

Bret Harte in "The Movies"

By Josephine Clifford McCrackin

An Appreciation of the Film Form in Which the Great California Author's Literary Masterpieces are Being Revived

Among the most sacredly guarded of my few treasures are two bound volumes of the *Overland Monthly*, the magazine that Bret Harte made famous. These volumes are of 1869 and 1870, years in which I was associated with the great Californian author on the editorial staff of that publication.

At that time, Californians' admiration and pride in their first and foremost literary celebrity were at their lowest ebb. But there is a renewed demand for Bret Harte's works, prose and poetry. And, strange to say, the motion pictures have brought about this awakening.

We might as well make up our minds to recognize this new recognition of the Bard of the Argonauts, and learn to say "movies" instead of "moving pictures," while we are about it.

Bret Harte himself, I think, would be rather flattered, upon more mature consideration, with the staging of so many of his stories, sketches and poems, especially with the minuteness of detail, with the painstaking research the motion picture producers have gone into, to make their films faithful to Bret Harte's conception and representation of life in early California, as he saw it. It may be, however, that, at first he would have exclaimed with nostrils quivering in disdain: "What! I in moving pictures! Never!"



"The Lily" and Jack Hamlin



Lily (Beatriz Michelena) in front of her father's store on the main street of Poverty Flat.

To be honest, I indignantly turned up my nose when I read in a local paper that, at Boulder Creek, in precincts hallowed by the memory of the massing of our forces during the struggle of the Sempervirens Club to "Save the Redwoods," had been located a motion picture company for the purpose of putting Bret Harte's "Lily of Poverty Flat" on the screen.

I did not know at this time that "Salomy Jane's Kiss" had already been filmed, though I saw it later and gave enthusiastic approval, feeling that sufficient homage had been paid to Bret Harte's unique standing in California's literary dominion.

Inquiring into the origin of this photo-play, "The Lily of Poverty Flat," I turned to my two volumes of the *Overland Monthly* and located "Her Letter" in the December number of 1869—a graceful, girlish epistle which Lily wrote to her sweetheart, Joe,

whom she left in the "diggins" when her father, John Folinsbee, had struck "pay gravel" in Poverty Flat and had taken his daughter to Paris for the higher education, and possibly a titled husband. Joe might imagine she had forgotten him did she not send him this tender missive:

*I'm sitting alone by the fire
Dressed just as I came from the dance,
In a robe even you would admire—
It cost a cool thousand in France;
I'm bediamonded out of all reason,
My hair is done up in a cue;
In short, sir, "the belle of the season"
Is wasting an hour upon you.*

*And yet, just this moment, when sitting
In the glare of the grand chandelier—
In the bustle and glitter befitting
The "finest soiree of the year"—
In the mists of a gaze de Chambéry,
And the hum of the smallest of talk—
Somehow, Joe, I thought of the "Ferry,"
And the dance that we had on "The Fork;"*

*Of Harrison's barn, with its muster
Of flags festooned over the wall;
Of the candles that shed their soft lustre
And tallow on head-dress and shawl;
Of the steps that we took to one fiddle,
Of the dress of my queer vis-a-vis;
And how I once went down the middle
With the man that shot Sandy McGee;*

*Of the moon that was quietly sleeping
On the hill, when the time came to go;
Of the few baby peaks that were peeping
From under their bedclothes of snow;
Of that ride—that to me was the rarest,
Of—the something you said at the gate.
Ah! Joe, then I wasn't an heiress
To the "best-paying lead in the State."*

*Well, well, it's all past; yet it's funny
To think, as I stood in the glare
Of fashion and beauty and money,
That I should be thinking, right there,
Of some one who breasted high water
And swam the North Fork and all that,
Just to dance with old Folinsbee's daughter,
The Lily of Poverty Flat.*

*But goodness! what nonsense I'm writing!
(Mamma says my taste still is low),
Instead of my triumphs reciting,
I'm spooning on Joseph—heigh-ho!
And I'm to be "finished" by travel—
Whatever's the meaning of that.
Oh, why did papa strike pay gravel
In drifting on Poverty Flat?*

*Good-night!—here's the end of my paper;
Good-night!—if the longitude please—
For maybe, while wasting my taper,
Your sun's climbed over the trees.
But know, if you haven't got riches,
And are poor, dearest Joe, and all that,
That my heart's somewhere there in the ditches,
And you've struck it—on Poverty Flat.*

Pretty enough to quote again—those seven stanzas. "Her Letter" has, as a sequel, "His Answer to Her Letter," a reply penned for Joe, on his sick bed, by his partner, Truthful James, one of Bret Harte's favorite figures. Truthful, in his own inimitable style, tells her that her sweetheart is sick and delirious, but carrying her name constantly on his lips. Lastly comes "Her Last Letter," completing a trio of as graceful poems as Bret Harte ever wrote.

