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Dramatic Publishing



BRET HARTE'S

The Outcasts of Poker Flat

A Play in One Act

adapted by

PERRY EDWARDS



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

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(THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT)

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THE OUTCASTS OF POKER FLAT
A Play in One Act
For Four Men and Three Women

CHARACTERS
in order of appearance

UNCLE BILLY	} <i>the outcasts</i>
MOTHER SHIPTON		
JOHN OAKHURST		
DUCHESS		

TOM SIMSON *a young man*

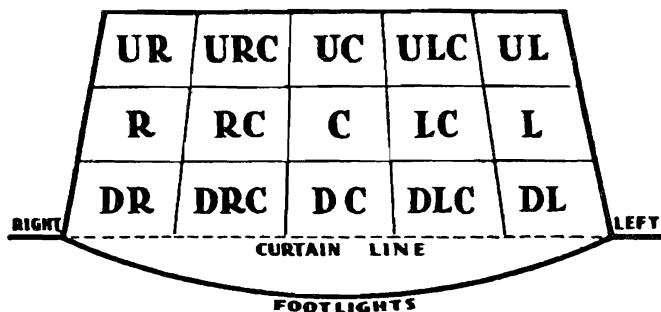
PINEY WOODS *his fiancée*

JIM WHEELER *a solid citizen*

PLACE: *A cabin somewhere in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California.*

TIME: *From November 23 to December 12, 1850.*

CHART OF STAGE POSITIONS



STAGE POSITIONS

Upstage means away from the footlights, *downstage* means toward the footlights, and *right* and *left* are used with reference to the actor as he faces the audience. R means *right*, L means *left*, U means *up*, D means *down*, C means *center*, and these abbreviations are used in combination, as: UR for *up right*, RC for *right center*, DLC for *down left center*, etc. A territory designated on the stage refers to a general area, rather than to a given point.

NOTE: Before starting rehearsals, chalk off your stage or rehearsal space as indicated above in the *Chart of Stage Positions*. Then teach your actors the meanings and positions of these fundamental terms of stage movement by having them walk from one position to another until they are familiar with them. The use of these abbreviated terms in directing the play saves time, speeds up rehearsals, and reduces the amount of explanation the director has to give to his actors.

The Outcasts of Poker Flat

SCENE: The curtain opens slowly, revealing the interior of a crude mountain cabin. Twilight rays of a day in late fall stream in through the door R which stands ajar, and through the gun slots in the shuttered windows U R and in the back wall.)

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: A voice is heard from far R calling out excitedly. As the lines continue, the speaker draws closer to the cabin door. In the background can be heard the sound of a horse walking slowly.)

BILLY (off R). Y'see there! Y'see! Did'nt Ah tell ye it had t' be some'eres 'round here? Ah knowed it the minute Ah see'd thet big black boulder by the trail . . . (Whinny of a horse.) Ehhhh, thunder an' damnation! Ah feel like Ah've walked a hundred miles. (He opens the door more widely, filling the cabin's interior with more light.)

OAKHURST (off R). Easy, Five Spot. Steady, boy.

(BILLY enters through door R. He carries a bed-roll on his shoulder.)

BILLY. Feet, jes' carry me to thet chair!

(Crosses to chair, throws bedroll on table,
and sits right of table.) Ooooh! Ahh!

OAKHURST (off R). Just lean in to me and slip
off the saddle, Duchess.

DUCHESS (off R). I . . . I . . .

OAKHURST (off R). Don't be afraid. I've got
hold o' you.

MOTHER SHIPTON (off R, overlapping). Kin I
give you a hand?

OAKHURST (off R). No need. (Straining slightly.)
Here we go, now . . .

BILLY (watching action from chair, calls out
jeeringly). Fine dance hall girl ye be,
Duchess, hobblin' on one foot like thet. Lucky
ye ain't a horse, or we'd have t' shoot ye dead.
(Laughs raucously.)

(MOTHER SHIPTON enters R and crosses to BILLY
in several steps.)

MOTHER SHIPTON. That foot be painin' her real
bad, Uncle Billy. It was a mean fall she took
out there on the path.

BILLY. Then we ought t' bring her the Lord's
own mercy an' shoot her whether she be a
horse or not! (Cackles gleefully.)

MOTHER SHIPTON. Why don't you shet yer
grizzled ol' face!

BILLY (serenely). Ah will at yer funeral, Mother
Shipton. Ah shorely will.

(OAKHURST enters, supporting DUCHESS down-
stage of him, with an arm around her.)

OAKHURST. Aren't things bad enough, without
you two skinnin' each other alive?

BILLY (whiny-angry). On'y tryin' t' pectect m'-self from the Devil's own sister here.

