

BRET HARTE

DRIFT FROM
TWO SHORES

Bret Harte
Drift from Two Shores

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=36322988

Drift from Two Shores:

Содержание

THE MAN ON THE BEACH	4
I	4
II	22
III	40
TWO SAINTS OF THE FOOT-HILLS	50
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	59

Bret Harte

Drift from Two Shores

THE MAN ON THE BEACH

I

He lived beside a river that emptied into a great ocean. The narrow strip of land that lay between him and the estuary was covered at high tide by a shining film of water, at low tide with the cast-up offerings of sea and shore. Logs yet green, and saplings washed away from inland banks, battered fragments of wrecks and orange crates of bamboo, broken into tiny rafts yet odorous with their lost freight, lay in long successive curves,—the fringes and overlappings of the sea. At high noon the shadow of a seagull's wing, or a sudden flurry and gray squall of sandpipers, themselves but shadows, was all that broke the monotonous glare of the level sands.

He had lived there alone for a twelvemonth. Although but a few miles from a thriving settlement, during that time his retirement had never been intruded upon, his seclusion remained unbroken. In any other community he might have been the subject of rumor or criticism, but the miners at Camp Rogue

and the traders at Trinidad Head, themselves individual and eccentric, were profoundly indifferent to all other forms of eccentricity or heterodoxy that did not come in contact with their own. And certainly there was no form of eccentricity less aggressive than that of a hermit, had they chosen to give him that appellation. But they did not even do that, probably from lack of interest or perception. To the various traders who supplied his small wants he was known as "Kernel," "Judge," and "Boss." To the general public "The Man on the Beach" was considered a sufficiently distinguishing title. His name, his occupation, rank, or antecedents, nobody cared to inquire. Whether this arose from a fear of reciprocal inquiry and interest, or from the profound indifference before referred to, I cannot say.

He did not look like a hermit. A man yet young, erect, well-dressed, clean-shaven, with a low voice, and a smile half melancholy, half cynical, was scarcely the conventional idea of a solitary. His dwelling, a rude improvement on a fisherman's cabin, had all the severe exterior simplicity of frontier architecture, but within it was comfortable and wholesome. Three rooms—a kitchen, a living room, and a bedroom—were all it contained.

He had lived there long enough to see the dull monotony of one season lapse into the dull monotony of the other. The bleak northwest trade-winds had brought him mornings of staring sunlight and nights of fog and silence. The warmer southwest trades had brought him clouds, rain, and the transient glories

of quick grasses and odorous beach blossoms. But summer or winter, wet or dry season, on one side rose always the sharply defined hills with their changeless background of evergreens; on the other side stretched always the illimitable ocean as sharply defined against the horizon, and as unchanging in its hue. The onset of spring and autumn tides, some changes among his feathered neighbors, the footprints of certain wild animals along the river's bank, and the hanging out of party-colored signals from the wooded hillside far inland, helped him to record the slow months. On summer afternoons, when the sun sank behind a bank of fog that, moving solemnly shoreward, at last encompassed him and blotted out sea and sky, his isolation was complete. The damp gray sea that flowed above and around and about him always seemed to shut out an intangible world beyond, and to be the only real presence. The booming of breakers scarce a dozen rods from his dwelling was but a vague and unintelligible sound, or the echo of something past forever. Every morning when the sun tore away the misty curtain he awoke, dazed and bewildered, as upon a new world. The first sense of oppression over, he came to love at last this subtle spirit of oblivion; and at night, when its cloudy wings were folded over his cabin, he would sit alone with a sense of security he had never felt before. On such occasions he was apt to leave his door open, and listen as for footsteps; for what might not come to him out of this vague, nebulous world beyond? Perhaps even SHE,—for this strange solitary was not insane nor visionary. He was never in

spirit alone. For night and day, sleeping or waking, pacing the beach or crouching over his driftwood fire, a woman's face was always before him,—the face for whose sake and for cause of whom he sat there alone. He saw it in the morning sunlight; it was her white hands that were lifted from the crested breakers; it was the rustling of her skirt when the sea wind swept through the beach grasses; it was the loving whisper of her low voice when the long waves sank and died among the sedge and rushes. She was as omnipresent as sea and sky and level sand. Hence when the fog wiped them away, she seemed to draw closer to him in the darkness. On one or two more gracious nights in midsummer, when the influence of the fervid noonday sun was still felt on the heated sands, the warm breath of the fog touched his cheek as if it had been hers, and the tears started to his eyes.

Before the fogs came—for he arrived there in winter—he had found surcease and rest in the steady glow of a lighthouse upon the little promontory a league below his habitation. Even on the darkest nights, and in the tumults of storm, it spoke to him of a patience that was enduring and a steadfastness that was immutable. Later on he found a certain dumb companionship in an uprooted tree, which, floating down the river, had stranded hopelessly upon his beach, but in the evening had again drifted away. Rowing across the estuary a day or two afterward, he recognized the tree again from a "blaze" of the settler's axe still upon its trunk. He was not surprised a week later to find the same tree in the sands before his dwelling, or that the next morning it

should be again launched on its purposeless wanderings. And so, impelled by wind or tide, but always haunting his seclusion, he would meet it voyaging up the river at the flood, or see it tossing among the breakers on the bar, but always with the confidence of its returning sooner or later to an anchorage beside him. After the third month of his self-imposed exile, he was forced into a more human companionship, that was brief but regular. He was obliged to have menial assistance. While he might have eaten his bread "in sorrow" carelessly and mechanically, if it had been prepared for him, the occupation of cooking his own food brought the vulgarity and materialness of existence so near to his morbid sensitiveness that he could not eat the meal he had himself prepared. He did not yet wish to die, and when starvation or society seemed to be the only alternative, he chose the latter. An Indian woman, so hideous as to scarcely suggest humanity, at stated times performed for him these offices. When she did not come, which was not infrequent, he did not eat.

Such was the mental and physical condition of the Man on the Beach on the 1st of January, 1869.

It was a still, bright day, following a week of rain and wind. Low down the horizon still lingered a few white flecks—the flying squadrons of the storm—as vague as distant sails. Southward the harbor bar whitened occasionally but lazily; even the turbulent Pacific swell stretched its length wearily upon the shore. And toiling from the settlement over the low sand dunes, a carriage at last halted half a mile from the solitary's dwelling.

"I reckon ye'll hev to git out here," said the driver, pulling up to breathe his panting horses. "Ye can't git any nigher."

There was a groan of execration from the interior of the vehicle, a hysterical little shriek, and one or two shrill expressions of feminine disapprobation, but the driver moved not. At last a masculine head expostulated from the window: "Look here; you agreed to take us to the house. Why, it's a mile away at least!"

"Thar, or tharabouts, I reckon," said the driver, coolly crossing his legs on the box.

"It's no use talking; I can never walk through this sand and horrid glare," said a female voice quickly and imperatively. Then, apprehensively, "Well, of all the places!"

"Well, I never!"

"This DOES exceed everything."

"It's really TOO idiotic for anything."

It was noticeable that while the voices betrayed the difference of age and sex, they bore a singular resemblance to each other, and a certain querulousness of pitch that was dominant.

"I reckon I've gone about as fur as I allow to go with them hosses," continued the driver suggestively, "and as time's vallyble, ye'd better unload."

"The wretch does not mean to leave us here alone?" said a female voice in shrill indignation. "You'll wait for us, driver?" said a masculine voice, confidently.

"How long?" asked the driver.

There was a hurried consultation within. The words "Might

send us packing!" "May take all night to get him to listen to reason," "Bother! whole thing over in ten minutes," came from the window. The driver meanwhile had settled himself back in his seat, and whistled in patient contempt of a fashionable fare that didn't know its own mind nor destination. Finally, the masculine head was thrust out, and, with a certain potential air of judiciously ending a difficulty, said:—

"You're to follow us slowly, and put up your horses in the stable or barn until we want you."

An ironical laugh burst from the driver. "Oh, yes—in the stable or barn—in course. But, my eyes sorter failin' me, mebbe, now, some ev you younger folks will kindly pint out the stable or barn of the Kernel's. Woa!—will ye?—woa! Give me a chance to pick out that there barn or stable to put ye in!" This in arch confidence to the horses, who had not moved.

