

CHAPTER III

The World of the Stories.

I

THE GOLD-RUSH WORLD

The achievement of a generation of local colourists can be measured if we consider them in relation to the growth of realism. The same kind of criterion can be applied to the short stories of Harte. He contributed in a sufficient degree, to an emerging concept of fidelity in those days. One of the simplest kinds of fidelity is detailed localism of setting. Harte threw over his stories, a peculiar atmosphere of locality, which was startlingly new aspect for the readers of his days. He made little use of his setting. If we read his stories, we may find that there are only a few sentences, here and there, touching upon the landscape or surroundings, and yet we carry away from it the local colouring as a dominating impression. Harte always, introduces the landscape or setting as a background and not as it is unusual or unique. He points it in a splashing manner. Thus the tragedy of "The Outcasts of poker Flat" takes place with this background setting:

"The spot was singularly wild and impressive. A wooded amphitheatre on three sides by precipiteres diffs of naked granite, sloped gently toward the crest of another precipice that overlooked the valley"¹

"The lack of Roaring Camp" opens with this setting :

"The camp lay in a triangular valley, between two hills and a river. The only outlet was a steep trail over the summit of a hill that faced the cabin, now illuminated by therising moon"²

The scenery, in Harte, is always in accord with or in contrast with the tragedy or the comedy. Another example may be given from "Tennessee's Partner" Tennessee is being tried for what the camp considers a capital crime, and the elements are in sympathy.

"The little canon was stifling with heated resinous, odors, and the decaying driftwood on the bar sent forth faint sickening exhalations. The feverishness of the day, and its fierree passions, still filled the camp"³

But,

"Above all this, etched on the dark firmament, rose the Sierra, remote, and passionless, crowned with remoter passionless stars"⁴

Sometimes the background becomes a character in the plot and dominates the tale like a personality. The opening of the tale "High Water Mark" has this effect:

"But if Dedlow Marsh was cheerless at the slack of the low tide, you should have seen it when the tide was strong and full. When the damp air blow chilly over the cold, glittering expanse, and came to the faces of those who looked seaward like another tide: when a steel like glint marked the low hollows and the sinuous line of slough; when the great shell-incrested and trunks of fallen trees arose again; and went forth on their dreary, purposeless wanderings, drifting hither & thither but getting no farther toward any goal of the falling tide of the day's decline than the cursed Hebrew in the legend; when the glossy ducks swing silently, making neither ripple nor farrow on the shimmering surface; when the fog came in with the tide and shut out the blue above, even as the green below had been obliterated; when boatmen, lost in the fog, paddling about in the hopeless way, started at what seemed the frushing of mermen's fingers on the boats keel, or shrank from the frifts of grass spreading around like the floating hair of a corpse, and know by these signs that they were lost upon Dedlow Marsh, and must make a night of it, and a gloomy

one at that then you might know something of Dedlow Marsh at high tide."⁵

Another notable characteristic of Harte is his startling use of paradox. The world he presents is topsy-turly. The pathetic and the grotesque go hand in hand in his stories. It seems that Harte aimed to show how even in the desperate characters the different people like the fortune-hunters, gamblers, thieves, murderers, drunkards, and prostitutes, gathered together there. Thus, of the dwellers in Roaring camp Harte notes that

"The greatest scamp had a Raphael face with a profusion of blonde hair Oakhurst, the gambler, had the melancholy air and intellectual abstraction of a Hamlet; the coolest and most courageous man was scarcely five feet in height, with a soft voice and an embarrassed timid manner...The strongest man had but three fingers on his right hand; the best shot had but one eye."⁶

This became a mannerism with Harte. His heroes are the men whom the world usually brands as villains. "A passage in the Life of Mr. John Oakhurst" illustrates Harte's method perfectly. There are two types of characters. One type is represented by Mrs. Decker, a pathetic invalid and a saintly soul, on the one hand, and another type by John Oakhurst, a notorious gambler, on the other. The two elements meet and the result furnishes the motif of the story. Oakhurst is everywhere regarded as a villain of melodramatic dye. Once, to be near the devout Mrs. Decker, he attended the church, and his appearance was considered by all the church members as an impertinence.

But still Oakhurst proves to be the only man in the story and the only admirable character. Whenever he appears, he satisfies our ideals of

what a hero should be. He was a notable man in ten thousand. But it is not enough, for like his namesake in "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" despite the fact that he is a beast of prey living richly upon his winnings, he is a saint: he sacrifices himself in the end for the sake of a principal. And the woman, Mrs. Decker, whom her husband worshipped as a saint, proved to be as black inwardly as Oakhurst was black outwardly. She is a deliberate reviner of at least two men; she has been all the time false to her husband. When he wants to tell the tragedy concerning Oakhurst and Flamitton, she begs him not to annoy her, for she has a headache. And when he asks about a stain on her white dress; she answers back that while closing the window, she had cut her fingers.

