

# The Saturday Review

## of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

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### The Mauve Decade

THE muse of history is the coyest of them all. She can be courted with rhetoric, assailed by figures, walled-in by facts, psycho-analyzed, and yet in the end a little imagination may succeed where hard labor has failed. Upon the Funeral Speech of Pericles, as reported by Thucydides, rests our most vivid idea of Greece, and there is more essential American history in Whitman's 1855 Preface to "The Leaves of Grass" than in Bancroft, Fiske, and Rhodes, more, that is, of the history that will be remembered as significant when the United States is a term of the past.

Thomas Beer has turned a flashlight upon history in his "The Mauve Decade."\* This brilliant and curious study of the late '80s and the '90s is not history at all in any recognized classification, but rather impressionistic literature in which, facet by facet, the form and pressure of a period are put together and made to sparkle from every angle. It is a glittering line of life on which politicians, prostitutes, financiers, reforming women, wars, immigrations are strung upon a philosophic idea of America which is, in effect, that the purple of our heroic period was diluted into mauve in the materialistic scramble that followed the Civil War ("Mauve," said Whistler, "is just pink trying to be purple"). But it was an electric mauve.

A review of this book should applaud Mr. Beer's tireless scholarship while marveling at his method. Here is the culmination of the new way of writing narrative which began when the novelists threw over plots and the historians dropped causation in order to see life as a whirl of states of consciousness. Mr. Beer emerges as an adventurer in this school. He has entered into a prodigious notebook every item he could dig up from his period, including the kind of item which professional historians leave out. There is Maud S. and Kitty Kane, the career of Harry Thurston Peck and the Dalton Brothers, Theodore Roosevelt speculating on how to dress for a parade and Bronson Alcott exhaling in sheer wind the last of New England transcendentalism. There is Frances Willard and the impossible purity of American womanhood and the sardonic realist William Graham Sumner, there are innocuous magazine editors and impassioned private letters from Irishmen and undergraduates. And this vast notebook he has dramatized; prefaced it by a *dramatis personae* (which should be much fuller), and divided it into scenes—the terribly pure and worse flattered American woman, the Real West that was never quite approved of, Depravity (which wasn't so very depraved), the Irish, the scientific realists who horrified the pious, the magazines, and those Figures of Earth who, like Hanna, Roosevelt, Elbert Hubbard, and Anna Held, beautifully realized the decade. These people talk, confess, are characterized in epigrams often brilliant; they vibrate against the vast ground of the notebook. The reader born in the '90s will often be confused; his elder will catch many allusions, miss others. The book indeed is too clever. But it is the very antithesis of textbook explanation. The philosophy of decadence is all implicit; the shifting scenes are full of hurry and babble as in life; the character portraits flash one after another so quickly that it is hard to see what they stand for, as with a roomful of chance gathered celebrities. No one will get much out of Thomas Beer's book unless he has been much alive

\*The Mauve Decade: American Life at the End of the Nineteenth Century. By Thomas Beer. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1926. \$3.

### Cotton-Mouth

By LEONARD BACON

HERE I lie coiled  
In the swampy grass where the pink  
orchids are.  
Go slow, you with the eyes that seek a star.  
Watch where you tread.  
I am Death and am not dead.  
I am hidden and when I like  
May strike.  
And when at the time and place  
Up from the shadow I dart,  
You will suddenly start  
And terror will bleach your face  
And numbness sicken your heart  
And my black eye shall brighten in the sun  
As the venom begins to stun.  
Turn from the star to the weed  
Where the orchids hang.  
Mine is a fearful fang.  
Take heed.

### This Week



"A Chinese Mirror." Reviewed by  
*Isidor Schneider.*  
"Howard Pyle." Reviewed by  
*Frank Jewett Mather, Jr.*  
"Virgin Spain." Reviewed by  
*Ernest Peixotto.*  
"Tales of Fishing in Virgin Seas."  
Reviewed by *F. G. Dellenbaugh.*  
"Rendezvous." Reviewed by *Louis  
Kronenberger.*  
"Odtaa." Reviewed by *William  
Rose Benét.*

### Next Week or Later

The Tragic Philosophy. By *Charles  
M. Bakewell.*

himself or is much interested in living. Yet this is the art of the moving picture and its technique applied to history. The book is a news reel, organized by captions, arranged to show the turns and twists of a decaying civilization, but always the pictures (as in a news reel) are the thing. You can take the moral or leave it.