Here the previous speaker, rotund, dignified, and elderly, alighted indignantly, closely followed by the rest of the party, two ladies and a gentleman. One of the ladies was past the age, but not the fashion, of youth, and her Parisian dress clung over her wasted figure and well-bred bones artistically if not gracefully; the younger lady, evidently her daughter, was crisp and pretty, and carried off the aquiline nose and aristocratic emaciation of her mother with a certain piquancy and a dash that was charming. The gentleman was young, thin, with the family characteristics, but otherwise indistinctive.

With one accord they all faced directly toward the spot

indicated by the driver's whip. Nothing but the bare, bleak, rectangular outlines of the cabin of the Man on the Beach met their eyes. All else was a desolate expanse, unrelieved by any structure higher than the tussocks of scant beach grass that clothed it. They were so utterly helpless that the driver's derisive laughter gave way at last to good humor and suggestion. "Look yer," he said finally, "I don't know ez it's your fault you don't know this kentry ez well ez you do Yurup; so I'll drag this yer team over to Robinson's on the river, give the horses a bite, and then meander down this yer ridge, and wait for ye. Ye'll see me from the Kernel's." And without waiting for a reply, he swung his horses' heads toward the river, and rolled away.

The same querulous protest that had come from the windows arose from the group, but vainly. Then followed accusations and recrimination. "It's YOUR fault; you might have written, and had him meet us at the settlement." "You wanted to take him by surprise!" "I didn't. You know if I'd written that we were coming, he'd have taken good care to run away from us." "Yes, to some more inaccessible place." "There can be none worse than this," etc., etc. But it was so clearly evident that nothing was to be done but to go forward, that even in the midst of their wrangling they straggled on in Indian file toward the distant cabin, sinking ankle-deep in the yielding sand, punctuating their verbal altercation with sighs, and only abating it at a scream from the elder lady.

"Where's Maria?"

"Gone on ahead!" grunted the younger gentleman, in a bass

voice, so incongruously large for him that it seemed to have been a ventriloquistic contribution by somebody else.

It was too true. Maria, after adding her pungency to the general conversation, had darted on ahead. But alas! that swift Camilla, after scouring the plain some two hundred feet with her demitrain, came to grief on an unbending tussock and sat down, panting but savage. As they plodded wearily toward her, she bit her red lips, smacked them on her cruel little white teeth like a festive and sprightly ghoul, and lisped:—

"You DO look so like guys! For all the world like those English shopkeepers we met on the Righi, doing the three-guinea excursion in their Sunday clothes!"

Certainly the spectacle of these exotically plumed bipeds, whose fine feathers were already bedrabbled by sand and growing limp in the sea breeze, was somewhat dissonant with the rudeness of sea and sky and shore. A few gulls screamed at them; a loon, startled from the lagoon, arose shrieking and protesting, with painfully extended legs, in obvious burlesque of the younger gentleman. The elder lady felt the justice of her gentle daughter's criticism, and retaliated with simple directness:—

"Your skirt is ruined, your hair is coming down, your hat is half off your head, and your shoes—in Heaven's name, Maria! what HAVE you done with your shoes?"

Maria had exhibited a slim stockinged foot from under her skirt. It was scarcely three fingers broad, with an arch as patrician as her nose. "Somewhere between here and the carriage," she

answered; "Dick can run back and find it, while he is looking for your brooch, mamma. Dick's so obliging."

The robust voice of Dick thundered, but the wasted figure of Dick feebly ploughed its way back, and returned with the missing buskin.

"I may as well carry them in my hand like the market girls at Saumur, for we have got to wade soon," said Miss Maria, sinking her own terrors in the delightful contemplation of the horror in her parent's face, as she pointed to a shining film of water slowly deepening in a narrow swale in the sands between them and the cabin.

"It's the tide," said the elder gentleman. "If we intend to go on we must hasten; permit me, my dear madam," and before she could reply he had lifted the astounded matron in his arms, and made gallantly for the ford. The gentle Maria cast an ominous eye on her brother, who, with manifest reluctance, performed for her the same office. But that acute young lady kept her eyes upon the preceding figure of the elder gentleman, and seeing him suddenly and mysteriously disappear to his armpits, unhesitatingly threw herself from her brother's protecting arms,—an action which instantly precipitated him into the water,—and paddled hastily to the opposite bank, where she eventually assisted in pulling the elderly gentleman out of the hollow into which he had fallen, and in rescuing her mother, who floated helplessly on the surface, upheld by her skirts, like a gigantic and variegated water-lily. Dick followed with a single gaiter. In another minute they were

safe on the opposite bank.

The elder lady gave way to tears; Maria laughed hysterically; Dick mingled a bass oath with the now audible surf; the elder gentleman, whose florid face the salt water had bleached, and whose dignity seemed to have been washed away, accounted for both by saying he thought it was a quicksand.

"It might have been," said a quiet voice behind them; "you should have followed the sand dunes half a mile further to the estuary."

They turned instantly at the voice. It was that of the Man on the Beach. They all rose to their feet and uttered together, save one, the single exclamation, "James!" The elder gentleman said "Mr. North," and, with a slight resumption of his former dignity, buttoned his coat over his damp shirt front.

There was a silence, in which the Man on the Beach looked gravely down upon them. If they had intended to impress him by any suggestion of a gay, brilliant, and sensuous world beyond in their own persons, they had failed, and they knew it. Keenly alive as they had always been to external prepossession, they felt that they looked forlorn and ludicrous, and that the situation lay in his hands. The elderly lady again burst into tears of genuine distress, Maria colored over her cheek-bones, and Dick stared at the ground in sullen disquiet.

"You had better get up," said the Man on the Beach, after a moment's thought, "and come up to the cabin. I cannot offer you a change of garments, but you can dry them by the fire."

They all rose together, and again said in chorus, "James!" but this time with an evident effort to recall some speech or action previously resolved upon and committed to memory. The elder lady got so far as to clasp her hands and add, "You have not forgotten us—James, oh, James!"; the younger gentleman to attempt a brusque "Why, Jim, old boy," that ended in querulous incoherence; the young lady to cast a half-searching, half-coquettish look at him; and the old gentleman to begin, "Our desire, Mr. North"—but the effort was futile. Mr. James North, standing before them with folded arms, looked from the one to the other.

"I have not thought much of you for a twelvemonth," he said, quietly, "but I have not forgotten you. Come!"

He led the way a few steps in advance, they following silently. In this brief interview they felt he had resumed the old dominance and independence, against which they had rebelled; more than that, in this half failure of their first concerted action they had changed their querulous bickerings to a sullen distrust of each other, and walked moodily apart as they followed James North into his house. A fire blazed brightly on the hearth; a few extra seats were quickly extemporized from boxes and chests, and the elder lady, with the skirt of her dress folded over her knees,—looking not unlike an exceedingly overdressed jointed doll,—dried her flounces and her tears together. Miss Maria took in the scant appointments of the house in one single glance, and then fixed her eyes upon James North, who, the least concerned

of the party, stood before them, grave and patiently expectant.

"Well," began the elder lady in a high key, "after all this worry and trouble you have given us, James, haven't you anything to say? Do you know—have you the least idea what you are doing? what egregious folly you are committing? what everybody is saying? Eh? Heavens and earth!—do you know who I am?"

"You are my father's brother's widow, Aunt Mary," returned James, quietly. "If I am committing any folly it only concerns myself; if I cared for what people said I should not be here; if I loved society enough to appreciate its good report I should stay with it."

"But they say you have run away from society to pine alone for a worthless creature—a woman who has used you, as she has used and thrown away others—a—"

"A woman," chimed in Dick, who had thrown himself on James's bed while his patent leathers were drying, "a woman that all the fellers know never intended"—here, however, he met James North's eye, and muttering something about "whole thing being too idiotic to talk about," relapsed into silence.

"You know," continued Mrs. North, "that while we and all our set shut our eyes to your very obvious relations with that woman, and while I myself often spoke of it to others as a simple flirtation, and averted a scandal for your sake, and when the climax was reached, and she herself gave you an opportunity to sever your relations, and nobody need have been wiser—and she'd have had all the blame—and it's only what

she's accustomed to—you—you! you, James North!—you must nonsensically go, and, by this extravagant piece of idiocy and sentimental tomfoolery, let everybody see how serious the whole affair was, and how deep it hurt you! and here in this awful place, alone—where you're half drowned to get to it and are willing to be wholly drowned to get away! Oh, don't talk to me! I won't hear it—it's just too idiotic for anything!"