Out of this material has Charles Kenyon built up the story of "The Lily of Poverty Flat," even as the California Motion Picture Corporation has built up a miniature of the town of Poverty Flat, near Boulder Creek, in the heart of the Santa Cruz Mountains.

And the photo-play, "Poverty Flat," is no ephemeral creation of the stage carpenter, but a solid, log-built village of over two dozen dwellings, stores, offices and saloons--a typical mining camp set up for photo-play "scenery" at a cost of thousands of dollars.

All these things I learned when I first went to Boulder Creek half in protest, half from curiosity, and quite ready to sneer at any attempt to put Bret Harte on the screen. But I became a convert when I found not only "The Lily" (Beatriz Michelena), graceful and girlish as the writer of the letter, but, also, Jack Hamlin, the gambler; Colonel Starbottle, Culpepper, his nephew; the partners, Joe and Truthful James, as well as the stagedriver, the express-messenger, the bandit, the outlaws, the Indians, the Vigilantes and the sheriff, all perfectly "made up" and correctly costumed—a band of pioneer characters who might easily have stepped out of the pages of Bret Harte stories.

I was immensely impressed with the replica of "Poverty Flat." The work, done in, on and about that picturesque little settlement reminded me of Bret Harte and of the detail and finish in every bit of his work, prose or poetry. I could recognize every building in the long, straggling street—the big coach barn, the Post office, the express office, the saloons, "The Bear Trap" and "The Jumping Frog," the boarding house—the store kept by "Old Folinsbee," Col. Starbottle's law office, the Folinsbee home, Dolores' cottage and the blacksmith shop.

Were Bret Harte alive, could he go with me to see that main street of "Poverty Flat," he would exclaim with enthusiasm—for he could be surprised into enthusiasm, as well I remember.

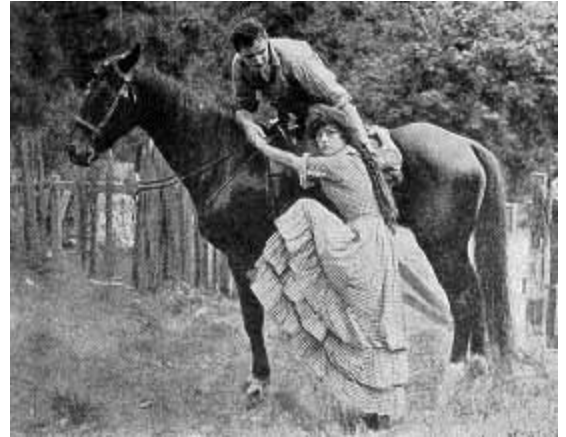
And, just as he would rejoice in seeing his mining camp and its colorful population revived for this twentieth century form of entertainment, so he would enjoy seeing how the producing motion picture company has spent infinite pains in constructing a typical mining claim with the stream dammed, with ditches, flumes and sluices, all in operation, just as naturally as in the early '50s.

So, when I had inspected it all and had chatted with the directors of this stupendous undertaking and had learned, from many conversations, how enthusiastic the actors and actresses were in making their photo-play the acme of perfection, I felt quite at home and reconciled to the innovation.

When "Salomy Jane" came to my home town and was presented at a local motion picture theatre, I was an eager spectator. I had seen what the company at Boulder Creek was doing with its second Bret Harte film, and I was curious to see what was the standard of its first production. I met with no disappointment.

"Salomy Jane," founded on Bret Harte's story, "Salomy Jane's Kiss," gives one a surprisingly beautiful picture of the exciting early days in "Hangtown"—a name which, in this photo-play, is eminently correct, for one of the stirring scenes filmed is the "necktie party," in which a swarm of vigilantes make short work of the desperado who holds up my old friend, "Yuba Bill."

The plot in "Salomy Jane" concerns the hot resentment of the beautiful pioneer girl when a worthless wretch kisses her impudently. "The Man" surprises the ruffian, and, having his own grudge to settle, follows him, and in a savage hand-to-hand battle, slays him. Fugitive, and, worse, suspected of holding up the stage, "The Man" is saved from lynching by "Salomy." The thrilling experiences the two have in escaping from the vigilantes, the treachery they have to combat, and the romantic climax of their adventures when, safe from pursuers, "Salomy," of her own accord, lifts her face to "The Man" on horseback, and gives him the kiss which plights their troth—all these are vividly and sympathetically portrayed on the screen.



Salomy Jane" riding away with "The Man."

California's glorious sunlight, marvelous redwoods, dimpled hillsides, rocky gorges and dancing streams are only some of the scenic features which form the background for this gripping photo-play. To me it was the complete visualization of what Bret Harte penned. His own vivid language found an ideal complement in the wonderful photography in this motion picture.

