

[Written for the Home Journal.]

Down on the Beach:

A STORY OF THE SOUTH.

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I.

CRAFT VS. YOUTH.

As far as the eye can reach, an unbroken level meets the vision. Tall mezquit grass rises and undulates, like the waves of the sea, before the wind. Here and there, stunted trees and bushes of chaparral lift themselves a few feet, from the vernal prairies, even, as on the ocean, one wave will rise above its fellows, then fall and disappear for ever.

Looking carefully over the scene, you will observe a toad that winds, like some huge serpent, through these wilds, and the soil, black and heavy, bears the impress of the wheels of those carts that go in long trains, drawn by some very lazy mules, urged on by the whip, in the hands of John Mexican and waifs from all quarters of the globe, gathered in the employ of the United States Government. Uncle Sam has queer servants.

Over head, the clear sunbath of an August afternoon bathes the great sea in a golden sheen. The breeze from the Gulf renders the sultry atmosphere balmy, and mingling with the grass, perfumes the air with an odor like new-mown hay. White, fleecy clouds, tinged with streaks of roseate hue, relieve the blue vault above your head, and alone in the wilderness of verdure, you feel the might and glory of the Ever-living God.

Travel for fifty miles northward, and you will meet no broken bit of landscape: the scenery here is majestic, and one vast expanse of verdant plain, often waving or sloping, but never rising into hills or descending into vales. The impression is as novel to one accustomed to the broken scenery of New York and New England, as is that which is created in the mind when he first embarks on an outward bound vessel, and the land fades from his wistful eyes.

Turning your head a little to the left, you perceive two horsemen approaching, and as they come nearer you remark that the one is a German, apparently about thirty five, while the other is a mere youth, hardly turned two and twenty. Mr. Schrieff rides with the air of a man who was born on horseback, and cradled in a stable. His features are strongly marked, and swarthy with years of exposure to semi-tropical sunshine and the vicissitudes of frontier life. His hat has a broad brim, and is made of rye straw, and a long green ribbon serves the double purpose of ornament and fastening it about his head. Lavater would have told you he approximated to the felline tribe, for his face expresses both cunning and secretiveness, yet, the large back head, and the deep coloring of the lips, indicate that the passions are burning like coals of fire. His attire is of drab alpacas, and the flowing garments well become his muscular figure; while his loose collar, worn without neckcloth, and fastened by buttons of gold, quaintly carved, set off his splendid throat to the best advantage. His companion is less easily described.

The figure has scarcely reached its full development, but it is very lithe, and graceful as a steed of the desert. With no preponderance of muscle or sinew, there is that kind of strength, that nervous energy, which in the American people often covers up, their deficiency, while it can never supply their place. His hair is of a golden auge, as you see it, in this sunshine, and the eyes are of that mingled tint, between violet and gray, that is neither blue, nor hazel, but a changing color, like the faces of the angels, that infants see in dreams. The forehead is high and slightly deficient in breadth, and the dark sombrero only serves to increase the whiteness of the face, too pale for perfect health. The attire is simple, of a dark gray fabric, fine in texture and only worn by the more opulent classes. His small, and almost womanly soft hands, are encased in gauntlets of deer skin, fastened with silver clasps.

On the face of the youth, there are indications of two natures; the one, pure, candid, lofty, enthusiastic: the other sceptical, sensual, vindictive. He can never rest, like Mahommed's coffin, midway between Earth and Paradise. No middle ground is possible for the man. The rich wine of his blood is warmed by fire from the skies and from the unfathomable depths below. The cup of rapturous bliss and unutterable pain have been long and often raised to his lips, and he has drunk the sweet waters of poesy, and tasted the bitterness of Marah? This is the critical period of his life, and as it is passed, so will the future be pregnant with flowers or with thorns for him through the rest of his days: through the cycles of his eternity.

The German treats his young companion with staid courtesy and inimitable tact. The man is a born diplomatist, and I have no doubt got his playmates share of *blas-bons* and comfits, when he was a mere child in the Rhine Valley. You could place him tomorrow in the desert of Sahara, without a second change of linen, and the day after he would be ruler in an Arab village, and marry the fairest daughter of the most powerful Chief. It may be he is a villain, but then he is no petty cut-purse, and it will not do for you and I to criticise our neighbors, for have we not sins enough on our own shoulders? Mr. Schrieff is a believer in the theory that underlies nine tenths of the chief transactions in the World's history: that this globe is an oyster made to be opened and swallowed. The big fishes eat up the little ones, and the insect world devours one another; so why should not men do the same? In the blotted pages of human nature, the Chief Clerk of Olin and Gnaubb, Commission Merchants of Corpus Christi, is profoundly versed. He landed there on horseback, or in a boat, or a balloon, nobody knows or cares how, some dozen years previous to the opening of this narrative, and is worth ever so many thousands of dollars. Perhaps he may own a negro or two; so you see he is nobody's ninny. But of some pages in the book of the heart, friend Schrieff knows less than the little charity children in San Patricio. Tenderness to him is a quality applicable to beef, not to woman, and self abnegation absolute Greek. In the hard school of the world he has learned to give more knocks than he takes, and if by any accident he ever falls in with a company of angels, I am firmly persuaded he

would endeavor to try and find out where he could purchase some shining robes at a reasonable figure. Venerating the Golden Calf, he has no worship for anything else, and while he has the tact to conceal his intense selfishness, the monster will occasionally peep out from the flimsy veil of conventional politeness and superficial education, which he has picked up, to peddle along with his other wares.

