

Women in the Frontier Dime Novel

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"Once more, Sam Sedley," he cried. "I give your wife a chance for her life. The boy has sealed his own fate and must go with you. Will you two yield if the woman is allowed to go free?"

"Yes, yes," cried Sedley, eagerly; "will you promise that she shall be allowed to go, and that no man shall lay a finger on her."

"Hold on!" cried the clear voice of Mrs. Sedley. "Do you think I will trust such villains as that? What is their word good for? No, if we've got to die let us die together, in the name of God."¹

Unlikely as this exchange may seem to the modern imagination, this episode is found in the pages of *Border Vengeance; or, The Nighthawk's Daughter*, a dime novel written by W. J. Hamilton (a pseudonym of C. Dunning Clark) and published by Beadle and Adams in 1873. A family of settlers has climbed to the roof of their house, driven there by a band of marauders known as the Nighthawks. When Sam Sedley, the patriarch, and his son, John, wound several of their adversaries and refuse to surrender, the Nighthawks threaten to burn the house and its occupants. In true dime-novel tradition Mrs. Sedley's stirring words dispel her husband's uncertainty and enable him to hold out until rescue arrives at just the moment when all hope seems lost. Of course, the reader has been breathlessly turning the pages, smelling the Nighthawks' smoky torches and waiting with the Sedleys for help.

Though such courage in the face of torture was admirable, it was by no means unusual. The women of frontier dime novels were a hardy lot. Armed with religious conviction and faith in their men, dime-novel women faced kidnapping by Indians, aspersions on their integrity, death of family and friends, prairie fire, wolves, and buffalo stampedes. The intense drama is still able to kindle the modern

¹ C. Dunning Clark. *Border Vengeance; or, The Nighthawk's Daughter*. (New York: Beadle and Adams, 1873), p. 64.

reader's imagination, and over the years dime novels have become popular with individuals and institutions collecting elements of popular American culture. In The University of Iowa Libraries are two substantial collections of dime novels, the Alden Chase and C. M. Hulett Collections, whose stories make interesting reading for those willing to explore this portion of America's past. Containing over three hundred sixty individual titles, these collections provide an overview of the publishing phenomenon known as the dime novel and include frontier, detective, and sea adventures as well as some romances.

Viewed as reflections of the times in which they were written, dime novels provide insight into a code of behavior and set of attitudes significant to the lives of people long gone. Perhaps the most intriguing part of this reading experience is the identification of the attitudes which bridged fiction and reality in the nineteenth century and whose remnants, fortunately or unfortunately, remain with us today. Female dime-novel characters and their living counterparts were both subject to these attitudes, and successful authors made their heroines and antiheroines conform to the expected social and spiritual requirements or pay a heavy price for failure.

The dime novel of the mid-to-late nineteenth century in which these tales were spun was not the first appearance of cheap adventure fiction. Paperbound books had been devoured by the public for approximately 30 years before the Civil War. Though many forms of sensational stories had appeared in the early 1800s, Irwin Beadle (1826-1882) was the first publisher to issue regular series of cheap paperbound books at a fixed price. Other publishers' attempts had appeared sporadically and, in some cases, disappeared quickly, with prices fluctuating from story to story. The first Beadle's dime novels were small booklets of approximately one hundred pages. A thin orange paper cover containing a woodcut of an action scene from the story bound the slim little book. Portable and affordable, these ten-cent tales were within the price range of all but the very poorest persons. The earliest dime novel tales dealt mostly with the perils of American frontier life. Though their tone may seem overdone to the modern reader, the descriptive accuracy of the stories was fairly good.

Many of the authors who contributed to the original Beadle's dime novels were popular and talented writers, though they certainly are not among the major literary names of the nineteenth century whose fame has survived. Some were frequent contributors to other magazines and had books other than dime novels to their credit. A sum of \$75 to \$150 was usually paid for a dime novel, though authors

whose stories were in great demand could command higher prices for their work. In some cases dime-novel stories were written by persons who had experienced firsthand the frontier adventures they described. Authors of the frontier tales more commonly depended, however, upon the yarns spun by old storytellers for plots and embellishments. Indian fights and the exploits of hunters and trappers passed on from those who experienced them became the fabric of the dime novel. Business conditions later forced Erastus Beadle (1821-1894), brother and later partner of Irwin Beadle, to expand the range of subjects into the detective novel and other more sensational genres. However, the first Beadle novel was an Indian story, *Malaeska, the Indian Wife of the White Hunter*, and Erastus Beadle managed to continue this frontier theme for some time before adopting additional subjects.

