

***JACK  
LONDON***



***WAR  
OF THE CLASSES***

**Jack London**

# **War of the Classes**

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# PREFACE

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When I was a youngster I was looked upon as a weird sort of creature, because, forsooth, I was a socialist. Reporters from local papers interviewed me, and the interviews, when published, were pathological studies of a strange and abnormal specimen of man. At that time (nine or ten years ago), because I made a stand in my native town for municipal ownership of public utilities, I was branded a “red-shirt,” a “dynamiter,” and an “anarchist”; and really decent fellows, who liked me very well, drew the line at my appearing in public with their sisters.

But the times changed. There came a day when I heard, in my native town, a Republican mayor publicly proclaim that “municipal ownership was a fixed American policy.” And in that day I found myself picking up in the world. No longer did the pathologist study me, while the really decent fellows did not mind in the least the propinquity of myself and their sisters in the public eye. My political and sociological ideas were ascribed to the vagaries of youth, and good-natured elderly men patronized me and told me that I would grow up some day and become an unusually intelligent member of the community. Also they told me that my views were biassed by my empty pockets, and that some day, when I had gathered to me a few dollars, my views would be wholly different,—in short, that my views would be their views.

And then came the day when my socialism grew respectable,—still a vagary of youth, it was held, but romantically respectable. Romance, to the bourgeois mind,

was respectable because it was not dangerous. As a “red-shirt,” with bombs in all his pockets, I was dangerous. As a youth with nothing more menacing than a few philosophical ideas, Germanic in their origin, I was an interesting and pleasing personality.

Through all this experience I noted one thing. It was not I that changed, but the community. In fact, my socialistic views grew solidier and more pronounced. I repeat, it was the community that changed, and to my chagrin I discovered that the community changed to such purpose that it was not above stealing my thunder. The community branded me a “red-shirt” because I stood for municipal ownership; a little later it applauded its mayor when he proclaimed municipal ownership to be a fixed American policy. He stole my thunder, and the community applauded the theft. And today the community is able to come around and give me points on municipal ownership.

What happened to me has been in no wise different from what has happened to the socialist movement as a whole in the United States. In the bourgeois mind socialism has changed from a terrible disease to a youthful vagary, and later on had its thunder stolen by the two old parties,—socialism, like a meek and thrifty workingman, being exploited became respectable.

Only dangerous things are abhorrent. The thing that is not dangerous is always respectable. And so with socialism in the United States. For several years it has been very respectable,—a sweet and beautiful Utopian dream, in the bourgeois mind, yet a dream, only a dream. During this period, which has just ended, socialism was tolerated

because it was impossible and non-menacing. Much of its thunder had been stolen, and the workingmen had been made happy with full dinner-pails. There was nothing to fear. The kind old world spun on, coupons were clipped, and larger profits than ever were extracted from the toilers. Coupon-clipping and profit-extracting would continue to the end of time. These were functions divine in origin and held by divine right. The newspapers, the preachers, and the college presidents said so, and what they say, of course, is so—to the bourgeois mind.

Then came the presidential election of 1904. Like a bolt out of a clear sky was the socialist vote of 435,000,—an increase of nearly 400 per cent in four years, the largest third-party vote, with one exception, since the Civil War. Socialism had shown that it was a very live and growing revolutionary force, and all its old menace revived. I am afraid that neither it nor I are any longer respectable. The capitalist press of the country confirms me in my opinion, and herewith I give a few post-election utterances of the capitalist press:—

“The Democratic party of the constitution is dead. The Social-Democratic party of continental Europe, preaching discontent and class hatred, assailing law, property, and personal rights, and insinuating confiscation and plunder, is here.”—Chicago Chronicle.

“That over forty thousand votes should have been cast in this city to make such a person as Eugene V. Debs the President of the United States is

about the worst kind of advertising that Chicago could receive.”—Chicago Inter-Ocean.

“We cannot blink the fact that socialism is making rapid growth in this country, where, of all others, there would seem to be less inspiration for it.”—Brooklyn Daily Eagle.

“Upon the hands of the Republican party an awful responsibility was placed last Tuesday. . . It knows that reforms—great, far-sweeping reforms—are necessary, and it has the power to make them. God help our civilization if it does not! . . . It must repress the trusts or stand before the world responsible for our system of government being changed into a social republic. The arbitrary cutting down of wages must cease, or socialism will seize another lever to lift itself into power.”—The Chicago New World.

“Scarcely any phase of the election is more sinisterly interesting than the increase in the socialist vote. Before election we said that we could not afford to give aid and comfort to the socialists in any manner. . . It (socialism) must be fought in all its phases, in its every manifestation.”—San Francisco Argonaut.

And far be it from me to deny that socialism is a menace. It is its purpose to wipe out, root and branch, all capitalistic institutions of present-day society. It is distinctly revolutionary, and in scope and depth is vastly more tremendous than any revolution that has ever occurred in the history of the world. It presents a new spectacle to the

astonished world,—that of an *organized, international, revolutionary movement*. In the bourgeois mind a class struggle is a terrible and hateful thing, and yet that is precisely what socialism is,—a world-wide class struggle between the propertyless workers and the propertied masters of workers. It is the prime preachment of socialism that the struggle is a class struggle. The working class, in the process of social evolution, (in the very nature of things), is bound to revolt from the sway of the capitalist class and to overthrow the capitalist class. This is the menace of socialism, and in affirming it and in tallying myself an adherent of it, I accept my own consequent unrespectability.

