



The Iron Heel

Jack London

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The Iron Heel is a dystopian novel by American writer Jack London. Generally considered to be "the earliest of the modern Dystopian", it chronicles the rise of an oligarchic tyranny in the United States.

The novel is based on the (fictional) "Everhard Manuscript" written by Avis Everhard which she hid and which was subsequently found centuries later. In addition, this novel has an introduction and series of (often lengthy) footnotes written from the perspective of scholar Anthony Meredith. Meredith writes from around 2600 AD or 419 B.O.M. (the Brotherhood of Man). Jack London thus writes at two levels, often having Meredith condescendingly correcting the errors of Everhard yet, at the same time, exposing the often incomplete understanding of this distant future perspective.

Meredith's introduction also acts as a deliberate "spoiler" (the term did not yet exist at the time of writing). Before ever getting a chance to get to know Avis and Ernest, how they fell in love or how Avis became politically involved, the reader is already told that all their struggles and hopes would end in total failure and repression, and that both of them would be summarily executed. This gives all that follows the air of a foreordained tragedy. There is still left the consolation that a happy end would come for humanity as a whole - though hundreds of years too late for Avis and Ernest as individuals; the cruel oligarchy would fall, and the two will be vindicated and respected by posterity as pioneers and martyrs.

The Oligarchy are the largest monopoly trusts (or robber barons) who manage to squeeze out the middle class by bankrupting most small to mid-sized business as well as reducing all farmers to effective serfdom. This Oligarchy maintains power through a "labor caste" and the Mercenaries. Labor in essential industries like steel and rail are elevated and given decent wages, housing, and education. Indeed, the tragic turn in the novel (and Jack London's core warning to his contemporaries) is the treachery of these favored unions which break with the other unions and side with the Oligarchy. Further, a second, military caste is formed: the Mercenaries. The Mercenaries are officially the army of the US but are in fact in the employ of the Oligarchs.

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