Obscure sometimes, too clever often, this book nevertheless shows what has been wrong with the writing of American history and wrong with the study of American literature. Too impressionistic for a final account, too inconsecutive for easy reading, too full of brilliant epigrams to be altogether true, it demonstrates the failure of soberer writers to get at the truth with their laborious progressions of cause and effect.

The vitality of America in the later nineteenth century is not often in its single figures, who are usually raw and unfinished beside their European contemporaries, nor in its statecraft, steel mills, social organization, conquests. It is to be found in the abounding vigor and variety of life itself spread through so many vivacious people, bubbling to meet such abundant opportunities, shared by more in-

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### The Luck of Bret Harte

By HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

LET those who are interested in the obscure relations between effort and success in literature study the letters and the career of Francis Bret Harte.

A well-born, well-read youngster drifted into the roaring California of the 'fifties where for a year or so he was gold miner, express messenger, and a keen and excited observer of life in the high Sierras. With this excellent literary capital in his head he turned to journalism and after ten years or so of not very brilliant practice brought his imagination to fruiting in a few stories—"The Luck of Roaring Camp," "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," "Tennessee's Partner"—and a poem, "The Heathen Chinee"—which gave him an immediate and an international reputation. On this reputation he lived, or rather struggled, for the rest of his life. He never again wrote well enough to increase it, though never so badly as to lower it, and almost all of his later work, doggedly pursued through thirty years, was drawn from this same rich, but narrow, bed of California gold which never again yielded such nuggets as the "Luck." It was as if Harte's beloved author, Charles Dickens, had written of Pickwick for a lifetime.

It has been difficult to understand this curious history of a man who displayed such marked originality that the whole school of the local-color short story sprang from his loins. Kipling learned his art from him; O. Henry is his follower, often his imitator; the American yarn, which, with its peculiar exaggerations and its humane humor, has been the basis of most of the best American short stories, owes its literary life to him as much as to Mark Twain. Waves of influence run from the man, and indeed the literary West may be said to have founded itself upon the imagination of Bret Harte.



None of the obvious explanations of his later sterility satisfy. It is true that Harte's observation was never deep. His strength was in rich sentiment, in sharp contrasts of noble hearts in wicked bodies and gentle manners in a rough wilderness, most of all in what Thomas Beer calls his "stencilled portraits," as neat and memorable as the face of a coin. He belonged to the age of Kingsley, of Dickens, of Charles Reade, and had no strength to meet to the change of taste toward a more exigent realism which came in the later century. Miss Wilkins and Henry James and Howells puzzled and distressed him. But this is no answer. There has never been a year since 1868 when such a story as "The Luck of Roaring Camp" would not have made a huge success. If he had continued in his own vein, but with fresh material, he would have carried taste with him. Nor is it probable that he lost virility because he left the West. This melancholy cosmopolitan, who left America in 1878 because he could not support himself here by writing, and never returned, remained stubbornly American throughout. He liked specific Englishmen and Englishwomen but never England and its ways. He stayed after he lost his Glasgow consulate in order to be near a market which paid him approximately twice the rates for short fiction in the pre-advertising days of America. But he was not a native son of California, and it is nonsense to suppose that his genius wilted when they brought him East.

\*The Letters of Bret Harte. Edited by Geoffrey Bret Harte. Boston: The Houghton Mifflin Co. 1926. \$5.



Civilized California he heartily disliked. His ties with the West were with a brief, dead past in the high Sierras which he romanticized and remembered with a vague longing, but with no more desire to return than every man's wish to go back to his youth.

Why did not his frail but unquestioned genius wed itself to new ideas and new materials? It is an interesting critical mystery, which these new letters help to solve. They begin in 1866, when his brief Sierra period was already long behind him, but they cover the whole of his literary life. There are two strains and two stories in the letters, as distinct as if two personalities had written them. The first Harte writes the long series of letters to his wife. They were married in 1862; she shared his early hardships, his first triumph, his disastrous attempt to realize upon success. Then, in debt and unable to support his family, he left her for his consulate in Crefeld, and thereafter writes of his financial difficulties, his ill health, his desire, which never quite reached accomplishment, to rejoin her, of his literary work as a slave might write of a distasteful but necessary task, and so in an unchanging vein of worry until his death. In these often affectionate but always petulant letters, you see the typical mind of the humanitarian, gentle, pessimistic, overwrought, emptied daily of its sentiment and humor for the benefit of the public. Thomas Hood, also a humanitarian and a humorist, also exiled to Germany, wrote such letters a generation earlier. He also worked his fingers to the bone and got nowhere, living on a reputation which just sustained him. Only the realists, like Howells, Hardy, Meredith, seem to be happy in their private life. They have discharged their sorrow elsewhere.

