



THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT



BRET HARTE'S FAMOUS STORY HELD BY MANY TO BE HIS BEST PRODUCTION

AS Mr. John Oakhurst, gambler, stepped into the main street of Poker Flat on the morning of November 23, 1880, he was conscious of a change in its moral atmosphere since the preceding night. Two or three men conversing earnestly together, seemed as if they were about to do something. There was a Sabbath lull in the air, which, in a settlement addicted to Sabbath influences, looked ominous.

Mr. Oakhurst's calm, handsome face betrayed small concern in these indications. Whether he was conscious of any predisposing cause was another question. "I reckon they're after somebody," he reflected; "likely it's me." He returned to his pocket the handkerchief with which he had been wiping away the red dust of Poker Flat from his hat, and quietly discharged his mind of any further conjecture.

In point of fact, Poker Flat was "after somebody." It had lately suffered the loss of several thousand dollars, two valuable horses and a prominent citizen. It was experiencing a spasm of virtuous reaction quite as lawless and ungovernable as any of the acts that had provoked it. A secret committee had determined to rid the town of all improper persons. This was done permanently in regard to two men who were then hanging from the boughs of a sycamore in the gulch, and temporarily in the banishment of certain other objectionable characters. I regret to say that some of these were ladies. It is but due to the sex, however, to state that their impropriety was professional, and it was only in such easily established standards of evil that Poker Flat ventured to set its judgment.

Mr. Oakhurst was right in supposing that he was included in this category. A few of the committee had urged hanging him as a possible example, and a sure method of reimbursing themselves from his pockets of the sums he had won from them. "It's a little justice," said Jim Wheeler, "to let this young man from Roaring Camp—an entire stranger—carry away our money." But a crude sentiment of equity residing in the breasts of those who had been fortunate enough to win from Mr. Oakhurst overruled this narrower local prejudice.

Mr. Oakhurst received his sentence with philosophic calmness, none the less coolly that he was aware of the hesitation of his judges. He was too much of a gambler not to accept fate. With him life was at best an uncertain game, and he recognized the usual percentage in favor of the dealer.

A body of armed men accompanied the deported wickedness of Poker Flat to the outskirts of the settlement. Besides Mr. Oakhurst, who was known to be a coolly separate man, and for whose intimidation the armed escort was intended, the expropriated party consisted of a young woman familiarly known as "The Duchess," another who had won the title of "Mother Shipton" and "Uncle Billy," a suspected thief, and a confirmed drunkard. The cavalcade provoked no comments from the spectators, nor was any word uttered by the escort. Only when the gulch which marked the uttermost limit of Poker Flat was reached the leader spoke briefly and to the point. The gates were forbidden to return at the peril of their lives.

As the escort disappeared, their pent-up feelings found vent in a few hysterical tears from the Duchess, some bad language from Mother Shipton, and a Parisian volley of expletives from Uncle Billy. The philosophic Oakhurst alone remained silent. He listened calmly to Mother Shipton's desultory and somewhat heated outpouring of the repeated statements of the Duchess that she would die on the road, and to the alarming oracles that seemed to be bumbled out of Uncle Billy as he rode forward. With the escort gone, the Duchess class he insisted upon exchanging his own riding-horse, Five-Spot, for the sorry mule which the Duchess rode. But even this act did not diminish the party's closer sympathy. The young woman re-adjusted her somewhat crumpled plumes with a feeble, faded coquetry; Mother Shipton eyed the possession of Five-Spot with unobscured interest. Uncle Billy included the whole party in one sweeping anathema.

