

“John Barleycorn.” Jack London’s ‘Alcoholic Memoirs’

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Jack London’s autobiographical account of his long struggle with alcoholism was first published in 1913¹, three years before he committed suicide by taking an overdose of drugs; he was 40 years of age.

He describes the drinker with imagination and vision, who “may bubble with wit, or expand with good fellowship ... It is when in this condition that he strips away the husks of life’s healthiest illusions ... This is the hour of John Barleycorn’s subtlest power ... It is the penalty the imaginative man must pay for his friendship with John Barleycorn. He looks upon life and all its affairs with the jaundiced eye of a pessimistic German philosopher. He sees through all illusions ... Good is bad, truth is a cheat, and life is a joke ... He sees, he knows. And he knows his one freedom: he may anticipate the day of his death ... Yet suicide, quick or slow, is the price John Barleycorn exacts. No friend of his ever escapes making the just, due payment.”

(At seventeen) “I drank every day, and whenever opportunity offered I drank to excess ... I was learning what it was to get up shaky in the morning, with a stomach that quivered, with fingers touched with palsy, and to know the drinker’s need for a stiff glass of whisky neat in order to brace up.”

Once, after a bout of heavy drinking, he says he was in a comatose condition for seventeen hours: “I shudder to think how close a shave I ran.”

Eventually he decided that the only answer was to go away to sea. On his first voyage of fifty-one days he did not drink and had no desire for alcohol, but on reaching shore again he began drinking heavily. Awakening in the

doorway of a house, he found that his coat, his money, his watch, his belt, and even his shoes had been stolen.

On returning to his home town of Oakland, California, he found work in a jute mill. He enrolled at night school, and joined a debating society, “And for a year and a half on end I never took a drink, nor thought of taking a drink.” He studied nineteen hours a day for three months, and during the University examinations he hardly slept, devoting every moment to studying. (He passed the examinations). In the end he was completely exhausted, and felt a strong urge to drink, although he seems to have recovered from this phase fairly soon, and he then decided to embark on a career as a writer. “Heavens, how I wrote! Never was there a creative fever such as mine from which the patient escaped fatal results. The way I worked was enough to soften my brain and send to me a mad-house ... At times I forgot to each ... I had brain and nerve fag, and body fag as well, and yet the thought of drink never suggested itself. All my waking hours, except those with that infernal typewriter, were spent in a creative heaven. I no longer feared John Barleycorn. Mine was that dangerous stage when a man believes himself John Barleycorn’s master. I had proved it to my satisfaction in the long years of work and study ...”

“The older I got, the greater my success, the more money I earned, the wider was the command of the world that became mine, and the more prominently did John Barleycorn bulk in my life. And still I maintained no more than a nodding acquaintance with him.

To show how unripe I was for John Barleycorn, when, at this time, I descended into my slough of despond, I never dreamed of turning to John Barleycorn for a helping hand ... I meditated suicide coolly, as a Greek philosopher might ... one way only was uppermost in my thought — my revolver,

¹Reissued in the Fitzroy Edition of the Works of Jack London, Arco Publications, London, 1967.

the crashing eternal darkness of a bullet." ... "After my long sickness my drinking continued to be convivial, but, imperceptibly my need for alcohol took form and began to grow ... And here we come to it. How to face the social intercourse game with the glamour gone? John Barleycorn."

He began to drink regularly and often alone. His daily consumption of alcohol steadily increased. He found he needed a drink before breakfast and "achieved a condition in which my body was never free from alcohol." He carried supplies of alcohol when travelling. Soon he found he had to take a drink before writing, whereas previously he only drank after completing his target of a thousand words a day.

"On my lovely ranch in the Valley of the Moon, brain-soaked with many months of alcohol, I am oppressed by the cosmic sadness that has always been the heritage of man. In vain I ask myself why I should be sad ... My life has indeed fallen in pleasant places. Not a hundred men in a million have been as lucky as I. Yet with all this vast good fortune, I am sad. And I am sad because John Barleycorn is with me ... and I know that I, too, shall some day, and soon, be gone."

London came to the conclusion that the only answer to alcoholism would be Prohibition, and he thought that one way to bring this about was to give women the right to vote — they would vote for Prohibition. "The women know. They have paid an incalculable price of sweat and tears for man's use of alcohol ... I can well say that I wish my forefathers had banished John Barleycorn before my time."

Had he lived for four more years, he would have seen the introduction of Prohibition in America, and its failure to have any significant effect on alcoholism.

He describes periods of severe depression, when the thought of suicide was never far from his mind, and also times when he had great energy, being able to work very long hours with little sleep, which suggests that he suffered from a bipolar affective illness. There seems to be no direct link however between his affective illness and his alcoholism, since he stressed that during a long period of severe depression he not only did not drink, the thought of drink did not enter his mind. Again, during his 'high' periods, as when he was spending his waking hours 'in a creative heaven', he did not drink. (He was a remarkably prolific author — he had fifty books published in a period of seventeen years.)

One rather surprising feature of this book is that he makes no mention of contact with the medical profession or hospitals.

He describes long periods of abstinence, followed by bouts of heavy drinking. Perhaps the approach to the problem of alcoholism adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous would have been successful in preventing relapse. But, if such an organisation had been in existence during his lifetime, would he have been willing to join? This seems rather unlikely, as in the final chapter of his book he tells his readers: "Mine is no tale of a reformed drunkard. I have never been a drunkard, and I have not reformed."