

The Outcasts of Poker Flat

Short Story by Bret Harte

NOTABLE QUOTE

"Luck is a mighty queer thing. All you know about it for certain is that it's bound to change."

FYI

Did you know that Bret Harte...

- was called "Dickens among the pines" for the vivid and recognizable characters he created?
- worked as a shotgun rider on a California stagecoach?
- worked as an abolitionist during the Civil War, often speaking out against the harsh treatment of minorities?

AuthorOnline

For more on Bret Harte, visit the Literature Center at ClassZone.com.



Bret Harte

1836–1902

Many of the familiar characters in Western stories and films—saloon keepers, fallen ladies, hard-bitten gamblers, mining prospectors, and dewy-eyed youngsters—can be found in the stories of Bret Harte. Harte's colorful writing helped shape the Western genre. It also inspired emigration to the developing region of the American west. Harte's writing made him—for a short while—one of America's most popular and highly paid literary figures.

A Man of Many Hats Born into an educated but financially struggling family, Bret Harte moved often during his childhood. Although the frequent moves and his poor health kept him from formal schooling, he read widely on his own and published his first writing at age 11. After his father died, Harte began working—first for a pharmacist, then a lawyer, and later as a tutor, a miner, and finally a journalist for a newspaper in California, where the

family had moved after his mother's remarriage. It was at this newspaper that Harte began to publish his stories and articles.

Good Times In the early 1860s, Harte moved to San Francisco and began to hone his literary craft. He wrote and edited stories, articles, humor, and literary criticism for two newspapers, the *Golden Era* and then the *Californian*. At the *Californian*, Harte helped along the career of a young, unknown Mark Twain. Becoming founding editor of the *Overland Monthly*, Harte soon wrote and published "The Luck of Roaring Camp" and "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," stories of outcasts with hearts of gold. These stories put him on the literary map. Suddenly, he was the talk of the town with his work much discussed, often imitated, and highly sought after. When the *Atlantic Monthly* in Boston offered Harte an annual contract with a big salary, he moved his family back east.

... **And Bad Times** Harte was careless about fulfilling his *Atlantic Monthly* contract, and it was not renewed. He tried lecturing, novel writing (*Gabriel Conroy*), and playwriting with Mark Twain (*Ah Sin*), but was left with a failing literary career. His marriage had also deteriorated. Finally, in 1877, friends helped Harte get an appointment as U.S. consul in Germany. By 1885 he had landed in London. Bret Harte, who played a key role in creating the popular portrait of the Old West, lived in London for the rest of his life, dying there in 1902.

The Outcasts of Poker Flat

Bret Harte

BACKGROUND Many of Bret Harte's stories highlighted both the lure of gold in California and the challenge of battling a harsh landscape of huge spaces and towering mountains. During the California Gold Rush, which began in 1848, thousands of people poured into the state, creating towns such as the one in this story. These towns, which developed from miners' camps, were often rough and featured the homemade style of justice that sets this story's events in motion.

As Mr. John Oakhurst, gambler, stepped into the main street of Poker Flat on the morning of the twenty-third 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 lull in the air, which, in a settlement unused to Sabbath influences, looked ominous. **A**

Mr. Oakhurst's calm, handsome face betrayed small concern in these indications. Whether he was conscious of any predisposing cause, was another question. "I reckon they're after somebody," he reflected; "likely it's me." He returned to his pocket the handkerchief with which he had been 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 permanently in regard of two

ANALYZE VISUALS

Describe the sense of time and place conveyed in this image. What details give you this sense?

A CLARIFY MEANING

Reread the first paragraph. What has happened thus far?

men who were then hanging from the boughs of a sycamore in the gulch, and temporarily in the banishment of certain other objectionable characters. I regret to say that some of these were ladies. It is but due to the sex, however, to state that their impropriety was professional, and it was only in such easily established standards of evil that Poker Flat ventured to sit in judgment. **B**

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 agin justice," said Jim Wheeler, "to let this yer young man from Roaring Camp¹—an entire stranger—carry away our money." But a crude sentiment of equity residing in the breasts of those who had been fortunate enough to win from Mr. Oakhurst overruled this narrower local prejudice. **C**

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

A body of armed men accompanied the deported wickedness of Poker Flat to the outskirts of the settlement. Besides Mr. Oakhurst, who was known to be a coolly 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,"² and "Uncle Billy," a suspected sluice-robber³ and confirmed drunkard. The cavalcade provoked no comments from the spectators, nor was any word uttered by the escort. Only, when the gulch which marked the uttermost limit of Poker Flat was reached, the leader spoke briefly and to the point. The exiles 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 Parthian volley of expletives⁴ 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 easy good-humor characteristic 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 draggled plumes with a feeble, faded coquetry; Mother Shipton eyed the possessor of "Five Spot" with malevolence, and Uncle Billy included the whole party in one sweeping **anathema**. **D**

B CLARIFY MEANING

Reread lines 13–22. What is the narrator's attitude toward the "virtuous reaction" of Poker Flat?

