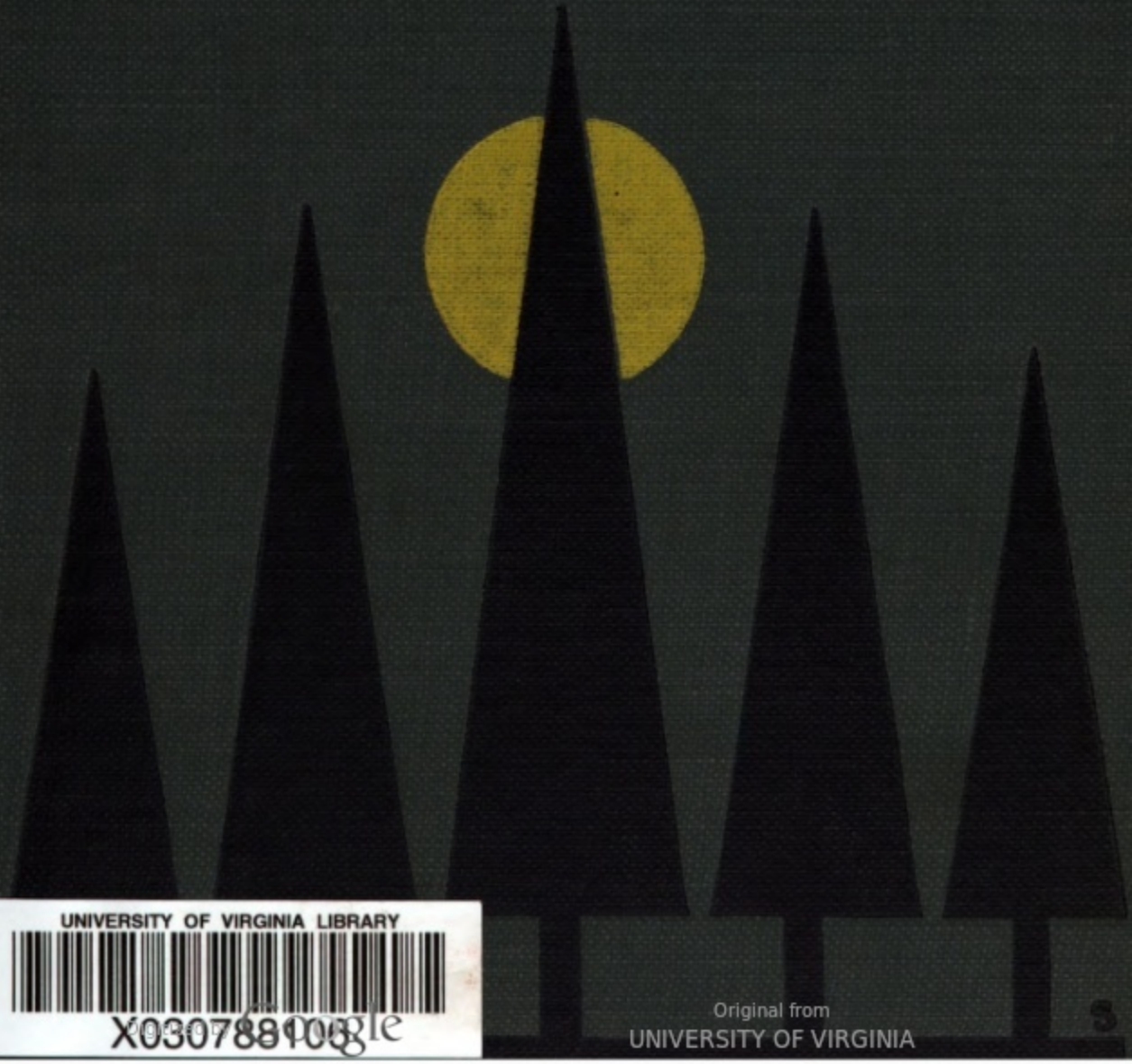
FIVE NIGHTS AT THE FIVE PINES



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FIVE NIGHTS AT THE FIVE PINES

