

**JACK LONDON'S FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH JAPAN:
THE VOYAGE OF THE *SOPHIE SUTHERLAND*
AND HIS FIRST ASIAN WRITING**

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Jack London (1876-1916) was the most famous and most widely read American novelist and short-story writer a century ago. London electrified his readers with his adventure stories in the Yukon, California and across the Pacific. London was also a celebrated journalist whose book, *People of the Abyss*, is a classic study of the slums of the city of London. What is far less known is Jack London's intense interest in Asia. He was the only American reporter to accompany the Japanese army as it marched through Korea and Manchuria to confront Russian forces in 1904. His many lengthy dispatches provide the best journalistic coverage of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). After the war, he wrote a series of essays that predicted the rise of Japan as a great power, its eventual invasion of Manchuria and China, China's socialist revolution, and China's rise as the world's leading economic power by the late twentieth century.

London's many literary biographers always neglect the fact that it was London's visit to Japan in 1893 as a teenage sailor that inspired him to become a writer, and that his first literary efforts focused entirely on Japanese themes. London first encountered Japan when he joined the crew of the sealing vessel the *Sophie Sutherland* on its voyage from San Francisco to the cold waters of the Bering Sea north of Japan near the Russian coast in search of seal skins. The *Sophie Sutherland* made a brief stop at the harbor of Futami at Chichijima, part of the Japanese-administered Bonin Islands,¹ on its outward voyage and stopped for up to three weeks at Yokohama on their return voyage. The trip inspired three of London's earliest short stories, all of which were Japan-based, as well as one of his most significant novels, *The Sea Wolf*.

¹ The Japanese-administered Bonin or Ogasawara Islands (*Ogasawara Shotto*) are an archipelago of over 30 subtropical or tropical islands, some 1000 km directly south of Tokyo in the Pacific Ocean. Administratively, they form one of the villages of Tokyo. The total area of the islands is 84 sq. km.

Jack London and the Voyage of the *Sophie Sutherland*

The *Sophie Sutherland* was one of the last sealing vessels to leave San Francisco en route to the once very lucrative seal hunting grounds in the Bering Sea north of Japan.² To sign on as an able-bodied seaman one had to be at least nineteen or have three years of experience. London was only seventeen with limited experience sailing in San Francisco Bay, but he had already acquired a reputation as a tough longshoreman and additional crew were hard to find. Nevertheless, London's toughness as a fighter and his ability to adapt himself to his new environment allowed him to quickly find a welcome place among the more experienced crew members.

Fifty-one days after leaving California, the *Sophie Sutherland*, weighing eighty tons with a crew of twenty-two, including two Japanese,³ approached the Bonin Islands, arriving 15 March 1893. To London, it may have seemed like a scene from Stevenson's *Treasure Island* or Melville's *Typee*, novels which greatly influenced him in his later writing. He described his first encounter with the islands in his novel, *John Barleycorn*:

We completed our run across the Pacific, lifted the volcanic peaks, jungle clad, of the Bonin Islands, sailed in among the reefs to the land-locked harbor, and let our anchor rumble down where lay a score or more of sea-gypsies like ourselves. The scents of strange

² The ruthless harvesting of seals in the northern Pacific was initially potentially as profitable as the Yukon gold rush was to those willing to make the strenuous effort to search for seals in the early spring months as far north as the Bering Sea. Garments made from seal fur were the rage in Europe at the time and a good quality pelt could fetch as much as sixteen dollars. The result was that between 1886 and 1911 the north Pacific fur seal almost went the way of the American passenger pigeon or the buffalo. According to some estimates, the seal population there dropped from several million to less than a quarter million by 1912. London, reflecting back on his voyage, wrote in *The Sea Wolf*: "It was wanton slaughter, and all for woman's sake. No man ate of the seal meat or oil. After a good day's killing I have seen our decks covered with hides and spattered with the sanguinary color; and the men, like butchers plying their trade, naked and red of arm and hand, hard at work with ripping and flensing knives, removing the skins from the pretty sea-creatures they had killed."

