Bret Harte (1836-1902)

The Outcasts of Poker Flat

As Mr. John Oakhurst, gambler, stepped into the main street of Poker Flat on the morning of the 23rd of November, 1850, he was conscious of a change in its moral atmosphere since the preceding night. Two or three men, conversing earnestly together, ceased as he approached, and exchanged significant glances. There was a Sabbath still in the air, which, in a settlement unused to Sabbath influences, looked ominous.

Mr. Oakhurst's calm, handsome face betrayed small concern of 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 whipping away the red dust of Poker Flat from his neat boots, 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 persistently in regard of two men who were then hanging from the boughs of a sycamore in the gulch, and temporarily in

8. For snuffing the cards.
9. First published in the Overland Monthly for January, 1863, and collected in The Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Stories (1870), which the present text follows.

1. Vigilance committees were often organized in the West for the protection of life and property.
the punishment 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 impudicity was professional, and it was only in such easily established standards of evil that Poker Flat ventured to sit in 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 sin to trust," said Jin Wheeler, "to let this yer young man run from Roaring Camp—an entire stranger—carry away our money." But a crude sentiment of equality residing in the breasts of those who had been fortunate enough to win from Mr. Oakhurst overruled this narrow prejudice.

Mr. Oakhurst received his sentence with philosophic calmness, none the less coolly than he was aware of the hatred 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 departed wickedness of Poker Flat to the outskirts of the settlement. Besides Mr. Oakhurst, who was known to be a coolly desperate man, and for whose intimidation the armed escort was intended, the expatriated 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 sluice-rober—and confirmed drunkard. The cavalcade proceeded no comment from the spectators, nor was any word uttered by the escort. Only when the gavel which marked the uttermost limit of Poker Flat was reached, the leader spoke briefly and to the point. The exits 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 Panther’s valley of expletives from Uncle Billy. The philosophic Oakhurst alone remained silent. He listened calmly to Mother Shipton’s desire to cut somebody’s heart out, to the repeated statements of the Duchess that she would die in the road, and to the alarming oaths that seemed to be bumped out of Uncle Billy as he rode forward.

With the even humblest characteristics of his 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 draw the party into any closer sympathy. The young woman readjusted her somewhat aggrandized position with a terse, faded coquetry. Mother Shipton eyed the possessor of "Five Spot" with malice, and Uncle Billy included the whole party in one sweeping anathema.

The road to Sandy Bar—a camp that, 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 soon passed out of the moist, temperate regions of the foothills into the dry, clear air of the Sierras. The trail was narrow and difficult. At noon the Duchess, falling out of her saddle upon the ground, declared her intention of going no farther, and the party halted.

The spot was singularly wild and impressive. A wooded amphitheatre, sloping on three sides by precipitous cliffs of naked granite, sloped gently toward the crest of another precipice that overlooked the valley. 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 was 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 hand 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 presence. 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 scored. Mr. Oakhurst alone remained erect, leaning against a rock, calmly surveying them.

Mr. Oakhurst did not drink. It interfered with a profession which required coolness, impassiveness, and presence of mind, and, in his own language, "he couldn’t afford it." As he gazed at his recumbent fellow exiles, the loneliness began of his pariah state, his habits of life, his very vices, for the first time seriously oppressed him. He bestowed himself in kissing his black clothes, washing his hands and face, and others acti characteristics of his studiously neat habits, and for a moment forgot his annoyance. The thought of deserting his bosom and more pitiably 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 equanimity for which he was noted. He looked at the glossy wilds that rose a thousand feet 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 equanimity, won the entire fortune—amounting to some forty dollars—of that guileless 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 back, pushed him gently from the room, and so made a devoted slave of Tom Simson.

There was a remembrance of this in his bosom and enthusiastic greeting of Mr. Oakhurst. He had started, he said, to go to Poker Flat to seek his fortune. "Alonge! No, not exactly alone, in fact (a giggle), he had run away with Pixey Woods. Didn’t Mr. Oakhurst remember Pixey? She 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 Pixey, a stout, coarsely dappled of fifteen, 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 fortunate. He retorted, 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 a superior power that would not be outdone. The old squire then enveloped Jim Simson from delaying further, but in vain. He even pointed out the fact that there was no provision, of course means of making a camp. But, unluckily, the innocent met this objection by assuming the part of a man who was provided with an extra mule loaded 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. There he confided the joke to the tall pine-trees, with many stitches of his leg, contortions of his face, and the usual profanity. But when he returned to the party, he found them seated by a fire—for the air had grown strangely chill and the sky overcast—in apparently amiable conversation. Piney was actually talking in an impulsive girlish fashion to the Duchess, who was listening with an interested 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 d—d picnic?" said Uncle Billy, with inward sneer, as he surveyed the scene, the glamping fire, and the tethered animals in the foreground. Suddenly an idea mingled with the alcoholic fumes that disturbed his brain. He was apparently of a peculiar nature, for he felt impelled to slap his leg again and examine his foot into his mouth.

