

GHOSTS OF THE COMSTOCK

by Craig Sodaro

Characters

Eilley Orrum

John Orr

Nick Kelly

Old Virginny

Miner One

Miner Two

Henry Thomas Paige Comstock

Woman One

Woman Two

Pete O'Reilly

Pat McLaughlin

Sandy Bowers

Phillip Deidesheimer

Julia Bulette

Dan DeQuille

Mark Twain

John Mackay

Voice One

Voice Two

Adolph Sutro

William Chapman Ralston

William Sharon

Augustus Harrison

Mr. Fair

Mr. Flood

Mr. O'Brien

President Ulysses S. Grant

Setting

The play takes place in and around Virginia City from 1850 to 1902. A rocking chair down left represents the last year. EILLEY ORRUM sits knitting in the chair at rise. A few crude benches and/or paper mache rocks can fill the playing area, along with a small table. A collage of Virginia City or Nevada history would make a good background or mountains representing the area around Virginia City.

At Rise

EILLEY ORRUM, now quite old, enters, sits, and begins knitting. After a moment she looks up towards audience and squints.

EILLEY: Why, isn't that just the way of it? My old eyes failing, and I didn't even see you come in! You'll have to excuse an old woman for not getting up, but my welcome to Virginia City and Eilley Orrum's boarding house is no less sincere. I suppose you're like most folks ... you've come lookin' for excitement. But I'm afraid that's all passed now. It's 1902, and there are just a few of us old-timers left. And I suspect before long we'll be joining the other ghosts of Virginia City. **(Thinking back)** Ghosts ... hmmm ... seems like the whole story of Virginia City is nothing but the story of ghosts now ... ghosts from as far back as 1850, when the area was called Washoe ... along with a few other words I wouldn't care to repeat in mixed company! In that year Millard Fillmore became president when Zach Taylor died ... "Old Folks at Home" was a popular song ... and people were reading "The California and Oregon Trails" by Francis Parkman. It was only two years after the discovery of gold in California, and John Orr and Nick Kelly were heading west to Sutter's Mill near Sacramento.

(JOHN ORR and NICK KELLY enter carrying backpacks and shovels.)

NICK: How much longer you reckon, John?

JOHN: I suppose another two, three days.

NICK: Ain't this just the worst spot in the world? Nothin' but dust, alkali, rocks ... and wind!

JOHN: They say you gotta get through hell to get to heaven!

NICK: Well then, after this California better be full of soft, white clouds, beautiful ladies, plates of oysters, and gold nuggets as big as boulders!

JOHN: I believe the sun's got to you, Nick! We're gonna camp here in this canyon. The water looks good.

NICK: I reckon. **(Looking downstage)** You suppose we'll find anything in this creek?

JOHN: If gold can wash down the west side of the Sierras, I don't see any reason why it can't wash down the east side. **(They crouch down and begin to pan for gold. They pick up rocks, examine them, and toss them back into the creek.)**

NICK: You know? Some folks think we're all just crazy.

JOHN: That so?

NICK: Well, it ain't exactly been a pleasure trip out here from the East. We could be back in Iowa or Kentucky right now, comfortable, warm, with money in our pockets.

JOHN: That might be fine for some, but then there's us, ain't there? We ain't content with warm, dry, and workin' for somebody else. There's more to be had than that, but it won't come take you by the arm, Kelly.

You gotta go lookin' for it. Only folks with enough fight and determination's gonna find it. Look here ... it might be inside this slate rock! **(He holds up rock.)**

NICK (Laughing): You are a dreamer, Orr! A real, true dream --

JOHN: (Delighted, shocked) Kelly! Kelly, you look here!

NICK: What'd you find?

JOHN: It's gold, Nick! This here's gold, wrapped up in a chunk of slate!

NICK: It's gold all right! And where there's one nugget, there's bound to be more!

JOHN: Why, this here's one big gold canyon! Let's try over there!

(JOHN and NICK exit with packs.)

EILLEY (To audience): Their enthusiasm was a bit premature. Sure, that nugget brought \$8.35 ... but, during the summer, only bits of gold dust were found. They lost interest and headed on to California.

(OLD VIRGINNY enters with pan and his ever-present whiskey jug.)

VIRGINNY (To audience): 'Course there were some of us who still had this feeling about the canyon and the mountain behind us!

EILLEY: Why, if it isn't James Fennimore!

VIRGINNY: Now, please, Eilley ... call me Old Virginny. That's how I'm known ... named after my home state!

EILLEY: It's been quite a spell since you sat at my table gobblin' up my pork and beans.

VIRGINNY: And they were mighty good, too!

EILLEY: Tell me ... what's all this about you thinkin' the canyon and mountain were worth somethin'?

VIRGINNY: Us prospectors work by know-how and feel-how. And me and some of the other boys just had this feelin' about the area. No place could be just so plain ugly without hidin' something mighty important!

(MINER ONE enters carrying a pick.)

MINER ONE: Say, you the feller they call Old Virginia?

VIRGINNY: Sure am, stranger!

MINER ONE: I'm a mite green here. I've got my pick but not an inkling how to use it!

