Jack London

THE STAR ROVER

Lingua

CHAPTER I

All my life I have had an awareness of other times and places. I have been aware of other persons in me.—Oh, and trust me, so have you, my reader that is to be. Read back into your childhood, and this sense of awareness I speak of will be remembered as an experience of your childhood. You were then not fixed, not crystallized. You were plastic, a soul in flux, a consciousness and an identity in the process of forming—ay, of forming and forgetting.

You have forgotten much, my reader, and yet, as you read these lines, you remember dimly the hazy vistas of other times and places into which your child eyes peered. They seem dreams to you to-day. Yet, if they were dreams, dreamed then, whence the substance of them? Our dreams are grotesquely compounded of the things we know. The stuff of our sheerest dreams is the stuff of our experience. As a child, a wee child, you dreamed you fell great heights; you dreamed you flew through the air as things of the air fly; you were vexed by crawling spiders and many-legged creatures of the slime; you heard other voices, saw other faces nightmarishly familiar, and gazed upon sunrises and sunsets other than you know now, looking back, you ever looked upon.

Very well. These child glimpses are of other-worldness, of other-lifeness, of things that you had never seen in this particular world of your particular life. Then whence? Other lives? Other worlds? Perhaps, when you have read all that I shall write, you will have received answers to the perplexities I have propounded to you, and that you yourself, ere you came to read me, propounded to yourself.

Wordsworth knew. He was neither seer nor prophet, but just ordinary man like you or any man. What he knew, you know, any man knows. But he most aptly stated it in his passage that begins "Not in utter nakedness, not in entire forgetfulness. . ."

Ah, truly, shades of the prison-house close about us, the new-born things, and all too soon do we forget. And yet, when we were new-born we did remember other times and places. We, helpless infants in arms or creeping quadruped-like on the floor, dreamed our dreams of air-flight. Yes; and we endured the torment and torture of nightmare fears of dim and monstrous things. We new-born infants, without experience, were born with fear, with memory of fear; and *memory is experience*.

As for myself, at the beginnings of my vocabulary, at so tender a period that I still made hunger noises and sleep noises, yet even then did I know that I had been a star-rover. Yes, I, whose lips had never lisped the word "king," remembered that I had once been the son of a king. More—I

remembered that once I had been a slave and a son of a slave, and worn an iron collar round my neck.

Still more. When I was three, and four, and five years of age, I was not yet I. I was a mere becoming, a flux of spirit not yet cooled solid in the mould of my particular flesh and time and place. In that period all that I had ever been in ten thousand lives before strove in me, and troubled the flux of me, in the effort to incorporate itself in me and become me.

Silly, isn't it? But remember, my reader, whom I hope to have travel far with me through time and space—remember, please, my reader, that I have thought much on these matters, that through bloody nights and sweats of dark that lasted years-long, I have been alone with my many selves to consult and contemplate my many selves. I have gone through the hells of all existences to bring you news which you will share with me in a casual comfortable hour over my printed page.

So, to return, I say, during the ages of three and four and five, I was not yet I. I was merely becoming as I took form in the mould of my body, and all the mighty, indestructible past wrought in the mixture of me to determine what the form of that becoming would be. It was not my voice that cried out in the night in fear of things known, which I, forsooth, did not and could not know. The same with my childish angers, my loves, and my laughters. Other voices screamed through my voice, the voices of men and women aforetime, of all shadowy hosts of progenitors. And the snarl of my anger was blended with

the snarls of beasts more ancient than the mountains, and the vocal madness of my child hysteria, with all the red of its wrath, was chorded with the insensate, stupid cries of beasts pre-Adamic and progeologic in time.

And there the secret is out. The red wrath! It has undone me in this, my present life. Because of it, a few short weeks hence, I shall be led from this cell to a high place with unstable flooring, graced above by a well-stretched rope; and there they will hang me by the neck until I am dead. The red wrath always has undone me in all my lives; for the red wrath is my disastrous catastrophic heritage from the time of the slimy things ere the world was prime.

It is time that I introduce myself. I am neither fool nor lunatic. I want you to know that, in order that you will believe the things I shall tell you. I am Darrell Standing. Some few of you who read this will know me immediately. But to the majority, who are bound to be strangers, let me exposit myself. Eight years ago I was Professor of Agronomics in the College of Agriculture of the University of California. Eight years ago the sleepy little university town of Berkeley was shocked by the murder of Professor Haskell in one of the laboratories of the Mining Building. Darrell Standing was the murderer.

I am Darrell Standing. I was caught redhanded. Now the right and the wrong of this affair with Professor Haskell I shall not discuss. It was

purely a private matter. The point is, that in a surge of anger, obsessed by that catastrophic red wrath that has cursed me down the ages, I killed my fellow professor. The court records show that I did; and, for once, I agree with the court records.

