

Drift from Two Shores

by

Bret Harte

McKinlay, Stone & Mackenzie
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I

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 sea-gull'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»

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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 parti-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 unin-

telligible 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, — his 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 light-house 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