Like many other Americans who wrote about the West, Bret Harte was originally an Easterner. Born in Albany, New York, he did not go west until 1854, following his father's death and his mother's remarriage. His reports of his early life were filled with fantasy and romance. He claimed early genius, to have been reading Shakespeare at the age of six. It is certain that he taught school for a time. He may also have prospected for gold for a short period, and there is evidence that he spent a "brief, delightful hour" in 1857 riding shotgun on a stagecoach for Wells Fargo Express. The job was as dangerous as legend and the movies have represented it: Harte's predecessor as guard was wounded by bandits; his successor was shot and killed.

Harte next became a professional writer, first for a newspaper in northern California. After he imprudently denounced a mob's massacre of sixty Indians, mostly women and children, his life was threatened, and he fled to San Francisco. There, in 1868, he became the first editor of The Overland Monthly, a magazine that was to be influential and prosperous until he left it. He had published poems and stories prior to his employment on The Overland Monthly, but it was while he was its editor that he wrote the works that made him famous: "The Luck of Roaring Camp" appeared in the second issue, soon followed by "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" and his most famous poem, "Plain Language from Truthful James," usually known as "The Heathen Chinee."

The enormous success of Harte's fiction brought him wide acclaim: Charles Dickens (Harte's favorite author) praised his writing and urged Harte to come to London to work for him; publishers from the East flooded Harte with offers. His career was at its peak: He was a famous writer and editor; he had been appointed Secretary of the U.S. Mint in San Francisco and Professor of Literature at the University of California.

In 1871 Harte accepted an unprecedented contract of ten thousand dollars from The Atlantic Monthly for twelve "poems and sketches," and he left California for Boston, now so famous that an English newspaper issued daily accounts of his journey from coast to coast. Although he was to live nearly thirty years more, the remainder of his life was a disappointment and anticlimax. After California, his writing became self-imitative and repetitious, as he himself admitted late in his life: "I grind out the old tunes on the old organ, and gather up the coppers." Without the immediate inspiration of the West to bring energy to his stories, his sentimentality became more obvious. In his later writings, a dominant theme—a moral redemption through sacrifice—was tiresomely repeated. His contract was not renewed by The Atlantic Monthly, and, unable to make a living from his writing, he went on a series of lecture tours, served in the U.S. diplomatic corps in Germany and Scotland, and spent the last years of his life in England. His last letters are full of his worries over money, self-pitying complaints about his health, and a grieving awareness of a wasted talent.

In fact, Harte's talent was always minor. Even the best of his stories are overly sentimental; the characters seem deadly similar from tale to poem. Cynical gamblers, gruff but ever-loyal partners, and whores "with hearts of gold" recur again and again. Nevertheless, Harte did vividly characterize a vital period in American history—the final settlement of the West. He was the first widely acclaimed, and one of the best, local color writers who emphasized American regionalism and paved the way for the coming of literary realism. Harte's writing was noteworthy, in an age of gentle evasions, for its frequent portrayal of crucial areas of human experience—sex, love, and death—directly and openly. But perhaps above all, Harte's works and his great, though short-lived, success stand as a notable expression of the world's long-lasting fascination with life on the American frontier.


TENNESSEE'S PARTNER

I do not think that we ever knew his real name. Our ignorance of it certainly never gave us any social inconvenience, for at Sandy Bar in 1854 most men were christened anew. Sometimes these appellatives were derived from some distinctiveness of dress, as in the case of "Dunagaree Jack," or from some peculiarity of habit, as shown in "Salserus Bill," so called from an undue proportion of that chemical1 in his daily bread; or from some unlucky slip, as exhibited in "The Iron Pirate," a mild, inoffensive man, who earned that baleful title by his unfortunate mispronunciation of the term "iron pyrites." Perhaps this may have been the beginning of a rude heraldry, but I am constrained to think that it was because a man's real name in that day rested solely upon his own unsupported statement. "Call yourself, Clifford, do you?" said Boston, addressing a timid new-comer with infinite scorn; "hell is full of such Cliffsords!" He then introduced the unfortunate man, whose name happened to be really Clifford, as "Jay-bird Charley,"—an unhallowed inspiration of the moment, that clung to him ever after.