VIRGINNY: You *are* green! Now, son, the first thing you got to do is take that there pick and toss it into the nearest ravine, and then you'll be ready to work.

MINER ONE: What do I have to do?

VIRGINNY: We placer mine here. You see the gravel and sand bars there along the side of the creek? Well, that's where you'll find gold. Now, gold is a lot heavier than the rocks and gravel. So, what we do is shovel up some of the sand bar and dump it into a rocker. See, there's a screen on the bottom and we rock the box back and forth. Then the big rocks get caught and the fine stuff falls through. That's the stuff we wash down a "long tom." The heavier dust -- the gold -- gets caught in the small ridges at the bottom of the box. Nothin' to it!

MINER ONE: Why, neighbor, I sure appreciate the advice. Maybe I'll see you at the bank sometime, once we both strike it rich!

(MINER ONE exits.)

EILLEY: They always came with a lot of hope, didn't they?

VIRGINNY: And some of us held on to it!

EILLEY (Impressed): You sure did, didn't you?

VIRGINNY: 'Course we had cause. You see, word of mouth began to get around that two brothers, the Grosches, had found something mighty big ... bigger than anything in California ... somewhere around the hill. Nobody knew the truth, but some folks said the brothers had staked out claims and were headin' to San Francisco to make it all legal.

EILLEY: But they never made it, did they? One brother died of fever, and the other perished in a blizzard on his way.

VIRGINNY: Yup ... so we all wondered even more!

(COMSTOCK enters.)

COMSTOCK: Say, Virginny ... I heard you've been poking around the hill ... right near the head of the canyon.

VIRGINNY: Why Henry Thomas Paige Comstock! It's been a month of Sundays.

EILLEY: Old Pancake himself!

COMSTOCK: Howdy, Eilley. Sure have missed your pork and beans.

EILLEY: C'mon, now, Pancake. You didn't get your nickname for nothin'. If I saw you once a month it was too much. You lived on pancakes for breakfast, lunch, and dinner!

COMSTOCK: Couldn't be too careful about my money. And I can't be too careful about my claims.

VIRGINNY: What claims?

COMSTOCK: Oh ... well ... you know the poor Grosch brothers are gone now ... but they left me with a bit of information!

VIRGINNY: I hear it's all just a rumor. There's no big strike around here ... is there?

COMSTOCK: Then why don't you head back down the canyon?

VIRGINNY: The ore pockets are almost all played out. You know that.

COMSTOCK (Slyly): Well, there ain't nothin' around here. You can take my word for it. **(COMSTOCK struts off.)**

VIRGINNY (Looking after him, shaking his head): I don't trust that feller somehow. He knows somethin' he ain't tellin'! **(VIRGINNY exits.)**

EILLEY (To audience): Those boys were like two kids fightin' over a present that was all wrapped up ... and they didn't even know what was inside. And so it went ... them boys pickin' and pokin' all over the hill until January 28, 1859.

(VIRGINNY, MINER ONE, and MINER TWO enter and look for gold.)

MINER ONE: See there, fellers? The willows?

MINER TWO: Looks like an Indian spring.

VIRGINNY: So it does! Let's try it!

(COMSTOCK enters and sneaks around them unseen.)

MINER ONE: Say, look here! **(He holds up handful of dust.)**

MINER TWO: Well, I'll be! It's gold!

VIRGINNY: Gold! And fine stuff, too! Finest gold dust I ever saw!

MINER ONE: I'm gonna buy a big house and put it right here!

MINER TWO: I'm gonna head to San Francisco and have a fine time!

COMSTOCK (Appearing angrily): Get off my claim, boys!

VIRGINNY (Friendly): Why, Henry T.!

MINER ONE (Angrily): *Your* claim?!

MINER TWO: This find is ours! All ours!

COMSTOCK: We'll see about that.

(COMSTOCK and VIRGINNY, MINER ONE, MINER TWO exit in opposite directions.)

EILLEY (To audience): Comstock finagled his way into a share of the discovery, but that didn't stop others from coming to Washoe to try their luck. Before that discovery, there was a town a bit away from what the boys now began calling Gold Hill. Soon all the miners moved up to Gold Hill and was hangin' onto the mountain for dear life!

WOMAN ONE (Entering): And so were you, Eilley. How you ever got those miners to build your cabin at Gold Hill, I'll never know!

EILLEY: It pays to know the secrets of good home cookin'!

WOMAN ONE: Don't tell me ... your pork and beans!

EILLEY: Not to mention my biscuits! They'd melt in your mouth!

WOMAN ONE: 'Course, the men about these parts would just about do anything for us women folk.

EILLEY: That's right! You know, since I was just a small twig of a thing in Scotland, I knew I was destined for something great. As I saw that town beginning to carve out a spot for itself on Gold Hill, I felt like it was getting closer and closer!

WOMAN ONE: That must have been the way Pete O'Reilly and Pat McLaughlin felt in June, 1859, when they were digging by a spring near the head of Six Mile Creek looking for some water to rinse some strange-looking yellow sand from their pans.

EILLEY: Wouldn't you know, it was two Irishmen!