No; I am not to be hanged for his murder. I received a life-sentence for my punishment. I was thirty-six years of age at the time. I am now forty-four years old. I have spent the eight intervening years in the California State Prison of San Quentin. Five of these years I spent in the dark. Solitary confinement, they call it. Men who endure it, call it living death. But through these five years of death-in-life I managed to attain freedom such as few men have ever known. Closest-confined of prisoners, not only did I range the world, but I ranged time. They who immured me for petty years gave to me, all unwittingly, the largess of centuries. Truly, thanks to Ed Morrell, I have had five years of star-roving. But Ed Morrell is another story. I shall tell you about him a little later. I have so much to tell I scarce know how to begin.

Well, a beginning. I was born on a quarter-section in Minnesota. My mother was the daughter of an immigrant Swede. Her name was Hilda Tonnesson. My father was Chauncey Standing, of old American stock. He traced back to Alfred Standing, an indentured servant, or slave if you please, who was transported from England to the Virginia plantations in the days that were even old when the youthful Washington went a-surveying in the Pennsylvania wilderness.

A son of Alfred Standing fought in the War of the Revolution; a grandson, in the War of 1812. There have been no wars since in which the Standings have not been represented. I, the last of the Standings, dying soon without issue, fought as a common soldier in the Philippines, in our latest war, and to do so I resigned, in the full early ripeness of career, my professorship in the University of Nebraska. Good heavens, when I so resigned I was headed for the Deanship of the College of Agriculture in that university—I, the star-rover, the red-blooded adventurer, the vagabondish Cain of the centuries, the militant priest of remotest times, the moon-dreaming poet of ages forgotten and today unrecorded in man's history of man!

And here I am, my hands dyed red in Murderers' Row, in the State Prison of Folsom, awaiting the day decreed by the machinery of state when the servants of the state will lead me away into what they fondly believe is the dark—the dark they fear; the dark that gives them fearsome and superstitious fancies; the dark that drives them, drivelling and yammering, to the altars of their fear-created, anthropomorphic gods.

No; I shall never be Dean of any college of agriculture. And yet I knew agriculture. It was my profession. I was born to it, reared to it, trained to it; and I was a master of it. It was my genius. I can pick the high-percentage butter-fat cow with my eye and let the Babcock Tester prove the wisdom of my eye. I can look, not at land, but at landscape, and pronounce the virtues and the shortcomings of

the soil. Litmus paper is not necessary when I determine a soil to be acid or alkali. I repeat, farm-husbandry, in its highest scientific terms, was my genius, and is my genius. And yet the state, which includes all the citizens of the state, believes that it can blot out this wisdom of mine in the final dark by means of a rope about my neck and the abruptive jerk of gravitation—this wisdom of mine that was incubated through the millenniums, and that was well-hatched ere the farmed fields of Troy were ever pastured by the flocks of nomad shepherds!

Corn? Who else knows corn? There is my demonstration at Wistar, whereby I increased the annual corn-yield of every county in Iowa by half a million dollars. This is history. Many a farmer, riding in his motor-car to-day, knows who made possible that motor-car. Many a sweet-bosomed girl and bright-browed boy, poring over high-school text-books, little dreams that I made that higher education possible by my corn demonstration at Wistar.

And farm management! I know the waste of superfluous motion without studying a moving picture record of it, whether it be farm or farm-hand, the layout of buildings or the layout of the farm-hands' labour. There is my handbook and tables on the subject. Beyond the shadow of any doubt, at this present moment, a hundred thousand farmers are knotting their brows over its spread pages ere they tap out their final pipe and go to bed. And yet, so far was I beyond my tables, that all I needed was a mere look at a man to know his predispositions,

his co-ordinations, and the index fraction of his motion-wastage.

And here I must close this first chapter of my narrative. It is nine o'clock, and in Murderers' Row that means lights out. Even now, I hear the soft tread of the gum-shoed guard as he comes to censure me for my coal-oil lamp still burning. As if the mere living could censure the doomed to die!

CHAPTER II

I am Darrell Standing. They are going to take me out and hang me pretty soon. In the meantime I say my say, and write in these pages of the other times and places.

After my sentence, I came to spend the rest of my "natural life" in the prison of San Quentin. I proved incorrigible. An incorrigible is a terrible human being—at least such is the connotation of "incorrigible" in prison psychology. I became an incorrigible because I abhorred waste motion. The prison, like all prisons, was a scandal and an affront of waste motion. They put me in the jute-mill. The criminality of wastefulness irritated me. Why should it not? Elimination of waste motion was my speciality. Before the invention of steam or steam-driven looms three thousand years before, I had rotted in prison in old Babylon; and, trust me, I speak the truth when I say that in that ancient day we prisoners wove more efficiently on hand-looms than did the prisoners in the steam-powered loom-rooms of San Quentin.

The crime of waste was abhorrent. I rebelled. I tried to show the guards a score or so of more efficient ways. I was reported. I was given the dungeon and the starvation of light and food. I emerged and tried to work in the chaos of inefficiency of the loom-rooms. I rebelled. I was given the dungeon,

plus the strait-jacket. I was spread-eagled, and thumbed-up, and privily beaten by the stupid guards whose totality of intelligence was only just sufficient to show them that I was different from them and not so stupid.

