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**THE BEST SHORT STORIES OF**

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# **JACK LONDON**

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**A choice collection from one of the world's great storytellers**

**TO THE MAN ON TRIAL • THE LAW OF LIFE • THE WIT OF PORPORTUK  
TO BUILD A FIRE • THE HEATHEN • A PIECE OF STEAK • LOVE OF LIFE  
LOST FACE • THE PEARLS OF PARLAY • AN ODYSSEY OF THE NORTH**

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**With an Introduction by EUGENE BURDICK**



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OF  
*Jack London*

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LOST FACE  
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THE HEATHEN

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THE PEARLS OF PARLAY

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EUGENE BURDICK

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## *Contents*

INTRODUCTION	v
TO BUILD A FIRE	13
AN ODYSSEY OF THE NORTH	29
LOST FACE	59
A PIECE OF STEAK	71
THE HEATHEN	90
THE LAW OF LIFE	109
TO THE MAN ON TRAIL	116
THE WIT OF PORPORTUK	125
LOVE OF LIFE	147
THE PEARLS OF PARLAY	167

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## *Introduction*

Once, years ago, I visited with a German on his tiny island in the Southern Solomons. He had come here long before, had married a coal-black Melanesian princess and, through her, he owned the island. He had once been a sailor, but had jumped a sailing ship because of harsh treatment. He was a tough and wiry man. He ran his island like a ship . . . and a taut one. It was every bit as taut as his ship. He lived a life which was thin by modern standards, but rich in one thing: independence.

He had two possessions he valued greatly. One was an old and rust-stained sextant; the second was an old yellowed photograph. The picture had four people in it, but their features were blurred by time and the pitiless quiet assault of the tropics. Even so the faces were vaguely familiar.

"That is me, that is my wife, that is Jack London, and that is his wife, Charmian," the German said. "They were here on a boat called the *Snark*. He said he was a writer. We piloted them to Lord Howe Reefs."

"He was a writer," I said. "A very famous one."

"No, he was a sailor," the German said with a heavy finality. "Maybe he wrote, but he was a sailor first. He held the pen like a marlinespike."

The German was partly right, but he missed a great deal. London did, indeed, often write with the power of the marlinespike, but he could also write with the delicacy of a whaler doing scrimshaw on a whale's tooth.

London was a marvelous instrument of experience. He was possessed of an uncanny perception of the ordinary as well as the bizarre. Most of what he experienced led him to "write with a marlinespike."

First, he was a man of the Pacific. All of the stories in this collection take place either upon the vast waters of the Pacific or on the lands that border it. In the North it

was bitterly cold. Indeed, the cold becomes a presence in London's stories . . . a thing that pursues every man, penalizes him brutally for his mistakes, is cunning and utterly impartial.

In the eerie story, "To Build a Fire," the reader at first seems to be viewing only a man and a dog moving across a snow-covered landscape. But then the cold begins to work: tobacco juice hardens into amber crystal on the man's chin, one finger after another loses sensation, matches begin to take on a mystical importance . . . and then the man makes his first tiny mistake. It takes him time to realize that the mistake is irrevocable, that the string of his personal guillotine has been cut and the blade is sliding slowly towards him. In the end he holds the mass of matches between his frozen hands, smells them burning his flesh . . . and loses.

When the story is over, the reader understands about cold. Not just everyday cold, the kind which modern arctic clothing and Primus stoves and alcohol pellets can overcome. This is a cold so ominous and relentless that it takes on a personality.

In the South Seas, where the water is warm and the islands are lush, the Pacific was no more kind. The waters were uncharted, sharks were everywhere, passages had to be shot using sail only, typhoons loomed up suddenly and without warning. Even today, when the Pacific has been largely tamed by radar and fathometers and planes and engines, it is a deadly place. In London's time Pacific sailors suffered casualties as regularly as soldiers in a fighting platoon. The reefs of Rarotonga, Noumea, the thousands of little islands of the Molaccas and Borneo were studded with the wrecks of unlucky or unskillful sailors. No one instituted a search for a missing vessel . . . everyone knew its fate. In any case the reaches were too vast to search.