(PETE and PAT enter with pans and other equipment. They crouch down as if beside a stream.)

PETE: If this isn't the durndest looking stuff, Pat!

PAT: Aye, but wait a minute, Pete. Look there, how it shines!

PETE: I'll be Paddy's pig! It's gold, Pat! Gold dust right out of a leprechaun's pot!

(COMSTOCK enters.)

COMSTOCK: Well, if it isn't Mr. O'Reilly and Mr. McLaughlin hard at it! Any luck?

PETE: A wee bit, Mr. Comstock! Look here!

PAT: It's gold spun from an angel's hair!

COMSTOCK: Why, so it is. Let me be the first to congratulate you! And now, perhaps, you'll want to talk business.

PETE: What kind of business?

PAT: This is our claim, Comstock. We won't fall for the shenanigans you pulled on Old Virginny!

COMSTOCK: Did I say this isn't your claim?

PETE: Then it seems the only business we got is pullin' the gold out of this mountain!

COMSTOCK (Craftily): But, boys ... you need water. Lots of it!

PAT: So? Look at it! We got plenty!

COMSTOCK: That's right. For a price. See, boys, I own the water rights. Bought it from a feller named Caldwell.

PETE (Angrily): But ... but!

COMSTOCK: I'll be happy to allow you all the water you like.

PAT: In exchange for what?

COMSTOCK: A share in whatever you got here.

PETE (Furiously): That's robbery!

COMSTOCK: That's business! Either sign over a share or you'll have to haul your water by the bucket!

(Angrily, PETE and PAT follow COMSTOCK off.)

EILLEY (To audience): Needless to say, the boys signed over a share to Comstock.

(MINER ONE enters)

MINER ONE: They named the place Ophir. Ain't that just the stupidest name you ever heard of?

(WOMAN ONE enters from the opposite side.)

WOMAN ONE: Shows what you know! If your eyes ever saw a page of the Bible you'd know that they named the mine after an African country from which gold and silver were taken as gifts for Solomon.

MINER ONE: Then it was a good name because O'Reilly and McLaughlin were soon washing \$50 to \$75 a day from a single tub of crushed ore! 'Course everybody began to call it Comstock's Lode, seein' as how he was the partner with the biggest mouth!

WOMAN ONE: And that's just about the time you met Mr. Bowers, wasn't it, Eilley?

EILLEY: Sure was! (**Dreamily**) He walked right into my boarding house one day ... tall, thin, and shy!

(MINER ONE and WOMAN ONE exit as SANDY BOWERS enters.)

SANDY (**Shyly**): Why, Ma'am ... I believe you've got a sign in the window ...

EILLEY (**Rising, businesslike**): That's right. I got a bed upstairs ... you have to share it with two other fellers. And I serve the best pork and beans this side of the Pacific.

SANDY: Sounds fair to me.

EILLEY: I s'pose you're into prospecting?

SANDY: Got a couple of claims, and I've been working steady.

EILLEY: Don't sell out. Be patient. I've been trying to tell the boys not to sell too quick, but they just don't want to listen. Some of 'em pay me in claims when they're low on cash. See here? (**Pulls claims from her apron.**)

SANDY: I'm too smart for that, Ma'am. I won't let nobody cheat me out of my share to a mine. No, sir. I aim to hang onto my claims. See here? (**He pulls out his claims. EILLEY notices one.**)

EILLEY: I'll be! You know we got claims right next to each other, Mr... Mr...

SANDY (**Embarrassed**): Bowers, Ma'am. Lemuel Sanford Bowers. But my friends call me Sandy. I'll just go take my things upstairs, if you don't mind. (**SANDY exits.**)

EILLEY (**Dreamily**): Mind? Why should I mind? (**Businesslike to the audience**) As you can see, I was quite taken with Mr. Bowers.

(WOMAN TWO enters.)

WOMAN TWO: And in due time -- two months -- you and Sandy got yourselves hitched!

EILLEY: A wedding was something Gold Hill didn't see often!

WOMAN TWO: It lasted from morning to night!

(WOMAN TWO exits.)

EILLEY (**To audience**): At the same time, a new discovery surfaced -- literally!

(MINER ONE enters holding a black rock. He studies it.)

MINER ONE: I never seen so much black rock. Makes it mighty tough to get the gold out!

(HARRISON enters wearing cowboy hat.)

HARRISON: Augustus Harrison's the name, sir. You just mentioned black rock. I know something about your black rock.

MINER ONE (Handing HARRISON the rock): Got any suggestion as to how we can get rid of the stuff? We'd be mighty obliged!

HARRISON (Holding the piece of rock): Sir, this is something you don't want to get rid of! I took some of your black rock over to Grass Valley and got it assayed. What I hold in my hand is pure silver!

MINER ONE (With a laugh): Are you all right, Mr. Harrison!

HARRISON: This is silver, I tell you!

MINER ONE (Nervously): But ... but there's tons of this stuff already pulled out of the Ophir Mine! It's piled up into a mountain!

HARRISON: A mountain of silver!

MINER ONE: And the walls inside the mine shaft are thick with it!