The other letters are chiefly to Harte's English friends, his illustrator, Boyd, his hosts and hostesses among the English aristocracy, who liked him at first because he was a California rarity, and afterwards for himself, and to others of a narrow but well-loved circle. These are—just letters, rather charming, sometimes clever, but such as a man of not one-quarter of his literary talent might have written, and absolutely unrevealing except for an occasional literary reference which shows what a confirmed romantic sentimentalist the man was, how he hated "gloom" and unhappy endings, and everything that was not "wholesome" in literature, and how carefully his own stories were constructed to be what "nice" people might like.



I draw two conclusions from the letters. First, that Bret Harte as a man has been misunderstood by both his enemies and his friends. By his enemies he has been accused of running from his wife and his country, whereas it is clear that he stayed abroad because he could not sell his wares at home, and that never in his twenty-four years of residence there did he have financial assurance good for three months ahead. By his friends and by himself he has been regarded as a martyr. He was a martyr to ill health, but not otherwise. It is quite evident that Harte, as he says himself, was an anchorite, an anchorite who liked the best company when he emerged from his hermitage. He had to work unceasingly in increasing ill health, and—he did not wish to be bothered with his family. What a panic he is in when they propose to come abroad to join him! What excuses he makes, all good, but the best, that his plans will be disarranged. How carefully he abstains from living with his wife, or even seeing too much of her, when she finally comes to England to live with their son. It is a situation more delicate than even the modern novelist handles, for both parties seem to have been unaware of its true nature. She was not thrifty; he was absorbed in his own grievances, best assuaged by his pleasant friendships, his week-ends in great houses, his easy familiarity with the great world, all difficult in England for a poor man with a wife and an establishment to keep up. And never once does the whole truth slip into the letters. For Harte was not a realist, and the romanticist, who can shape things to his own liking in literature, may be helpless in the complications of his personal life.

The explanation of Bret Harte's failure to capitalize success may be deduced from this life history. He had a rich fancy and a humor close to tears. With a good subject this was enough to go on. California of the 'fifties—the rough prospectors who in that masculine world were, and still are, sentimental, the death always waiting in life, the hazard of fires everywhere, beauty above and

around, the unexpected wherever sought—California was a prize for such a writer as he. But the man had no real philosophy in him, no deep knowledge nor even interest in human nature. He was self-centered, and his romantic inner visions were pallid when projected into any world that was not itself romantic. In short, Harte played out like his own gold fields, and for exactly the same reason. The sands were worked too often, and in him there was no new and deeper gold. This does not detract from the validity of his early bonanza. Time, place, and man did meet in "The Outcasts of Poker Flat." But genius cannot hope to meet opportunity on the same street corner for thirty years on end!

Why then did he not turn from California, and find new romance in Washington, Crefeld, Glasgow, London? It is not enough to say that he could not find new inspirations for a genius limited to the romantic and the picturesque; he might have never gilded another land as he gilded California, but a careful, conscientious artist such as he should have done at least as well as the lazy O. Henry, who turned so readily from the West to New York. The letters show that he was not permitted. They are excellent testimony to the difficulties of literary life before advertising made short stories an essential commodity. It must be remembered that Harte was a short-story writer, not a successful novelist or playwright. He was, therefore, essentially a writer for periodicals, and his capital was used up as fast as it was produced. He was for a while the premier short-story writer in the English market, and yet his stories, once paid for, died, for his books apparently never sold well enough to help his meagre income. He was bound to the wheel of the months. This is the reason why he never broadened his success. The Golden West was his specialty and the Golden West has always been a prime commodity in England. For the author of "The Luck," a California story was sure fire, and he had to sell his story!

A very pretty argument could be drawn from this to prove that editors throttle literature. There is a valid argument that Bret Harte's talent was starved and attenuated. If he had not been driven into writing his heart out weekly, he would never have had to take consulships abroad in the prime of his life. If he had been better paid in America he would have been able to live at home. If he had lived at home, he would surely have found fresh material in the vivid stirrings of the 'eighties and 'nineties, for it was only America (in spite of his grievances) that stirred his imagination, excited him, Europe was always merely foreign to him, and there he was never more than a listless observer, no Englishman even meant more than a pleasant companion to his patriotic soul. If he had lived where life touched him, he would have found new themes, and the pressure to draw from that single year of vividness in California would have relaxed. With the ready financial success of the current writer of popular short stories, he would have much extended the scope of his fame. He would, I think, have rivalled in the 'eighties the popular success of Kipling in the 'nineties. Less rich in genius, he had as sure a touch upon interest, until repetition spoiled him.

