

# The Feminization of Roaring Camp: Bret Harte and *The American Woman's Home*

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## 1

More than any other author, Bret Harte was responsible for literary representation of the Gold Rush and for putting California on the world's literary map. The challenge he faced was how to represent a lawless and uncivilized phase of American history in a way that would not only capture the imagination of the middle-class, magazine-buying public, but also be socially acceptable. His solution was to import romantic situations and plot structures into a hitherto unmapped fictional landscape. His Californian mythology was founded on symbols and emplotments taken from the Bible, from Greek legend, from Cervantes, Washington Irving, Walter Scott, Cooper, Dumas, and Dickens. The combination was one of enormous rhetorical power.

From the very first, then, Harte was writing historical romance. We see this most clearly when we contrast his short stories with contemporary documents, such as Dame Shirley's "Letters from the California Mines," which also functioned as source material for Harte the local historian. Although there would continue to be goldminers and mining camps, the Gold Rush was over when Harte first arrived in California in 1854, and the days of the "Argonauts of '49" were numbered when he began to write stories for the *Overland Monthly* in 1868. Of this Harte was acutely conscious, writing in the preface to his landmark collection *The Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Sketches* (1870), that he fears he "cannot claim . . . any higher motive than to illustrate an era of which Californian history has preserved the incidents more often than the character of the actors . . . ."

The first of Harte's Californian short stories to achieve nationwide and worldwide circulation was "The Luck of Roaring Camp," published in August 1868 in the newly started *Overland Monthly*, of which Harte was the editor. One modern reader has described the story as "a parable where Christ-like Tommy Luck converts several picturesque miners to a facsimile of

Victorian civilization—before raw, savage, anarchistic wilderness wipes them all out” (Morrow 128). As Patrick Morrow correctly observes, in “The Luck of Roaring Camp” Harte incorporates elements from one of the most familiar and beloved stories in Western culture—the birth of Christ. With this starting point, the story sets out to describe the effect of the introduction of a child in to an all-male community. The major part of the narrative is taken up with the relation of how the men raise this child, son of an Indian prostitute and an unknown father.

The modern reader may wonder at how the author dared to confront a postbellum audience with both prostitution and miscegenation. Harte, of course, ran a calculated risk. Yet in the early years of the Gilded Age, no author would prove more adept at walking the tightrope between novelty and convention, between piquancy and propriety, than Bret Harte. As it turned out, the time was ripe for an expansion of American fiction’s field imaginary. Even the Iron Madonna might under certain conditions press a fictive fallen sister to her chilly bosom, not to mention her sister’s child. The success of Harte’s experiment can be no better demonstrated than by quotations from two representative reviews of Harte’s first collection of short stories, which included “The Luck of Roaring Camp” and others equally bold. A *Chicago Times* reviewer wrote on 4 May 4 1870 that Harte “has taken even the lowest phases of this life, and, with a human sympathy and artistic directness that do him equal credit, he has proved that the best of poetry can be made of rude slang, and that the purest human motives and affectations can be found in the most repulsive exteriors” (“The First Appearance”). On the other side of the Atlantic, a *Spectator* commentary stated on 31 December of that same year: “No reader, however innocent, however sensitive, need fear any harm from this book” (“Sketches” 1587).

The timing was right and Harte’s textual strategy was even righter. One of Harte’s brilliant sleights of hand was to link his metaphorical acquisition of the story of Christ’s birth with a strikingly exact simulation of the child-rearing practices of middle class, white women of his day. These practices were epitomized and largely influenced by Catharine E. Beecher’s *Treatise on Domestic Economy*—which was first published in 1841 and republished nearly every year until 1856—and by the expanded version, *The American Woman’s Home*, which Beecher wrote with her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe and published in 1869. It too went into many printings and was published as a “text-book for the use of young ladies in schools, seminaries, and colleges” in 1870, under the title *Principles of Domestic Science*.

