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THE BEST SHORT STORIES OF

JACK LONDON

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**TO THE MAN ON TRAIL • 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**

With an Introduction by EUGENE BURDICK



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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.

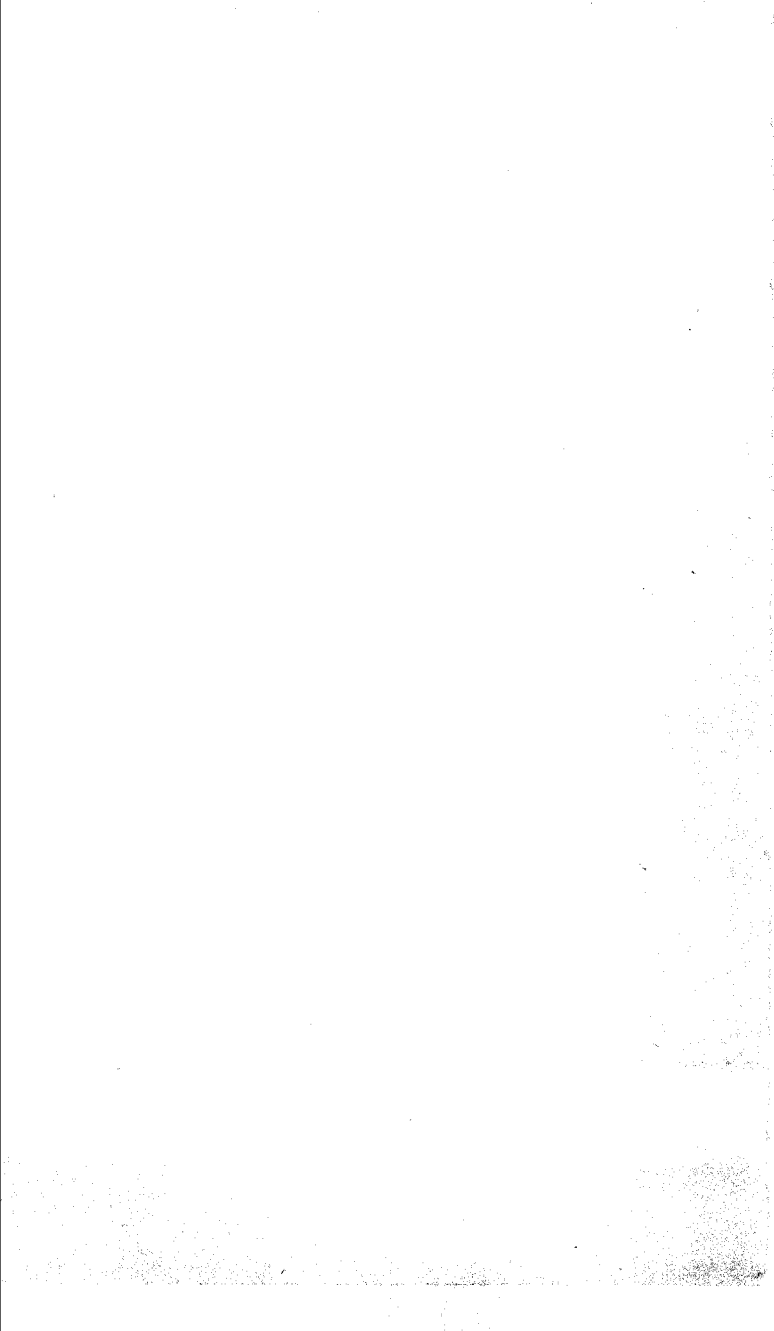
London's world will never exist again. The web of law is too tightly drawn, science has made us too invulnerable to the way of nature. But it is precisely for this reason that London's stature as a writer has grown. He can take that lost and savage world and make it live and move for a modern reader. 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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THE BEST SHORT STORIES
OF
Jack London



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

the man. It was not because he was long used to it. He was a newcomer in the land, a *chechaquo*, and this was his first winter. The trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances. Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost. Such fact impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable, and that was all. It did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man's frailty in general, able only to live within certain narrow limits of heat and cold; and from there on it did not lead him to the conjectural field of immortality and man's place in the universe. Fifty degrees below zero stood for a bite of frost that hurt and that must be guarded against by the use of mittens, ear flaps, warm moccasins, and thick socks. Fifty degrees below zero was to him just precisely fifty degrees below zero. That there should be anything more to it than that was a thought that never entered his head.