The road to Sandy Bar—a campsite, not having as yet experienced the regenerating influences of Poker Flat—consequently seemed to offer some invitation to the emigrants—lay over a steep mountain range. It was distant a day's severe travel. In that advanced season the party passed out of the moist, temperate regions of the foothills into the dry, cold, bracing air of the Sierras. The trail was narrow and difficult. It was undoubtedly the most suitable spot for a camp, had camping been advisable. But Mr. Oakhurst knew that scarcely half the journey to Sandy Bar had been accomplished, and the party were not equipped or provisioned for delay. This fact he pointed out to his companions curtly, with a philosophic commentary on the folly of "throwing up their hands before the game was played out." But they were furnished with liquor, which in this emergency stood them in place of food, fuel, rest and precedence. In spite of his remonstrances it was not long before they were more or less under its influence. Uncle Billy passed rapidly from a bellicose state into one of stupor, the Duchess became maudlin, and Mother Shipton moored. Mr. Oakhurst alone remained erect, leaning against a rock, calmly surveying them.

Mr. Oakhurst did not drink. It interfered with a precision which, in his coolness, impassiveness and presence of mind, and, in his own language, he "couldn't afford it." As he gazed at his recumbent fellow-travelers, the loneliness he gotten of his pariah trade, his habits of life, his very vices, for the first time seriously oppressed him. He bestirred himself in dusting his black clothes, washing his hands and face, and other acts characteristic of his studiously neat habits, and for a moment forgot his annoyance. The thought of deserting his weaker and more pitiable companions never perhaps occurred to him. Yet he could not help feeling the want of that excitement which, singularly enough, was most conducive to that calm consciousness for which he was notorious. He looked at the gloomy walls that rose a thousand feet sheer above the circling pines around him; at the sky, ominously clouded; at the valley below, already deepening into shadow. And, doing so, suddenly he heard his own name called.

A horseman slowly ascended the trail. In the fresh, open face of the newcomer Mr. Oakhurst recognized Tom Simson, otherwise known as "The Innocent," of Sandy Bar. He had met him some months before over a "little game," and had with perfect equality won the entire fortune—amounting to some \$40,000—of that gulleless youth. After the game was finished Mr. Oakhurst drew the youthful speculator behind the door and thus addressed him: "Tommy, you're a good little man, but you can't gamble worth a cent. Don't try it over again." He then handed him his money bag, pushed him gently from the room, and so made a devoted slave of Tom Simson.

There was a remembrance of this in his boyish and enthusiastic greeting of Mr. Oakhurst. He had started, he said, to go to Poker Flat to seek his fortune. "Alone?" No, not exactly alone; in fact (a giggle) he had run away with Piney Woods. Didn't Mr. Oakhurst remember Piney? Yes, that used to wait on the table at the Temperance House. They had been engaged a long time, but old Jake Woods had objected, and so they had run away and were going to Poker Flat to be married, and here they were. And they were tired out, and how lucky it was they had found a place to camp and company. All this the Innocent delivered rapidly, while Piney, a stout, comely damsel of 15, emerged from behind the pine tree where she had been blushing unseen and rode to the side of her lover.

Mr. Oakhurst seldom troubled himself with sentiment, still less with propriety; but he had a vague idea that the situation was not a fortunate one. He retained, however, his presence of mind sufficiently to kick Uncle Billy, who was about to say something, and Uncle Billy was sober enough to recognize in Mr. Oakhurst's kick a superior power that would not bear trifling. He then endeavored to dissuade Tom Simson from delaying further, but in vain. He even pointed to the fact that there was no provision nor means of making a camp. But, unluckily, the Innocent met this objection by assuring the party that he was provided with an extra mule load-

ed with provisions, and by the discovery of a rude attempt at a log house near the trail. "Piney can stay with Mrs. Oakhurst," said the Innocent, pointing to the Duchess, "and I can shift for myself."

Nothing but Mr. Oakhurst's admonishing foot saved Uncle Billy from bursting into a roar of laughter. As it was, he felt compelled to retire up the canyon until he could recover his gravity. Then he confided the joke to the tall pine trees, with many slaps of his leg, contortions of his face and the usual profanity. But when he returned to the party he found them seated by the fire—for the air had grown strangely chill and the sky overcast—in apparently amicable conversation. Piney was actually talking in an impulsive, girlish fashion to the Duchess, who was listening with an interest and animation she had not shown for many days. The Innocent was holding forth, apparently with equal effect, to Mr. Oakhurst and Mother Shipton, who was actually

relaxing into amiability. "Is this yer a 3-2 picnic?" said Uncle Billy, with inward scorn, as he surveyed the sylvan group, the glancing firelight, and the tethered animals in the foreground. Suddenly an idea mingled with the alcoholic fumes that disturbed his brain. It was apparently of a jocular nature, for he felt impelled to slap his leg again and cram his fist into his mouth.