³ The *Ghost* of *The Sea Wolf* is also an eighty-ton schooner holding twenty-two men.

vegetation blew off the island. Aborigines, in queer outrigger canoes, and Japanese, in queer sampans, paddled about the bay and came aboard. It was my first foreign land; I had won to the other side of the world, and I would see all I had read in the books come true. I was wild to get ashore.⁴

London, commenting in his 1897 article, "Bonin Islands: An Incident of the Sealing Fleet of '93," tells how Japan had firmly seized the islands after the Meiji Restoration of 1868: "Japan, having aroused from her lethargy, began her onward march towards the civilization which at the present time causes the whole world to look upon her with astonishment and admiration, and woke to the fact that the possession of these islands was not a trivial matter." The natives were a pitiful bunch, London thought, semi-barbarous people pushed aside by the "progressive Japanese" who fully dominated the colony and relegated the few surviving natives to pitiful out-of-the-way grass huts. The luxurious scenery (volcanic peaks, dense forests, shimmering waterfalls, and a "little coral beach of purest dazzling white") offered London a stark contrast to the misery of the original inhabitants of the island.⁵

London relates what happened when his ship, together with fifteen or so other sealing vessels including a British schooner out of Victoria, British Columbia, suddenly interrupted the tranquil life of the Japanese colonials and the natives on their peaceful island:

When the inhabitants recovered from their first surprise at the unexpected invasion, they realized the great possibilities and profits to accrue from their intercourse with the strangers. With the typical energy of their enterprising race, they launched boldly into the hitherto unknown channels of commerce. The plantations were ransacked, and their joyful proprietors came aboard with whole boatloads of...[tropical fruit and other local produce]...Whew! How things boomed! The simple Japanese must have thought that the millennium had come. And how they scrambled in the mad

⁴ Quoted from the online version of Jack London's novel, *John Barleycorn*, <http://london.sonoma.edu/Writings/JohnBarleycorn>.

⁵ Jack London, "Bonin Islands: An Incident of the Sealing Fleet of '93," in Irving Shepard, ed., *Jack London's Tales of Adventure* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1956), pp. 59-63.

rush for wealth! To them, it seemed as though the white sea-rovers were made of gold, and even their vessels laden with the precious metal. Prices went up faster than a hot air balloon...The Japanese are shrewd speculators...!

London and his shipmates finally got ashore and really hit the town, drinking heavily, dancing in the streets, and causing considerable destruction. His last memories were of singing “a rollicking sea song” with a group of other sailors:

From up and down the street came far choruses of sea-voices similarly singing, and life is great, and beautiful and romantic, and magnificently mad. And next, after the blackness, I open my eyes in the early dawn to see a Japanese woman, solicitously anxious, bending over me. She is the port pilot’s wife and I am lying in her doorway. I am chilled and shivering, sick with the after-sickness of debauch. And I feel lightly clad. Those rascals of runaway apprentices...they have run away with my possessions. My watch is gone. My few dollars are gone. My coat is gone! So is my belt. And yes, my shoes...⁶

A contemporary Japanese newspaper confirmed the alcoholic depravity of the excited *gaijin*:

As the visiting vessels were unusually much more this year, some of the islanders have made great unexpected profits. Above all, alcoholic drinks, even bad beer and cheap potato spirits for home use, were sold out at once.⁷

London’s ship and the other sealing vessels soon left their haven in the Bonin Islands and headed north to the Bering Sea. London, reflecting back on this expedition much later in his novel, *The Sea Wolf*, wrote:

We ran to the north and west till we raised the coast of Japan and picked up with the great seal herd. Coming from no man knew

⁶ London, *John Barleycorn*. .

⁷ “Foreign Vessels at Ogasawara,” *Mainichi Shimbu* (12 May, 1893); quoted in Sachiko Nakada, *Jack London and the Japanese: An Interplay between the West and the East* (Tokyo: The Central Institute, 1986), p. 3.

where in the illimitable Pacific, it was traveling north on its annual migration to the rookeries of the Bering Sea. And north we traveled with it, ravaging and destroying, flinging the naked carcasses to the shark and salting down the skins so that they might later adorn the fair shoulders of the women of the cities.⁸

After completing their sealing, the crew of the *Sophie Sutherland* sailed their vessel to Yokohama where they discharged their cargo of 3850 sheets of seal-skin, collected provisions for their long voyage home to San Francisco, and had time to sample the local sites. London described his initial stay in Japan in his 1913 book, *John Barleycorn*, an autobiographical indictment of his excesses in drinking:

I was eager to be ashore and see Japan, but the first day was devoted to ship's work, and not until evening did we sailors land. And here, by the very system of things, by the way life was organized and men transacted affairs, John Barleycorn reached out and tucked my arm in his. The captain had given money for us to the hunters, and the hunters were waiting in a certain Japanese public house for us to come and get it. We rode to the place in rickshaws. Our own crowd had taken possession of it. Drink was flowing. Everybody had money, and everybody was treating. After the hundred days of hard toil and absolute abstinence, in the pink of physical condition, bulging with health, over-spilling with spirits that had long been pent by discipline and circumstance, of course we would have a drink or two.