C REGIONALISM

What can you infer about life in Poker Flat?

expatriated

(ĕk-spā'trē-ā'tīd) *adj.* sent out of a country or area; banished **expatriate v.**

anathema (ə-nāth'ə-mə)

n. a strong denunciation; a curse

D CLARIFY MEANING

Reread lines 44–55. What is your impression of Oakhurst at this point in the story? Compare him with the other outcasts.

1. **Roaring Camp**: name applied to a wild California settlement that was established in the 1830s by Isaac Graham. Harte used the name in his story "The Luck of Roaring Camp."
2. **"Mother Shipton"**: originally, a 16th-century English woman who was accused of being a witch.
3. **sluice-robber** (slōōs'rōb-ər): a person who steals gold from sluices, or the water troughs used by miners to sift gold.
4. **Parthian volley of expletives**: crude or hostile remarks made when leaving. Soldiers from the ancient Asian land of Parthia typically shot at their enemies while pretending to retreat on horseback.

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 foot-hills into the dry, cold, bracing air of the Sierras.⁵

The trail was narrow and difficult. At noon the Duchess, rolling 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, surrounded 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 **prescience**. 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 snored. 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 begotten of his **pariah**-trade, his habits of life, his very vices, for the first time seriously oppressed him. He bestirred himself in dusting his black clothes, washing his hands and face, and other acts characteristic of his studiously neat habits, and for a moment forgot his annoyance. The thought of deserting his weaker and more pitiable companions never perhaps occurred to him. Yet he could not help feeling the want of that excitement which, singularly enough, was most conducive to that calm **equanimity** for which he was notorious. He looked at the gloomy walls that rose a thousand feet sheer above the circling pines around him; at the sky, ominously clouded; at the valley below, already deepening into shadow. And, doing so, suddenly he heard his own name called. **E**

A horseman slowly ascended the trail. In the fresh, open face of the new-comer 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.

prescience (prĕsh'ens) *n.* knowledge of events before they occur

maudlin (mōd'līn) *adj.* excessively sentimental

pariah (pə-r'īə) *n.* an outcast, someone or something looked down on by others

equanimity (ē'kwə-nīm'ī-tē) *n.* evenness of temper, especially under stress

E REGIONALISM
Reread lines 56–88. In what way is this passage typical of regionalist writing?

5. Sierras: the Sierra Nevada range of mountains, in eastern California.



There was a remembrance of this in his boyish and enthusiastic greeting of Mr. Oakhurst. He had started, he said, to go to Poker Flat to seek his fortune. "Alone?"
100 No, not exactly alone; in fact (a giggle), he had run away with Piney Woods. Didn't Mr. Oakhurst remember Piney? She that used to wait on the table at the Temperance House?⁶ They had been engaged a long time, but old Jake Woods had objected, and so they had run away, and were going to Poker Flat to be married, and here they were. And they were tired out, and how lucky it was they had found a place to camp and company. All this the Innocent delivered rapidly, while Piney, a stout, comely damsel of 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 retained,
110 however, his presence of mind sufficiently to kick Uncle Billy, who was about to say something, and Uncle Billy was sober enough to recognize in Mr. Oakhurst's kick a superior power that would not bear trifling. He then endeavored to dissuade Tom Simson from delaying further, but in vain. He even pointed out the fact that there was no provision, nor means of making a camp. But, unluckily, the Innocent met this objection by assuring the party that he was provided with an extra mule 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."