As the shadows crept slowly up the mountain, a slight breeze rocked the tops of the pine trees and moaned through their long and gloomy aisles. The ruined cabin, patched and covered with pine boughs, was set apart for the ladies. As the lovers parted they unaffectedly exchanged a kiss, so honest and sincere that it might have been heard above the swaying pines. The frail Duchess and the malevolent Mother Shipton were probably too stunned to remark upon this last evidence of simplicity, and so turned without a word to the hut. The fire was replenished, the

men lay down before the door, and in a few minutes were asleep. Mr. Oakhurst was a light sleeper. Toward morning he awoke, denumbed and cold. As he stirred the dying fire, the wind, which was now blowing strongly, brought to his cheek that which caused the blood to leave it—snow!

He started to his feet with the intention of awakening the sleepers, for there was no time to lose. But turning to where Uncle Billy had been lying, he found him gone. A suspicion leaped to his brain, and a curse to his lips. He ran to the spot where the mules had been tethered. They were no longer there. The tracks were already rapidly disappearing in the snow. The momentary excitement brought Mr. Oakhurst back to the fire with his usual calm. He did not wake the sleepers. The Innocent slumbered peacefully, with a smile on his good-humored, freckled face; the virgin Piney slept beside her truller sisters as sweetly as though attended by celestial guardians, and Mr. Oakhurst, drawing his blanket over his shoulders, stroked his mustaches and waited for the dawn. It came slowly in a whirling mist of snowflakes that dazzled and confused the eye. What could be seen of the landscape appeared magically changed. He looked over the valley and summed up the present and future in two words—"snowed in!"

A careful inventory of the provisions—which, fortunately for the party, had been stored within the hut, and escaped the felonious fingers of Uncle Billy—disclosed the fact that with care and prudence they might last 10 days longer. "That is!" said Mr. Oakhurst, sotto voce, to the Innocent. "If you're willing to board us. If you ain't—perhaps you'd better not—you can wait till Uncle Billy gets back with provisions." For some occult reason Mr. Oakhurst could not bring himself to disclose Uncle Billy's rascality, and so offered the hypothesis that he had wandered from the camp and had accidentally stampeded the animals. He dropped a warning to the Duchess and Mother Shipton, who, of course, knew the facts of their associate's defection. "They'll find out the truth about us when they find out anything," he added, significantly. "There's no good frightening them now."

Tom Simson not only put all his worldly store at the disposal of Mr. Oakhurst, but seemed to enjoy the prospect of their enforced seclusion. "We'll have a good camp for a week, and then the snow'll melt and we'll all go back together." The cheerful gravity of the young man, and Mr. Oakhurst's calm, infected the others. The Innocent, with the aid of pine boughs, extemporized a thatch for the roofless cabin, and the Duchess directed Piney in the rearrangement of the interior with a taste and tact that opened the blue eyes of that provincial maiden to their fullest extent. "I reckon, now, you're used to fine things at Poker Flat," said Piney. The Duchess turned away sharply to conceal something that reddened her cheeks through its professional tint, and Mother Shipton requested Piney not to "chatter."

But when Mr. Oakhurst returned from a weary search for the trail he heard the sound of happy laughter echoed from the rocks. He stopped in some alarm, and his thoughts first naturally reverted to the whisky, which he had prudently cached. "And yet it don't seem somehow like whisky," said the gambler. It was not until he caught sight of the blinding fire through the still blindfold of snow that the group around it, that he settled to the conviction that it was "square fun."

