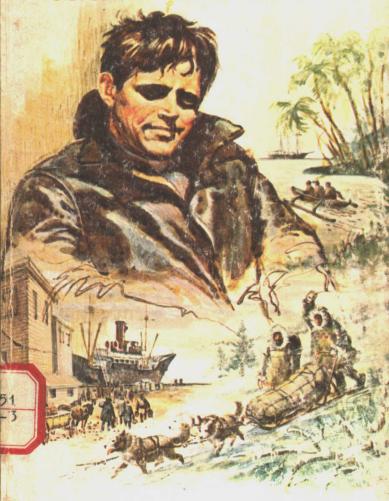
Jack London

Selected Short Stories







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Jack Londor



SELECTEL SHORT STORIES

Introduction

John Griffith London, who used the pen name "Jack London," and whose friends called him "Wolf," was born January 12, 1876 in Oakland, California. His parents were "Professor" W. H. Chaney, an Irish astrologer, and Flora Wellman, an astrologer, spiritualist, and impractical visionary, who had run away from her Massilon, Ohio home.

When Jack London was eight months old, his mother, who was no longer living with Chaney, married John London, a railway worker. Some people insist that John was Jack's real father. Whatever the case, John London and Flora made a home for Jack, and remained man and

wife until John London's death in 1898.

Jack grew up in the San Francisco Bay area. Flora's scatterbrained ideas kept the family constantly impoverished and on the move from one working-class home to another, and occasionally to a small farm. Jack finished grammar school in 1889, and for the next four years was a "wharf rat" on the Oakland waterfront, selling newspapers and working at odd jobs, and learning to sail a small skiff in the estuary between Oakland and Alameda.

In 1896 he joined the Socialist Labor Party, and, after some hard "cramming," passed the entrance examinations for the University of California at Berkeley. He attended classes but one semester and then headed for Alaska with the thousands of gold seekers who had heard of the discovery of gold along the Klondike river. Though his formal education was over, he continued to read extensively, and he carried some of his books over the icy Chilkoot Pass and down the Yukon to Dawson. He wintered near there, read everything he could lay his hands on, and began collecting materials for the stories he was

planning to write.

In Canada and Alaska he met prototypes of the people who appear in his stories: cheechakos (or chechaquos: "tenderfeet"); Indians; "sourdoughs"; Mounted Police; dance-hall girls, and the like. He visited mining camps, and staked out a claim. He experienced first-hand the bitterness of the Arctic winter, and he observed the ways in which man and animals survived cold which dropped to sixty degrees below zero. Around him swirled strange languages and dialects and wild songs and stories. From all of these experiences and adventures he got the settings, incidents, plots, and the vivid style for his stories.

Then, ill with scurvy, he sailed for home down the 1900 miles of the Yukon to the Bering Sea. In Oakland he began writing in earnest. He analyzed the contents of countless magazines; he printed unknown words on cards and hung the cards from the ceiling of his room as a means of building a vocabulary. He wrote thousands of words every day and accumulated a five-foot high pile of rejection slips. Then at last *The Overland Monthly* sent him a check for five dollars for "To the Man on the Trail."

"To the Man on the Trail" (1899) is a "yarn," the kind of story that men such as the Malemute Kid might tell on a night when the frost is "three inches thick" on the greased-paper window, and no one ventures out of doors without good dogs, good "grub," and good matches. A yarn is a story designed to have the ring of truth about it; its details are sharp and vivid and have the ring of factuality. In this story the references to the "Tananas," "Nuklukyeto," "Five Fingers," and the "Hootalinqua" are to real places and people London had seen in the Arctic. A yarn is designed to be effective and often romantic. In this story, the appeals to manliness, to "pluck," to "squareness," and to poetic justice accomplish those ends.

The Overland Monthly bought seven more stories of the North in 1899, raising their price to \$7.50 for some of the later ones. Then in October of 1899, The Atlantic Monthly bought "An Odyssey of the North" for \$120, published it in January of 1900, and London's career as a writer was firmly begun.