6. Temperance House: a place where customers could not drink.

Nothing but Mr. Oakhurst's admonishing foot saved Uncle Billy from bursting
120 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 slaps 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 **amicable** conversation. Piney
was actually talking in an impulsive, girlish fashion to the Duchess, who was
listening with an interest and animation she had not shown for many days. The
Innocent was holding forth, apparently with equal effect, to Mr. Oakhurst and
Mother Shipton, who was actually relaxing into amiability. "Is this yer a d—d
picnic?" said Uncle Billy, with inward scorn, as he surveyed the sylvan group, the
130 glancing firelight, and the tethered animals in the foreground. Suddenly an idea
mingled with the alcoholic fumes that disturbed his brain. It was apparently of
a **jocular** nature, for he felt impelled to slap his leg again and cram his fist into
his mouth. **F**

As the shadows crept slowly up the mountain, a slight breeze rocked the tops
of the pine trees, and moaned through their long and gloomy aisles. The ruined
cabin, patched and covered with pine boughs, was set apart for the ladies. As
the lovers parted, they unaffectedly exchanged a kiss, so honest and sincere
that it might have been heard above the swaying pines. The frail Duchess and
the malevolent Mother Shipton were probably too stunned to remark upon this
140 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. **G**

Mr. Oakhurst was a light sleeper. Toward morning he awoke benumbed and
cold. As he stirred the dying fire, the wind, which was now blowing strongly,
brought to his cheek that which caused the blood to leave it—snow!

He started to his feet with the intention of awakening the sleepers, for there
was no time to lose. But turning to where Uncle Billy had been lying, he found
him gone. A suspicion leaped to his brain and a curse to his lips. He ran to the
spot where the mules had been tethered; they were no longer there. The tracks
were already rapidly disappearing in the snow.

150 The momentary excitement brought Mr. Oakhurst back to the fire with his
usual calm. He did not waken the sleepers. The Innocent slumbered 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 mustaches and waited for the
dawn. It came slowly in a whirling mist of snowflakes, that dazzled and confused the
eye. What could be seen of the landscape appeared magically changed. He looked
over the valley, and summed up the present and future in two words—"snowed in!"

A careful inventory of the provisions, which, fortunately for the party, had
been stored within the hut, and so escaped the felonious fingers of Uncle Billy,
160 disclosed the fact that with care and prudence they might last ten days longer.

amicable (äm'ĭ-kə-bəl)
adj. characterized by
friendly goodwill

jocular (jök'yə-lər) *adj.*
humorous

F CLARIFY MEANING

Reread lines 117–133.
What effect has the
arrival of Tom and Piney
had on the outcasts?

G GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Reread lines 134–135.
Note that the verbs *crept*
and *moaned* are used to
personify the shadows
and the breeze.

“That is,” said Mr. Oakhurst, *sotto voce*⁷ to the Innocent, “if you’re willing to board us.” If you ain’t—and perhaps you’d better not—you can wait till Uncle Billy gets back with provisions.” For some occult reason, Mr. Oakhurst could not bring himself to disclose Uncle Billy’s rascality, and so offered the hypothesis that he had wandered from the camp and had accidentally stampeded the animals. He dropped a warning to the Duchess and Mother Shipton, who of course knew the facts of their associate’s defection. “They’ll find out the truth about us *all* when they find out anything,” he added, significantly, “and there’s no good frightening them now.”

170 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, extemporized a thatch for the roofless cabin, and the Duchess directed Piney in the rearrangement of the interior with a taste and tact that opened the blue eyes of that provincial maiden to their fullest extent. “I reckon now you’re used to fine things at Poker Flat,” said Piney. The Duchess turned away sharply to conceal something that reddened her cheeks through its professional tint, and Mother Shipton requested Piney not to “chatter.” But when Mr. Oakhurst returned
180 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.⁸ “And 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.” **H**

Whether Mr. Oakhurst had cached his cards with the whiskey as something debarred 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 the evening. Haply the time was beguiled by an accordion, produced somewhat ostentatiously by
190 Tom Simson from his pack. Notwithstanding some difficulties attending the manipulation of this instrument, Piney Woods managed to pluck several reluctant melodies from its keys, to an accompaniment by the Innocent on a pair of bone castanets. But the crowning festivity of the evening was reached in a rude camp-meeting hymn, which the lovers, joining hands, sang with great earnestness and vociferation. I fear that a certain defiant tone and Covenanter’s swing⁹ to its chorus, rather than any devotional quality, caused it speedily to infect the others, who at last joined the refrain:

“I’m proud to live in the service of the Lord,
And I’m bound to die in His army.”¹⁰ **I**

7. *sotto voce* (sōt’ō vō’chē) *Italian*: in a low voice.

8. **prudently cached** (kă-shād’): wisely hidden away.