Everywhere, in every story, it is the same. A moment of brightness in a life supposed by all to be unrelievably black ; a deed of sacrifice that atones for a life of wickedness - that is the typical motif of the Bret Harte short story.

Still another characteristic concerns his method of characterization. Harte peopled his stories with highly individualized types, with picturesque extremes in an abnormal social regime. His characters do not deserve one's full sympathy until they succeed in redeeming themselves. They are human and, as such, are subject to human failings. Harte was always humane in his treatment of character. It was just that he realized human virtues as well as human limitations. In the preface of "The Luck of Roaring Camp" he wrote :

"I might have painted my villains of the blackest dye... I might have made it impossible for them to have performed a virtuous or generous

action, and have thus avoided that moral confusion which is apt to rise in the contemplation of mixed motives and qualities"⁷

Even in this preface, Harte's use of irony is skillful. He was a shrewd judge of character with a talent for "the contemplation of mixed motives and qualities" His characters are not photographs or actual individuals. They are the composites made up by fusing the unique qualities of many men and women into a single personality. Yuba Bill is one of those who achieve the noblest and the most difficult of all the triumphs of a fictitious character. We feel that he has a great deal more in him than appears to be.

Harte put his talent in his sketches. He proved himself to be an admirable craftsman in blending virtue and vice; humour and pathos; the ridiculous and the sublime. He paid a lot more attention to the contrast between nature and man on the one hand, nature, for him was remote, serene, and passionless, and on the other, it could be violent, deadly and passionate. The moods of the nature are always in juxtaposition to the moods of his characters in Harte's stories. In "The Luck of Roaring Camp", for example, nature becomes still for a moment at the birth and the first cry of the baby. Later when everything is calm and settled, nature, in the form of a flood, overwhelms the mining camp and takes several lives including the baby's. The same thing occurs in "The Outcasts of Poker Flat". When the gambler, the thief, and the two prostitutes are driven out of the town everything is calm and quiet. But when these four begin to find some shelter and some measure of peace, a snowstorm overwhelms them along with their innocent companions.

II

Harte's vision of life goes far to explain the meteoric popularity of his stories, the local colour, the picturesque characters and the peculiar endings added to his brilliant success in story writing. But the heart of his success lay in his particular vision of life and his ability to convey that vision to his readers. Harte was essentially, an optimist and an uplifter. This does not mean that he believed in a shallow doctrine of social or moral reform. He believed rather in the potential goodness of man and in the possibility of redemption for every. He saw human life as a purgatory for the human soul, a test for men, as a trial in which the ultimate goal is salvation. In his vision of life, the salvation was to be achieved in this life, although paradoxically, it was often to be gained at the cost of death. Thus death was to be seen as the final consummation of the trial rather than an end of the trial. Again this final ending, too is seen as a selfless act of devotion on the part of Harte's heroes. Thus, for Harte, redemption was an act of selfless heroism of love, of devotion and of selfless sacrifice. Such an act lifted Harte's heroes above the petty world of grasping self interest and redeemed them from the sin of self-involvement. This spirit, this thought pervades Harte's most memorable stories.

This spirit raises Harte's best characters from local stereotypes and picturesque caricatures to people of real feelings and semi-heroic stature. He got his California and his Californians by unconscious absorption and put both of them into his tales alive. The people Harte wrote about were people seeking salvation from themselves, people who longed to wipe their past clean, and people who had come West to lose their identity, to create a new future. It is indicated by the fact that very few of his characters retained their

given names. These characters have had their identities and their pasts wiped clean with names like Cherokee Sal, Kentuck, Yuba Bill, Tennessee's Partner, and the Dutchess. The core of Harte's most successful stories which are collected in The Luck of Raring Camp and Other Sketches is the theme of redemption and salvation after having committed sins, and it is mainly on this theme that his success and national reputation rests.

