

RENO

BY KATHARINE FULLERTON GEROULD

NOTHING is more bitter, we have been told, than a gratified desire. I pondered the saying often during my stay in Nevada. For I had had, for a great many years, a certain curiosity about Reno: a desire to experience it. I had wanted to see Reno, Nevada, as I had wanted to see Butte, Montana, and New Orleans, Louisiana, and San Antonio, Texas. It had struck me that it would be curious and interesting. Here I was, then, with my desire fulfilled, my curiosity free to slake itself; and I very much wished myself elsewhere.

The fact is that Reno, though a neat and pretty town, with one of those Western situations that break the Eastern heart with envy, is a very dull town for the visitor. It is only after the traveler begins to put to himself a few questions, and explore social history for the answers, that it takes on any interest at all. "How Reno got that way"—to use a despicable phrase—is interesting. And the answer is compounded of many subtle Americanisms. Reno could not have happened east of the Mississippi, whatever the state divorce laws. In fact, Reno could not have happened—again, whatever the divorce laws—outside the State of Nevada. Nevada is different from all other Western states; and the quality of Nevada is a strong element in the quality of Reno. The dullness is partly the fault of Nevada and partly the fault of Paris.

Let us orient ourselves by stating a few facts. Nevada, which, "set down in the East would fill a space from central Pennsylvania to Georgia, and from Delaware Bay to Ohio" (oh,

"goodly is our heritage!"), holds not much more than seventy-five thousand souls. Reno, on the eastern slope of the Sierras close to the California border, is by far the largest town in the state, having about thirteen thousand citizens. The thirteen thousand do not, presumably, include the seventeen or eighteen hundred men and women who are always there for "the necessary six months." Goldfield with an odd four thousand (before the fire), Carson City and Sparks with twenty-five hundred apiece, are Reno's only rivals—and you can see that they are not really rivals at all. Reno is the metropolis and the magnet—even the legislators, when the legislature is in session, are apt to stop in Reno and motor to Carson City for their day's duties. Moreover, it must be stated as sober fact that Reno as a place "gets" people—not only Nevadans but citizens of other states who have business interests in Nevada and therefore have to visit Reno. More than one rolling stone has rolled there to rest, liking it better than a hundred other places.

Why then call it dull? The answer, as has been said, is partly Nevada and partly Paris.

Reno is dull because its roots—socially, humanly speaking—are fastened in decay. If you like to put it in that way, Reno is sinister. This little town with its girdle of enchanting mountains, its wide well-kept streets, its delightful park where the Truckee River flows—irrigation creating for it a dense greenness in the midst of the hopeless desert—has a fairly equivocal future. Its past is the past of the great

mining camps. It was bred in their tradition. The wealth that is in Reno at the present day was made in Goldfield and Tonopah (for there is nothing left in Nevada of what was made longer ago in Virginia City). The Reno magnates are men who knew and took their part in the earlier hectic days—sinking into old age and death now, squandering or saving their “piles,” but without any prospect of more “piles” to be made. The gold and silver, you see, have gone. Even the Comstock Lode petered out at last; and though they are mining the cheap ore at Virginia and American Flat, though Goldfield and Tonopah go on somehow with dwindling strength, Nevada is forlorn of mining booms. Yet it must never be forgotten that the tradition, the point of view, the human habit of Reno are the tradition, the point of view, the human habit of the mining camp. A mining camp after the gold is gone is not a cheerful or an exciting place; and dabbling in cheap mining stocks, or playing the races (such races!), is a poor substitute for standing with your foot on the rail of the Crystal Bar and watching a fortune swim towards you. The big men, the great adventurers go, and only the little men and the habit of gambling—for lessening stakes—are left. The precious metals made the state; and unlike California, Nevada has not much to fall back on. Oh, yes, there is truck farming round Fallon: the land that is not good enough for cattle will suffice for sheep; and various Italians are slowly enriching themselves by intensive vegetable gardening. But the American population of Nevada has never been of the farming or the ranching type; the obstacles of the desert are too many to have attracted that type. So much for Nevada's part in Reno's dullness.

Reno has no visible industries. It makes its living, as far as one can tell, off the marital unhappiness that prevails in forty-seven states of the Union.

