

CHAPTER II

Bret Harte, and Local Colour
and the West.

Bret Harte is often regarded as a literary artist, a historian, shocking realist or fanciful romancer. His work also has been reviewed from many perspectives since his literary career began more than a century ago. During his lifetime, the commentary consisted, almost solely, of reviews summarizing particular stories or poems, and praising or condemning them. These analyses were not serious, critical studies of Bret Harte's fiction. In spite of it, various aspects of Harte's work such as his originality, his concise style, his use of pathos and humour and the sentimental tone, can be identified. The paradoxical nature of his characters, the accuracy of his portrayal of California the realism of his writings, his ineptness at plot construction and the contemporary life was reflected in his stories. The accuracy of his 'local colour' and the accuracy of his portrayal of California stand out prominently. Virtually all the commentators who discussed this facet of his works assumed that the accuracy was describable and most of them credited Harte with it. According to many critics Harte's first stories were as new as the land and different from anything that had ever appeared in fiction. Harte was hailed as the founder of the local colour movement. Critical evaluations of Harte's accuracy in the portrayal of California take into account such elements as the characters he portrayed, the situations and events he described and the general atmosphere he created. The actual physical appearance of the land is also considered by the critics. Most of them have felt that not only was Harte historically accurate but his work is, as good as, if not better than, actual historical accounts.

Harte dealt with countries and communities almost of an unexampled variety and laxity. He dealt with a life which we may find it difficult to realize in a venerable and historic society of today. He created a peculiar

atmosphere of locality, which to the readers of his days was startlingly new. We can say that Harte did for California what Dickens did for London. He romanticized it by giving it a mythology with a background perfectly in keeping.

Harte's heyday began with his acceptance of the editorship of the "Overland Monthly" in 1868. Although Anton Roman hesitated over Harte with the fear that Harte would make the magazine too literary, the two soon agreed on the point that literature also should be Californian.

As the frontier progressed and reached the Great Plains the West remained remote, colourful and exciting to people. To the average farmer or factory worker, the West became a magic word where adventure was a daily experience to the bold, romantic riders. Harte wrote highly colourful tales of gamblers and miners, schoolmarm and dancehall girls, by making use of the sectional peculiarities of the west. Though he had spent only a few years in California, he nearly always wrote about the mining camps, during his thirty years' stay in England. He knew not much directly about mining or miners because he had very fragmentary and superficial experience of mining. But in spite of it, he painted unforgettable, impressionistic pictures of the vanishing west of the Golden Era. In his stories a kind of fictional world of his own imagination came alive, whose citizens were simple, direct, amusing, brave, lovable and durable types. He brought to life such characters as Yuba Bill, the stage coach drivers; Colonel Starbottle, the gallant lawyer of the old school. Jack Hamlin and John Oakhurst, chivalrous gamblers, Miss Mary, the tender schoolmarm; Betsy Baker, the dependable and pretty postmistress a host of sentimental, rough and ready, dishonest but loyal miners, and unvirtuous but self sacrificing dance - hall women. All these characters

appear again and again in the pages of several of Harte's stories. In fact, Yuba Bill, the stagecoach driver, Jack Hamlin and John Oakhurst are present in almost each story, as the inevitable parts and factors of the frontier life. Thus while writing about mining and miners, he unknowingly or knowingly created the local colour school or human interest stories in American fiction. We can say that Harte's short stories can be read and considered as a mirror of the life in the gold rush days in California in the nineteenth century. They truly reflect and portray various aspects of life lived by the miners and immigrants who came to California to try their fortunes. Harte had tried his hand at various jobs like mining, drug supplying etc. He had worked in a mine at the Mother Lode and this experience of Harte as a miner can be detected in many of his stories. Though his work can not be considered as a whole truth and though critics think of his work as extravaganza, yet it is extravaganza which touches not California mines and men alone, but while reporting California in his stories, he deliberately manufactured a California that it would fill his readers with wonder.