As the shadows crept slowly up the mountains, a slight breeze rocked the tops of the pine-trees and maneuvered through their long and glossy aisles. The ruined cabin, patched and covered with pine boughs, was set apart for the ladies. As the lovers parted, they unfastened exquisitely a kiss, and honest and sincere that it might have been heard above the swaying pines. The frail Duchess and the maladroit 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 bumbling 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 males 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 shambled peacefully, with a smile on his good-humored, freckled face; the virgin Piney slept beside her frailer sisters as sweetly as though attended by celestial guardians; and Mr. Oakhurst, drawing his blanket over his shoulders, stroked his mustache and waited for the dawn. It came slowly in a whirling mist of snowflakes that dazzled and confounded the eye. What could be seen of the landscape appeared magically changed. He looked over the vallon, 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 so escaped the felonious fingers of Uncle Billy, disclosed the fact that with care and prudence they might last ten days longer. "That is," said Mr. Oakhurst sotto voce to the Innocent, "if you're willing to bound. If you ain't—and perhaps you'd better not—you can turn Uncle Billy gets back with provisions. For some occult reason, Mr. Oakhurst could not bring himself to disclose Uncle Billy's captivity, and so offered the hypothesis that he had wandered from the camp and had accidentally stumbled upon the animals. He dropped a warning to the Duchess and Mother Shipton, of whom he knew the facts of their associate's detection. They'll find out the truth about us all when they find out anything," he added significantly, "and 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 gaiety of the young man and Mr. Oakhurst's calm infected the others. The innocent, with the aid of pine boughs, emptiected 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 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 their 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 whiskey, which he had prudently cached. "had yet it don't somehow sound like whiskey," said the gambler. It was not until he caught sight of the blazing fire through the still blinding storm, and the group around it, that he settled to the conviction that it was "square fun." Whether Mr. Oakhurst had cached his cards with the whiskey as something dedicated 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. The time was beguiled by an accordian, produced somewhat untentatively by Tom Simson from his pack. Notwithstanding some difficulties attending the manipulation of this instrument, Piney Woodhouse managed to pluck several melodious 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 defiant tone and Covenanters' swing to its chorus, rather than any devotional quality, caused it specifically 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 pines rocked; the storm echoed and whirled above the miserable group, and the flames of their altar leaped heavenward, as if in token of the vow.

4. In a low tone.
5. I.e., Our martial best of the songs of the Scottish Covenanters, who ministerially supported their claim for separation from the Church of England in the seventeenth century.
6. Refers to an early American epic, "Briar of the Lord."
At midnight the storm abated, the rolling clouds parted, and the stars glittered keenly above the sleeping camp. Mr. Oakhurst, whose professional habits had enabled him to live on the smallest possible amount of sleep, in divided watch with Tom Simon somehow managed to take upon himself the greater part of that duty. He excused himself to the Innocent by saying that he had "often been a week without sleep." "Doing what?" asked Tom. "Poker!" replied Oakhurst sententiously. "When a man gets a streak of luck,—igger luck,—he don't get tired. The luck gives in first. Luck," continued the gambler reflectively, "is a mighty queer thing. All you know 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. We've had a streak of bad luck since we left Poker Flat—you come along, and slap you get into it, too. If you can hold your cards right along you'll all right. For," added the gambler, with cheerful irreverence,

"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-cotted valley, saw the outcasts divide their slowly decreasing store 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 in counterfeit communion 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 marbleily clear air the smoke of the pastoral village of Poker Flat rose majestically. Mother Shipston saw it, and from a rack of piñon of her rocky fastness hurled in that direction a final imprecation. It was her last vituperative attempt, and perhaps for that reason it was invested with a certain degree of sublimity. It did not, however, privately informed the Duchess. "Just go out there and curse, and see." She then set herself to the task of amusing "the child," as she the Duchess were well. Pinny was no chicken, but it was a soothing and original theory of the part thus to account for the fact that she didn't swear and wasn't improper.