The divorcées (as they are always called) bring a certain amount of money into the place, and banks, shops, and markets are kept going in that way. The churches are inconspicuous; the few doctors have Chinese herbalists for hot rivals; the lawyers, naturally, are many. The Public Library is so tiny that it could not possibly keep anyone in reading matter for six months, and if there were a run on its shelves most of the besiegers would have to stop in the street. I remember that during my stay in Reno it was closed for a day or two “in order that a few shelves might be put up in the basement to accommodate books that might from time to time be added.” The Washoe County Court House, however, is a handsome building, and quite large enough to accommodate any number of simultaneous decrees. Divorce being the recognized industry—if not, indeed, a monopoly—the lawyers have pooled their interests to the extent of standardizing the fee for a divorce suit. The mere legal fee is not high—it is, or was, three hundred dollars, I believe—but extra expenses are almost certain to be incurred. You can get almost any ingredient of drama in Reno, naturally—from cocaine to the convolutions of Henry James psychology; yet the fact remains that Reno is less interesting than it must once have been because of the American habit, in later years, of going to Paris rather than to Nevada for easy divorce. Paris has resources of entertainment, distraction, civilization; and Reno has none. There is indeed an almost cynical refusal on the part of the solid citizenry of Reno to offer any attraction to the temporary resident save the attraction of legal escape from a detested spouse. They do not even change the bills often enough at the movie theaters to guarantee you a fresh one every day or two. Reno is dull; and the measure of stoicism with which the dullness is endured depends wholly on the character of the individual. Any American is likely to find a group of acquaintances in Paris; but he—or she

—will find no familiar faces in Reno. It is a lonely adventure, this six months' sojourn in little-populated Nevada. Nor can you mitigate it by running away for a week, now and then, to Salt Lake or San Francisco. They keep tabs on you better than they used. (Reno *has*, in its time, been criticized.) Your six months cannot be docked by so much as a day. If you leave the state, the time of your absence is charged against you and you have to work it out—"make it up" by prolonging your stay at the other end. You can divorce with ease in the sovereign state of Nevada; but in order to do it you have to stop there. Six months' residence is not much, but it has to be *bona fide*. No—not even the California shores of Lake Tahoe: you must remain on the Nevada side. Reno, then, really means Reno; and what comes of it?

Everyone who has lived in a college town knows the way in which "the students" are regarded as a class by themselves. "The students do this"; "the students never go there"; "the students like—or do not like—this or that." Precisely thus in Reno are "the divorcées" referred to. "The divorcées do thus and so"; "that is for the divorcées." What, then, is their manner of life? What are the occupations of their exile and the technic of their days? They come, a little shy and strange, and make their arrangements; they are not herded together by any social agent; there is no Beau Nash to control the society of Reno and introduce them to one another. There are no natural meeting places for lonely ladies and gentlemen; their amusements depend on their wits and their tastes.

If you are a woman desiring a divorce and resolved to obtain it in Nevada, you arrive in Reno and go to the hotel. There is more than one hotel, but one is pre-eminent. You choose your lawyer; you make your legal arrangements for freedom. If you have not decided on your "grounds" before you came, you must do it at once. Even in Nevada

you have to have "grounds"; though almost anything will go, especially as cases are not so likely to be contested here as at home. A dissatisfied spouse, that is, does not usually absent herself from home for six months until the situation has been, at least, stated. In a large number of cases the husband must, indeed, be paying the bills. All the ladies seem to cling to their engagement rings. Some of them have plenty of money, naturally—and there are ways to spend it in Reno, even if those ways are not very inviting. But there is not much "splurge" here. Remember, as we have said, that Reno is not fashionable, and that the people with money and imagination go to Paris. Truth compels one to admit that the divorcées are on the whole a cheap-looking lot; and that the few who look expensive look peculiarly uncivilized—are apt, in fact, not even to look respectable. Some are mouselike, and some look really miserable. But generally speaking they are poor figures for drama.

The divorcée, having secured her lawyer, sits down and prepares to wear out her necessary six months. She seldom stops more than a week or a fortnight at the hotel: she immediately takes a little apartment—whether it is a flat in one of the many apartment buildings or a mere room or two in a private house. There she busies herself as best she can, in ironically domestic ways. No acquaintances are made in the hotel itself which, in spite of hanging out a sign in its little lobby, "Breakfast being served" (or "lunch" or "dinner"), affects a truly metropolitan impersonality. Acquaintance, contacts come after the withdrawal to one's own lair. There are—as you would expect—both a furtive distrust and a secret freemasonry operative in the hearts of the divorcées. You are playing a lone hand in Reno; but so are the others. Gradually acquaintance forms, in apartment-house manner. You are very lonely; and in spite of your domestic duties (there are no servants to be had in Reno)

you hardly know what to do with yourself, unless you have brought a companion of your own sex, or your children. There is, you see, except in the racing season, nothing whatever to do in Reno; and the Silver State Jockey Club has only two meetings a year—early summer and early autumn. Those who can afford it usually buy motor cars. But who wants to drive through the desert alone? You enter into talk with the woman in the apartment beside or below you. She too is idle and lonely. You inspect each other; you make other similar contacts; and eventually there are bridge parties and movie parties. If you dine outside your flat—and many women seem to feel that breakfast and lunch are all they care to get for themselves—you find a friend to go with.

