Life on the frontier as seen in the early sketches and tales of Bret Harte

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Thesis

LIFE ON THE FRONTIER AS SEEN IN
THE EARLY SKETCHES AND TALES OF BRET HARTE

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LIFE ON THE FRONTIER AS SEEN IN
THE EARLY PROSE OF BRET HARTE

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INTRODUCTION

California in the middle of the nineteenth century had just begun to glitter. When gold was discovered in 1848, thousands of adventurers, convicts, business men, and gamblers poured into a land where it was said the streets were paved with gold. Many honest men, too confident for their own good, left their wives and children in the States and promised to come back when their pockets could hold no more. The vast majority of these argonauts failed to find gold and, what was worse, lingered on penniless and heartbroken, ashamed to face their families. Eventually, a great number of these men perished from want or were murdered, and not a few were hanged by the Vigilance Committees.

Nevertheless, many brought their families with them. On the overland trails the hardships they suffered from Indians, lack of food, weather conditions, and sickness are sufficient evidence that the cry of gold in California must have been a lure which only the hardy undertook to follow. True, many did reach the Pacific frontier to find that the average miner made enough to keep himself only in food and supplies.

What, then, does this writer mean by saying that California was just beginning to glitter? It was certainly not the gold which glittered for the majority. Yet in this
vast stretch of territory was a type of existence unique and exciting in its own right. Here were a people who struggled for existence in the real sense of the word—a people who had come in contact with a Mexican society whose philosophy led them to believe that the prime reason for existence was not to extract yellow metal from Mother Earth. And, finally, here were a people who, because they were American pioneers fighting to preserve and exert themselves in the face of all dangers, made the West the most romantic region in the United States.

California was a gold mine in more ways than one. It was as ripe for the writer as it was for the miner. The middle of the nineteenth century was just about the time for the right man to arrive on the scene and depict the types of people which made up the California society and the odd situations in which they inevitably became involved. That Harte was the man to accomplish this task is clearly shown in the following quotation from Fred Lewis Pattee:

"Harte was an ardent Dickens fan, and the time was ripe for a California Dickens. The pioneer country was more full of strange types than even the slums of London: Pikes, Yankees, Chinese, gamblers, and adventurers from all over the wild places of the world. Harte...came at the right time with the right kind of literature."

Bret Harte might never have been heard of had he not come at this moment. Little did he realize the importance of a virgin

1. Pattee, A History of American Literature Since 1870, p. 70
literary field in 1854 when he came from the East. It took
time—over fifteen years—for him to develop into the local-
colorist of standing. But he was still the first in the field.
"America was ready for local color," and, "Harte was the voice
that started the avalanche that was bound to come sooner or
later." ²

It is not this writer's concern, in the following
thesis, to criticize Harte's lack of adherence to literary
principles. Nor is it his concern to show whether Harte was
actually aware that he wrote of a vanishing scene or not. But
it is his concern to show how Harte portrayed the pioneers and
the events in their lives. The latter dealt with themes of
love, death, friendship; with characters such as Tennessee's
Partner, John Oakhurst, Yuba Bill; with racial questions, with
social barriers, and with pioneer justice. In short, Harte
portrayed the rough-hewn life on a rough-hewn frontier. It is
with this life and environment that the writer is interested.

Though Harte's characters may be exceptions and
his situations theatrical, he cannot be ignored.

"He caught the spirit of the early
mining camps and, with it, the romantic
atmosphere of the Old Spanish colonial
civilization that was swept away by the
Anglo-Saxon rush for gold. His name can-
not fail to go down with the era he
recorded. And to identify one's self

Literature, p. 390
with an era, though the era be a brief and restricted one, is no small achievement." 3

Harte drew from his reckless communities a fund of episode and character rougher than any metal in the miner's cradle and turned it into vignettes and types of sterling, profane, acute, but above all human. "He packed the essence of life and adventure into the very idiom of effective speech and Harte woke up to find himself famous." 4 The thoughts of his characters may not have been always clothed in the best language, yet that language struck home with its precision and fitness.

What should be said of the reality of Harte's California and of his characters? Was there really such a romantic place? And were there such people as Colonel Starbottle, John Oakhurst, and Tennessee's Partner?

This question has as yet remained unanswered.

Evidence points both ways. In one instance Noah Brooks writes:

"As long as Harte was in California he maintained his painstaking elaboration of his work. He neglected no detail, overlooked no trifling incident that gave color and semblance of life to his tales." 5

And again:

"He came to me, one day, with a request for help in a small mathematical problem. How many pounds of flour were

4. J.P. Collins, Nineteenth Century, DLXXII, 540
5. Noah Brooks, Century, LVIII, 450
in a sack, and how long could a certain number of persons subsist on a specified quantity of food?...He explained that he had beguiled a party of refugees into the wilds of the Sierra Nevada, where, overtaken by a snowstorm, they were slowly starving to death. How much longer could any one of them hold out?...Months passed before we were permitted to read the tragic tale of "The Outcasts of Poker Flat." 6

Harte's world is one in which the unexpected catastrophe is the usual thing. In the mining camp, accident is normal. The fires, explosions, floods, and all the other forms of sudden peril are implicit in the wild gamble of the argonaut's life "and we accept it as an experience truly portrayed." 7

This writer has chosen to deal with Harte's prose from the time he arrived in California to the time he left the United States never to return, that is from 1854-1878. Most critics have ascertained, in one way or another, that the best of Harte's local-color stories and sketches were written within a period of two or three years. 8 Boynton writes, "He had one brilliant vision and spent the rest of his life reminding himself of it." 9 But it is left to the reader to look at the latter work with an open mind and check for himself.

6. Ibid., 451. See, also, John Erskine, Leading American Novelists, p. 326: "In default of better evidence, one can well believe his California stories to be accurate."
7. John Erskine, Leading American Novelists, p. 359. See Lelia Mitchell, Overland, LXXXVI, p. 215: "The whole place was irresistibly alluring and every phase of pioneer existence was deeply impressed upon his mind."
9. Boynton, Bret Harte, p. 95
It was during these years that Harte absorbed much about him and set forth, rather shakily at first, to give us his interpretation of life on the California frontier. Only when he left California and America did his stories come to have more imaginative and sentimental appeal. "His methods grew more romantic, his atmospheres more mellow and golden." 10

First, as far as the method of work in this thesis is concerned, this writer feels that a brief but pertinent biography of Harte will offer the reader at least an introduction to those phases of his life which influenced him in his writing. The major portion of the biography will deal with the years 1854 to 1871—those years which Harte spent in California.

The remaining and most important section of the thesis will be taken up with an analysis of specific subjects in the interpretation of Harte's California.

1. BIOGRAPHY

Birth of Bret Harte. Early Life in California.

Francis Bret Harte was born in Albany, New York, on August 25, 1836. He left school at thirteen to work in a lawyer's office and, later, in a merchant's counting room, supporting himself from the time he was sixteen. Mrs. Harte, when her school-teacher husband died, left for California in 1853 to marry a Colonel Williams. Young Harte and a sister followed later, arriving in San Francisco in March, 1854.

Colonel Williams, kindly, generous, courtly in manners, doubtless a little pompous, dabbled in local politics. Here may have lain a distinct suggestion of Colonel Starbottle, since both gentlemen were political horses, members of the Old School, and colonels by courtesy.

Harte's life in Oakland, with his mother and Colonel Williams, was, at this time, barren of any literary work. The events in his life during that period now are almost entirely lost. However, the most authentic accounts represent Harte, at least between 1854 and 1857, as a California school-teacher.

In "M'liss," the schoolmaster is a principal figure, and it is generally assumed by most writers of Harte's life that in this story he made good use of his own experiences
The action of "M'liss" takes place at Smith's Pocket in the Sierra Nevadas. The name is probably fictitious, but in the story the settlement is located just where a Sierran river shoots out from the foothills and entering upon the plain ceases to be a mountain torrent. Surveying the possibilities in the southern district one lights upon La Grange. Now La Grange had a school in 1854, something which could not be said of most California towns. Moreover, the original title of "M'liss" was "The Work on Red Mountain" and near that landmark Smith's Pocket was located. An actual Red Mountain is only a few miles above La Grange. The characteristics of La Grange and Smith's Pocket, moreover, are similar. Both were mining towns. 1

Hence, if our assumption is correct and La Grange is the actual setting of "M'liss", then young Harte must have spent some months in a typical mining town of the fifties.

By the end of 1855, Harte had probably already experienced everything which he was to know at first hand of early California mining life. After this date, the record of his life is less obscure.

1. George R. Stewart, Jr., Bret Harte-Argonaut and Exile, pp. 44-45
The Wanderer

The greater part of 1856 Bret Harte spent in Oakland. An Abner Bryan, who had a cattle ranch in Sycamore Valley near Alanco, hired Harte to tutor his four sons. His engagement with the Bryans proved to be temporary and before the year was over, the young "wanderer" was again out of a job.

In 1857 something occurred which stirred people's imaginations, though really nothing definite is known about it. Called the Bret Harte Legend, it is concerned with the idea that Harte may have been a messenger for the Welles Fargo Express Company. The author himself says, years after the incident had allegedly taken place, that he held the post of a Welles Fargo messenger for some months before giving it up to become the schoolmaster near Sonora. 2

This material is taken from an interview which may have been very inaccurate. If, however, Harte's experience was nothing more than riding a certain stage route for a few weeks, he probably gained much from it. The stage was always the center of interest, and Harte could easily have come to know the Western types. Undoubtedly Yuba Bill, one of the best known of Harte's characters--the rough but human driver of the coaches in Harte's stories--was copied from an old Welles Fargo driver.