Like the previous story, "An Odyssey" is also a story of revenge. But its themes are larger: the white man's coming to the land of the Indian, and the possessive attitude of the white man to all he sees—the gold in the

river valleys or the Indian girls.

In 1900, "An Odyssey of the North," "To the Man on the Trail," and seven others of his stories were published in Jack London's first book, Son of the Wolf. London's magazine editors often required him to shorten or "soften" his magazine stories. The excisions were restored and other changes made in book publication. Even the story titles are sometimes changed or modified.

In 1900 London married Bess Maddern who subsequently bore him two daughters. In 1902 he started for Africa to cover the after-effects of the Boer War for a newspaper. He got no farther than London. While there he lived for seven weeks in the horrible slums of the East End and used his material for his book, The People of

the Abyss.

"The Man with the Gash" (1900) is in a tradition of stories of men who are destroyed by their own greed as they attempt to destroy another. (A similar theme appears in "All Gold Canyon" where the would-be robber

is killed by his own gun.)

"The Story of Jees Uck" (1902) uses a theme which was quite well known at the time—the theme which Puccini was to use in his opera, Madame Butterfly (1904). Many details of the two stories are quite alike; both focus on the white man's disregard for races he thought of as inferior. London's story has a happy ending and the cause of poetic justice is somewhat served.

"The League of the Old Men" (1902) (the story Lon-

The League of the Old Men" (1902) (the story London said was his favorite) is a story, seen through the Indian's eyes, of what the coming of the white man to the Northland meant to the Indian. London's stories often

reflect the consequences of the expansion of the West in its pursuit of its nineteenth century dream of manifest

destiny.

In the years 1899 to 1903 Jack London published a total of thirty-nine stories of the Northland and his most famous novel, Call of the Wild. In 1904 he went to Russia to cover the Japanese-Russian War, and was for a time imprisoned by the Japanese because of his audacity in getting his stories.

"The Sun-Dog Trail" (1905) is another story of pursuit. The storyteller is an Indian who has learned white men's ways—so much so that he has become an art critic. After a dialogue which recalls Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," he tells his story to illustrate his theory of art.

In the next few years London's books and stories brought him wealth and fame. He divorced his first wife and married Charmian Kittredge. Angered, his public turned against him. He renounced Socialism and in 1907 built his boat, *The Snark*, on which he set sail around the world. Two years later, ill and unhappy, he cut off the voyage and returned home on a commercial liner.

"The House of Mapuhi" (1909), "Make Westing" (1909), and "The Heathen" (1910) are based on the

Snark travels in the Pacific.

"Samuel" (1911) is a story unlike any of the others. In tone, in mood, in point of view, it is consistent—as consistent as the grim old Margaret Henan is in naming her three sons after the tragic uncle. The setting, the characters, the language, the actions—all are of another age, an

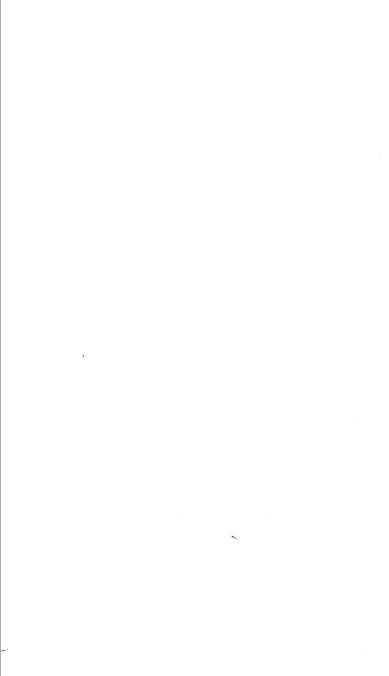
age when the world was simpler.

Jack London was forty when he died in 1916—perhaps because of a deliberate overdose of drugs. He had come a long way from his "wharf rat" days. He had published over forty books (many of which were filmed) and hundreds of stories and articles. His stories had brought the icy breath of the Northland to the genteel age of the late nineties, and did much to change the reading habits of millions of people.