Whether Mr. Oakhurst had cached his cards with the whisky, as something departed the free access of the community I cannot say. It was certain that, in Mother Shipton's words, he "didn't say cards once during that evening. Happily the time was beguiled by an accordion produced somewhat ostentatiously by Tom Simson from his pack. Notwithstanding some difficulties attending the manipulation of this instrument, Piney Woods managed to pick several reluctant melodies from its keys to an accompaniment by the Innocent on a pair of bone castanets. But the crowning festivity of the evening was reached in a rude camp-meeting hymn, which the lovers, joining hands, sang with great earnestness and vociferation. I fear that a certain distant tone and Covenanters' swing to its chorus, rather than any devotional quality, caused it speedily to infect the others, who at last joined in the refrain:

"I'm proud to live in the service of the Lord,
And I'm bound to die in his army."

The third day came, and the sun, looking through the white-curtained valley, saw the outcasts divide their slowly decreasing stocks of provisions for the morning meal. It was one of the peculiarities of that mountain climate that its rays diffused a kindly warmth over the wintry landscape, as if from some beneficent reflection of the past. But it revealed drift on drift of snow piled high around the hut—a hopeless, uncharted, trackless sea of white lying below the rocky shores to which the castaways still clung. Through the marvelously clear air the smoke of the pastoral village of Poker Flat rose miles away. Mother Shipton saw it, and from a remote pinnacle of the rocky crags, hurled in that direction a final malediction. It was her last vengeful attempt, and perhaps for that reason was invested with a certain degree of subtlety. It did her private informant, the Duchess, "Just you got out there and cuss, and see." She then set herself to the task of amusing "the child," as she and the Duchess were pleased to call Piney. Piney was no chicken, but it was a soothing and original theory of the pair thus to account for the fact that she didn't swear and wasn't improper.

When night crept up again through the gorges the ready notes of the accordion rose and fell in fitful spasms and long-drawn gasps by the flickering campfire. But this time the music was not to be followed by insufficient food, and a new diversion was proposed by Piney—story-telling. Neither Mr. Oakhurst nor his female companions caring to relate their personal experiences, this plan would have failed, too, but for the Innocent. Some months before he had chanced upon a stray copy of Mr. Pope's ingenious translation of the Iliad. He proposed to narrate the principal incidents of that poem—having thoroughly mastered the argument and fairly forgotten the words—in the current vernacular of Sandy Bar. And so for the rest of that night the Homeric demigods again walked the earth, Trojan bully and wily Greek wrestled in the winds, and the great pines in the canyon seemed to howl to the wrath of the son of Peleus. Mr. Oakhurst listened with quiet satisfaction. Most especially was he interested in the fate of "Achilles," as the Innocent persisted in designating the "swift-footed Achilles."

So with small food and much of Homer and the accordion a week passed over the heads of the outcasts. The sun again forsook them, and again from leaden skies

A DAY WITH CHILDREN AT THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

WHAT THE YOUNGSTERS LIKE TO READ AND HOW THEY CONDUCT THEMSELVES



EVERY-DAY SCENE IN THE CHILDREN'S ROOM AT THE PUBLIC LIBRARY.

There is no frigate like a book
To take us lands away,
Nor any coursers like a page
Of prancing poetry;
This traverse the poorest take
Without oppress of toll;
How brave a human soul
That bears a human soul!

—Emily Dickinson.

TO SEE a picture of pure abandon to literary delights, you should visit a certain pleasant north room in the Portland Library during the children's hour. This room is devoted to the children's use exclusively. In it are polished oak tables, very low ones, and numbers of woe, low chairs, besides multitudes of books—fairy books, jungle books; St. Nicholas is there too, and a charming new magazine called "Birds and Nature," adventure stories, and histories. Since the library was reopened, in March, Miss Millard and Miss Corinne Reed, who are in charge of the children's room, have admitted to membership 56 children.

A big impressive register reposes on the librarian's desk, and each small applicant is invited to sign his name in it, which he does, proudly, in careful, square, but very often shaky letters.