The young man, Mr. Dacre, does not talk a great deal to his new acquaintance. Indeed the novelty of the scene absorbs his attention. The balmy breeze from the distant sea sings sweet, sad songs in his ear, and the sun-light is reflected in the clear hope in his heart. He has fallen in with Mr. Schrieff at Corpus Christi, and rides out with him to visit some ranches, and see the country, where land goes a begging at twenty cents the acre. They are now on their return to the city which is an hour's ride distant, and while they canter steadily onward the young man dreams glorious visions.

Far in the distance, there is a cloud, a shade darker than any in the sky. If you look at it steadily, you will see it takes the form of a vulture, and that cloud floating nearer resembles a man, and a rock. Have we Prometheus bound there, and is the ill-omened bird to peck his heart out? I wonder if Lansing Dacre notices what I fancy I see? No, no, for his imagination searches only for happy images and forms of hope. Mr. Schrieff has not a lively fancy, but, he smiles as he glances ahead of him. He very well knows, Mr. Dacre is not to marry the young girl he is dreaming of, and he knew it, before the gentleman ever set foot on the shore. In fact Mr. Schrieff has some very particular reasons, why Mr. Dacre and Miss Emily Hazleton, should not become man and wife. Miss Hazleton is the best match in Nueces County: Mr. Dacre has youth, but somebody else has more experience. Shall a man, who never fails to get his candidate sent to Austin, to the Legislature, find his plans thwarted by a youth of twenty two? Cannot a man who can pack a convention, break off one match, and make up another one? Mr. Schrieff thinks it can be tried, so uses all his tact, to make friends with young Dacre.

Now what will Miss Emily say to all this? As our friends are nearly at Corpus Christi, you may ride on in advance, and inquire.

II.
EMILY.

Emily Hazleton was walking up and down the gallery, which ran around all sides of her father's house. The building was newly erected, and stood at the extreme north-west boundary of the city, not more than fifty yards from Corpus Christi bay.

From the west wing of the mansion, which was but a story-and-a-half high, and covered a good deal of ground, you could see the entire town. In Texas, a city does not mean a crowded capital, but a village that has a charter, a Mayor, and Board of Aldermen. The white population of Corpus, at the period of which we are writing, 1853, was much larger than it is at present, because it was a military station for Uncle Sam's soldiers on the Rio Grande, and the cash ex-

pendent at this point amounted to over half a million of dollars per annum.

A more beautiful site for a city does not exist on the globe. Coming from the sea, through a long chain of lagoons and bayous, freight is lightered in small vessels—and as you enter Corpus Christi bay, deep enough and vast enough for the largest vessels to ride in safety, the shore looms up in the form of a crescent. A long dead level extends from south to north, half a mile wide, when a high bluff rises up some fifty or sixty feet, overlooking the bay, and the business portion of the city. Along this bluff, many of the more opulent people reside, and the mansions of the late General Forbes Britton, Major Chapman, and Chief Judge Webb, are particularly remarkable for their beauty and exquisite proportions. This bluff once gained, the country is a prairie, as described in the previous chapter.

Emily gazed towards the bluff, and was awaiting the arrival of Mr. Dacre, her father's guest, to whom she was betrothed. The wedding day had not been fixed, but it was supposed the event would take place in a month or six weeks. The twain had been "engaged" for the past three years, and the judgment of Mrs. Grundy rather approved the match, though what business it was of hers is more than I can tell.

Miss Emily was turned twenty-four. She had the advantages of a modern education, and was a very creditable specimen of the boarding school training of the Middle States. She could read French, with the aid of a dictionary and a translation, to peep into occasionally; embroider in Parisian style the finest cambric muslins; run through equations in Algebra tolerably glibly; wrote a very fine hand, bordering on Italian; played on the pianoforte all the light pieces of the day, and a few church chants, in methodical style, and conversed with ease on such subjects as she understood, and even better upon those with which she had no glimmering of an acquaintance. In "the proprieties," the two-and-six-penny moralities, she was literally *au fait*, and thoroughly despised the conventionalisms she obeyed.

Emily Hazleton was a Northern woman. Her father was a man of infinite energy, and his wife a walking interpretation of the word *parveau*. But the daughter was no fool. She was far more cultivated than papa and mama, and felt towards the latter a strange mixture of contempt, mixed with natural affection, in a homeopathic dose. Emily was one of those women, who, without being beautiful, bring more men, and of a higher class, to her feet, than your generally received beauty. Her amber hair was very fine in texture, and fell about her exquisitely moulded head in a wealth of profusion. The forehead was almost too high for feminine loveliness of the classical standard, but deficient in breadth; the arrangement of her hair concealed a portion of its height, while the eyes were so womanly that you never mistook her for a "blue stocking." The nose was small, and anything but handsome, and, moreover, had a slight tendency to turn up; but the nostrils were so exquisitely chiselled, that you forgot the defect. The upper lip was short, and the mouth capable of expressing deep scorn, as well as love. The chin was finely wrought, yet denoted lack of firmness. Her face was slightly freckled,