The subject of this outburst neither spoke nor moved a single muscle.

"Your aunt, Mr. North, speaks excitedly," said the elder gentleman; "yet I think she does not overestimate the unfortunate position in which your odd fancy places you. I know nothing of the reasons that have impelled you to this step; I only know that the popular opinion is that the cause is utterly inadequate. You are still young, with a future before you. I need not say how your present conduct may imperil that. If you expected to achieve any good—even to your own satisfaction—but this conduct—"

"Yes—if there was anything to be gained by it!" broke in Mrs. North.

"If you ever thought she'd come back!—but that kind of woman don't. They must have change. Why"—began Dick suddenly, and as suddenly lying down again.

"Is this all you have come to say?" asked James North, after a moment's patient silence, looking from one to the other.

"All?" screamed Mrs. North; "is it not enough?"

"Not to change my mind nor my residence at present," replied

North, coolly.

"Do you mean to continue this folly all your life?"

"And have a coroner's inquest, and advertisements and all the facts in the papers?"

"And have HER read the melancholy details, and know that you were faithful and she was not?"

This last shot was from the gentle Maria, who bit her lips as it glanced from the immovable man.

"I believe there is nothing more to say," continued North, quietly. "I am willing to believe your intentions are as worthy as your zeal. Let us say no more," he added, with grave weariness; "the tide is rising, and your coachman is signaling you from the bank."

There was no mistaking the unshaken positiveness of the man, which was all the more noticeable from its gentle but utter indifference to the wishes of the party. He turned his back upon them as they gathered hurriedly around the elder gentleman, while the words, "He cannot be in his right mind," "It's your duty to do it," "It's sheer insanity," "Look at his eye!" all fell unconsciously upon his ear.

"One word more, Mr. North," said the elder gentleman, a little portentously, to conceal an evident embarrassment. "It may be that your conduct might suggest to minds more practical than your own the existence of some aberration of the intellect—some temporary mania—that might force your best friends into a quasi-legal attitude of—"

"Declaring me insane," interrupted James North, with the slight impatience of a man more anxious to end a prolix interview than to combat an argument. "I think differently. As my aunt's lawyer, you know that within the last year I have deeded most of my property to her and her family. I cannot believe that so shrewd an adviser as Mr. Edmund Carter would ever permit proceedings that would invalidate that conveyance."

Maria burst into a laugh of such wicked gratification that James North, for the first time, raised his eyes with something of interest to her face. She colored under them, but returned his glance with another like a bayonet flash. The party slowly moved toward the door, James North following.

"Then this is your final answer?" asked Mrs. North, stopping imperiously on the threshold.

"I beg your pardon?" queried North, half abstractedly.

"Your final answer?"

"Oh, certainly."

Mrs. North flounced away a dozen rods in rage. This was unfortunate for North. It gave them the final attack in detail. Dick began: "Come along! You know you can advertise for her with a personal down there and the old woman wouldn't object as long as you were careful and put in an appearance now and then!"

As Dick limped away, Mr. Carter thought, in confidence, that the whole matter—even to suit Mr. North's sensitive nature—might be settled there. "SHE evidently expects you to return. My opinion is that she never left San Francisco. You can't tell

anything about these women."

With this last sentence on his indifferent ear, James North seemed to be left free. Maria had rejoined her mother; but as they crossed the ford, and an intervening sand-hill hid the others from sight, that piquant young lady suddenly appeared on the hill and stood before him.

"And you're not coming back?" she said directly.

"No."

"Never?"

"I cannot say."

"Tell me! what is there about some women to make men love them so?"

"Love," replied North, quietly.

"No, it cannot be—it is not THAT!"

North looked over the hill and round the hill, and looked bored.

"Oh, I'm going now. But one moment, Jem! I didn't want to come. They dragged me here. Good-by."

She raised a burning face and eyes to his. He leaned forward and imprinted the perfunctory cousinly kiss of the period upon her cheek.

"Not that way," she said angrily, clutching his wrists with her long, thin fingers; "you shan't kiss me in that way, James North."

With the faintest, ghost-like passing of a twinkle in the corners of his sad eyes, he touched his lips to hers. With the contact, she caught him round the neck, pressed her burning lips and face to

his forehead, his cheeks, the very curves of his chin and throat, and—with a laugh was gone.

II

Had the kinsfolk of James North any hope that their visit might revive some lingering desire he still combated to enter once more the world they represented, that hope would have soon died. Whatever effect this episode had upon the solitary,—and he had become so self-indulgent of his sorrow, and so careless of all that came between him and it, as to meet opposition with profound indifference,—the only appreciable result was a greater attraction for the solitude that protected him, and he grew even to love the bleak shore and barren sands that had proved so inhospitable to others. There was a new meaning to the roar of the surges, an honest, loyal sturdiness in the unchanging persistency of the uncouth and blustering trade-winds, and a mute fidelity in the shining sands, treacherous to all but him. With such bandogs to lie in wait for trespassers, should he not be grateful?

If no bitterness was awakened by the repeated avowal of the unfaithfulness of the woman he loved, it was because he had always made the observation and experience of others give way to the dominance of his own insight. No array of contradictory facts ever shook his belief or unbelief; like all egotists, he accepted them as truths controlled by a larger truth of which he alone was cognizant. His simplicity, which was but another form of his egotism, was so complete as to baffle ordinary malicious

cunning, and so he was spared the experience and knowledge that come to a lower nature, and help debase it.

Exercise and the stimulus of the few wants that sent him hunting or fishing kept up his physical health. Never a lover of rude freedom or outdoor life his sedentary predilections and nice tastes kept him from lapsing into barbarian excess; never a sportsman he followed the chase with no feverish exaltation. Even dumb creatures found out his secret, and at times, stalking moodily over the upland, the brown deer and elk would cross his path without fear or molestation, or, idly lounging in his canoe within the river bar, flocks of wild fowl would settle within stroke of his listless oar. And so the second winter of his hermitage drew near its close, and with it came a storm that passed into local history, and is still remembered. It uprooted giant trees along the river, and with them the tiny rootlets of the life he was idly fostering.

The morning had been fitfully turbulent, the wind veering several points south and west, with suspicious lulls, unlike the steady onset of the regular southwest trades. High overhead the long manes of racing cirro stratus streamed with flying gulls and hurrying water-fowl; plover piped incessantly, and a flock of timorous sand-pipers sought the low ridge of his cabin, while a wrecking crew of curlew hastily manned the uprooted tree that tossed wearily beyond the bar. By noon the flying clouds huddled together in masses, and then were suddenly exploded in one vast opaque sheet over the heavens. The sea became gray, and

suddenly wrinkled and old. There was a dumb, half-articulate cry in the air,—rather a confusion of many sounds, as of the booming of distant guns, the clangor of a bell, the trampling of many waves, the creaking of timbers and soughing of leaves, that sank and fell ere you could yet distinguish them. And then it came on to blow. For two hours it blew strongly. At the time the sun should have set the wind had increased; in fifteen minutes darkness shut down, even the white sands lost their outlines, and sea and shore and sky lay in the grip of a relentless and aggressive power.

Within his cabin, by the leaping light of his gusty fire, North sat alone. His first curiosity passed, the turmoil without no longer carried his thought beyond its one converging centre. SHE had come to him on the wings of the storm, even as she had been borne to him on the summer fog-cloud. Now and then the wind shook the cabin, but he heeded it not. He had no fears for its safety; it presented its low gable to the full fury of the wind that year by year had piled, and even now was piling, protecting buttresses of sand against it. With each succeeding gust it seemed to nestle more closely to its foundations, in the whirl of flying sand that rattled against its roof and windows. It was nearly midnight when a sudden thought brought him to his feet. What if SHE were exposed to the fury of such a night as this? What could he do to help her? Perhaps even now, as he sat there idle, she—Hark! was not that a gun—No? Yes, surely!