Harte had been trained as an editor, he had tried at the type case; and had worked up through all the departments to the editor's Chair.¹ All these professions left inevitably their mark upon Harte as a writer. In those days, from California news paper stand point, a story had to be short and condensed to lower terms in order to be accepted by the readers. Harte himself thought of brevity as the soul of California will and literature. In the fifties and sixties the air was full of youth and energy unbounded, nothing slow or dull or long drawn-out appealed to that headlong generation. One of Harte's early ambitions was to become the founder of a characteristic western literature and in order to achieve the ambition, he studied his art

carefully by long and patient efforts. After seventeen years of continuous reading, writing and observation of the land, he found at last an art combination that captured the reading public of his day. His Condensed Novels and the whole series of his short stories may be taken as the genre that is most completely his own. In order to study his stories and the influence of the gold rush days upon them, it is essential to have a clearer view of what the California gold rush was really like.

Gold had been ~~found~~ in California a good many times before 1848, and at least as long before that as 1690. What really brought about the rush to California was the fact that the treasure hunt was open to all comers. So when a sawmill worker found a few yellow flakes in a stream of California in 1848, people realized that he had found gold and the news spread rapidly across the continent and across the seas. In one of the greatest mass movements of history, many thousands of people came to California from all over the world, to seek their fortunes in the rocks. The whole continent was settled within just one century, largely because of this gold rush. The saw mill worker's few yellow flakes came from a region called the Mother Lode where Harte himself worked as a miner when he came to California. As facts point out this was an area 120 miles long and a mile wide, a region rich in gold. But after ten days, there seemed to be no gold in the Mother Lode. Then these pioneers went back to the Rockies, where they had found yellow mountain streams and had heard stories of gold and diamonds. By 1860, hundreds of lonely, courageous men were found searching along the mountain sides for loose mineral specimens which came from rich deposits. Thus, all over the United States, many kinds of mineral deposits were discovered -- the Black Hills of South Dakota were rich in tin ores.

Butte, Montana was exploited for its greater wealth in silver, copper and lead. But it was not enough to find the ores. The miners had to dig the mines and get the minerals processed. So even if mining has become less dangerous and risky now a days, it was a very difficult and hard task. Some mines were high on the mountain sides and the miners had to carry down the ore by different trails. Sometimes a rich deposit seemed to be difficult to dig out, because the cost of transporting would be greater than the value of the metal itself. The miners always searched for different deposits of these metals and so the formerly rich, wild cities whose mines produced unbelievable amounts of wealth, were suddenly exhausted. People believed in rumours and started at once for other areas. So for no further reasons to exist, the towns were left to die. One such town in Rhyolite near Death Valley. This town was born, became rich, and died -- all during a period of four years. In 1859 Virginia City, Nevada, was a busy town where 10,000 men hunted for treasures in rocks. For 16 years, the mountains near Virginia City yielded enormous fortunes in gold and silver. But then, almost overnight the story ended. The settlement died, like other famous towns such as Tombstone, Goldfield, Cripple Creek, and Central city. The miners and their families moved away, leaving the empty buildings to remind the later travellers that people had once lived and worked in the town. In Nevada alone there are as many as 400 ghost towns which bear witness to a vanished prosperity.

Sierra Nevada massif is a huge tilted block, four hundred miles long and fifty miles wide. The structure is complex, with folded sediments, igneous intrusions and local faulting. Because it is so high and unbroken, the range acts as a most effective barrier to climatic influences and communications. Rain-bearing, winds from the Pacific shed most of their moisture as rain or snow on the west facing slopes. Many rivers rise here,

fed by the rain and melting snow, and they descend rapidly to the Central Valley. The higher passes are blocked by snow for eight to ten months of the year. The western slope of the highlands shows a striking relationship between climate and natural vegetation. At the foot of the range, due to the arid conditions, of the land is covered with grass for only a few weeks each year. But, with increasing altitude and precipitation, there are forests of pine, fir, cedar, and sequoia. The gravels of rivers in the Klamath Mountains and the Northern Sierra Nevada are dredged for gold which has been washed down over millions of years from Mother Lode. The foothills still remain a major source of the metal and there has been a small production of mercury and platinum.

