

# SHORT STORY AMERICA

## A NIGHT'S SWIM IN YEDDO BAY

JACK LONDON

"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 them to our people, for real moral goodness and purity, why, we ain't in it." And the speaker, a grizzled, old merchant seaman, drained his glass and set it down on the bar with a slam, as though inviting criticism or controversy. But none dared to oppose him. Good-humoredly glancing round on his little group of listeners, he called for another round of drinks.

"An enterprising people, they are," he went on, leaning comfortably back against the bar and striking an attitude, without which, as his old chum, Bill Nandts, said, it was impossible for him to spin a yarn.

"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.

"Why, there isn't a ship that leaves Yokohama but with a fo'ks'le full of slender, dilapidated wardrobes, the rest of which the Japs have obtained by shrewd trading and sharp tricks. Of course, the curio traders that come aboard while in port get more than a fair share of the spoils; but still, the 'sam pan' or boat men do a fair trade in that line.

"God pity the sailor who finds himself down on the pier without the necessary 'ten sen' to pay the boatmen's hire out to his vessel. Unless he can find a shipmate, from whom to borrow the money, he will usually end in parting with his shirt or singlet, or some article of wearing apparel; for the rapacious 'sam pan' men just ache to dress like us, though they can't do it on the square. They tried that game on me once, but it did not succeed.

"It was my first trip to Yokohama, and I had been ashore half the night, carrying on as only a reckless young rat knows how. I had been up in 'Bloodtown', for that is what the low white quarter is called by the natives, because of the many drunken brawls and fights that occur there. Well, it was 'do in Rome as Rome does', and, of course, I had got mixed up in a couple of rows and street fights, for I was about half seas under, and did not care a snap for anything. Just about midnight I came wandering down to the little stone pier, or jetty, which was Yokohama's only apology for the long line of docks to be met with in every seaport. In Yokohama, as you know, all the shipping lays out to anchor or to huge buoys; the work of loading and unloading being carried on by hundreds of lighters and thousands of low class Japanese laborers. I hear, however, that

the Government has now erected a splendid steel pier, which cost a couple of million.

"But to return to my yarn. Along I came, taking in the whole street in a way that reminded me of the drunken fishermen, who, with thirty-two points in the compass, steered thirty more. My hat was gone; the sailor's knot, with which I had tied the silk handkerchief round my neck, had been slipped and drawn tight against my windpipe, nearly choking me; my clothes were all dusty and awry, from where I had been rolling on the ground with two doughty 'ricksha' men and a policeman; and, in fact, I must have presented a most charming appearance as I came under the lights of the police station and custom-house.

"About a hundred paces farther on, I came to the stone steps where the 'sam pans' clustered, while their owners solicited custom, for all the world like our own cabmen and hotel runners down at the ferries when the overland passengers are due.

"I soon engaged an old codger, who seemed like those battered armors which one sees in museums and such places. He must have been at least sixty years old, and, with great height, he was as lean as a skeleton; while his whole body was nothing but a mass of wrinkles. Here and there, as the light from a brazier, charcoal fire, shone on his sunburned hide, I could see big black and white scars of all descriptions. He was the most battered old hulk one would wish to meet with, and his voice was in harmony with the rest of him. It was as thin and shrill and piping as a child's, and it made me fidget as he bowed and ducked before me.

"Following him, I climbed aboard the 'sam pan', where I made the acquaintance of the rest of his crew. It was as startling a contrast as I ever saw. It was a little lump of a boy,

not much larger than a good-sized chaw of tobacco. He was a precocious little youngster, with plump, well-formed body, and the bearing and assurance of a full-grown man. I proceeded to take a seat; but, what with my condition and the shaky, old concern, I came down all in a heap, as though I intended going through the bottom of the rickety craft.

"As I lay there, sprawling, I saw the little shaver glance sharply at me, and then jabber away to the old fellow, who, in turn, stared at me and paused in the very act of shoving the 'sam pan' off. I managed to gain my feet, and, irritated at the delay and my own clumsiness, I told them rather sharply to go ahead. They refused to do so. By this time the steps were crowded by the rough watermen, who were all laughing and jeering at me.

"I began to get angry at all this, and was about to shove off myself when the youngster came up to me and said very laconically, as he held out his hand, 'Pay now'. At first I did not understand, so closely were the two words run together; but after he repeated his 'pay now' several times, to the great delight of the crowd, I comprehended. Of course, I had no objections as to when I paid; but, digging down into my pocket, I found I was broke. Then I carefully searched every pocket, and the result was the startling knowledge that I hadn't a 'sou markee' to my name.

"When this became apparent, the crowd on the steps fairly howled in their glee, as they chattered away and hurled whole strings of advice and admonitions to my triumphant 'sam pan' crew.

"The youngster, after sharply scanning me with his shrewd, black eyes, laid hold of my

shirt, which was bran' new from the slop chest, and said, 'Gimme shirt'. To this request the crowd signified their approval by sundry had-clappings and with much laughter enjoyed my predicament.

"Not by a long-shot', sez I, and, finding him obstinate, I climbed out on the pier, feeling pretty cheap.