2. Overland, December, 1916, pp.535-536
There is a suggestion that Harte was working at this time in a drug store in the firm of Sparlow and Kane of San Francisco. There is some evidence of this in "How Reuben Allen Saw Life in San Francisco." But the city directory for the year 1857 gives no such firm in San Francisco and F. B. Harte's name, consequently, fails to appear. 3

In the summer of 1857 Harte sailed from San Francisco to Uniontown, a settlement of about 500 inhabitants. It is not known whether Harte, who followed his recently married sister there, had definite plans in mind. On October 19, however, he became tutor to Captain Liscom's two boys. He instructed them in the three R's and geography. 4 But the day he began work is important in that he started to keep a diary, the only one he is known to have kept. It reveals fully the daily routine of his life. On the mornings he was busy with his pupils. On the afternoons he often went duck-shooting or else walked to town to see various friends. For evenings the common notation was 'read' and 'wrote'. During the last months of 1857 Harte was constantly writing, and his diary shows that he had already developed the critical faculty to reject or to consider rejecting some of his own work. 5

The year 1858 was a rather discouraging one for

3. George R. Stewart, Jr., Bret Harte--Argonaut and Exile, p. 60
4. Ibid., p. 63
5. Ibid., pp. 64-66
Harte. He was without work most of the year, and though he was willing to do anything, he had little ability to help himself.
The Northern Californian; The Golden Era

San Francisco supported in abundance journals through which writers could get their training and reach their public. As early as 1850 there were fifty printers working at their trade in the fast-growing city. The capital of the West boasted that it published more newspapers than London, that in its first decade it published more books than did all the rest of the United States west of the Mississippi. The Pioneer, The Golden Era, The Hesperian, The Californian, and The Overland Monthly could compare with the best Eastern journals. "Wealth to produce and leisure to read such journals alone made them possible." 6

An opportunity came about for Bret Harte in 1858 with a new paper in Uniontown, published by a Major Murdock and a Colonel Whipple. It was called The Northern Californian and our young hero took over the post of printer's devil.

Harte's work at first was merely mechanical. He helped set and distribute the type and the forms. Almost from the first, however, he began to help with the editorial work and actually became an associate editor when Colonel Whipple went off to San Francisco and left his young worker in charge for three weeks. During this period, Harte did not contribute a thing to The Golden Era, a San Francisco magazine to which he

had earlier contributed a few poems. He did, however, write many unsigned pieces for his own paper.

This experience was one of the best things that could have happened to Harte. Up to this time, he had had no real reason for writing, nothing to write about, and no one to write to. The poems he had submitted to *The Golden Era* in 1857 had sounded too literary and important. But now that he had definite subject matter and a known public, he learned to express what had to be expressed in the fewest and most accurate words.

Colonel Whipple left for San Francisco on a business trip in February, 1860. At this time Indian troubles were blazing up in Humboldt Country. A tribe of Redskins further back in the wilderness were giving the white settlers difficulty. The followers of the "Manifest Destiny" philosophy avenged their brethren by killing in cold blood at least sixty women and children of a peaceful tribe along the coast. This was the famous massacre of February 26, 1860. 7 When Colonel Whipple sent his report back to Harte from San Francisco, he put the young editor in an awkward position because, to the latter, there could never have been any doubt as to who was at fault. The test of Harte came when on February 29 *The Northern Californian* printed boldly this headline:

7. Henry Childs Merwin, the *Life of Bret Harte*, p. 30
INDISCRIMINATE MASSACRE OF INDIANS
WOMEN AND CHILDREN BUTCHERED

Within a month Harte left Uniontown, undoubtedly by request. Murdock, the best authority on Harte's life at Uniontown, noted merely, "He was seriously threatened and in no little danger." In connection with this, one cannot help thinking of the morning in Poker Flat when John Oakhurst suddenly sensed that a committee was waiting upon him with an order to leave town.

Harte may have been no richer when he left Uniontown than when he came in, but he had gained much experience. The events of the last four weeks had inspired him with a never-ending hatred of frontier lawlessness and brutality.

Bret Harte's residence in San Francisco began in 1860 and was to continue for eleven years. In "Bohemian Days in San Francisco" the young author recorded some impressions of his first weeks in the city. He commented on:

"Sunday in San Francisco; on Russ Gardens; the Bohemian does the agricultural thing, the cheap shows; the Bohemian discourses on muscles, on ferocious wild beasts and on female gymnastics. He lingered over the forlorn condition of the Plaza as well as the smiles of the flirtatious damsels at the Fair. He wrote whimsically on the question of whether short dogs oscillated their tails more rapidly than long ones." 10

8. Murdock, Overland, XL, 301
9. Walker, San Francisco's Literary Frontier, p. 128. Harte was "Exhaling the misty odor of Bohemianism from the contents as well as the title of the department."
10. Ibid., p. 128
But he was still learning to write. In the "Bohemian Papers" his defense of the Chinaman forecasts his pleas in many a story for the social outcast. His growing interest in local color is reflected in his realistic portrait of the decayed Mission Dolores with "its ragged senility contrasting with the smart spring sunshine, its two gouty pillars with the plaster dropping away like tattered bandages, its rayless windows, its crumbling entrances, and the leper spots on its white-washed wall eating through the dark abode." 11

Harte soon began to work in the composing room of The Golden Era. It was with this magazine that he signed his name for the first time to the works which he had written—Bret Harte. Of the score of short stories which he wrote during the entire first year on the Era, the best was "M'liiss." In this he seemed to sense for the first time the values of the observations he had made in the mining country and, as a result, "he wrote better than he had ever done before." 12

The power of this story lay in the vivid descriptions of the Sierra foothills and the mining society, the touches of humor such as Melissa Smith's farewell note to her master, and the moments of pathos in such passages as that which tells of the suicide of Melissa's father.

12. Franklin D. Walker, San Francisco's Literary Frontier, p.132
One writer states:

"One cannot make the charge that Harte missed the significance of the scene around him; rather, he was the first of the Western writers to sense its possibilities. What is to be regretted, however, is his sense of cautiousness, that too-critical attitude which put chains on his feelings as well as his writing."

13. Anonymous, Current Literature, LI, 682
Fortune's Knock

Mrs. Jessie Benton Fremont, daughter of a great senator and the wife of a great hero, came to San Francisco and "discovered" the young type setter. She listened critically to his manuscripts and showed him where he was good and where he was not. The sketches in the Era improved. There was finally a drift toward realism.

When the Civil War broke out, just a year after Harte became a typesetter, he was ready to leave for Oregon where he was offered an editorship on a newspaper. However, Mrs. Fremont said a word and Harte received a clerkship in the Surveyor-General's office. After this he never saw Mrs. Fremont again.

When he entered the political office, Harte ceased to write for the Era, and there is no record that after May 12, 1861, he published anything for more than a year.

By the spring of 1863, Harte was becoming known as a promising local writer though he still was an underpaid clerk with a complaining wife and a child. 14 In May of the same year he was appointed clerk to the Superintendent of the Mint in San Francisco and received $180 a month, which was, even with the allowance for war prices, a comfortable income.

14. Harte married Miss Anna Griswold on August 11, 1862.
In October "The Legend of Monte del Diablo" filled eight pages in The Atlantic Monthly. In form and content it followed Irving, whose influence in American literature was still strong. As the latter wrote about the myths of the Hudson and Catskills, so Harte did the same with Contra Costa, just behind San Francisco. And as the Dutch in New York occupied an influential position, so the Spanish occupied a comparable position in the West.

On September 20, the first chapter of the lengthened "M'liess" appeared in the Era. This last serial was among Harte's last contributions to the Era.
The Californian and Fame

On Saturday, May 28, 1864, a new magazine called The Californian, under the proprietorship of Charles H. Webb, burst upon an unexpectant public. It was twice as large as The Golden Era and superior in all ways to it. It was the best magazine to appear on the Pacific Coast. Webb, Harte, and Mark Twain were the chief contributors. The greater part of its reading matter consisted of general articles, stories, poems, and reviews.

Webb was already a sceptic about "California values" and he continued to make unkind remarks about forty-niners, patriotism, and literacy. 15 Harte left the field he had touched in "M'liss" and devoted himself entirely to informal essays and parodies in prose and verse, culminating in his Condensed Novels. The gunman was ridiculed in half a dozen satires, and even miners' place-names that were considered by some to be romantic, such as Shirt-Tail Band, Whisky Diggins, and Poker Flat, were condemned as vulgar.

Only pre-gold-rush California interested Harte, and he did some reading in books dealing with the period of Spanish occupation. The use of the "devil" in the California tales by earlier writers prompted a few sketches by Harte

15. F.D. Walker, San Francisco's Literary Frontier, pp. 181-187
which included "The Legend of Devil's Point" and "A Legend of Monte del Diablo." Harte's best writing was not his satire but in his verse parodies and in his Condensed Novels which were prose parodies of the styles of thirteen novelists.

But not until Harte got most of the travesty out of his system was he to write the short stories which were to bring him fame.