In the title story of the above collection "The Luck of Raaring Camp" which first appeared in the Overland Monthly in 1968, a dissolute prostitute works out her salvation by giving birth to a baby and dying after the delivery. The miners in the camp work out their salvation by caring for the baby and giving it generous gifts with love in the absence of a mother. One miner in particular, Kentuck, works out his salvation by sacrificing his life in a futile attempt to save the baby. One year after the baby's birth, when the river rose, Roaring Camp is ENGULFED AND Kentuck is drowned with the Luck in his arms. What matters is that the baby brought out the generous qualities of the people involved and thereby redeemed them from their own pettiness. Truly, this story is a regeneration in which Harte makes most of the contrast between the rude exterior and the heart of gold as Harte himself said. The story illustrates the ultimate nobility of all men especially in times of crises. According to Harte the Luck makes the camp regenerate and become more civilized as the miners take on parental roles, tidy up the cabins and hold a christening. Moreover the wild California floovoures become a predominating characteristic in "The Luck of Roaring Camp" It fulfilled its purpose of promoting Californian things and matters.

In the second story of the collection, "The Outcasts of the Poker Flat" Harte employs the same theme of redemption and salvation. It can

also be read as the study of moral contrasts. It tells the story of the exile from Poker Flat, a California mining camp of 1850. A gambler, John Oakhurst, two prostitutes known as "the Duchess" and "Mother Shipton" and a drunken sluice-roffer "Uncle Billy". This group is later joined by the "Innocent". Tom Simpson and the young girl Piney. The party has insufficient provisions and has to face a heavy snow storm continuously for a week. Mother Shipton starves to save her rations for Piney Woods, Oakhurst gives the one chance of safety to Tom by killing himself and the Duchess pillows her head on Piney's breast as the two die together. Thus Oakhurst, the Duchess, and Mother Shipton are saved from themselves by virtue of their devotion to a pair of innocent youngsters. The story shows that, ultimately, there is good in even the worst people. It also describes the conversion of several characters from evil to good. When they are isolated and trapped in an immense mountain snowstorm.

In "Tennessee's Partner" Tennessee's partner, tough and veteran miner pines away when his friend departs from him forever. He can not stand the breaking of fond of love and friendship. The partner becomes ready to part with his a bag-full gold dust in order to rescue Tennessee. It is a story of the power of brotherly love.

"Brown of Calaveras" illustrates the nobility of duty over desire. The gambler, Jack Hamlin rides off into the rosy sunset after having denied to run away with Brown's beautiful wife. Jack achieves redemption through his act of rejecting to run his friends' marital life.

"How Santa Claus Came to Simpson's Bar" is a story with the theme of never give up" A rough miner of the settlement, Dick, contrives to make happy a deprived boy and rescue him from having a solitary and disillusioning

Christmas. This is the power of love which works in Dick's mind and brain that makes him risk his life only to fetch some toys. Dick, in a way, redeems himself through love. This is Harte's vision of life - his most wicked and cruel villain perform a virtuous action and achieve salvation.

One of Harte's best, although not most famous, stories is "The Right Eye of the Commader" It is atak about a naive frontier and an evil civilization. It shows how the continuous exeistence of evil denies the ultimate triumph of good. When Salvatierra mysteriously receives his glass - eye, he becomes an instrument of evil and a palor of evil and a palor of evil falls upon everything he comes into contact with. The story ends with the redvealation that Pegled who gave the glass eye, continues trade his wares in other areas.

Hartes stories take place in an atmosphere of mystery, isolation and loneliners. Although Harte was not a great artist, he was a skilled writer of popular fiction and he fashioned the local colour story out of tall tales and barroom ballads. His stories for the overland continued in the formula set by "The Luck" A gambler gave up his life in an attempt to save his companions from starvation, and a prostitute starved to death so that a young vergin might live. Another prostitute, Miggles; shamed her virtuous sisters by her faithful attendance on a helpless, paralyzed lover. A never - do -well tried to save his partner at the court of Judge Lynch by offering his "Stake" of gold dust and when failed, he gave his pal a decent burical and soon followed him to a world where partners are never separated. A prostitute in Red Gulch gave up her son so that he might receive an honourable education and a school teacher gave up the drunkard whom she had reformed so that she could educate the prostitute's son. Jack Hamlin, the gambler,

almost ran away with the wife of his friend, Brown of Calaveras, but his better instinct won out at the last moment and he rejected to elope with her.

The deaths of Kentuck, the Duchers and the partners brought tears to the eyes of many readers. But Harte's tales were not merely tear - jerkers, they succeeded in turning the gold-rush days alive in them. Roaring camp, Poker Flat, Sandy Bar, Wingdam, and Red Galch were the towres which were inhabited by a society grown in two decades after 1849. With his unforgettable characters like Colonel Starbottk, John Oak hurst, Jack Hamlin, Yark and Scott Harte created the land of a million Westerns, in his stories.