It was the old story. There were so many drinks to be drunk, and as the warm magic poured through our veins and mellowed our voices and affections we knew it was time to make invidious distinctions – to drink with this shipmate and to decline to drink with that shipmate. We were all shipmates who had been through stress and storm together, who had pulled and hauled on the same sheets and tackles, relieved one another's wheels, laid out side by side on the same job-boom where she was plunging into it and looked to see who was missing when she cleared and lifted. So we drank with all, and all treated, and our voices rose, and we remembered a myriad acts of comradeship, and forgot our fights

⁸ London, *The Sea Wolf* (New York: Library of America, 1983), p. 603.

and wordy squabbles, and knew one another for the best fellows in the world.

Well, the night was young when we arrived in that public house, and for all of that first night that public house was all I saw of Japan – a drinking place which was very like a drinking place at home or anywhere else over the world.

We lay in Yokohama harbor for two weeks, and about all we saw of Japan was its drinking places where sailors congregated. Occasionally, some of us varied the monotony with a more exciting drink. In such fashion I managed a real exploit by swimming off to the schooner one dark midnight and going soundly to sleep while the water police searched the harbor for my body and brought my clothes out for identification.

Perhaps it was for things like that, I imagined, that men got drunk. In our little round of living what I had done was a noteworthy event. I enjoyed several days of fame Among the Japanese boatmen and ashore in the pubs. It was a red letter event. It was an event to be remembered and narrated with pride. I remember it today, twenty years afterward, with a secret glow of pride. It was a purple passage, just as Victor's wrecking of the tea-house in the Bonin Islands and my being looted by the runaway apprentices were purple passages...

We hove up anchor to a jolly chanty, and sailed out of Yokohama harbor for San Francisco. We took the northern passage, and with the stout west wind at our back made the run across the Pacific in thirty-seven days of brave sailing. We still had a big pay-day coming to us, and for thirty-seven days, without a drink to addle our mental processes, we incessantly planned the spending of our money.⁹

It is impossible to believe that London spent all of his time in Yokohama Harbor bars because his short stories about Japan reveal a good knowledge of local scenery, Japanese homes, and a basic understanding of Japanese cultural history. His early short stories provide rich details of traditional Japanese cultural life. The narrator of these tales travels by train, visits Japanese homes and makes frequent use of the rickshaws in common use in the Meiji period (1868-1912) in Japan. He befriends the rickshaw

⁹ London, *John Barleycorn*.

drivers and takes special notice of beautiful Japanese women. He visits numerous cultural sites traveling by rickshaw. He claims to visit Tokyo, Yokohama and Kamakura, where he spied the Daibutsu, a huge statue of the Buddha. He befriends a sad rickshaw driver in the stories and attends the dances of a beautiful geisha. These are not the stories of a drunken teenager who passed out every night in a Yokohama bar, but rather of a young man with a fascination for the new country which he was visiting very briefly on this occasion. It is also evident that he was reading extensively about Japan – almost certainly the works of Lafcadio Hearn – from a young age and that he had developed an interest in the country.

The three short stories London composed on Japan mark the very beginning of his literary career. In 1895, while a student at Oakland High School, he penned two stories for the school's literary magazine, *The High School Aegis*: "Sakaicho: Hona Asi and Hakadaki" (19 April, 1895) and "A Night's Swim in Yeddo Bay" (27 May, 1895). He wrote the story "O Haru" for another publication in 1897.

This Japanese trilogy is an early indication of London's deep and lifelong curiosity about ethnic and racial others. They are also notable because of London's obvious great admiration for the Japanese. It is through these stories that we see the image of Japan that London portrayed to his reading public, as well as the phenomenal that he was already exhibiting as a teenager.