Harte's withdrawal from The Californian came about shortly after his editing of Outcroppings, a small anthology of verse by California poets in 1865. He was not forced to retire. The reason was that he was too busy with other projects. The bulk of Harte's writing at this time, that is, from the mid-sixties to the day he started the Overland Monthly, was done for the San Francisco "News Letter." 16

In 1867 Harte established his reputation more firmly by publishing two collections of his own writings. In October appeared his Condensed Novels And Other Papers with comic illustrations by Frank Bellew. Only a few weeks after the publication of the Novels, Harte's first book of original verse, The Lost Galleon and Other Tales, appeared in San Francisco.

16. Ibid., pp. 245-246
The Overland Monthly

Early in 1868 Anton Roman determined to establish a magazine which would supply information on the development of the Pacific Coast and its vast back-country. Harte was given the job of editing the magazine.

It was Roman who induced Harte to write "The Luck of Roaring Camp." The former, an argonaut himself, "prized the romance of an era that the latter had scorned as crass and uninteresting." On a trip to the Santa Cruz hill, Roman changed the Harte who had been satirizing the old-timers into the Harte who was ready to idealize the gold-rush in romantic fiction.

"The Luck of Roaring Camp" finally appeared in print. Its sudden appearance burst upon the literary world like a bombshell. The form of the story was new and the subject matter was entirely new. For the author of it "The Luck" represented a suddenly and completely changed artistic attitude toward life. The importance of this attitude can be summarized as follows:

Harte in his writings before 1868, had tried to impress his readers with his own gentility. Merwin thinks this characteristic may have been due perhaps to the fact that in

17. Ibid., p. 267
childhood Harte's family had never been able to occupy the
position its members felt entitled to. Hence, the world, to
Harte, was divided between low persons and persons and persons
worth knowing. That had been his philosophy as far as the
West was concerned. That is why, in 1867, Harte satirized the
miners as low persons.

Not only was "The Luck" acclaimed in the West, but
the greatest praise came from the East. The Atlantic Monthly
requested the anonymous writer, upon the most flattering terms,
for a story similar to "The Luck."

"The Outcasts of Poker Flat," which appeared in
the January Overland, brought a letter from Fields, Osgood,
and Company, asking to examine his stories of the West with a
view toward their publication in a book. Harte had to reply
that he had but two, though he had others in mind. In June
appeared "Miggles," hailed as another masterpiece.

By September, 1869, Fields, Osgood, and Company
was again negotiating. Harte had a volume ready in 1870,
though he had promised it for the previous October. The small
book consisted of "Tennessee's Partner," "The Idyl of Red
Gulch," and ten early California sketches, including "M'liss."

"His tales were not merely suc-
cessful tear-jerkers in a sentimental
era; they succeeded in turning the
gold-rush days into what Harte called
'an era replete with a certain heroic
Greek poetry.' Roaring Camp, Poker Flat, Sandy Bar, and Red Gulch were mythical towns inhabited by a society grown into two decades almost as romantic and universal as Camelot or Bagdad. Harte created the land of a million Westerners, a land in which gunplay was a habit, where vigilantes met before breakfast and death was as common as a rich strike in the mines!" 18

In addition to his editorial duties, Harte was the heaviest contributor to the Overland. His poetical contributions differed little from the verses in The Lost Galleon volume.

18. Ibid., p. 264
Goodbye, Golden Gate!

On August 16, 1870, the University of California offered Harte the appointment as Professor of Recent Literature and Curator of the Library and the Museum at the salary of five hundred dollars a month. But the author turned it down, giving as an excuse that this work would interfere with his writing and that he was seriously contemplating visiting the East.

Carmany, the new proprietor of the Overland, did his best to induce Harte to stay, but to no avail. The tempting suggestions from the East were too strong for Harte to resist. Backers in Chicago offered support for a new magazine; the Atlantic "held out open arms," and Fields, Osgood, and Company was bringing out an edition of his poems.

By January 10, 1871, Harte's plans were so settled that the papers announced his departure with his family for about February 1. On the morning of February 2, 1871, The Overland Express clattered down towards San Jose. In one of its new-fangled cars rode Bret Harte, his wife, and their two boys.
II. INTERPRETATION

The Pioneer Spirit

Bret Harte wrote of the miner's tragedy—the tragedy of men who had traveled to California to find gold and had returned home more or less defeated, poor and broken-spirited. Royce, writing of these same men, says: "Many would die early deaths; the survivors would, for the most part, stay in the new land as hard toilers and poor men; a few only would reap great fortunes and, of these, only a part would ever see the old home." \(^1\)

But regardless of the general outlook of tragedy and pathos, there were individual aspects of life in a mining camp or in any pioneer settlement which were romantic in many senses of the word. The game of life was won the hard way, to be sure, but there was so great an area of freedom in the shuffle for it that the majority of the pioneers who died young in years died not young in the tastes of it.

This was not only true in the mining camp but in the city as well. Harte writes:

"The shiftless lassitude of a gambler can never be mistaken for the lounge of a gentleman. Even the brokers who loiter upon Montgomery Street at high noon are not

\(^1\) Josiah Royce, *California*, p. 234
loungers. Look at them closely and you will see a feverishness and anxiety under the mask of listlessness. They do not lounge—they lie in wait...You cannot keep Californians quiet even in their amusements. They dodge in and out of the theater, opera, and lecture-room; they prefer the street-cars to walking because they think they get along faster. The difference of locomotion between Broadway, New York and Montgomery Street, San Francisco, is a comparative view of Eastern and Western civilization." 2

There was a spirit about the pioneers which could only be found in a frontier community. This spirit was reflected in the calamities at which they learned to laugh, the blunders from which they soon recovered, and even in the boast of their prowess and denial of their sins. As Royce writes, "They would quietly go on to correct their past grievous error, good-humored and self-confident as ever..." 3

This self-confidence, this easy-come-easy-go mode of existence is well exemplified by Harte in many of his characters. He recognized the California tempo which seemed so romantic to his readers and yet so realistic.

In Gabriel Conroy an Eastern couple visits California and is astounded at the idea that

"here were men accepting and considering an actual and present loss of nearly a quarter of a million dollars as quietly and as indifferently as if it were a postage stamp!"

3. Josiah Royce, California, p. 275
But one of the Californians is made to answer:

"'Yes, gentlemen, it's the fortunes of war. 'T'other man's turn today, ours tomorrow. Can't afford time to be sorry in this climate. A man's born again here every day. 'Move along and pass the bottle.'" 4

California was steeped in humor and none but a humorist could have interpreted the lives of the pioneers. Harte was just such a humorist. Democracy, they say, is the mother of humor. Both, certainly, were found in the West, and both were found in Harte's sketches and tales. The pioneers, struggling with a new country and often with chills and fever, religious in a gloomy, old-fashioned way, leading a lonely life, had developed a humor "more saturnine than that of New England." 5 California humor was the product of youth, courage, and energy wrestling with every kind of difficulty and danger. Hardship, insecurity, and death were all in a day's work, and they could best be endured by making light of them. Instead of exaggeration, the tendency was to minimize. "To pass in his checks," as John Oehurst did, was the way Harte showed that the end had come. G. K. Chesterton wrote:

"Bret Harte had to deal with countries and communities of an almost unexampled laxity, a laxity of civilized men grown savage. It was a life which we may find it difficult to realize...The great glory and achievement of Bret Harte consists in the fact that

he realized that pioneers, in a lax state of this sort, do not become callous, supercilious, and cynical, but they become sentimental and romantic and deeply affectionate. He discovered the intense sensibility of the primitive man... And Harte told the truth about the wildest and grossest of all the districts of the earth—the truth that, while it is very rare indeed in the world to find a thoroughly good man, it is rarer still to find a man who does not either desire to be one or imagine that he is one already." 6

The Early Civilization

California, before the earliest gold-rush, maintained a civilization both colorful and distinctive in its Old World atmosphere. The Spaniard and Mexican were living the quiet and peaceful lives which their ancestors had lived in Old Granada. Catholic in religion and philosophy these Latins found it difficult to understand and justify the harsh and yet lax American faculty for working the mines all day and spending their fortunes on wine, women, and song at night. Furthermore,

"The coming temptation and excitements, the injustice and the unkindness of a conquering and often wickedly progressive race would often find him," i.e., the early Californian, "morally weak, and would rapidly degrade him, too often losing for him his own bitter shame and often to the still

6. G. K. Chesterton, Critic, XLI, 174
greater shame of his stronger brother,  
the carelessly brutal American settler  
or miner."

Harte has given us many pictures of the early Californians in his writings. The subject of early California and its inhabitants are treated somewhat sentimentally, as if the writer wished there never was a gold-rush and a consequent overwhelming of a peaceful civilization by a people who could see only the present and not the future or the past.

Years later Harte recalled his early days in San Francisco--his Bohemian days--with the same sense of youthful satisfaction and wonder,

"My wandering through the Spanish quarter, where three centuries of quaint customs, speech, and dress were still preserved; where the proverbs of Sancho Panza were still spoken in the language of Cervantes, and the high-flown illusions of the La Manchian knight still a part of the Spanish Californian hidalgo's dream. I recall the modern 'greaser,' or Mexican--his index finger steeped in cigarette stains; his velvet jacket and crimson sash; the many-flounced skirt and lace mantilla of his women, and their caressing intonations--the one musical utterance of the whole hard-voiced city."  