This was the first of Bret Harte's works to be converted into what the motion people refer to professionally as a "feature film." I understand that it has proved immensely popular throughout the country, particularly in the New England States, where no doubt these vistas of our Golden State are enjoyed--and envied, in a peculiar sense.

Marin County, the Mount Tamalpais region, Lagunitas creek and the Bolinas ridges, all were utilized in securing characteristic bits of California scenery for the film.

No mining camp was constructed for "Salomy Jane," as was the case in "The Lily of Poverty Flat," but Marin County region contains plenty of picturesque settlements with weather-beaten, tumble-down shacks, typical of the Sierran mining towns.

Having seen "Salomy Jane" on the screen, and having had the great privilege of witnessing the filming of many of the scenes in "The Lily of Poverty Flat," I was moved to ask the producers of these two photo-plays, "What else can you do?" And the answer was: "Put on 'A Phyllis of the Sierras.'" I have no doubt it will be well done. Boulder Creek will again be the locale for many of the scenes, for this region is ideally adapted to the purposes of this cycle of Bret Harte screen dramas. Charles Kenyon, again, will prepare the scenario, and the same competent company, headed by Beatriz Michelena, will produce the film.

Following "A Phyllis of the Sierras," the California Motion Picture Corporation will undertake an elaborate production of a photo-play based on Bret Harte's dramatic tale, "In the Carquinez Woods."

Through special arrangements with Houghton, Mifflin & Co., publishers of Bret Harte's works, the California Motion Picture Corporation has the exclusive privilege of producing the bulk of his stories on the screen. Hence the filming of "Salomy Jane," "The Lily of Poverty Flat," "A Phyllis of the Sierras," "In the Carquinez Woods," and other photo-plays as yet not selected. It is a prodigious task, but it has been well commenced. A California company, backed by California capital, working in the heart of California's scenic wonderland and headed by a typical California girl, beautiful Beatriz Michelena—the combination should succeed.

I, for one, a convert to motion pictures, and an enthusiastic one, sincerely hope to see all of the immortal stories of Bret Harte eventually transferred to the screen, where, in picture form, they will delight millions and stimulate thousands at least to familiarize themselves with the work of the man I consider California's greatest man of letters.

There will never be another Bret Harte; and those who are so faithfully reproducing the pictures that he drew for us of a time that is past, are entitled to the eternal gratitude of California and the world outside.

No account of the filming of Bret Harte's stories would be complete without a word about the beautiful little artist who has been given the responsibility of interpreting his heroines for the screen.

Beatriz Michelena is by birth, temperament and experience remarkably qualified to play the California mountain girls described by the famous California author. Daughter of a renowned tenor of San Francisco's pioneer days, herself a prima donna with an assured place on the modern operatic stage, a girl with a wealth of artistic tradition behind her, Miss Michelena's gifts do not stop there. She has rare beauty, vivacity, wit, intellectual attainments, and athletic grace.

The first time I saw her, at Boulder Creek, I thought her the most provokingly charming creature I had ever seen. She was riding her milk white horse, her pet, Dick, and she was clad in a becoming modern riding habit. Her cheeks were flushed, her hat was tilted back over dark, curly hair, her brown eyes were flashing, and she was mischievously taunting the driver of the big stage, which carried the actors and actresses from Boulder Creek to "Poverty Flat."

"I'll hold up the stage," she cried saucily, "if you splash any mud on my horse."

And the driver saw to it that Dick escaped unscathed.

In a company of veteran actors and experienced actresses—a company of unusual merit, gentlemen and gentlewomen, Miss Michelena shone as a bright, particular star. The most winsome, unassuming, gracious presence, she shed radiance on her surroundings and worthily merited the homage which was given her not only by her associates, but by the Boulder Creek villagers, who seemed to realize that, in this charming personality, they had a guest of rare qualities.

Being a Bret Harte heroine is no easy job. When you have been an operatic soprano, gifted with a voice of wondrous notes, it is asking a good deal to expect you to jump, fully clad, into a foaming torrent and swim across in icy water, just because the scenario requires you to perform the feat. Miss Michelena was urged by her associates not to attempt the swim, but to yield to a substitute. She laughed merrily at the suggestion, and, when the time came for the performance, she was ready and willing. She and her horse took the plunge and made the swim under heavy odds—difficulties which seemed for a while to be too great for her and her steed. Even the cowboys gasped with dread when they saw her buffet the powerful eddies of the swollen river, sink and rise again, only to sink once more.

It took the kind of nerve that belongs to the Western girl—the kind that can swim and ride and run and climb and never complain. Such an actress is this—my favorite "movie" heroine.

Sources

- *This article with photographs was published in "Overland Monthly", June, 1915. pp. 487–497.*

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