In the early gold rush days, for some years there was no law. Often, when greedy competitors were too close to each other and particularly when they had come from different nations, the complications got beyond mere liveliness. There was claim jumping at gun-point, beating, robbery and murder. The feud between York and Scott in "The Illiad of Sandy Bar" and the known gambler and thief, Tennessee in "Tennessee's Partner" are the best examples of these social conditions. When these stories are read carefully keeping the contemporary atmosphere and social conditions in mind, they can be held as the accurate accounts of the California gold rush days. Majority of groups of miners, usually American, tried to set up their own local laws and enforce them, but often the workings of their "Courts" were no fairer than the activities they punished. The only law that existed was the lynch-law. Tennessee a known gambler and a suspected thief, who works in a mining claim at Sandy Bar, is captured after he empties his revolver recklessly at the crowd before the Arcade saloon. He is captured by a small man, on a gray horse, who was equally fearless, self-possessed and independent as Tennessee. The captive, then, is taken before the juries and the "court". Harte writes "The law of Sandy Bar was implacable but not vengeful".



According to the lynch law, then existing, Tennessee is hanged to death at the top of Marey's Hill. The importance of partnership in the heydays of the gold - rush can be even more directly illustrated through this story because Harte took his idea for "Tennessee's Partner" as he did take for his other stories, from actual newspaper reports. There was, however, one very important difference between the actual trial in the story. The real "judge" and "jury" were so moved by the partner's clumsy offer that they let the real "Tennessee" off, despite the fact that he had a good many more counts and some worse ones, against him the Tennessee in the story. It does seem from the end of the story how sacred the bond of partnership was, and how generally it was recognized as such, for certainly the "court" rendered its verdict for the partner's sake. And most importantly close friendship and partnership produced a depth of feeling and took of a variety of meanings almost inconceivable to people who have never lived such a life. It meant help in trouble, care in sickness, companionship in solitude, and someone to trust where not much could be trusted. And this is the same secret behind the Partner's behaviour in "Tennessee's Partner" he remains a devoted friend even when Tennessee returns after his elopement with the wife of his Partner. In fact when Tennessee returns, his partner should have reacted revengefully, but the partner receives his friend heartily and accompanies him wherever he goes. Often such partnerships went on through good luck or bad, for years until the friendship became so strong and so personal that, as in the case of "Tennessee's Partners" it no longer needed reasons at all, but was its own law and reason. Partnership was universally looked upon, all through the mining country, as the sacred of all relationships. The story "The Iliad of Sandy Bar" is another example of this kind of friendship. Here however, the case is different, because Scott and Yark who were once very close



friends have quarreled and try tokill one another. But the story ends with their reunion -- within a moment the fend comes to an end and both of them forgive one another. York, who hated Scoft and once thought of killing him in a duel, becomes very sentimental and emotional at their last meeting. And Sandy Bar, where both of them lived, is struck with astonishment upon the reunion of these two friends.

Most of the men who came to the West were no worse, at least when they first came, than the average of men anywhere. Excepting the frontiersmen most of them had lived perfectly civilized lives before they came to the west in search of gold. In fact, very few of them, at heart, liked the gold-rush life. They had to play tough with each other, and the harder the life was, the more they had to take it witha joke. But secretly, in the heart, they were often lonely, homesick and frightened. They hadday dreams about the life they had left behind them, the life they longed to go back to. Thousands of them did go back, after just a few weeks or months, some because they had been luckly and made their pile, but most of them went being unfearably homesick, being very feeble to stand the gold rush life any longer. Many people still, were too proud to return empty - handed and so they remained there. But still many others, who had run away from crimes and did not dare go back, felt bitter about their past and so that they chose not to return. Among such men, who had many memories of a better life in that chancy, dangerous, comfortless, womanless, childless world, personal relationships took on veryspecial and important meanings. Good women, bearing with them all sorts of reminders of mothers, sisters, and sweethearts and of more decent, mannerly, homelike life, became objects of worship. They were not only beautiful to the eyes of such men, but they wanted at once

to protect and help them, or even to court them and marry them. There are many examples of such women characters in Harte's stories, who were worshipped and protected in all conditions by the male characters. Some of these women characters portrayed by Harte are : Miss Mullins in "An Ingenue of the Sierras" "Miggles" in "Miggles"; Mrs. Rivers in "The Convalescence of Jack Hamlin"; the young school teacher Mary in "The Idyl of Red Gulch"; and Mrs. Baker in "The Postmistress of Laurel Run".

