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Meta
Journal des traducteurs
Translators' Journal

MƐTA

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Volume 34, Number 1, mars 1989

Humour et traduction
Humour and Translation

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/002418ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/002418ar

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Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (print)
1492-1421 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Tavernier-Courbin, J. (1989). Translating Jack London's Humor. *Meta*, *34*(1), 63–71. https://doi.org/10.7202/002418ar

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TRANSLATING JACK LONDON'S HUMOR

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That Jack London is often humorous has seldom been recognized, and few are the critics who dealt with this aspect of his work[1]. However, an examination of London's letters and manuscripts reveals that he conceived of much of his work as humorous, or at least as including humorous elements, and one might well apply to London himself his description of one of his protagonists: "He had the touch of humor, ... could see the humor of tragedy, the pathos of comedy...[2]" It is thus not surprising that a writer like Philip José Farmer should have commented that he drew from a prolonged reading of London's work "a gusto, a sense of the ridiculous and the absurd, [as well as] a realization of man's cruelty and injustice to man and beast alike[3]". In 1906, London described a book he had just finished — *Before Adam* — as "a skit, ridiculously true, preposterously real[4]". This description of a book which deals with subconscious primal instincts and fears touches on what is perhaps the key to London's humor: a naturalistic vision of life in which nothing is soft, harmless, or conventional, combined with an ability to perceive the ludicrous in any situation and relish it thoroughly.

London's humor, in fact, ranges from a sheer enjoyment of the visually ridiculous as shown in such tales as "A Relic of the Pliocene" and "The Man with the Gash", to tales that essentially dramatize a practical joke played at the expense of some respected social figure, such as "A Flutter in Eggs" or "The Townsite of Tra-Lee". On a more complex but still light-hearted level, London's humor achieves meaning in social comedies which are parodies of archetypal social situations, such as "A Daughter of the Aurora" and "The Wife of a King", and in historical or religious parodies such as "The Master of Mystery" and "A Hyperborean Brew". London will often also use visual humor to lighten some of his more powerful stories, such as "The Red One". But, perhaps more importantly, one finds throughout London's work an ironical view of life and a sense of the paradox based on the contrast between an ideal, or, at least, a romantic vision of life and a down-to-earth evaluation of man's nature. For the protagonists who take life and themselves terribly seriously it ends up in tragedy in such stories as "Keesh, the Son of Keesh", or in triumph for those who understand human nature and both accept or use its weaknesses — a triumph which may be joyful as in "Chun-Ah-Chun" or tragic as in "Lost Face". Interestingly, these various forms of humor to be found in London's work (and there are more) are easily translatable as they rely more on mental and visual concepts, on plot and tone, on ironical reversals of situations, than on word-play. Whether London's humor is sheer fun, black, or existential, whether it debunks, ridicules or punishes, it seldom relies on puns, on jokes that result from someone's understanding of a word in a different way than might reasonably be expected, on statements that are literally true in more ways than one, on reversals of traditional statements, or on witticisms. However, to say that London's humor is generally easily translatable does not mean that it has always been well translated.

"A Relic of the Pliocene" is a tall tale in which a nameless narrator relates an improbable tale told him by Thomas Stephens, according to which Stephens has not only discovered but also put to death the last mammoth on earth, by pestering the poor animal

to death, forcing him to run around a valley until he collapses from exhaustion and starvation, allowing Stephens to butcher him. The visual image of the poor mammoth reduced to a whimpering and quivering "jelly-mountain of misery" is both hilarious and sad, for the reader cannot help but sympathize with the gigantic animal whose psychology is fully as developped as that of the hunter. Far from being ridiculous at the outset, the mammoth had a great dignity before becoming victim to a nervous break-down at the hands of Stephens. In "The Man with the Gash", humor relies also on a visual image, for the miser, Kent, is unable to hang the man he suspects of having stolen his gold dust, because Cardegee is heavier than he. Pull as he might on the rope, he cannot lift him off the ground, let alone kill him. Another tale which evidences the sense London had of the absurd possibilities inherent in any situation in his satiric version of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde — "When the World Was Young" — where one finds one of London's few word-plays. James Ward is both in love and terrified of getting married for at night he reverts to the early Teuton stage and feels "almost irresistibly impelled to reach out and paw and maul at [his *fiancée*]". No wonder that he finds it unthinkable to meet his wife after dark and that, when he proposed and she accepted, he "prayed privily and fervently that it was nor for worse". "*Pour le meilleur ou pour le pire* — For the better or for the worse" are both similar concepts and similar phrases in French and English, and the word play is naturally transposed[5].

