



Paul Azevedo

The Reactor

Tales of a Storyteller

It was just a hundred years ago, in 1883, that a little boy lived somewhere in the Pacific Manor area. He was seven years old. On school days he trudged up to the top of the hill to a shack that passed for a school house. The shack was somewhere near Lake Alta, the drained earthquake sag pond not far from the now Fairmont Shopping Center and Fairmont School. It was called San Pedro School, and it served the entire area that included the Sanchez Adobe, the barren farmlands that are now Sharp Park Golf Course, and the barren, grassy ravines that are now tree-studded Vallemar.

There was no Ocean Shore railroad. That was 25 years in the future. There was no castle.

Mr. McCloskey, (Congressman Paul McCloskey's grandfather) had not yet decided to build it, and would not for almost a quarter of a century.

No one knows just where the school was. The best we can do is put it within a surveyor's block, a certain fraction of a township.

No one knows exactly where the little boy's house was. We know that his stepfather raised potatoes, or tried to that year, on a 75-acre place. We know that there were few neighbors, but at least some of them were Italians, and they sang and drank wine and grew crops and children.

We know that the little boy was an unhappy child. The year he spent here was a difficult one. He remembered the place as the "bleak, sad coast" when he wrote of it later. He remembered being always hungry for meat, though some people think he was merely showing his creative imagination even at seven.

His family was restless and poor. Potatoes did not prove a bonanza that year. The family moved, and moved again. The little boy, who had been born in San Francisco, would also have ties to Livermore and Oakland. As he grew to manhood he became what they called an "Oyster Pirate."

Then he came under the influence of a woman who served the people of Oakland as a librarian, and who wrote poems, and who influenced the little boy immensely. Her name was Ina Coolbrith.

He went on to participate in the Alaskan gold rush while he was in his early twenties. And he wrote.

Oh, how he wrote. Adventure tales for the magazines. And books. They were the kinds of books that people could not put down.

He wrote about wolves, and dogs, and gold miners, and sea captains. He had a rare gift, and people around the world loved his way with words.

They still do. He called himself John Griffith London, his stepfather's name. The name of his real father is known, but whether his mother ever was actually married to his real father seems to be unsure, far less sure than the fact that he was an authentic genius, this little boy who lived in the potato fields before there was an Edgemar, or a Pacific Manor, or a Sharp Park, or a Vallemar. For a brief time, Jack London lived here, and soaked up ideas and personalities and settings that would reappear transformed in his books.