HARRISON (Shouting right and left): Silver! Silver by the ton!

MINER ONE (Shouting the same): Silver! Silver by the ton! Washoe or bust! Rush to Washoe! Your dreams will come true!

(MINER ONE and HARRISON exit, while WOMEN ONE and TWO cross from the opposite way.)

WOMAN ONE: Silver! Imagine that!

WOMAN TWO: I'm gonna find *me* a rich husband!

(OLD VIRGINNY crosses from opposite direction as COMSTOCK enters opposite.)

VIRGINNY: Nothin' like it ever before ... no, siree!

COMSTOCK (Proudly): Head to the Comstock Lode!

(As COMSTOCK passes in front of OLD VIRGINNY, the prospector sticks his tongue out.)

EILLEY (To audience): And come they did ... by the thousands. They threw up their tents, carved caves into the side of Gold Hill, or slept under the stars. They were as rough and tough a gang of men as ever congregated in one spot. And they called the town Silver City.

VIRGINNY (Enters with a whiskey bottle): Silver City ... HA!

EILLEY: Evenin', Virginny. Looks like you've been drinking again!

VIRGINNY (Sadly, carrying a whiskey bottle): It's all I got left, Eilley. I came out here with such high hopes ... and you know I'm the best placer miner around here! I had two good claims ... includin' a share in the Ophir. But I got cheated! I got nothin' left now ... but you know? I ain't gonna leave this place without leaving my mark! **(Throws his whiskey bottle on the ground.)**

EILLEY: What're you doin'?!

VIRGINNY: I'm baptizing this place Virginia! Dear old Virginia, my home. And you tell 'em all, Eilley! Nobody can cheat me out of that! This place is Virginia from now on! **(VIRGINNY rises proudly and exits.)**

EILLEY (To audience): And so it was. Silver City became Virginia City overnight.

(SANDY races on.)

SANDY (Excitedly): Eilley! Eilley! There's a feller from San Francisco who says he wants to give us \$400,000 for our twenty feet of claim in the new silver mine!

EILLEY: \$400,000! My, Sandy ... but that's a powerful lot of money.

SANDY: We could buy the mansion you're always dreamin' about ... and maybe a trip to Europe!

EILLEY: The answer's no, Sandy.

SANDY (Dumbfounded): But, Eilley! You want me to say no to almost half a million dollars?

EILLEY: I said no, and I meant it!

SANDY (To audience): Well, now ... Eilley always knew best, and this time it was no different. We hung onto our claim ... and soon it was yielding a million dollars a year! We had enough money to throw at birds.

EILLEY (Dreamily): So we did, Sandy. We built our mansion and headed off to Europe to have tea with the Queen.

SANDY: We never *did* catch up to her ...

EILLEY: But what a grand time we had!

(SANDY exits as WOMAN ONE enters.)

WOMAN ONE (To audience): But most folks took more simple pleasures in Virginia City!

(MINER ONE enters.)

MINER ONE: No time for pleasure, Ma'am. We're working in the mines day and night ... workin' to find that big bonanza! That big strike!

WOMAN ONE: Bigger than the Ophir and the other strikes?

MINER ONE: It's down there ... we all know it!

(WOMAN TWO enters.)

WOMAN TWO: But there were problems in pulling all that gold and silver out of the mountain.

WOMAN ONE: Pulling so much out left a big hole inside the mountain!

MINER ONE: Giant caves honeycombed Gold Hill. Soon the houses and buildings on top began to sag as the weight of Virginia City grew.

MINER TWO (Entering): Cave-ins occurred, miners were killed ... and many were injured.

WOMAN TWO: Couldn't you shore up the shafts with timbers?

MINER ONE: We tried, but the caves were so big and the weight was so great, the timbers just couldn't take it ... they split like match sticks.

WOMAN ONE: But something had to be done! My husband was down there day in and day out. I couldn't live with that terrible fear! That one day --

(A whistle blows.)

MINER ONE: Another cave in !

MINER TWO: Quick! Bring picks and shovels!

(PHILLIP DEIDESHEIMER enters with blueprints and pencil as MINERS ONE and TWO exit.)

WOMAN ONE (Desperately): Mr. Deidesheimer! You're the superintendent of the Ophir ... you must *do* something!

WOMAN TWO: The entire mountain will collapse one day! **(WOMAN ONE and TWO exit.)**

PHILLIP (To himself, calculating): It would seem that if we could ... hmm ... yes!

EILLEY (To audience): Mr. Deidesheimer was a very smart man and understood things like physics and engineering -- things the rest of us couldn't even spell!

PHILLIP: But it's so simple, Eilley! We build boxes of timbers ... each box like a separate, powerful unit. We build the box eight feet high by eight feet deep. Then we put another box the same size on top and so on. Each box is strong, and many strong timber boxes will create a structure inside the mountain that will hold it up. Not only that ... we can build safe tunnels, install pulleys so we can raise and lower supplies easily ... and guarantee the safety of the miners!

(PHILLIP exits making calculations.)