London's social parodies rely on traditional myths and archetypal situations of Western culture and their transposition into the primitive environment of the Klondike. "A Daughter of the Aurora" is a delightful transposition of the traditional medieval joust of the knights for the hand of the lady into the refreshingly primitive society of the Far North, and "The Wife of King" is an amusing transposition of the Pygmalion myth in that same setting. Joy Molineau informs two of the men who have been courting her that a rich claim on Eldorado Creek is about to become available, and that the first man who jumps it will be rich. She also suggests that if either of them wins, she will marry him. Both Louis Savoy and Jack Harrington prepare for the staking of the claim, buying the best dogs they can find, and spacing four relays of dogs along the icy trail. When the time comes, both men, as well as a few hundred others, stake the claim and rush back to the Gold Recorder's office to register it. Throughout the race, Harrington is in the lead. When he reaches his last relay, he has the pleasant surprise of finding Joy's lead dog — the best lead dog in the North — at the head of his team. Jack is now sure of his success. But, when he reaches Forty Mile, still in the lead, but with Savoy a determined but hopeless second, Joy whistles to her dog. Wolf Fang instantly leaves the track, throwing Harrington in the snow, and joins his mistress. The way is thus cleared for Louis Savoy to register the claim, and claim Joy's hand in marriage. Clearly, Joy's trick is completely dishonest but at the same time hilariously crafty. It is only at the end that one finds out that Joy has always known which man she wanted for a husband; but she wanted him to deserve her. She thus carefully set the two men up against each other, called the rules of the game, but rigged the cards to her own advantage. However, had Savoy not made a good enough showing to deserve her favor, she still had it in her power to let Harrington win. Thus, Joy could not lose, and, no matter what happened, she would end up with a husband who was both worthy and rich. It is impossible to not laugh and approve of her craftiness and skill, especially since she takes advantage of her unknown-to-others power and of her charm to convince a poorly paid *Lieutenant de police* to bet on Louis Savoy against all odds, allowing him to win a substantial amount of money.

Such a story would be amusing in any language, and London's phonetic transcription of Joy's pidgin English can be translated in "*petit nègre*" French with no difficulty.

For instance, Joy's concluding comment as to how well Jack Harrington served her purpose is easily translatable:

> "Ah, him do vaire well", Joy Molineau was explaining to the Lieutenant. "Him — what you call — set the pace. Yes him set the pace vaire well"[6].
>
> *"Ah, lui, très bien faire", Joy Molineau expliquait au Lieutenant. "Lui — comment vous dites — imposer l'allure. Oui, lui imposer bonne allure"* (my translation).

However, for some mysterious reason the most common translation in French by Louis Postif translates Joy's *"petit nègre"* into perfectly good, not to say elegant French: *"Ah! il a bien travaillé! expliquait-elle. Il a ... comment dites-vous ça? ... mené le train. C'est cela même, il a bien mené le train"*[7]. This lack of faithfulness to both the spirit and the letter of the text is present from the first sentence to the last one. Actually the translation of the first sentence is far worse than that of the last, but the sin is of a kind:

> You — what you call — lazy mans, you lazy mans would desire me to haf for wife. It is not good. Nevaire, no, nevaire, will lazy mans my hoosband be. (p. 210)
>
> *Vous qui êtes (comment dites-vous ça?) ah! oui! un paresseux! Vous, un paresseux, vous voudriez me prendre pour femme? N'y songez pas un instant! Jamais, au grand jamais, un paresseux ne sera mon mari.* (p. 120)

