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Sophia Starling Arrives with John Sprockett in Gold Creek, Colorado Territory, Early 1874

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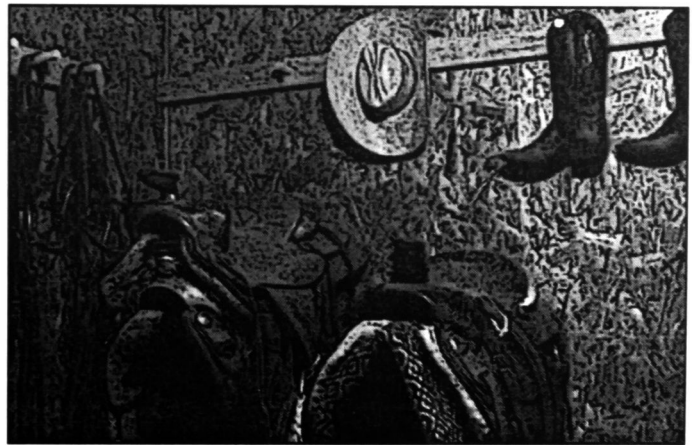
by Robert Cooperman

Though we've stumbled ten miles
in waist-high snow, I feel no gratitude
for this town, as foul as any hole
since apes, or angels, fell from trees,
or heaven, into caves dank as crypts:
a livery, a jail, and the saloon-hotel
that doubles as a courtroom
when the circuit judge isn't drunk.
Beds upstairs for exhausted miners,
and for poor drabs who have bartered
their hearts for money from strangers.

Meals are being served.
I cling to John's arm, a child
afraid to be splattered by bullies.
One terrific glare from Mr. Sprockett
and all eyes drop to their hands,
as men once trembled
at black welts of plague.

One night of no longer being a maiden
and the world seems deprived to me:
this fetid saloon—tobacco smoke
like the fumes of Hell—those beds
with barely a curtain instead of a decent door.
I fear Mr. Sprockett will try with force
what I yielded to for love.
He seemed dear as a play-panda last night,
not this walking scarred horror
infamous for the rage I've ignored.

I can barely touch my half-cooked meat.
"This flea-bag has one private room,"
Mr. Sprockett advises. "Use the lock."
I touch his hand in gratitude,
love flooding like Juliet's.
He pulls back as if from a scorpion.



Photograph by C. Michael McKinney