EILLEY (To audience): See what I mean about smart? Soon the entire inside of Gold Hill was being square-set timbered. And that made profits that jingled in the pockets of mine owners and workers alike,. 'Course there was always somebody willing to take a little of that cash off your hands!

(WOMAN ONE entering with laundry basket.)

WOMAN ONE: Wash! I'll take in your dirty duds, miner, and have 'em clean for you tomorrow morning!

(She exits crossed by MINER ONE.)

MINER ONE: Buy your shovels, picks, and pans right here. There's more gold and silver out there to be had if you can dig it out!

(MINER ONE exits as WOMAN TWO enters.)

WOMAN TWO: Fresh baked chicken dinner, just like your wife used to make! C'mon in and try our apple pie ... only two bits a slice!

(WOMAN TWO exits as MINER TWO enters.)

MINER TWO: Step right up, men! I've got the finest cotton work shirts for only five dollars apiece! **(MINER TWO exits.)**

(JULIA BULETTE enters wearing a lavish dress and feather boa.)

JULIA: C'mon in, boys! Drinks are on the house!

EILLEY (To audience): And, of course, there was Julia Bulette, Virginia City's famous hostess who entertained the miners.

JULIA: Why, evenin', Miss Eilley. It certainly is a beautiful sunset tonight, isn't it?

EILLEY: Aside from me, you're the one person around here who appreciates the beauty.

JULIA: Oh, I do! I'm from New Orleans where the buildings are so high and the streets are dark ... and there's a foul smell drifting in from the riverfront. I do love these open spaces and the view from my porch.

EILLEY: I see your flowers are doing nicely.

JULIA: Aren't they, though? I like to think I've got the nicest garden in Virginia City.

EILLEY: You've got the only garden, Julia. And you've got crystal chandeliers in your parlor, I hear tell ... and champagne that's even chilled.

JULIA: Champagne isn't good unless it's chilled, Eilley. Anyway, the boys who stop by for a drink are tired after their long day in the mine. They want a bit of refinement ... a bit of civilization.

EILLEY: You are an angel, Julia. Especially after the way you nursed the sick during the last epidemic.

JULIA: There were so many sick men, and no one else to care for them.

EILLEY: Well, you've got the respect of all Virginia City.

JULIA: That's all I ever wanted, Eilley. The jewels and furs I've got ... well, they aren't nearly as precious as being made an honorary of Fire Company #1.

EILLEY: That honor ain't bestowed on too many women.

JULIA: I'm the only one, Eilley.

(MINERS ONE and TWO enter and sheepishly approach JULIA.)

MINER ONE: Evenin', Miss Julia ... on behalf of Fire Company #1, we got something we'd like to ask you.

JULIA: Go right ahead, boys!

MINER TWO: How'd you like to be Queen of the Fourth of July parade this year?

JULIA: Why, gentlemen ... I'd be honored. Come into my parlor and give me the particulars ...

(With a MINER on each arm, JULIA exits.)

WOMAN ONE (Entering opposite side): Unfortunately, that would be Julia's last parade.

WOMAN TWO (Entering): A stranger in town strangled her that winter and stole her jewels and furs.

EILLEY: Oh, there were bad fellers aplenty! 'Course, all these stories were duly reported in the most famous of all western newspapers, the *Territorial Enterprise*.

WOMAN ONE: Mr. Jernegan and Mr. Janes founded the paper in 1858 and moved it to Virginia City in 1860.

WOMAN TWO: Joe Goodman and Dennis McCarthy bought the paper and promptly made it a success.

WOMAN ONE: Not only did they print the news ...

WOMAN TWO: They printed rumors, speculation, and downright lies!

WOMAN ONE: On days when there was real news, you could trust what the *Territorial Enterprise* had to say.

WOMAN TWO: But on days when there wasn't any news, Goodman and McCarthy let their reporters make up stories of interest to the rough and tumble mining crowd.

WOMAN ONE: Two reporters became world-famous. One was a feller named William Wright ... otherwise known as Dan Dequille.

(WOMEN ONE and TWO cross DAN DEQUILLE as he enters opposite. He tips his hat as they exit.)

DAN (To audience): My specialty was mining, pure and simple. I knew just about everything there was to know about the Comstock Lode and the business of running the mining operations. But that wasn't what the folks wanted to read about. So, like other good reporters of the day, I took a little poetic license and made up a few stories.

(MINER ONE enters with newspaper.)

MINER ONE: Say! You see here where this feller found the Traveling Stones of Pahranaagat Valley?!

(MINER TWO enters with newspaper.)

MINER TWO: Says the stones actually move around by themselves!

MINER ONE: Maybe it's some kind of curse!

MINER TWO: Or maybe it's done by ghosts!

MINER ONE: Either way ... if the *Enterprise* says it's so ... it's so!

(MINERS ONE and TWO exit.)

DAN (Proudly): P.T. Barnum, the fellow who started up the big circus, actually offered me the astounding sum of \$10,000 for the traveling stones. But, being an upstanding member of the newspaper profession, I declined. After all, my traveling stones were nothing more than the product of an active magnetic field and an overly active imagination!

(MARK TWAIN enters with a newspaper.)

