



GIRLS OF THE GOLDEN WEST

Synopsis

ACT I

Scene 1: On the road to the Sierras

The miner Clarence King evokes the "driving, vigorous, restless population" of young men who have come to the gold country. Louise Clappe, who calls herself "Dame Shirley," on her way with her husband to Rich Bar, describes her astonishment at finding herself, a woman, in Gold Rush California. Undaunted even after falling off her mule, she transfers to a wagon driven by Ned, a recently freed slave. Ned describes his eventful life, including often being cheated because he is a Negro.

Scene 2: An encounter with Indian women

On their way to join with her husband in the mountains, Shirley and Ned encounter a group of Indian women. Despite their seeming wretchedness, Shirley is struck by the astonishing physical beauty of a girl of sixteen among them.

Scene 3: Rich Bar, Plumas County in the Sierras

At the Empire Hotel, the miner Joe Cannon tells Ah Sing, a Chinese prostitute, about his bride-to-be back home who has given up on him and married a butcher. Ah Sing has fallen in love with Joe, but after making furtive love to her, he suddenly bolts, leaving her alone and distraught. Shirley muses on the frantic absurdity of gold mining activity. Joe and Clarence, sloppy drunk, bemoan the news of Joe's being dumped by his betrothed back home in Missouri.

Scene 4: Late night at the Empire Hotel

While the miners sing a rowdy song, Josefa works the tavern tables, expertly flirting with and encouraging the customers. Ramón, dealing at the gambling table, describes the need to have a girl on hand when running a hotel. The miners are unaware that he and Josefa, both Mexican, are a couple. Left alone, the two recall their first love encounter.

Scene 5: The Coronation Dinner

Shirley wryly describes how she has managed to make her tiny and primitive log cabin comfortable, using discarded cans, bottles and boards for furniture. Ah Sing tells how she

was sold into prostitution as a girl and has now grown older and wiser. Joe confesses his love for her. Ned has prepared a "Coronation Dinner" to celebrate Shirley's presence in the camp, since to him she is "the queen." He lists the menu items in his lavish feast, and sings quietly about treating all creatures with respect and kindness.

ACT II

Scene 1: The Raven himself (Fourth of July in Downieville)

Independence Day celebrations feature Shakespearean recitations, including Dame Shirley's performance of Lady Macbeth's soliloquy. Ramón and Ned predict this could be a bad day for anyone who isn't white.

Scene 2: Pogrom

Ramón describes how gangs of white miners are violently forcing Hispanics off their claims. Coaxed to the stage, Ah Sing describes coming to America from China in search of a rich husband. When the crowd mocks and jeers her, Joe mounts the stage to defend her. To distract the unruly men, Clarence introduces Lola Montez, who performs her famous "Spider Dance." The audience turns violent again with anti-Chinese and anti-Mexican sentiments.

Scene 3: The Whipping

Clarence, wandering in the dark in a drunken stupor, recites Macbeth's "Is this a dagger which I see before me?" A mob publicly humiliates several Mexicans. Then all watch while Clarence brutally whips them. Shirley is appalled by the sight. Ned attempts to calm the mob, reminding them of the meaning of Independence Day.

Scene 4: The Stabbing

Ned's impassioned speech, a plea for dignity and fairness, enrages the white miners, and he barely escapes hanging as he flees, leaving Dame Shirley to lament the loss of her only real friend.

Josefa and Ramón sing of their love and the peril of being "foreigners" in the town. Joe Cannon, drunk and lost in the dark, comes upon Josefa, ridiculing her. As he tries to grab her, they struggle until she seizes a knife and stabs Joe in the chest, killing him.

Scene 5: The Hanging

By morning a wild and crazed mob has gathered around Josefa's cabin. When she appears, calm, dignified, and neatly dressed, she is given a hasty trial and condemned to death. The whole town watches the execution.

Epilogue

Dame Shirley, on her last day at Rich Bar, surveys her surroundings, with their strange mixture of ugliness and beauty, marveling that the "never-enough-to-be-talked-about sky of California drops down upon the whole its fathomless splendor."

For a more detailed version of the synopsis, please go to www.earbox.com/girls-golden-west/.