Sakaicho, Hon Asi and Hakadaki

"Sakaicho" is the short, ultimately tragic and haunting story of Sakaicho, a *rickshaw* man, who spends a week taking the narrator on a tour of local sites around Yokohama and Tokyo. The life of a *rickshaw* man was tough – it involved running long distances up and down hilly streets and thoroughfares transporting one or more individuals for a small amount of money. Because of intense competition from other *rickshaw* men, the prices they charged were low and the profits minimal. There were an estimated 40,000 or more rickshaws in operation in the Tokyo region during the heart of the Meiji period. Because of their hard and stressful lives, many men like Sakaicho died before the age of forty.

The story begins with Sakaicho and the narrator becoming close friends after a week of touring together.¹⁰ Sakaicho invites him to his house

¹⁰ Sachiko Nakada writes: Sakaicho is one of the rickshaw men waiting at the wharf for foreign sailors to take them to the city of Yokohama. (His

for an authentic Japanese meal and the chance to meet his wife Hona Asi and their son Hakadaki. The narrator accepts with gusto:

Ah! The magic of these words...Food! Dinner! What a relish they conveyed to me, who was as hungry a sight-seer as had ever trod the by-ways and thoroughfares of Yokohama. All morning I had wandered from tea-house to temple, through bazaar and curio-shop, “up hill and down dale,” till now I was as famished as the most voracious shark that ever cut the blue waters of the tropic sea with his ominous fin, while in search of breakfast. In fact, I felt like a veritable man-eater, and this unexpected invitation of my jinrisha man was most opportune. And, of course, I accepted.

Sakaicho and his hungry American guest traversed through a very poor section of Yokohama until they reached a small dilapidated hut where they encountered Hona Asi, Sakaicho’s wife.

Concerning the economic life of Sakaicho’s family, London writes: “He owned his little home and two jin-riki-shas, one of which he rented out at fifteen cents a day. His wife, a true helpmeet, worked industriously at home hemstitching silk handkerchiefs, sometimes making as high as eighteen cents a day.”

Hona Asi said that she was only 27, but her face was so haggard that she looked at least 40. “Toil and worry had stamped her naturally pretty face, and left it wrinkled and sallow.” The party smoked together briefly and then sipped weak green tea served by Hona Asi. Then Sakaicho and the narrator sat back for a true Japanese feast.

In accordance with Japanese custom, Hona Asi did not eat with the men. Rather she waited on them, removing the top of a round wooden box and ladling out two bowls of steaming sweet smelling rice, presenting a multitude of plates with delicious and intricate Japanese delicacies. The “savory odors” arising from the different dishes whetted the narrator’s appetite and pushed him to jump into the meal. They had miso soup, boiled fish, stewed leeks, pickles and soy, sushi, *kurage* (a form of jellyfish), and endless cups of tea. “The soup we drank like water; the rice we shoveled

name seems to have been derived from the name of a block near the wharf, “Sakaichô.”) He spoke to London in Yokohama English, “Jock, you like come see my house? – not far – you come see my wife – come ‘chopee – chopee,” Nakada, *Jack London and the Japanese*, p. 5.

into our mouths like coals into a Newcastle collier; and the other dishes we helped ourselves out with the chopsticks which by this time I could use quite dexterously." They also merrily sipped sake from tiny lacquered cups.

The narrator, noting that he normally found the Japanese to be a shrewd people with a keen interest in making money, is surprised with the generous hospitality of Sakaicho and a bit floored when he adamantly refuses the guest's generous offer of payment for the feast. He is also struck with the kindness and hospitality of his hosts and notes the inherent goodness of the Japanese as a people.

After the meal Sakaicho relates his hard struggle for life to his guest. Here we see, for perhaps one of the first times, London's obvious sympathy with the working classes, who had to struggle and labor against great odds merely to survive. London was only nineteen when he wrote this story, but the descriptions of Sakaicho's abode and struggle to survive parallel those of characters found years later in *People of the Abyss* and other pieces by him. One can clearly see the leanings that would make London an active socialist only a very few years later. Adopting a melancholy tone to his writing, London describes Sakaicho's life:

In his queer broken English, he told me of his youth; his struggles, and his hopes and ambitions. His boyhood had been spent as a peasant in the fields, on the sunny slopes of Fujihama;¹¹ his youth and early manhood as porter and driver of hired jin-riki-shas in Tokio. With great economy he had saved from his slender earnings, till now, having removed to Yokohama, he owned his little home and two jin-riki-shas, one of which he rented out at fifteen cents a day. His wife, a true helpmeet, worked industriously at home hemstitching silk handkerchiefs; sometimes making as high as eighteen cents a day. And all this struggle was for his boy – his only child. He was now sending him to school, and soon, when he would own and rent out several jin-riki-shas, the boy would receive instruction in the higher branches, and mayhap, some day, he would be able to send him to America to complete his education. "Who knows?"