He hurriedly unbolted the door, but the strength of the wind

and the impact of drifted sand resisted his efforts. With a new and feverish strength possessing him he forced it open wide enough to permit his egress when the wind caught him as a feather, rolled him over and over, and then, grappling him again, held him down hard and fast against the drift. Unharméd, but unable to move, he lay there, hearing the multitudinous roar of the storm, but unable to distinguish one familiar sound in the savage medley. At last he managed to crawl flat on his face to the cabin, and refastening the door, threw himself upon his bed.

He was awakened from a fitful dream of his Cousin Maria. She with a supernatural strength seemed to be holding the door against some unseen, unknown power that moaned and strove without, and threw itself in despairing force against the cabin. He could see the lithe undulations of her form as she alternately yielded to its power, and again drew the door against it, coiling herself around the log-hewn doorpost with a hideous, snake-like suggestion. And then a struggle and a heavy blow, which shook the very foundations of the structure, awoke him. He leaped to his feet, and into an inch of water! By the flickering firelight he could see it oozing and dripping from the crevices of the logs and broadening into a pool by the chimney. A scrap of paper torn from an envelope was floating idly on its current. Was it the overflow of the backed-up waters of the river? He was not left long in doubt. Another blow upon the gable of the house, and a torrent of spray leaped down the chimney, scattered the embers far and wide, and left him in utter darkness. Some of the spray

clung to his lips. It was salt. The great ocean had beaten down the river bar and was upon him!

Was there aught to fly to? No! The cabin stood upon the highest point of the sand spit, and the low swale on one side crossed by his late visitors was a seething mass of breakers, while the estuary behind him was now the ocean itself. There was nothing to do but to wait.

The very helplessness of his situation was, to a man of his peculiar temperament, an element of patient strength. The instinct of self-preservation was still strong in him, but he had no fear of death, nor, indeed, any presentiment of it; yet if it came, it was an easy solution of the problem that had been troubling him, and it wiped off the slate! He thought of the sarcastic prediction of his cousin, and death in the form that threatened him was the obliteration of his home and even the ground upon which it stood. There would be nothing to record, no stain could come upon the living. The instinct that kept him true to HER would tell her how he died; if it did not, it was equally well. And with this simple fatalism his only belief, this strange man groped his way to his bed, lay down, and in a few moments was asleep. The storm still roared without. Once again the surges leaped against the cabin, but it was evident that the wind was abating with the tide.

When he awoke it was high noon, and the sun was shining brightly. For some time he lay in a delicious languor, doubting if he was alive or dead, but feeling through every nerve and fibre an exquisite sense of peace—a rest he had not known since

his boyhood—a relief he scarcely knew from what. He felt that he was smiling, and yet his pillow was wet with the tears that glittered still on his lashes. The sand blocking up his doorway, he leaped lightly from his window. A few clouds were still sailing slowly in the heavens, the trailing plumes of a great benediction that lay on sea and shore. He scarcely recognized the familiar landscape; a new bar had been formed in the river, and a narrow causeway of sand that crossed the lagoon and marshes to the river bank and the upland trail seemed to bring him nearer to humanity again. He was conscious of a fresh, childlike delight in all this, and when, a moment later, he saw the old uprooted tree, now apparently forever moored and imbedded in the sand beside his cabin, he ran to it with a sense of joy.

Its trailing roots were festooned with clinging sea-weed and the long, snaky, undulating stems of the sea-turnip; and fixed between two crossing roots was a bamboo orange crate, almost intact. As he walked toward it he heard a strange cry, unlike anything the barren sands had borne before. Thinking it might be some strange sea bird caught in the meshes of the sea-weed, he ran to the crate and looked within. It was half filled with sea-moss and feathery algae. The cry was repeated. He brushed aside the weeds with his hands. It was not a wounded sea bird, but a living human child!

As he lifted it from its damp enwrappings he saw that it was an infant eight or nine months old. How and when it had been brought there, or what force had guided that elfish cradle to his

very door, he could not determine; but it must have been left early, for it was quite warm, and its clothing almost dried by the blazing morning sun. To wrap his coat about it, to run to his cabin with it, to start out again with the appalling conviction that nothing could be done for it there, occupied some moments. His nearest neighbor was Trinidad Joe, a "logger," three miles up the river. He remembered to have heard vaguely that he was a man of family. To half strangle the child with a few drops from his whisky flask, to extricate his canoe from the marsh, and strike out into the river with his waif, was at least to do something. In half an hour he had reached the straggling cabin and sheds of Trinidad Joe, and from the few scanty flowers that mingled with the brushwood fence, and a surplus of linen fluttering on the line, he knew that his surmise as to Trinidad Joe's domestic establishment was correct.

The door at which he knocked opened upon a neat, plainly-furnished room, and the figure of a buxom woman of twenty-five. With an awkwardness new to him, North stammered out the circumstances of his finding the infant, and the object of his visit. Before he had finished, the woman, by some feminine trick, had taken the child from his hands ere he knew it; and when he paused, out of breath, burst into a fit of laughter. North tried to laugh too, but failed.

When the woman had wiped the tears from a pair of very frank blue eyes, and hidden two rows of very strong white teeth again, she said:—

"Look yar! You're that looney sort a' chap that lives alone over on the spit yonder, ain't ye?"

North hastened to admit all that the statement might imply.

"And so ye've had a baby left ye to keep you company? Lordy!" Here she looked as if dangerously near a relapse, and then added, as if in explanation of her conduct,—

"When I saw ye paddlin' down here,—you thet ez shy as elk in summer,—I sez, 'He's sick.' But a baby,—Oh, Lordy!"

For a moment North almost hated her. A woman who, in this pathetic, perhaps almost tragic, picture saw only a ludicrous image, and that image himself, was of another race than that he had ever mingled with. Profoundly indifferent as he had always been to the criticism of his equals in station, the mischievous laughter of this illiterate woman jarred upon him worse than his cousin's sarcasm. It was with a little dignity that he pointed out the fact that at present the child needed nourishment. "It's very young," he added. "I'm afraid it wants its natural nourishment."

"Whar is it to get it?" asked the woman.

James North hesitated, and looked around. There should be a baby somewhere! there **MUST** be a baby somewhere! "I thought that you," he stammered, conscious of an awkward coloring,—**"I—that is—I—"** He stopped short, for she was already cramming her apron into her mouth, too late, however, to stop the laugh that overflowed it. When she found her breath again, she said,—

"Look yar! I don't wonder they said you was looney! I'm Trinidad Joe's onmarried darter, and the only woman in this

house. Any fool could have told you that. Now, ef you can rig us up a baby out o' them facts, I'd like to see it done."

Inwardly furious but outwardly polite, James North begged her pardon, deplored his ignorance, and, with a courtly bow, made a movement to take the child. But the woman as quickly drew it away.

"Not much," she said, hastily. "What! trust that poor critter to you? No, sir! Thar's more ways of feeding a baby, young man, than you knows on, with all your 'nat'ral nourishment.' But it looks kinder logy and stupid."

North freezingly admitted that he had given the infant whisky as a stimulant.

"You did? Come, now, that ain't so looney after all. Well, I'll take the baby, and when Dad comes home we'll see what can be done."

North hesitated. His dislike of the woman was intense, and yet he knew no one else and the baby needed instant care. Besides, he began to see the ludicrousness of his making a first call on his neighbors with a foundling to dispose of. She saw his hesitation, and said,—

"Ye don't know me, in course. Well, I'm Bessy Robinson, Trinidad Joe Robinson's daughter. I reckon Dad will give me a character if you want references, or any of the boys on the river."

"I'm only thinking of the trouble I'm giving you, Miss Robinson, I assure you. Any expense you may incur—"

"Young man," said Bessy Robinson, turning sharply on her

heel, and facing him with her black brows a little contracted, "if it comes to expenses, I reckon I'll pay you for that baby, or not take it at all. But I don't know you well enough to quarrel with you on sight. So leave the child to me, and, if you choose, paddle down here to-morrow, after sun up—the ride will do you good—and see it, and Dad thrown in. Good by!" and with one powerful but well-shaped arm thrown around the child, and the other crooked at the dimpled elbow a little aggressively, she swept by James North and entered a bedroom, closing the door behind her.