## 2

By 1870, Catharine Beecher had spent a large part of her life and numerous pages of print trying to prove that “the family state . . . is the aptest earthly illustration of the heavenly kingdom, and in it woman is its chief minister” (19). In August 1868, a little short story of some 3,000 words made the diametrically opposed, provocative and evocative claim that a mining camp—the most male-dominated, coarse, inveterately sinful and unchristian environment in America—could be the aptest earthly illustration of the heavenly kingdom, and an illegitimate child of mixed race its chief minister. For as the expressman in the story notes with wonder: “‘They’ve a street up there in ‘Roaring,’ that would lay over any street in Red Dog. They’ve got vines and flowers round their houses, and they wash themselves twice a day. But they’re mighty rough on strangers, and they worship an Ingin baby.’”<sup>1</sup>

In one sense, what is literally “up for grabs” in “The Luck of Roaring Camp” and subtextually in *The American Woman's Home* is the child, the contested practice is child rearing. On a broader level, both Harte's short story and Beecher's treatise are expressions of a battle between the sexes, a battle for control over the home, for the power to define what a “home” is and what is the proper definition of gender roles. In this context, Harte's story can only be seen as a counter move to the attempt to establish a female hegemony in the home. Writing at a time fraught with tensions between the sexes, Harte engaged the cult of domesticity on its own terms and showed that its rhetoric might be made to accommodate a diametrically different picture of the American home and the American family.

*The American Woman's Home* was Catharine Beecher's final and most detailed attempt to define the woman's sphere and to professionalize American housekeeping. In the opening chapter she writes:

Woman's profession embraces the care and nursing of the body in the critical periods of infancy and sickness, the training of the human mind in the most impressible period of childhood, the instruction and control of servants, and most of the government and economics of the family state. (14)

Of the role of men, she writes:

To man is appointed out-door labor—to till the earth, dig the mines, toil in the foundries, traverse the ocean, transport merchandise, labor in the manufactories, construct houses, conduct civil, municipal, and state affairs, and all the heavy work.

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<sup>1</sup>Due to the brevity of Harte's story and its availability in a variety of different editions and anthologies, I cite no page numbers for the quotations.

Furthermore, "the great stimulus to all these toils, implanted in the heart of every true man, is the desire for a home of his own, and the hopes of paternity" (19). Harte's story illustrates Beecher's points about men's labor and desires to the full, but what the story claims with even greater eloquence is that these labors do not make men unfit to take an active part in raising children.

Bret Harte's miners are such good "mothers" that we might suspect them of reading up on Beecher's *Treatise on Domestic Economy* on the sly. The point for point parallels between Harte's text and Beecher's are so exact that it would be difficult to imagine a closer homology between the "theory" of the treatise and the "practice" of fictional representation. We do not know if Harte ever read any of Beecher's works, nor does it matter. The extent to which the question he addresses must have been "in the air," so to speak, is no more dramatically illustrated than by the fact that *The American Woman's Home* was published a year *after* Harte's short story. In that sense, the fictive text was the "background" of the factual one as much as vice versa. Although large parts of Beecher's 1869 text are taken from *The Treatise on Domestic Economy*, there are important revisions in the final version particularly relating to gender roles. "The Luck of Roaring Camp" reveals the remarkable extent to which Harte has absorbed the language of domesticity, from whatever source, and as my discussion will show, the extent to which he was able to manipulate it to his own ends.

Harte begins his story by conjuring up the womanly ideal. He speaks of the dying "Cherokee Sal" being sadly bereft of "the ministrations of her own sex," "sympathizing womanhood," and "her sex's intuitive tenderness and care." The assumption, soon to be undermined, is that it is woman's work to care for the sick and the dying: only the female of the species has the innate sympathies that this type of work requires. Even at this early point, though, the picture is not black and white. Despite "the half-contemptuous faces of her masculine associates . . .," notes the narrator, "a few of the spectators were, I think, touched by her sufferings." Stumpy, "the putative head of two families," who has had "experience in them things," goes in to see what he can do, and manages to save the child but not the mother.

Having deftly done away with the only woman in the community, Harte has the miners replace her with the only other female inhabitant of Roaring Camp: an ass. The implication is that even as a provider of nourishment for the baby, the mother is not strictly speaking necessary. As Catharine Beecher also notes, milk from a new-milch cow mixed with one third water and a little white sugar would do as well (268). She does not comment on the suitability of ass's milk. When it is suggested that the child be sent to Red Dog, which represents civilization in the story and where "female attention could be procured," this "unlucky suggestion" meets with "fierce and unanimous opposition." Nor will the miners suffer the introduction of a female nurse in their midst. It is decided that Stumpy and the ass will rear the child. "There

was something original, independent, and heroic about the plan that pleased the camp."

