

“THE HEATHEN CHINEE”

The following poem was written by Bret Harte in 1871. Bret Harte was a writer and journalist who was generally sympathetic towards the Chinese, at least in so far as he saw hypocrisy in their treatment at the hands of people whose own parents and grandparents had experienced hostility upon immigrating to the United States from Ireland, Italy, and other places. This particular poem was immensely popular and widely circulated, costing only 25 cents. Although it was probably not Bret Harte’s intention, this short, frivolous poem brought the term “heathen” into popular usage to refer to Chinese and Chinese Americans. Harte did not invent the stereotypes in this poem, but because this poem reached such a wide audience it served to deepen and perpetuate Americans’ negative perception of the Chinese.

The poem tells the story of a card game played by an Irish man named William Nye, a Chinese man named Ah Sin, and the narrator. As you read the poem and look at the illustrations, keep in mind the following questions.

How are the Irish man and the Chinese man in this poem portrayed?

What stereotypic characteristics does each character have?

Which character does the narrator find most objectionable?

What does the narrator think about the actions taken by the other two participants in the card game? Does he hold them both to the same standard?

In the last verse the poem says certain traits are “peculiar,” or unique, to the Chinese. Does the rest of the poem support this?

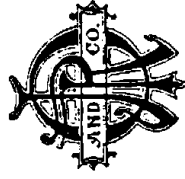
Do you think the author, Bret Harte, wanted his readers to think about how the Chinese were being judged by Americans?

What do you think people remembered most about this poem a few months after they had read it?

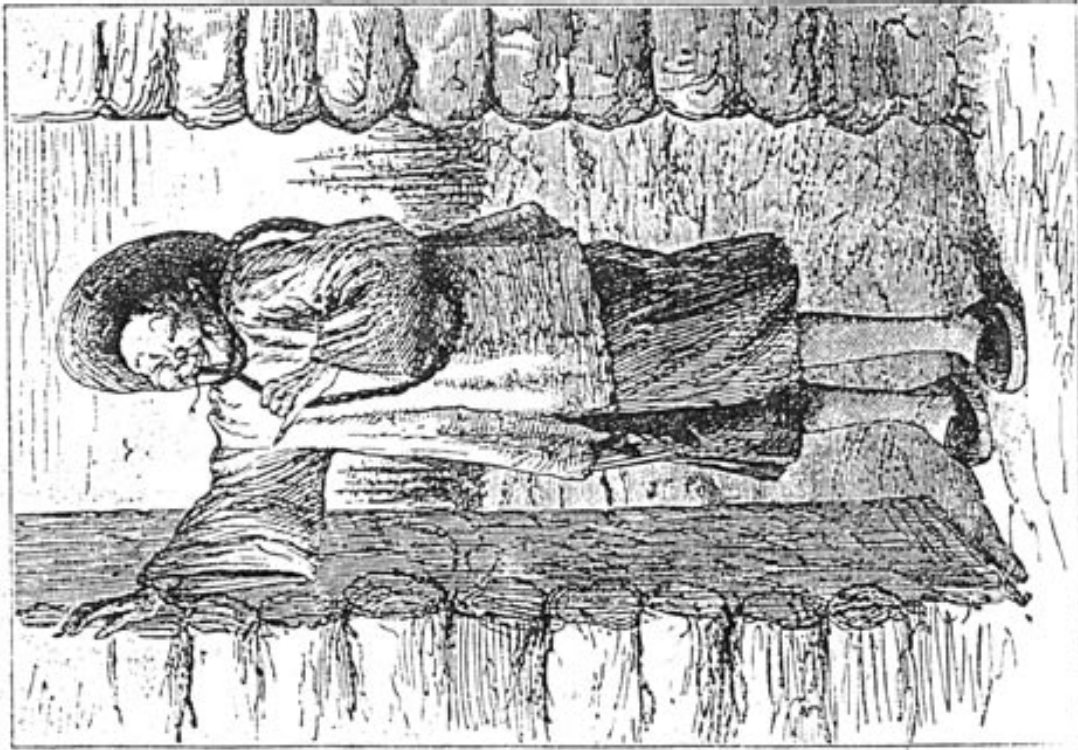
“THE HEATHEN CHINEE.”

BY
BRET HARTE.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY S. EYTINGE, JR.



BOSTON:
JAMES R. OSGOOD AND COMPANY,
LATE TICKNOR & FIELDS, AND FIELDS, OSGOOD, & CO.
1871.



AH SIN WAS HIS NAME

The Heathen Chinese.

It was August the third;
And quite soft was the skies;
Which it might be inferred
That Ah Sin was likewise;
Yet he played it that day upon William
And me in a way I despise.

Which we had a small game,
And Ah Sin took a hand:
It was Euchre. The same
He did not understand;
But he smiled as he sat by the table,
With the smile that was childlike and bland.



WHICH WE HAD A SMALL GAME

The Heathen Chinese.

Yet the cards they were stocked

In a way that I grieve,

And my feelings were shocked

At the state of Nye's sleeve:

Which was stuffed full of aces and bowers,

And the same with intent to deceive.

But the hands that were played

By that heathen Chinese,

And the points that he made,

Were quite frightful to see, —

Till at last he put down a right bower,

Which the same Nye had dealt unto me.



TILL AT LAST HE PUT DOWN A RIGHT BOWER

The Heathen Chinese.

Then I looked at Nye,
And he gazed upon me;
And he rose with a sigh,
And said, "Can this be?
We are ruined by Chinese cheap labor,"—
And he went for that heathen Chinese.

In the scene that ensued
I did not take a hand,
But the floor it was strewed
Like the leaves on the strand
With the cards that Ah Sin had been hiding,
In the game "he did not understand."



AND HE WENT FOR THAT HEATHEN CHINEE

The Heathen Chinese.

In his sleeves, which were long,
He had twenty-four packs, —
Which was coming it strong,
Yet I state but the facts;
And we found on his nails, which were taper,
What is frequent in tapers, — that's wax.

Which is why I remark,
And my language is plain,
That for ways that are dark,
And for tricks that are vain,
The heathen Chinese is peculiar, —
Which the same I am free to maintain.



THE SCENE THAT ENSUED