The doors are opened to the children at 3 o'clock, but just as soon as they are released from school they scamper down to the library and gather in the corridor and on the marble steps. When it is nearly 3 they line up in front of the glass doors of their paradise like the crowds in front of the box office in a theater when a star attraction is coming to town.

These little citizens are never noisy in the halls or in the reading room, but conduct themselves in an ideally quiet manner and with the perfection of well-bred dignity. And they are very careful of the books entrusted them, often returning them carefully wrapped in paper. When one little boy had the misfortune to see a book, he worked at various odd jobs until he had earned the money to pay for it. Finally another boy found the lost book and returned it, and the first little boy was made happy by the money which the librarian refunded him.

The boys, of course, all delight in history and in stories of war and adventure, and all the children are eager for animal stories. Seton Thompson's books being particularly popular. There is also a strong liking for "Black Beauty" and "Beautiful

Joe." The younger children always go straight to the shelf where the fairy tales are kept. One mother instructed the librarian not to let her small boy find the fairy stories, for she knew in that case he would not look at anything else, but the shelf of these alluring volumes is plainly marked and within easy reach of bright eyes and eager hands.

It is to be inferred that this careful mother, like many others, considers the unrestricted reading of these purely imaginative tales highly objectionable, both from a moral and a literary point of view, yet the shelves for children in all the great libraries still glow with the old familiar titles of Anderson, Grimm, Arabian Nights and La Fontaine, in harmony with the strong belief of as many other wise mothers and librarians who think these stories wholesome, because in them the evil are always portrayed in vividly repellent colors; the good are radiant and unmistakably good, and all receive their just deserts. This is considered to be more healthful for children than many other juvenile stories in which the writer, through a strong effort to prove that good may be found in the most discouraging specimens of humanity, not only awakens philanthropic sentiment but succeeds in making the bad attractive.

The girls from 10 to 14 love the board-and-school story, with its account of fascinating pranks committed for the sole purpose of tantalizing an invariably severe principal. The heroine of the tale is usually an ugly duckling, some misundstood girl boarder who shines forth in a blaze of glory at the end of the book, and whose preliminary suffering, united with the escapades of the other girls, forms the plot of the exciting boarding school romance.

But it is to the credit of the little girls that they also like the stories of Margaret Sidney, Kate Douglas Wiggin and Sarah Chauncey Woolsey (Susan Coolidge). Mrs. A. D. T. Whitney and Mrs. Ewing they do not seem to care for, probably for the reason that Mrs. Whitney's books are too introspective, and that Mrs. Ewing's are so severely and uncompromisingly religious.

Sometimes parents come to help the children select books, and one father picked out a volume of Oliver Optic that had once given him intense delight; but, much to his surprise, his young name-

sake did not care for it at all. Since then the books of impossible adventure by Oliver Optic and Horatio Alger have been removed and a number of new books by the more up-to-date Kirk Munroe substituted.

The librarians talk to the children continually about the books, and the children repay their interest with an ever-deepening interest and affection. When one boy took out a copy of "The Indian Mutiny" the young lady who gave it to him told him to be sure to tell her how he liked it when he had finished it. When he came back she happened to be absent, but he requested the other librarian, who was in charge for the afternoon, to be sure and tell her how much he appreciated it. He was one of the boys who come and look at the librarian straight in the eyes and demand "Bears!"

Any one who has experienced the petrifying effect of having a loaned book coldly returned without comment, or even criticism, can appreciate the golden courtesy of these dear little fine-grained souls, who want their librarian to know without fail how they enjoyed the book, especially if she helped them select it.

One little girl who was asked what sort of a book she would like replied that she wanted a book with "sentences in it." Further inquiry developed the fact that she meant conversation.

"I want a book where they say things," said this up-to-date young woman, whose ideas are certainly in harmony with the period which dates upon Richard Harding Davis, J. A. Mitchell and other bright writers of the day, because their people are live people and can talk, and cleverly at that. Besides the children like to sparkle with talk, the children like those which tell of action. Here, too, the small facts are keeping up with the procession. Just as fast as they can reach them, Kipling, with his captains of labor, and Booth Tarkington, with his dashing heroes, will become favorites.