Mrs. Baker's husband dies in an accident in a tunnel at Burnt Ridge. After his death, the people of Laurel Run take as much care of Mrs. Baker as possible for them. They feel very grateful towards her as John is killed in the efforts to save them. When she is appointed as postmistress at Laurel Run, they try to help her in their own ways. Every man in Laurel Run participates in the building of the pretty yet substantial edifice -- the only public building at Laurel Run -- which is half a mile away from the settlement "The Sanctity of her cabin was however, always kept as inviolable as if it had been his tomb"³. Moreover in order to assure the government authorities of the necessity for a post-office at Laurel Run and thereby to secure a permanent job for the postmistress they buy the stamps at fancy prices, wildly recklessly as well as unprofitably and on all occasions. They overpay outgoing letters and use stamps for decorative. Thus the sell of the stamps is artificially raised, as a result of it, the Department decides to appoint a post master at Laurel Run and to pay a permanent salary to the post mistress. Thus she is helped by them and protected even though she is alone in her life. They try their best to make her feel happy and fell at home taking care of her in absence of her husband. In almost each story, with some exceptions, women are treated in this manner, they are cared for given much attention

and paid attention to by all settlers.

Miss Mary, the young school teacher in "The Idyl of Red Gulch" is respected by each and every person in the settlement. Even "Profane Bill", the driver of Slumgullion Stage, revered her and always offers her the box seat and half of the coach for herself. Jack Hamlin, the gambler, who once silently had ridden with her in the same coach, gets angry and injures confederate by throwing a decanter at his head when he mentions Mary's name on a barroom. Thus the rough men like Bill and criminals like Jack Hamlin revered Mary and tried to protect her at all times.

Miss Mullins in "An Ingenue of the Sierras" is an innocent young girl. She first fools all the men in coach by telling them a false name of her father. But when she is made tell the truth, all of them, along with Bill and Judge Thompson become ready to help her to marry her lover. The company performs a marriage ceremony under the performance of the judge as a magistrate.

Women and children were revered by all the people in every settlement. It had a proof in the contemporary news papers and memoirs also. One forty niner describes in his personal journal, the reception of the first woman in the little creek camp. Despite the shop keeper's efforts to keep her presence secret, the news of her being in the camp spread rapidly among the rough, bearded, booted, pistol-packing miners. All of them at once gathered in front of the shopkeeper's and cabin and demanded to have a look at her. The shopkeeper, very frightened at first, calls his wife outside of the cabin. The moment she came out before them, all of them took off their hats, stood looking at her with tears in their eyes. They wanted to

see her only for the single reason that they had not seen a woman for a long period of time. Later the miners vokenterily helped the shopkeeper in setting up his cabin and shop. Whenever they went to the shop, they came all washed, trimmed and brushed, in clean clothes, taking their hats off as they entered the door.

As Harte tramped through the gold rush country, he witnessed such incidents and we find their refleselon in his stories. Perhaps having this vision at the back of his mind, Harte makes his colonel Starbottle help and revere the plaintiff or Jack Hamlin and Bill revere and help Miss Mullins or Mr. Oakhurst respects Cherokee Sal even though she is a sinner.