Beadle's dime novels depicted the adventures of some of the frontier's most famous heroes and villains. Wild Bill Hickok, Kit Carson, Calamity Jane, Simon Girty, Jesse and Frank James, Buffalo Bill Cody, Daniel Boone, Big Foot Wallace, and Joaquin Murietta were all dime-novel characters at least once and usually several times. Many adventures are fictionalized, and in the case of a popular character like Buffalo Bill, so many adventures are enumerated that it would be impossible for one person to experience them all in one lifetime. A story, true or not, demonstrates the extraordinary quality of some of the tales. Kit Carson, then an old man, examined the unbelievable action on the cover of a dime novel of which he was the supposed hero. Adjusting his spectacles, the elderly Carson viewed the illustration in which he was shown fighting several Indians at once and remarked, "That there may have happened, but I ain't got no recollection of it."²

The widespread popularity of dime novels placed pressure on the authors. To a certain extent formula plots were used, though the variety of writers yielded many variations on a theme. The lack of revision time was in part responsible for plot similarities. However, in spite of the speed exacted by the market, most of the writers wrote in reasonably good English. Modern readers may find the speech and tone of the stories romantic and flowery, but by nineteenth-century standards the writers were amazingly restrained. The Beadle Company prided itself on the standards of quality which its authors were required to meet, yet the frantic rate of production caused some edi-

² Albert Johannsen. *The House of Beadle and Adams and Its Nickel and Dime Novels*. 2 vols. (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950), 1:5.

torial laxity. A nimble use of pseudonyms masked the prolificness of the dime novel authors, lest readers suspect that the stories were hastily or carelessly written.

The romantic, exciting world of the dime novel stands in contrast to the sober realities of daily life for the nineteenth-century woman. The United States had passed through the turbulent years of its conception and organization. The social order was undergoing change, and the status of women was part of that change.

Alterations in the role of women in the early and mid-nineteenth century were based on inevitable changes in the economic system. As the new country grew in population, a gradual shift from the home-based subsistence economy of the colonies to a market-based economy of the early 1800s removed the responsibility for the production of necessities from the home. The burgeoning factory system placed the cost of necessities within the reach of most of the population. Women no longer produced clothing, foodstuffs, and other items as long as mass production could provide these goods cheaply. The produce of the growing industrial complex was controlled and traded by men in a system far removed from the home. By the 1830s this economic change was well established, as were the changes in attitude which accompanied it.

The former usefulness and basic importance of the colonial woman was replaced by idleness for her nineteenth-century counterpart. This attitude remained couched in euphemistic terms which implied an acceptance of the new values which were emerging. The term "The Cult of True Womanhood"³ best describes the all-encompassing nature of the attitudes toward the woman's role. Four components which touched virtually all aspects of a woman's life comprised the cult: purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity. Though genteel perfection required economic security for the family, even rural and working-class women aspired to the goals of The Cult of True Womanhood as much as their limited means allowed. The financially equipped women of the industrial middle class, however, were in the best position to concentrate on womanly attributes and could spend years trying to reach this new femininity, an important if unattainable ideal for all women. Their efforts were applauded by society, and their failures were thunderously denounced.

An idealized image of the woman's role pervaded all aspects of nineteenth-century American society. Like most forms of popular cul-

³ Barbara Welter. "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," in *Women and Womanhood in America*, ed. Ronald Hogeland (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath, 1973), p. 103.

ture, the frontier dime novel was affected by the attitudes of that same society. The result was a special treatment of women characters. Always conscious of their audience, the dime novel authors created women characters of whom their readers would approve. The purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity of The Cult of True Womanhood provided the dime-novel author with a standard by which a female character could be modeled and later judged. Woven through the fabric of the imaginative writer's craft was a belief in the social values of nineteenth-century American society. These beliefs consequently surround the women of the frontier dime novel and surface at sometimes unexpected moments.

Though characterization patterns may vary slightly among frontier novels, certain traits remain constant among the female characters. Physical traits are the most readily noticeable characteristics, and their lack of variation among primary female characters is an unaltered pattern. The primary female character is always beautiful in the most perfect sense of femininity. Within the first chapter of the story, the author provides the reader with a memorable description of womanly beauty. The following passages are taken from three novels written by three different authors and published in 1860, 1873, and 1892 respectively.

As the grand old hymn reverberated through the forest, Harry stole a glance at the sweet countenance of Susan, which was all trembling and alight with pure worship and gladness. The slight stain of tears upon her cheeks softened her somewhat brilliant beauty. Rustic as was her white frock, her blue scarf, and kid slippers, she looked so innocent, so maidenly, so refined, that she gave an impression of all womanly sweetness and excellence.⁴

Her head was crowned by short clustering ringlets of brown hair, and her long lashes fell upon her marble cheek, as she lay with closed eyes—as if asleep—her head pillowed on her rounded arm. A lovely creature; the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.⁵

The girl was of medium height, supple, graceful and handsome. She had the form of a Venus and the air of a princess. She was a perfect brunette with dark flashing eyes and the red blood showing warmly in lips and cheeks, making her the picture of health.⁶

Women who are cruel, devious, or otherwise negative characters are not described with such lavish detail or affection. The following

⁴ Metta V. Victor. *The Backwoods Bride, A Romance of Squatter Life*. (New York: Beadle and Company, 1860), p. 12.

⁵ Clark, *Border Vengeance*, p. 12.

⁶ W. G. Patten. *Wild Bill's Sable Pard*. (New York: Beadle and Adams, 1892), p. 2.

passage describes Barbara Warner, a spoiled and vengeful heiress who had hoped to marry Davy Crockett in *Daring Davy, the Young Bear Killer; or, Trail of the Border Wolf*. She is compared to Rosebud Thornton, Davy's fiancée, whom the author has already described at length as a blonde, innocent beauty.