But to return to Tennessee's Partner, whom we never knew by any other than this relative title; that he had ever existed as a separate and distinct individuality we only learned later. It seems that in 1855 he left Poker Flat to go to San Francisco, ostensibly to procure a wife. He never got any farther than Stockton. At that place he was attracted by a young person who waited upon the table at the hotel where he took his meals. One morning he said something to her which caused her to smile not unlively, to somewhat coquetishly break a plate of toast over his upturned, serious simple face, and to retreat to the kitchen. He followed her, and emerged a few moments later, covered with more toast and victory. That day a week they were married by a Justice of the Peace, and returned to Poker Flat. I am aware that something more might be made of this episode, but I prefer to tell it as it was current at Sandy Bar,—in the gulches and barrooms,—where all sentiment was modified by a strong sense of humor.

Of their married felicity but little is known, perhaps for the reason that Tennessee, then living with his partner, one day took occasion to say something to the bride on his own account, at which, it is said, she smiled not un-

1 Salserus, baking soda.
kindly and chastely retreated,—this time as far as Marysville, where Tennessee followed her, and where they went to housekeeping without the aid of a Justice of the Peace. Tennessee’s Partner took the loss of his wife simply and seriously, as was his fashion. But to everybody’s surprise, when Tennessee one day returned from Marysville, without his partner’s wife,—she having smiled and retreated with somebody else,—Tennessee’s Partner was the first man to shake his hand and greet him with affection. The boys who had gathered in the cañon to see the shooting were naturally indignant. Their indignation might have found vent in sarcasm but for a certain look in Tennessee’s Partner’s eye that indicated a lack of humorous appreciation. In fact he was a grave man, with a steady application to practical detail which was unpleasant in a difficulty.

Meanwhile a popular feeling against Tennessee had grown up on the Bar. He was known to be a gambler; he was suspected to be a thief. In these suspicions Tennessee’s Partner was equally compromised; his continued intimacy with Tennessee after the affair above quoted could only be accounted for on the hypothesis of a copartnership of crime. At last Tennessee’s guilt became flagrant. One day he overtook a stranger on his way to Red Dog. The stranger afterward related that Tennessee beguiled the time with interesting anecdotes and reminiscence, but illogically concluded the interview in the following words: “And now, young man, I’ll trouble you for your knife, your pistols, and your money. You see your weepings might get you into trouble at Red Dog, and your money’s a temptation to the evil disposed. I think you said your address was San Francisco. I shall endeavor to call.” It may be stated here that Tennessee had a fine flow of humor, which no business preoccupation could wholly subdue.

This exploit was his last. Red Dog and Sandy Bar made common cause against the highwayman. Tennessee was hunted in very much the same fashion as his prototype, the grizzly. As the toils closed around him, he made a desperate dash through the Bar, emptying his revolver at the crowd before the Arcade Saloon, and so on up Grizzly Cañon; but at its farther extremity he was stopped by a small man on a gray horse. The men looked at each other a moment in silence. Both were fearless, both self possessed and independent; and both types of a civilization that in the seventeenth century would have been called heroic, but in the nineteenth, simply “reckless.” “What have you got there?—I call,” said Tennessee, quietly. “Two bowlers and an ace,” said the stranger, as quietly, showing two revolvers and a bowie-knife. “That takes me,” returned Tennessee; and with this gamblers’ epigram, he threw away his useless pistol, and rode back with his captor.

It was a warm night. The cool breeze which usually sprang up with the going down of the sun behind the chaparral-crested mountain was that evening withheld from Sandy Bar. The little cañon was stifling with heated resinous odors, and the decaying drift-wood on the Bar sent forth faint, sickening exhilarations. The feverishness of day, and its fierce passions, still filled the camp. Lights moved restlessly along the bank of the river, striking no answering reflection from its tawny current. Against the blackness of the pines the win-

dows of the old loft above the express-office stood out staringly bright; and through their curtainless panes the loungers below could see the forms of those who were even then deciding the fate of Tennessee. And above all this, etched on the dark firmament, rose the Sierra, remote and passionless, crowned with the remoter passionless stars.