Sometimes of course, as anywhere else, a man or a woman has introductions to Reno residents and may work into the settled life of the place. But for the most part acquaintance has to be made in that casual and hesitating way; and I did not discover that it is any part of a lawyer's necessary business to find friends for his clients. The social life of the residents goes on apart from the divorcées. They must get a good deal of free drama from the situations that now and then arise publicly in this town; but the divorcées are their living, not their diversion. There is no prejudice against them as a type—Reno is not so cynical as all that—but natural social law operates. You cannot fill up your personal life with birds of passage; and unless a real sympathy springs up, you let them go their own way. "Do you play bridge?" the attractive young wife of a Reno lawyer whom I happened to "meet" asked me. When I admitted a faint addiction to the game she said, "Oh, you ought to get plenty of bridge, then. I believe the divorcées play a lot." I was not a divorcée, so far as she knew; but in spite of mild disclaimers I could never convince a Renoite that I was

anything but a divorcée, actual or prospective. What else, indeed, could I be? There is only one reason for any Eastern woman to be in Reno.

"How do they bear six months of it? What do they *do*?" I asked myself, over and over. Reno is four thousand feet high, set in the last tumble of the Sierras. Even if you have a car, the season for driving it is not so very long. No matter how you choose your season, there must be weeks, if not months, when you cannot sit in the park, meditating above the Truckee River, or play tennis on the park courts, or drive over one pass to Virginia City or over another range to Lake Tahoe. Even if you go to the races every day while they are on—and most people do—the two meetings together do not fill up many weeks. The racing is not first-class, you understand: most of the horses are bound for no more distinguished bournes than Vancouver or Tiajuana; they will never be entered at Saratoga or Belmont Park or for the Kentucky Derby. I sampled, as in duty bound, the most exciting feature of Reno social life; went to the races, bet according to the best advice and lost my money (but who would expect a horse named "Fireplace" to win a race?), discussed the ethics of the turf with my escort, and watched the curious limited throng. You look across the race track to a lonely beautiful range of the Sierras—never had race track a lovelier setting. There in front of you are the boxes of the magnates; all round you are collarless farmers and their tight-lipped wives, divorcées painted and unpainted, children in arms, drifting males of every type, a few squaws with papooses on their backs, spectacled Chinamen. Everyone, male and female—except the squaws and the infants in arms—is betting. The *pari mutuel* machines during the summer meeting of the Silver State Jockey Club last year took in over two million dollars. This is Nevada, where betting is in the blood; and the divorcées bet too, up to the limits of their purses. Sometimes, alas!

beyond. One woman in my hotel corridor bet all she had, lost it, and came back to face the collapse of her budget and the complete frustration of her plans. Her despair terrified the chambermaid, who came in and told me about it. But the Reno hotel is not a boarding house, and the surface of life showed no ripple.

Twenty-one days of horse racing, however, do not fill six months; and my question persisted. What do they *do*? I should never find out without being told, so I asked respectively, a man and a woman who did not know each other. The man—a resident of Reno for years—said, "Well, to be perfectly frank, most of them take lovers." The woman—herself a divorcée—said precisely the same thing. The longer I stayed in Reno, the more clearly I saw that that was the answer. As there are no legitimate social distractions for the stranger in Reno—by which I mean no plays, no music, no galleries, hardly a library, and churches very down at heel—the idle, discontented human being on the verge of a complete freedom takes to pleasures that even in Reno are not considered legitimate, though they are deemed, apparently, inevitable. These women are thrown absolutely on their own resources for six months in a strange land. Many, if not most of them, lack resources within themselves. The habitual duties and relations are violently excised from their lives. In many cases they have not yet planned their futures; and in any case their futures will not lie here. They feel the freedom of the cast-away, or the men and women having their last fling at a spa which they know will not cure. It is a curious, temporary, exotic interlude in life—and they are excruciatingly bored. The moral paste of which many of them are made is an inferior composition . . . and there are the same old easy and obvious temptations.

Some of them—let me say in parenthesis—have their future lives planned already. Not long before I arrived in Reno a woman had lost her head, Reno-

fashion; had taken an unscrupulous lover, a doctor who permitted her to acquire the drug habit. When she was down and out, he chucked her—refused even to visit her in the hospital, where she was lying clad literally in the rags of charity. Public opinion was roused against the man, and in camp-and-frontier fashion they ran him out of town. But the woman? Out of her own resources she had not so much as a toothbrush left. The man she expected to marry after her decree was granted had been supporting her; and he withdrew all funds after he learned of her behavior. Someone helped her to get out of Reno—whither she went no one knew. Oh, yes, that kind of thing happens, and real Renoites do not approve any more than you or I; but they are less censorious, perhaps, and—since surprise is a necessary element in shock—they are not so shocked, being unsurprised. Luckier divorcées than such a one as this buy her jewels out of the pawnshop, and life goes on.

There are exceptions, male and female: in many the moral paste is finer and the Reno interlude is a tragically necessary one. These men and women set their teeth and bear the burden of empty, small-town days—living quietly, seeing very few people, wringing such inspirations and suggestions as they can from mere patience. But, as we were saying, of latter years Paris has welcomed the best and most fortunate of these.