9. **Covenanter’s swing**: the strong rhythms of songs sung by Scottish Presbyterians, who made covenants or agreements to oppose the Church of England.

10. “I’m proud . . . army”: lines from the early American spiritual “Service of the Lord.”

H CLARIFY MEANING
Reread lines 170–185.
What is Piney’s
impression of the
Duchess? of Poker Flat?

I REGIONALISM
Reread lines 186–199.
From the information
given, what can
you **infer** about the
characters and the
culture to which they
belong?

200 The pines rocked, the storm eddied and whirled above the miserable group, and the flames of their altar leaped heavenward, as if in token of the vow.

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 dividing the watch with Tom Simson, 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, he don’t get tired. The luck gives in first. Luck,” continued the gambler, reflectively, “is a mighty queer thing. All
210 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’re all right. For,” added the gambler, with cheerful irrelevance,

“I’m proud to live in the service of the Lord,
And I’m bound to die in His army.”

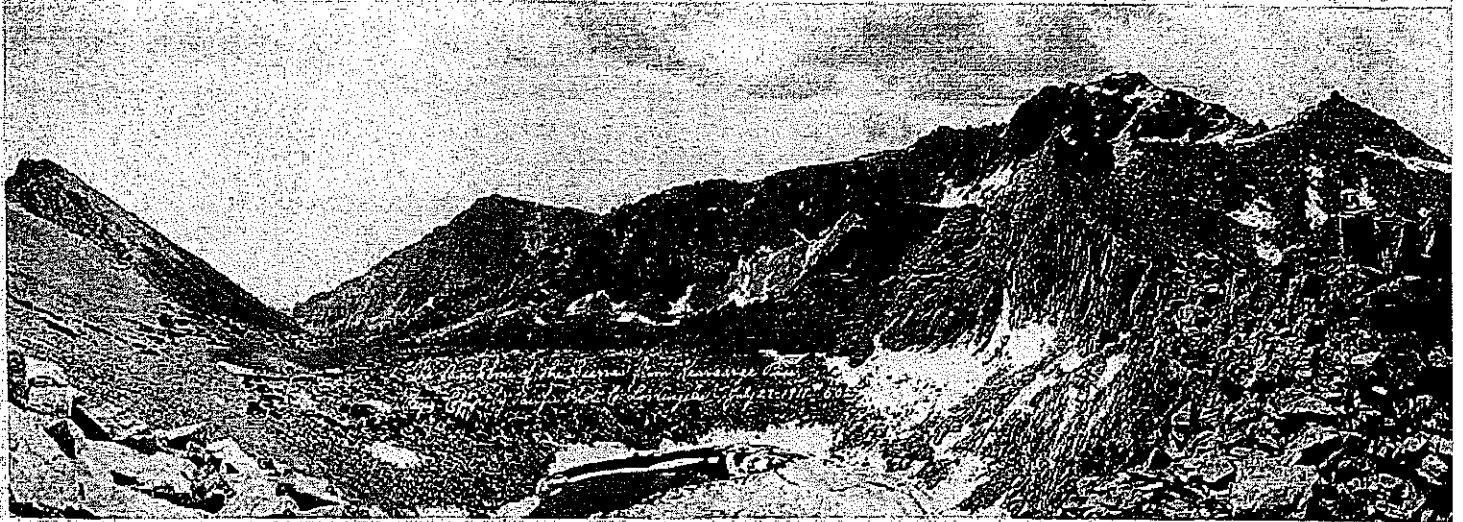
The third day came, and the sun, looking through the white-curtained valley, saw the outcasts divide their slowly decreasing store of provisions for the morning meal. It was one of the peculiarities of that mountain climate that its rays diffused
220 a kindly warmth over the wintry landscape, as if in regretful commiseration of the past. But it revealed drift on drift of snow piled high around the hut—a hopeless, uncharted, trackless sea of white lying below the rocky shores to which the castaways still clung. Through the marvelously clear air the smoke of the pastoral village of Poker Flat rose miles away. Mother Shipton saw it, and from a remote pinnacle of her rocky fastness, hurled in that direction a final malediction.¹¹ It was her last **vituperative** attempt, and perhaps for that reason was invested with a certain degree of sublimity. It did her good, she privately informed the Duchess. “Just you go out there and cuss, and see.” She then set herself to the task of amusing “the child,” as she and the Duchess were pleased to call Piney. Piney was
230 no chicken, but it was a soothing and original theory of the pair thus to account for the fact that she didn’t swear and wasn’t improper.

vituperative
(vī-tōō’pər-ə-tīv) *adj.*
abusively critical

When night crept up again through the gorges, the reedy notes of the accordion rose and fell in fitful 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 Piney—storytelling. Neither Mr. Oakhurst nor his female companions caring to relate their personal experiences, this plan would have failed, too, but for the Innocent. Some months before he had chanced upon a stray copy of Mr. Pope’s ingenious translation of the *Iliad*.¹² He now proposed

11. malediction: curse.