The trial of Tennessee was conducted as fairly as was consistent with a judge and jury who felt themselves to some extent obliged to justify, in their verdict, the previous irregularities of arrest and indictment. The law of Sandy Bar was implacable, but not vengeful. The excitement and personal feeling of the chase were over; with Tennessee safe in their hands they were ready to listen patiently to any defence, which they were already satisfied was insufficient. There being no doubt in their own minds, they were willing to give the prisoner the benefit of any that might exist. Secure in the hypothesis that he ought to be hanged, on general principles, they indulged him with more latitude or defence than his reckless hardihood seemed to ask. The Judge appeared to be more anxious than the prisoner, who, otherwise, unconcerned, evidently took a grim pleasure in the responsibility he had created. “I don’t take any hand in this yer game,” had been his invariable, but good-humored reply to all questions. The Judge—who was also his captor—for a moment vaguely regretted that he had not shot him “on sight,” that morning, but presently dismissed this human weakness as unworthy of the judicial mind. Nevertheless, when there was a tap at the door, and it was said that Tennessee’s Partner was there on behalf of the prisoner, he was admitted at once without question. Perhaps the younger member of the jury, to whom the proceedings were becoming irksomely thoughtful, hailed him as a relief.

For he was not, certainly, an imposing figure. Short and stout, with a square face, sunburned into a preternatural redness, clad in a loose duck “jumper,” and trousers streaked and splashed with red soil, his aspect under any circumstances would have been quaint, and was now even ridiculous. As he stooped to deposit at his feet a heavy carpet-bag he was carrying, it became obvious, from partially developed legends and inscriptions, that the material with which his trousers had been patched had originally intended for a less ambitious covering. Yet he advanced with great gravity, and after having shaken the hand of each person in the room with laborious cordiality, he wiped his serious, perplexed face on a red bandanna handkerchief, a shade lighter than his complexion, laid his powerful hand upon the table to steady himself, and thus addressed the Judge:

“I was passin’ by,” he began, by way of apology, “and I thought I’d just step in and see how things was gittin’ on with Tennessee thar,—my pardner. It’s a hot night. I disremember any sich weather before on the Bar.”

He paused a moment, but nobody volunteering any other meteorological recollection, he again had recourse to his pocket-handkerchief; and for some moments mopped his face diligently.

“Have you anything to say in behalf of the prisoner?” said the Judge, finally.

“Thet’s it,” said Tennessee’s Partner, in a tone of relief. “I come yar as Tennessee’s pardner,—knowing him nigh on four year, off and on, wet and dry, in luck and out o’ luck. His ways ain’t allers my ways, but thar ain’t any p’ints in that young man, thar ain’t any liveliness as he’s been up to, as I don’t know. And you sez to me, sez you,—confidential-like, and between man and

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3Snares, traps.
4High cards.
man,—sez you, 'Do you know anything in his behalf?' and I sez to you, sez I,—confidential-like, as between man and man,—'What should a man know of his pardner?'"

"Is this all you have to say?" asked the Judge, impatiently, feeling, perhaps, that a dangerous sympathy of humor was beginning to humanize the Court.

"Thet's so," continued Tennessee's Partner. "It ain't for me to say anything agin' him. And now, what's the case? Here's Tennessee wants money, wants it bad, and don't like to ask it of his old pardner. Well, what do Tennessee do? He lays for a stranger, and he fetches that stranger. And you lays for him, and you fetches him; and the honors is easy. I put it to you, bein' a far-minded man, and to you, gentlemen, all, as far-minded men, ef this is n't so."

"Prisoner," said the Judge, interrupting, "have you any questions to ask this man?"

"No! no!" continued Tennessee's Partner, hastily. "I play this yer hand alone. To come down to the bed-rock, it's just this: Tennessee, that has played it pretty rough and expensive-like on a stranger, and on this yer camp. And now, what's the fair thing? Some would say more; some would say less. Here's seventeen hundred dollars in course gold and a watch,—it's about all my pile,—and call it square!"

And before a hand could be raised to prevent him, he had emptied the contents of the carpet-bag upon the table.

For a moment his life was in jeopardy. One or two men sprang to their feet, several hands groped for hidden weapons, and a suggestion to "throw him from the window" was only overruled by a gesture from the Judge. Tennessee laughed. And apparently oblivious of the excitement, Tennessee's Partner improved the opportunity to mop his face again with his handkerchief.