As he turned to go on, he spat speculatively. There was a sharp, explosive crackle that startled him. He spat again. And again, in the air, before it could fall to the snow, the spittle crackled. He knew that at fifty below spittle crackled on the snow, but this spittle had crackled in the air. Undoubtedly it was colder than fifty below—how much colder he did not know. But the temperature did not matter. He was bound for the old claim on the left fork of Henderson Creek, where the boys were already. They had come over across the divide from the Indian Creek country, while he had come the round-about way to take a look at the possibilities of getting out logs in the spring from the islands in the Yukon. He would be in to camp by six o'clock; a bit after dark, it was true, but the boys would be there, a fire would be going, and a hot supper would be ready. As for lunch, he pressed his hand against the protruding bundle under his jacket. It was also under his shirt, wrapped up in a handkerchief and lying against the naked skin. It was the only way to keep the biscuits from freezing. He smiled agreeably to himself as he thought of those biscuits, each cut open and sopped in bacon grease, and each enclosing a generous slice of fried bacon.

He plunged in among the big spruce trees. The trail was faint. A foot of snow had fallen since the last sled had passed over, and he was glad he was without a sled, travelling light.

In fact, he carried nothing but the lunch wrapped in the handkerchief. He was surprised, however, at the cold. It certainly was cold, he concluded, as he rubbed his numb nose and cheekbones with his mittened hand. He was a warm-whiskered man, but the hair on his face did not protect the high cheekbones and the eager nose that thrust itself aggressively into the frosty air.

At the man's heels trotted a dog, a big native husky, the proper wolf dog, gray-coated and without any visible or temperamental difference from its brother, the wild wolf. The animal was depressed by the tremendous cold. It knew that it was no time for travelling. Its instinct told it a truer tale than was told to the man by the man's judgment. In reality, it was not merely colder than fifty below zero; it was colder than sixty below, than seventy below. It was seventy-five below zero. Since the freezing point is thirty-two above zero, it meant that one hundred and seven degrees of frost obtained. The dog did not know anything about thermometers. Possibly in its brain there was no sharp consciousness of a condition of very cold such as was in the man's brain. But the brute had its instinct. It experienced a vague but menacing apprehension that subdued it and made it slink along at the man's heels, and that made it question eagerly every unwonted movement of the man as if expecting him to go into camp or to seek shelter somewhere and build a fire. The dog had learned fire, and it wanted fire, or else to burrow under the snow and cuddle its warmth away from the air.

The frozen moisture of its breathing had settled on its fur in a fine powder of frost, and especially were its jowls, muzzle, and eyelashes whitened by its crystallized breath. The man's red beard and mustache were likewise frosted, but more solidly, the deposit taking the form of ice and increasing with every warm, moist breath he exhaled. Also, the man was chewing tobacco, and the muzzle of ice held his lips so rigidly that he was unable to clear his chin when he expelled the juice. The result was that a crystal beard of the color and solidity of amber was increasing its length on his chin. If he fell down it would shatter itself, like glass, into brittle fragments. But he did not mind the appendage. It was the penalty all tobacco chewers paid in that country, and he had been out before in two cold snaps. They had not been so cold as this, he knew, but by the spirit thermometer

at Sixty Mile he knew they had been registered at fifty below and at fifty-five.

He held on through the level stretch of woods for several miles, crossed a wide flat of nigger heads, and dropped down a bank to the frozen bed of a small stream. This was Henderson Creek, and he knew he was ten miles from the forks. He looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock. He was making four miles an hour, and he calculated that he would arrive at the forks at half-past twelve. He decided to celebrate that event by eating his lunch there.

The dog dropped in again at his heels, with a tail drooping discouragement, as the man swung along the creek bed. The furrow of the old sled trail was plainly visible, but a dozen inches of snow covered the marks of the last runners. In a month no man had come up or down that silent creek. The man held steadily on. He was not much given to thinking, and just then particularly he had nothing to think about save that he would eat lunch at the forks and that at six o'clock he would be in camp with the boys. There was nobody to talk to; and, had there been, speech would have been impossible because of the ice muzzle on his mouth. So he continued monotonously to chew tobacco and to increase the length of his amber beard.

Once in a while the thought reiterated itself that it was very cold and that he had never experienced such cold. As he walked along he rubbed his cheekbones and nose with the back of his mittened hand. He did this automatically, now and again changing hands. But, rub as he would, the instant he stopped his cheekbones went numb, and the following instant the end of his nose went numb. He was sure to frost his cheeks; he knew that, and experienced a pang of regret that he had not devised a nose strap of the sort Bud wore in cold snaps. Such a strap passed across the cheeks, as well, and saved them. But it didn't matter much, after all. What were frosted cheeks? A bit painful, that was all; they were never serious.

Empty as the man's mind was of thoughts, he was keenly observant, and he noticed the changes in the creek, the curves and bends and timber jams, and always he sharply noted where he placed his feet. Once, coming around a bend, he shied abruptly, like a startled horse, curved away from the place where he had been walking, and retreated several paces back along the trail. The creek he knew was