Clarice Stasz

On 9 July 1908 Jack London and the Snark crew landed at Pennduffryn Plantation in the Solomon Islands, which would be their base for the next three-and-a-half months. Their hosts were Englishmen, Tom Harding and George Darbyshire, whose business was trading and copra. Other Whites in the plantation compound were Harding’s wife, Baroness Eugénie, and Claude Bernays, the plantation manager. Melanesians under contract, not much better than slavery, provided the labor. The hosts soon regaled the crew with stories of murders of White schooner captains and head-hunting attacks upon plantation Whites. Charmian observed that in her boudoir was “a rack of rifles, always loaded and ready, and [that she was] to keep [her] revolver with [her] day and night” as protection against uprising.

Tropical disease mocked the lush beauty of the blue lagoons, the coral reefs underneath crisscrossed by the purple shadows of the feathery palm trees lining the beaches. The entire crew of the Snark had malaria, yaws, and infected ulcerations. London suffered from an additional curious ailment: his hands swelled up, the skin thickened, then peeled off in many layers. Partly because of their poor health, the Londons spent the next three-and-a-half months at Pennduffryn, with brief explorations of nearby islands. During this stay, Jack completed “The Heathen” and began Adventure, using the plantation and several of its inhabitants (even a vicious “nigger-hating” mongrel named Satan), as the model for the fictional Berande. Woven into the plot were some of the stories recounted by their hosts, as well as incidents they experienced themselves. On 25 October 1908, London wrote George Brett that he had completed 20,000 words of
“a short Solomon Island novel — love story and adventure,” which he expected to complete in two months. In fact, he was so weakened by his various ailments that five months later he informed Brett that he had accomplished only 40,000 words. It was 3 May 1909 before he could send the completed 75,000-word manuscript off to John Cosgrove, editor of *Collier’s Weekly*, to be considered for serialization. Cosgrove declined, as did *Hampton’s Magazine*. Eventually, *The Popular Magazine*, an action and adventure journal, bought the serialization rights, and Macmillan, after sitting on the manuscript for almost two years, brought it out in 1911.

The editorial resistance to the work was reasonable. The final version cries for extensive cutting and editing. When Benjamin Hampton advised he could publish only 40,000 words, Jack defended the length:

> There is one unfortunate thing about my writing, namely, that I weave. This makes it impossible to cut radically to the extent that you suggest. Possibly, all-told, a thousand or so words might be cut from this story, and still leave a clear, sensible narrative; but the man doesn’t live who could cut 30,000 words out of *Adventure*, and leave anything but insane gibberish.

In fact, as with others of London’s lesser works, trimming would have strengthened the narrative.

Written under stressful conditions, *Adventure* easily competes for the nadir of London’s longer tales. The characters are cartoons, the suspense episodes flat, and the racism raw. The triad love story, a favorite plot device of London’s, is feeble. In his critical overview of London, Earle Labor relegated the novel to a single footnote in which he called it “a warmed-over version of *A Daughter of the Snows*.” In his cogent study of London’s novels, Charles Watson excluded *Adventure* from consideration, while noting that it was “perhaps the most readable” of his lesser novels, and praised its narrative power. Yet London himself, while acknowledging that the work was not a major one, defended its value. The ever-present threat of violence and disease, the corruption of the Whites, the concept of survival despite crude aggression, all captured his imagination; but other works, such as “The Red One” and many of his *South Sea Tales*, would present more successfully this land of darkness. *Adventure* fails perhaps most clearly in its use of humor as a support for characterization and plot, and in its failure to use comic rhetoric in ways which foster the effectiveness of related works.

*Adventure*’s plot is slight. Joan Lackland, a Hawaiian-born White tomboy, suddenly appears in the Berande Plantation house of fever-ridden David Sheldon, whose partner has died, as has Joan’s father with whom she was adventuring. Dave and Joan are thus the only Whites on the island. She ministers to him, shows intelligence and daring in this dangerous environment, and pressures him into accepting her as a partner. He continually objects to her demand because it is socially unacceptable for a White man and woman to live alone together, unmarried. But she eventually wins out. Although various action episodes intervene, the main storyline concerns Sheldon’s falling in love with Joan, and her stubborn resistance to him, as told from his point of view. Two potential rivals appear at different points, Christian Young, the Tahitian-English descendant of a *Bounty* crew...
member, and John Tudor, a gold-hunter. Eventually Tudor recovers from malaria under Joan's care, and one day makes a pass at her, which she rebuffs. Sheldon confronts Tudor, and the two end up agreeing to a "modern duel," hunting one another in the jungle. After wounding Tudor, Sheldon is delighted to hear Joan say that she is ready to marry him — the last line of the book being "I am ready, Dave."