The child thrives. The narrator hypothesizes that "Perhaps the invigorating climate of the mountain camp was compensation for material deficiencies" and waxes eloquently:

Nature took the foundling to her broader breast. In that rare atmosphere of the Sierra foot-hills,—that air pungent with balsamic odor, that ethereal cordial at once bracing and exhilarating,—he may have found food and nourishment, or a subtle chemistry that transmuted ass's milk to lime and phosphorus.

Stumpy inclines to the belief that the baby's well-being is due to plenty of fresh air and good nursing; "'Me and that ass,' he would say, 'has been father and mother to him!'"

In *The American Woman's Home* no less than two chapters are devoted to the need for fresh air and how to get it. "The first and most indispensable requisite for health is pure air, both by day and night" (43), Beecher writes, also informing her readers that "[t]he human race in its infancy was placed in a mild and genial clime, where each separate family dwelt in tents, and breathed, both day and night, the pure air of heaven" (49). Her rhetoric here is strikingly like that of the narrator of "Luck"; her "mild and genial clime" could very well be "that rare atmosphere of the Sierra foot-hills."

The child thrives and the regeneration of the camp begins. The first necessity is to make Stumpy's cabin into a proper "Christian house." The cabin is kept scrupulously clean and whitewashed, and it is boarded, clothed, and papered. In their collective parenthood, the miners become good consumers, sparing no expense on "'lace, you know, and filigree-work and frills, —d—m the cost!'" A rosewood cradle is imported, which "kills" the rest of the furniture, necessitating a complete refurbishment. To compete as a social center, "Tuttle's grocery" acquires a carpet and mirrors. The mirrors show the miners how dirty they are and "produce[s] stricter habits of personal cleanliness." Stumpy imposes "a kind of quarantine upon those who aspired to the honor and privilege of holding 'The Luck.'" It is a cruel mortification to one of the miners, Kentuck, when he is debarred from holding the baby because he is not clean enough. Stumpy is nevertheless adamant in following Beecher's admonition that "Both the health and comfort of a family depend, to a great extent, on cleanliness of the person and the family surroundings" (150). Kentuck cleans up, appearing regularly every afternoon "in a clean shirt, and face still shining from his ablutions." He and the other miners clearly demonstrate Beecher's point that "If men will give as much care to their skin as they give to currying a horse, they will gain both health and wealth" (157). As the narrator observes: "They were 'flush times,'—and the Luck was with them."

“Nor were moral and social sanitary laws neglected,” writes the narrator further. “‘Tommy,’ who was supposed to spend his whole existence in a persistent attempt to repose, must not be disturbed by noise” and Roaring Camp roars no more. Profanity is given up, as “There is no more important duty devolving upon a mother, than the cultivation of habits of modesty and propriety in young children. All indecorous words or deportment should be carefully restrained; and delicacy and reserve studiously cherished” (Beecher 285). Music is still allowed, “Being supposed to have a soothing, tranquilizing quality,” and being known to be a “very elevating and delightful recreation for the young” (Beecher 296). The baby gets plenty of fresh air and exercise in his open-air nursery, where “Nature was his nurse and playfellow. For him she would let slip between the leaves golden shafts of sunlight that fell just within his grasp; she would send wandering breezes to visit him with the balm of bay and resinous gums.” The baby is placed in the shade of a tree, as direct sunlight would endanger his eyes (Beecher 269). Spending most of the day on his blanket spread over pine-boughs, little Tommy is “always tractable and quiet.” The child has clearly not been allowed “to form such habits that it will not be quiet unless tended and amused. A healthy child should be accustomed to lie or sit in its cradle much of the time” (Beecher 271). It is even recorded that “once, having crept beyond his ‘corral,’ . . . he dropped over the bank on his head in the soft earth, and remained with his mottled legs in the air in that position for at least five minutes with unflinching gravity. He was extricated without a murmur.” All in all, Tommy appears to be “securely happy,” in perfect accord with Beecher’s observation that “A child who is trained to lie or sit and amuse itself, is happier than one who is carried and tended a great deal, and thus rendered restless and uneasy when not so indulged” (271).