The sympathy Harte felt for the dying Spanish civilization is well shown in another early sketch called "The Mission Dolores." In this, he sighs for the old days and gives

1. Josiah Royce, California, p. 34  
"the poor old mendicant but a few years longer to sit by the highway and ask alms in the names of the blessed saints... The shriek of the locomotive discords with the angelus bell... I look in vain for the half-reclaimed Mexican whose expectability stopped at his waist, and whose red sash under his vest was the utter undoing of his black broadcloth. I miss, too, those black-haired women, with swaying unstable busts, whose dresses were always unseasonable in texture and pattern; whose wearing of a shawl was a terrible awakening from the poetic dream of the Spanish mantilla. Trages of another nationality are visible."

The foreign influence had never been for the American community in California more than skin-deep. The new-comers had assumed very few native Californian ways. Royce claims in his history of California that

"the theater, the opera, and the out-of-doors amusements of the early American population were the social institutions most affected by foreign influences, and the foreign peoples have indeed had great effect upon these matters ever since."

Harte, enjoying a peaceful summer evening in San Francisco, was startled into consciousness when a group of Mexican singers began to serenade him from beneath his balcony. Humorously he curses them:

"May purgatorial pains seize ye, William Count of Poitou, Girard de Boreuil, Pirmand de Marviel, Bertrand"

4. Josiah Royce, California, p. 226
de Born, mischievous progenitors of jongleurs, troubadours, provencals, minnesingers, minstrels, and singers of cansos and love chants! Confusion overtake and confound your modern descendants, the "metrical ballad-mongers," who carry the shamelessness of the middle ages into the nineteenth century, and awake a sleeping neighborhood to the brazen knowledge of their loves and wanton fancies!" 5

The element of love or passion constituted a great difference in the philosophies of the Latins and the Americans. The women of the former had been accustomed to an existence where love played an important role in their lives. It seemed as if they had existed for that one passion only. When the Americans came it was taken for granted by the Spanish and Mexican women that the Anglo-Saxons who invaded their fairy-land presented a new and different element, not obstacle, towards which they could turn their affections. However, to the Anglo-Saxons, love was not the primary reason for their quest in a foreign country. Practicality, in the form of a philosophy of materialism, was their primary reason for existence. Hence there was not so much of an American-Latin compatibility along this line as one would expect, even though the Alta Californian did write that "Rowdyism and crime increase in proportion to the number of senoritas." 6

Harte brings this point out in several places.

5. Bohemian Papers, p. 218
6. The Alta Californian, Oct. 1851
For example, in the story "How Santa Claus Came to Simpson's Bar," he presents an American miner, Dick Bullen, who is hastening to bring Christmas toys to the sick child of a fellow miner. On the ride back to the camp

"he was waylaid by Beauty--Beauty opulent in charms, affluent in dress, persuasive in speech, and Spanish in accent! In vain she repeated the invitation in 'Excelsior,' happily scorned by the all-Alpine climbing youth and rejected by this child of the Sierras--a rejection softened in this instance by a laugh and his last gold coin." 7

And again, in the play, "Two Men of Sandy Bar," Manuela, the servant girl, says, "These Americans have no time for love when they are sober." 8 In the same play, Don Jose, the father of a beautiful daughter who is in love with the gambler John Oakhurst has this to say of American sentiment:

"It is now five years since I have known your countrymen, these smart Americans. I have yet to know when love, sentiment, friendship, was worth any more than a money value in your market." 9

On only one theme of early California does Bret Harte show any irreverence at all. And even then the feeling is slight. This is the theme of the Spanish religion and padre. He satirizes the Church and belittles the priest.

Merwin, in his biography of Harte, says that Harte had really no religion and that he cared little for the mysterious phi-

9. Ibid., p. 338.
losophies of human existence with which religion is supposed to deal, that he was a Pagan, Merwin continued, and had the "conception of human life and destiny which belongs to Paganism." 10 This may very well be one reason why the clerical element in the Spanish church fares ill.

In "The Legend of Monte del Diablo," Harte writes that to the Holy Fathers, "A new conversion, the advent of a saint's day, or the baptism of an Indian baby was at once the chronicle and marvel of their day." 11

Later in the story, Father Jose, awakened by the report of a rifle, "reached the spot only in time to chide the muleteer for wasting powder and ball in a contest with one whom a single ave would have been sufficient to utterly discomfit." 12 Harte continues the satire on the priest in the following manner:

"At nightfall they reached the base of the mountain. Here Father Jose unpacked his mules, said vespers, and, formally ringing his bell, called upon the Gentiles within hearing to come and accept the Holy Faith. The echoes of the black frowning hills around him caught up the pious invitation and repeated it at intervals, but no Gentiles appeared that night." 13

Finally, when Father Jose meets the devil himself, he is given a forecast of things to come.

10. Merwin, The Life of Bret Harte, p. 207
11. The Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Tales, "The Legend of Monte del Diablo," p. 383
12. Ibid., p. 386
13. Ibid., p. 387
"Thou hast beheld, Sir Priest, the fading footprints of adventurous Castille. Thou hast seen the declining glory of Old Spain--declining as yonder brilliant sun. The sceptre she hath wrested from the heathen is fast dropping from her decrepit and fleshless grasp. The children she hath fostered shall know her no longer. The soil she hath acquired shall be lost to her irrevocably as she herself hath thrust the Moor from her own Granada." 14

The forecast is further impressed upon the mind of Father Jose when

"he turned, and, as the fog broke away before the waving plume, he saw that the sun was rising. Issuing with its bright beams through the passes of the snowy mountains beyond appeared a strange and motley crew. Instead of the dark and romantic visages, the Father beheld with strange concern the Blue eyes and flaxen hair of a Saxon race. In place of martial airs and musical utterance, there rose upon the ear a strange din of harsh guttrals and singular sibilation. Instead of the decorous tread and stately mien of the cavaliers of the former vision, they came pushing, bustling, panting, and swaggering...and Father Jose looked in vain for holy cross or Christian symbol; there was but one that seemed an ensign, and he crossed himself with holy horror as he perceived it bore the effigy of a bear." 15

The vision is complete, as far as poor Father Jose is concerned, when he finds himself

14. Ibid., p. 392
15. Ibid., p. 393
"in a vast vault, bespangled overhead with luminous points like the starred firmament. It was also lighted by a yellow glow that seemed to proceed from a mighty sea or lake that occupied the center of the chamber. Around this subterranean sea dusky figures flitted bearing ladles filled with the yellow fluid which they had replenished from its depths. From this lake, diverging streams of the same mysterious flood penetrated like mighty rivers the cavernous distance." 16

In another of his tales, "The Right Eye of the Commander," Harte brings in superstitions and witchcraft which cause the reader to smile at the expense of the Spanish. The aforementioned tale concerns a one-eyed Spanish commander who was given the gift of a glass eye by a Yankee trader. The tumult which this "piece of jewelry" arouses in the fort area—especially from the religious sect—can be best illustrated by quoting:

"Indeed, the few who were first to ascribe the right eye of Salvatierra to miraculous origin and the special grace of the blessed San Carlos, now talked openly of witchcraft and the agency of Luzbel, the evil one...When the commander stood up at mass, if the officiating priest caught that sceptical and searching eye, the service was inevitably ruined. Even the power of the Holy Church seemed to be lost, and the last hold upon the affections of the people and the good order of the settlement departed from San Carlos." 17

16. Ibid., p. 394
17. The Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Tales, "The Right Eye of the Commander," p. 404
Partnership

The best of the stories in which Bret Harte used the theme of friendship or partnership is, undoubtedly, "Tennessee's Partner." The pathos of this story consists chiefly in the fact that Tennessee was unworthy of his partner's devotion. He was a robber and a drunkard. And he had run off with his partner's wife. When we consider, then, the devotion the partner had for Tennessee we can realize "the outpouring of a generous and affectionate character." 1 Whether the partner saw in Tennessee something which was really there, something known only to God and the friend who loved him, or that in Tennessee he saw an ideal of his own creation, in either case his affection is equally disinterested and noble.

Frank Stocking, a friend of Harte's, furnished him with many unique characters to be transformed into book-beings. In a camp, near Yosemite Valley, Stocking met a man who fifteen years later was to become Tennessee's partner. At that time Chaffee and Chamberlain had been mining six years and had firmly cemented a friendship which was to last for fifty years. Millicent Shinn writes:

"One day while Harte was in his room ransacking his brain in quest of a good incident to back a partnership story, he asked Stocking about this,

1. Henry Childs Merwin, The Life of Bret Harte, p. 162
and the latter told him of Chaffee and Chamberlain. According to Stockings narrative, Chaffee ordered a bag of gold-dust to the mob about to lynch his pal Chamberlain, saying he would rather give it all than have such a breach of the law disgrace the camp. He talked quietly and finally made a motion that the prisoner be turned over to the regular authorities at Columbia, near Sonora. Somehow he won the crowd and this was done...The friendship of Chaffee and Chamberlain began on the ship which brought them to California in July, 1849, and lasted till their deaths fifty-four years later."  

In another article, it was written that

"Bret Harte heard of the lynching incident and wove out of it his story in which Tennessee's partner vainly tried to save his friend's life, although he had robbed the partner of his wife. In Harte's story, the partner cuts down Tennessee's body, loads it into a cart, takes it home and buries it."  