Another journal tells the story of a two year old boy (the son of a shopkeeper -- they were the men most likely to have their families in those camps), whom the miners liked to have a look at. When the boy was nolonger scared of them, they- played with him, gave him various presents like flowers. They touched him for luck and whenever they set out for a new digging. This account is similar with the story of Cherolee Sals Luck in "The Luck of Roaring Camp" Harte describes, how the Luck was brought up by the rough miners after his mother's death. They spent a bag of gold dust to buy the best lace, the filigree-work and frills for the Luck. They also set apart a day for christening him. One cabin was assigned to Tommy Luck, it was kept clean, boarded, clothed and papered. The abusive words like "Damn the Luck" were abandoned and every miner appeared in a clean shirt and shining face. They gave yelling and shouting and began conversing in whispers. In the long summer days, they carried the Luck to their diggings. They gives such presents to him as a chister of honeysuckles azaleas, a flake

of glittering mica, or a bright pebble. The camp is changed into a middle-class and Luck lived very happily. Although the story ends with a tragic note, the account of the miner's caressing for the Luck cannot be denied its accuracy.

In the comforters, temporary, reckless, wilderness world, where seeking gold was the chief occupation and gambling and betting were the chief amusements, chance or luck became the deepest and the most constant concern. To have luck was everything and "Lucky" was the nickname to be envied. On the other hand, if one's luck ran out beyond recovery, one accepted that fate too. There only thing that mattered was to make "a good end", even to finish with a joke, if possible as do Oakhurst and Tennessee. When John Oakhurst, a gambler, stepped into the main street of Poker Flat, he was consciovs of the change in its moral atmosphere. The men of the settlement were after somebody for the reason that Poker-Flat had lately lost several thousand dollars, two valuable horses and a prominent citizens. To avoid further loss, Poker Flat appointed a secret committee that was determined to rid the town of all improper persons. And when Mr. John Oakhurst came to Poker Flat from Roaring Camp, he heard the committee's decision and received the sentence with "Philosophic Calmness". He was too much of a gambler not to accept his fate. Not only he accepted his banishment but he also behaved very coolly during his stay in the outskirts of Poker Flat with the two women and Uncle Billy. He received the last but cruel blow of fate very calmly and "with a derringer by his side and a bullet in his heart he laid under a pine tree, who was at once the strongest and yet the weakest of the outcasts of Poker Flat."⁴

Tennessee, in "Tennessee's Partner" received his death sentence very calmly and codly. The law of sandy Bar was implacable but not vengeful and the trial was conducted fairly. But when the judge and the jury gave him every chance to defend himself "I don't take any hand in this yer game" was Tennessee's invariable but good-humoured reply to all questions.

Furthermore, in the wilderness of the Sierra Nevadas, changes of weather were far from being the least important gestures of Luck or Fate. The mining depended upon them entirely. There was scarcity of water and the miner couldnot wash his gold or himself either. Sometimes there was too much water -- and the seasonal rains of California was usually torrential -- because many rivers rose in these mountain ranges, fed by the rain, and metting snow, and they descended rapidly to the Central Valley. The miners could not hunt for the gold but they might even find, as the miners of Roaring Camp did, that once the floods and passed the rich deposits they had been working had vanished. Even staying alive depended on the weather. When the rains were heavy the big supply wagons bogged down in the valleys and the river-crossings became impassable for stage coaches and even for men on horseback. The same kind of circumstances are faced by Dick, while reading the story "How Santa Claus Came to simpson's Bar" Dick, contrives to rescue a deprived boy from having a solitary and disillusioning Christmas. He sets out in order to go to the town, tuttleville, at about twelve in the night before the Christmas He faces many dangers on his way. The roads from Rattlesnake Creek to Red Mountain was full of ditches and hollows.He had to pass a flooded

water current before he reaches Rattlesnake Creek. In addition to it there was a heavy snow storm. And only after a few moments of kicking, wading and swimming, Dick could step on the opposite bank.

Moreover while returning, after he took the toys and presents, his right arm is shattered by a highway robber's bullet. The difficulties arised one after another. Dick had to swim a few hourse through the stream which was doubled in its volume. Dick threw away his coat, pistol, boots and saddle, and binding his percious pack of toys, the dashed into the yellow water. He as received by some men on the opposite bank. Soon after he gives the toys to the old Man, Dick dies of excessive bleeding and exhaustion.