12. Mr. Pope’s . . . *Iliad*: British poet Alexander Pope published his translation of Homer’s *Iliad* in 1720.



to narrate the principal incidents of that poem—having thoroughly mastered the
240 argument and fairly forgotten the words—in the current vernacular of Sandy Bar.
And so for the rest of that night the Homeric demigods again walked the earth.
Trojan bully and wily Greek wrestled in the winds, and the great pines in the
canyon seemed to bow to the wrath of the son of Peleus.¹³ Mr. Oakhurst listened
with quiet satisfaction. Most especially was he interested in the fate of “Ash-heels,”
as the Innocent persisted in denominating the “swift-footed Achilles.”

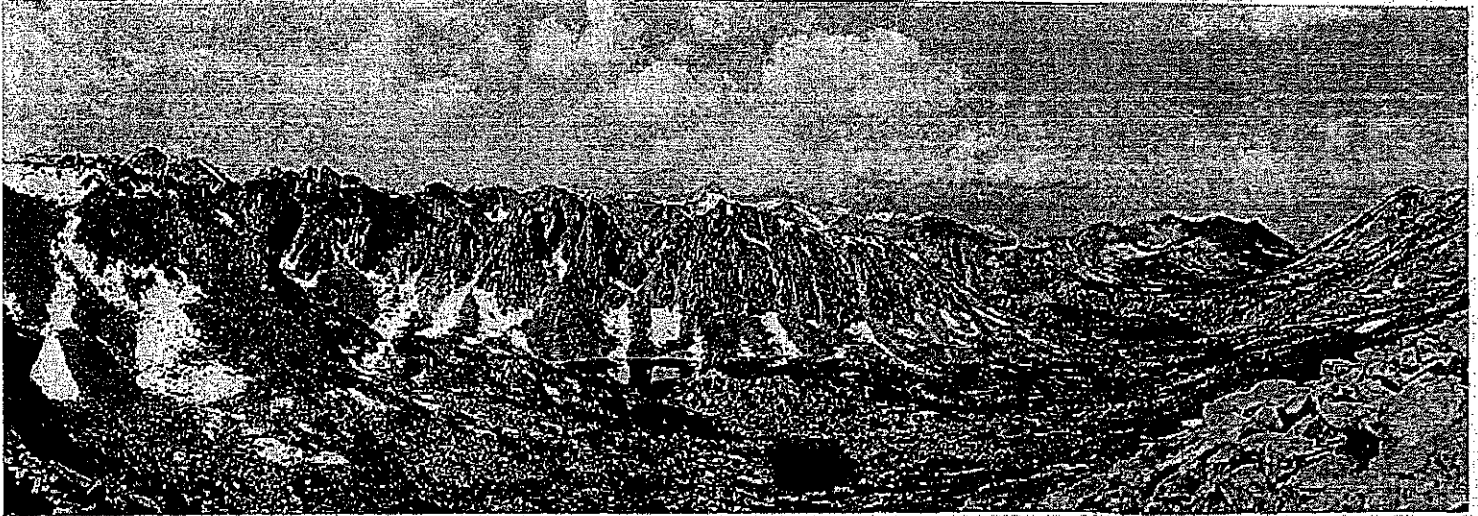
So with small food and much of Homer and the accordion, a week passed over
the heads of the outcasts. The sun again forsook them, and again from leaden skies
the snowflakes were sifted over the land. Day by day closer around them drew
the snowy circle, until at last they looked from their prison over drifted walls of
250 dazzling white, that towered twenty feet above their heads. It became more and ❶
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 coolly to the losing game before him. The Duchess, more cheerful
than she had been, assumed the care of Piney. Only Mother Shipton—once the
strongest of the party—seemed to sicken and fade. At midnight on the tenth day
she called Oakhurst to her side. “I'm going,” she said, in a voice of **querulous**
weakness, “but don't say anything about it. Don't waken the kids. Take the bundle
from under my head and open it.” Mr. Oakhurst did so. It contained Mother
260 Shipton's rations for the last week, untouched. “Give 'em to the child,” she said,
pointing to the sleeping Piney. “You've starved yourself,” said the gambler. “That's

