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7 BEST SHORT STORIES WESTERN

EDITED BY AUGUST NEMO

TACET BOOKS

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Western

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August Nemo

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Introduction

WESTERN, A GENRE OF novels and short stories, motion pictures, and television and radio shows that are set in the American West, usually in the period from the 1850s to the end of the 19th century. Though basically an American creation, the western had its counterparts in the gaucho literature of Argentina and in tales of the settlement of the Australian outback. The genre reached its greatest popularity in the early and middle decades of the 20th century and declined somewhat thereafter.

The western has as its setting the immense plains, rugged tablelands, and mountain ranges of the portion of the United States lying west of the Mississippi River, in particular the Great Plains and the Southwest. This area was not truly opened to white settlement until after the American Civil War (1861-65), at which time the Plains Indians were gradually subdued and deprived of most of their lands by white settlers and by the U.S. cavalry. The conflict between white pioneers and Indians forms one of the basic themes of the western. Another sprang out of the class of men known as cowboys, who were hired by ranchers to drive cattle across hundreds of miles of Western pasturelands to railheads where the animals could be shipped eastward to market. The cattle and mining industries spurred the growth of towns, and the gradual imposition of law and order that such settled communities needed was accomplished by another class of men who became staple figures in the western, the town sheriff and the U.S. marshal. Actual historical persons in the American West have figured prominently in latter-day re-creations of the era. Wild Bill Hickok, Wyatt Earp, and other lawmen

have frequently been portrayed, as have such outlaws as Billy the Kid and Jesse James.

The western has always provided a rich mine for stories of adventure, and indeed a huge number of purely commercial works have capitalized on the basic appeal of gunslinging frontier adventurers, desperadoes, and lawmen. But the western has also furnished the material for a higher form of artistic vehicle, particularly in motion pictures. This was perhaps because the historical western setting lacked the subtly confining web of social conventions and mundane safeties that typify more settled societies. The West's tenuous hold on the rule of law and its fluid social fabric necessitated the settling of individual and group conflicts by the use of violence and the exercise of physical courage, and the moral dramas and dilemmas arising within this elemental, even primeval, framework lent themselves remarkably well to motion-picture treatment.

In literature the western story had its beginnings in the first adventure narratives that accompanied the opening of the West to white settlement shortly before the Civil War. Accounts of the Western plainsmen, scouts, buffalo hunters, and trappers were highly popular in the East. Perhaps the earliest and finest work in this genre was James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie* (1827), though the high artistic level of this novel was perhaps atypical in regard to what followed. An early writer to capitalize on the popularity of western adventure narratives was E.Z.C. Judson, whose pseudonym was Ned Buntline; known as "the father of the dime novel," he wrote dozens of western stories and was responsible for transforming Buffalo Bill into an archetype. Owen Wister, who first saw the West while recuperating from an illness, wrote the first western that won critical praise, *The Virginian* (1902). Classics of the genre have been written by men who actually worked as cowboys; one of the best loved of these

was Bransford in Arcadia (1914; reprinted 1917 as Bransford of Rainbow Range) by Eugene Manlove Rhodes, a former cowboy and government scout. Andy Adams incorporated many autobiographical incidents in his Log of a Cowboy (1903). By far the best known and one of the most prolific writers of westerns was Zane Grey, an Ohio dentist who became famous with the classic Riders of the Purple Sage (1912). In all, Grey wrote more than 80 books, many of which retained wide popularity. Another popular and prolific writer of westerns was Louis L'Amour.

Western short stories have also been among America's favourites. A.H. Lewis (c. 1858-1914), a former cowboy, produced a series of popular stories told by the "Old Cattleman." Stephen Crane created a comic classic of the genre with "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (1898), and Conrad Richter (1890-1968) wrote a number of stories and novels of the Old Southwest. The Western Writers of America, formed in 1952, has cited many fine western writers, including Ernest Haycox (1899-1950); W.M. Raine (1871-1954), a former Arizona ranger who wrote more than 80 western novels; and B.M. Bower (1871-1940), a woman whose talent for realistic detail convinced thousands of readers that she was a real cowboy writing from personal experience. Other western classics are Walter van Tilburg Clark's The Ox-Bow Incident (1940), which uses a Nevada lynching as a metaphor for the struggle for justice; A.B. Guthrie, Jr.'s The Big Sky (1947), about frontier life in the early 1840s, and The Way West (1949); and Larry McMurtry's Pulitzer Prize-winning paean to the bygone cowboy, Lonesome Dove (1985). Many western novels and short stories first appeared in pulp magazines, such as Ace-High Western Stories and Double Action Western, that were specifically devoted to publishing works in the genre.

The Outcasts of Poker Flat

BRET HARTE

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.

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 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.

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 Camp—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.

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"; and "Uncle Billy," a suspected sluice-robber 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 expletives from Uncle Billy. The philosophic Oakhurst alone remained silent. He listened calmly to Mother Shipton's desire to cut somebody's heart out, to the repeated statements of the Duchess that she would die in the road, and to the alarming oaths that seemed to be bumped out of Uncle Billy as he rode forward. With the 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.

The road to Sandy Bar—a camp that, not having as yet experienced the regenerating influences of Poker Flat, consequently seemed to offer some invitation to the emigrants—lay over a steep mountain range. It was distant a day's severe travel. In that advanced season, the party soon passed out of the moist, temperate regions of the foothills into the dry, cold, bracing air of the Sierras. 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 amphitheater, 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.

A horseman slowly ascended the trail. In the fresh, open face of the newcomer Mr. Oakhurst recognized Tom Simson, otherwise known as the "Innocent" of Sandy Bar. He had met him some months before over a "little game," and had,

with perfect equanimity, won the entire fortune—amounting to some forty dollars—of that guileless youth. After the game was finished, Mr. Oakhurst drew the youthful speculator behind the door and thus addressed him: "Tommy, you're a good little man, but you can't gamble worth a cent. Don't try it over again." He then handed him his money back, pushed him gently from the room, and so made a devoted slave of Tom Simson.

There was a remembrance of this in his boyish and enthusiastic greeting of Mr. Oakhurst. He had started, he said, to go to Poker Flat to seek his fortune. "Alone?" 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? 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, 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."

Nothing but Mr. Oakhurst's admonishing foot saved Uncle Billy from bursting into a roar of laughter. As it was, he felt compelled to retire up the canyon until he could recover his gravity. There he confided the joke to the tall pine trees, with many 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 damned picnic?" said Uncle Billy with inward scorn as he surveyed the sylvan group, the 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.

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 last evidence of simplicity, and so turned without a word to the hut. The fire was replenished,