As yet, to the average bourgeois mind, socialism is merely a menace, vague and formless. The average member of the capitalist class, when he discusses socialism, is condemned an ignoramus out of his own mouth. He does not know the literature of socialism, its philosophy, nor its politics. He wags his head sagely and rattles the dry bones of dead and buried ideas. His lips mumble mouldy phrases, such as, “Men are not born equal and never can be;” “It is Utopian and impossible;” “Abstinance should be rewarded;” “Man will first have to be born again;” “Coöperative colonies have always failed;” and “What if we do divide up? in ten years there would be rich and poor men such as there are today.”

It surely is time that the capitalists knew something about this socialism that they feel menaces them. And it is the hope of the writer that the socialistic studies in this volume may in some slight degree enlighten a few



capitalistic minds. The capitalist must learn, first and for always, that socialism is based, not upon the equality, but upon the inequality, of men. Next, he must learn that no new birth into spiritual purity is necessary before socialism becomes possible. He must learn that socialism deals with what is, not with what ought to be; and that the material with which it deals is the “clay of the common road,” the warm human, fallible and frail, sordid and petty, absurd and contradictory, even grotesque, and yet, withal, shot through with flashes and glimmerings of something finer and God-like, with here and there sweetnesses of service and unselfishness, desires for goodness, for renunciation and sacrifice, and with conscience, stern and awful, at times blazingly imperious, demanding the right,—the right, nothing more nor less than the right.

JACK LONDON.

OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA.

January 12, 1905.

## **THE CLASS STRUGGLE**

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Unfortunately or otherwise, people are prone to believe in the reality of the things they think ought to be so. This comes of the cheery optimism which is innate with life itself; and, while it may sometimes be deplored, it must never be censured, for, as a rule, it is productive of more good than harm, and of about all the achievement there is in the world. There are cases where this optimism has been disastrous, as with the people who lived in Pompeii during its last quivering days; or with the aristocrats of the time of

Louis XVI, who confidently expected the Deluge to overwhelm their children, or their children's children, but never themselves. But there is small likelihood that the case of perverse optimism here to be considered will end in such disaster, while there is every reason to believe that the great change now manifesting itself in society will be as peaceful and orderly in its culmination as it is in its present development.

Out of their constitutional optimism, and because a class struggle is an abhorred and dangerous thing, the great American people are unanimous in asserting that there is no class struggle. And by "American people" is meant the recognized and authoritative mouth-pieces of the American people, which are the press, the pulpit, and the university. The journalists, the preachers, and the professors are practically of one voice in declaring that there is no such thing as a class struggle now going on, much less that a class struggle will ever go on, in the United States. And this declaration they continually make in the face of a multitude of facts which impeach, not so much their sincerity, as affirm, rather, their optimism.

There are two ways of approaching the subject of the class struggle. The existence of this struggle can be shown theoretically, and it can be shown actually. For a class struggle to exist in society there must be, first, a class inequality, a superior class and an inferior class (as measured by power); and, second, the outlets must be closed whereby the strength and ferment of the inferior class have been permitted to escape.

That there are even classes in the United States is vigorously denied by many; but it is incontrovertible, when a group of individuals is formed, wherein the members are bound together by common interests which are peculiarly their interests and not the interests of individuals outside the group, that such a group is a class. The owners of capital, with their dependents, form a class of this nature in the United States; the working people form a similar class. The interest of the capitalist class, say, in the matter of income tax, is quite contrary to the interest of the laboring class; and, *vice versa*, in the matter of poll-tax.

If between these two classes there be a clear and vital conflict of interest, all the factors are present which make a class struggle; but this struggle will lie dormant if the strong and capable members of the inferior class be permitted to leave that class and join the ranks of the superior class. The capitalist class and the working class have existed side by side and for a long time in the United States; but hitherto all the strong, energetic members of the working class have been able to rise out of their class and become owners of capital. They were enabled to do this because an undeveloped country with an expanding frontier gave equality of opportunity to all. In the almost lottery-like scramble for the ownership of vast unowned natural resources, and in the exploitation of which there was little or no competition of capital, (the capital itself rising out of the exploitation), the capable, intelligent member of the working class found a field in which to use his brains to his own advancement. Instead of being discontented in direct ratio with his intelligence and ambitions, and of radiating

amongst his fellows a spirit of revolt as capable as he was capable, he left them to their fate and carved his own way to a place in the superior class.

But the day of an expanding frontier, of a lottery-like scramble for the ownership of natural resources, and of the upbuilding of new industries, is past. Farthest West has been reached, and an immense volume of surplus capital roams for investment and nips in the bud the patient efforts of the embryo capitalist to rise through slow increment from small beginnings. The gateway of opportunity after opportunity has been closed, and closed for all time. Rockefeller has shut the door on oil, the American Tobacco Company on tobacco, and Carnegie on steel. After Carnegie came Morgan, who triple-locked the door. These doors will not open again, and before them pause thousands of ambitious young men to read the placard: NO THOROUGH-FARE.

And day by day more doors are shut, while the ambitious young men continue to be born. It is they, denied the opportunity to rise from the working class, who preach revolt to the working class. Had he been born fifty years later, Andrew Carnegie, the poor Scotch boy, might have risen to be president of his union, or of a federation of unions; but that he would never have become the builder of Homestead and the founder of multitudinous libraries, is as certain as it is certain that some other man would have developed the steel industry had Andrew Carnegie never been born.

Theoretically, then, there exist in the United States all the factors which go to make a class struggle. There are the capitalists and working classes, the interests of which