Yet from the standpoint of pure literature, I believe that we have lost only quantity, not quality. We should have had a series of volumes with as much variety as O. Henry's and a far higher level of workmanship. But we should have had nothing better than, and probably nothing so good as, "The Luck." Stevenson could not repeat "Treasure Island," but Stevenson had a turn for character that Harte did not possess, and was making a new novelist of himself in "The Weir of Hermiston." Bret Harte was a one-book man. His genius was real, but it had only one rich pocket. He, poor fellow, was born too late for romance, too early for easy popularity. He lived on the peaks for a year and wrote at his best for a little longer—and we have the best of him.

Anatole le Braz, the bard of Brittany, lecturer and authority on Celtic folklore, who has been compared to such Breton writers as Chateaubriand and Renan, is dead here. He was sixty-seven years old. He published in all more than twenty volumes, most of which were crowned by the French Academy, and in recognition of his ability he was selected by the French Government for more than twenty foreign missions.

## The Real China

A CHINESE MIRROR. By FLORENCE AYS-COUGH. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1925. \$5.

Reviewed by ISIDOR SCHNEIDER

"FURTHERMORE," writes an English resident from Shanghai in the London *Spectator* for January 9th, "An American marine very correctly shot dead a Chinaman here during a small riot, but not a word has been said about that."

The gentleman wrote in defense of British murder. He assured his readers that it was all for the benefit of the Chinese. This is one type of Western outlook—the seeing of exploiters who are hacking at the edge of China like pioneers clearing a forest and are exasperated by the toughness of the human timber.

In the columns of the newspapers and the journals of opinions of all sorts, the names of Chang Tso Lin, Christian Feng Yu Hsiang, Kuo Sun Lin, Wu Pei Fu, etc., glitter in the headlines. Knowing articles and editorials speak of China as a duelling ground for Russia and Japan, or Russia and England. For those who read of these things there is something of the titillation of being in on a vast intrigue—heaven preserve them to remember the futility and nonsense of it.

Of such things—is the common Western knowledge of China made. The rare interested reader, cons his "Marco Polo," his manuals of Oriental art, and the available translations of China's poetry and learns enough to know that he knows nothing until he can get to China. "A Chinese Mirror" is the first writing I have found that enables one to live in China satisfyingly by book.

Because it tells of living in China. Mrs. Ayscough lived there for twenty-five years. She did not stay in Shanghai, in the pitiful colonial society of the foreign quarter which takes out in insolence to the natives its ridiculous humility before the distant Londons, Parises, Lisbons, and New Yorks. She built a Chinese house to live in, and the story of its building is a joy to read. The ceremonial at its completion, as Mrs. Ayscough describes it, gave me a palpable feeling of participation. In the same way she writes of her voyage up the Yang Tse Chiang, her adventure in unravelling the symbolism of the Purple Forbidden City in Peking, the plotting of a garden, the ascent of the sacred Mountain T'ai-Shan, the research into the cult of the Spiritual Magistrates of City Wallo and City Moats.



As Chinese as the Chinese in her reverence and pleasure in books, she learns and teaches much by recourse to the literature of China. Readers who have been grateful to Mrs. Ayscough for her translations (done in collaboration with Amy Lowell) in "Fur Flower Tablets," will have another debt to acknowledge in the beautiful translations scattered through the book—translations that are all the more vivid by their relevance to the context. Words, symbol, history have become warm, human, touchable. Stuff of the mind has been given mobile substance. She lives, and for the hours of reading, she enables you to live the civilization of China.

For me one of the chief pleasures the book affords is its exposition of Nature as felt by the Chinese. Nature is grand, beautiful, and good—not the battleground of the struggle for existence. The delight in Nature is more sincere, wholesome, and complete in Chinese art than in any other art I have encountered. In her translations, in her chapters on the housebuilding, her river voyage, her climbing of T'ai Shan, and on the Chinese garden, Mrs. Ayscough gives us lovely and eloquent visions. It is one of Mrs. Ayscough's distinctions that nowhere in her book does the comparative force attention. There is no comparison with Western civilization. If the reader finds comparisons necessary he must make them himself.

"A Chinese Mirror" is one of the best books in English on China that one can get. It is written out of a long and full experience, by a mind sensitive, graceful, patient, intelligent, and enthusiastic. It is a book that succeeds, as few books do, in making a transfer of experience from writer to reader. The thorough reader will be thankful for the maps, the index, the historical synopsis at the end. The illustrations are excellent.