

The Cruise of the Snark

By Clarice Stasz

On April 23, 1907 reporters, well-wishers, and curious strangers crowded a wharf on the Oakland estuary to watch Charmian and Jack London sail toward the narrow Golden Gate straits. The couple waved from the two-masted *Snark*, the ketch Jack designed for a planned seven-year trek around the world. The crew included a Stanford athlete, a Japanese valet, a magazine editor, and Martin Johnson from Kansas. Journalists called the plan “London’s Folly.” Close friends feared they would never again see the couple, while naval officers bet over their likelihood to reach Hawaii.

For Charmian and Jack, the venture promised a rare opportunity to circle a rapidly changing world and report on colonialism. Jack had crossed the Pacific on a tall sealing ship, and understood the difficulty of the plan. Naturally courageous, Charmian was game for any perils ahead. They knew the experience would provide ore for his writing, just as the Yukon Gold Rush had served his early works. They were better prepared for the physical and mental challenge than anyone else on the boat.

Within hours the results of poor construction appeared. The *Snark* leaked like a sieve and failed to handle as expected. For a week everyone hung over the rails in reaction to the towering waves. Later the plumbing malfunctioned, and food stuffs rotted. Reaching Hawaii required precise navigation, but Jack discovered the appointed navigator had no idea where they were. In typical fashion, he pulled out a book and taught himself the instruments. The reached Honolulu the very morning he predicted.

Throughout the trip, Jack’s devotion to order and schedules remained. Mornings he wrote, completing his novel *Martin Eden*, as well as short stories and essays inspired by stops along the way. Charmian also wrote, a typed diary in multiple copies to send off to friends. They took turns at the wheel and boat maintenance. Jack fished while Charmian shot birds for food. For relaxation they listened to their RCA Victrola, mostly opera, and read aloud. After dinner they played card games, Charmian noting the scores like a competitive athlete.

While the *Snark* underwent repairs Hawaii, the Londons enjoyed hospitality from deposed monarch Queen Liliuokalani, major plantation owners, and local residents. Whenever possible, London gave speeches on the benefits of Socialism. Among the first visitors to surf, Jack's later articles inspired mainlanders to try the sport. Curiosity drew the couple to the Molokai leper colony. Spending several days, they watched the afflicted garden, ride horseback, and play piano with missing fingers. Jack's journalism describing the colony displeased Hawaiians who wished its presence concealed.

The *Snark* repaired and most crew replaced, they headed to the South Seas. They followed the earlier footsteps Melville, Stevenson, and Gauguin in order to observe changes brought by colonization. Travelling on horseback or foot, they explored isolated villages. At one feast they played opera and Sousa marches on their Victrola to accompany hula dancing. Charmian's diaries also observed disease, signs of indifferent government, and local culture weakened by Western incursion. When the Londons gave local people gifts of thanks, natives reciprocated with papayas, live chickens, and one pig. For several weeks a local couple joined their travels through the islands.

If the beauty of Tahiti and Samoa mocked the reality for its indigenous people, the Solomon Island landscape matched its horrors. Heavily-treed waterways reminded of the Londons of Conrad's "Heart of Darkness." The islanders were warring cannibals, their culture based upon revenge murders. Well-armed white slavers captured local men and sold them to coconut growers. The Londons stayed at one plantation to study how it was run. Despite being charming guests, they left in disgust that this brutal system remained.

By this stage in their journey, illness afflicted everyone on the *Snark*. Infections and puzzling ailments forced a cancellation of their dream. The ship sold, they recovered in Australia. Despite the loss, both Jack published *The Cruise of the Snark*, while Charmian wrote two books, *Log of the Snark* and *Our Hawaii*. His journalism and short stories informed readers how Western colonial ways were harmful. Despite the initial plan falling through, they were proud of all they accomplished by using their words to educate readers used to hearing the glories of imperialism.