MARK TWAIN: Don't go being so free with the secrets of the trade, Dan.

DAN: Why, Sam! Sam Clemens!

MARK TWAIN: Better call me by my "nom de plume," Dan ... I wouldn't want anybody knowing my true identity!

DAN: You're absolutely right, Mr. Twain ... Mark Twain.

MARK TWAIN (To audience): It was rough around here in those early years. Editors and reporters were prime bait for being beat, robbed, or strung up, if somebody didn't like what they wrote. So, we all adopted pen names. I got mine from my river boat days.

DAN: You never intended to be a reporter, did you, Mark?

MARK TWAIN: Shucks, no! I was a prospector like every other self-respecting bum out here! But, as luck would have it, I didn't have any luck! So I wrote an editorial lambasting a judge in these here parts. Joe Goodman liked what I had to say and hired me.

DAN: We learned reporting by doing!

MARK TWAIN: I recall my first day I got told to find some news. I roamed Virginia City from one end to another, but not a thing happened. A squirrel didn't even cross my path.

DAN: So, Joe told you to go out and make some news!

MARK TWAIN: He said go write about the arrival of the freight wagons from San Francisco. But only one broken down buggy arrived that day.

DAN: So, what'd you do?

MARK TWAIN: Did what any self-respecting *Enterprise* reporter would do. I wrote how sixteen wagons rolled into town laden with the treasures of an Arabian prince! I tell you, Dan ... I learned how to write fiction while working at the *Territorial Enterprise*!

(JOHN MACKAY enters.)

MACKAY: Say, feller ... I'll take a copy of that paper. (TWAIN hands MACKAY the newspaper.)

DAN: Don't I recognize you from the Kentuck Mine?

MACKAY: Mackay's the name. John Mackay. I work the mine, sure as you're standing there.

MARK TWAIN: A pity it isn't a going concern at present.

MACKAY: Well, now, sir ... they've been payin' us in shares in the mine, so I can't say we're going entirely without.

DAN: That's pretty risky.

MACKAY: Life's pretty risky, sir. Good day to you! (MACKAY exits.)

MARK TWAIN: Odd fellow. Doesn't seem to have the drive most of the men around here do ... or the fear.

DAN: Maybe he'll have some luck. Well, Eilley ... it's time we headed over to the hangin'.

MARK TWAIN: Evenin', Eilley! (DAN and MARK TWAIN exit.)

EILLEY (Calling to them): And try and get the facts straight this time, boys!

VOICE (From offstage): Fire!

ANOTHER VOICE (From offstage): Fire!

MINER ONE (Enters excited): Man the hoses! **(Runs off stage.)**

MINER TWO (Enters excited): I'll get the pumps! **(Runs off stage.)**

WOMAN ONE (Enters excited): Fire! Hurry! Man the buckets! **(Runs off stage.)**

EILLEY: Virginia City burned down three times during her exciting history. And no wonder! Buildings made of wood, tar paper, and canvas lighted by kerosene made a wonderful kindling ... and when those Washoe Zephyrs roared down the mountain, well, there was no stopping the flames ... no matter how much water we poured onto them. 'Course, each time the town burned up, it rose from the ashes like a phoenix ... bigger and more beautiful -- and I use the term loosely -- than before! You know ... flames caused a lot of problems and heartache ... but water caused even more!

(MINER ONE and MINER TWO enter with picks.)

MINER ONE: We've gone as deep as we can.

MINER TWO: You've struck water again?

MINER ONE: It's rushing through our last tunnel. The men just got out in time.

MINER TWO: Hard to believe, in a land so dry, there's so much water underground. So much we can't even get the silver and gold out!

MINER ONE: We've tried pumps!

MINER TWO: But even the new 120 horsepower steam pump they put in at the Ophir isn't powerful enough to do much good.

MINER ONE: You mean there's no way to get all that silver and gold out?

MINER TWO: We're just going to have to close up.

MINER ONE: But this could mean the end of Virginia City! The Comstock Lode might be bust!

(ADOLPH SUTRO enters holding a map.)

SUTRO: Now just a moment, gentlemen!

MINER TWO: Mr. Sutro ... you've got an idea?

SUTRO: But, of course! I'm not a genius for nothing! It stands to reason that we can drain the water out of the mountain and into the Carson River. That's due east of Virginia City and the Comstock Lode. This will allow us to dig 1,600 feet deeper into the mountain without having to pump!

MINER ONE: But, Mr. Sutro ... how do we drain the water out of a mountain?

SUTRO: Poke a hole in it ... just like a blister.

MINER TWO: How do you ... poke a hole in a mountain?

SUTRO (Proudly): You dig a tunnel, my boy! A tunnel!

MINER ONE: But it will have to be almost four miles long!

SUTRO: 20,145 feet to be exact!

MINER TWO: And it'll cost a fortune!

SUTRO: \$4,500,000!

MINER ONE: It's ridiculous!

MINER TWO: It's foolhardy!

SUTRO: Are you with me?

MINER ONE: Why not?!

SUTRO: Now all we have to do is find somebody with \$4,500,000!

(MINERS ONE and TWO exit with SUTRO.)

