

The Disappearance of Harrington

SAVE in the character to which it owed the name Sandy Beach is changed in everything since the early seventies.

Then it was a cheering scene that opened on the view as you pushed through the clump of spruce trees that formed the last outpost of the high-land and took the half mile of road across the sand to where the stages halted, like balking animals, on the edge of the channel. Now you may wander all day about the Beach without sign of life meeting the eye, unless it be the hermit snipe that dodges from one tuft of whistling grass to another, or the lone saddle back gull that tilts above you with a careful appreciation of range which no amount of manoeuvring on your part can confuse. I have seen him in fatter days, when it was an enterprise to discharge the flint-lock which Jack McNevin, in deference to his reputation as a sport, kept in the binnacle of the shanty; and when, emboldened by immunity, he would seize a mackerel in mid-air as they were flung from boat to stage, and plane across the channel to devour it on the other side. For the harbor was bulwarked by a ridge of sand dunes running parallel to the shore and terminating in a sunken rock, known locally, if not on the mariners' chart, as the Devil's finger-nail; while from the opposite side and favorably situated to bear out the metaphor another ridge of sand, partly uncovered at low water, ran outside and past the extremity of the first till it too ended in a rock, known as the thumb-nail of the same potentate. And now curve the forefinger well inside the thumb but without touching, and leaving enough lagoon for the harbor to stow its intake, and you can fancy what a grip of death it was when the storm came straight from the sea and the drunken tide reeled between the rocks or clambered roaring across the bar.

In those days, before the advent of the seine and the trap had reduced fishing from the status of a fine art to that of a mere industry the wage or "lay" was not the only consideration entertained by the habitués of the stations. The remuneration could not of course be suffered to fall below half-line; so much was due the honor of the art. But after this a fine range for eclecticism offered itself to the individual taste, and due weight

was given to such factors as the quality of the table, the character of the boss and the social outlook, and I regret to say that choice was sometimes determined too by the prospects which a particular station offered a man to establish himself as a daring and dangerous character. It is but fair to add, however, that this purpose quite as often had its origin in a politic desire to increase importance and to avoid petty annoyances as in native truculency of disposition; so that the arts by which that bad eminence was sought, though generally ridiculous or pathetic enough, and seldom characterized by consideration for the feeling of others much less by any precaution against detection, rarely led to a crisis unde pudor aut lex operis vetat referre pedem.

It was a cool afternoon in April, with spongy scud in the sky and an occult quality in the air, to be interpreted only by the issue, when two men were seen beating their way on foot along the high-road already mentioned towards the beach. You would have said at a glance that they had been companions of the same way before, for, though every turn of the road gave a neat farmhouse or a picturesque grove to the view, they looked neither to the right nor to the left. The foremost, rather below the middle height and somewhat thick set, walked with the left shoulder elevated and the head bent obliquely forward to meet it. This attitude is not easily compatible with perfect flexibility of the other members; and in the present case there was a rigidity and appearance of conscious control which, taken together with the considerable space separating him from his companion, admitted of but one explanation. The effect of this demonstration, however, was to all appearance, lost upon the latter, who walked with chin carried level and easy, balancing a long open, sand-gait with the arms thrown out from the shoulders like a pair of half-raised wings. Apart from the impression of height which an upright carriage lends to a man of even medium stature number two was decidedly a tall man. The ease and amplitude of his movement, which imagination at once associates with deliberate and probably deep utterance, would stamp him, in an unsophisticated community, as a man of quality; so that it must have been a sturdy churl who led the tramp and dared, under whatever provocation, the demonstration of defiance which sat in his rigid gait and lifted shoulder. It was evident, however, that some bond of sympathy stronger than all discord existed between them, for, though neither seemed to regard the other, the space separating them remained constant as the resultant of planetary laws.

The two moved on in silence till the way dropped through some shrubbery to where a little stream crossed it diagonally to lose itself in the sand a few hundred yards beyond. Here the lead retarded his pace and, to avoid the appearance of striking colors, turned down ostensibly to select a place in the stream where he might stoop and drink. The other, coming up, perched himself on the low rail of the bridge above, and producing a long wooden pipe from his pocket, proceeded very deliberately to fill it. The employment bureau was only ten minutes away and the need of understanding was pressing upon them both, but neither seemed to concern himself at all as to how the pour-parlers should come about. In the pause we cannot but notice what a weary face the lifted chin revealed to the evening sun from the rail of the bridge. Time had written upon it, if not the story of dissipation, at least the barren annals of wasted years. There was no challenge to fortune in the wide open and rather vacant eyes, only a half-wondering suggestion of ineffectual protest. The large flaccid mouth had no hint of recoil; you would have said it might be smitten with impunity. A small retousse nose and a light fringe of brown moustache, not very conspicuous on its sand-colored back ground, completed the attributes of a countenance in which there was no dawning of wisdom read from the hard experience which it evidently had undergone.