Such a contrast as the two presented, both beautiful, but one with the glory of sunbeams in her hair, and the other with the somber shades of night amid her sable tresses. Great black eyes looked down upon Rosebud Thornton, with something more than curiosity in their glance.⁷

Sybil Chase, the conniving protagonist of Ann Stephen's *Sybil Chase; or, The Valley Ranche*, receives a precise description, but the comparison to a notorious historical figure foreshadows the role she will play.

Her long, golden hair was brushed smoothly back from her forehead and gathered in shining bands at the back of her head, and made the chief beauty of her person. Only those who have seen the tress of Lucretia Borgia's hair, preserved in a foreign gallery, can form any idea of the peculiar color which I desire to describe.⁸

When the reader completed the first chapter, he or she had a fairly clear picture of the story's principal characters, their attributes and, if necessary, their failings. Secondary women characters were introduced later in the story but, because of their limited importance, received less description. These minor women characters were usually not involved in the mainstream of the story's action, and the reader received minimal information about them.

Generally the dime novelists were favorably disposed toward their women characters and wrote with an understanding of the code of behavior against which a genteel woman of the nineteenth century was judged. Though the authors were writing about frontier women far removed from middle-class, eastern parlors, the novelists themselves were primarily easterners thoroughly grounded in the precepts they imparted to their heroines. The young frontier girl might start out relatively carefree in the novel's first chapter, but by the end of the story she displays the proper attitude.

The standards by which women characters were judged were simple and exacting. A positive woman struggled against any odds to behave as befitted her sex. The four components of true womanhood were her goals, and no reasonably good woman even began a story

⁷ St. George Rathborne. *Daring Davy, the Young Bear Killer; or, Trail of the Border Wolf*. (New York: Beadle and Adams, 1879), p. 2.

⁸ Ann S. Stephens. *Sybil Chase; or, The Valley Ranche, A Tale of California Life*. (New York: Beadle and Company, 1861), p. 7.

with less than two already achieved. The negative woman character acted with hateful rebellion against the ordinances of true womanhood. This woman, even if she repented later in the story, paid a heavy price for her sins.

The dime-novel frontier woman displayed various degrees of purity; the majority of primary women characters possess this attribute, and there is no doubt that it is a greatly admired trait in fictional as well as actual women. Purity in the context of the dime novel goes beyond its basic definition of freedom from moral faults to an interpretation of perfect, unspoiled innocence. The author was careful to establish the appropriate purity of the women in the story through indirect as well as direct means. The most popular indirect technique was the emphasis on the character's natural surroundings. The corruption of the city could not touch a woman who lived on the prairie, and detailed descriptions of the countryside are included in the frontier novel. The city woman when she appeared was at best a little thoughtless and at worst scheming and selfish. To ensure the reader's belief in the purity of the heroine, the author often followed a subtle description with a direct declaration of innocence in his character.

To the nineteenth-century reader the admirable heroine was completely guileless. To lie or perform any duplicitous act was a heart-wrenching ordeal even if such a deed were necessary to save a life, often that of the man she loves. William F. Cody in *Gold Bullet Sport; or, Knights of the Overland* leaves no question in his reader's mind as to Victorine's purity.

A woman, and yet almost a child, for she was scarcely over eighteen, and notwithstanding her rude attire, strangely beautiful in face and form—a face to idolize, for in it dwelt so much of womanly loveliness and purity of soul.⁹

To preserve her purity, Victorine begs her husband to stab her to death rather than have her risk abduction by a lustful former lover.

Death did not always claim the innocent frontier woman, though it was certainly preferable to separation from the man she loved or dishonor in any form. This same unshakable purity and unspoiled charm could help a woman weather a situation worse than death. Wrongful accusation for misdeeds ranging from lying to murder are common in dime novels, and women were sometimes the targets. Mary Bryant, the protagonist of Mrs. Orrin James's *Old Jupe; or, A*

⁹ William F. Cody. *Gold Bullet Sport; or, Knights of the Overland*. (New York: Beadle and Adams, 1879), p. 1.

Woman's Art endured an unending string of misfortunes framed by a jealous half-sister from the city, Annette. The reader, however, is assured of Mary's goodness early in the story.

Sitting in the doorway, she [Mary] made a lovely picture, her red cheeks redder in the sunset, with the smile of expectation in her eyes. Handsome as fine features, complexion, and figure could make her, she possessed a still greater charm in a peculiar expression of innocence and sweet temper. This sweet temper it was which made her the comfort and delight of her parents. . . .¹⁰

Soon after this peaceful scene takes place, Mary is falsely accused of counterfeiting and is subsequently convicted by the townspeople. Though she has been a beloved member of the community, her neighbors vent their frustration on her uncomplaining head and sentence her to prison, where her baby is born. Though she is abandoned by her husband, who has been duped into believing the false accusation, Mary's courage never wavers, and she can never be induced to speak out in anger against her unfair situation. The townspeople gradually become uneasy about their actions in the face of such stalwartness, and the author reiterates Mary's purity of spirit.