EILLEY: While Adolph Sutro, the engineer, tried to raise funds for his tunnel, Virginia City fell on hard times. You see, as the men worked, they pulled out what gold and silver was hidden in the mountain. And one by one the mines were played out ... that means they became empty.

SANDY (Entering, sadly): Even we found that out, didn't we, Eilley? Our mine lost its vein.

EILLEY: And you, you poor feller ... you had to dig and dig day and night to try and find enough gold or silver to keep us going.

SANDY: But a body can only work so long.

EILLEY: You got that cough ... and then one day ... well, Sandy Bowers ... you left me with a terrible mess!

SANDY: I'm right sorry for that, Eilley. I didn't think we'd ever spend *all* our money.

EILLEY: I made do. I always could. I guess I never really did run out of luck.

SANDY: How so?

EILLEY: You know our beautiful mansion out on Lake Washoe? The bankers decided nobody'd buy it, so they thought to raffle it off to pay our bills. Well, I took the last of my cash and bought a thousand tickets, and I won the place fair and square!

SANDY: Now, don't that beat all!

EILLEY: I turned the place into a resort and did right fine.

SANDY: I always knew you'd fare well, Eilley. And my, but didn't we have a fine time while it lasted! A fine time!

(SANDY exits as RALSTON and SHARON enter.)

EILLEY: I guess we all win some and lose some. But there are folks that believe you just gotta win all the time and not necessarily fair and square. They want to win no matter what!

RALSTON (Haughtily): I want control of the Comstock, Mr. Sharon.

SHARON: They say it's bust.

RALSTON: Nonsense! The biggest bonanza of all still lies somewhere in that mountain!

SHARON: You already own the Bank of California ...

RALSTON: But we're nothing without the Comstock. And there must be a way of grabbing up every claim we can!

SHARON (Slyly): Well, perhaps there *is* a way. You realize, now that it's 1864, nobody's got much money in Virginia City. Perhaps I could go and set up a branch of the bank in Virginia City, and then here's what I'll do -- **(SHARON whispers to RALSTON.)**

EILLEY: Meet Mr. William Chapman Ralston, a Californian who thought Comstock cash ought to build San Francisco into the Paris of the Pacific ... and his sly, conniving partner, William Sharon.

RALSTON: Perhaps, Mr. Sharon, your scheme might just work!

(RALSTON exists as SHARON sets up table with two chairs. MINER ONE enters nervously.)

MINER ONE: Mr. Sharon?

SHARON (Sitting down): Welcome to the new branch of the Bank of California. How can we help you? **(Indicates to MINER ONE to sit and he does.)**

MINER ONE: It's this bust that's going on ...

SHARON: Merely temporary, I'm sure.

MINER ONE: Our mine is operating, but we're not pulling out enough gold or silver to pay the men. Our geologists say we're about to strike a new bonanza, if we can just hang on a little longer.

SHARON: How much do you need to keep going?

MINER ONE: Why, Mr. Sharon, I came all ready to ...

SHARON: Beg? No ... the Bank of California is behind you and will see you through this crisis.

MINER ONE: Thank you, Mr. Sharon! It's good doing business with you!

(MINER ONE signs a paper, shakes hands with SHARON, and then exits.)

MINER TWO **(Entering)**: Only five percent, Mr. Sharon? How can you loan money for that?

SHARON: This is the Bank of California. We can do as we please!

MINER TWO: Well, I thank you, and my men thank you! You've seen to it we can stay open until our next bonanza. Good day, sir.

(They shake hands. MINER TWO exits.)

EILLEY: Soon Sharon had almost every mining company working the Comstock in his debt. The next step of his plan was easy.

(MINER ONE enters. SHARON moves to him.)

SHARON: I'm certainly glad you stopped by, sir.

MINER ONE: Your message sounded urgent.

SHARON: I'm afraid you're behind in your payments.

MINER ONE: But, Mr. Sharon ... we've been paying what you required.

SHARON: The directors of the bank, however, have told me that we are going to have to extract a higher figure of repayment from you -- effective immediately!

MINER ONE: But, Mr. Sharon! We're paying everything we can!

SHARON: It's out of my hands. Either pay the bank what you owe, or we shall be forced to foreclose.

MINER ONE: We'll be ruined! We trusted you, Mr. Sharon! We trusted you with our fortunes!

SHARON: This is business, sir. I'm sorry.

(MINER ONE exits while SHARON exits the opposite way.)

EILLEY: It wasn't long before William Sharon had control of most of the mining in the area except for a chunk of the Kentuck Mine which was being bought up by a group of men who wouldn't give in to Sharon or Ralston.

(FLOOD, MACKAY, O'BRIEN, and FAIR enter and group around the table on which they put a lantern.)

FAIR: I say we sell out!

MACKAY: I know it's down there, Fair!

FAIR: But how much longer? It's hard holding onto nothing!

FLOOD: I say we listen to John here. He knows mining. He knows the Comstock.

FAIR: And what do you know? You two are nothing but lunch saloon owners from San Francisco.

MACKAY: Fair! Enough of this! We're partners.

FAIR (Thoughtfully): That we are.

