quarters would smell like by the time they reached Alaska.

He'd heard whispers that the steamer had twice as many passengers as it was licensed to carry, and he could well believe it. Having stowed their equipment in the ship's hold themselves, Jack and Shepard, his aging and ailing brother-in-law, had shouldered their way through a bustle of gold prospectors, from sailors and rough-handed laborers to the sons of the wealthy elite who were setting out to seek their own fortunes.

Now, from the ship's railing, they prepared to bid farewell to San Francisco.

"No need for goodbyes, Jack," said Shepard. "It'll still be here when we get back, same as ever." He looked sidelong at Jack, and his usually glittering eyes seemed wan and empty. "Do you think we're going to change?"

Jack thought of the hardships ahead of them. For him, the future was a vastness of opportunities, and it called to him with a voice like the wind across the desert, or the echo that sang through trees heavy with the weight of a blizzard's snowfall. He thought of that voice as the call of the wild, and it set Jack's heart pumping like nothing else.

"We'll change, John, but only in a good way," he replied at last. "Adventure makes a man grow." He refrained from voicing that other possibility: *Adventure can kill a man*. But he could see in Shepard's eyes that he knew the brutal truth of things.

John Shepard was a big man made small by sickness. His eyes still held the vigor of youth, but his body betrayed the cruelty of time, lined and worn by successive assaults and currently defending against this one, final attack. His heart was weakening, but his mind remained as strong as ever. Jack had always liked the gray-haired, gray-eyed Shepard; though much older than Jack's sister Eliza, the man seemed to make her happy. Eliza's happiness meant everything to Jack.

Embarking upon this adventure, Shepard seemed more alive than he had in a very long time. That could only bode well for all of them.

Leaving port at last, waving madly at the well-wishers on shore, Jack had never been so excited. Ahead of them lay sixteen hundred miles of ocean, wild rivers, snow-covered mountains, treacherous passes, and some of the most inhospitable country known to Man.

He was embarking upon the greatest adventure of his life.

But with greatness, comes pain.

The voyage from San Francisco took eight days, and despite the overcrowding aboard the *Umatilla*, the time passed quickly. Jack kept a close eye on Shepard and was pleased to see that the man lost none of his resolve during the journey.

When they arrived at Dyea, sailing toward the breathtaking views of mainland Alaska, rather than seeming worse for the trip Shepard shone with a new vitality. His heart might no longer have pumped blood with its former vigor, but its essence remained strong.

The two men jostled for space at the railing as the ship came into port. One of the reasons Jack had been so pleased with the *Umatilla* was that it could actually land them at Dyea, thanks to having a shallower draught than some larger ships. Most had to settle for docking in Skagway, near the entrance to White Pass, which could be even more treacherous and time consuming than the perilous route Jack intended to follow.

“Where are the docks?” Shepard asked. He coughed into his fist and then spat a wad of phlegm over the side.

At seventeen, most young men tended to ignore the cautions of their elders. Impulsive and quick-tempered, Jack had never been an exception. But where this trip—and gold—were concerned, Shepard behaved more like an excitable boy than Jack himself. So when he heard that wary tone, Jack frowned and studied the shore.

The crew began to weigh anchor with no dock in sight. Jack could see the beach from here, and smoke rising from chimneys in the town beyond, but nowhere for them to put in. Small boats were already heading out toward the *Umatilla*, locals intent upon earning a little money helping to offload the ship.

“Excuse me!” Jack said to a grizzled crewman—a pale, drawn figure about thirty years of age—who tried to hurry by even as Jack accosted him. “Where’s the dock?”

The man tugged his arm from Jack’s grasp. “No docks in Dyea, kid. You’ll land on the beach.”

Shepard cleared his throat, sounding like an angry bear as he clamped a firm hand on the crewman’s wrist. “Now hold on. That’s lunacy! It’ll take hours to get all the supplies out of your hold, sorted and off the beach before the tide comes in.”

A dangerous glint had appeared in the crewman’s eyes and he glanced down at the grip Shepard had on him.

“John...?” Jack began, glancing around to make sure no one else would jump into the fight. He reached around to the small of his back, where he’d tucked a small, sheathed knife.

