

The Writer Next Door: Jack London and the Sonoma State Home by Jeff Falconer

Celebrated Glen Ellen resident Jack London began acquiring property on Sonoma Mountain in the early 1900's, amid his first flush of success as a writer. Though London's literary career would last less than twenty years, his output was impressive, including over fifty books and countless short stories and articles. He was by turns a war correspondent, political commentator and travel writer, and the subjects and settings of London's work were literally "all over the map".

In contrast to his far-flung travels and interests, one of London's more unique works is set close to home. The short story "Told In The Drooling Ward" takes place in the Sonoma State Home, originally called the California Home for the Care and Feeding of Feeble-Minded Children, and known today as Sonoma Developmental Center. London's Beauty Ranch shared its southern border along Asbury Creek with the Sonoma Home, and his time in Glen Ellen, from his first visit in 1903 until his death in 1916, marked a period of dramatic growth for the institution.

Attitudes regarding care for people with disabilities continue to evolve and are an ongoing source of controversy. "Told In The Drooling Ward" provides an unflinching and important snapshot of what the writer saw, for better or worse, in his day. Devoid of political correctness but full of insight, "Drooling Ward", like much of London's work, is not for the squeamish.

A young resident of the Home weaves the tale: *"My name's Tom. I'm twenty-eight years old. Everybody knows me in the institution. This is an institution, you know. It belongs to the State of California and is run by politics."*

Tom is proud of his status as a "high-grade feeb", an elevated ranking in the patient population based on functionality. At the bottom of this hierarchy are the "droolers", with whose feeding Tom is entrusted. *"I like to feed droolers. They don't make trouble. They can't. Something's wrong with most of their legs and arms, and they can't talk. They're very low-grade. I can walk and talk and do things. You must be careful with droolers and not feed them too fast. Then they choke. Miss Jones says I'm an expert."* At the upper end of the spectrum are epileptics, who Tom calls "epilecs". *"They're stuck up because they ain't just ordinary feebs... they say they're just as good as anybody outside, only they're sick. I don't like them much. They laugh at me, when they ain't busy throwing fits."*

Tom fantasizes about marrying one of the young nurses and settling down, but always returns to his senses. *"I could get out of here if I wanted to. I'm not so feeble as some might think. But I don't let on. I have too good a time. Besides, everything would run down if I wasn't around. I'm afraid sometime they'll*

find out I'm not a feeb and send me out into the world to make my own living. I know the world, and I don't like it. The Home is fine enough for me."

"Told In The Drooling Ward" was published in 1914 in The Bookman, and is readily available online. It's a quick read and is highly recommended.

After a sympathetic exploration of Tom's life in the Home, London's story climaxes when Joe and Charley, two "*high-grade epilecs*", recruit him to run away over Sonoma Mountain, where a gold mine waits for the plunder. Tom insists on carrying along Little Albert, a drooler to whom he's become attached. The sketchy fugitives venture off Sonoma Home property and onto a neighboring ranch, where they encounter a friendly couple on horseback, Jack and Charmian London thinly disguised.

"We're running away," I said.

And he said, "Good luck, but be sure and get back before dark."

"But this is real running away," I said.

And then both he and his wife laughed."

"Mr. Endicott" leaves the escapees with a warning about bears and mountain lions, which doesn't help morale. Nonetheless they continue far up the hillside. As darkness falls, Tom and his friends hunker down for a cold, hungry, frightening night.

At dawn the humbled pilgrims retrace their steps to the Home. "*Doctor Wilson was mad as could be, and said I was the worst feeb in the institution, along with Joe and Charley. But Miss Striker, who was a nurse in the drooling ward then, just put her arms around me and cried she was so happy I'd got back. I thought right there that mebbe I'd marry her.*"

A recurring theme in Jack London's writing is the dynamic tension between the needs and rights of the individual and the overall good of the collective. As an avowed socialist who made a fortune from his work and saw no conflict there, London clearly had personal experience of this dynamic. In "Told In The Drooling Ward", he deftly examines the subject through the character of Tom, offering a stark portrayal of the young man's limitations, along with a full-throated celebration of his sense of self and aspirations.

In both his life and his work, our famous neighbor Jack left us much to ponder.

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