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An Odyssey of the North

The sleds were singing their eternal lament to the creaking of the harnesses and the tinkling bells of the leaders; but the men and dogs were tired and made no sound. The trail was heavy with new-fallen snow, and they had come far, and the runners, burdened with flint-like quarters of frozen moose, clung tenaciously to the unpacked surface and held back with a stubbornness almost human. Darkness was coming on, but there was no camp to pitch that night. The snow fell gently through the pulseless air, not in flakes, but in tiny frost crystals of delicate design. It was very warm—barely ten below zero—and the men did not mind. Meyers and Bettles had raised their ear flaps, while Malemute Kid had even taken off his mittens.

The dogs had been fagged out early in the afternoon, but they now began to show new vigor. Among the more astute there was a certain restlessness—an impatience at the restraint of the traces, an indecisive quickness of movement, a sniffing of snouts and pricking of ears. These became incensed at their more phlegmatic brothers, urging them on with numerous sly nips on their hinder quarters. Those, thus chidden, also contracted and helped spread the contagion. At last the leader of the foremost sled uttered a sharp whine of satisfaction, crouching lower in the snow and throwing himself against the collar. The rest followed suit. There was an ingathering of back bands, a tightening of traces; the sleds leaped forward, and the men clung to the gee poles,

violently accelerating the uplift of their feet that they might escape going under the runners. The weariness of the day fell from them, and they whooped encouragement to the dogs. The animals responded with joyous yelps. They were swinging through the gathering darkness at a rattling gallop.

"Geel Geel" the men cried, each in turn, as their sleds abruptly left the main trail, heeling over on single

runners like luggers on the wind.

Then came a hundred yards' dash to the lighted parchment window, which told its own story of the home cabin, the roaring Yukon stove, and the steaming pots of tea. But the home cabin had been invaded. Threescore huskies chorused defiance, and as many furry forms precipitated themselves upon the dogs which drew the first sled. The door was flung open, and a man, clad in the scarlet tunic of the Northwest Police, waded knee-deep among the furious brutes, calmly and impartially dispensing soothing justice with the butt end of a dog whip. After that the men shook hands; and in this wise was Malemute Kid welcomed to his own cabin by a stranger.

Stanley Prince, who should have welcomed him, and who was responsible for the Yukon stove and hot tea aforementioned, was busy with his guests. There were a dozen or so of them, as nondescript a crowd as ever served the Queen in the enforcement of her laws or the delivery of her mails. They were of many breeds, but their common life had formed of them a certain type—a lean and wiry type, with trail-hardened muscles, and sun-browned faces, and untroubled souls which gazed frankly forth, clear-eyed and steady. They drove the dogs of the Queen, wrought fear in the hearts of her enemies, ate of her meager fare, and were happy. They had seen life, and done deeds, and lived romances; but they did not know it.

And they were very much at home. Two of them were sprawled upon Malemute Kid's bunk, singing chansons which their French forebears sang in the days

when first they entered the Northwest land and mated with its Indian women. Bettles' bunk had suffered a similar invasion, and three or four lusty voyageurs worked their toes among its blankets as they listened to the tale of one who had served on the boat brigade with Wolseley when he fought his way to Khartoum. And when he tired, a cowboy told of courts and kings and lords and ladies he had seen when Buffalo Bill toured the capitals of Europe. In a corner two half-breeds, ancient comrades in a lost campaign, mended harnesses and talked of the days when the Northwest flamed with insurrection and Louis Riel was king.

Rough jests and rougher jokes went up and down, and great hazards by trail and river were spoken of in the light of commonplaces, only to be recalled by virtue of some grain of humor or ludicrous happening. Prince was led away by these uncrowned heroes who had seen history made, who regarded the great and the romantic as but the ordinary and the incidental in the routine of life. He passed his precious tobacco among them with lavish disregard, and rusty chains of reminiscence were loosened, and forgotten odysseys resurrected for his especial benefit.

When conversation dropped and the travelers filled the last pipes and unlashed their tight-rolled sleeping furs, Prince fell back upon his comrade for further information.