The costume furnished no violent contrast to the expressionless face. A trousers and short coat of some brown or embrowned material followed the sweep of the figure from shoes to throat, revealing there the rolling collar of a black sateen shirt through which ran a ribbon, checked blue and white, and fastened under the chin with a square knot, the ends falling out in front. This general appearance of homogeneity was completed and crowned by a gray and dusty soft felt hat turned up in front and dropping behind after the manner of a "sou'wester."

The pipe being now filled, the last powdered tobacco patted down upon the surface and the vent freed, the palms were gently rubbed clean on the trousers and, as part of the same effort, a hand was stretched languidly towards the man below. "Have you got a match, McNevin?" The wide opening of the mouth and the flatted tones gave the impression of a lisp overcome by conscious effort. Then as the other grudgingly perused his pockets, rather in search of what to say, he added "never mind, I've got one here." Another interval of silence followed, broken only by the muffled consonants produced by a

pair of loose labials breaking apart with the intake of a whiff. But for the occult understanding which had kept them in peace on the highway the sound might have passed with McNevin, whose face was turned away, for the drop, drop, from the arches of the bridge to the mud beneath. There was so much apathetic content in the attitude and action as to remind one of those sketches by Rambrandt in which Ruskin sees the idealization of hogs and ditch-water. McNevin was extremely embarrassed; perhaps he felt a desire to worship where some point of honor compelled him to stand averted. As the harmonizing influence of the weed began to pervade the atmosphere the oracle again spoke. "McNevin, I want you to give me a hand to-night if the Guysboro gang is here." "Well Harrington I never went back on you yet, if you'd only treat a man right." "That'll be alright McNevin; but see, we've got to give 'em a fright, understand?" "Take care you don't try that game once too often" said McNevin, propitiated but not very enthusiastic. "That'll be alright," was Harrington's only answer, and so they took the road.

It was a busy if not highly animated scene that grew upon them as they loped down the long reach of sand towards the scattered hamlet which on nearer approach divided itself into two distinct groups, the one of stages huddled along the water's edge, the other of cook houses or sleeping shanties higher up, all of the uniform tan which the brine lays so rapidly on fresh-cut spruce and fir. Their way lay among the debris of last year's temporary drying flakes now for the most part buried in the sand. Here and there a man in new dungarees and top-boots might be seen exploring these ruins for whatever fragments of stuff was yet available for the making of killocks or the use of the stoves. Passing by one of these sign-posts of the preceding year's industry around which a considerable portion of sand had gathered, they came upon an old man down on both knees and so stooped into the sand that in his brown dungarees he might, to the casual glance, pass for a protuberance of the hillock into which he was burrowing. This ancient familiarly known for a quarter of a century at Sandy Beach as the "Tartar," not by any stretch of historic imagination at all, but from an observed temperamental analogy with the pungent and effervescent decoction of which that drug is the active principal, picked himself up nimbly at their approach and began flicking the dry sand from his overalls. It was a clean, dry, frosty face, light-fringed with as clean white beard, that looked up to them

as they came nearer and changed expression from irritation to subdued welcome and apologetic concern.

Twenty five years of frequenting the Beach had not vulgarized him. He had still his first abhorrence of unprovoked blasphemy. To see a swash-buckler swagger more than the measure of his potations warranted, angered and disgusted him now as then. The old corrective value that sat in his countenance had lost nothing with the lapse of years; it belonged to him organically and did not wane with waning functions. Yet there was no hauteur in his bearing; only a general chastity of faculty and a substratum of natural gentleness had thus oxidized in the irritating atmosphere in which a perverse fate had cast his days.

Harrington's extravaganza of a "Helloa, Michael!" was answered with a rather stiff "Good day, Mr. Harrington," while McNevin's quieter, "How do you do, Mr. McCarthur," elicited a corresponding interest in the state of his own health, and the volunteered information that most of the old crowd were already returned. As there was nothing more to say and the silence was embarrassing, McCarthur dropped to his burrowing and they passed on to the office of the boss and later to the cook-house.