Quite amazingly Joy's faulty pronunciation and grammatical errors are nowhere to be found in the translation. We no longer have a simple Indian girl who speaks English badly, but a woman speaking in perfectly elegant French, with the result that the *"comment dites-vous ça"* becomes absurd. In fact, throughout the story, a major source of humor has been lost in the translation: the amusing phonetic transcription of Joy's accent and poor English, as well as the dramatic contrast created with Joy's sound knowledge of men. She may not manipulate English well, but she certainly manipulates men and events in a masterly fashion.

Such departure from the tone of London's story was purely gratuitous, and translating Joy's pidgin English into *"petit nègre"* French would have been an easy task. Much of the charm of the story was lost in the translation. An admirer of *Huckleberry Finn* would shiver at the idea of it in straight English, French, or any other language, and Twain would certainly turn in his grave.

In "The Wife of a King", Madeline, a young and pretty *Métis*, has been deserted by her "sourdough" husband, who finds the company of more sophisticated women more to his taste, in particular that of the Greek dancer Freda. In despair, Madeline comes to Dawson and puts her case before three Northlanders, including the Malemute Kid, London's ideal hero. In order to bring the philandering husband back, the three men run an intensive charm school for Madeline's exclusive benefit. The paradoxes are hilarious, for we have a girl being coached into the refinements of seduction in a cabin lost in the middle of nowhere by three virile men (including Jack Harrington) more used to handling wolf-dogs than pretty women. The very roughness of the setting and the men is a major source of humor:

> The most pathetic part, perhaps, was the businesslike way in which they went about it. No athlete was ever trained more rigidly for a coming contest, nor wolf-dog for the harness than was she[8].

Amusingly, as her social graces develop and her self-esteem grows, Madeline becomes increasingly annoyed at how little her husband paid her father in order to marry her:

"One rifle, one blanket, twenty bottles of *hooch*" (to make matters worse, the rifle broke). Indeed, what pretty woman could be satisfied with being valued as low as *"un fusil, une couverture, et vingt bouteilles de tord-boyau"* (my translation)[9] ?

Of course, all is well that ends well, and Madeline seduces her husband away from Freda at the ball. London heightens the sense of comedy by indirectly reminding us that this is not a refined drawing-room but a rough and violent environment. During the whole exercise, Madeline's three teachers are watchful, and cover each other's backs, always ready to draw their guns. Again, the story presents no real translation problem. However, the translators, Louis Postif, Paul Gruyer, and S. Joubert, took with the text such liberties that they, at times, flatly changed its meaning. The most glaring *"contresens"* combined with some creative translation is the following:

> Freda pouted and went in with Cal Galbraith; but she had a good heart and a sure tongue, and she spoiled his oysters for him. What she said is of no importance, but his face went red and white at intervals, and he swore repeatedly and savagely at himself. (p. 147)

> *Cal Galbraith, faisant bon visage contre mauvaise fortune, offrit son bras à Frida et tous deux allèrent à leur tour s'asseoir à une table, devant une assiette d'huîtres. Il y eut à voix basse, une vive conversation, qu'interrompait de temps à autre Cal Galbraith, par une bordée d'injures. Alors on voyait Frida s'efforcer, avec douceur, de calmer son compagnon.* (p. 264)

Frankly, this is as poor a translation as any I have ever read, and the French and English texts have little in common. One, in fact, wonders whether the translator(s) understood Jack London. Far from doing her best to appease Cal, Freda is the one who gives him a good tongue lashing: *"mais elle avait bon coeur (le coeur bien placé) et la langue bien pendue, et elle lui gâcha ses huîtres (en lui disant ce qu'elle pensait de sa conduite). Ce qu'elle lui dit n'a pas d'importance, mais le visage de Cal s'empourprait et blêmissait alternativement, et il jurait continuellement et sauvagement contre lui-même."* The facts that Cal puts on a good face, offers his arm to Freda, and that both sit down in front of plates of oysters is of course not in London's text. Conversely, the fact that Freda pouts does not appear in the translation.