In the superb "The Pearls of Parlay," London writes of a typhoon, that most difficult of things to describe. Most writers skirt the subject if they can. A typhoon is one of the most awesome things known to man. All the atomic bombs so far exploded do not equal the energy which a season's typhoons expend against atolls, high islands, reefs and ships. London's description is masterful, an exercise in economy and the glancing insight. The barometer begins to fall, the sea falls flat, there is the sudden approach of a film of

quiet black water, and suddenly a whole lagoon full of vessels is in mortal danger. In the end London does the impossible: he makes the wind visible, gives it palpable character.

The men who roamed London's Pacific were a strange, savage and remorseless type. They were the wolves of their time, the men who took great risks, asked no quarter, gave none. The whole theme of "The Heathen" rests upon the surprising fact that one man would risk his existence to save another. When it occurred, the two men were locked together for the rest of their lives. When the end comes and Otoo goes under the water, blood gushing from the shark-severed stubs of both hands, London has said more than a hundred books could say on the character of the men who lived in the old days on the Pacific.

There are few women in these stories. This is not because London disliked women. Quite the contrary. In his own person he was enormously attractive to women and he reciprocated. Some of his affairs enraged the Puritanical morals of his time. But in London's Pacific there were, in simple fact, very few women. Whether they were the whores of Woomooloo or the "demis" of Tahiti or a Parisian ballerina, they are "off-stage" because the Pacific was a masculine place. "The Wit of Porportuk" is an exception, and there the beautiful fawn-like girl El-Soo is made to pay a price as grim and brutal as that suffered by any man.

This is not a world which lends itself to delicate writing. It is a world in which a fist is blunt and an instrument, hunger is a fearful gripe in the bowels, the whisky is eye-watering. But despite the subject matter, London could and did write with a touch that was almost exquisite. In "Lost Face" there are, for example, all of the elements of cruelty and implacability which London knew so well. But there is much more. There is an aching nostalgia for things that might have been, the calculation of a fragile balance between life and death. In "A Piece of Steak," London depicts a battered pug with a softness of detail and an eye for the human condition which is very rare indeed.

In a way the German was right. London did write with a marlinespike, but he could also catch the tiny fragment of authenticity which passes so quickly it is almost lost. In their sum, however, they make London much more than a ham-fisted writer.

London's world will never exist again. The web of law is too tightly drawn, science has made us too invulnerable to the way of nature. But it is precisely for this reason that London's stature as a writer has grown. He can take that lost and savage world and make it live and move for a modern reader. For this reason, if no other, he will not soon be forgotten. It is the mark of the master writer.

—EUGENE BURDICK  
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## *Contents*

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TO BUILD A FIRE	13
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LOVE OF LIFE	147
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## *To Build a Fire*

DAY HAD BROKEN cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray, when the man turned aside from the main Yukon trail and climbed the high earth-bank, where a dim and little-travelled trail led eastward through the fat spruce timberland. It was a steep bank, and he paused for breath at the top, excusing the act to himself by looking at his watch. It was nine o'clock. There was no sun nor hint of sun, though there was not a cloud in the sky. It was a clear day, and yet there seemed an intangible pall over the face of things, a subtle gloom that made the day dark, and that was due to the absence of sun. This fact did not worry the man. He was used to the lack of sun. It had been days since he had seen the sun, and he knew that a few more days must pass before that cheerful orb, due south, would just peep above the sky line and dip immediately from view.

The man flung a look back along the way he had come. The Yukon lay a mile wide and hidden under three feet of ice. On top of this ice were as many feet of snow. It was all pure white, rolling in gentle undulations where the ice jams of the freeze-up had formed. North and south, as far as his eye could see, it was unbroken white, save for a dark hairline that curved and twisted from around the spruce-covered island to the south, and that curved and twisted away into the north, where it disappeared behind another spruce-covered island. This dark hairline was the trail—the main trail—that led south five hundred miles to the Chilcoot Pass, Dyea, and salt water; and that led north seventy miles to Dawson, and still on to the north a thousand miles to Nulato, and finally to St. Michael, on Bering Sea, a thousand miles and half a thousand more.

But all this—the mysterious, far-reaching hairline trail, the absence of sun from the sky, the tremendous cold, and the strangeness and weirdness of it all—made no impression on