Worn night crept up again through the gorge, the rosy notes of the accademia rose and fell in frival spasms and long-drawn gasps by the flickering campfire. But music failed to fill entirely the aching void left by insufficient food, and a new diversion was proposed by Piñey—story-telling. Neither Mr. Oakhurst nor his female companions cared 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 Latin version of the Iliad. He now 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 epics again walked the earth. Trojan battle and swift-foots wrestled in the winds, and the great pines in the cove seemed to bow to the wrath of the son of Peleus. Mr. Oakhurst listened with patient satisfaction. Most especially was he interested in the fate of "Achilles," as the Innocent persisted in denoting the "swift-footed Achilles." So, with small food and much of Homer and the accademia, a week passed over the heads of the outcasts. The sun again gloweth them, and again from leaden skies the snowdrifts were sifted over the land. Day by day closer around them drew the snow circle, until at last they looked from their prison over drifted walls of dazzling white, that towered twenty feet above their heads. It became more and more difficult to replenish their fires, even from the fallen trees beside them, now half hidden in the drifts. And yet no one complained. The lovers turned from the dreary prospect and looked into each other's eyes and were happy. Mr. Oakhurst settled himself cozily to the loving game before him. The Duchess, more cheerful than she had been, assumed the care of Piñey. Only Mother Shipston—once the strongest of the party—seemed to sinken and fade. At midnight on the tenth day she called Oakhurst to her side. "I'm going," she said, in a voice of quavering weakness, "but don't say anything about it. Don't wake the kids. Take the bundle from under my head, and open it." Mr. Oakhurst did so. It contained Mother Shipston's ration's for the last week, untouched. "Give 'em to the child," she said, pointing to the sleeping Piñey. "You've starved yourself," said the gambler. "That's what they call it," said the woman quaveringly, as she lay down again, and, turning her face to the wall, passed quietly away.

The accademia and the horses were put aside that day, and Homer was forgotten. When the body of Mother Shipston had been committed to the snow, Mr. Oakhurst took the Innocent aside, and showed him a pair of snowshoes, which he had fashioned from the old jack-saddle. "There's one chance in a hundred to save her yet," he said, pointing to Piñey, "but it's there," he added, pointing toward Poker Flat. "If you can reach there in two days she's safe. "And you?" asked Tom Simon. "I'll stay here," was the curt reply. The lovers parted with a long embrace. "You are not going, too," said the Duchess, as she saw Mr. Oakhurst apparently waiting to accompany her. "As far as the cove," he replied. He turned suddenly and kissed the Duchess, leaving her pallid face aflush, and her trembling limbs rigid with amazement.

Night came, but not Mr. Oakhurst. In the snow beside the hut the dream of the swift-foots again and the whining snow. Then the Duchess, feeding the fire, found that one kid had quietly piled beside the hut enough fuel to last a few days longer. The tears rose to her eyes, but she hid them from Piñey.

The woman slept but little. In the morning, looking into each other's faces, they read their fate. Neither spoke, but Piñey, accepting the position of the stronger, drew near and placed her arm around the Duchess's waist. They kept this attitude for the rest of the day. That night the storm reached its greatest fury, and, rending asunder the protecting pines, invaded the very hut.

Toward morning they found themselves unable to feed the fire, which gradually died away. As the ember slowly blushed, the Duchess crept closer to Piñey, and broke the silence of many hours. "Pinny, can you pray?" "No, dear," said Piñey simply. The Duchess, without knowing exactly why, felt relieved, and putting her head upon Piñey's shoulder, spoke no more. And so reclining, the younger and part pilloring the head of her sister sister upon her virgin breast, they fell asleep.

The wind halted as it feared to waken them. Feather drifts of snow, slaked from the king pine boughs, flew like white-winged birds, and settled about them as they slept. The trees through the tilted clouds looked down upon what had been the camp. But all human stam, all trace of earthly travail, was hidden beneath the spotless mantle mercifully flung from above.

They slept all that day and the next, nor did they wake when voices and footsteps
broke the silence of the camp. And when pitying fingers brushed the snow from their own faces, you could scarcely have told, from the equal peace that dwelt upon them, which was she that had sinned. Even the law of Poker Flat recognized this, and turned away, leaving them still locked in each other's arms.

But at the head of the gully, on one of the largest pine trees, they found the decase of clubs pinned to the bark with a Bowie-knife. It bore the following, written in pencil in a firm hand:

†

BENEATH THIS TREE LIES THE BODY OF JOHN OAKHURST,
WHO STRUCK A STREAK OF BAD LUCK ON THE 23RD OF NOVEMBER, 1850,
AND HANDED IN HIS CHECK ON THE 7TH DECEMBER, 1850.

†

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 outlaws of Poker Flat.

1869, 1870