A little boy, who sat with his eyes intent on a thrilling page of Kirk Munroe, was questioned as to what he liked best in the reading room.

"I like the appearance of things," he answered, succinctly.

"But the appearance of what—in particular?"

And the small boy, with the gallantry of a Chesterfield, summoned up his ap-

probation in one decided sentence: "I like the appearance of the librarian."

A few of the children seem to like the library simply as a cozy, clublike rendezvous; they come and bring their dolls and dogs, the latter not being allowed, although they are occasionally winked at. Sometimes you may see a small baby carriage load of dolls waiting for the corridor, while their "mother" is busy procuring her weekly supply of literature. The faithful collies and cockers follow their owners inside and contentedly lie down and wait till they are called to go home. One day a tiny pug, gayly dressed in a Red Riding Hood costume, came to the library in his mistress's arms, and while she signed her name in the registry he cheerfully licked the ink off her application blank.

There was one small boy who took out a book and brought it back unfailingly every day for some time, until the observant librarian questioned him as to his knowledge of the contents, and discovered that he had not read a thing. It is needless to say that this proceeding summarily stopped, the librarian instituting a rule that the little boy should be able to tell something about the last book he had taken out before he was allowed to have another.

There are children who can absorb an amazing quantity of reading. How one can devour two books a day or 14 books a week, as was lately related of a bright little girl, and understand and enjoy what she reads, is a breathless wonder. Some of the library children may be capable of this, but their exploits have not yet come to light.

The children's library is democratic, as it should be. A story is told of Archie Roosevelt that when a Washington society woman asked him if he did not find it unpleasant to meet all sorts of boys in the public school, replied slowly and emphatically: "My papa says there are good boys and bad boys and tall boys and short boys, and those are all the boys there are." And in the Portland reading-room the children are as friendly with the small colored people who come there and with the children of the Chinese merchant whose governess sometimes brings them, as with the children of their own race. The older children sweetly fraternize with the younger ones, as unfortunately is not always the case within the

walls of home, although when the room was first opened it did happen in one instance that a mass of 12, after an account, sweeping glance at the low chairs and tables remarked tartly, "I didn't know you kept a kindergarten," made a bee line for the front exit, and never returned.

As might be expected, books of good, plain, practical directions for doing things are eagerly sought after. A bevy of wide-awake little girls find with delight that here is a book of charming little plays which they can act. A trio of boys, full of energy, from the crowns of their heads down to their heels, have been struggling with plans for a houseboat. A bright idea sends them to the library, and here is practical help in the "American Boy's Handy Book," which they bear away rejoicing.

A teacher of long experience finds that the greatest benefit to the children gained from the library is not in haphazard reading, however enjoyable; it is from the advantages afforded for topical study under skilled guidance. And the literature should not be too light in character. Even the histories children read may do them harm if carelessly written and gathered up in a heedless jumble of fiction. Fiction and history and ballads should be carefully blended. For instance, she says to give a child a good, well-rounded picture of a period, you might put into his hands a course something like this: Kingsley's novel, "Westward, Ho!"; "The Voyages of Sir Francis Drake," Macaulay's ballad, "The Armada"; Kingsley's "Essay on Sir Walter Raleigh"; Tennyson's "Ballad of Sir Richard Greenville and the Revenge," Carlyle's "Cromwell," Macdonald's "St. George and St. Michael," or Miss Yonge's "Chaplet of Pearls," or suitable chapters from Green's history of England.

Perhaps there will come a time when the library does not need "something more." It is said that the best teachers are never satisfied. The more they have accomplished the more beautiful possibilities forever shine and widen before them. But it is certainly true that the enthusiastic workers in the children's library have reason to desire still better advantages for children, although so much has been done. More books of the best class are needed, which the children will read and enjoy; more technical books, more good histories, more wide-awake, wholesome life stories, more "bears!"

RITA BELL.