"Well, you know what the cowboy is," Malemute Kid answered, beginning to unlace his moccasins; "and it's not hard to guess the British blood in his bed partner. As for the rest, they're all children of the coureurs du bois, mingled with God knows how many other bloods. The two turning in by the door are the regulation breeds' or Boisbrüles. That lad with the worsted breech scarf-notice his eyebrows and the turn of his jawshows a Scotchman wept in his mother's smoky tepee. And that handsome-looking fellow putting the capote under his head is a French half-breed-you heard him talking; he doesn't like the two Indians turning in next to

him. You see, when the 'breeds' rose under Riel the fullbloods kept the peace, and they've not lost much love for one another since."

"But I say, what's that glum-looking fellow by the stove? I'll swear he can't talk English. He hasn't opened

his mouth all night."

"You're wrong. He knows English well enough. Did you follow his eyes when he listened? I did. But he's neither kith nor kin to the others. When they talked their own patois you could see he didn't understand. I've been wondering myself what he is. Let's find out."

"Fire a couple of sticks into the stove!" Malemute Kid commanded, raising his voice and looking squarely

at the man in question.

He obeyed at once.

"Had discipline knocked into him somewhere," Prince commented in a low tone.

Malemute Kid nodded, took off his socks, and picked his way among recumbent men to the stove. There he hung his damp footgear among a score or so of mates.

"When do you expect to get to Dawson?" he asked ten-

tatively.

The man studied him a moment before replying. "They

say seventy-five mile. So? Maybe two days."

The very slightest accent was perceptible, while there was no awkward hesitancy or groping for words.

"Been in the country before?"

"No."

"Northwest Territory?"

"Yes."

"Born there?"

"No."

"Well, where the devil were you born? You're none of these." Malemute Kid swept his hand over the dog drivers, even including the two policemen who had turned into Prince's bunk. "Where did you come from? I've seen faces like yours before, though I can't remember just where."

"I know you," he irrelevantly replied, at once turning the drift of Malemute Kid's questions.

"Where? Ever see me?"

"No; your partner, him priest, Pastilik, long time ago. Him ask me if I see you, Malemute Kid. Him give me grub. I no stop long. You hear him speak bout me?"

"Oh! you're the fellow that traded the otter skins for

the dogs?"

The man nodded, knocked out his pipe, and signified his disinclination for conversation by rolling up in his furs. Malemute Kid blew out the slush lamp and crawled under the blankets with Prince.

"Well, what is he?"

"Don't know-turned me off, somehow, and then shut up like a clam. But he's a fellow to whet your curiosity. I've heard of him. All the coast wondered about him eight years ago. Sort of mysterious, you know. He came down out of the North, in the dead of winter, many a thousand miles from here, skirting Bering Sea and traveling as though the devil were after him. No one ever learned where he came from, but he must have come far. He was badly travel-worn when he got food from the Swedish missionary on Golovin Bay and asked the way south. We heard of this afterward. Then he abandoned the shore line, heading right across Norton Sound. Terrible weather, snowstorms and high winds, but he pulled through where a thousand other men would have died, missing St. Michael's and making the land at Pastilik. He'd lost all but two dogs, and was nearly gone with starvation.

"He was so anxious to go on that Father Roubeau fitted him out with grub; but he couldn't let him have any dogs, for he was only waiting my arrival to go on a trip himself. Mr. Ulysses knew too much to start on without animals, and fretted around for several days. He had on his sled a bunch of beautifully cured otter skins, sea otters, you know, worth their weight in gold. There was also at Pastilik an old Shylock of a Russian trader. who had dogs to kill. Well, they didn't dicker very long, but when the Strange One headed south again, it was in the rear of a spanking dog team. Mr. Shylock, by the way, had the otter skins. I saw them, and they were magnificent. We figured it up and found the dogs brought him at least five hundred apiece. And it wasn't as if the Strange One didn't know the value of sea otter; he was an Indian of some sort, and what little he talked showed he'd been among white men.

"After the ice passed out of the sea, word came up from Nunivak Island that he'd gone in there for grub. Then he dropped from sight, and this is the first heard of him in eight years. Now where did he come from? and what was he doing there? and why did he come from there? He's Indian, he's been nobody knows where, and he's had discipline, which is unusual for an Indian. Another must be a like the product of the North for any tree like.

other mystery of the North for you to solve, Prince."
"Thanks awfully, but I've got too many on hand as it

is," he replied.