A scandal can be a scandal even in Reno, as I have intimated. You cannot run a successful industry in these days without a semblance of virtuous management. And the management is virtuous—granted its principles. That is why Reno looks like a paradox until one has looked hard and long. There is cynicism in the Reno point of view: there is also the blessed, honest, liberty-loving West. When a certain bishop started to make trouble about easy Nevada divorces, the Reno Chamber of Commerce met for a serious session and devised ways and means to "put a stop to

the bishop's foolishness." The home market must be protected. If Nevada adopted the New York divorce laws overnight, in six months—I should not give it more—Reno would be about as alive and prosperous, probably, as Tonopah. The University of Nevada would still sit on its hill at the far end of the town; the races might last out a year or two. But there would be very few shops and garages left, and I fancy more than one bank would fail. Reno does live on divorce: there is no use blinking the fact. Your six months' residence must be *bona fide*—they are very stern about that. Though your grounds may be fantastic—one man accused his wife of keeping too many Persian cats and got his decree with no difficulty—grounds of a sort you must have. It is possible to eschew publicity entirely: to have your hearing and get your decree after hours, with none but the absolutely necessary witnesses. I know of cases where it has been done—though discreetly—and the opportunity of like privacy was definitely offered to me. But on the whole the requirements are so easy that it is not hard to keep them honestly. The divorces that are fought are the divorces one gets at home. If a woman can arrange to live in Nevada for six months, it means either that her husband is willing for her to divorce him or that he is, financially and practically, powerless to prevent her. Divorcées arrive in Reno with a lot of spade-work already done.

Those are some of the cynical aspects of the Nevada attitude. To people who take the Catholic point of view concerning marriage and divorce, all aspects of that attitude are cynical. But being, historically and prevailingly, a Protestant country, America at large accepts the fact of divorce and differs only on the procedure. You must, I think, grant that every sovereign state has a right to make its own divorce laws. There is a certain amount of agitation at present for a uniform divorce law; but it is to be hoped that American

common sense will prevent such a calamity. There is no perfect divorce law, since divorces differ from one another as much as marriages do: no code can cover all cases. In Nevada they believe that they are acting morally in making divorce easy. They do not make it any easier, really, than some other Western states—Washington, I believe, grants divorces on as "slight" grounds as does Nevada, the difference being that it demands a longer residence in the state. Nor when I say that they believe they are acting morally do I mean to imply the least admixture of hypocrisy. This is the Far West: strongly individualistic, unable to live in bonds, distrustful of community tyrannies, able to do without luxuries so long as it has elbow-room. These are the people who must have wide views from their windows, who cannot be choked or herded or coerced—heirs of frontier codes and adventurous attitudes.

"Why should any woman live with a man who makes her wretched?" one Reno woman asked me. She was not arguing about divorce in general: she was merely indicating, while telling me about the unhappy position of a friend of hers, that she could see no sanction in heaven or earth for undesired bondage. Oh, yes, these Reno citizens believe in easy divorce; they are subtly horrified at the notion of anyone, save a criminal, being kept in any way captive against his will. Like you or me they can censure a particular bit of human behavior; but on the principle of the thing they are absolutely fixed. The laws must be thus to protect people's freedom: if some people misuse the laws—well, isn't that true of all laws? "It's very decent," I mused ironically one day, concerning some quiet breaking of bonds. My companion—a very hard-boiled Nevadan—brought his fist down on the table. "Exactly!" he said. "Nevada is practically the only state in the Union where divorce *is* decent. In most states they make it so disgusting that decent people can hardly go through with it."

Even the convinced and honest Nevadan must admit that a good many of the divorces are not morally pretty, and are acquired without due regard to personal responsibilities and other people's rights. But I think he would always cling to his conviction that it was better to have the laws abused than to abolish them. Nor does he worry over abuses so much as an Easterner, simply because, being a Far Westerner, he is used to minding his own business. East of the Missouri no one minds his own business; but west of the Missouri people really do mind it. I do not mean to hold up the sovereign State of Nevada as an example of legal purism. Nor is it an especially law-abiding state. It is wild country, most of it, pretty well unredeemed to civilization. Perhaps the only laws they respect are the laws that give, not curtail freedom. They more or less ride steeplechases through the rest, I fear.

My own position in Reno was of course anomalous. Within twenty-four hours I had to take an attitude; and it was not easy. I know of nothing more difficult than to discuss, in any detail, a divorce that you have no intention of getting. My first caller—to whom I had, indirectly, an introduction—opened conversation by saying sympathetically, "You are here for the usual reason, I suppose"—and proceeded to tell me of an apartment, providentially vacated, into which I could move within the week. Of course I did not want an apartment: I replied vaguely that I was there to look about me, to see what the place was like. "You don't mean to say, I suppose, that your getting your divorce depends on the beauties of Reno?" was his perfectly reasonable query. I could not truthfully say that it did. He was baffled, I suppose; thought me squeamish, or inferred that I was not yet sure of my intentions—perhaps, of my "grounds." Even my confession that I sometimes "wrote" started no suspicion. When I declared that I was not getting a divorce at present, I was

merely urged to get it at the right season of the year, since the six months of winter are the depressing period for "residence."