There are many such instances of poor translation in the story. It is, of course, understood that a translator cannot be completely faithful to a text if he is going to transpose it into another language. However one should not change a text that presents no real difficulty of translation. In the two following examples, the exaggerated inventiveness of the translation stands out, and needs no comment:

> (1) At first she looked in awe at the tiny white satin slippers; but she quickly understood the admiration which shone, manlike, in the eyes of the men. Her face flushed with pride. For the moment she was drunken with her woman's loveliness;... (p. 136)

> *Mais, maintenant, elle ne paraissait plus du tout gênée et, le pied en avant, elle sentait son brun visage s'empourprer d'orgueil. Car elle avait lu, dans les yeux brillants de Stanley Prince et d'Arrington, qu'elle était devenue une femme élégante.* (p. 244)

> (2) "May — may I have the next round dance with you ?" the king stuttered.
> The wife of the king glanced at her card and inclined her head. (p. 147)

> *"— Voulez-vous, madame ... balbutia Cal Galbraith, voulez-vous m'accorder la première danse que vous avez de libre ?*
> *— Comme il vous plaira ... Pour la huitième valse."* (p. 265)

It would take too long to comment on the flaws of the translation of these two passages; however I should like to mention, with respect to the first one, that there were three men in the room, admiring Madeline. Why the translator decided to exclude the Malemute Kid will probably always remain a mystery.

Stories such as "A Flutter in Eggs", "The Townsite of Tralee", "The Master of Mystery", and "A Hyperborean Brew" all rely on thematic humor. The first two stories are basically "canulars", elaborate practical jokes that make use of the greed of a couple of Klondike Kings in order to amuse Dawson City. In the first story Smoke Bellew is tricked by Wild Water Charley into cornering the egg market, and ends up the unhappy possessor of tens of thousands of rotten eggs. The second story features Smoke Bellew's revenge, when he tricks Wild Water Charley into buying worthless plots of land where "Peace and solitude [are] always and perpetually guaranteed". The other two stories are more complex and more interesting, and essentially debunk religion. "The Master of Mystery" demonstrates amusingly that shamans perform miracles not because they have the power of the gods, but because they have a commonsensical and shrewd knowledge of human nature, that the shamans know that they know nothing and that they have no supernatural powers, and do not pretend otherwise between themselves, that impressive religious rituals essentially cover up a void, and that no-one is completely free of religious superstitions, even the most outspoken disbelievers. Hooniah's blankets have been stolen. The village's shaman is in disgrace and another shaman, Klok-No-Ton, is brought in to uncover the thief. Klok-No-Ton visits Scundoo in the hope of discovering who the culprit is in exchange for sharing his fee equally with Scundoo. Scundoo generously refuses the bribe and provides the necessary hint — but the wrong one. After an impressive ritual designed to put fear in the hearts of all, Klok-No-Ton points his accusing finger at the only one who could not possibly have done it. Klok-No-Ton is driven out of the village in shame, and Scundoo devises a brilliant trick worthy of Sherlock Holmes to make the guilty one reveal himself. Scundoo banks on the fact that even the most outspoken disbeliever of the tribe, who also turns out to be the thief, will not in the intimacy of a dark tent dare challenge the gods — *i.e.* touch a black pot in front of Jelchs, the raven. His clean hands give him away to the wrath of the people. Dirty hands are not necessarily guilty hands, Jack London is telling us. An implied paradox which easily translates into French since *"les mains sales"* have the same connotation of guilt.