When order was restored, and the man was made to understand, by the use of forcible figures and rhetoric, that Tennessee's offence could not be condoned by money, his face took a more serious and sanguinary hue, and those who were nearest to him noticed that his rough hand trembled slightly on the table. He hesitated a moment as he slowly returned the gold to the carpet-bag, as if he had not yet entirely caught the elevated sense of justice which swayed the tribunal, and was perplexed with the belief that he had not offered enough. Then he turned to the Judge, and saying, "This yer is a lone hand, played alone, and without my pardner," he bowed to the judge and was about to withdraw, when the Judge called him back. "If you have anything to say to Tennessee, you had better say it now." For the first time that evening the eyes of the prisoner and his stranger advocate met. Tennessee smiled, showed his white teeth, and, saying, "Euchred, old man!" held out his hand. Tennessee's Partner took it in his own, and saying, "I just dropped in as I was passin' to see how things was gettin' on," let the hand passively fall, and adding that "it was a warm night," again mopped his face with his handkerchief, and without another word withdrew.

The two men never again met each other alive. For the unparalleled insult of a bribe offered to Judge Lynch—who, whether bigoted, weak, or narrow, was at least incorruptible—firmly fixed in the mind of that mythical personage any wavering determination of Tennessee's fate; and at the break of day he was marched, closely guarded, to meet it at the top of Marley's Hill.

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4. I.e., honor cards are equally divided; thus, everything is equal.

5. From the card game euchre, the loser of which is "euchred."
sanity. Sandy Bar made a point of calling on him, and proffering various uncouth, but well-meant kindnesses. But from that day his rude health and great strength seemed visibly to decline; and when the rainy season fairly set in, and the tiny grass-blades were beginning to peep from the rocky mound above Tennessee’s grave, he took to his bed.

One night, when the pines beside the cabin were swaying in the storm, and trilling their slender fingers over the roof, and the roar and rush of the swollen river were heard below, Tennessee’s Partner lifted his head from the pillow, saying, “It is time to go for Tennessee; I must put ’Jinny’ in the cart;” and would have risen from his bed but for the restraint. Struggling, he still pursued his singular fancy: “There, now, steady, ’Jinny,’—steady, old girl. How dark it is! Look out for the rats,—and look out for him, too, old gal. Sometimes, you know, when he’s blind drunk, he drops down right in the trail. Keep on straight up to the pine on the top of the hill. Thar—I told you so—that he is,—coming this way, too,—all by himself, sober, and his face a-shining, Tennessee! Fardner!”

And so they met.

In his Autobiography, Mark Twain recalled that among the happiest moments of his youth were those at his uncle’s farm when he listened rapidly while Uncle Dan (later the model for Jim in Huckleberry Finn) told the “immortal tales . . . Uncle Remus Harris was to gather into his books and charm the world with.” The stories of Br’er Fox and Br’er Rabbit had their origins in the folk myths of Europe and Africa, but Harris made them memorable by presenting their humorous and sometimes bitter wisdom through the character and dialect of an old, uneducated former slave, Uncle Remus.

Written at a time when writers and readers alike were fascinated by local-color stories, Harris’s tales had much the same appeal as Twain’s frontier yarns, Bret Harte’s tales of the Sierra miners, and Kate Chopin’s portrayals of the Louisiana Creoles. And Harris’s tales were object lessons not only for those who, like Br’er Rabbit, paid for their heedlessness and pride, but also for all the down-trodden who used their wits to survive and to laugh at their oppressors. Like other regionalist stories, they captured the flavor of a way of life at a single point in time, but like the best of local-color fiction, they had a peculiarly human appeal that kept them alive long after the historical and regional peculiarities they described had disappeared.

Harris took most of his stories from blacks he had known while working as a youth on a Georgia plantation. Later he became a journalist in Macon, New Orleans, and Savannah before serving twenty-four years on the staff of the Atlanta Constitution, where he published many of the humorous stories of plantation blacks that made him famous.

His first volume of collected tales, Uncle Remus, His Songs and Sayings, appeared in 1880. Numerous other collections followed during the next thirty years, among them Nights with Uncle Remus (1883) and Free Joe and Other Geor-