I think the impression I left with a few kind residents of Reno was that of an erratic woman who did not know her own mind; who was uncertain, not so much about Reno as about divorcing at all: a woman with strange irrelevant curiosities—about old mining camps, prize fights, Nevada thoroughbreds, mountain scenery, dead magnates, and State universities—who thus sought surcease from perplexity and indecision. No disclaimer—not my middle-age itself—could save me from the assumption that in my own good time I should bring suit for divorce; for there were plenty of other middle-aged women in Reno. I am told that the lone female, arriving in the town, is apt to be besieged by touts for lawyers. I was not—doubtless because I was immediately provided with acquaintance, as the hotel lobby could witness. I was, I suppose, an enigma; especially after I refused the suggestion of a party at a roadhouse (I do not dance and was frankly determined not to experiment with Nevadan violations of the Volstead Act) and confessed that I had been, more than once, to visit the University of Nevada campus. Even on my last evening in Reno, when I was known to be taking the train presently for Salt Lake City, a judge was dragged into the hotel to make my acquaintance on the score that sometime I should be coming back to encounter him professionally. The implication was that social relations with the bench could do no harm. Again I disclaimed intentions of divorce; but so does Reno work upon one that even as I said my farewells, with the Overland Limited drawing into the station, I failed to disclose that chief among the "friends" I expected to see in Salt Lake was my husband. It would not have done: it would have been out of keeping. A woman may, I suppose, tarry in Reno without divorcing, but

no woman leaves Reno to keep an appointment with her own husband. Moreover, there was my underlying sense of guilt: a few people had been polite to me, considerate, hospitable, and I was bringing no return—no lawyer's fees, no house rent, no grocer's bills, no bank account even. I had done nothing for the Chamber of Commerce. I had never lied to them; but I had wronged their natural expectations. . . .

I said earlier that Reno was not only dull but sinister; and I have not yet defended the latter adjective. I have tried indeed to explain that Renoites themselves are as nice as anyone else; and that though divorce, in the last analysis, gives them their livelihood, they are convinced that they are doing a moral service to the community. They are giving people their freedom—and freedom is a good thing—very cheap. The publicity, the indecency, the cruelty of divorce proceedings in most of our states really inspire in the Nevadan soul a moral horror. You may not agree with them, but it is not their bland good conscience that makes the atmosphere sinister. Nor is it the divorcées, poor things! They are depressing, as cheap folk making of life a cheap adventure are always depressing, but they would not suffice of themselves to make the air of this pretty town miasmatic to the spirit. I knew within a few days that my acute discomfort, my sense of being cut off from all normality, sprang from deeper sources than the divorcées. "It's the races," I said to myself at first; "when the racing crowd has gone, the town will be itself." But eventually the races were over; the horses and their human satellites departed for other meetings; and the town remained the same. Give me any hotel lobby in the world rather than a hotel lobby in Reno; give me any Main Street rather than those trim and shaded avenues, any slum rather than Commercial Row. It is the male population of Reno—not the female—that makes one hire a motor car in despera-

tion and cross the ranges to other Nevadan desolations.

Men of Reno . . . I came very soon to capitalize them in my mind. "Men of Reno" . . . like the title of a tale—something, for quality, between Jack London and John Russell. They were the haunting horror, the poison in the town's blood. I am not speaking of the solid citizens: bankers, lawyers, merchants, and real-estate men. I speak of the drifting males who pace the sidewalks (you meet ten men to one woman, I think, on Reno thoroughfares), who clog the hotel lobbies, who pack aimlessly on street corners, who sit on the park benches above the Truckee River, regarding life with wandering, hostile eyes. I was in full tide of this disaffection when a divorcée told me that in four months she had never once, in daylight or after dark, had a discourteous word spoken to her by a man. That of course is the simon-pure West; and it was good hearing. I cocked my eye (we were dining together) at the other tables and the lobby just outside. I recalled a few news items in the *Reno Evening Gazette*. Aloud, I praised the West and the men of the West, harking back to old knowledge and old experience. There was no point in going into the subject with this simple soul. But I could not get rid, in my own mind, of "Gentle Alice Brown." You remember that her conscience was very tender in some matters but that she confessed with no qualms to having

. . . planned a little burglary and forged a little cheque
And slain a little baby for the coral on its neck.

The men of Nevada seemed to me, conceivably, Alice Browns. They would not be discourteous to a woman (in the streets of Reno: I fear the unpoliced desert tells another tale); but they might, just possibly, kill her for the cash she carried.