The evening meal passed by with a great deal of concern on the part of McNevin to meet the tastes of his companion and a marked taciturnity on the part of the latter who churlishly refused to be pleased. In the subsequent conversation to the accompaniment of the pipe he took no share, sitting apart and biting at his finger nails, while putting what lurid meaning he could into the elaborately furtive glances which he cast at intervals towards the company. As darkness thickened the group began to disperse each to his bunk, and McNevin advanced with clumsy cajolery towards his pard, ostentatiously urging him to retire. "Do now like a good fellow; you'll feel better after a good sleep." But the other became more agitated and began to pace the floor with a lowering look that summoned up who knows what reckless courage in his own timid heart. This comedy went on till the last of the loiterers had coiled himself into his shop-shell of a bunk. Even the "Tartar" annoyed and disgusted was fain to tuck the clothes about his ears and so prove an alibi from the extravagance which he could not control. Only McNevin remained alert with one foot in bed and one on the floor, pouring out his blandishments with a volubility and iteration that had been his undoing in more sophisticated surroundings. But the gigantic figure kept pacing the

floor and tossing black shadows from the smoky oil lamp about the wall and ceiling. Finally he plucked the hat from his head and with a hyena howl leaped upon McCarthur- -presumably the least dangerous man in the bunks. "Murder! Murder!" roared the confederate, and in a moment every man was in the open air. In the first moment of alarm the instinct of self-preservation asserted itself and the "Tartar" was left to his fate. Whether it was because the cool air brought cooler thought, or because the touch of human kind can never utterly, or for long, disappear from the human breast, I cannot say; at any rate it is pleasing to know that they no sooner came together in the open than they resolved to return. McNevin endeavored to dissuade them from so desperate an enterprise, but their sense of shame was aroused; and fearful of betraying a too eager advocacy he suffered events to take what course they would. Meanwhile one voice was dominant in the shanty, the voice of the "Tartar" in direst extremity. No time was to be lost. Pushing each other ahead they clambered up the crazy outside stair, put fire to a bandanna handkerchief and flung it blazing in at the open door: and behold, the Tartar rampant on the middle of the floor and Harrington couchant on the side of the bed, alarm and apology in every feature, and a suspicious hectic on the left cheek which gave cryptic interest to the fantastic play of the Tartar's right arm.

This of course was playing the game too low and McNevin was the first to point out the fact. Little could be done upon such a victim to wipe out their late dishonor. One thing was plain however, that he should be secluded from the consort of the company whilst held to appear for the morning assizes. Harrington was marched down the beach to the stage-house over the edge of the channel, and locked up for the night. The general discomfort of the interior appointments and the prevailing atmosphere of his special industry, together with the tonic coolness of the stout April breeze now tossing caps across the Devil's Finger, were very properly judged the best antidotes against a too effusive sense of humor.

And now the mystery in the afternoon air began to be revealed. The scattered clouds that had been moving about the cold sky all afternoon, like fore-loppers of revolution, clustered into companies and were fast massing into battalions in the north-east, whence came low trumpet calls of wind threading the muffled trampling of the storm along the open reaches of the deep. Pressing a startled face against the one square of

glass which served to light his prison Harrington could observe its movements and suffer by anticipation all the horror of its effects. Swiftly it came pressing heavily along the seaward slope of the sand dunes while flying columns swept their crests, taking captive the withered herbage of last year and lashing it forward with whips of sand towards the entrance of the channel. Here the waters fell away for a moment in a syncope of terror, and the bare reefs lay darker than all else like two monsters in the quaking flood. The next they were flying streamers of foam and roaring under the tramp of white-maned chargers. With a sickening of heart he realized that here one, there another elsewhere groups of the invaders, no longer detained by the reefs, took the channel towards his own giddy perch, already rocking under the force of the gale. He heard the swish of passing waters about the foundations of the building and something like a hand feeling for the latch. A wild hope of rescue leaped into his heart; he shouted with all his might. In the dreadful stillness that followed he struck a match and, looking about him, saw stealthy streams of water stealing towards him from every chink of the yawning floor. A merciful Providence abbreviated the suspense, for scarcely had the growing light revealed to him the extremity of his danger when there came as the answer to his cry, the tumble of seas upon the stage in front and a rush that burst the door from its fastening, flooded the room waist deep and drawing off again, whirled him through the opening, captive or free. He sprawled along the projecting ends of the slippery timbers of the foundation, reached the landward side, and looking up the beach, saw that he was marooned. Fortunately for him the compulsion from behind left no time for thought, else had he perished where he stood. The next onslaught pushed him from his standing and carried him out upon the sand.

Towards morning the coachman at the summer hotel was awakened by a tapping at his window, and from him I have this veracious story. How the hours of darkness were spent and what thoughts passed through Harrington's mind as the ghostly waves scourged him about the lone beach was never revealed. At dawn he took the road by which he came the evening before, and passed out of the life of Sandy Beach forever.