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Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin

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Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin

## **To Love or Not To Love? Jack London and Anna Strunsky's *The Kempton-Wace Letters***

Those differences—what were they but the healthy expression of our immaturity, of our aspirations toward the absolute of truth and right and justice. [...] The differences tortured us as they did precisely because in the great essentials we were at one—but this, youth could not know. [...] Was he not an ardent feminist and suffragist? Why, then, did I suspect him of thinking women the inferiors of men? Did he not finally marry with love and for love, and exemplify in his own life the need of love that men and women have in common. [...] Why, then, did we spend twenty-two months writing *The Kempton-Wace Letters*, trying to convert each other to positions which, at bottom, we must both have held?<sup>1</sup>

In this 1919 letter to Charmian Kittredge, Anna Strunsky touches on some of the many ironies which characterized the biographical context, the writing, and the argument of *The Kempton-Wace Letters*. Indeed, the paradoxes are numerous and reach into Jack London's very personality, relationships, vision of women and of the role of humans in the natural world. A born romantic, London nevertheless defended in his early twenties the concept of the 'economic man' and the 'scientific man,' insisting on viewing love as merely a part of the reproductive process—that is as a trick played by nature on mankind to ensure procreation and the survival of the species—while, at the same time, arguing his scientific vision of love with more logic and passion than Anna her own romantic view of love. Ironically, London could probably have written Anna's side of the argument far more convincingly than she did, and the failure of his own so-called 'scientific' first marriage to Bessie Maddern only superficially appears to invalidate his side of the argument in both his life and the book.

Indeed, his losing the argument in *The Kempton-Wace Letters* is a fallacious parallel to his failed first marriage since that marriage was based on neither reason nor eugenics but was apparently brought about by Anna's rejection of his love—i.e.