When Mr. James North reached his cabin it was dark. As he rebuilt his fire, and tried to rearrange the scattered and disordered furniture, and remove the debris of last night's storm, he was conscious for the first time of feeling lonely. He did not miss the child. Beyond the instincts of humanity and duty he had really no interest in its welfare or future. He was rather glad to get rid of it, he would have preferred to some one else, and yet SHE looked as if she were competent. And then came the reflection that since the morning he had not once thought of the woman he loved. The like had never occurred in his twelvemonth solitude. So he set to work, thinking of her and of his sorrows, until the word "Looney," in connection with his suffering, flashed across his memory. "Looney!" It was not a nice word. It suggested something less than insanity; something that might happen to a common, unintellectual sort of person. He remembered the loon, an ungainly feathered neighbor, that was popularly supposed to have lent its name to the adjective. Could

it be possible that people looked upon him as one too hopelessly and uninterestingly afflicted for sympathy or companionship, too unimportant and common for even ridicule; or was this but the coarse interpretation of that vulgar girl?

Nevertheless, the next morning "after sun up" James North was at Trinidad Joe's cabin. That worthy proprietor himself—a long, lank man, with even more than the ordinary rural Western characteristics of ill health, ill feeding, and melancholy—met him on the bank, clothed in a manner and costume that was a singular combination of the frontiersman and the sailor. When North had again related the story of his finding the child, Trinidad Joe pondered.

"It mout hev been stowed away in one of them crates for safe-keeping," he said, musingly, "and washed off the deck o' one o' them Tahiti brigs goin' down fer oranges. Least-ways, it never got thar from these parts."

"But it's a miracle its life was saved at all. It must have been some hours in the water."

"Them brigs lays their course well inshore, and it was just mebbe a toss up if the vessel clawed off the reef at all! And ez to the child keepin' up, why, dog my skin! that's just the contrariness o' things," continued Joe, in sententious cynicism. "Ef an able seaman had fallen from the yard-arm that night he'd been sunk in sight o' the ship, and thet baby ez can't swim a stroke sails ashore, sound asleep, with the waves for a baby-jumper."

North, who was half relieved, yet half awkwardly

disappointed at not seeing Bessy, ventured to ask how the child was doing.

"She'll do all right now," said a frank voice above, and, looking up, North discerned the round arms, blue eyes, and white teeth of the daughter at the window. "She's all hunky, and has an appetite—ef she hezn't got her 'nat'ral nourishment.' Come, Dad! heave ahead, and tell the stranger what you and me allow we'll do, and don't stand there swappin' lies with him."

"Weel," said Trinidad Joe, dejectedly, "Bess allows she can rar that baby and do justice to it. And I don't say—though I'm her father—that she can't. But when Bess wants anything she wants it all, clean down; no half-ways nor leavin's for her."

"That's me! go on, Dad—you're chippin' in the same notch every time," said Miss Robinson, with cheerful directness.

"Well, we agree to put the job up this way. We'll take the child and you'll give us a paper or writin' makin' over all your right and title. How's that?"

Without knowing exactly why he did, Mr. North objected decidedly.

"Do you think we won't take good care of it?" asked Miss Bessy, sharply.

"That is not the question," said North, a little hotly. "In the first place, the child is not mine to give. It has fallen into my hands as a trust,—the first hands that received it from its parents. I do not think it right to allow any other hands to come between theirs and mine."

Miss Bessy left the window. In another moment she appeared from the house, and, walking directly towards North, held out a somewhat substantial hand. "Good!" she said, as she gave his fingers an honest squeeze. "You ain't so looney after all. Dad, he's right! He shan't gin it up, but we'll go halves in it, he and me. He'll be father and I'll be mother 'til death do us part, or the reg'lar family turns up. Well—what do you say?"

More pleased than he dared confess to himself with the praise of this common girl, Mr. James North assented. Then would he see the baby? He would, and Trinidad Joe having already seen the baby, and talked of the baby, and felt the baby, and indeed had the baby offered to him in every way during the past night, concluded to give some of his valuable time to logging, and left them together.

Mr. North was obliged to admit that the baby was thriving. He moreover listened with polite interest to the statement that the baby's eyes were hazel, like his own; that it had five teeth; that she was, for a girl of that probable age, a robust child; and yet Mr. North lingered. Finally, with his hand on the door-lock, he turned to Bessy and said,—

"May I ask you an odd question, Miss Robinson?"

"Go on."

"Why did you think I was—'looney'?"

The frank Miss Robinson bent her head over the baby.

"Why?"

"Yes, why?"

"Because you WERE looney."

"Oh!"

"But—"

"Yes—"

"You'll get over it."

And under the shallow pretext of getting the baby's food, she retired to the kitchen, where Mr. North had the supreme satisfaction of seeing her, as he passed the window, sitting on a chair with her apron over her head, shaking with laughter.

For the next two or three days he did not visit the Robinsons, but gave himself up to past memories. On the third day he had—it must be confessed not without some effort—brought himself into that condition of patient sorrow which had been his habit. The episode of the storm and the finding of the baby began to fade, as had faded the visit of his relatives. It had been a dull, wet day and he was sitting by his fire, when there came a tap at his door. "Flora;" by which juvenescent name his aged Indian handmaid was known, usually announced her presence with an imitation of a curlew's cry: it could not be her. He fancied he heard the trailing of a woman's dress against the boards, and started to his feet, deathly pale, with a name upon his lips. But the door was impatiently thrown open, and showed Bessy Robinson! And the baby!

With a feeling of relief he could not understand he offered her a seat. She turned her frank eyes on him curiously.

"You look skeert!"

"I was startled. You know I see nobody here!"

"Thet's so. But look yar, do you ever use a doctor?"

Not clearly understanding her, he in turn asked, "Why?"

"Cause you must rise up and get one now—thet's why. This yer baby of ours is sick. We don't use a doctor at our house, we don't beleeve in 'em, hain't no call for 'em—but this yer baby's parents mebbe did. So rise up out o' that cheer and get one."

James North looked at Miss Robinson and rose, albeit a little in doubt, and hesitating.

Miss Robinson saw it. "I shouldn't hev troubled ye, nor ridden three mile to do it, if ther hed been any one else to send. But Dad's over at Eureka, buying logs, and I'm alone. Hello—wher yer goin'?"

North had seized his hat and opened the door. "For a doctor," he replied amazedly.

"Did ye kalkilate to walk six miles and back?"

"Certainly—I have no horse."

"But I have, and you'll find her tethered outside. She ain't much to look at, but when you strike the trail she'll go."

"But YOU—how will YOU return?"

"Well," said Miss Robinson, drawing her chair to the fire, taking off her hat and shawl, and warming her knees by the blaze, "I didn't reckon to return. You'll find me here when you come back with the doctor. Go! Skedaddle quick!"

She did not have to repeat the command. In another instant James North was in Miss Bessy's seat—a man's dragoon saddle,

—and pounding away through the sand. Two facts were in his mind: one was that he, the "looney," was about to open communication with the wisdom and contemporary criticism of the settlement, by going for a doctor to administer to a sick and anonymous infant in his possession; the other was that his solitary house was in the hands of a self-invited, large-limbed, illiterate, but rather comely young woman. These facts he could not gallop away from, but to his credit be it recorded that he fulfilled his mission zealously, if not coherently, to the doctor, who during the rapid ride gathered the idea that North had rescued a young married woman from drowning, who had since given birth to a child.

The few words that set the doctor right when he arrived at the cabin might in any other community have required further explanation, but Dr. Duchesne, an old army surgeon, was prepared for everything and indifferent to all. "The infant," he said, "was threatened with inflammation of the lungs; at present there was no danger, but the greatest care and caution must be exercised. Particularly exposure should be avoided." "That settles the whole matter, then," said Bessy potentially. Both gentlemen looked their surprise. "It means," she condescended to further explain, "that YOU must ride that filly home, wait for the old man to come to-morrow, and then ride back here with some of my duds, for thar's no 'day-days' nor picknicking for that baby ontill she's better. And I reckon to stay with her ontill she is."

"She certainly is unable to bear any exposure at present," said

the doctor, with an amused side glance at North's perplexed face. "Miss Robinson is right. I'll ride with you over the sands as far as the trail."