Somehow, a feeling was creeping through the community, and taking root, that a wrong had been done toward the innocent.¹¹

As the reader could see in Mary's story, a pure soul may be the cornerstone of a fine character, but it was certainly not without danger. Possession of an innocent nature left a woman vulnerable to any number of pitfalls. Without knowing, a woman could fall into the passionate clutches of the wrong type of suitor and lose her good reputation forever. Dime-novel women trod a very precarious path. A woman struggled to achieve complete purity, yet a lack of worldliness was responsible for the naiveté which led her into many problems. A shrewder woman could certainly avoid such problems, but she would assume an unfeminine hardness of character. The authors leave the reader with the impression that innocence is still the best choice, and a woman could never be too pure.

Spiritual purity is present in yet another type of woman in many forms of nineteenth-century fiction including the dime novel. The woman whose physical handicap or general ill health weakens her is always pure and full of inspirational courage. The frontier dime novel contained fewer delicate heroines, though they were neverthe-

¹⁰ Mrs. Orrin James. *Old Jupe; or, A Woman's Art*. (New York: Beadle and Company, 1867), p. 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

less present in some of the stories. This reduced incidence may be attributable to the actual pioneer experience. The rigorous life naturally required physical strength; women who lacked it soon died, a fact which may account for the numerous young dime-novel heroines who are orphans or who have only a male parent.

Though dime novelists described the spiritual purity of their heroines at length, sexual purity was never mentioned. Dime novels contained explicit violence and frantic action, but they were completely devoid of even the vaguest references to sex. Young betrothed lovers shook hands upon meeting after long separations. Occasionally an innocent kiss was snatched, but pretty remonstrations often followed. Sexual purity was an unshakable code understood by both author and reader. No further mention was necessary.

When dime-novel characters were abducted by Indians or, worse yet, kidnapped by hated white renegades, women were sexually safe. Abduction was such a frequent occurrence in the stories that the pattern becomes clear and consistent. The woman who fell into the hands of an enemy suffered terrible fright, and in some instances, torture and death. Their honor, however, was *never* violated. "A thousand paleface damsels were captured by red-skinned warriors, during the progress of the dime novel, and some of them may have suffered death or grievous torment. But not one of them, Heaven be praised, ever came through the experience otherwise than as *virgo intacta*."¹²

Though dime-novel heroines were sexually pure, the authors were at least aware that not all women were inviolable. Such a character had to be minor to the story, and the details of her debasement were veiled. Yet she sporadically appeared and remained long enough to fulfill a requirement of the story's action. The all-inclusive term "ruined" described her fate. A ruined woman might have retained her essential goodness, but society refused to forget her state. Calamity Jane was a popular dime-novel character and is described as an unnatural representative of her sex. Her peculiar personality is explained in Edward L. Wheeler's *Deadwood Dick; or, The Prince of the Road*. Ned Harris cuts short his companion's criticism of Jane's masculine appearance.

"Hold! there are yet a few redeeming qualities about her. She was *ruined*"—and here a shade as dark as a thundercloud passed over Ned Harris' face—"and set adrift upon the world, homeless and friendless; yet she has bravely fought her way through the storm, without asking

¹² Edmund Pearson. *Dime Novels; or, Following an Old Trail in Popular Literature*. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1929), p. 37.

anyone's assistance. True, she may not now have a heart; that was trampled upon, years ago, but her character has not suffered blemish since the day a foul wretch stole away her honor."¹³

Harris continues, stating that Jane came from a respectable Virginia City, Nevada, family. Of course, she never considered returning home in her disgrace. A ruined woman's fate was irreversible.

Occasionally certain women characters assumed more sinister proportions. Whether sexual degradation or some other experience was responsible was not always made clear by the author. Circumstances received oblique reference, and sometimes no reasons at all were given. Though truly villainous women characters were not common to every dime novel, authors inserted this character periodically to show the depths to which an impure soul could plunge. Male antagonists were bad, but the reader knew that men were prone to unrestrained behavior unless a wife or daughter kept these tendencies in check. However, the idea of a female antagonist was nearly incomprehensible. Traits undesirable in a man were far more distasteful in a woman.

Barbara Warner of *Daring Davy* is an example of the corrupting effects of unrestrained ambition coupled with self-centeredness. No reason is given for Barbara's cold-hearted nature until midway through the story, when the author reveals that the early loss of her mother was the cause of Barbara's unwomanliness. Upon hearing the word "mother," Barbara instantly realizes how horrible her actions have been, but her reform comes too late. She pays for her evilness with her life. Other female antagonists rivaled Barbara's evil character but did not repent before their punishment was meted out. Women who refused to repent were so thoroughly debased that they were far beyond saving. James Bowen's *The First Trail; or, The Forest Foundling* introduces a woman so repulsive that the reader must search for more than the usual reasons for her hideousness. Moll Carroll's witch-like figure must be attributed to more substantial reasons than lack of maternal guidance.