Two years of this witless persecution I endured. It is terrible for a man to be tied down and gnawed by rats. The stupid brutes of guards were rats, and they gnawed the intelligence of me, gnawed all the fine nerves of the quick of me and of the consciousness of me. And I, who in my past have been a most valiant fighter, in this present life was no fighter at all. I was a farmer, an agriculturist, a desk-tied professor, a laboratory slave, interested only in the soil and the increase of the productiveness of the soil.

I fought in the Philippines because it was the tradition of the Standings to fight. I had no aptitude for fighting. It was all too ridiculous, the introducing of disruptive foreign substances into the bodies of little black men-folk. It was laughable to behold Science prostituting all the might of its achievement and the wit of its inventors to the violent introducing of foreign substances into the bodies of black folk.

As I say, in obedience to the tradition of the Standings I went to war and found that I had no aptitude for war. So did my officers find me out, because they made me a quartermaster's clerk, and as a clerk, at a desk, I fought through the Spanish-American War.

So it was not because I was a fighter, but because I was a thinker, that I was enraged by the

motion-wastage of the loom-rooms and was persecuted by the guards into becoming an "incorrigible." One's brain worked and I was punished for its working. As I told Warden Atherton, when my incorrigibility had become so notorious that he had me in on the carpet in his private office to plead with me; as I told him then:

"It is so absurd, my dear Warden, to think that your rat-throttlers of guards can shake out of my brain the things that are clear and definite in my brain. The whole organization of this prison is stupid. You are a politician. You can weave the political pull of San Francisco saloon-men and ward heelers into a position of graft such as this one you occupy; but you can't weave jute. Your loom-rooms are fifty years behind the times. . . ."

But why continue the tirade?—for tirade it was. I showed him what a fool he was, and as a result he decided that I was a hopeless incorrigible.

Give a dog a bad name—you know the saw. Very well. Warden Atherton gave the final sanction to the badness of my name. I was fair game. More than one convict's dereliction was shunted off on me, and was paid for by me in the dungeon on bread and water, or in being triced up by the thumbs on my tip-toes for long hours, each hour of which was longer than any life I have ever lived.

Intelligent men are cruel. Stupid men are monstrously cruel. The guards and the men over me, from the Warden down, were stupid monsters. Listen, and you shall learn what they did to me. There was a poet in the prison, a convict, a weak-chinned,

broad-browed, degenerate poet. He was a forger. He was a coward. He was a snitcher. He was a stool—strange words for a professor of agronomics to use in writing, but a professor of agronomics may well learn strange words when pent in prison for the term of his natural life.

This poet-forger's name was Cecil Winwood. He had had prior convictions, and yet, because he was a snivelling cur of a yellow dog, his last sentence had been only for seven years. Good credits would materially reduce this time. My time was life. Yet this miserable degenerate, in order to gain several short years of liberty for himself, succeeded in adding a fair portion of eternity to my own lifetime term.

I shall tell what happened the other way around, for it was only after a weary period that I learned. This Cecil Winwood, in order to curry favour with the Captain of the Yard, and thence the Warden, the Prison Directors, the Board of Pardons, and the Governor of California, framed up a prison-break. Now note three things: (a) Cecil Winwood was so detested by his fellow-convicts that they would not have permitted him to bet an ounce of Bull Durham on a bed-bug race—and bed-bug racing was a great sport with the convicts; (b) I was the dog that had been given a bad name: (c) for his frame-up, Cecil Winwood needed the dogs with bad names, the lifetimers, the desperate ones, the incorrigibles.

But the lifers detested Cecil Winwood, and, when he approached them with his plan of a wholesale

prison-break, they laughed at him and turned away with curses for the stool that he was. But he fooled them in the end, forty of the bitterest-wise ones in the pen. He approached them again and again. He told of his power in the prison by virtue of his being trusty in the Warden's office, and because of the fact that he had the run of the dispensary.

"Show me," said Long Bill Hodge, a mountaineer doing life for train robbery, and whose whole soul for years had been bent on escaping in order to kill the companion in robbery who had turned state's evidence on him.

Cecil Winwood accepted the test. He claimed that he could dope the guards the night of the break.

"Talk is cheap," said Long Bill Hodge. "What we want is the goods. Dope one of the guards to-night. There's Barnum. He's no good. He beat up that crazy Chink yesterday in Bughouse Alley—when he was off duty, too. He's on the night watch. Dope him to-night an' make him lose his job. Show me, and we'll talk business with you."

All this Long Bill told me in the dungeons afterward. Cecil Winwood demurred against the immediacy of the demonstration. He claimed that he must have time in which to steal the dope from the dispensary. They gave him the time, and a week later he announced that he was ready. Forty hard-bitten lifers waited for the guard Barnum to go to sleep on his shift. And Barnum did. He was found asleep, and he was discharged for sleeping on duty.

Of course, that convinced the lifers. But there was the Captain of the Yard to convince. To him,