"A Hyberborean Brew" is an amusing parody of the struggle between spiritual and temporal powers which characterized our Western society for centuries. Two men, Stevens and his Indian companion, Moosu, reenact the traditional rivalry between the King and the Pope amid a very remote and backward Indian tribe by the rim of the Arctic Sea. Stevens establishes his power as chief by making moonshine whiskey, but he makes the mistake of allowing Moosu to declare himself shaman. When occasion for discord arises between the two over women, wealth and power, the temporal power of Stevens is worsted by the spiritual power of Moosu. Angered, Stevens, by far the most intelligent, devises a scheme whereby Moosu will have to perform a miracle to save his neck. After having starved the tribe, Stevens calls upon Moosu to perform the miracle of the loaves and the fishes, and feed the tribe. Moosu, who had expected to find meat in Steven's *"cachés"* and finds them empty instead, is disgraced and is forced to run away with Stevens and break trail for his dogs. Would that such struggle in civilized societies be that easily solved, and with such immanent justice!

London's humor often relies on tone, and will often arise from a first-person narrator speaking with great earnestness, but whose words are hilariously funny because of the unexpected context in which they are said. "Jan, the Unrepentant" and "That Spot" rely on such a humorous device. Jan must hang because he has supposedly killed another

man. He fights fiercely to escape, and his friends who must execute him cannot master him. During the fight they try to convince him to behave decently and let them hang him:

> "Quit yer tantrums, Jan, an' ease up!" panted Red Bill, getting a strangle-hold on Jan's neck. "Why on earth can't yeh hang decent and peaceable?"
>
> ...
>
> "An' yer no comrade," broke in Red Bill. "If you was, you'd hang 'thout rampin' around an' roarin'. Come on Jan, there's a good fellow. Don't give us no more trouble. Jes' quit, an' we'll hang yeh neat and handy, an' be done with it.[10]

The translation of Louis Postif is faithful to the meaning of the passage but again does not translate the pronunciation[11]. However, in this story, the phonetic transcription into French would have been more difficult to make than would have been the case with "A Daughter of the Aurora". It would still have been feasible, though. But one shudders at the idea of having to translate such phonetic English as the one found in Southern humor, in particular that found in George Washington Harris's Sut Lovingood yarns. A passage such as the following from "Sut Lovingood's Sermon" would be a challenge to even a translator of genius:

> FUSTLY, that I haint got nara a soul, nuffin but a whisky proof gizzard, sorter like the wust half ove a ole par ove saddil bags. SECONDLY, that I'se too durn'd a fool tu cum even onder millertary lor. THUDLY, that "hes the longes" par ove laigs ever hung to eny cackus, "scepting only ove a granddady spider, an' kin beat HIM a usen ove em jis" es bad as a skeer'd dorg kin beat a cripple mud turkil. FOUFLY, that I kin chamber more cockscrew, kill-devil whisky, an' stay on aind, than enything scepting only a broad bottum'd chun. FIVETY, an' las'ly, kin git inter more durn'd misfortnit skeery scrapes, than enybody, an' then run outen them faster, by golly, nat enybody.[12]

But, unlike Harris, London is still easily readable when he writes phonetically; therefore he is easily translatable, and one cannot but wonder why his translators made no effort at phonetic speech transcription.

As most good comic characters, the narrator of "That Spot" has himself no sense of humor whatsoever, and his dismayed narration of his predicament is extremely funny. Stephen MacKaye complains bitterly that his partner returned to him that Spot, a magnificent and absolutely useless dog, with a genius for stealing, but who would rather die than work. After that Spot nearly starved and bankrupted his owners, after they had tried to sell him and abandon him countless times, after they and a number of others had tried to kill him, and the dog had always escaped safely and rejoined, his favorite owners, MacKaye, on the verge of a nervous break-down, abandoned his partner and the dog. But, a year later, his partner returned, left the dog tied at MacKaye's gate post, and left without leaving an address. MacKaye's outrage at being treated with such cruelty is of course extremely funny, since he richly deserves his fate.

The description of that Spot, as well as that of the pitiful state of nerves of MacKaye, should present no translation problems, as evidenced by two short passages.