MOTHER SHIPTON (icily). Be you carryin' a gun, John? (Extends hand toward OAKHURST but keep eyes on BILLY.) If'n so, I'd like t' borrow it fer a minute.

BILLY (viciously). Take care, woman!

OAKHURST (laughing; crossing below table with DUCHESS, to farthest upstage bunk). Don't bother yourself, Mother Shipton. When we get t' Sandy Bar they'll probably lynch him, the way they almost did at Poker Flat.

BILLY (angrily). Thet were a woeful misundersandin', Oakhurst. An' don't ye fergit it! (OAKHURST eases DUCHESS to bunk.)

OAKHURST (sardonically). Oh, I know, Uncle Billy. Fine upstandin' man like you!

BILLY (half rising). You callin' me a liar? (OAKHURST turns to him.)

OAKHURST (low, tense voice, cold smile; slowly). A liar, a sneak, a drunk, and a thief. (There is a pause as BILLY glares at OAKHURST malevolently. Then he speaks softly, with growing "humor.")

BILLY. Well, like Ah always say, the good Lord didn't make me exackly pecteck. An' He shorely put me in the right company this time! (Sits.)

MOTHER SHIPTON (crossing above BILLY to chair upstage of table; angry). Don't ye go makin' out we're all mean-bad like you, ye ol' coot! (Sets chair upright with a little slam.)

BILLY (slyly). Ain't ye?

MOTHER SHIPTON. No! We ain't! (Sits.)

OAKHURST (with bitter self-contempt). He's right! So why argue? Those "good citizens" of Poker Flat don't want any of us around.

(Crosses to table.) In their eyes we're all the same! That's why they ran us out of town and warned us to stay out. (Quotes scornfully) "On peril of your lives." (Nodding toward BILLY) Sluice robber----

BILLY (lashing out). Ain't nobody ever found one lick o' proof ----

OAKHURST (indicating self). Gambler ---- (Indicates DUCHESS and MOTHER SHIPTON.) Ladies of the dance hall ----

MOTHER SHIPTON. But we didn't do nothin' to 'em, the Duchess n' me. We didn't drag the men into the Silver Slipper.

OAKHURST (shrugging, smiling). Their women-folk figure you did. (Amiably, going L to chair below bunk.) Well, they chose us for a very special list: just the "worst elements" of Poker Flat, as Jim Wheeler put it.

BILLY. Yes, sir—we all be eeeeq'al! (BILLY nudges MOTHER SHIPTON on arm and laughs.)

MOTHER SHIPTON. Don't touch me. I'm warnin' ye!

BILLY (gleefully). Always meant t' ask ye: How come they call ye Mother Shipton? Only thing Ah ever see'd ye mother was a bunch o' drunken miners! (MOTHER SHIPTON, in frustration and rage, slaps his face as hard as she can. BILLY breaks off, struggles to his feet, and holding his hand up high he prepares to deliver a vicious backhand slap. MOTHER SHIPTON cringes. BILLY gloats.) Ah'll teach you, ye scurvy-mouth ol' bitch!

OAKHURST (rising; moving in and grabbing his wrist while it is still poised.) Hold it right there, Billy! I mean it. (At left of table.)

BILLY (slowly lowering his arm, glaring at OAKHURST venomously). Ah don't take kindly t' being walloped, Oakhurst.

OAKHURST. And I don't take kindly to seeing a man lay his hand to a woman.

BILLY. Even a sow thet deserves it?

OAKHURST (an edge of menace in his voice). That's enough!

BILLY (pause; smiling thinly). Didn't mean no harm, Mr. Oakhurst. (Turns DR a few steps, moves hands resignedly into coat pockets.) Jes' sort o' lost m' temper. (Turning.) Kin we shake on it an' fergit the hull thing, John?

OAKHURST (wearily but warily). Sure, Uncle Billy. (Slowly going to him.) This is no picnic for any of us. We're all tired, and----

BILLY (bringing knife out of pocket; its blade springs to life). Figger as how ye need a little lesson, Johnny-boy. (They are circling slowly.) Do ye good, seein' as how yer nothin' but a card sharper an' fancy man fer these here Jes'bels. (Lunges again; OAKHURST manages to arc body away from blade. They continue to circle slowly.) Got to carve a little reminder in ye to treat yer elders with respec'.

OAKHURST (regaining wristlock). Why . . . why, you're drunk, you old fool. Crazy drunk!

BILLY (averting face). No!

OAKHURST. Where you hiding it?

BILLY (straining against the increasing pressure on his wrist). Don't know what ya mean----

OAKHURST. The liquor--where is it? (The knife drops to the floor. MOTHER SHIPTON snatches it up.)