The present writer brings these points out for two very specific reasons. First, he wants to show the sincerity with which Harte developed his characters and the authenticity of many of his incidents. Secondly, the writer wants to show that friendship in the California towns was not mere acquaintance, but a partnership in which the components allowed nothing less than death itself to separate them.

2. Overland Monthly, Shinn, Millicent, "Origin of Tennessee's Partner," LXVIII, 533
Early California was inhabited with all types of men, many of them lawless and merciless. In such an area bonds of friendship were made to help protect one another from the lawlessness which, until the time of the vigilante organizations—and even them—ran rampant and unchecked. If one could not trust the friends he made or the partners with whom he shared his life there could be no sense in staying in California, for life would be completely worthless. As it turned out, however, the friendships between the miners were so stable and sincere that not once has this writer read a story of Harte’s which culminated in tragedy or failure due to a severed partnership.

Even in "The Iliad of Sandy Bar" when York and Scott tried to keep away from each other for years on end a reconciliation was brought about finally, not through any outside influence but by one of the partners himself.

In this same story it is interesting to see how far the friendship went. Both York and Scott—after their separation—were interested in the same girl, Jo Folinsbee. One evening, while Scott was visiting Miss Folinsbee, York came in and

"beholding Scott sitting, turned to the fair hostess with the abrupt query, 'Do you love this man?' The young woman thus addressed returned that answer—
once spirited and evasive—which would occur to most of my fair readers in such an exigency. Without another word, York left the house....'But would you believe it, dear?' she afterward related to an intimate friend, 'the other creature after glowering at me for a moment got upon its hind legs, took its hat, and left too. And that's the last I've seen of either.'" 4

Friendship went further than love in many cases.

Old man Johnson, in "Mrs. Skaggs' Husbands," sums up the idea of partnership quite adequately in his inimitable way when he speaks to young Islington:

"'It's six months ago sens I made you my pardner. Thar ain't a lick I've struck sense then, Tommy, thar ain't a han'ful o'yearth I've washed, thar ain't a shovelful o'rock I've turned over, but I tho't o' you. "Share, and share alike," sez I. When I wrote to my agint I wrote ekal for my pardner, Tommy Islington.'" 5

There is another reason why friendship and partnership became more solidified in the West than anywhere else. Many men had made the long voyage without families. They expected to come back; they had not wanted to burden their wives and children with the hardships of travel to and life in the wild and unpopulated land beyond the Rockies. It can truly be stated that the vast majority of men who went to early California went with the assuredness of finding gold and returning to the States. Therefore, since there was this lack of

5. Ibid., "Mrs. Skaggs' Husbands," p. 19
women and children, it was only natural for men to check their loneliness by relying for friendship on other lonely men. For truly, most Americans in the early days of California were lonely. The Spanish and Mexican peoples offered little in the way of compatibility between themselves and the Anglo-Saxons.

When Old Man Plunkett had staked and lost his pile in the speculation of Amity Ditch, "there was a general feeling of regret that this misfortune would interfere with the old man's long-cherished plan of 'going home'." 6

York was Plunkett's only friend. When Abner Dean indirectly accused Plunkett of lying about his going home to see his wife and children, it was York who stood up in the bar-room, turned and faced the accuser and the loungers, and said quietly, "'That man lies.'" 7 York did not know for sure whether Plunkett had gone East or not—he hoped he had. In any case, the point remains that the compelling force of friendship, to defend your partner, right or wrong, instinctively urged York to stand up and contradict Dean. Yet Dean was no coward. What he says and does only helps to enlighten us further into the pioneer code of ethics of which there are such precepts as "a man is as good as his word" and "truth is a necessity."

7. Ibid., p. 120
"That man ain't here," continued Abner Dean with listless indifference of voice and a gentle pre-occupation of manner as he carelessly allowed his right hand to rest on his hip near his revolver. 'That man ain't here; but, if I'm called upon to make good what he says, why, I'm on hand.'

Gambling in Early California

Almost everybody in California gambled. Royce tells us that

"judges and clergymen used to elbow their way...to the tables and used to play with the rest. The men in San Francisco who did not thus gamble were too few to be noticed." 1

The recklessness of the California society lay not so much, however, in the fact that everybody openly gambled or did worse, but in the tolerance of the open vices of those who chose to follow the wrong ways.

Gambling continued to be licensed in San Francisco until 1855, but long before that time met with steadily increasing condemnation. The San Francisco Herald of April 7, 1852, showed the view generally taken of the gambling halls at the time.

"They still constitute a prominent feature of life in San Francisco, but

8. Ibid., p. 120
1. Josiah Royce, California, p. 394
public opinion, in the main, is opposed to their existence, and they are tolerated for no other reason that we know of than that they are charged heavily for licenses."

By the end of 1855, however, gamblers were condemned as among the worst elements of society.

The gambling saloons of which Harte writes were the largest, most comfortable, and most decorated rooms in all San Francisco. People staked and lost their last dollar here with a resignation which was unbelievable. Harte recalls, in one of his sketches, a conversation at the door of one saloon which shows equal silence and imperturbability. This particular conversation is characteristic for its brevity and its prevailing stoicism.

"'Hello!' said a departing miner as he recognized a brother miner coming in, 'when did you come down?'
'This morning,' was the reply.
'Made a strike on the bar?' suggested the first speaker.
'You bet!' said the other and passed in.
I chanced an hour later to be at the same place as they met again--their relative positions changed.
'Hello. What now?' said the incomer.
'Back to the bar!'
'Cleaned out?'
'You bet!'
Not a word more explained a common situation."

It seems that even children gambled in the mining

2. Ibid., p. 425
camps. Little Tommy Islington and his partner Johnson, three times his age, gambled among themselves many times. On one occasion, the two are sitting in a cave near their claim and plan to pass the time away as best they can.

"'Make it five thousand,' replied Tommy reflectively, also to the landscape,' and I'm in.'

'Wot do I owe you now?' said Johnson after a lengthened silence.

'One hundred and seventy-five thousand two hundred and fifty dollars,' replied Tommy with business-like gravity.

'Well,' said Johnson, after a deliberate pause, commensurate with the magnitude of the transaction, 'ef you win, call it a hundred and eighty thousand round. War's the keerds?" 4

Tommy and Johnson may have been exaggerating slightly the amounts played for. In any case, the point does show that Tommy knew how to gamble and could hold his own with the older and more experienced partner.

One of Harte's favorite characters is John Oakhurst, a professional gambler. Harte seems to love the man in the same way that Shakespeare loved his Falstaff. He uses him in many short stories, two of which famous ones are "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" and "A Passage in the Life of John Oakhurst." In the novel Gabriel Conroy, and in the play, Two Men of Sandy Bar, Oakhurst plays leading roles. If the characterization of any one person is as complete as possible in Harte's

4. Mrs. Skaggs' Husbands And Other Sketches, "Mrs. Skaggs' Husbands," p. 16
work, it is that of this handsome gambler. Oakhurst accepted
the fate which he took for granted. There was no use fighting
it. "With him life was at best an uncertain game, and he
recognized the usual percentage in favor of the dealer." 5 Or
again in the same story, "Mr. Oakhurst did not drink. It
interfered with a profession which required coolness, im-
passiveness, and presence of mind, and, in his own language,
he 'couldn't afford it.'" 6 This philosophy of fatalism proved
to be the downfall as well as the rise of John Oakhurst. He
spoke, reflectively, that luck is a queer thing and that all
one ever knows about it for certain is that it's bound to
change. "And it's finding out when it's going to change that
makes you." 7

The downfall of Oakhurst, the supreme test of his
way of life, comes finally in "The Outcasts of Poker Flat." His luck changed for the last time. Nothing better illustrates
his code of existence than his own epitaph at the time of
suicide.

"Beneath This Tree
Lies the Body
of
John Oakhurst
Who Struck A Streak of Bad Luck
On the 23d of November 1850
And
Handed in His Checks
On the 7th of December 1850." 8

5. The Luck of Roaring Camp And Other Tales, "The Outcasts of
Poker Flat," p. 15
6. Ibid., p. 19
7. Ibid., p. 22
8. Ibid., p. 26
And Harte adds, in the sentimental fashion of which he is capable, but also with the understanding of the character of his own creation:

"And pulseless and cold, with a derringer by his side and a bullet in his heart, though still calm as in life, beneath the snow lay he who was at once the strongest and yet the weakest of the outcasts of Poker Flat." 9

Harte's treatment of the theme of gambling, especially when Oakhurst is involved, is not always one of pathos for the unlucky losers or one of regret at the passing of a romantic age, but there is also humor and excitement in his stories as well. For example, in "A Passage in the Life of Mr. John Oakhurst," he writes:

"The season had been a prosperous one to Mr. Oakhurst, and proportionately disastrous to several members of the legislature, judges, colonels, and others who had enjoyed but briefly the pleasure of Mr. Oakhurst's midnight society." 10

In this particular story Oakhurst has the misfortune of falling in love with another man's wife, a Mrs. Elsie Decker. And because he thinks that a man who has faith in only the turn of a card is not worthy of such a woman, the easy-go-lucky gambler tries his hand at church-going to cleanse his soul. Of course, this is not very successful. He is remembered as

9. Ibid., p. 26
10. Tales of the Argonauts And Other Sketches, "A Passage in the Life of Mr. John Oakhurst" p. 53
"standing up to receive the benediction with the suggestion, in his manner and highly buttoned coat, of taking the fire of his adversary at ten paces... His appearance was generally considered as an impertinence, attributable only to some wanton fancy, or possibly a bet. One or two thought that the sexton was exceedingly remiss in not turning him out after discovering who he was; and a prominent pew-holder remarked that if he couldn't take his wife and daughters to that church, without exposing them to such an influence, he would try to find some church where he could." 11

From the above passage we see not only the humor in the situation—the paradox of character—but also the point that gamblers, especially those of Oakhurst's caliber, were not admired by all people. The church scene took place in San Francisco, the mother of gambling dens. Yet in that city at this particular time gambling was being outlawed and the men who practiced that profession were not looked upon as the healthiest class of citizens, no matter how good they were away from the table.