Later that afternoon the narrator meets the son, Hakadaki, "a sturdy rollicking little chap of ten." The narrator, truly enjoying the

¹¹ Probably Fuji-yama or Mt. Fuji.

encounter, slipped a Mexican dollar coin into “his sweaty little paw” before leaving.

A week later, after returning to Tokyo from a busy dose of sightseeing in Tokyo and Mt. Fuji, the narrator searches in vain for Sakaicho all over Yokohama. At last he hires another rickshaw to do some last minute sightseeing and shopping, and is cruising through the countryside near Yokohama when he encounters a funeral cortege with two coffins. “A solitary mourner followed, and in the slender form and bowed head I recognized Sakaicho. But O! how changed! Aroused by my coming he slowly raised his listless head, and, with dull apathetic glance, returned my greeting.” The narrator later learns that Sakaicho’s wife and boy had died in a major fire that had swept through their neighborhood.

After the Buddhist funeral the narrator sadly returns to his ship. The joy and excitement surrounding the visit to Japan are gone, for there is great sadness over the grief suffered by his friend, the hardworking and kindhearted Sakaicho. “And, though five thousand miles of heaving ocean now separate us, never will I forget Sakaicho nor Hona Asi, nor the love they bore their son Hakadaki.”¹²

This tale is a sad but surprisingly unsentimental reflection on London’s first visit to Japan. London presents detailed information about Japanese cuisine as well as a very accurate portrait of a humble Japanese dwelling and the lives of ordinary working people of the period. It is clear that he had conversed with common people in Japan, had visited their homes, and fully empathized with their struggle to survive. One might find similar depictions in the later writing of Lafcadio Hearn, but Hearn had not yet published much of his most enduring work. We also see the nurturing of another feature of London’s writing – the sad or unhappy ending which comes as an unexpected twist.

The Tale of “O Haru”

London’s “O Haru”¹³ is the sad and rather haunting tale of a beautiful geisha, O Haru. It is not clear where he got the material or the idea

¹² This story of the fire is based on a true incident in Yokohama. On 17 June 1893, two weeks before London’s arrival, a raging fire destroyed more than 1600 homes in Yokohama. The fire started in Motomachi 5th St, not far from the wharf. London certainly saw the ruins of the fire. Nakada, p. 6.

¹³ Jack London, “O Haru,” http://www.jacklondon.net/writings/ShortStories/o_haru.html.

for this story, but it is one of his best early pieces. The start is slow and not that well focused, and the personage of the narrator is unclear—we don't know just who is telling the story. The story picks up speed as it moves along and ends with a dramatic crash. Like the story about Sakaicho, "O Haru" ends with a tragic twist that catches the reader by surprise. The parallel themes of racial and gender oppression come together when O Haru's husband spurns her for a Caucasian girl.¹⁴

The story begins with a superb description by London of the role and art of the geisha in Japanese society:

The *geishas* or dancing girls are the brightest, most intelligent, and most accomplished of Japanese women. Chosen for their beauty, they are educated from childhood. Not only are they trained in all the seductive graces of the dance and of personal attraction; but also in singing, music, and the intricate etiquette of serving and entertaining; nor are their minds neglected, for in wit, intelligence, and repartee, they excel. In short, the whole aim of their education is to make them artistically fascinating. In class, they occupy much the same position as do our actresses, and though many are frail beauties that grace the tea house festivals, here and there will be found gems of the purest luster.

London then introduces us to the most accomplished dancer and most beautiful geisha of all, O Haru. The daughter of a samurai, she had achieved great fame and fortune as a dancer. She was much desired by some of the wealthiest men in the land who would have given up much of their fortunes even to have her for one night, but she staked her love and future on a proud but penniless son of a samurai, Toyotomi. To her great regret, her great love had gone to America a decade earlier, promising to gain fame and fortune there before returning to Japan to marry her.