Shepard released the man’s hand, but did not back off.

The crewman smiled. “If you’re worried about the tide, you’d better hurry.”

With that, he rushed off through the crowd, many of whom appeared to have been aware of this little detail, though others were only just now learning. A chorus of complaints rumbled across the deck but there was nothing any of them could do about it. They’d come too far and spent too much money to turn back now.

If Jack had thought the preparation for the journey a breathless scramble, it seemed nothing in comparison to the chaotic rush as the *Umatilla*’s more than four hundred passengers attempted to get their supplies and equipment onto the beach, and from there to higher ground. Would-be prospectors, who’d been dubbed “stampeder” by the press, cursed one another and fought for space aboard the many small boats ferrying goods and people ashore.

Many of the men and women must have become lethargic during the voyage, and some already seemed to be having second thoughts about the journey they’d set out upon. Jack, on the other hand, felt as though he might burst into song as he and Shepard crouched in a small rowboat, clinging to packs full of their most vital belongings.

During their last few days in the city, Jack had used Shepard’s money to buy equipment and provisions. Adequate clothing was a necessity: heavy mittens, hats, fur-lined coats and trousers, warm underwear, boots with thick grips and straps to seal them against the ingress of water and snow. He purchased tools with which they could chop trees and construct boats and cabins, a year’s supply of food in sealed containers—dried, preserved, and pickled. Camping equipment was vital, and Jack had the money to buy

two of everything, including tents and blankets, shovels, groundsheets, and the important Klondike stoves that would keep them warm whilst camping, cook their food and give them light.

He had also packed his all-important books. Jack never traveled without at least some work of Melville's, at least, and *Moby Dick* rode in his pack now.

He breathed in the Alaskan air, caught the scent of the wild, and after eight long days aboard ship, felt ready to run the Chilkoot Pass. All of the preparations here in Dyea would only make him more anxious to begin. If he could have set off that very day and left all of the supplies behind, he would have done so, and eagerly. But though he had come to the northlands to dare much and would not be discouraged by whatever obstacles might be put in his path, still only a fool took unnecessary risks.

Best to be cautious, and smart. There was a lot riding on this expedition.

A grin stretched his lips as the rowboat slid onto the shore of Dyea Beach. Jack took two steps—quite used to the sway of the surf by now—and then stood on dry land for the first time in more than a week. He turned to watch Shepard climb out of the boat and nearly offered his brother-in-law a hand, before realizing the man would never take it. To do so would be a sign of weakness.

Once on land, though, Shepard threw his head back and breathed deeply. Jack expected another of his ragged coughing fits to follow, but it did not come. An auspicious sign. Shepard peered up the beach toward the smoke rising from the town's chimneys and nodded, as if to himself.

“Let's get to work, boy,” Shepard said.

Boy. That dreaded word. Yet today, Jack did not object. Perhaps it was merely a term of endearment, or the way the old soldier chose to remind himself and his young wife's stepbrother which of them was in charge here. It didn't matter. Jack would not be broken by the frozen north, and certainly, despite his often quickdraw temper, he would not allow himself to be irked by a single word.

And so they set to work.

With Jack as the runner and foreman and Shepard as the paymaster, they quickly corralled a group of willing locals. As their equipment began to arrive on the beach in crates and packs, those enterprising Indians carried them to higher ground and arranged them neatly in a spot Jack had chosen. Trusting no one but themselves, Jack remained on the beach with their equipment while Shepard oversaw its safe delivery.

The tide came in fast that afternoon, and three large crates were partially dampened by the encroaching surf. Jack exhorted the men to work faster or they wouldn't be paid a dime, and the last crate he half-dragged several feet to avoid having the contents swamped before it, too, was finally hauled away to safety.

Halfway through the job, the price changed. The Indians charged twenty dollars an hour when the tide was low—already an astronomical sum—but as the waves grew closer and the tide rolled in, the price went up to fifty dollars an hour.

“They ought to have been pointing guns at us, asking that price!” Jack fumed, indignant, as the men raced away to enrich themselves from the plight of some other passenger.

Shepard seemed barely to have heard him. The man wore a smile Jack had never seen on him before, not even in his most tender moments with Eliza.