## 3

As these numerous examples indicate, in “The Luck of Roaring Camp” Harte brings the cult of domesticity to the Sierra foothills. What makes the text so novel is not only that Bret Harte erects the “American Woman’s Home” in the wilderness, but that he does it *without* the American woman. The men of Roaring Camp become everything she could wish for—they are docile, sensitive, caring and not least of all, clean; they stop fighting and swearing; they even develop an aesthetic sense—yet it is a child and not a woman who brings about their regeneration. This cannot be seen as anything but a direct challenge to the woman’s self-appointed role as the “minister of the family state” and the savior of “the Homeless, the Helpless, and the Vicious” (the latter is part of the title of Beecher’s penultimate chapter).

As to Beecher’s claims for a woman’s superior fitness as “the chief educator of our race, and the prime minister of the family state” (149), “The

Luck of Roaring Camp" proved with convincing clarity that "it ain't necessarily so." Neither was marriage necessary to establishing a "Christian house"—that is, "a house contrived for the express purpose of enabling every member of a family to labor with the hands for the common good, and by modes at once healthful, economical, and tasteful" (Beecher 24). Stumpy's rural cabin is a Christian house *avant la lettre* and probably looks not far different from the illustration on the title page of Beecher's book. In one of the final chapters of her book, Beecher suggests that the same building may serve as a home, a church, and a schoolhouse. In Harte's story, it is the great outdoors that takes on this triple function. Tommy is christened in the open air "as seriously as he would have been under a Christian roof, and cried and was comforted in as orthodox fashion." Roaring Camp as a whole is a Christian house with the heavens as its roof. Here is the "outdoor labor for all" that the family state demands and plentiful "exercise in the pure air, under the magnetic and healthful rays of the sun" (Beecher 24).

From the most unpromising of starting points, Harte creates an all-male utopia. In a central image from the story, "Man-o'-War Jack" is depicted rocking the baby in his arms as he croons forth a naval ditty to soothe him to sleep. The men "lie at full length under the trees, in the soft summer twilight, smoking their pipes and drinking in the melodious utterances. An indistinct idea that was pastoral happiness pervaded the camp. 'This 'ere kind o' think,' said the Cockney Simmons, meditatively reclining on his elbow, 'is evngly.'" Roaring Camp has been depicted from the beginning as "a city of refuge," though what it is a refuge *from* is not directly stated. We may now discern that it is a refuge from American womanhood in general and from marriage in particular. In the background of the story lurks the specter of beset manhood, so vividly delineated by Leslie Fiedler and, in the context of theories of American literature, by Nina Baym. "The Luck of Roaring Camp" features not just one but a hundred men that more or less fit Fiedler's description of the "typical male protagonist of our fiction": "a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat—anywhere to avoid 'civilization', which is to say, the confrontation of a man and woman which leads to the fall of sex, marriage, and responsibility" (25).

Misogyny is not veiled in the text; it is explicit: the men are described as being "fiercely skeptical in regard to [the female sex's] general virtue and usefulness." In this they may have something in common with their Eastern brethren, as Catharine Beecher notes with dismay the "increasing agitation of the public mind, evolving many theories and some crude speculations as to woman's rights and duties" (16). It was not manifest to all that women had "a great social and moral power in their keeping" (16), and clearly not to the author of "The Luck of Roaring Camp." His strategy was to beat his contestants at their own game; in subtlety it was worthy of the "Heathen

Chinee," the hero of Harte's famous poem "Plain Language from Truthful James." By putting middle-class domestic ideals to work in a camp full of roughs, Bret Harte made himself and his story unassailable. Who could object to the regeneration of sinful manhood? Who could pillory a child, however dubious its origins, for being the cause of this regeneration? Beecher herself reminds us in her chapter entitled "The Christian Home" that Jesus Christ "chose for his birthplace the most despised village, for his parents the lowest in rank" and Tommy Luck (and his author) does just the same in mid-century America. What parents could be lower? What village more despised? What precedent more illustrious?

