

The Luck of Roaring Camp

Bret Harte

Adapted by Suzanne I. Barchers

Summary

The men of Roaring Camp are a rough group. But when Cherokee Sal, the lone woman, dies in childbirth, they decide to raise the orphaned baby, with Stumpy as the primary caretaker. This rough group of men becomes dedicated to the child, enjoying the prosperity that seems to come with the arrival of the baby they christen “Tommy Luck.” Their rude camp slowly transforms, and the men become more civilized. But the winter of 1851 brings floods, and several men—plus Tommy Luck—are swept away in a deluge.

Background Information

Bret Harte was born as Francis Brett Harte in Albany, New York, on August 25, 1839. After living in New York City and Brooklyn, he left for California with his widowed mother in 1854. He held various jobs—miner, teacher, express messenger, and printer—which prepared him for writing. While editor of the *Overland Monthly*, he published “The Luck of Roaring Camp,” which brought him instant fame. He wrote many poems and stories. He also worked with Mark Twain, who is said to have credited Harte with teaching him how to write. In 1871, Harte contracted with *Atlantic Monthly* to write 12 stories a year for ten thousand dollars, the highest figure paid to an American writer up to that date. Harte retired in London in 1885. He died May 5, 1902.

Presentation Suggestions

The characters can sit casually on the floor or on stools in any order, with the narrators on either side of the stage.

Props

The students can be dressed in rugged clothes typical of men panning for gold in the mid-1800s. The stage can look like a rustic cabin, with mining artifacts.

Characters

- ❁ Narrators 1 and 2
- ❁ *Members of camp in the West:*
 - ❁ Kentuck
 - ❁ Sandy
 - ❁ Oakhurst
 - ❁ Stumpy
 - ❁ Ryder
 - ❁ Tipton



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Scene 1

Narrator 1: There is a commotion in Roaring Camp. It cannot be a fight, for in 1850 that is not novel enough to have called forth the entire settlement. The whole camp collects before a rude cabin on the outer edge of the clearing. Conversation carries on in a low tone, but the name of a woman is frequently repeated.

Kentuck: I wish we had another woman here. No matter that Cherokee Sal didn't have a husband, no woman should have to go through this alone.

Sandy: This is rough for sure, but she's surely brought it on herself.

Kentuck: That's surely true, but to give birth here in Roaring Camp all by herself? Stumpy, go in there and see what you can do. You've had experience in them things.

Narrator 2: The crowd approves the choice, and Stumpy is wise enough to bow to the majority. The door closes on the extempore surgeon and midwife, and the inhabitants of Roaring Camp sit down outside and await the new life.

Narrator 1: The camp holds about a hundred men. Some are fugitives from justice, some are criminals, and all are reckless. The men wait, talk quietly, and make wagers.

Oakhurst: I've got a gold piece that says Sal makes it through all this. Anyone want to bet against me?

Sandy: I'll take that bet. She doesn't sound good.

Kentuck: She may not make it, but I'll wager that it's a big, healthy boy.

Sandy: Nope. We need another girl for sure!

Oakhurst: Stop! Listen to that cry!

Narrator 2: The camp rises to its feet in concern. Whether owing to the rude surgery of the camp or some other reason, Cherokee Sal is sinking fast. Within an hour, she has climbed that rugged road that leads to the stars, and so passes out of Roaring Camp forever.

Narrator 1: While the men speculate as to the fate of the newborn boy, milk is found from a donkey. The men form themselves into a single line at the front door of her cabin to pay their respects.

Stumpy: Gentleman, please pass in at the front door, round the table, and out at the back door. Them that wishes to contribute anything toward the orphan will find a hat handy.

Narrator 2: The first man takes his hat off as he enters, setting an example for the rest. The men offer their comments about the babe.

Sandy: Is that him?

Kentuck: Mighty small specimen.

Oakhurst: Ain't bigger than a derringer.

Narrator 1: The contributions are characteristic: a silver tobacco box, a doubloon, a navy revolver, a diamond breastpin, a Bible, a golden spur, a silver teaspoon. The initials on the teaspoon are not the giver's.

Narrator 2: Other gifts included a pair of surgeon's shears, a Bank of England five pound note and about two hundred dollars in loose gold and silver coin.

Narrator 1: As Kentuck bends over the baby, the child catches his finger and holds it fast for a moment. Something like a blush appears on his weather-beaten cheek.

Kentuck: The darned little cuss! He rastled with my finger, the darned little cuss.

Narrator 2: Stumpy and Kentuck sit up that night, and Kentuck relates with great gusto his experience, ending with his calling the baby *the darned little cuss*. This seems to relieve him of any unjust implication of sentiment. Later he takes a walk down to the river. Then he returns to the cabin and knocks on the door. When Stumpy opens the door, Kentuck looks past him toward the baby.