The subplot concerns the Whites' encounters with South Sea island natives: Joan's Polynesian workers, the Melanesian plantation indentured servants, and various bush people, including head-hunters. Upon arrival, Joan disapproves of Dave's hostility towards the darker races, but with exposure to uprisings and the sight of White heads hanging in a smoke house, she adopts his less tolerant, racially superior attitude. This change is assisted by the repeated episodes of threat, including uprisings from plantation workers, an attack by head-hunters on Tudor's gold-hunting unit, and an invasion of the plantation by a nearby tribe. Joan's conversion to race dominance is complete when she uses her whip to beat a recalcitrant worker.

Joan Lackland fits a familiar mold of female characters from London's fiction, known at the time as the New Woman whose most developed first appearance is in A Daughter of the Snows in the form of Frona Welse. The only child of a fatherless Alaskan capitalist, Frona violates the Victorian strictures of ladyhood by wearing skirts which show her ankles, being adept at various athletics (including boxing), speaking her mind, and befriending a prostitute. Jack's second wife Charmian would in life exemplify the ways of the New Woman, and become the model for some later heroines, such as Dede Mason in Burning Daylight and Paula Forrest in The Little Lady of the Big House. But the model for Joan Lackland was Armine von Tempsky, a young friend who had been raised on the Haleakala Ranch in Hawaii. Preferring cattle drives to dances, Armine had the forthright independence of a cowboy. Although Joan Lackland may seem unbelievable to some, her actions reflect a form of gender rebellion common at the time. This was, after all, the decade when women's clubs formed to mobilize numerous social campaigns, and the suffrage movement revitalized. And particular to the younger rebellious women was a hardy resistance to marriage.

Dave Sheldon, on the other hand, is trapped in a more traditional view of femininity. From the beginning he has difficulty with Joan's temperament:

*Her quick mind and changing moods bewildered him, while her outlook on life was so different from what he conceived a woman's outlook should be... Her temper was quick and stormy, and she relied too much on herself and too little on him, which did not approximate at all to his ideal of a woman's conduct when a man was around... At any rate, she did not look the part. And that was what he could not forgive.* (75-76)

Of English birth and education, he has difficulty conceiving of a woman as a business partner and complains that her moral reputation is under threat. One solution is to force her to leave, which worries him because he would be sending her off alone; the other is to marry her.
London’s major device for dramatizing Joan’s independence is to provide her with a sarcastic voice. When the weakened Dave disputes her forcing him to rest, objecting that he has his plantation to attend to, she replies with humor in her eyes: “Don’t you want to know about me? Here am I, just through my first shipwreck, and here are you, not the least bit curious, talking about your miserable plantation?” (48) Later on she mocks his asking her if she is an American by parrying: “You’re English, aren’t you?” (58) She continues taunting him during a conversation several days later, in which she further teases him for being impolite by impugning his Englishness. Just in case the reader does not catch her humor, London often includes references to the laugh lines around her eyes.

These conversational ridicules continue through half of the story. Referring to Satan, she remarks that the dog is smarter than Dave Sheldon, for, unlike him, it is able to identify her workers as Tahitian rather than Melanesian. Another time she says that she will find her own island plantation, and concludes her mocking remarks with: “Find some spot where I shall escape the indignity of being patronized and bossed by the superior sex” (121). Following one argument, she jeers amusedly: “I suppose you’ve been accustomed to Jane Eyres all your life. That’s why you don’t understand me.” As she walks away from that encounter, she laughs and calls out: “You’re hoping a ’gator catches me, aren’t you” (126-27).

London makes similar use of sarcasm, mockery, and teasing to establish the independence of female characters in some of his other works. Frona Welse similarly puts down Vance Corliss for his conventional views of femininity in A Daughter of the Snows. Even the richly-drawn Paula Forrest in The Little Lady of the Big House uses sarcasm, though more subtly, to express her distress over her husband’s preoccupations with work. Because the subjugation of women is ultimately built upon their being silenced by men, a heroine’s speaking in such a manner efficiently establishes her rejection of patriarchy. Significantly, by portraying Dave as somewhat of a boor, seldom quick of repartee, London further confirms Joan’s dominance. Furthermore, in conversations with male characters who respect her prowess, Joan speaks directly without use of deprecatory humor.