The creature [Moll] was tall, standing nearly six feet in height [sic], with thin bony limbs, almost frightful to behold. Her hair was a dirty yellow color . . . Her forehead was long and narrow . . . The mouth had been wide, at some former time, but had fallen in very much, leaving two long teeth in the upper jaw which overshot the lower lip, and gave to the face much of its terribly haggish appearance.¹⁴

¹³ Edmund L. Wheeler, *Deadwood Dick, The Prince of the Road*. (New York: Beadle and Adams, 1877), p. 4.

¹⁴ James Bowen. *The First Trail; or, The Forest Foundling*. (New York: Beadle and Adams, 1870), p. 39.

Moll is by far one of the most repulsive women in the frontier dime novel. Her degeneration is explained by her close contact to an Indian tribe. She not only lived almost in their midst, but she was their medicine woman, an occupation no woman of even minimal purity would touch. Moll also pays for her indiscretions with her life.

The frontier woman who had achieved the necessary purity of soul was required to embrace deep religious convictions, the second component of The Cult of True Womanhood and one which interfaces with purity. Religious influence in the frontier dime novel was based partly upon the religious beliefs of early pioneers, who often counted a church or meetinghouse among the basic requirements for a new settlement. The fact that many dime novelists were aware of their readers' approval of feminine faith in God only heightened the necessity for including it in the stories. Dime-novel publishers may also have hoped to shore up the shaky foundation on which their stories stood in the eyes of moralists who feared the corrupting effects of unrestrained adventure on young readers. Injecting a note of religion would not damage the dime novel's defense.

The religious values of frontier dime novels were far outweighed by the exciting and sometimes violent adventures also found in the stories. There was no danger of religion overshadowing adventure. Frontier women were usually the guardians of their family's piety since, according to nineteenth-century attitudes, women were emotionally suited for this task. The notes of religion are sprinkled among exciting episodes and are not confined to the camp meeting or country church.

The frontier woman's faith in God was the basis for other admirable qualities—courage, perseverance, industriousness, loyalty. To the wild mountain men, trappers, and hunters of the dime novels, a pious woman was a symbol of the godliness and civilization they left behind. *Through the Toils: A Thrilling Story of the Prairie* by William H. Bushnell shows the extreme lengths to which some authors used religion in their stories. *Through the Toils* concerns the Ferguson family traveling from Kentucky to Oregon by covered wagon. The party consists of Jim Ferguson and his wife Martha, two grown sons, a daughter Ellen, a black slave Sam, and King Travers, a rugged prairie scout who leads the expedition. A simple, loyal, if somewhat rude soul, Travers reveres Ellen.

King Travers looked upon the delicate girl with the same feeling he would have entertained for an angel . . .¹⁵

¹⁵ William Bushnell. *Through the Toils: A Thrilling Story of Prairie Life*. (Boston: Elliott, Thomes & Talbot, 1865), p. 9.

The Fergusons' uneventful travel is short lived. A prairie fire set by the Indians destroys the family's belongings and drives off their livestock. Following the holocaust, Ellen questions her mother about the sight they have just witnessed. Mrs. Ferguson is thinking sorrowfully of practical matters as well as the loss of family treasures. Ellen, however, is reminded of something more awesome.

"What are you thinking of, Ellen?"

"The destruction of the world."

Even far from religious King Travers felt the force of the comparison, and bowed his head meekly to the words as if they had been a reproof.¹⁶

The family is later threatened by a buffalo stampede, which they manage to ward off with a fire hastily built by Sam. Two buffalo are killed in the process, and Ferguson questions Sam about what was responsible for his quick thinking. Ellen responds appropriately to Sam's answer.

"Dun no, dun no, massa. De good Lord, I 'spect," answered the negro.

"Yes, and to him be the praise!" whispered Ellen solemnly; and with one accord they sank upon their knees and poured forth fervent thanks to the Giver of all good.¹⁷

After their much-needed meal, Mrs. Ferguson reminds the family of how wrong wastefulness is.

"Now, boys," said the ever-thoughtful mother, "that Providence has placed the opportunity to provide food against the hour of want, it would be sinful to waste it."¹⁸

While preparing to dry the buffalo meat, the family is attacked by hungry wolves. The men of the party repel the animals for a time, but exhaustion overtakes Mr. Ferguson, and Ellen insists on taking his place. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, Ellen's strength is unequal to her courage, and she is overwhelmed.

"Father! Mother! God!" burst forth from the lips of the agonized girl, as she was tossed about in the mad waves of that living sea.¹⁹

Her prayers are answered as Sam saves her at the expense of great injury. The family's hopes begin to fade, however, as they see the wolves devour the buffalo meat, leaving the party in worse straits than before.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 36.

"He [God] will save us yet," whispered Ellen, from where she was kneeling by the side of the negro and striving to check the rapid flow of blood. She looked on high with perfect faith, and perchance hope smiled upon that faith.²⁰

As Ellen prays for assistance from Heaven, King Travers, who left the family after the prairie fire to search for help, has his own problems. Captured by the Indians, he is about to be burned at the stake. He tries to pray but cannot remember the little-used words. His thoughts turn to the person who has reminded him of his long-abandoned faith in God.

