

CHARMIAN KITTRIDGE LONDON/ELIZA SHEPARD
JACK'S WOMEN – A HEART FULL OF LOVE

Jack London was fortunate to have two loving, special women in his life — Charmian Kittridge London, his Wife, and his Step-Sister Eliza Shepard. These two non-traditional, independent women complimented his life in immeasurable ways that helped him become the literary genius of his time.

Charmian was a model for the “new woman” in an era when feminism in the late 19th century was part of an unbridled spirit of rebellion. She was an emancipated, self-sufficient woman before she met Jack.

She was well versed in literature, an accomplished horsewoman and a classical pianist. As a young woman, she worked as a secretary for a shipping firm in San Francisco, earning enough money to provide a stable and food for her horse as well as travel to Europe. With inheritance from her father and uncle, she purchased rental property in Berkeley.

It's well known that Jack was very athletic, and Charmian, whom he called “Mate,” enjoyed competing with him in many sports—a perfect match. The two fell in love in the summer of 1903 and settled in Glen Ellen at Wake Robin Lodge in the spring of 1905, purchasing their first property the Hill Ranch 129 acres. They married on November 19, 1905.

They traveled extensively. Their Snark voyage lasted 1 year and 8 months, terminating in December 1908. They slowly made their way back to Oakland on July 21, 1909 and put down roots at their Beauty Ranch in September 1911.

In their 13 years together, Jack and Charmian, seldom apart, experienced a lifetime of adventure that few people enjoy, and they were known to be great hosts to a steady stream of people who visited them at Beauty Ranch.

Jack was a prolific writer, but without Charmian his works might not have been published. She was his editor, proof-reader and literary confidante. She prepared his research notes for his literary files, organized the hundreds of photographs they took at their ranch and travels, and kept up-to-date scrapbooks of numerous reviews of his books and newsworthy items of the day.

Eliza entered Jack's world early in his life. Her father John London married Jack's Mother Flora when Eliza was 8 years old and Jack was 8 months old. She had a strong influence on him and helped shape his idea of what the ideal woman was supposed to be...loving, strong and supportive.

When Eliza was 16, she married 41-year-old James Shepard to escape the drudgery at Flora's household. She remained very close and supportive of Jack, mortgaging her home to finance his journey to the Klondike in the gold rush of 1897.

Jack and Eliza had a very loving relationship, and later, with Charmian, they formed a very loving trio. In 1910, Jack asked Eliza to be the Superintendent of the Beauty Ranch, which allowed Jack freedom to travel and write. Eliza became the force that kept the 1400 acres of the Beauty Ranch solvent.

Before Jack died, he granted Eliza power of attorney in handling business with publishers and agents.

Following Jack's death on November 22, 1916, the women became devoted to each other and forged a firm partnership. Eliza continued to handle most business matters, notably the continuation of the ranch and movie rights contracts. Eliza preferred to be in the background, while Charmian handled public relations and most of the literary estate.

Eliza was active in the community and was committed to veterans rights and welfare of women and children throughout her life. She died in 1939 at the age of 71.

In 1910, Jack dedicated *Lost Face*, a collection of short stories to Eliza.

Dearest Sister Eliza:

"With a heart full of love, and full of joy that you are here with us in this joy-spot of the Valley of the Moon"

Your Brother Jack London"

During the next decade after Jack's Death, Charmian committed herself to preserving Jack's literary legacy for future generations. She met with publishers and playwrights in New York and traveled to Europe to get Jack's books translated into many foreign languages.

In the 1930s, Charmian became involved with the movie industry to convert Jack's writings into films. She sold her book, *Book of Jack London* which was made into a film. She authored two other autobiographical books about her life with Jack: *The Log of the Snark* and *Our Hawaii* and wrote prefaces to Jack's writings that were published posthumously.

In 1934, due to economic pressures of the Great Depression, Eliza, her son Irving and Charmian decided to convert the Jack London cottage, the old winery, cabins and other buildings into a guest ranch. Charmian moved to her larger home on the property, *House of Happy Walls*.

The Guest Ranch operation continued from 1935 to 1948. Her efforts to support Jack's literary and ranch legacies spanned nearly four decades. Charmian moved back to the cottage in late 1940's and died on January 13, 1955, at age 83.

Her ashes were put under the same rock she placed on Jack's grave site so the "mates" could be together for all eternity.

Jack dedicated his 1916 novel, *The Little Lady of the Big House*, to Charmian:

"Dearest Mate –

The years pass. You and I pass. But yet our love abides — more firmly, more deeply, more surely, for we have built our love for each other, not upon sand, but upon the rock.

Your Lover-Husband

Jack London"

Authored by Alice T. Melillo, Chairperson JLSP Volunteer Council and Docent