London waxes considerable attention on O Haru's beauty:

To the Occidental she could not but appeal, while to the Japanese she was the ideal of beauty. Her figure, slender, long-waisted and narrow-hipped, was a marvel of willowy grace, rendered the more

¹⁴ Jeanne Campbell Reesman, *Jack London's Racial Lives: A Critical Biography* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2009), p. 9.

bewitching by the ease and charm of her carriage. Her bust was that of a maid's – no suggestion of luscious charms beneath the soft fold of her kimono – rather, the chaste slimness of virginity. Long, slender, beautifully curved, the neck was but a fitting pedestal for the shapely head, poised so delicately upon it. Her hair, long, straight and glossy black, was combed back from the clear, high forehead – a wondrous dome to the exquisite oval of the face.

Her exquisite dancing, her moves and gestures, only added to her luster:

The expression, never the same, the shifting mirror of every mood, of every thought: now responsive to vivacious, light-hearted gayety; now reflecting the deeper, sterner emotions; now portraying all the true womanly depths of her nature. Truly was she “O Haru, the dream of the lotus, the equal of Fugi [Fuji] and the glory of man!”

O Haru appears on stage clad in the armor of the samurai of Tokugawa Japan. She dances the role of Oishi Kuranosuke, one of the ronin heroes of the samurai epic *Chushingura*. Oishi's lord had been disgraced by a minister of the Shogun and was forced to commit *seppuku* when he raised his sword in anger at the minister. Oishi is one of the lord's forty-seven who a year later assassinate the minister and then commit *seppuku* themselves. O Haru dances the whole story:

Fired by the wild rush of her father's blood, her slender form seemed to vibrate with intensity of Oishi's emotion, seemed to suffocate with the scorching heat of his passion...The last scene, the *hara-kiri*. All hopes, all joys of life forgotten, Oishi follows his lord into the nether world. A flash of steel, the simulated death thrust in the abdomen, and the dance is over.

O Haru, despite her samurai heritage, was an impoverished orphan who sold herself to the master of a geisha house. She had learned all the dances and graces of a geisha and made her master wealthy because of all her public performances that wealthy men paid dearly to marvel at. Toyotomi desired her as well and spent everything he had to purchase her from her geisha house. She agreed to marry her new master, but he told her

that she must wait, that he wanted to go to the land “of the white barbarians, promising to come back, rich and powerful, and marry her.”

Toyotomi, however, stayed away for over a decade, but she remained faithful to him despite invitations to marriage from many men rich and famous. Finally her lover returned from the land of the “barbarians” and had in fact married her, but to her horror he was a changed man. She had given him her fortune, but he ignored her and spent his time carousing in tea houses chasing women of disrepute.

Toyotomi had come back with a foreign standard of beauty and no longer found his wife at all attractive. “He would come home drunken and surly and criticize her walk, her carriage, her narrow hips, her flat breast, slim face and slanting eyes; then rave in ecstasies of delight over the Occident beauties. Buddha! That such could be. That her Toyotomi could admire those fierce, masculine creatures, that strode, long-stepping, like men; that had great hips and hums like actual deformities. Those repulsive creatures, with their large mouths, high noses, and eyes deep-sunk in horrid sockets beneath fierce, heavy brows. These creatures, so terrible, that when they looked on a Japanese baby it must burst into tears of fright. Those animals, who were so loathsome, disgustingly mouthing themselves and their men – Toyotomi called it kissing and had tried to teach her. Ach! How could it be!

O Haru, in a state of deep depression, visits a temple with a large statue of the Buddha – perhaps the great Kamakura Daibutsu which London surely must have visited when docking at Yokohama. A young priest blesses her and tells her the life story of the Buddha and of his discovery of the great truth. “Self, the mere clinging to life, was the evil: self was the illusion, whereby the soul endured the pain of countless incarnations: self was to be annihilated, and when destroyed, the soul passed to Nirvana. Nirvana, the highest attainable sphere, where peace and rest and bliss unuttered soothed the soul, weary from many migrations...”

O Haru returned to her home, pulled out the samurai sword that belonged to her father, and prepared for her evening dance. The pavilion was packed when she arrived to see her dance program that was to end with her favorite, the “Loyal Ronin.” She danced with more intensity than ever before, especially when the “low crescendo” of the finale commenced. She takes out her father’s blade and vigorously kisses it. “The audience

shudders expectantly. She is to follow her lord into the nether world, into the silent Nirvana. Her body sways in rhythmical undulations: her face is aglow with heavenly rapture: she poises for the blow. Now – the music rolls and crashes – swift, that deft, upward thrust – swift the mighty gush of blood. And the sweet silence of the lotus-time night is rent with the sobbing agony of many voices: “Woe! Woe! Woe! O Haru, the divine O Haru is no more!”