"Ef Miss Ellen war only here now to pray for me," he muttered inaudibly. "The good Lord would hear her, I know fer ef thar ever war er angel on the aith she is one fer sartin. But who knows that she ain't with him before this time? Wal, ef she is, poor child, maybe she'll put in er good word for King Travers."²¹

King's thoughts turn to escape, and he manages to return to the Fergusons. Ellen, meanwhile, has met a young stranger, Lynd Douglass, who is searching for his two hunting companions. While seeking his friends, he discovers the forlorn party of pioneers who are anxiously awaiting King Travers's return. Lynd joyfully attributes the crossing of their paths to fate. "Rather say God," whispered Ellen
..²²

The story continues to a happy conclusion with the entire party at last reunited and Ellen married to Lynd Douglass. To the end Ellen never misses an opportunity to see God's hand in anything that happens. She is a constant reminder of divine guidance and does not hesitate to voice her convictions. The religious elements of *Through the Toils*, though represented more extensively than in other stories, are similar in tone to those of frontier dime novels as a whole. The frontier woman was not loud or passionate in her declarations but rather stood as a quiet but stalwart reminder. While dime novels of the late 1870s and 1880s drew away from religious influence, the dime-novel frontier woman of the Civil War and post-Civil War years was a staunch woman of God.

Submissiveness is the third component of true womanhood, a trait which the reader also finds in the frontier dime-novel woman. Her submissiveness to her religious faith has already been established; however, a willingness to subjugate her needs and desires to a dom-

²⁰ Ibid., p. 36.

²¹ Ibid., p. 38.

²² Ibid., p. 44.

inant male was essential. This male could be a husband, father, brother, guardian, or suitor.

The submission of a woman to a dominant male character formed the basis of a partnership. A woman of unimpeachable virtue served as the preserver of the superior male figure's moral well-being. The man, in turn, provided physical and spiritual shelter for his weaker wife or child. No adjustment of this pattern was tolerated. The tone of the dialogue between the partners of this relationship told the reader of the respect which the woman owed her male guardian. The reader, who realized the value which society placed on the relationship, did not question the validity or necessity of the scheme. The symbiotic sex hierarchy thus remained an unspoken but essential part of the dime novel's world. Active young women of courage and initiative exist in these stories, and, though they may live unorthodox lives even by pioneer standards, they still must depend upon a stronger man.

Many dime-novel women who led untamed lives were the wives, sweethearts, or daughters of outlaws, a fact which did not diminish their willingness to submit to the persons who were designated their superiors. Though the relationship may have threatened her life or future happiness, the frontier woman clung to her commitment in the hope that her honesty might somehow save her husband. The wife who would willingly sacrifice her life for that of her husband appears frequently. Annie Ralston James, wife of outlaw Frank James, is a famous example of such a woman. *Frank James on the Trail*, a poorly written and highly romanticized story, describes a fictionalized episode of this incredible devotion. When Annie James learns of an impending duel which pits her husband against a famous marksman, she lures Frank away from town and takes his place masked and dressed like a man. The anonymous author clearly admires this selflessness and imparts these feelings to the reader.

Was there in the whole of the United States a woman so devoted, so loving and so courageous, that she would offer her life in place of a man for whose body so large a reward was offered?

Yes! There was one!

And that one, whose love was so matchless was—

Annie Ralston James.

The wife of the outlaw. The sharer of his troubles, the partner of his joys.²³

Through all the action of the episode, Annie utters only one word: "Frank." She is shown only in the role of a selfless wife whose own

²³ *Frank James on the Trail*. (n.p.: John W. Morrison, 1882), p. 7.

life meant nothing if her husband was killed. The proper frontier wife's personality could hardly be separated from that of her husband.

Mountain Kate, in Joseph E. Badger Jr.'s *Mountain Kate; or, Love on the Trapping Grounds*, is a young woman of initiative who displays a greater degree of individuality than does Annie James. This does not affect her submission to her father's wishes, however. Kate, the daughter of Carl Shensen, a land pirate, is saved from a wolverine attack by Frank Yates, a young trapper who is astonished when he learns the identity of Kate's parent. Kate tells Frank of her lifelong misery, her mother's early death, and her desire to give up her wandering existence for a secure life. When Frank offers her such a life, she explains why she feels she cannot leave her father.

"Despite all, I love my father, and he is very kind to me. That makes it still harder for me to see him stain his soul with such deeds. But, bad as he is, I believe my influence has saved him from becoming worse. Whenever I feel tempted to flee from them—to try and begin a new and better life—I think of that and feel my duty is here with him."²⁴

Kate's submission to her father's authority is unshakable to the point that only his death releases her, and she is free to seek another future. She does so by marrying Frank Yates.

Alicia Newcome, in Frances Fuller Barritt's *Border Law; or, The Land Claim* is possibly the most timidly submissive woman of the dime-novel frontier. Daughter of a settler who jealously and cruelly guards her, Alicia is helplessly and mindlessly devoted to her father. When Newcome is falsely accused of murder, Alicia is cared for by the local constable and his wife. Her father bitterly accuses her of betrayal when she refuses to marry the French trader he has chosen for her. Her reaction to her father's scorn is similar to that of a beggar.