In the mining towns, however, gambling was taken for granted. Everyone tried his luck, young and old alike. Superstitions arose as to who should win and who should lose. For example, when the Fool of Five Forks strikes a "pocket" in the hillside near his solitary cabin, there is little wonder because in those days a popular belief arose that luck

11. Ibid., p. 66
particularly favored the foolish and unscientific. And, as Harte says, in the story with the same title,

"That the 'Fool' should gamble seemed eminently fit and proper. That he should occasionally win a large stake, according to that popular theory which I have recorded in the preceding paragraph, appeared, also, a not improbable or inconsistent fact. That he should, however, break the faro bank which Mr. John Hamlin had set up in Five Forks, and carry off a sum variously estimated at from ten to twenty thousand dollars, and not return the next day, and lose the money at the same table, really appeared incredible." 12

It seems natural enough then that Bret Harte, treating a period of California history where gambling played an important part in the social circles of the mining camps and reflected an important phase of the California tempo, should incorporate so much of the gambler and his philosophy in his works.

**Pioneer Law and Lawlessness**

Bret Harte's characters are usually responsible to no laws except those improvised by the camp, and the final judge is either the six-shooter or the rope of Judge Lynch. Yet behind this lawlessness there is a sort of respect for the law which is characteristically American.

Beginning with 1850 the newspapers were full of shooting events. Shooting at sight was very common in San Francisco at this time. One newspaper puts it this way:

"Another case of the influenza in fashion occurred yesterday. We allude to a mere shooting match in which only one of the near-by-standers was shot down in his tracks." ¹

There are two reasons why order in early California was difficult to maintain: one, the sense of irresponsibility, and the other, a local exaggeration of the common national feelings towards foreigners. The first tendency the Pioneers admitted though not in all its true magnitude; the second they seldom recognized at all, charging to the foreigners themselves whatever trouble was due to the brutal ill-treatment of them.

Duels were common and in many cases very serious affairs. They were due mostly to the Southern element which was numerically and influentially strong in California. The most southern of Southerners is, of course, Harte's immortalized Colonel Starbottle.

Mr. Noah Brooks seems to have recorded the exact time when the picture of Starbottle came into Bret Harte's mind:

"In Sacramento, he and I met Colonel Starbottle who had, of course, another name. He wore a tall silk hat and loosely fitting clothes and he carried on his left arm by its

¹ Alta California, November 25, 1851
crooked handle a stout walking-stick. The colonel was a dignified and be-nignant figure; in politics he was everybody's friend...." 2

Merwin seems to think that this may have been a certain Dr. Ruskin who is described by a Pioneer as

"wearing a white fur plug hat, a blue coat with brass buttons, a buff-colored vest, white trousers, varnished boots, a black satin stock, and, on state occasions, a frilled shirt front. He always carried a cane with a carved handle." 3

The reader may remember that the Colonel was always holding himself "personally responsible" for any consequences of a hostile nature and was, therefore, dubbed "Old Personal Responsibility." This phrase was not invented by Bret Harte. It was almost a catchword in California society. It was a Southern phrase and showed the Southerner's attitude. One paper wrote:

"The basis of many of the outrages which have disgraced our state during the past four years has been the 'personal responsibility system'--a relic of barbarism." 4

Colonel Starbottle uses the phrase "personally responsible" thirteen times in Two Men of Sandy Bar.

Harte's characters take dueling more or less for granted. It is the final arbiter in a personal quarrel, and

2. Henry Childs Merwin, The Life of Bret Harte, p. 135
3. Ibid., p. 135
all Californians knew this. The participants of a duel, are, for the most part, brave and nonchalant men who hold themselves "personally responsible" for any slight on their character or the character of their loved ones.

The famous Southern gambler, John Oakhurst, takes part in a duel as if it were another faro game and he lets the cards fall wherever fate decides them to fall. In "A Passage in the Life of John Oakhurst," our hero walks to the field and shoots his opponent on the first fire as calmly as if he were dealing cards.

Harte gives an excellent picture of the easy-going type who walks out to his death with the air of nonchalance and, even, amusement.

"A handsome young fellow...was scrupulously dressed but I was struck by the fact that he was all in black, and his slight figure, buttoned to the throat in a tightly fitting frock coat, gave, I fancied, a singular melancholy to his pale Southern face. Nevertheless, he greeted me with more than his usual serene cordiality, and I remembered that he looked up with a half-puzzled expression at the rosy morning sky as he walked a few steps with me down the deserted street. I could not help saying that I was astonished to see him up so early, and he admitted that it was a break in his usual habits, but added with a smiling significance I afterwards remembered that it was 'an even chance if he did it again'...It was not until a week later that I knew that an hour after
he left me that morning he was lying
dead in a little hollow behind the
Mission Dolores—shot through the
heart in a duel for which he had risen
so early." 5

Harte seems a little cynical—and this writer has
little doubt as to Harte's disgust for the dueling system as it
existed in early California—when he puts into the mouth of
Colonel Starbottle the witty remark concerning the split in
friendship between Scott and York,

"A fuss that gentlemen might have
settled in ten minutes over a social
glass, if they meant business; or in
ten seconds with a revolver, if they
meant fun." 6

The one case where Bret Harte shows some sympathy
for a young Southerner forced into a duel and glorifies him in
the eyes of the reader is that of Culpepper Starbottle, nephew
of the famous colonel, in the story "The Romance of Madrono
Hollow."

Culpepper has the misfortune of falling in love
with a Yankee girl whose brother has insulted Colonel Starbottle
at a dance. When the Colonel requests his nephew to avenge him,
Culpepper knows, like all dutiful Southern gentlemen of the
time, that there's nothing he can do but meet his opponent at
so many paces and either give up his life for the girl he loves
or kill the man who has insulted his uncle.

6. Mrs. Skaggs' Husbands And Other Sketches, "The Iliad of
Sandy Bar," p. 107
The colonel says:

"'Why, the son of that dashed nigger-worshipping psalm-singing Puritan Yankee. What's the matter now? Look yer, Culp, you ain't goin' back on your blood, ar' ye? You ain't back on your word? Ye ain't going down at the feet of this trash like a whipped hound?'

Culpepper was silent. He was very white. Presently he looked up and said, quietly, 'No.'" 7

Lawlessness had not only the one form of dueling in California. There was also the type of crime committed by Tennessee—the unforgiveable type of waylaying a citizen and robbing him of guns as well as money. Tracked like the criminal he was and finally forced to face the showdown between himself and his pursuer, Tennessee plays the game according to the rules. There is no such thing as fighting fate when the game is up. If one committed a crime—though perhaps the Western Pioneer wouldn't call it that—and could get away with it, he would never betray himself then or later. But, if he were caught, there was no crying and less grumbling. It is hard to steer away from the factual evidence that life was a mere game in the early West and he who could play better or had luck on his side could win and think not a whit more of his luck.

For example, Tennessee is trapped and he knows it.

7. Ibid., "The Romance of Madrono Hollow," p. 146
There is no use for him to run about like a caged rat. Instead, he merely asks,

"What have you got there? I call," said Tennessee quietly.
'Two bowers and an ace,' said the stranger as quietly, showing two revolvers and a bowie-knife.
'That takes me,' returned Tennessee; and with this gambler's epigram he threw away his useless pistol and rode back with his captor." 8

In the same story there is a remarkable contrast between the ignorance of the law and a sense of justice on the part of Tennessee's partner. The biting humor in the court scene shows the partner offering, with all the seriousness he can muster in what he considers a common legal procedure, to pay 1700 dollars and a watch to the court for the freedom of Tennessee. The reaction on the part of the more legally educated jurors is astounding and almost catastrophic for the well-meaning partner.

Harte describes the reaction thus:

"For a moment his life was in jeopardy. One or two men sprang to their feet; several hands groped for hidden weapons, and a suggestion to 'throw him from the window' was only overridden by a gesture from the Judge." 9

An appropriate and last comment from Colonel Starbottle in the novel *Gabriel Conroy* will bring the chapter to a

8. The Luck of Roaring Camp And Other Tales, "Tennessee's Partner," p. 43
9. Ibid., p. 46
close. He illustrates for us, somewhat sadly, the growing California sentiment regarding dueling.