“I’ve sent a boy ahead to secure rooms for tonight,” Shepard said. “We’ll depart at first light.”

Then he noticed Jack studying him.

“What are you staring at?” Shepard demanded.

“You look well,” Jack told him, surprised. “Ready for adventure?”

Shepard appeared to give the question a moment’s thought. Jack had expected a light-hearted reply, a rallying moment before they set about engaging more Indian porters to carry their equipment into town, but his brother-in-law seemed apprehensive.

“I’m sixty-one years old, boy, and God gave me a bum ticker.” Shepard gazed at the packs and crates piling up all along the beach. “At night, I dream of gold. It might be the only thing keeping me alive.”

Jack nodded. “Fair enough. Let’s go find some.”

Having engaged Indian porters to carry their supplies and equipment to the hotel—and paid handsomely—Jack and Shepard shouldered their packs and walked from the rocky beach up toward Dyea proper. The word “town” was generous. The single main street and few outlying homes and buildings were more a settlement than anything remotely permanent. Coming upon it from the coast, Jack had a queer moment of disconnection, and felt as though they had found themselves not in Alaska but in Deadwood, during that town’s run of gold fever.

The sky had been a crystalline blue when the *Umatilla* weighed anchor, but on the shore a light mist seemed to hang permanently above Dyea, and the plumes of chimney

smoke from the settlement only added to the gauzy veil that obscured the eastward view. They could see the outline of icy hills in the distance, but as they started along the main street, their focus remained on the town.

On the right they passed a row of nearly identical, barn-like buildings, each with a small window just below its peak and with a shop entrance below. Jack glanced at the signs—Yukon Trading Post, U.S. Post Office, Coughlin-Landry Hardware, Dutcher Bill's Saloon.

The left side of the street seemed more familiar, with a brightly painted façade on a standalone structure whose sign read only DANCE HALL. Beyond that stood Hayley's Hotel, a big box of a building—clapboard like all of the others—with its sign painted right on the side wall.

“Looks like it's about to fall down,” Shepard muttered.

“I've slept in much worse,” Jack said, thinking about railroad sidings and jail cells. “It'll be nice to have a soft bed for a night, especially since it's going to be a long while before we encounter another. And a bath wouldn't go amiss for either of us.”

Shepard grunted in amusement. After eight days at sea, they both stank. “First we have to get there.”

It was an excellent point. The entire street was a muddy mess of hoof and boot prints, and furrows cut by wagon wheels. In some places the dirt had dried and hardened into ridges, and in others water filled the crevices.

As they navigated the runnels and potholes, mud sucking at their boots, Shepard's breathing grew labored under the weight of his fifty-odd pound pack. Jack gave him a

surreptitious glance and saw that rather than glowing red with exertion, his brother-in-law's face had paled. Before long, Shepard would be unable to carry his own pack.

“You doing all right?” Jack asked.

“I'll manage,” Shepard muttered.

They'd been amiable traveling companions all through the voyage, but now a growing tension enveloped them. In all the world there was no one Jack loved as much as his stepsister Eliza. She had practically raised him and against her wishes, and with full knowledge of the man's deteriorating health, he had encouraged her husband to embark upon this adventure, knowing that Shepard was able and keen to finance the entire journey himself.

Jack had been selfish, but there was nothing to be done for it now.

He tried to assuage his guilt by considering the other purpose for this adventure: to aid his mother. On the day of departure, Eliza had revealed to him that their mother was close to losing her home. She had relied on Jack's income for a long time, and his recent month-long absence—a stretch in jail for vagrancy, though none of his family knew of it—had caused her to fall deeper into debt. She had even returned to conducting séances and other absurd rituals as a spiritual medium, an absurdity she perpetuated as the truth, though Jack considered it nothing more than a charade and a fraud. The woman had little love in her heart—all the nurturing he had needed as a boy he had found in Eliza—but still she was his mother. If he found gold, she would be able to keep her home, and to abandon the charlatanry of spiritualism. Yet that seemed a distant concern right now; it was Shepard who worried him most.

But Shepard had his own mind. He was a man, not some sickly child to be coddled, and Jack believed that every man must be master of his own fate. Nevertheless, he dreaded having to deliver the news to Eliza should calamity befall her husband.