She [Alicia] clasped her hands across her forehead, and bent her face to the floor, like the most abject eastern slave. Her young life seemed crushed out of her, and she felt the Juggernaut of perpetual despair had already gone over her. She had no fear, no resentment, no hope; all was a dull, dead motionless desolation. In this attitude she remained for several minutes, while her father uttered no word . . .²⁵

Alicia's single-minded devotion to her father precludes her accepting a true love without her jealous parent's consent. She is buffeted throughout the story, offering no resistance or opinions but

²⁴ Joseph E. Badger, Jr. *Mountain Kate; or, Love in the Trapping Grounds*. (New York: Beadle and Adams, 1872), p. 19.

²⁵ Mrs. Frances Fuller Barritt. *Border Law; or, The Land Claim*. (New York: Beadle and Adams, 1862), p. 57.

rather depending upon her persistent suitor, Frederick Allen, for protection. Alicia's future is secured when her father dies and an aristocratic British relative arrives. She reveals her own perception of her submissiveness when her baronet uncle asks her wishes.

"You have the authority to give me to whom you choose," she answered, with a slight emphasis on *give*, and blushing beautifully.²⁶

Her uncle playfully regards her answer as womanly coyness and a means of obtaining her desire.

"Oh, the artfulness of woman!" cried the baronet, laughing. "Who but a woman would have found so smooth a way out of a difficulty? . . . Here, Mr. Allen, I *give* her to you . . ."²⁷

After passing wordlessly from hand to hand, Alicia at last is safe in the care of someone who will look after her forever.

Women who displayed initiative were acceptable in dime novels if their initiative remained within proper bounds and did not become ruthless ambition. Proper bounds stopped just short of the prerogatives exercised by male characters. A woman who interfered with the course of action defined by a male protagonist defied acceptability. Barbara Warner in *Daring Davy* allows her ambition to become uncontrolled as she seeks revenge on Davy Crockett for his supposed spurning of her love. Rosebud, Davy's fiancée, displays the proper attitude when she expresses her view of her relationship with her husband-to-be as she begs: "Pray Heaven that no harm may come to my Davy, my king."²⁸

Sybil Chase; or, The Valley Rancho by Ann Stephens again demonstrates the danger of an ambitious woman. Alone on a secluded California ranch, Sybil is isolated and miserable with her selfish husband, Philip Yates. In desperation she vows to find a way out of her lonely life.

"Will there never be an end? Oh, Sybil—Sybil! what a weak, miserable fool you have been! This is the end of your art and talent—a home in the wilderness, a gambler's wife! But it shall change—oh, it shall change, I say!"²⁹

Though Mrs. Stephens presents a more complex character than is usual in dime novels, she is unable to change Sybil's fate of inevitable punishment. Sybil's desertion of her husband, her plan to ruin the engagement of another woman and other ruthless deeds doom her. The

²⁶ Ibid., p. 95.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 95.

²⁸ Rathborne, *Daring Davy*, p. 3.

²⁹ Stephens, *Sybil Chase*, p. 32.

difference in Sybil's fate from that of most female antagonists is that Sybil survives the end of the story. Her punishment is rather a form of living death—a solitary widow's life on the remote California ranch she vowed to leave.

The code of behavior which decreed that submission was a part of true womanhood allowed the dime-novel woman one of two destinies: marriage or death. A young single woman who embodies true womanhood marries her suitor at the end of the story and lives a long, happy, and usually prosperous life. If a woman who survived the rigors of the story remains unmarried, she was a widow, a permissible situation, for she had been married and was usually a mother. The result of this pattern was almost always a wedding at the close of each story. Double and triple weddings were not uncommon. A woman who did not marry died a usually violent death; submission to matrimony was certainly preferable. William Bushnell's attitude toward this blissful and inevitable submission is indicative of the attitude held by most dime-novel authors.

. . . Boone and his brother had learned to love two sparkling brunettes who were their companions, and shortly . . . the names of Jenny and Mary Darling were lost forever in that of Ferguson.³⁰

For a pure, pious woman who recognizes her true position in life, to refuse domesticity, the last component of true womanhood, would be unusual. The dime-novel reader must naturally assume the heroine's acceptance of this obligation in many cases since less direct mention is given this precept than any of the others. The reason for the relative absence of domestic matters lies in the nature of the frontier story. In order to interest and excite the reader, an author must provide action and suspense, two qualities missing from routine domestic science. Though this framework made the description of home life difficult, the author usually found a way to overcome the obstacle. Demonstrating the heroine's feminine instincts for providing sustenance and comfort was a requirement for a true woman, and the author could not leave his heroine imperfect or incomplete.

A common means of suggesting a sense of the heroine's domesticity involved the author's description of the homely surroundings in which she is found at the outset of the story. Rosebud Thornton is snatched from her home early in the story and is thrust into circumstances which do not allow domestic tasks. The author, however, establishes her domestic instincts prior to the story's action. After de-

³⁰ Bushnell, *Through the Toils*, p. 68.

scribing the countryside, Mr. Rathborne describes the cabin and Rosebud's activity.