"I'm afraid," said North, feeling it incumbent upon him to say something, "that you'll hardly find it as comfortable here as—"

"I reckon not," she said simply, "but I didn't expect much."

North turned a little wearily away. "Good night," she said suddenly, extending her hand, with a gentler smile of lip and eye than he had ever before noticed, "good night—take good care of Dad."

The doctor and North rode together some moments in silence. North had another fact presented to him, i. e. that he was going a-visiting, and that he had virtually abandoned his former life; also that it would be profanation to think of his sacred woe in the house of a stranger.

"I dare say," said the doctor, suddenly, "you are not familiar with the type of woman Miss Bessy presents so perfectly. Your life has been spent among the conventional class."

North froze instantly at what seemed to be a probing of his secret. Disregarding the last suggestion, he made answer simply and truthfully that he had never met any Western girl like Bessy.

"That's your bad luck," said the doctor. "You think her coarse and illiterate?"

Mr. North had been so much struck with her kindness that really he had not thought of it.

"That's not so," said the doctor, curtly; "although even if you

told her so she would not think any the less of you—nor of herself. If she spoke rustic Greek instead of bad English, and wore a cestus in place of an ill-fitting corset, you'd swear she was a goddess. There's your trail. Good night."

III

James North did not sleep well that night. He had taken Miss Bessy's bedroom, at her suggestion, there being but two, and "Dad never using sheets and not bein' keerful in his habits." It was neat, but that was all. The scant ornamentation was atrocious; two or three highly colored prints, a shell work-box, a ghastly winter bouquet of skeleton leaves and mosses, a star-fish, and two china vases hideous enough to have been worshiped as Buddhist idols, exhibited the gentle recreation of the fair occupant, and the possible future education of the child. In the morning he was met by Joe, who received the message of his daughter with his usual dejection, and suggested that North stay with him until the child was better. That event was still remote; North found, on his return to his cabin, that the child had been worse; but he did not know, until Miss Bessy dropped a casual remark, that she had not closed her own eyes that night. It was a week before he regained his own quarters, but an active week—indeed, on the whole, a rather pleasant week. For there was a delicate flattery in being domineered by a wholesome and handsome woman, and Mr. James North had by this time made up his mind that she was both. Once or twice he found himself contemplating her splendid figure with a recollection of the doctor's compliment, and later, emulating her own frankness, told her of it.

"And what did YOU say?" she asked.

"Oh, I laughed and said—nothing."

And so did she.

A month after this interchange of frankness, she asked him if he could spend the next evening at her house. "You see," she said, "there's to be a dance down at the hall at Eureka, and I haven't kicked a fut since last spring. Hank Fisher's comin' up to take me over, and I'm goin' to let the shanty slide for the night."

"But what's to become of the baby?" asked North, a little testily.

"Well," said Miss Robinson, facing him somewhat aggressively, "I reckon it won't hurt ye to take care of it for a night. Dad can't—and if he could, he don't know how. Liked to have pizened me after mar died. No, young man, I don't propose to ask Hank Fisher to tote thet child over to Eureka and back, and spile his fun."

"Then I suppose I must make way for Mr. Hank—Hank—Fisher?" said North, with the least tinge of sarcasm in his speech.

"Of course. You've got nothing else to do, you know."

North would have given worlds to have pleaded a previous engagement on business of importance, but he knew that Bessy spoke truly. He had nothing to do. "And Fisher has, I suppose?" he asked.

"Of course—to look after ME!"

A more unpleasant evening James North had not spent since the first day of his solitude. He almost began to hate the unconscious cause of his absurd position, as he paced up and

down the floor with it. "Was there ever such egregious folly?" he began, but remembering he was quoting Maria North's favorite resume of his own conduct, he stopped. The child cried, missing, no doubt, the full rounded curves and plump arm of its nurse. North danced it violently, with an inward accompaniment that was not musical, and thought of the other dancers. "Doubtless," he mused, "she has told this beau of hers that she has left the baby with the 'looney' Man on the Beach. Perhaps I may be offered a permanent engagement as a harmless simpleton accustomed to the care of children. Mothers may cry for me. The doctor is at Eureka. Of course, he will be there to see his untranslated goddess, and condole with her over the imbecility of the Man on the Beach." Once he carelessly asked Joe who the company were.

"Well," said Joe, mournfully, "thar's Widder Higsby and darter; the four Stubbs gals; in course Polly Doble will be on hand with that feller that's clerking over at the Head for Jones, and Jones's wife. Then thar's French Pete, and Whisky Ben, and that chap that shot Archer,—I disremember his name,—and the barber—what's that little mulatto's name—that 'ar Kanaka? I swow!" continued Joe, drearily, "I'll be forgettin' my own next—and—"

"That will do," interrupted North, only half concealing his disgust as he rose and carried the baby to the other room, beyond the reach of names that might shock its ladylike ears. The next morning he met the from-dance-returning Bessy abstractedly, and soon took his leave, full of a disloyal plan, conceived in

the sleeplessness of her own bedchamber. He was satisfied that he owed a duty to its unknown parents to remove the child from the degrading influences of the barber Kanaka, and Hank Fisher especially, and he resolved to write to his relatives, stating the case, asking a home for the waif and assistance to find its parents. He addressed this letter to his cousin Maria, partly in consideration of the dramatic farewell of that young lady, and its possible influence in turning her susceptible heart towards his protege. He then quietly settled back to his old solitary habits, and for a week left the Robinsons unvisited. The result was a morning call by Trinidad Joe on the hermit. "It's a whim of my gal's, Mr. North," he said, dejectedly, "and ez I told you before and warned ye, when that gal hez an idee, fower yoke of oxen and seving men can't drag it outer her. She's got a idee o' larnin'—never hevin' hed much schoolin', and we ony takin' the papers, permiskiss like—and she says YOU can teach her—not hevin' anythin' else to do. Do ye folly me?"

"Yes," said North, "certainly."

"Well, she allows ez mebbe you're proud, and didn't like her takin' care of the baby for nowt; and she reckons that ef you'll gin her some book larnin', and get her to sling some fancy talk in fash'n'ble style—why, she'll call it squar."

"You can tell her," said North, very honestly, "that I shall be only too glad to help her in any way, without ever hoping to cancel my debt of obligation to her."

"Then it's a go?" said the mystified Joe, with a desperate

attempt to convey the foregoing statement to his own intellect in three Saxon words.

"It's a go," replied North, cheerfully.

And he felt relieved. For he was not quite satisfied with his own want of frankness to her. But here was a way to pay off the debt he owed her, and yet retain his own dignity. And now he could tell her what he had done, and he trusted to the ambitious instinct that prompted her to seek a better education to explain his reasons for it.

He saw her that evening and confessed all to her frankly. She kept her head averted, but when she turned her blue eyes to him they were wet with honest tears. North had a man's horror of a ready feminine lachrymal gland; but it was not like Bessy to cry, and it meant something; and then she did it in a large, goddess-like way, without sniffing, or chocking, or getting her nose red, but rather with a gentle deliquescence, a harmonious melting, so that he was fain to comfort her with nearer contact, gentleness in his own sad eyes, and a pressure of her large hand.

"It's all right, I s'pose," she said, sadly; "but I didn't reckon on yer havin' any relations, but thought you was alone, like me."

James North, thinking of Hank Fisher and the "mullater," could not help intimating that his relations were very wealthy and fashionable people, and had visited him last summer. A recollection of the manner in which they had so visited him and his own reception of them prevented his saying more. But Miss Bessy could not forego a certain feminine curiosity, and asked,—

"Did they come with Sam Baker's team?"

"Yes."

"Last July?"

"Yes."

"And Sam drove the horses here for a bite?"

"I believe so."

"And them's your relations?"

"They are."

Miss Robinson reached over the cradle and enfolded the sleeping infant in her powerful arms. Then she lifted her eyes, wrathful through her still glittering tears, and said, slowly, "They don't—have—this—child—then!"

"But why?"

"Oh, why? I saw them! That's why, and enough! You can't play any such gay and festive skeletons on this poor baby for flesh and blood parents. No, sir!"

"I think you judge them hastily, Miss Bessy," said North, secretly amused; "my aunt may not, at first, favorably impress strangers, yet she has many friends. But surely you do not object to my cousin Maria, the young lady?"