"'You call to mind, sir, one of the--er--highest illustrations of a code of honor--that--er--er--under the present--er--degrading state of public sentiment is--er--er--passing away. We are drifting, sir, drifting--drifting to er--er--political and social condition, where the Voice of Honor, sir, is drowned by the Yankee Watchword of Produce and Trade, Trade, sir, blank me!" 10

Pioneer Women and Children

California miners were, for the most part, lonely men. The vast majority of them had come to California alone. Hence, the fact that there weren't many women or children in the early camps was cause enough, as far as the miners were concerned, to set these creatures up on pedestals for worship.

In "Waiting for the Ship" Harte paints a sentimental picture of a man who is desperately awaiting the arrival of his wife and children. But the ship never comes, and

"One Sunday a party of pleasure seekers clambering over the rocks were attracted by the barking of a dog that had run on before them. When they came up they found a plainly dressed man lying there dead." 1

There are many instances in Harte's writing where

1. The Luck of Roaring Camp And Other Tales, "Waiting for the Ship," p. 373
men—the hardiest pioneers—have become the perfect gentlemen in their dealings with the opposite sex. Jack Hamlin, the famous gambler, having once ridden in the same coach with the Red Gulch schoolmistress afterward "threw a decanter at the head of a confederate for mentioning her name in a bar-room." 2

And, in the same story:

"The overdressed mother of a pupil whose paternity was doubtful had often lingered near this astute vestal's temple, never daring to enter its sacred precincts, but content to worship the priestess from afar." 3

And when pretty Jo Folinsbee steps out of her home to take a walk she commands the respect of every male on the road.

"Small wonder that a passing teamster drove his six mules into the wayside ditch and imperilled his load to keep the dust from her spotless garments. Small wonder that the Lightning Express withheld its speed and flash to let her pass, and that the expressman, who had never been known to exchange more than rapid monosyllables with his fellow man, gazed after her with breathless admiration...she was certainly attractive." 4

However, not all California women possessed the qualities of femininity which caused stage coach drivers to slow down and Jack Hamlins to throw whiskey decanters at pioneers' heads. "Mother Shipton" and "The Duchess" in "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" are not exactly angels or else they

2. Ibid., "The Idyl of Red Gulch," p. 58
3. Ibid., p. 58
4. Mrs. Skaggs' Husbands And Other Sketches, "The Romance of Medrono Hollow," p. 140
wouldn't have been driven out of Poker Flat with John Oakhurst.

There were women like Miggles, for instance, whose "conversation was never elegant, rarely grammatical," and who "employed expletives the use of which had generally been yielded to our sex." Yet Miggles commands respect because she has the gumption to live in a forest and take care of an insane man who had at one time been her benefactor and protector.

And, again, Jenny McClasky of Tuolumne is the type of woman who hasn't yet rid herself of the habits formed on the prairie march.

"Indeed it was only four years ago that without shoes or stockings, a long-limbed, colty girl, in a waistless calico gown, she had leaped from the tail-board of her father's emigrant wagon when it first drew up at Chemisal Ridge. Certain wild habits of the 'Rose' had outlived transplanting and cultivation." 6

Yet Harte is sympathetic towards the "Rose" not because she was accustomed to a hard life but because she still possessed those feminine qualities which have endeared her to the poetic lover, Ridgeway. When the latter is shot by a jealous suitor and Jenny finds the wounded man,

"she uttered a cry, the first she had given--the cry of a mother over her stricken babe, of a tigress over her mangled cub; and in another moment she had leaped the fence and knelt beside

5. The Luck of Roaring Camp, etc., "Miggles," p. 34
6. Tales of the Argonauts and Other Sketches, "The Rose of Tuolumne," p. 2
Ridgeway, with his fainting head upon her heart...Then with a sudden resolu-
tion, she stooped over the insensible
man, and with one strong effort lifted
him in her arms as if he had been a
child." 7

Jovita, in Two Men of Sandy Bar, sums up the
situation nicely when she describes the type of man with which
a woman would fall in love. She says: "Ah, give me a man that
is capable of a devotion to anything, rather than a cold calcu-
ling average of all the virtues." 8 A Woman on the West
Coast could afford to be fussy in picking her man. No man, no
matter how much of a man he was, could just look at a girl,
fall in love, and immediately carry her off to a preacher.
Even in the roughest mining camp this would not go. One miner
complains:

"'Ther's that Cy Dudley, with plenty o' money and wantin' a wife bad, and ez
is goin' to Sacramento tomorrow to
prospect fur one, and he hez been up and
down that canon time outer mind, and no
dam ever said "break" to him! No Sir!
Or take my own case; on'y last week when
the Fiddletown coach went over the bank
at Dry Creek, wasn't I the fist man that
ez cut the leaders adrift and bruk open
the coachdoor and helped out the passen-
gers? Six Chinymen, by Jink --and a
greaser! Thet's my luck!'" 9

Children, too, were creatures of devotion in early
California. The older men realized that there were hardly any

7. Ibid., pp. 18-19
8. Two Men of Sandy Bar, Riverside Edition, Vol. XII, p. 437
as he extricated his finger, with perhaps more tenderness and care than he might have been deemed capable of showing...'He rastled with my finger,' he remarked to Tipton, holding up the member, 'the d---d little cuss!'" 11

And when Stumpy christens the child with the phrase "I proclaim you Thomas Luck, according to the laws of the United States and the State of California, so help me God," it is the first time that the Deity is used otherwise than profanely in the camp.

"Profanity was tacitly given up in these sacred precincts, and throughout the camp a popular form of expletive, known as 'Damn the luck!' and 'Curse the luck!' was abandoned as having a new personal bearing." 12

Jack Hamlin, too, is not slow in showering his favors upon youngsters. It seems that wherever he meets them he enjoys himself with them and leaves them in a very happy state of mind.

In "Brown of Calaveras" he

"came upon some barelegged children wading in the willowy creek, and so wrought upon them with a badinage peculiar to himself, that they were emboldened to climb up his horse's legs and over his saddle, until he was fain to develop an exaggerated ferocity of demeanor, and to escape, leaving behind some kisses and coin." 13

We see then, in Harte's stories, that women and

11. The Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Tales, "The Luck of Roaring Camp," p. 5
12. Ibid., p. 10
13. Ibid., "Brown of Calaveras," p. 67
schools in the mining areas where the youngsters could go to learn the three R's and keep out of mischief. Many children worked the mines and suffered the same ordeals as did their elders.

Tommy Islington, for instance, is the junior partner of the drunken Johnson. It is Tommy who sobers his partner, nurses him whenever he is sick, and cheers him when the latter complains of his unfaithful wife in the States. But Tommy is still a child to the rest of the camp. On one occasion he asks Yuba Bill if any mail had come through for him, and Harte makes the famous driver answer:

"'Anythin' for you!' echoed Bill with an over-acted severity equally well understood by Tommy--'anythin' for you? No! And it's my opinion there won't be anythin' for you ez long ez you hang around bar-rooms and spen your va--alloable time with loafers and bummers. Git!" 10

"The Luck of Roaring Camp" is a good example of how Harte makes his miners revere children. Just after the child is born and the men religiously walk into the lonely cabin to see it and donate whatever they can for its upkeep, the author makes one of the most prominent citizens in the isolated community feel elated when the new-born half-breed grabs his finger.

"Kentuck looked foolish and embarrassed. Something like a blush tried to assert itself in his weather-beaten cheek. 'The d----d little cuss!' he said,

10. Mrs. Skaggs' Husbands and Other Sketches, "Mrs. Skaggs' Husbands," p. 7
children in early California soon became objects of devotion to the lonely pioneers. We may assume, also, that the sentimentality with which Harte portrayed these characters is not of and by itself a mere device to gain a larger reading audience but a justifiable design as well to depict true conditions in the lonely mining camps.

Harte's Treatment of the Chinese

In all Harte's work with the one exception of "The Heathen Chinee"—and that was published by accident—\(^1\) are the Chinese people dealt with gently and fairly. California, in Harte's day, was just beginning to feel the pressure of the racial problem and its influence on the Western economic front. Chinese labor was cheap, cheaper by far than the labor of the lowliest white man. Feeling ran high in all sections of California where Chinese were employed. As a matter of fact, there was growing intensity towards all non-Americans in California. This came about with the rise of church society in San Francisco. Harte writes:

"San Francisco was early a city of churches and church organizations to which the leading men and merchants belonged. The lax Sundays of the dying

\(^{1}\) See Merwin, *The Life of Bret Harte*, pp. 49-51
Spanish race seemed only to provoke a revival of the rigors of the Puritan Sabbath. With the Spaniard and his Sunday afternoon bull-fight scarce an hour distant, the San Francisco pulpit thundered against Sunday picnics... Against the actual heathen the feeling was even stronger and reached its climax one Sunday when a Chinaman was stoned to death by a crowd of children returning from Sunday school." 

If anything, Harte praises the Chinaman for the Oriental civilization which he has brought over with him to America, and for the romantic atmosphere he has lent to an already romantic California.

Writing his "Bohemian Days in San Francisco," Harte recalls the observations he had made regarding the Chinese.