. . . in front of the homestead, a young girl was seated, engaged in some little household sewing, and singing softly to herself.³¹

The women of the settler's party in *Through the Toils* display their domestic instincts from time to time in the story even when disaster overtakes the family. Mrs. Ferguson sets about the task of drying the buffalo meat procured by the men until she is interrupted by the attacking wolf pack. She is also the member of the group who is most concerned about the loss of their household goods in the prairie fire, exclaiming at one point that they could not camp on the prairie since they had no bedding. The men of the party naturally show no interest in these housewifely matters. They have their rifles and supplies for basic protection; nothing more is needed.

A distasteful but probably facetious reference to the woman's domestic role occurs in Mrs. Barritt's *Border Law*. A band of four claim seekers is sitting around a fire awaiting the evening meal. Doc, the appointed cook, complains of a sore back from bending over the fire, but his companion, Flag, is scornful.

"Pooh, you talk like a woman," says Flag, in a tone intended to be very disdainful of the weakness.³²

Doc complains further about his cooking chores and his lack of skill when compared to a woman. Another man, Squire, comments.

"Without a doubt," put in Squire, soberly; "women are among the most useful of domestic animals . . . I shouldn't wonder, if we had a woman in the house, if she could put to flight these pilfering mice . . . There was a Mrs. Smith that I boarded with when I studied law—she never had a cat about the house nor a mouse either. I suppose she must have caught them herself . . . I suppose a woman to be the epitome of the domestic animals."³³

Squire is chastised mildly for his irreverence, but the group's attention is diverted by supper, and the opinion passes with little comment.

When the action of the frontier dime novel pauses and a domestic chore presents itself, the woman performs it without question. Mollie Bradley, daughter of trapper Sile Bradley in Edward Willett's *The Hidden Home; or, The Backwoods Banditti*, leads an unconventional life yet has not forgotten her feminine duties.

³¹ Rathborne, *Daring Davy*, p. 2.

³² Barritt, *Border Law*, p. 13.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

. . . supper was immediately prepared, Mollie Bradley cooking the salmon as if it was a matter of course that she should do so.³⁴

Such skills are found even in very young girls, a fact which reinforces the attitude that women were naturally suited for wifely duties. Myrtle, in *Myrtle, Child of the Prairie* by Metta V. Victor, is nine years old when the beloved family housekeeper dies. Myrtle surprises her foster father with her capabilities.

When she saw him fussing about in a man's awkward way, little Myrtle's womanly instincts were aroused, and she put away her at first overwhelming grief to try and aid him. He would not have believed those slender little hands could do so much.³⁵

Other common domestic tasks—childcare, sewing, housecleaning—receive little if any specific mention. Nursing does receive a blunt reference in Ann Stephen's *Esther: A Story of the Oregon Trail*. In the style of the dime-novel mountain man, Kirk Waltermeyer states: "Waal, it's woman's business to take care of the sick."³⁶ This is his final word on the subject, and since his flat statement invites no discussion, he receives none. Everyone listening knew that what he said was true.

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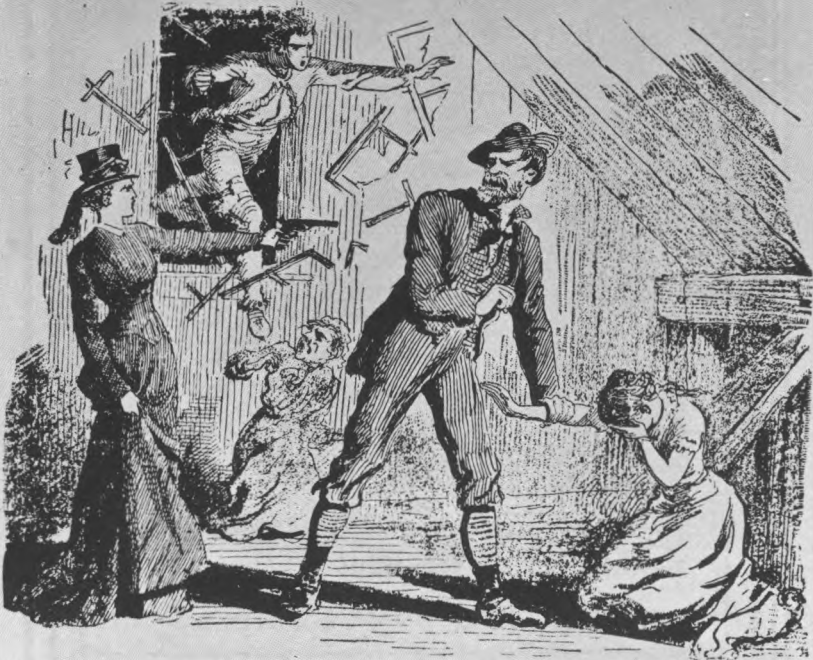
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DARING DAVY, The Young Bear Killer; or, the Trail of the Border Wolf.

BY HARRY ST. GEORGE,

AUTHOR OF "ROARING RALPH ROCKWOOD," "RATTLING RUBE," "OLD HICKORY," ETC., ETC.



Stand back! or so surely as there is a sky above us, I will send your soul unbidden, before the judgment bar. Stand back!

Front cover of a Beadle and Adams dime novel published in 1879. *Daring Davy* is one of the titles discussed in the article "Women in the Frontier Dime Novel" in this issue.