Let me bring other witnesses. "I don't know what these men do," said

one divorcée. "They never seem to do anything. They just hang about. Of course the place is wide open, and the men gamble all the time or play the races or dabble in mining stocks. I suppose they pick up enough money to live on, somehow, but they don't seem to have any business or any work to do." Indeed, eleven o'clock in the morning or three o'clock in the afternoon seem alike to the men of Reno. There are many Italians (greatly prosperous), there are Mexican laborers, there are casual Indians, there are broken men who look as if they had once carried a solitary pick into desolate and delusive regions; but the mass of men that throng the streets of Reno are unplaceable to the normal imagination. They have not the sharpness we associate with men who live by their wits; they cannot all be hangers-on of the Silver State Jockey Club; they look as unprofessional as they do unbusinesslike; and they have no physical "points" to recommend them. They look crude without strength and shifty without sophistication. I have never, anywhere, seen so many human beings whose heads and faces seemed to have gone wrong in the modeling—all very well until suddenly a nose, a chin, a mouth, or some part of the skull's surface met with quick disaster. The exceptions did nothing but point the moral. Your eyes do not leap to the sight of an average human being unless they have been full-fed with the sub-average. It was absurd, the inveteracy with which one jumped to the conclusion that any average-looking male was merely waiting about for his divorce.

Lest it should seem that the divorcée and I were experiencing an essentially feminine shiver over the Men of Reno, let me quote, practically verbatim (I jotted his words down while they were fresh), a clean upstanding young son of the West, himself a ranch-bred lad, now living (and working) in Reno—a quoter of Mark Twain and a devoted admirer of the manifold colors and

shapes of the high Sierras. We held much conversation while our business lasted, and to him I put the question:

"What do these men do?" I asked. "They don't look as if they did anything."

"No, ma'am, they don't. Except gamble. There's not more than a quarter of the men in Reno that work for a living."

"Well, but they have to live. And sometimes the luck must go against them."

"Yes, ma'am, sometimes it does, of course. Why, you can't walk along Commercial Row without getting held up half a dozen times, for a meal. But I'll tell you—luck may go against them, but they've always got an ace in the hole. Money's easy in Reno, and they can get away with things here they couldn't anywhere else. Why, while the races were on, you could—anybody could—walk into any place in town and get a drink right over the bar. There were two roulette wheels going and two faro banks, and craps everywhere—just as long as the races lasted. Of course after the races they shut them up."

"But if everybody knew it was going on, the officials must have known."

"Sure, they knew. But you understand—they wanted to keep all that money in town. They didn't want people to clear out. And the officials get something on the side. Law's easy, you know, in this state."

"Do these men live in Reno all the time or come in from everywhere else?"

"Well, they maybe have to light out for a month now and then, but they come back in as soon as they can—ride in on a freight car or something."

"And they never do anything?"

"I've seen fellows round here for years that never did a stroke of work. You understand they may get cleaned out, but they've always got an ace in the hole. Yes, ma'am, always got an ace in the hole."

"Well, but how . . ."

"Oh, they've always got *something*—

maybe an automobile, maybe a woman. . . . Yes, ma'am, they've always got an ace in the hole. They do lose an awful lot, but they seem to go right on. They spend an awful lot and lose an awful lot."

This conversation came at the very end of my stay; but I took it for reminiscent corroboration of all that I had been feeling for a fortnight about the Men of Reno. The same lad told me—his face had lighted up enthusiastically when I spoke of the beauty of the town's situation—that he loved the place so much he could not be happy away from it for three weeks. There was nothing sinister about *him*, and he obviously disapproved of what he called "wildcat laws." He thought it, for example, distinctly wrong that a man he knew should have been allowed, only ten years ago, to put five bullets into another man on the street (causing him to lose both legs) and get off with a mere fifty-dollar fine for disturbing the peace. Yet I do not think he would be censorious like his young counterpart east of the Great Divide.

I have always regretted that my courage failed me for Goldfield, my only consolation being that I should have had to make the decision to go, almost immediately, since Goldfield burned to ashes during my stay in Reno. I hesitated because I was very much alone. If I went to Goldfield (nearly three hundred miles away in the desert) I should have to spend a day and a night there, whether I liked it or not; and though I should never hesitate, however solitary, to visit a mining camp during the boom period, a mining camp after the boom is over is another matter. The real people have gone, and only the desperate, the weak, and the shifty remain. No, I did not venture the long lonely trip to Goldfield. I think I probably made a great mistake. Virginia City's past is so far away now that there is nothing left by which you can recapture it. Architecture in a mining camp is a matter of board shacks with-

out cellars—sometimes the house walls are made of old barrels ranged side by side—and the earth literally resumes it. Between Reno and Carson lies the site of a town that once held twenty thousand souls; and of the twenty thousand residents, the twelve grocery stores, and the thirty saloons, all that the eye can now detect is a dilapidated stone wall that once enclosed the cemetery. No Old Testament city detested of Jehovah ever disappeared more quickly and completely. These things have happened in other Western states—even in California. But most Western states have a present that overshadows, displaces even the recent past: they are going strong on lumber, crops, mines, or cattle. In Nevada there is very little natural wealth of another kind to make one forget, to re-channel the imagination for one. They had Virginia City; they had Goldfield and Tonopah; and even to-day, in the windows of Second Street in Reno, you can see the printed record of the output—staggering even to minds which the Great War has accustomed to vast arithmetic—of the Comstock Lode.