Not only storms made it difficult to be alive for the miners; but the floods also often washed the camps, or parts of them, away along with the gold-bearing sad-bars too, because most of the camps were built as close to the workings as could be, right along the streams and even in deep ravines cut by the streams. As a result of this water came down many feet deep and very swiftly "The Luck of Roaring Camp" reflects in it this natural calamity. Thewhole camp is washed away by the flood. Every mountain creek, in that winter of 1851, Heart Writes, became a river and every river a lake. Each gulch and gorge was transformed into a tumultores water course that descended the hillsides tearing down giant trees and scattering its drifts along the plain.

In the west of Sierra Nevada Mountains, there are places in which 100 inches of rain falls each year. The story "High-Water Mark" also is akind of an account of such heavy floods. The story, in fact, is a piece of memoir, of a particular incident about Dedlow Marsh. It is a story of

a woman who lived, midway of the great slough of dedlow Marsh and a good sized river with her husband and husband. The house she lived in was a small frame cabin raised from the Marsh a few feet byshort piles. It was three miles away from the settlements repon the river. Her husband was a logger. In spring when he left on the eff of the high tide, it began to storm and blow harder. The trees fell in the river and the house began to rock like her baby's craddle. She tried to awake throughout the night. But she slept for sometime and then she awoke to find herself with the baby, surrounded all over by the water. She came out of her cabin and leaped on the trunk of a big tree that had fallen previously. There was danger, all the time, of her drifting away from the cabin and getting crushed in the floating drift. Thetree floated away and she found herself, in the morning drifting with the tide. Some Indians, who were gathering berries on the marsh, saw the skirt of her gown fluttering on the tree and they saved her with the baby. Saved in this way from drouning, her husband built a new house with the tree that saved her, and that too, above the high-water mark and called it after her "Mary's Ark !"

Higher up in the Sierras, in such camps as Poker Flat, these heavy seasonal rainsbecame equally heavy snow storms. In fact, the Northern Sierra region is by official. Weather - bureau measurement, the heaviest snonfall region in the world. It was not unusual, and it is not unusual even now, to have three to four feet snowfall there in a day, or to have a storm continue unbroken four or five days at a time. Usually, there were high winds with the storms, too, winds which drifted the snow to a depth of fifty feet and more in the hallows and ravines. Hundreds of people who came to California by the Overland route, especially who took the

northernmost or Lessen trail and reached the sierras a little late in October or November, perished in such storms. Thousands of them lost their wagons and animals and all their belongings. Little wonder, then, that weather became a kind of Head God, a Fate of Fates, to the forty - niners and the miner who came later "The Outcasts of Poker Flat", which describes the snow-storm and the condition of the outcasts trapped in the storm, is a fine example of Harte's skill of describing the picturesqueness of California life in the gold-rush days. John Oakhurst, Uncle Billy, Mother Shipton and the Dauchess are told the sentence of banishment from Poker Flat and they set out of it. They camp "in a wooded amphitheatre, surrounded on three-sides by the principitons cliffs of naked granite, sloped gently toward the crest of another precipice that overlooked the valley"⁵. The party was not provided with the sufficient provisions. Later on they are joined by the Innocent and Piney Woods. All of them thus live there for a week with small food and then the Snowstorm began. Day by day a snowy circle drew closer around them. And a time came when the place looked like a prison, surrounded by drifted walls of dazzlingly white snow, which were twenty feet above their heads. It was very difficult to replenish the fires as the trees were half - hidden in the drifts. The storm continued thus for a week and in the last night it reached its greatest fury. It invalded the hut in which Piney and the Duchess slept. Both the women died locked in each other's arms. And Oakhurst shot himself with his derringer. So heavy the snow storm it was, that they did not have a single chance to save themselves. Harte depicts eachand every minute change in the Nature.

Thousands of early Californian newspapers, diaries, memories, official records and personal letters still offer the evidence to prove that it was really like that. And as we have seen, it is this colourful, complex to California life that Bret Harte portrays so successfully in his stories.