"What! that dried cuttle-fish, with nothing livin' about her but her eyes? James North, ye may be a fool like the old woman,—perhaps it's in the family,—but ye ain't a devil, like that gal! That ends it."

And it did. North dispatched a second letter to Maria saying that he had already made other arrangements for the baby.

Pleased with her easy victory, Miss Bessy became more than usually gracious, and the next day bowed her shapely neck meekly to the yoke of her teacher, and became a docile pupil. James North could not have helped noticing her ready intelligence, even had he been less prejudiced in her favor than he was fast becoming now. If he had found it pleasant before to be admonished by her there was still more delicious flattery in her perfect trust in his omniscient skill as a pilot over this unknown sea. There was a certain enjoyment in guiding her hand over the writing-book, that I fear he could not have obtained from an intellect less graciously sustained by its physical nature. The weeks flew quickly by on gossamer wings, and when she placed a bunch of larkspurs and poppies in his hand one morning, he remembered for the first that it was spring.

I cannot say that there was more to record of Miss Bessy's education than this. Once North, half jestingly, remarked that he had never yet seen her admirer, Mr. Hank Fisher. Miss Bessy (coloring but cool)—"You never will!" North (white but hot)—"Why?" Miss Bessy (faintly)—"I'd rather not." North (resolutely)—"I insist." Bessy (yielding)—"As my teacher?" North (hesitatingly, at the limitation of the epithet)—"Y-e-e-s!" Bessy—"And you'll promise never to speak of it again?" North—"Never." Bessy (slowly)—"Well, he said I did an awful thing to go over to your cabin and stay." North (in the genuine simplicity of a refined nature)—"But how?" Miss Bessy (half piqued, but absolutely admiring that nature)—"Quit! and keep

your promise!"

They were so happy in these new relations that it occurred to Miss Bessy one day to take James North to task for obliging her to ask to be his pupil. "You knew how ignorant I was," she added; and Mr. North retorted by relating to her the doctor's criticism on her independence. "To tell you the truth," he added, "I was afraid you would not take it as kindly as he thought."

"That is, you thought me as vain as yourself. It seems to me you and the doctor had a great deal to say to each other."

"On the contrary," laughed North, "that was all we said."

"And you didn't make fun of me?"

Perhaps it was not necessary for North to take her hand to emphasize his denial, but he did.

Miss Bessy, being still reminiscent, perhaps, did not notice it. "If it hadn't been for that ar—I mean that thar—no, that baby—I wouldn't have known you!" she said dreamily.

"No," returned North, mischievously, "but you still would have known Hank Fisher."

No woman is perfect. Miss Bessy looked at him with a sudden—her first and last—flash of coquetry. Then stooped and kissed—the baby.

James North was a simple gentleman, but not altogether a fool. He returned the kiss, but not vicariously.

There was a footstep on the porch. These two turned the hues of a dying dolphin, and then laughed. It was Joe. He held a newspaper in his hand. "I reckon ye woz right, Mr. North,

about my takin' these yar papers reg'lar. For I allow here's suthin' that may clar up the mystery o' that baby's parents." With the hesitation of a slowly grappling intellect, Joe sat down on the table and read from the San Francisco "Herald" as follows: "It is now ascertained beyond doubt that the wreck reported by the Aeolus was the American brig Pomare bound hence to Tahiti. The worst surmises are found correct. The body of the woman has been since identified as that of the beau-ti-ful daughter of—of—of—Terp—Terp—Terpish'—Well! I swow that name just tackles me."

"Gin it to me, Dad," said Bessy pertly. "You never had any education, any way. Hear your accomplished daughter." With a mock bow to the new schoolmaster, and a capital burlesque of a confident school girl, she strode to the middle of the room the paper held and folded book-wise in her hands. "Ahem! Where did you leave off? Oh, 'the beautiful daughter of Terpsichore—whose name was prom-i-nently connected with a mysterious social scandal of last year—the gifted but unfortunate Grace Chatterton'—No—don't stop me—there's some more! 'The body of her child, a lovely infant of six months, has not been recovered, and it is supposed was washed overboard.' There! may be that's the child, Mr. North. Why, Dad! Look, O my God! He's falling. Catch him, Dad! Quick!"

But her strong arm had anticipated her father's. She caught him, lifted him to the bed, on which he lay henceforth for many days unconscious. Then fever supervened, and delirium, and Dr.

Duchesne telegraphed for his friends; but at the end of a week and the opening of a summer day the storm passed, as the other storm had passed, and he awoke, enfeebled, but at peace. Bessy was at his side—he was glad to see—alone.

"Bessy, dear," he said hesitatingly, "when I am stronger I have something to tell you."

"I know it all, Jem," she said with a trembling lip; "I heard it all—no, not from THEM, but from your own lips in your delirium. I'm glad it came from YOU—even then."

"Do you forgive me, Bessy?"

She pressed her lips to his forehead and said hastily, and then falteringly, as if afraid of her impulse:—

"Yes. Yes."

"And you will still be mother to the child?"

"HER child?"

"No dear, not hers, but MINE!"

She started, cried a little, and then putting her arms around him, said: "Yes."

And as there was but one way of fulfilling that sacred promise, they were married in the autumn.

TWO SAINTS OF THE FOOT-HILLS

It never was clearly ascertained how long they had been there. The first settler of Rough-and-Ready—one Low, playfully known to his familiars as "The Poor Indian"—declared that the Saints were afore his time, and occupied a cabin in the brush when he "blazed" his way to the North Fork. It is certain that the two were present when the water was first turned on the Union Ditch and then and there received the designation of Daddy Downey and Mammy Downey, which they kept to the last. As they tottered toward the refreshment tent, they were welcomed with the greatest enthusiasm by the boys; or, to borrow the more refined language of the "Union Recorder,"—"Their gray hairs and bent figures, recalling as they did the happy paternal eastern homes of the spectators, and the blessings that fell from venerable lips when they left those homes to journey in quest of the Golden Fleece on Occidental Slopes, caused many to burst into tears." The nearer facts, that many of these spectators were orphans, that a few were unable to establish any legal parentage whatever, that others had enjoyed a State's guardianship and discipline, and that a majority had left their paternal roofs without any embarrassing preliminary formula, were mere passing clouds that did not dim the golden imagery of the writer. From that day

the Saints were adopted as historical lay figures, and entered at once into possession of uninterrupted gratuities and endowment.

It was not strange that, in a country largely made up of ambitious and reckless youth, these two—types of conservative and settled forms—should be thus celebrated. Apart from any sentiment or veneration, they were admirable foils to the community's youthful progress and energy. They were put forward at every social gathering, occupied prominent seats on the platform at every public meeting, walked first in every procession, were conspicuous at the frequent funeral and rarer wedding, and were godfather and godmother to the first baby born in Rough-and-Ready. At the first poll opened in that precinct, Daddy Downey cast the first vote, and, as was his custom on all momentous occasions, became volubly reminiscent. "The first vote I ever cast," said Daddy, "was for Andrew Jackson; the father o' some on your peart young chaps wasn't born then; he! he! that was 'way long in '33, wasn't it? I disremember now, but if Mammy was here, she bein' a school-gal at the time, she could say. But my memory's failin' me. I'm an old man, boys; yet I likes to see the young ones go ahead. I recklect that thar vote from a suckumstance. Squire Adams was present, and seein' it was my first vote, he put a goold piece into my hand, and, sez he, sez Squire Adams, 'Let that always be a reminder of the exercise of a glorious freeman's privilege!' He did; he! he! Lord, boys! I feel so proud of ye, that I wish I had a hundred votes to cast for ye all."

It was hardly necessary to say that the memorial tribute of Squire Adams was increased tenfold by the judges, inspectors, and clerks, and that the old man tottered back to Mammy, considerably heavier than he came. As both of the rival candidates were equally sure of his vote, and each had called upon him and offered a conveyance, it is but fair to presume they were equally beneficent. But Daddy insisted upon walking to the polls,—a distance of two miles,—as a moral example, and a text for the California paragraphers, who hastened to record that such was the influence of the foot-hill climate, that "a citizen of Rough-and-Ready, aged eighty-four, rose at six o'clock, and, after milking two cows, walked a distance of twelve miles to the polls, and returned in time to chop a cord of wood before dinner."