> He could steal and forage to perfection; he had an instinct that was positively grewsome for divining when work was to be done and for making a sneak accordingly; and for getting lost and not staying lost he was nothing short of inspired. But when it came to work, the way that intelligence dribbled out of him and left him a mere clot of wobbling, stupid jelly would make your heart bleed.
>
> I was worn down to skin and bone by that Spot, and I was that nervous that I'd jump and look around when there wasn't anybody within hailing distance. But it was astonishing the way I recuperated when I got quit of him.[13]

However, Louis Postif seems to have misunderstood the text again :

> *Il s'entendait beaucoup à voler et à piller. Oh ! là, il excellait. Il avait un instinct tout à fait surprenant pour deviner quand il y avait à faire quelque travail. Et il se défilait en hâte. Il avait, dans ces occasions, le génie de se perdre et de demeurer perdu. Mais, pour le travail, toute son intelligence tombait soudain. Il devenait un être stupide, plus mou que du beurre, qui tremblait sur ses pattes, à vous faire saigner le cœur.*
>
> *Lorsque je quittai le Klondike, je n'avais plus que la peau sur les os, tellement je souffrais des nerfs. Parfois, quand on ne me voyait point, je faisais tout seul des pirouettes, comme un dément. Dès que j'eus rompu avec ce chien, je récupérai ma graisse, à vue d'œil.*[14]

Clearly, the problem was that the dog did *not* stay lost: *"de ne pas demeurer perdu"*. If he had stayed lost, his owners' martyrdom would have been at an end. In the second passage, the translator does not translate the feeling of persecution which is the real reason the narrator jumps and looks around. He does not take advantage of the fact that there is no-one around to jump up and down, as suggested by the translator. He is nervous and edgy, always expecting someone to be after him; and therefore behaves as if there were someone behind him, trying to do him in.

The aggrieved tone of the narrator is the major source of humor in the story. The context is also in itself funny, since we have a reversal of traditional expectations : a beautiful dog, traditionally seen as man's best friend, becomes a ruthless persecutor in that his love and faithfulness to his masters are unwanted. The dog's self-reliance and physical strength, and above all his intelligence, become a liability instead of an asset because he will not use them in the direction demanded by his masters. Finally, it is amusing to watch two grown men, strong and self-reliant, unable to master a dog or get rid of him.

"The Red One", a powerful science-fiction tale which dramatizes London's own version of the Heart of Darkness, is lightened by various forms of dark humor. In a nutshell, the story dramatizes a scientist, dying of fever and prisoner of a primitive tribe in the jungle of the Solomons, who is fascinated by the god this and other tribes worship. In order to view the god, he must court a native woman who is the epitome of ugliness :

> Her breasts advertised at one time her maturity and youth; and, if by nothing else, her sex was advertised by the one article of finery with which she was adorned, namely a pig's tail, thrust through a hole in her left ear-lobe. So lately had the tail been severed, that its raw end still oozed blood that dried upon her shoulder like so much candle-droppings. And her face ! A twisted and wizened complex of apish features, perforated by up-turned, sky-open, Mongolian nostrils, by a mouth that sagged from a huge upper-lip and faded precipitately into a retreating chin, and by peering querulous eyes that blinked as blink the eyes of denizens of monkey-cages.[15]

The humor of this description presents no translation difficulties, and, in fact, was well translated. Another important form of humor in the story arises from the friendship between the scientist and the devil-devil doctor of the tribe, Ngurn. The scientist of modern times and the scientist of primitive times spend much time together as Ngurn patiently awaits Bassett's death so that he might have his head to cure. The topic of head-shrinking is a recurrent one in their conversations, and Ngurn attempts repeatedly to reassure Bassett as to how good a job he would make of curing his head. The horror and the humor of the situation are evenly balanced, and Ngurn literally waxes poetic :

> I would like to have the curing of your head,... It is different from any other head. No devil-devil has a head like it. Besides, I would cure it well. I would take months and months. The moons would come and the moons would go, and the smoke would be very slow, and I should myself gather the materials for the curing smoke. The skin would not wrinkle. It would be as smooth as your skin now.[16]