Joan also exhibits great physical courage and wiliness, goes off alone and cleverly acquires a trading schooner, confronts violent Melanesian workers directly, swims in the lagoon despite the alligators, and handles her gun with aplomb. She is so finely drawn and presented so much more admirably than any of the other characters that the men, even Dave himself, seem little more than cartoons. Consequently, her capitulation is incredible because she seems more competent and capable than the lucky hero. While writing the story, London teased Charmian that he was falling in love with his heroine. This emotional overidentification may well be at the root of the imbalance, for, throughout most of the story, her character is exteriorized, as viewed by Dave Sheldon.

Since Dave’s perceptions dominate, the tracking of the love story consists primarily of Dave’s reflections about Joan, interspersed between the action episodes. In his first lengthy meditation, Dave “stumble[s] upon the clew to her tantalizing personality”: that she is a boy in her viewpoint (134-36). Consequently, he identifies with her masculine qualities, while retaining a feeling of superiority and viewing her as immature. Yet when she asks to be his partner, he objects that to do so he would have
to marry her because she is a woman. Her problem, in his mind, is that she has a boy’s mind and a woman’s body, which he believes she denies. Despite his confusion and anger over her being “a masquerader” (“Under all her seeming of woman, she was a boy, playing a boy’s pranks”), he falls in love with her (220).

In fact, Joan is well aware that she is a woman, for she wears lacy underwear and finds Christian Young and John Tudor attractive. She surprises Dave when she returns from a trip dressed uncharacteristically in brown slippers, brown openwork stockings, and a skirt which allows a glimpse of her ankles. Again he proposes to her, unsuccessfully, and expresses his love. Soon afterward, Joan remarks that he is changing and could be a good husband, one who considers his wife a free agent. Notably, by this point in the story she no longer uses humorous language, and metamorphoses into a “traditional female.” Unfortunately, little in Dave’s behavior corroborates her sudden shift in perception, and the archaic duel situation which follows only reinforces the patriarchal ideology. Joan’s submission, with its sudden identification of Dave with her father, is utterly unbelievable. As a proof of patriarchy’s victory, Dave refers to her as his “little girl” (400).

If certain forms of humor determine the character of Joan Lackland, the absence of other forms significantly detracts from the story. Most notably absent here is irony, a technique London would use brilliantly at times in his later writing. An ironic tone, for example, concerning the major characters, might have left the reader of Adventure aware that the couple would hardly live happily ever after. Such irony well defines the complexity of relationships in The Little Lady of the Big House or “The Kanaka Surf.”

More important, irony would have mitigated the most disagreeable part of the plot: its racism. It is surprising that critics have not addressed this feature of Adventure, because it stands in strong contrast to London’s other South Sea tales. In some cases irony is the plot motive. For example, in “The Chinago” the ironic misspelling of a name sends the innocent protagonist, a Chinese worker, to the guillotine. The message is clear: that the superior attitude of the colonizers brings injustice upon the colonized. The protagonist of “Mauki” is able to take advantage of another irony, his brutal master’s succumbing to disease, to carry out his vengeance and take his head. This plot implicitly mocks the idea of the White race being the fittest to survive.

In other stories, ironic commentary by the narrator or the characters illuminates London’s questioning of pure Social Darwinism. The drinking buddies in “The Inevitable White Man” discuss how “In direct proportion to the white man’s stupidity is his success in farming the world . . . . Tip it off to him that there’s diamonds on the red-hot ramparts of hell, and Mr. White Man will storm the ramparts and set old Satan himself to pick-and-shovel work.”

Adventure, on the contrary, though written at the same time as these works with their more ambivalent or critical position, presents White racism without apology, and indeed appears to support it. In accord with the imperialistic fervor of the day, the Whites never question their right to exploit native lands and people and defend their use of violence by explaining that the natives are violent
toward one another. London also borrows from common stereotypes of the day in describing the Melanesians, the frequent analogy to monkeys matching the cartoons prevalent in the newspapers of the day. Although he made similar references in other South Sea stories, the natives were not so crudely drawn, and, indeed, often invested with admirable qualities. Consequently, the Spencerian system of social dominance is fully reinforced: male over female, White over Black, with race the tie breaker. Joan sacrifices her struggle for equality with White men while receiving in return the guarantee of superiority over men (and women) of other races. Her attitude is shown toward the end when she chides Dave for dueling, explaining that “White men shouldn’t go around killing each other” (402). Whites should not act like other races, in other words.