Malemute Kid was already breathing heavily; but the young mining engineer gazed straight up through the thick darkness, waiting for the strange orgasm which stirred his blood to die away. And when he did sleep, his brain worked on, and for the nonce he, too, wandered through the white unknown, struggled with the dogs on endless trails, and saw men live, and toil, and die like men.

The next morning, hours before daylight, the dog drivers and policemen pulled out for Dawson. But the powers that saw to Her Majesty's interests and ruled the destinies of her lesser creatures gave the mailmen little rest, for a week later they appeared at Stuart River, heavily burdened with letters for Salt Water. However, their dogs had been replaced by fresh ones; but, then, they were dogs.

The men had expected some sort of a layover in which to rest up; besides, this Klondike was a new section of the Northland, and they had wished to see a little

something of the Golden City where dust flowed like water and dance halls rang with never-ending revelry. But they dried their socks and smoked their evening pipes with much the same gusto as on their former visit, though one or two bold spirits speculated on desertion and the possibility of crossing the unexplored Rockies to the east, and thence, by the Mackenzie Valley, of gaining their old stamping grounds in the Chippewyan country. Two or three even decided to return to their homes by that route when their terms of service had expired, and they began to lay plans forthwith, looking forward to the hazardous undertaking in much the same way a city-bred man would do a day's holiday in the woods.

He of the Otter Skins seemed very restless, though he took little interest in the discussion, and at last he drew Malemute Kid to one side and talked for some time in low tones. Prince cast curious eyes in their direction, and the mystery deepened when they put on caps and mittens and went outside. When they returned, Malemute Kid placed his gold scales on the table, weighed out the matter of sixty ounces, and transferred them to the Strange One's sack. Then the chief of the dog drivers joined the conclave, and certain business was transacted with him. The next day the gang went on upriver, but He of the Otter Skins took several pounds of grub and turned his steps back toward Dawson.

"Didn't know what to make of it," said Malemute Kid in response to Prince's queries; "but the poor beggar wanted to be quit of the service for some reason or other—at least it seemed a most important one to him, though he wouldn't let on what. You see, it's just like the army: he signed for two years, and the only way to get free was to buy himself out. He couldn't desert and then stay here, and he was just wild to remain in the country. Made up his mind when he got to Dawson, he said; but no one knew him, hadn't a cent, and I was the only one he'd spoken two words with. So he talked it over with the lieutenant-governor, and made arrangements

in case he could get the money from me—loan, you know. Said he'd pay back in the year, and, if I wanted, would put me onto something rich. Never'd seen it, but knew it was rich.

"And talk! why, when he got me outside he was ready to weep. Begged and pleaded; got down in the snow to me till I hauled him out of it. Palavered around like a crazy man. Swore he's worked to this very end for years and years, and couldn't bear to be disappointed now. Asked him what end, but he wouldn't say. Said they might keep him on the other half of the trail and he wouldn't get to Dawson in two years, and then it would be too late. Never saw a man take on so in my life. And when I said I'd let him have it, had to yank him out of the snow again. Told him to consider it in the light of a grubstake. Think he'd have it? No sir! Swore he'd give me all he found, make me rich beyond the dreams of avarice, and all such stuff. Now a man who puts his life and time against a grubstake ordinarily finds it hard enough to turn over half of what he finds. Something behind all this, Prince; just you make a note of it. We'll hear of him if he stays in the country—"

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then my good nature gets a shock, and I'm sixty some odd ounces out."

The cold weather had come on with the long nights, and the sun begun to play his ancient game of peekaboo along the southern snow line ere aught was heard of Malemute Kid's grubstake. And then, one bleak morning in early January, a heavily laden dog train pulled into his cabin below Stuart River. He of the Otter Skins was there, and with him walked a man such as the gods have almost forgotten how to fashion. Men never talked of luck and pluck and five-hundred-dollar dirt without bringing in the name of Axel Gunderson; nor could tales of nerve or strength or daring pass up and down the campfire without the summoning of his presence. And when