O'BRIEN: We can trust John, here.

MACKAY: It's a waiting game. The Comstock's not played out yet. There's plenty for all of us if we're patient.

(The men exit.)

EILLEY (To audience): Soon John Mackay was the superintendent of the Kentuck Mine, but everyone still held his breath waiting for the big bonanza that everybody figured was down there somewhere. Slowly but surely, Mackay and Fair took over control from Ralston by buying stocks in Ralston's mines.)

(RALSTON and SHARON enter.)

SHARON: My information is that the Con Virginia and California Mines are virtually worthless. If we offer them for sale, we can make up for some of your recent losses, Mr. Ralston.

RALSTON: Then sell! Sell as quick as you can!

(RALSTON moves upstage as FLOOD and O'BRIEN enter.)

FLOOD: Stock in the Con Virginia? I'll take a thousand shares.

SHARON: I'm sure it will show promise, sir! **(SHARON snickers.)**

FLOOD: That's what I hear tell. Thank you, sir!

(FLOOD exits and O'BRIEN steps up to SHARON.)

SHARON: And how can I help you, sir?

O'BRIEN: I went to a fortune teller the other day, sir. She said to put two thousand dollars into the California Mine.

SHARON (Pleased): She did, eh? Well, I'm sure we can oblige her!

O'BRIEN (Handing SHARON money): Here you are!

SHARON: A pleasure doing business with you. (**FLOOD and O'BRIEN exit as SHARON moves up to RALSTON**) You see, Mr. Ralston, how stupid some of these people are? It almost makes me feel like I'm taking advantage of them! (**They laugh as they exit.**)

EILLEY (To Audience): But, in the late fall of 1873, Mackay and Fair invited Dan DeQuille down into a section of the Con Virginia Mine.

(**MACKAY and FAIR enter holding lanterns. DAN follows with FLOOD and O'BRIEN.**)

DAN: Can't imagine what you boys wanted to show me down here at the bottom of this mine shaft!

MACKAY: We figured you'd know best, Dan. Just have a look around!

(**MACKAY and FAIR hold up lanterns.**)

DAN (Looking around, shocked): Well, I'll be, boys! I'll be! This is it! This is the big one!

O'BRIEN: You ever seen so much silver?

DAN: That corridor ... it's what? A hundred and twenty --

MACKAY: Hundred and forty feet long.

FAIR: And solid silver!

DAN: And the ceiling ... it's eighteen --

MACKAY: Twenty feet high.

DAN: It's solid silver, too?

FLOOD (Proudly): Like my Aunt Margaret's teapot!

MACKAY: Assayed at \$632 per ton!

DAN: You're the new kings, boys! The Bonanza Kings!

(**All the men exit.**)

EILLEY: Within two years, William Sharon had managed to get himself elected Senator from Nevada, then proceeded to destroy his old partner -- who lost everything when his bank failed. In August, 1875, the body of William Chapman Ralston, once the richest man in California, was found floating near Alcatraz Island. Meanwhile, the Bonanza Kings went on to make a fortune, as over a billion dollars worth of silver was pulled from their mines.

WOMAN ONE (Entering): That's the way it's always been, Eilley ... boom or bust.

WOMAN TWO (Entering): Champagne and caviar one day ...

WOMAN ONE: Beans and bacon the next.

EILLEY: Eventually modern mining methods stripped out every last silver and gold nugget from the Comstock Lode.

(PRESIDENT GRANT and ADOLPH SUTRO enter. The women clap.)

SUTRO (Proudly): Well, Mr. President, you have walked the entire length of the tunnel, and we can now consider it dedicated.

PRESIDENT GRANT: It is a remarkable structure, Mr. Sutro ... one you can be proud of, as indeed the entire state of Nevada can be proud! I am sure it will aid the future of mining in the area and will help the many mining companies find still untold riches beneath Mount Davidson.

(The women clap and follow GRANT and SUTRO off as they continue to examine the tunnel.)

EILLEY: That was in 1878. Even though the opening of the Sutro Tunnel was greeted with bands playing, champagne flowing, and parades -- a dark secret brewed within the mines ...

(MACKAY, O'BRIEN, FLOOD, and FAIR enter dejectedly and look around.)

FAIR: It's finished?

O'BRIEN: So soon?

FLOOD: We've used the best methods possible to strip it.

MACKAY: We knew it wouldn't last forever. The silver's gone, boys.

FAIR (Dreamily): It was great while it lasted.

O'BRIEN: For us? Sure!

FAIR: No, I mean for everybody.

MACKAY (Nodding): Who would have suspected one little dried-up hill next to nowhere would have attracted so many thousands and given so much to the world?

FAIR: It was the richest place on earth, wasn't it?

(The men back away during EILLEY'S last speech.)

EILLEY: That it was. The Comstock Lode was the greatest find of gold and silver in the history of the world. It built businesses, cities, ways of life, and created an important chapter in the history of America. But, like all things ... it passed quietly like an old man in his sleep. All that's left now are the ghosts ... still wandering the forgotten streets ... still looking for the next big bonanza!

(The lights dim.)