One must wonder, then, how London could simultaneously produce such variant interpretations of race and sex. One reason is his and Charmian’s own ambivalence toward Social Darwinism by this point in their lives. With regard to sexism, their positions were less complicated. Throughout the South Seas, the Londons encountered various taboos concerning “Mary,” the bèche-de-mer (Melanesian pidgin) for female, and joked about these practices. He quipped about seeing “Charmian’s proud spirit humbled and her imperious queendom of femininity dragged in the dust.”18 She enjoyed sneaking into tribal male sanctuaries and teasing Jack in return about how uninteresting they were. Jack was a supporter of woman’s suffrage, and was unusual for the time in his embracing marriage as a comradeship.

With regard to racism, however, their attitudes were confused. Both Jack’s and Charmian’s accounts of the Solomons mix expressions of White superiority with those of empathy and compassion for the native people. One senses a struggle going on, with the scientific ethos of the age pressing on one side, and their own private, contrary interpretations on the other. Charmian, for
example, could be insulted that an Asian man did not make more room for her on the sidewalk in Honolulu, yet acknowledge that some Solomon bushmen were more intelligent than some of the White colonizers. Adding to these mixed impressions was the particularly alien Solomon Island culture, with its body tattooing and piercing, and its head-hunting practices. Later on, the Londons learned that both Bernays and a trading captain they had met had lost their heads during native uprisings. Such practices could not help but reinforce the imperialist credo of the day that White Christian civilization could improve life for these peoples. Yet the Londons were not close-minded people, nor had they a personal investment in imperialism, so their attitudes were ambiguous.

Jack London did not require consistency of himself, which is why disagreement is intense concerning the sincerity of his socialism, the depth of his racism, and the exact shape of his spirituality. Also, a most pragmatic writer, he self-consciously shaped his novels, meant first to be published as serials, for the audience. He wanted *Adventure* to be a diversion, an exciting entertainment, and a source of income. Just as he kept sex out of some novels to appease Mrs. Grundy, and inserted spiritualism in *The Star Rover* to satisfy the fad occultists, so too he may have maintained the prevailing social views of the day for this plot. It is in the South Sea short stories that morally complex and socially critical views of imperialism and Social Darwinism are expressed.

London’s vacillation and ambiguity reflected that of the age. During the Progressive Era, Americans were trying to resolve similar inconsistencies between idea and reality. Women’s sphere was no longer limited to the household, Christian progressives and socialists were successfully challenging a tiny capitalist elite, African Americans were organizing for more civil rights, and immigrant workers were changing the social order through unions and retention of certain Old World ways. Consequently, London readily found outlets for both traditional and radical interpretations of imperialism. *Hampton’s Magazine*, which refused to serialize *Adventure*, readily published “Strength of the Strong,” “Mauki,” and “The Terrible Solomons.”

In capitulating to convention, however, London cut off the most productive quality of his creativity, his ability to identify with the character so completely that the reader participates in the character’s journey. As long as Joan Lackland is sarcastic, the reader identifies with her attitude, but once she abandons irony, she loses verisimilitude, for she now meets the demands of Dave Sheldon, the representative of patriarchy and racism. In silencing Joan Lackland’s voice, Jack London silences his own.

**Notes**


4 The Letters, p. 804.


6 The Letters, p. 831.


11 Jack London to Joan and Becky London, 22 August 1916, The Letters, p. 1566. “One of the Von Tempsky girls, who was a model for Joan Lackland, is just now up from Hawaii and visiting us on the ranch. I wish you knew her and her sister and their strong old father.”

12 For a cogent introduction to these changes, see Glenda Riley, Inventing the American Woman (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1987), particularly chapter 6, “Reordering Women’s Sphere: The Progressive Era, 1890-1917.”

13 See, for example, A Daughter of the Snows, pp. 108-109.

14 The Log of the Snark, p. 389.

15 “The Kanaka Surf” appears in On the Makaloa Mat (New York: Macmillan, 1919). For further analysis, see American Dreamers, pp. 303-306, where the story is incorrectly identified as “On the Makaloa Mat.”

