

Jack London possessed a secret and he put it to a use which amounted to little less than alchemy. He knew the magic formula which permitted him to write about the things he knew best—a bag of tricks in itself.

Like the rest of us, Jack had his ups and sub-zeros, but unlike many of us he knew the correct way to combat them. He knew that work was the only solution and, far more than that, he knew how to get to work. He knew what to do when his pockets sagged with emptiness. He knew that sitting around bewailing a writer's lot was a poor method of creation.

Down on the San Francisco waterfront, there was a bookshop which handled mildewed volumes and secondhand pulps. It was close to the Embarcadero and the ships and the saloons, and its proprietor was close to the heart of Jack London. At those trying times when the checks were few and small, Jack would drop around for the purpose of borrowing half a dollar.

It was not that he was hungry. That fifty-cent piece was much more necessary than that. For with it, Jack London would head for the nearest saloon. Straight for the swinging doors and the barflies.

Sailors would be there. Sailors from Alaska and China and the South Seas. Sailors whose ships were lately on the bottom or whose crews were lately serving time for mutiny. And from that crowd, Jack London would select himself a tough old salt who looked garrulous. And then the fifty-cent piece would diminish across the mahogany and the old salt would pour out his heart. Perhaps the things he said were lies, perhaps divine truth. But whatever they were, they stimulated.

With the half-dollar gone, Jack would depart with a quick stride and end up at his writing desk. Seldom would he write what he had heard. It was enough that his mental wheels were revolving once more and that he could again taste salt spray and listen to the singing of wind aloft.

That was his trade secret. By applying it, he was soon enabled to place a silver dollar in the cash drawer at the bookshop.

“But I only lent you fifty cents!” protested the proprietor.

“I know, but I’ll be wanting it again. Take it while I’ve got the money.”

Jack London never allowed his interest in men to lag. And because of that, he grew to know men and could write about them and what they did and why.

Circulate was his motto and circulate he did. Everyone on the Embarcadero knew him and liked him and brought stories to him.

Often our ears are filled with the advice “Write about the things you know. The things

close to you.” And in despair, we wail that there is nothing of interest in our surroundings or in the lives we lead. We say that and we believe it. And in despair, we pound out a bloody thunderer, using the other side of the world as our locale.

The reason we cannot write about the things at hand is apparent. If we *knew* our surroundings well enough, we could put them on paper. Someone else comes around, looks us over and studies our environment for a brief period and then goes off to write a novel. Why, we moan, didn’t we write that book? Surely we knew more about it than the lucky one.

But did we? To know a thing, we must first find it interesting. And it’s certain that we can never see the hovel next door while we yearn for the picturesque scene hundreds of miles away.

People pass our houses to and from their work each day. We know their names and what they do, but we are not really interested in them. Even though each is a potential story, we pass them all up because, as with the postman, we never really see them.

Down on the corner is a drugstore. Occasionally we enter to buy copies of our prospective markets, but do we ever get to know the clerk? Or the loafers out front? Or the cop who parks his motorcycle at the curb? Or the fireman just off duty? Or the high-school seniors who suck up sodas in the booth? Or . . . ?

No, probably and sadly not. Even while we look at them we’re probably thinking about the story we are going to write about the north woods and the girl caught in the outlaw’s cabin. The outsider comes in and looks our people over, goes off and writes about them, and then, quite reasonably, we get sore about his stealing our neighbors for material.

Jack London’s environment was the sea. He knew it well. Too well, in fact. He knew he had to work hard to keep up his interest. As a boy he was an oyster pirate. Then a member of the fish patrol. Later he was a seaman on a sealing vessel. From there he went to the Klondike, to Japan, to Mexico and finally around the world in the *Snark*. No wonder, you say, he wrote about the sea. It was fascinating. No wonder he dealt with wild animals. They had attacked him. His environment, you say, was intensely interesting.

Jack London, strangely enough, didn’t think so. He had to work hard to whip up flagging interest in the things he knew so well. He aspired to be, and became, the best-known American Socialist. His finest works, so he and the literati thought, were *The Iron Heel*, *War of the Classes*, *Revolution*, *Martin Eden* and *The People of the Abyss*.

But he made his money on adventure and sea stories. And to write them, he found that he must know them better than he did. He circulated among the men who were to become his characters. Long after he had given up the sea, he still forced himself to study his subject. He too wanted to graze in greener fields. He said that he wrote his adventure novels solely for the money.

In other words, he did not revel in his environment any more than we do in ours. Yet he forced himself to study it thoroughly and write about it because it was his means of livelihood. He never allowed himself to go stale. He circulated constantly.

And now, how about our drugstore? The clerk knows all about the trouble Mrs. Smith is having with her back and why young Smith had to come home from college. The loafers out front have fought wars and excavated ditches. The fireman can tell why the mansion on the hill went up in smoke and just how that affected his little boy's schoolwork. The cop leaning on his motorcycle played a big part in the late kidnapping. He knows the inside story and he'll tell it. He also knows a hundred rackets which are worked right under your nose. And those high-school seniors could fill a novel with their hidden adventures.

But most of us just walk up to the magazine rack and thumb the copies and wish to goodness we could think of something worthwhile to write about. We wish we could be in New York or Texas or Tahiti so that we could gather some real material.

The point of it is, we'll never be able—most of us—to shed our present environment unless we can make the well-known bucks. And if we can't sell, we can't earn. And if we can't think up stories, we therefore can't move on. In short, we're trapped.

It is not that our present locale is the best, but that it will have to do—emphatically. And the only real solution lies in circulating. In moving around and talking. In studying our neighbors and associates as closely as if we were about to transfer their likenesses to canvas.

If we don't *know* the average man, we can't write about him or for him and our assets will shrink in direct ratio to the pile of cancelled stamps on the return envelopes.

In other words: CIRCULATE!

– L. Ron Hubbard

GLOSSARY

Embarcadero: a waterfront section in San Francisco, from *embarcadero*, an American Spanish term meaning a wharf or landing place.

Klondike: a sparsely populated region (and river) located in northwest Canada, just east of Alaska, the site of a gold rush in the late 1800s. (A *rush* is an eager rushing of numbers of persons to some region that is being occupied or exploited, especially because of a new mine.)

London, Jack: (1876–1916) American author, journalist and political activist, one of the most widely read American authors with works translated into numerous languages. His adventures in gold mining and his sea voyages served as material for many of his more than fifty books.