SPECIAL ARTICLES

Jack London's Sleep

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Jack London (1876–1916) was probably the first blockbuster American author having written books that many of us have read. Who has not read or heard of *Call of the Wild* or *White Fang* among his many works? A visit to his home in Glen Ellen, California, where he died at age 40 years of a still mysterious ailment sheds light on his sleep. He and his wife, Charmian, both had severe insomnia. The room where London slept (**Figure 1**) overlooks a beautiful garden, and strung above his bed was a thin rope upon which are fastened sheets of paper. When he awakened during his frequent sleepless nights, he wrote himself notes. It is probable that nightmares from posttraumatic stress disorder played a part in his insomnia.

London had suffered many traumatic events in his life.¹ These include incarceration, participating in the gold rush in the Klondike, the ill-fated voyage of the Snark, and the destruction by fire of his never-lived-in 26 room Wolf House in Glen Ellen, California.

By 1901, about two years before publication of *Call of the Wild*, London had become a reader of the works of the Russian writer Maxim Gorky, who was an advocate of revolution to overthrow the Czar of Russia. On January 26, 1906, London gave a speech at Woolsey Hall to 3,000 men of Yale under the auspices of the Yale Debating Association. This caused a great deal of controversy because his speech promoted socialism. One can speculate about the psychologically traumatic effects of a New York Times editorial called *Class War* skewering Mr. London 5 days after that speech.² However, perhaps his greatest trauma occurred less than 3 months later.

London witnessed first hand the catastrophic disaster caused by the San Francisco Earthquake of April 18, 1906. The following is taken from an article he wrote for the May 5, 1906 issue of *Colliers Magazine* about what he saw, smelled, and felt³:

...On Wednesday morning at a quarter past five came the earthquake. A minute later the flames were leaping upward...At eight o'clock Wednesday evening I passed through Union Square. It was packed with refugees. Thousands of them had gone to bed on the grass...At half past one in the morning three sides of Union Square were in flames. The fourth side, where stood the great St. Francis Hotel was still holding out. An hour later, ignited from top and sides the St. Francis was flaming heavenward...On Mission Street lay a dozen steers, in a neat row stretching across the street just as they had

been struck down by the flying ruins of the earthquake. The fire had passed through afterward and roasted them.

The following year, London and his wife, Charmian left for a round the world voyage on his ketch, the Snark. The voyage was cut short after he developed a mysterious debilitating illness. The following passage is taken from his book *Cruise of the Snark* (1911) which described this ill-fated voyage⁴:

I confess my sleep was not...like a summer sky
That held the music of a lark. (see endnote A)

Rather did "I waken to the voiceless dark," and listen to the creaking of the bulkheads and the rippling of the sea alongside as the Snark logged steadily her six knots an hour. I went over my calculations again and again, striving to find some mistake, until my brain was in such fever that it discovered dozens of mistakes. Suppose, instead of being sixty miles off Futuna, that my navigation was all wrong and that I was only six miles off? In which case my course would be wrong, too, and for all I knew the Snark might be running straight at Futuna. For all I knew the Snark might strike Futuna the next moment. I almost sprang from the bunk at that thought; and, though I restrained myself, I know that I lay for a moment, nervous and tense, waiting for the shock.

My sleep was broken by miserable nightmares. Earthquake seemed the favourite affliction, though there was one man, with a bill, who persisted in dunning me throughout the night. Also, he wanted to fight; and Charmian continually persuaded me to let him alone. Finally, however, the man with the everlasting dun ventured into a dream from which Charmian was absent. It was my opportunity, and we went at it, gloriously, all over the sidewalk and street, until he cried enough. Then I said, "Now how about that bill?" Having conquered, I was willing to pay. But the man looked at me and groaned. "It was all a mistake," he said; "the bill is for the house next door." That settled him, for he worried my dreams no more; and it settled me, too, for I woke up chuckling at the episode. It was three in the morning. I went up on deck."

Figure 1—London's bed at the Beauty Ranch in Glen Ellen, Sonoma California.

Notice the notes London wrote to himself attached by clothespins to the clothes line above the bed.

Thus not only did London suffer from nightmares that haunted his sleep, but so did some of the characters he described in his books, even the dog, Buck, from *Call of the Wild*⁵ after witnessing a sled dog brutally killed:

But she lay there limp and lifeless in the bloody, trampled snow, almost literally torn to pieces, the swart half-breed standing over her and cursing horribly. The scene often came back to Buck to trouble him in his sleep.

In the following excerpts from his 1913 novel *The Valley of the Moon*,⁶ London describes the consequences of insomnia:

This that she saw nightly was an older mother, broken with insomnia and brave with sorrow, who crept, always crept, a pale, frail creature, gentle and unfaltering, dying from lack of sleep, living by will, and by will refraining from going mad, who, nevertheless, could not will sleep, and whom not even the whole tribe of doctors could make sleep...

In her nightmare-ridden sleep it became an accomplished fact, so that she would awake, trembling, in a cold sweat, crying out. Her sleep had become wretched. Sometimes she was convinced that she did not sleep at all, and she knew that she had insomnia, and remembered that it was of insomnia her mother had died.

The cause of London's death remains a mystery and there have been hypotheses that he suffered from uremia, alcoholism, mood disorder, and opiate addiction. The medical kit from the Snark, shows a vial labeled "heroin" (**Figure 2**). London did write about his sleep problem and whether that contributed to

Figure 2—A photo of the medical kit from Snark, London's ketch from the ill-fated voyage.

The second vial from the left is labeled "Terpin Hydrate and Heroin." Jack London State Historic Park - Wolf House, Glen Ellen, California.

or was a consequence of the other comorbidities is unknown. Alex Kershaw, in a biography of London⁷ wrote:

After dinner, at 10:30, Jack retires to his sleeping-porch fronting the ocean. He and his wife have slept apart for several years because of her nightly battles with insomnia.

Until 2 a.m., as every night, he reads his mail. Then the quest for a few hours' peace begins in earnest. To help them through the night he consults his medicine chest, the most important object in his life. It contains an array of painkillers: strychnine, strontium sulfate, aconite, belladonna, morphine, and that sweetest of all escapes—opium...

Jack is now his own anaesthetist. He prescribed himself enough to stop the pain, just as he used to down bottles of whiskey.

He takes out a silver hypodermic needle and with practised precision mixes the correct amounts of painkillers, then pulls back the plunger. The skin breaks clean—a good vein. The drugs began to work, jolting his heart and bladder muscles and making him drowsy at last.

The term *posttraumatic stress disorder* and its impact on sleep were not appreciated by the medical profession until about 1980, when the term first appeared in the medical literature.⁸ We now understand that traumas and catastrophes of many types (earthquakes, terrorist attacks, tsunamis, etc.)^{9–11} can lead to PTSD and sleep difficulties. Jack London has taught us that the response to traumas can affect sleep for decades.

ENDNOTE

A. George Sterling, a poet living in California, became best friends with Jack London. In fact, Sterling was an executor of London's estate. Jack London modified the first two lines of part II of Sterling's 1903 poem *The Testimony of the Suns*.

"My sleep was like a summer sky
That held the music of a lark"

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