Indeed, Bassett must be greatly gratified that such good care should be taken of his head ! One also wonders what emotions might arouse in a dying man the promise of cosy companionship after his death :

> In not many months I shall have you here turning and turning in the smoke. It is pleasant, through the long afternoons, to turn the head of one you have known as well as I know you. And I shall talk to you and tell you the many secrets you want to know. Which will not matter, for you will be dead.[17]

Much of London's humor arises from the understanding and the use shrewd men have and make of human nature. A story like "Chun Ah Chun" is essentially funny, if slightly bitter. It dramatizes the fact that snobishness, moral principle, or family loyalty all disappear when large amounts of money are involved. Chun Ah Chun, a Chinese, makes a fortune, marries a woman of mainly Anglo-American blood, and has twelve daughters and three sons. When his daughters, who are grown-up, well-educated and beautiful, cannot find a husband because of their parentage, Chun Ah Chun gives them a substantial enough dowry to quiet the social principles of young men of noble and distinguished families. For $300 000 a future admiral from a well-to-do American family marries his eldest daughter. The next two daughters receive a dowry of $200 000; and the others get an increasingly smaller dowry. Chun Ah Chun had sacrified $300 000 at the beginning to start the trend. Ten of his daughters married, Chun Ah Chun puts in the bank a dowry of $100 000 to bear interest for each of his last two daughters until they find a husband, gives a half a million dollars to his wife as well as a couple of houses, and moves away to Macao. In Macao, far away from the mess his family made of their money, and far away from their quarrelling, he finished his days in peace and tranquility. Each postal boat from Macao took to Honolulu a letter in which Chun Ah Chun advised his family to live in fraternal harmony. Contrary to the popular opinion which holds that in old age parents will find peace and happiness among their offsprings, Chun Ah Chun knew better. For years, he planned how to get rid of his family, and found peace and happiness in solitude, far away from them. So much for family life and family bonds.

In "Lost Face", the stakes are not personal happiness, but a painless death. Like "A Flutter in Eggs" and "The Townsite of Tra-Lee", "Lost Face" is a "canular". But, this time, it is a dreadfully serious one. The elaborate practical joke is played on the gullibility of the chief of a savage Indian tribe. Subienkow, an intelligent and sophiticated man, has just witnessed his friends tortured to death by a vengeful Indian tribe. Subienkow knows that he must die, but dislikes the idea of what the Indians will do to him. He, therefore, devises a trick that, if successful, will allow him a swift and painless death, and it is with relief that the reader sees Makamuk's believing the far-fetched story Subienkow tells him. He tells Makamuk that he knows a powerful medecine that will make him immune to even the strongest blow of an axe. In exchange for the recipe, he demands his life, the chief's daughter, a sled and dogs, one hundred beaver skins, and more, convincing Makamuk by his rapacity that his medecine is indeed strong. To demonstrate how powerful it is, Subienkow rubs some on his neck and allows Makamuk to strike him with all his might. Of course, Subienkow is beheaded by Makamuk's axe, escaping torture, and Makamuk looses face in front of his tribe and becomes a laughing-stock. "Lost Face" is an impressive story, and a tribute to man's ingenuity in the face of the inevitable.

These are but a few instances of the humor that pervades London's work. It is humor that evidences a philosophy of life, and because it depends on concepts rather than on word-play it tends to be easily translatable. Why it was not always well translated is not due to difficulties inherent to the text, but to carelessness, and, perhaps too often, a tendency to choose the easy way out. It is a rare thing when London actually plays on words as he does in "Goliah", a story which evidences London's unique brand of black humor. An all-powerful man terrorises the world into happiness, putting into action the motto: "I want laughter, not slaughter. Those of you who stand in the way of laughter will get slaughter[18]". And, indeed, some get slaughtered. Here, the play on the phonetic similarity of the two words would have been difficult, not to say impossible to translate.