BY

AVERY GAUL

Harriette Lester Avis Gaul

NEW YORK
THE CENTURY CO.
1922

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To

MARY FENOLLOSA

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CHAPTER I

THE HOUSE OF THE FIVE PINES

A SEA of yellow sand rose, wave on wave, around us. High hills, carved by the bitter salt winds into tawny breakers, reared towering heads, peak upon peak. Like combers that never burst into spray, their static curves remained suspended above us, their tops bent back upon the leeward side, menacing, but never engulfing, the deep pools of purple shadows that lay beneath them. The sand was mauve in the hollows, and black upon white were the cupped dunes hung over their own heights. They were like water that did not move, or mountains with no vegetation. They did not support as much life upon their surface as that which crawls upon the floor of the ocean. They were naked and unashamed as the day when they were tossed up

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out of the bed of the sea. Only tufts of sharp green grass clung to some of the slopes, their silhouettes flattened out before them like the pin-feathers of a young bird, inadequate and scant, accentuating the barrenness of the saffron sand.

Centuries ago some gigantic upheaval of Neptune had forced this long ridge out of the shielding water, to lie prone in the sight of the sun, like a prehistoric sea-monster forever drying its hide. More isolated than an island, the head of the cape, with the town in its jaws, fought the encroaching sea, which thundered upon it in constant endeavor to separate it from the tail, extending a hundred miles to the mainland. From the height on which we stood, the line of ocean far away was dark blue, following in a frothy scallop the indentations of the coast. The sound of the surf came to us like a repeated threat. It could bend the cape, but never break it, twist and turn it, change the currents and the sand-bars, and toss back upon its shore the wreckage of such vessels as men essayed to sail in, but the sand-dunes continued to bask blandly. Sometimes they shifted, but so silently and gradually that they seemed not so much to

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move as to vanish. To-day there would be a dune in the way of our path to the sea, so steep as to make a barrier, impossible to scale. To-morrow the force of the wind upon its surface, and the strength of the far-away tide which continually seeped its roots, would have leveled it. The very footsteps one followed, trying to trace a track across the waste, would have melted away.

On this desert each traveler must be his own guide and climb to some eminence which topped all others, to get his bearings from the strip of deep blue that marked the ocean's rim. Nor could he say to himself, securely, "Here is east," although he looked out on the Atlantic. Land played a trick upon the wayfarer who trusted it, and turned its back upon the sea, and curled up like a snail, so that the inside of the cape, where the town lay behind us in its green verdure, faced south, and the outside sea, where the sun set, curved west and north. The glory of light in the afternoon struck first upon the hills and was reflected back from the sheltered bay to the little fishing-village.

The path from the woods, by which you entered the dunes, lost itself to sight under the foliage of the scrub-oak trees, and un-

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less you had tied a white rag to the last branch, marking the point where you climbed up out of the forest, you would never find it again. There were many foot-paths through the thicket which separated the hamlet on the inside of the horn from the immense dry sea-bed, but none of them were visible, once you had left them. By day you must mark the entrance to the desert of your own footsteps, by night it was useless to look for them.

This must have been the place, I thought, where Dorothy Bradford was lost. Brave as the Pilgrim Fathers were, they had not loitered here after dark to look for William's young wife! They had conscientiously attended to their laundry work, on that first November day when the *Mayflower* landed, and, having finished their domestic duties, waited no longer for any scatterbrain of the party who had been foolish enough to venture from the fold, but weighed anchor without finding her and put off for Plymouth Rock!

As I looked about me at the profound grandeur of space, it seemed to me that I understood why Dorothy had not hurried back to the boat. She had embarked upon the *Mayflower*, a bride, strange to the ways of