"Well, I fooled around a long while; but not one of all the 'sam pan' men would take me out without being paid in advance. To my every appeal, they would answer, 'Gimme coat', 'Gimme shirt', and so on. I was very obstinate myself in those days and wouldn't give in.

"I remember getting up on a big block of hewn granite and delivering an impassioned harangue to the motley mob, who cheered and jeered me by turns, not understanding a word of my discourse. Bye and bye I fell off the stone on top of them, nearly mashing two or three.

"Then I wandered down to the police station, and made known my ridiculous plight to the lieutenant. He seemed a very affable, good-natured man, and he went out and addressed the 'sam pan' men in choice Japanese. But they still refused to take me unless I parted company with my coat or shirt, or some article of wearing apparel, worth ten times the necessary money.

"Well, to make a long story short, after puzzling my head a little, I decided to swim aboard. As quick as it takes to tell it, I stripped myself, and, telling the lieutenant to take care of my clothes, I started out the pier on the run, closely followed by the 'sam pan'

men, who seemed to hugely enjoy the queer caper I cut. I started down the stone steps with the tread of a hero; but the tide was out, and slipping on the slimy ooze which covered them, I went heels over head, bumpety bump, all the way down to the bottom. I struck the water with a mighty splash, to the accompaniment of the hoarse shouts of the enthusiastic crowd.

"However, when I came to the surface, they all signified their willingness to take me aboard if I would return. But I was stubborn now. I waved them good-bye, and paddled away in the dark. I had no fear, for I could swim like a fish, and, as it was mid-summer, the water was quite warm. Besides, the freshening effect of the salty brine was rapidly clearing my muddled head.

"Far ahead of me our anchor light burned brightly, and, with a strong, steady stroke, I struck out. It was not much of a swim—hardly a mile—and I soon found myself alongside. Climbing silently on deck, unperceived by the anchor watch, who was no other than my old chum here, Bill Nandts, I made my way to the fo'ks'le. I took my blankets up on the fo'ks'le head, near the catheads, and laid down, for the fo'ks'le was too stifling for a comfortable sleep.

"Before I could close my eyes, I heard a boat come alongside and hail the anchor watch. Then quite a conversation followed, and some one climbed over the side and threw something down on the deck. This Bill Nandts examined. All of a sudden, he jumped to his feet, and exclaimed, 'My God! They're Charley's'

"It was one of the harbor police boats, which had brought my clothes aboard and inquired about my safety. Of course, Bill hadn't seen me, and, after rousing the fo'ks'le

to find me, he made sure that I was drowned. The Captain, aroused by the noise, came on deck. After listening to the story, he ordered a boat over the side to search for me.

"Away both boats pulled, and I could hear Bill Nandts shouting again and again, 'Charley! O Charley! Where are you?'

"After vainly hunting for me in the water, they inquired of all the ships, thinking that I might have swam aboard one of them in the dark. Before long the whole harbor was in an uproar. The hailing of the anchor watches roused the dogs, which many of the ships carried, and soon every dog in the harbor was baying vigorously. The noise was contagious and spread to the shore, where all their canine friends came in on the grand chorus. And the cocks began to crow and the chickens to cackle, as though the last day had come, while a general alarm of fire was turned in by a nervous watchman; and all Yokohama awoke, thinking the city was being burned down.

"The bay was now swarming with the 'sam pan' men, who lent their hoarse cries to swell the tumult. Lights were flashing hither and thither across the water. The police tug, having got up steam by this time, came out to see what was all the uproar was about, and but added to the general confusion. Then the Harbor Master, aroused by some over-zealous official, with a wild tale of disaster, came hurrying out in his six-oared gig. But the scene of excitement had spread so far that he could neither make head nor tail out of it.

"Suddenly he was run down and spilled into the water by the police boat, which was just then engaged in an exciting chase of a poor, bewildered fisherman, to whom, with startling intuition, they had attributed all the trouble. The frightened fisherman, now that

he was saved by the accident, lost his head, and fouled the bowsprit of a Norwegian bark, near us, and capsized. Then a whole fleet of custom-house boats, thinking it was a preconcerted plan of the smugglers to land illicit goods during the excitement, came dashing across the harbor in all directions. And how they overhauled the frightened 'sam pans' and fishing craft with great fierceness, in the heroic discharge of their duty!

"And to cap the climax, the aged keepers of the two light ships, on either side of the narrow opening in the great breakwater, seeing the lights of a P. and O. steamer approaching, thought it was an invasion of the Chinese. So they hurriedly extinguished both lights, and the big passenger steamer ran aground in the darkness.

"The excitement was intense; but, after an hour's duration, it died away, and I fell asleep, hugging myself in glee at the great prank I had played.

"The next I knew I was being roughly awakened. Opening my eyes, I found the sun rising in the East. Bill Nandts was a-shaking me like mad, so happy as not to know whether to be angry with me or not. Of course, explanations followed, and it was a long time before I heard the last of it. And as for the 'sam pan' men—why, I had the freedom of the harbor. For, ever after, they refused to take money from me, though they would always set up a great jabbering and laughing whenever I hove in sight."

"Well, boys," said Bill Nandts when he concluded, "that's one on me. So come up, all hands, and drink to the health of Long Charley, the best old 'shell back' that ever sailed out of Frisco."