Slightly exaggerated as this statement may have been, the fact that Daddy was always found by the visitor to be engaged at his wood-pile, which seemed neither to increase nor diminish under his axe, a fact, doubtless, owing to the activity of Mammy, who was always at the same time making pies, seemed to give some credence to the story. Indeed, the wood-pile of Daddy Downey was a standing reproof to the indolent and sluggish miner.

"Ole Daddy must use up a pow'ful sight of wood; every time I've passed by his shanty he's been makin' the chips fly. But what gets me is, that the pile don't seem to come down," said Whisky Dick to his neighbor.

"Well, you derved fool!" growled his neighbor, "spose some chap happens to pass by thar, and sees the old man doin' a man's

work at eighty, and slouches like you and me lying round drunk, and that chap, feelin' kinder humped, goes up some dark night and heaves a load of cut pine over his fence, who's got anything to say about it? Say?" Certainly not the speaker, who had done the act suggested, nor the penitent and remorseful hearer, who repeated it next day.

The pies and cakes made by the old woman were, I think, remarkable rather for their inducing the same loyal and generous spirit than for their intrinsic excellence, and it may be said appealed more strongly to the nobler aspirations of humanity than its vulgar appetite. Howbeit, everybody ate Mammy Downey's pies, and thought of his childhood. "Take 'em, dear boys," the old lady would say; "it does me good to see you eat 'em; reminds me kinder of my poor Sammy, that, ef he'd lived, would hev been ez strong and beg ez you be, but was taken down with lung fever, at Sweetwater. I kin see him yet; that's forty year ago, dear! comin' out o' the lot to the bake-house, and smilin' such a beautiful smile, like yours, dear boy, as I handed him a mince or a lemming turnover. Dear, dear, how I do run on! and those days is past! but I seems to live in you again!" The wife of the hotel-keeper, actuated by a low jealousy, had suggested that she "seemed to live OFF them;" but as that person tried to demonstrate the truth of her statement by reference to the cost of the raw material used by the old lady, it was considered by the camp as too practical and economical for consideration. "Besides," added Cy Perkins, "ef old Mammy

wants to turn an honest penny in her old age, let her do it. How would you like your old mother to make pies on grub wages? eh?" A suggestion that so affected his hearer (who had no mother) that he bought three on the spot. The quality of these pies had never been discussed but once. It is related that a young lawyer from San Francisco, dining at the Palmetto restaurant, pushed away one of Mammy Downey's pies with every expression of disgust and dissatisfaction. At this juncture, Whisky Dick, considerably affected by his favorite stimulant, approached the stranger's table, and, drawing up a chair, sat uninvited before him.

"Mebbee, young man," he began gravely, "ye don't like Mammy Downey's pies?"

The stranger replied curtly, and in some astonishment, that he did not, as a rule, "eat pie."

"Young man," continued Dick, with drunken gravity, "mebbee you're accustomed to Charlotte rusks and blue mänge; mebbee ye can't eat unless your grub is got up by one o' them French cooks'? Yet WE—us boys yar in this camp—calls that pie—a good—a com-pe-tent pie!"

The stranger again disclaimed anything but a general dislike of that form of pastry.

"Young man," continued Dick, utterly unheeding the explanation,—"young man, mebbee you onst had an ole—a very ole mother, who, tottering down the vale o' years, made pies. Mebbee, and it's like your blank epicurean soul, ye turned up your nose on the ole woman, and went back on the pies, and on

her! She that dandled ye when ye woz a baby,—a little baby! Mebbe ye went back on her, and shook her, and played off on her, and gave her away—dead away! And now, mebbe, young man—I wouldn't hurt ye for the world, but mebbe, afore ye leave this yar table, YE'LL EAT THAT PIE!"

The stranger rose to his feet, but the muzzle of a dragoon revolver in the unsteady hands of Whisky Dick, caused him to sit down again. He ate the pie, and lost his case likewise, before a Rough-and-Ready jury.

Indeed, far from exhibiting the cynical doubts and distrusting of age, Daddy Downey received always with childlike delight the progress of modern improvement and energy. "In my day, long back in the twenties, it took us nigh a week—a week, boys—to get up a barn, and all the young ones—I was one then—for miles 'round at the raisin'; and yer's you boys—rascals ye are, too—runs up this yer shanty for Mammy and me 'twixt sun-up and dark! Eh, eh, you're teachin' the old folks new tricks, are ye? Ah, get along, you!" and in playful simulation of anger he would shake his white hair and his hickory staff at the "rascals." The only indication of the conservative tendencies of age was visible in his continual protest against the extravagance of the boys. "Why," he would say, "a family, a hull family,—leavin' alone me and the old woman,—might be supported on what you young rascals throw away in a single spree. Ah, you young dogs, didn't I hear about your scattering half-dollars on the stage the other night when that Eyetalian Papist was singin'? And that money

goes out of Ameriky—ivry cent!"

There was little doubt that the old couple were saving, if not avaricious. But when it was known, through the indiscreet volubility of Mammy Downey, that Daddy Downey sent the bulk of their savings, gratuities, and gifts to a dissipated and prodigal son in the East,—whose photograph the old man always carried with him,—it rather elevated him in their regard. "When ye write to that gay and festive son o' yourn, Daddy," said Joe Robinson, "send him this yer specimen. Give him my compliments, and tell him, ef he kin spend money faster than I can, I call him! Tell him, ef he wants a first-class jamboree, to kem out here, and me and the boys will show him what a square drunk is!" In vain would the old man continue to protest against the spirit of the gift; the miner generally returned with his pockets that much the lighter, and it is not improbable a little less intoxicated than he otherwise might have been. It may be premised that Daddy Downey was strictly temperate. The only way he managed to avoid hurting the feelings of the camp was by accepting the frequent donations of whisky to be used for the purposes of liniment.

"Next to snake-oil, my son," he would say, "and dilberry-juice,—and ye don't seem to pro-duce 'em hereabouts,—whisky is good for rubbin' onto old bones to make 'em limber. But pure cold water, 'sparklin' and bright in its liquid light,' and, so to speak, reflectin' of God's own linyments on its surfiss, is the best, onless, like poor ol' Mammy and me, ye gets the dumb-agur from over-use."

The fame of the Downey couple was not confined to the foot-hills. The Rev. Henry Gushington, D.D., of Boston, making a bronchial tour of California, wrote to the "Christian Pathfinder" an affecting account of his visit to them, placed Daddy Downey's age at 102, and attributed the recent conversions in Rough-and-Ready to their influence. That gifted literary Hessian, Bill Smith, traveling in the interests of various capitalists, and the trustworthy correspondent of four "only independent American journals," quoted him as an evidence of the longevity superinduced by the climate, offered him as an example of the security of helpless life and property in the mountains, used him as an advertisement of the Union Ditch, and it is said in some vague way cited him as proving the collateral facts of a timber and ore-producing region existing in the foot-hills worthy the attention of Eastern capitalists.

Praised thus by the lips of distinguished report, fostered by the care and sustained by the pecuniary offerings of their fellow-citizens, the Saints led for two years a peaceful life of gentle absorption. To relieve them from the embarrassing appearance of eleemosynary receipts,—an embarrassment felt more by the givers than the recipients,—the postmastership of Rough-and-Ready was procured for Daddy, and the duty of receiving and delivering the United States mails performed by him, with the advice and assistance of the boys. If a few letters went astray at this time, it was easily attributed to this undisciplined aid, and the boys themselves were always ready to make up

the value of a missing money-letter and "keep the old man's accounts square." To these functions presently were added the treasurerships of the Masons' and Odd Fellows' charitable funds,—the old man being far advanced in their respective degrees,—and even the position of almoner of their bounties was super-added. Here, unfortunately, Daddy's habits of economy and avaricious propensity came near making him unpopular, and very often needy brothers were forced to object to the quantity and quality of the help extended. They always met with more generous relief from the private hands of the brothers themselves, and the remark, "that the ol' man was trying to set an example,—that he meant well,"—and that they would yet be thankful for his zealous care and economy. A few, I think, suffered in noble silence, rather than bring the old man's infirmity to the public notice.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.