BILLY (gasping in pain). Bedroll--the bedroll! (OAKHURST sends BILLY sprawling to the floor, crosses to the bedroll, tears it open and removes canteen through the following dialogue.)

OAKHURST. You've been going it all day, haven't

you? Slowing us up, lagging on the trail
moaning about being old and helpless so you
could fall back for a nip!

MOTHER SHIPTON. Throw him out. Let him
shift for himself!

BILLY (half rising, leaning on one arm). That
'ud be murder, plain and simple. (OAKHURST
crosses with canteen and pours it out at
door.)

MOTHER SHIPTON (crossing to left of table).
None of us ain't safe with him around, and
that's a fact.

OAKHURST (scornfully). Don't worry about
Uncle Billy. He'll have all he can do to
keep up once we're back on the trail. Well,
now we've had our "rest," let's get going.

DUCHESS. You mean . . . now?

OAKHURST. Sandy Bar's a long way off.

MOTHER SHIPTON (dismayed). Can't we rest
up here for the night, John?

OAKHURST (replacing canteen on table). Too
risky.

BILLY (getting to his feet). Seems right comfort-
able to me. Even got wood ready in the
fireplace. (Indicating it.)

OAKHURST. Now look, all of you. We don't have
any real supplies and we're out in the middle
o' the mountains. If a blizzard catches us
here, we're finished!

BILLY. How fur ye figger we gonna git tonight?

OAKHURST. All the way!

BILLY. With us walkin', and the women ridin'
double on yer horse?

OAKHURST. We can't risk being snowed in.

MOTHER SHIPTON (crossing to OAKHURST).
But there ain't been no snow anywheres yit,
an' it were sech a nice day t'day.

DUCHESS (coming down slightly). We could

start out again before dawn.

OAKHURST (controlling himself; going slowly L toward DUCHESS). All I know is: We've been dealt some cards that aren't much good to begin with. But let's play out the hand, instead of just throwing it in by sitting here. (BILLY snorts and crosses to fireplace.)

BILLY (kneeling and striking a wooden match to light the fire). Couple o' hours cain't make much diff'rence. Ah'm stayin' put! (Gently blows the 'flames' into life.)

OAKHURST. Fine! And the rest of you? (No answer.) All right. Good luck, and I hope you make it to Sandy Bar. (He is already going toward door.)

DUCHESS (anxiously moving after him a few steps). Don't leave us here with him!

MOTHER SHIPTON (going to OAKHURST). You jes' gonna ride away an' ----?

OAKHURST. Can't you understand? I've figured The odds. We've got to keep moving.

BILLY (not turning). This ain't no game o' cards, Oakhurst. We're all done in. (Pause, as OAKHURST stands at door.)

MOTHER SHIPTON. Ye ain't goin' off without us, are ye, John?

OAKHURST (smiling ruefully). No, I guess not. I suppose the 'outcasts' have to stay together, no matter what!

MOTHER SHIPTON (gaily throwing arms around him, kissing him on cheek). I knew it. I jes' knew it. You'll get a blessin' fer this. Jes' wait an' see.

TOM (calling out rather brusquely from far off R). Be that horse the prop-e'ty o' Mr. John Oakhurst? (They all react with surprise and definite alarm. Their lines overlap in hushed anxiety and urgency.)

MOTHER SHIPTON (backing to left of table).

They come after us. Them jackals is gonna take us back.

DUCHESS (crossing in to left of table). It isn't fair. They've got no right to hound us.

BILLY (rising, backing away D L). Ain't goin' nowheres. Nossir! Any rattlesnake tries t' lay a hand on me is ----

OAKHURST (also overlapping). Simmer down, all of you. (Moves quickly to door R, drawing a pistol from an inside coat pocket.) We got out like they wanted. That's enough. (Flattens himself against door frame, upstage of door. There is a tense hold as all characters strain toward the door. A mule's hoofbeats are heard off R; then OAKHURST sees who it really is.) Tom! Tom Simson! You miserable son of a triple-horned she-goat! (Replaces pistol in pocket.)

TOM (off R, jovially). Howdy, Mr. Oakhurst! Ah jes' know'd that had t' be Five Spot a-standin' there. (The following three speeches come almost simultaneously, overlapping Tom's speech and each other.)

MOTHER SHIPTON. Who is it?

DUCHESS. Is he all right?

BILLY (moving in to L C). Be it some'un ye know?

TOM (off R, drawing nearer). Hurry up, Piney.

That there's m' good friend Mr. Oakhurst.

OAKHURST (moving a few steps L; overlapping, to the others). It's a lad I know from Sandy Bar. Folks there call him The Innocent. Nobody finer than Tom, I can tell you.