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SEPARATIONS

By Oakley Hall

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The 21st book in venerable Oakley Hall's half-century writing career offers a painful reminder that the good old days lacked the innocence with which nostalgia gilds them. Twelve years after Major John Wesley Powell's 1869 expedition described the Grand Canyon's majesty, Colorado mining magnate Charles Daggett sponsors another canyon excursion. Under the protective coloration of a mission to rescue a white woman held captive by Indians, Daggett's party's actual assignment is to impugn Powell's plea to preserve the canyon as public land, enabling Daggett to run coal to canyon mining interests. Although the characters' wooden dialogue allows them at most a *Mdme. Tussaud*-like vitality, and even the Grand Canyon itself seems only an airbrushed background, the novel succeeds admirably at depicting grave stains upon the national character. The captured woman, her sister who discusses poetry over cakes and ale at San Francisco's Malvolio's Restaurant, and young Miranda Straw who's just murdered her newborn daughter because "she wouldn't bring a girl into a world that was ruled by men," reflect the crushing vulnerability and victimization of the 19th century woman. Most violated of all is Mother Nature. Spouting the doublethink morality of the gospel of wealth, conservatives hate conservation and charge that making the canyon public land would "take it right away from the people", at least from the people who want to rape it for profit, inspiring even some among Daggett's party to note, "Sometimes it seems a shame what the country must suffer for the sake of the nation."