London wrote this story four years after his return from Japan and soon after his return from the Yukon. He had turned to writing full time and was beginning to sell a number of his stories to noteworthy magazines and journals. Perhaps by then, through his reading of essays and books by Lafcadio Hearn, he had gained a sympathetic appreciation for Japanese culture. He admires and respects his heroine, allowing her to maintain her honor and sense of self-worth through her ritual suicide.

London’s understanding of Japanese culture is also remarkable. The concept of regaining one’s honor, which Toyotomi had stripped from O Haru when he betrayed her love for him, is central to Japanese culture. London also appreciates the position of a geisha as a gifted artist, but even more remarkable is his understanding of the key tenets of Buddhism – the idea that one can reduce or eliminate suffering by letting go – in this case the annihilation of the self.

“A Night Swim in Yeddo Bay”

“A Night's Swim in Yeddo Bay,” written for *Aegis* in May of 1895, is the third of London’s trilogy of stories centering on Japan after his voyage on the *Sophie Sutherland*.¹⁵ The story is based on an incident when London’s crew stopped in Yokohama returning from their sealing expedition in the Bering Sea. One night after a bout of heavy drinking, London decided to swim back to his ship anchored far out rather than engaging a “sam pan” (small water taxi). He stripped off his clothes, swam to the ship and probably went to sleep in his bunk. The Yokohama harbor police, assuming London had drowned, searched the harbor in vain.

London’s narrator is an old sailor named Long Charlie who spins his yarn while sitting in a Yokohama saloon. Long Charlie relates how he got drunk one night in Yokohama, hired a “sam pan,” but found he had no money to pay for the passage. When a small Japanese boy, probably the son

¹⁵ Jack London, “A Night’s Swim in Yeddo Bay,” http://www.jacklondon.net/writings/ShortStories/night_swim_yeddo_bay.html.

of the boat's owner, demands that Long Charlie hand over his shirt in payment, the sailor refuses and, jumping clumsily into the water, swims back to his vessel. The harbor patrol, assuming that he had drowned, returns his clothes to the ship and searches for his body.

London effectively catches the voice of Long Charlie and builds his character through the first-person narration. London again provides the reader with a very positive portrait of Japan through the words of Long Charlie:

Yes, a mighty nice set of people are them Japs, for all their being half civilized, which I deny, and say right here that for smartness, push and energy, learning, honesty, politeness and general good-naturedness, their like can't be beat. And when it comes to comparing to our people, for real moral goodness and purity, why, we ain't in it...An enterprising people, they are...They're always longing to be, as they call it, Europeanized or Americanized. They're only too quick to discard their old habits and way of doing things for the newer and more improved customs and methods of ours. Why, take the simple matter of dress, for instance. From the lowest beggar in the street to the highest dignitary in the land, they all want to be European in their dress. Pretty near all that can afford it dress like us, and sometimes those who can't put themselves to pretty shifts in order to do so.

Conclusion

These three stories, while lacking some of the incredible mastery of much of London's later stories, such as "To Build a Fire," show the innate talent of London as a very young writer at the start of his career. He very effectively develops the personalities of his main characters while deftly bringing the reader into the story. The frequent unexpected endings of his stories – the forlorn face of the grief-stricken Sakaicho only shortly after spending a marvelous day with the narrator or the image of the beautiful O Haru plunging a sword into her abdomen while she dances in front of a huge cheering crowd – adds greatly to the power of London's narrative.

London's stories are a refreshing break from the intense anti-Asian racist dogma found in the California press at the time. London admires the Japanese for their hard work, discipline, and drive for success. But his characters are far more than mere stereotypes. They are fully human with

feelings of joy and anger, happiness and sadness, ambition and drive. We can relate to the poverty of Sakaicho and his wife and the vast hopes they placed in their son. We feel the wretchedness and sense of betrayal experienced by O Haru when her husband spurns her. And through the eyes of Long Charlie we see the dramatic moves by the Japanese to modernize and westernize their country during the Meiji period.

London's initial trip to Japan in 1893 provided invaluable material for his early stories and provided him with enough background information to permit his brilliant portrayal of not only Japanese, but also Chinese and Korean societies a decade later when he returned to Asia to cover the Russo-Japanese War.