## 4

Harriet Beecher Stowe's contribution to *An American Woman's Home* was four new chapters on home decorating and gardening that had not been part of the original *Treatise* (Sklar 263). These chapters reveal an interior decorating aesthetic that sounds like a recipe for bringing the Californian wilderness to Nook Farm. Whether in the shape of pretty rustic frames, brackets, hanging-baskets or planted in "Ward cases" (tabletop conservatories), pine is the wood of preference in 1869 and pine cones very much *de rigueur* (Beecher 91, 95, 98, 102). Ivy is the thing with which to decorate a room (Beecher 96), just like the wondrous "vines and flowers" around the houses of Roaring Camp. Among the inexpensive yet beautiful cabinet pictures recommended by Stowe is Bierstadt's "Sunset in the Yo Semite Valley." Yet, as the goldminers show, it is not necessary to buy works of art to beautify the home, and poverty is no excuse for negligence:

If you live in the country, or can get into the country, and have your eyes opened and your wits about you, your house need not be condemned to an absolute bareness. Not so long as the woods are full of beautiful ferns and mosses, while every swamp shakes and nods with tremulous grasses, need you feel yourself an utterly disinherited child of nature, and deprived of its artistic use. (Beecher 94)

As the narrator of "The Luck" comments: "The men had suddenly awakened to the fact that there were beauty and significance in these trifles, which they had so long trodden carelessly beneath their feet." In this realization, the men of Roaring Camp are way ahead of Mrs. Stowe. As early as 1851 they are busy decorating the baby's bower "with flowers and sweet-smelling shrubs." Their "wild honeysuckles, azaleas, or the painted blossoms of Las Mariposas" are far more exotic and beautiful than Mrs. Stowe's mundane ferns, trailing arbutus, Mayflowers, eye-bright, and violets (Beecher 101-02).

The miners, of course, do not have to pay \$12 for a chromo of the Yosemite. They and their child can have the real thing completely free, and we may well imagine that "Surrounded by such suggestions of the beautiful,"



Tommy is being "constantly trained to correctness of taste and refinement of thought" (Beecher 94) at least as well as any Eastern child. What need has he of a "Ward case" to "learn to enjoy the beautiful, silent miracles of nature" (Beecher 102)? How sorry seem the "grottoes from bits of shells, and minerals, and rocks" (Beecher 101) when compared with "A flake of glittering mica, a fragment of variegated quartz. . . . [P]laythings such as never child out of fairy-land had before. . . ." "The Luck" does not have to be content with only having "a fragment of the green woods brought in" (Beecher 103). He does not need plate glass between him and nature. Or does he?

At the end of the story, little Tommy Luck, not yet a year old, is drowned in a flashflood. Mother Nature's spring cleaning wipes the "Virgin Sierras" free of impurities, literally throwing the baby out with the bathwater. It is not insignificant that it is the only "female" influence in the child's life (besides the ass) that finally kills him. Mother Nature, who had taken the foundling "to her broader breast" and been his "nurse and playfellow," drowns him through an act of wanton negligence, while Kentuck, one of Tommy's many foster fathers, gives his life trying to save him. Ironically, despite the efforts of one hundred motherly men to raise the child according to the most modern and enlightened principles, Harte's story reenacts a sad truth in the America of the late 1860s: "*one fourth* of all who are born die before reaching the fifth year" (Beecher 54).

## 5

Toward the end of her life, Catharine Beecher found it increasingly difficult to see the family as an institution that would bridge the ever-widening gulf between the sexes. As Kathryn Kish Sklar has noted, by 1869 the family seemed to her "to embody rather than to meliorate the tensions between . . . men and women" (167). An important difference between *The Treatise on Domestic Economy* and *The American Woman's Home* was that in the latter book, Beecher began to outline alternatives to the traditional family. She "appended to the usual domestic forms an entirely female domesticity, in which a woman 'who earns her own livelihood, can institute the family state' by adopting children" (Sklar 167). Despite these developments, *The American Woman's Home* was an end-point for Catharine Beecher; she was "too deeply immersed" in the ruling ethic of domesticity "to break away completely from domestic forms" (Sklar 167). Not so Bret Harte. For him, "The Luck of Roaring Camp" was only the beginning. He went on to build an entire literary career on exalting the strength and beauty of male bonds, particularly as represented by the institution of "partnership" between men in the mines. In such stories as "Tennessee's Partner" (1869) and "Uncle Jim and Uncle Billy" (1897), partnership represented an idyllic contrast and a viable, life-long alternative to marriage.

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