Over in Virginia City itself, when you buy soft drinks in the old Crystal Bar, you see pathetic and absurd mementos on the walls beyond the shadow of the famous and incredible chandelier: General Grant and his lady dressed to go down into the mines, chaperoned by John Mackay and Colonel Fair; James J. Corbett with a pompadour, looking (in spite of being stripped to the waist) like a Sunday School teacher—witnesses of the great days long past. In Virginia City you expect it: it is natural piety if nothing else. But that Reno should still offer you those figures as a matter of contemporary significance seems strange—until you realize that Reno has nothing to remember and nothing to hope for save another "boom"; and that Reno fortunes, as we said, came out of Goldfield—and came rather by gambling in mines, I gather, than by digging in them.

The prominent residents of Nevada have not prevailingly been of a particularly civilized type. On the other hand, Nevada has welcomed, as temporary sojourners, all sorts and kinds. Therefore something cosmopolitan has washed off on the Nevadan metropolis; which is, I suppose, why Reno differs so subtly from other Western small towns. Its equipment for life is no better than theirs; but it has seen all sorts of people and events and is surprised at nothing. The seekers for freedom are less vital, less impressive, less interesting than the seekers for gold; yet no doubt they help to save Reno from being Gopher Prairie. But its fate is the general Nevadan fate: no one stays. The visitors vanish with their freedom as of old they vanished with their gold—both the freedom and the gold are more pleasantly squandered elsewhere. Nevada has always been, for most people, a purely temporary habitation. Therefore it is different from every other sovereign state. Reno is rather a curious isolated phenomenon than a portent or a menace.

"Say," said the elevator girl to me one day (if I ever go back to Reno, it will be for the sake of conversing with the elevator girls), "did you see the Bowers Mansion? Gosh, I wisht I had the time to tell you about Old Man Bowers. Our family was awful intimate with the Bowers family." And she shot upwards, chewing gum violently and adjusting her pink-chiffon dress with one hand while she operated the car skilfully with the other. She never did have time, friendly soul! for the whole story. But I saw the Bowers Mansion; and between manicuring and gum-chewing and the consumption of sundaes in lieu of lunch, and the eternal operating of the car, I learned that "Old Man Bowers, he made his pile off the Comstock. Back in Virginia City his wife used to take in washing and tell fortunes. Then he died; and after he died his wife she lost her money, taking advice from the other world about investments. And

gosh! the place was sold for taxes, and look at it now."

The Bowers Mansion lies between Reno and Carson City and is run as a roadhouse—so far as I know, a respectable one. It accommodates Sunday-school picnics occasionally, and divorcées make up parties to lunch there. The fountain that used to run wine when Old Man Bowers entertained his friends does not even run water now; and the solid-gold doorknobs and window-fastenings have been, I believe, frugally removed. The swimming pools (hot and cold, for this is Nevada, where boiling water issues from every mountain-side) are less decorative than swimming pools would be if built by such a magnate now. But at least Old Man Bowers stuck by the source of his wealth; built his Folly where he could look at the single range that separated him from the Comstock Lode. The clairvoyant power that had been a financial help in Virginia City lost his widow her fortune later in the Mansion. But, luckily, Old Man Bowers had died.

At one end of Reno the University sits on a hill of its own, and you look out between buildings across perfect turf to desert foreground and the beautiful Sierras beyond. Anyone in Reno will tell you that the only money made in Nevada mines that has ever done any good to Nevada is Mackay money. All the others lost their fortunes or took them out of the state forever. On the campus, at the end of a vast greensward as exquisite as a bowling green, flanked on either side by birch-shaded brick walks, stands the Mackay School of Mines, and in front of it the Gutzon Borglum statue of John W. Mackay—open shirt, high boots, the left hand resting on his miner's pick, the right hand full of nuggets. The sculptor has not tried to give John Mackay any beauty or comeliness; but he has given him something that the men of Reno have not—a look, shall we say, of reality; of a preoccupation (however crude) with vital things. The big

bonanza kings came and went, much as Mackay came and went; the ore of the Comstock Lode has been sifted over the whole planet; but some of the Mackay gold has returned to Nevada—and Nevada does not forget.