It is indeed surprising that it should have taken so long for London's humor to be recognized. In fact, the thrust of London's work is generally positive, an affirmation of life, of the joy of living, of endurance, of an ability to laugh at the world and at oneself in the midst of pain, and in the face of death.

Notes

1. Discussions of London's humor are few. One should note, however, the following: Steven T. Dhontd, "Jack London's *When God Laughs*: Overman, Underdog, and Satire", *Jack London Newsletter*, 2 (1969), pp. 51-57, and "'There is a Good Time Coming': London's Spirit of Proletarian Revolt", *Jack London Newsletter*, 3 (1970), pp. 25-34; Dennis E. Hensley, "A Note on Jack London's Use of Black Humour", *Jack London Newsletter*, 8 (1975), pp. 110-113, and "Jack London's South Seas Humour", *Ball State University Forum*, 20, n° 2, pp. 44-48; Charles N. Watson, Jr., "Jack London's Yokohama Swim and his First Tall Tale", *Studies in American Humor*, 3 (1976), pp. 84-95; Don Graham, "Madness and Comedy: A Neglected Jack London Vein", *Critical Essays on Jack London*, ed. Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983), pp. 223-229; and Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin, "The Many Facets of Jack London's Humor", *Critical Essays on Jack London*, pp. 89-101.
2. File 998, Jack London's unpublished manuscripts, the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
3. Foreword to *Curious Fragments* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1975), p. viii.
4. Jack London to George Sterling, Jack London Manuscript Collection, the Huntington Library.
5. *Curious Fragments*, p. 132. If the word-play is naturally transposed, for some reason it was not translated at all by Louis Postif. In fact, Postif skipped over the whole sentence fragment in his translation. See "Quand le monde était jeune", in *Mille fois mort* (Paris, Union générale d'éditions, 1981), p. 52.
6. *The God of His Fathers* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), p. 229. Future reference to this story will be included in the text by page number.
7. *En pays lointain* (Paris: les Éditions G. Grès et Cie, 1926), p. 135. Future reference to this story will be included in the text by page number.
8. *The Son of the Wolf* (London: Arco Publications, 1962), p. 134. The translation of this passage is not entirely satisfactory: "L'application qu'ils mettaient à leur besogne avait quelque chose de touchant. Et jamais athlète ne fut entraîné, en vue d'un record à battre, jamais un chien-loup ne fut dressé au harnais, avec plus de conscience et de soin." "Bal masqué", in *le Fils du loup* (Paris: Union générale d'édition, 1976), p. 239. Further references to this story will be included in the text by page number.
9. For some reason the translator did not translate "hooch", and simply explained in a foot note that it is an alcoholic beverage: *"Une espèce de boisson forte"* (p. 265).
10. *The God of his Fathers*, pp. 140-141.
11. "Yan, l'irréductible", *En pays lointain*, pp. 35-36: *"Assez blagué, Yan, calme-toi! s'écria Bill le Rouge d'une voix entrecoupée. En même temps, il serrait le coup de Yan à l'étrangler. Que diable! ne peux-tu te laisser pendre sans faire tous ces embarras... Tu n'es plus un frère, reprit Bill le Rouge, autrement tu nous laisserais te passer la corde au cou, sans résistance. Allons, Yan, sois chic avec les copains. Tu nous as assez ennuyés, cesse tes grimaces, que nous puissions te pendre proprement et en un tournemain. Ensuite on n'en parlera plus."*
12. *Sut Lovingood Yarns*, Thomas Inge, ed. (New Haven: College and University Press, 1967).
13. "That Spot", in Jack *London's Stories for Boys* (New York: Cupples & Leon Co., 1936), pp. 103, 119.
14. "Ce Spot", *Sur les pistes du Grand Nord* (Paris: éditions GP, 1978), p. 108.
15. *Curious Fragments*, p. 204. For translation, see, *Mille fois mort*, p. 117.
16. *Curious Fragments*, p. 207; *Mille fois mort*, p. 121.
17. *Curious Fragments*, p. 208; *Mille fois mort*, p. 122.
18. *Curious Fragments*, p. 94.