❶ REGIONALISM

Reread lines 246–250.
What words used to
describe the characters'
physical surroundings
seem especially
descriptive of their
situation?

querulous (kwēr'ē-lēs)
adj. complaining

13. **son of Peleus** (pē'lē-əs): Achilles (ə-kīl'ēz), the Greek hero in the *Iliad*. Tom Simson mispronounces his name as “Ash-heels.”



what they call it," said the woman, querulously, as she lay down again, and, turning her face to the wall, passed quietly away. **4**

The accordion and the bones were put aside that day, and Homer was forgotten. When the body of Mother Shipton 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 pack saddle. "There's one chance in a hundred to save her yet," he said, pointing to Piney; "but it's there," he added, pointing toward Poker Flat. "If you can reach there in two days she's safe." "And
270 you?" asked Tom Simson. "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 him. "As far as the canyon," he replied. He turned suddenly, and kissed the Duchess, leaving her pallid face aflame, and her trembling limbs rigid with amazement.

Night came, but not Mr. Oakhurst. It brought the storm again and the whirling snow. Then the Duchess, feeding the fire, found that someone 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 Piney.

The women slept but little. In the morning, looking into each other's faces,
280 they read their fate. Neither spoke; but Piney, 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, rendering asunder¹⁴ the protecting pines, invaded the very hut.

Toward morning they found themselves unable to feed the fire, which gradually died away. As the embers slowly blackened, the Duchess crept closer to Piney, and broke the silence of many hours: "Piney, can you pray?" "No, dear," said Piney,

4 CLARIFY MEANING
What happens to
Mother Shipton?
Explain whether or not
you were surprised by
this development, and
why or why not.

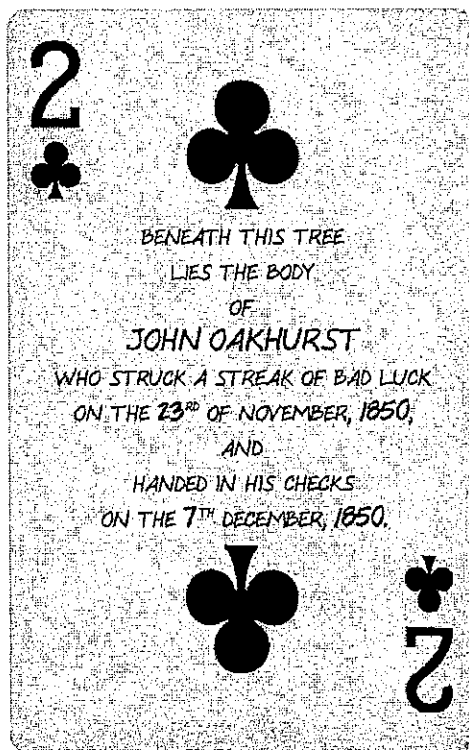
14. rending asunder: forcefully ripping apart.

simply. The Duchess, without knowing exactly why, felt relieved, and, putting her head upon Piney's shoulder, spoke no more. And so reclining, the younger and purer pillowing the head of her soiled sister upon her virgin breast, they fell asleep.

290 The wind lulled as if it feared to waken them. Feathery drifts of snow, shaken from the long pine boughs, flew like white-winged birds, and settled about them as they slept. The moon through the rifted clouds looked down upon what had been the camp. But all human stain, 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 waken when voices and footsteps broke the silence of the camp. And when pitying fingers brushed the snow from their wan 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. **U**

300 But at the head of the gulch, on one of the largest pine trees, they found the deuce of clubs¹⁵ pinned to the bark with a bowie-knife. It bore the following, written in pencil, in a firm hand:



And pulseless and cold, with a Derringer¹⁶ 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. **U**

U CLARIFY MEANING

Summarize what has happened to the Duchess and Piney. What point does the narrator seem to be making in lines 279–299?

M CLARIFY MEANING

Why has Oakhurst committed this final act?

15. **deuce of clubs**: the lowest card in a deck of playing cards—thus a loser's card.

16. **Derringer**: a short-barreled pistol invented by American gunsmith Henry Derringer.