Kentuck: How goes it?

Stumpy: All serene!

Kentuck: Anything up?

Stumpy: Nothing.

Narrator 1: The men pause for a moment.

Kentuck: Rastled with it—the darned little cuss.

Scene 2

Narrator 2: After Cherokee Sal is buried the next day, the camp meets to discuss what should be done with her infant. A resolution to adopt it is unanimous and enthusiastic.

Ryder: But how shall we care for it?

Tipton: Let's send the child to Red Dog. That's only 40 miles away and they have women there.

Stumpy, Kentuck, Sandy, Oakhurst: No, no!

Ryder: Besides, them fellows at Red Dog would take it over from us. They can't be trusted.

Oakhurst: What about bringing in someone to nurse it?

Ryder: What decent woman is going to want to come here?

Tipton: What about you, Stumpy? Could you take care of him?

Stumpy: Well, I've got my donkey for milk. And we can send to Sacramento for supplies.

Tipton: Everyone agrees?

Narrator 1: The men like the original and heroic plan and get the best they can afford for the baby. Strange to say, the child thrives. Perhaps it's the invigorating climate of the mountain camp, but Stumpy likes to claim credit.

Stumpy: Me and that donkey have been father and mother to him.

Narrator 2: By the time the baby is a month old, he has been known as *The Kid*, *Stumpy's Boy*, *The Coyote*, and even Kentuck's endearment, *the darned little cuss*. But the men decide it's time to give him a name.

Sandy: You know, this baby seems to have brought luck to us. How about Luck for his name?

Ryder: Sounds fine with me. Any objections?

Tipton: Let's give him a first name too. How about Tommy?

Oakhurst: Tommy Luck. That's good. Gives him a fresh start all around.

Narrator 1: Some of the men plan a christening, but it promises to be a satirical treatment of this usually serious church service. The men march to the grove with music and banners, expecting a grand revelry. They deposit the child before a mock altar, and Stumpy steps in front of the expectant crowd.

Stumpy: It ain't my style to spoil the fun, boys. But it strikes me that this thing ain't exactly on the square. It's playing it pretty low down on this here baby to make fun that he ain't going to understand. And if there's going to be any godfathers round, I'd like to see who's got better rights than me.

Oakhurst: You're right, Stumpy.

Stumpy: But we're here for a christening, and we'll have it. I proclaim you Thomas Luck, according to the laws of the United States and the state of California, so help me God.

Narrator 2: This is the first time that the name of the deity has been uttered other than profanely in the camp. Tommy is christened as seriously as he would have been under a Christian roof. He cries and is comforted in normal fashion.

Narrator 1: Almost imperceptibly, a change comes over the settlement. The cabin assigned to Tommy Luck, or "The Luck," is the first to change. Stumpy keeps it scrupulously clean, and the men appreciate the change. Tuttle's grocery imports a carpet and mirrors. Personal cleanliness improves. Even Kentuck starts wearing a clean shirt each afternoon.

Narrator 2: The men begin conversing in whispers and give up profanity. Music is acceptable, and the men rock Luck to a variety of songs. On long summer days the men take Luck to the gulch where he naps while they work.

Scene 3

Narrator 1: The summer is a time of prosperity, but the winter of 1851 brings deep snow in the Sierras. Every gorge and gulch becomes a tumultuous watercourse that descends the hillsides and tears down giant trees.

Stumpy: We've been under water before. Water put the gold into the gulches.

Oakhurst: You're right, Stumpy. The water's been here once and will be here again!

Narrator 2: However, one wet night the North Fork leaps over its banks and sweeps toward Roaring Camp. Little can be done to clear out the camp. The next morning, those fortunate to be on high ground when the floods came look for survivors.

Oakhurst: Well, boys, Stumpy is gone. Tommy Luck must be gone with him.

Narrator 1: Just then, they hear a shout. A relief boat from down-river has brought a man and an infant.

Tipton: Hey, fellas! It's Kentuck and the Luck!

Narrator 2: Kentuck, cruelly crushed and bruised, still holds the Luck of Roaring Camp in his arms. The child is cold and lifeless.

Tipton: He's dead.

Narrator 1: Kentuck opens his eyes.

Kentuck: Dead?

Ryder: Yes, my man, and you are dying too.

Narrator 2: A smile lights Kentuck's eyes.

Kentuck: Dying! He's a-taking me with him. Tell the boys I've got the Luck with me now.

Narrator 1: Kentuck, clinging to the babe, drifts away into the shadowy river that flows forever to the unknown sea.