Eyes front, chin high, Jack marched across the muddy ruin of Dyea's main street toward the boardwalk in front of Hayley's Hotel. Only when he had stepped up onto the wood and kicked mud from his boots did he glance back to check on Shepard's progress.

The man had stopped a dozen feet back.

"John?" he said.

Shepard's face had gone slack and he stared eastward with wide eyes, bent slightly forward to manage the weight of his pack. He'd been pale before, but now he looked dreadfully sick. He blinked, coughed lightly, and then set off into a deeper fit of coughing that bent him double. The old soldier let his pack slip from his back and fall into the mud.

Jack dropped his own pack down on the boardwalk and ran to Shepard's side.

"What is it, John?" he asked, gripping the man's elbow. "You're all right. Try to catch your breath."

Shepard nodded, taking several long, steady breaths. He wheezed and coughed some more, eyes watering the entire time. Still bent double, hands on his knees, he gestured further along the street with a tilt of his head.

"Is that it, boy? Is that the trail?"

Jack turned to see that the mist had thinned, providing a clearer view of the nearby hills. It might be early August, but they were in Alaska, and to the east white walls of ice rose up from the land like the forbidding landscape in a dream of endless

winter. The gap in the ice, visible only as a shadow from here, was the Chilkoot Pass. The trail that would take them to Dawson City began at the foot of those frozen cliffs.

Even from this distance Jack could make out the dark line of men and horses trekking up the Chilkoot Trail toward the pass—men with dreams of gold, and the Tlingit Indians making their own fortunes just getting the stampedeers and their gear over the mountains.

Shepard started coughing again and this time, when he wiped at his lips, Jack saw a smear of blood.

It did not bode well. Dark thoughts of resentment and frustration flitted at the edges of Jack's mind, but he pushed them away. They had made a pact, the two of them, and Jack London always kept his word.

He put a hand on Shepard's shoulder. "I'll help you every step of the way. I'll get you there, so help me God, or else we'll share an icy grave. And I don't mean to die, so that means we'll both have our stake on the Klondike come spring, and bring back a pile."

At last able to breathe evenly, Shepard gently pushed Jack's hand away.

"I've been a fool," he said, words burning with a fury obviously reserved for himself. "I won't allow you to become one."

"John..." Jack began.

But Shepard fixed him with a dark gaze that forestalled any further conversation. In his eyes, Jack could see sorrow and regret, and a self-loathing that his infirmity had created within him.

Shepard picked up his pack slowly and slipped it on again, taking deep breaths. He turned a rueful glance toward the frozen mountain pass, and then looked at Jack.

“I’ve got to get back to the beach before the *Umatilla* sails for home,” Shepard said. “I’ll bring your love to Eliza and your mother.”

Jack said nothing. Shepard would clearly brook no argument.

“I’ve invested a great deal in this journey, Jack,” the old soldier went on. “More than money, you understand? Every wish I’ve ever made. I’m leaving them here with you, and I expect you to carry them all the way to Dawson, and beyond. Don’t let me down, boy.”

Jack shook his head. “Of course I won’t.”

“See you don’t,” Shepard said. And with that he left, trudging back through half-frozen mud toward the shore, leaving Jack with all of their supplies and equipment and enough determination for both of them.

Jack watched him go and hoped he made it home in good health, so that Eliza would not have to grieve. He found himself untroubled by the idea of making the journey alone, for most of his life’s journeys had been undertaken as solo ventures, even when he was surrounded by others pursuing their own paths.

Shepard walked to the edge of town and vanished on the road down to the beach without once turning to look back. The moment he was out of sight, a huge grin broke out on Jack’s face. He felt a strange elation growing within him. Freed of his obligations to and concern for Shepard, he felt more confident than ever in his course of action.

He turned to look up into the mist at the Chilkoot Pass, tempted to run there now, to climb it all tonight, supplies or not. Throughout the voyage they had heard tales of

men who had died on the trail, and thousands who had faltered and turned back. Shepard had wilted at the mere sight of the ominous terrain.

Not Jack. The frozen north would not defeat him. Only death could stop him now.