No, to understand Reno you must plumb the heart of the sovereign State of Nevada. You must understand that Nevada is no more fertile or settled for the crowds that have come to scar her soil. They have filched her mineral wealth and died or departed. Neither crops nor commerce have resulted. Yet these are the people and the frenzies that have built the tradition of the state. A mining civilization is not a civilization at all: it is temporary, feverish, uncreative. The divorcées of Reno are no more impermanent than the men who "made" and left Virginia City and later Goldfield. Yet these men have built a legend not like other legends, and Nevada's lonely and forsaken eyes still glow with romance. You might irrigate every inch of Nevada soil and turn in thousands of homesteaders; but Nevada, I fancy, would still remember, and would infallibly despise them. It is certainly not a state that is going to put barriers in the path of the adventurer: it is not going to make divorce difficult.

Reno, you may be sure, would like to be another Goldfield if it could. It never will be, since the gold is not there. But if you care to know the municipal ideals of Reno, let me record for you a paragraph from an editorial published in the *Reno Evening Gazette* after the Goldfield fire:

It was the last of the great mining booms, and, as the Associated Press story says to-day, Goldfield was the last of the mining boom towns. There will be others perhaps in the years to come, but there will never be another Goldfield. There was a Virginia City, and there was an Alaskan rush, with their histories and memories. Tonopah is still flourishing, with its traditions still alive. Goldfield, with its wonderful history, was a kind of combination of Virginia City,

Tonopah, and Alaska all in one, and the men who lined its busy streets in the great boom from 1904 until 1909 and 1910 had come from all the world. It was a wonderful cosmopolitan gathering. There were men from Dawson and from Nome, standing talking to men from the tin mines of Malaysia and the gold depths of the Rand, or from the mines of China and the distant Ural. Bankers and financiers from every country in the world were there, too, looking for investment. Men whose names stood high in London registered at the Casey and later at the Goldfield hotel and beneath their names would be seen those of bankers who ranked high up on the bourse of Paris or that of Berlin. It was a great gathering.

That is the happy city Reno would, in her heart of hearts, like to be—not a Port Sunlight or a Spotless Town or a Brookline, Massachusetts, or a Los Angeles, California. It is reduced instead to being a divorce mart and to finding its romance in its scenery—as the divorcées apparently are reduced to being "aces in the hole" for the males so vividly characterized by my young friend. Being Western—though Nevadan—it does its civic duty in the matter of planting trees, making wide streets, erecting beautiful school buildings. Its provision for public entertainment is small—smaller than that made by most isolated American towns. I never quite got over wondering why. Probably, however, you must go into the recesses of the Nevadan heart to find any answer. You do not take trouble to provide yourself (or the stranger within your gates) with amusement that does not amuse you. Horse racing amuses them—and they have the meetings of the Silver State Jockey Club. Prize fights amuse them; and in their day they have had famous ones. Gambling amuses them, and good liquor—but the laws are inconvenient, evade them as you will. Religion and chautauquas do not amuse them. Books and music and pictures and plays do not amuse them—and there are none. Because the eyes of the world are upon them they must be discreet—and Reno

is, as we have said, a dull town for the law-abiding visitor. Even divorce does not amuse them much: it has merely come to be the most valuable local commodity. The civilized people make their own life after the fashion of their Western kind—with much dependence on the scenery and motor cars, and on simple outdoor pleasures. But the excitement they crave is not the excitement that women's clubs or church sociables or a municipal entertainment committee can give them. They do not put out their hands for such pleasures.

Far out Virginia Avenue, or within the purlieus of the University, or on the lovely parked heights where a few

citizens can greet both sunrise and sunset, "homes"—and, no doubt, quiet—prevail. But down in the town people talk all night in the streets. I never woke, at any hour, without hearing conversation under my windows. Probably there are always some of the men of Reno who have not, at the moment, a place to lay their heads. And of course night is the best time for shooting craps in dark alleys. (Curious little Reno! So pretty, so uneventful, so isolated—so very "small-town"—yet so manifestly linked to a brilliant and lawless past; and bearing for all eyes in the broad light of day the light flotsam of divorcées, the heavy jetsam of shifty, broken men.

IN A POWDER CLOSET

(Early Eighteenth Century)

AMY LOWELL

MY very excellent young person,
 Since Fate has destined you to play the role of coiffeur,
 You will permit that I admire your quite unsurpassed skill,
 Together with your polished, if a trifle over-pronounced, manners,
 Without by an inch lessening the distance
 Which the hazard of birth and the artifice of custom
 Have placed between us.
 My mirror tells me that you are a personable man;
 But, indeed, it is my own image in this same mirror
 Which most occupies my attention.
 That such a subject as I offer
 Engages you to put forth your best efforts
 Is only natural;
 That I should remain indifferent is equally so.
 Be satisfied that the exigencies of your profession
 Admit you to privileges from which a more exalted station would exclude you.
 My maid will, I am sure, be most happy to accommodate herself to your wishes,
 She is a worthy girl and entertains a not unjustifiable belief in my continued recognition of her services.
 The spray of heliotrope is well placed.
 Do you think a patch just here—at the corner of the eye?
 Ah, yes. It adds perceptibly.
 You are, Sir, a consummate artist.
 To-morrow at four I shall expect you.