"The latter," that is, the Chinese, "seldom flaunted his faded dignity in the principal thoroughfares... They brought an atmosphere of the Arabian Nights into the hard, modern civilization; their shops—not always confined at that time to a Chinese quarter—were replicas of the bazaars of Canton and Peking, with their quaint display of little dishes on which tid-bits of food delicacies were exposed for sale, all of the dimensions and unreality of a doll's kitchen or a child's housekeeping... They were a revelation to the Eastern immigrant, whose preconceived ideas of them were borrowed from the ballet or pantomine; they did not wear scalloped drawers and hats with jingling bells on their points, nor did I ever see them dance with their forefingers verti-

cally extended. They were always neatly dressed, even the commonest of coolies, and their festive dresses were marvels. As traders they were grave and patient; as servants they were sad and civil, and all were singularly infantine in their natural simplicity. The living representatives of the oldest civilization in the world, they seemed like children." 3

As far as Chinese entertainment goes, Harte writes in the same sketch:

"His recreations at that time were chiefly gambling, for the Chinese theater wherein the latter produced his plays (which lasted for several months and compressed the events of a whole dynasty) was not yet built. But he had one or two companies of jugglers who occasionally performed also at American theaters." 4

Harte can be humorous, too, when dealing with the Chinese question. But he is not laughing hilariously or in any deriding manner. He smiles as one smiles today at the French beret. He writes in his "Bohemian Papers,"

"I will back my Americanized Chinaman against any neophyte of European birth in the choice of that article." (He had been speaking of the cravat.)... "There is but one article of European wear that he avoids. These Bohemian eyes have never yet been pained by the spectacle of a tall hat on the head of an intelligent Chinaman." 5

"Wan Lee" is the story of a small and innocent

3. Ibid., p. 146
4. Ibid., p. 151
Chinese boy who, if he had been given the chance that most American boys of foreign-born parents receive today, would have lived to become a decent American citizen. But as it turns out, he lives only long enough—to the age of thirteen—to be "stoned to death in the streets of San Francisco, in the year of Grace 1869, by a mob of half-grown boys and Christian schoolchildren!"  

The bitterness and sincerity with which Harte wrote is further illustrated in the same story.

"There were two days of that eventful year which will long be remembered in San Francisco--two days when a mob of her citizens set upon and killed unarmed, defenseless foreigners because they were foreigners and of another race, religion, and color, and worked for what wages they could get."  

In "An Episode of Fiddletown," there is a passage concerning the journey of the loyal Ah Fe from Fiddletown to San Francisco. Ah Fe is an innocent laundryman who is about to do a favor for a white woman, a favor which would and did net him nothing but the mere happiness from his deed. Yet

"On the road to Sacramento he was twice playfully thrown from the top of the stagecoach by an intelligent but deeply intoxicated Caucasian whose moral nature was shocked at riding with one addicted to opium-smoking. At Hangtown, he was beaten by a passing stranger, purely an act of Christian supererogation. At Dutch Flat he was robbed by well-known

6. Tales of the Argonauts and Other Sketches, "Wan Lee," p.104
7. Ibid., pp. 102-103
hands from unknown motives. At Sacramento he was arrested on suspicion of being something or other, and discharged with a severe reprimand—possibly for not being it, and so delaying the course of justice. At San Francisco he was freely stoned by children of the public schools; but, by carefully avoiding these monuments of enlightened progress, he at last reached, in contemplative safety, the Chinese quarters where his abuse was confined to the police, and limited by the strong arm of the law."

Perhaps Bret Harte had never forgotten that one quarter of his blood was Jewish. If so, with the fact that he stood against the outrageous persecution of innocent Indians, it is not to be wondered at that he felt bitter over the Anglo-Saxon handling of the Chinese problem in early California.

8. Ibid., "An Episode of Fiddletown," pp. 226-227
CONCLUSIONS

In the foregoing pages the writer has endeavored to give, in addition to a biographical account of Bret Harte, a picture of life on the California frontier as depicted in the early prose of the latter.

The following conclusions are drawn from the material thus far in the thesis:

1. Bret Harte's early years in California were extremely influential in impressing upon his mind the potentiality of a new "geography" in the field of American literature.

2. Bret Harte, in his early sketches and tales, gives frequent expression to a subtle blending of satire, humor, and pathos as it existed on the Western frontier.

3. The Spanish and Mexican elements in Bret Harte's work are dealt with sympathetically. The one exception to this case is the satirical treatment of the Spanish church.

4. Harte makes partnership in early California a synonym for undying friendship insofar as the components of the partnership were concerned.

In Harte's early work gambling, until it was outlawed in 1855, was a common pastime for miners and city dwellers alike. Harte does not always represent gamblers as
the lowest elements in society.

6. Harte, though cynical of the dueling system as it existed in early California, respects the pioneer for his simple sense of justice and for his fearlessness in the face of death.

7. The women and children in Harte's California stories are dealt with sympathetically because they were in the minority and were brave enough to face the dangers of a frontier existence.

8. And, finally, Harte's treatment of the much-persecuted Chinese is entirely sympathetic. He shows the suffering of the latter at the hands of the American population in the early West.
ABSTRACT OF THESIS

The spirit of the miner and frontiersman was not always one of pathos or loneliness. The simplicity of their existence made for a humor and self-confidence not to be found elsewhere in America. Theirs, as Harte expresses it, was a humor of democracy in which hardship, danger, and death were endured by being made light of. Cynicism could not be afforded on the frontier. The tendency to minimize rather than exaggerate a situation was a very singular element in the humor of the West and in the humor of Harte.

Harte's treatment of the Spanish and Mexican civilizations in early California is important in that it not only gives the reader an historical background of the far West but prepares him for the incongruities which came about when Old and New World cultures clashed. Harte, generally sympathetic to the Spaniards and Mexicans, found an element in the mode of their existence which he took time to criticize and almost sneer at: namely, the Spanish Catholic church. In "The Legend of Monte del Diablo," for example, Spanish padres are made the objects of ridicule at the hands of a Devil who can see nothing but Anglo-Saxons and the hordes of gold which they are carrying out of California.
The system of lasting partnerships was one of the more particular and romantic elements of pioneer existence. Loneliness and rampant lawlessness were two of the main reasons for the formation of partnerships. Harte's best example of loyalty of one man for another is his "Tennessee's Partner." In this story he shows where even death cannot separate the devotion which the one man has for the other. "The Iliad of Sandy Bar" is another famous example in which the theme is undying friendship. Here we see that love, time, and distance cannot rupture the devotion of Scott and York for each other. Harte always ends a story of broken friendship with the feeling that the parties concerned have either already become reconciled or will be so in the future.

Gambling was tolerated in California till about 1855. Before this time—and it is with these years that Harte was concerned—the John Oakhursts and Jack Hamlin's of California retained almost complete control of the destinies of many men. They lived virtually by the turn of a card. Harte in "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" gives us one of the best stories in which the philosophy of a gambler is tested to the limit. Oakhurst, whose steel nerve and steady right hand were the weapons of his existence, finally recognized his defeat at the hands of Mother Nature and "cashed in his chips." The fatalism that was the gambler's and the superstitions which
accompanied that fatalism helped to set apart the California
tempo—the easy-come-easy-go mode of existence—from that of
the rest of the United States and even the world.

The two reasons for the rampant lawlessness in the
early West were the irresponsibility of the pioneers and their
attitude toward the foreign elements in California. Dueling
was one of the main sources of lawlessness. This system of
revenging one's honor was carried over into California by the
Southern element which indeed made up a sizeable portion of the
society. The inimitable Colonel Starbottle as well as Oakhurst
and Hamlin are the most famous professors of the dueling system
in Harte's stories. It is Starbottle who is always holding
himself "personally responsible" for the slightest intimation
of flawlessness in his character. Harte, generally, is not
sympathetic to dueling and only in a rare case does he make the
exception of sympathizing with the original challenger of a
duel.

Aside from the duel there was the lawlessness of
theft and murder. Again, in "Tennessee's Partner," to take a
prime example, we see that the Vigilance Committee was not slow
in catching up with the wayward Tennessee or in doling out
justice to him for the robberies he had committed. There is a
singular and almost pathetic incident of carrying out the law,
in the same story, when Tennessee's partner tries to bribe the
jury into letting Tennessee go. This act is not accompanied
by any willful malice on the partner's part, but it does show both the ignorance of the law on the part of many pioneers such as Tennessee and the attitude of confidence in the simple law of the West on the part of the jurors.

Because of the fact that there were few women and children on the California frontier, those women and children who were there were looked upon and worshipped as creatures few and far between. But a woman was not only regarded as a creature of beauty—as was Jo Polinsbee—but as an idol of respect as well. Women such as Miggles, M'liess, and Jenny McClosky, who maintained their self-respect and femininity in spite of physical hardships and forced loneliness, represent the feminine element of California society which drew the courtesy and reverence of the roughest and toughest men on the frontier.

Children, too, because they were in the minority and because they were forced to spend the formative years of their lives in a comparatively bare environment, were looked upon sympathetically and affectionately. The "Luck" of Roaring Camp was the cause of a minor tumult because he was a rarity. We see how cursing is forbidden because of him and how the poor Kentuck does not forget—to his dying day—that the Luck had "wrastled" with his finger when he was less than an hour old.

Bret Harte, from his early Bohemian days in San
Francisco to the time he left California, is in extreme sympathy with the Chinese in Western society. He bitterly describes the brutal treatment of the "heathen" element in "Wan Lee" and in "An Episode of Fiddletown." Stoning to death, the refusal of permits to ride in local vehicles, robbery, and general man-handling were several of the afflictions the Chinese suffered at the hands of the Anglo-Saxons. The fact that Bret Harte in his own veins contained the blood of a persecuted people might be taken to account for his sympathy towards the Chinese.
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