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men and of marriage, and for sixty-three days the stern-faced Puritans had been her only companions and the rolling sea her entire horizon. Her quarters must have become a prison to her before the voyage was over. When at last this finger of land, reaching into the Atlantic, had beckoned to the mariners, her heart must have sung like a caged canary, even as mine responded when first I saw the cape. Did she linger with the other virtuous housewives at the first spring, to wash her husband's dirty linen? Not she! I liked to think that in glad escape she ran from all those stuff gowns and starched kerchiefs, through the woods, chasing the scarlet-winged blackbirds on and on, picking the wintergreen berries and ravenously eating them, gathering her arms full of bright autumn leaves, feeding her hungry eyes on the vivid color of growing things and her starved soul, at last, upon the dunes. It was not the Indians who prevented Dorothy Bradford from returning to the ship; it was her own heart. If Indians saw her, they must have fallen on their red knees in the sand and worshiped her for a sprite of limitless space, running past them with gay branches clasped to her gray

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dress and a wreath of waxy bayberries on her fair young head. It was her wayward feet that forbade her from following further the fortunes of the Pilgrims. No doubt, from some high point on the dunes she watched them sail away, and laughed, taking off her shoes upon the sand and dancing, fleeing further. That is what I would have done. That is what I wanted to do now. Something starving in my heart found food here; a hardness that had been growing within me for two years dissolved, as my mind relaxed, and the troubles that had driven me here appeared insignificant. The tired spirit of hope that had been driven deeper and deeper down beneath the weight of disillusion began to bubble up. There might be a way of regaining the nice balance of life, after all, if one could weigh it every afternoon upon the sand-dunes!

Ruth and I were sitting on a pyramid, where we had brought a picnic lunch, and were watching her children play in the hollows.

"Do people get lost here nowadays?" I asked her.

"The natives never come here," she answered; "at least, not for fun. They only follow the wagon-track to the coast-guard sta-

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tion on 'the outside,' and that is about all the summer people do. It is three miles across the soft sand to the sea, and most people get discouraged and turn back before they reach the further shore. But enough children and strangers have been lost here in recent years to scare away the others! The townspeople say the dunes are haunted, and that at night strange shapes flit across the sand, spirits of those who have never been found. They will not come near the white fields at moonlight, when they are wrapped in mystery. The landmarks are not permanent. Every storm changes them, just as it changes the shoals on 'the outside.' The sailors are more afraid of this neck of land than any one else. Do you see how far distant the big steamers keep?" She pointed out to me a thin line of smoke on the horizon. "Hundreds of ships have run aground off here in less than that many years. There are lighthouses at every point now, but the bed of the sea moves constantly. That is why they call this coast the 'Graveyard of the Cape.'"

"Have there been any wrecks since you have lived here?"

Ruth's eyes darkened. "A year ago a fleet

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of fishing-vessels were caught in a sudden tempest and half of them were lost. Eleven men were drowned, all from this town! Star Harbor raises her sons upon the sandy flats of the bay at her doorway, and when they grow old enough they sail away from her, and she knows that one day, sooner or later, they will fail to return. In the meantime the mothers do not bring their boys out here on the dunes to play, as we do our children from the cities. It is too much like dancing on their own graves! They try to forget the dunes are here, and walk up and down the front street of the village."

"I do not want to forget them," said I. "They mean something to me, Ruth, something that I have needed for a long time."

Ruth smiled at me fondly, without replying. We had known each other for a long time.

"It is like the touch of a hand on the heart," I tried to explain, "or like a song heard outside a window in the dark—or a flaming embroidery on a stucco wall."

The sun shone down upon the tawny sand, illuminating the dunes with so blinding a radiance that description was futile. The effect of so much heat and light was soothing and

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restful, and at the same time stimulating. The body drank up enough electricity, through contact with the sand, to renew its youth and send the worn years reeling backward. The children were shouting and sliding down the inside of a crater below us, transposing their winter sports to the summertime, climbing up the opposite slope, only to shoot down again on the seats of their rompers, laughing and crawling up, and repeating the game, in ecstasy of abandonment.

"I would like to do that, too," said I.

Ruth smiled. "You would get sand in your sneakers."

"Sneakers!" I scoffed.

"And wear holes in your silk stockings."

"Silk stockings! No one should wear stockings out here. They should run barefoot before the wind, and leap from peak to peak. It is absurd, in the face of this vast emptiness, to wear clothes at all!"

"So many people feel that way," said Ruth, dryly.

But I refused to be rebuffed.

"We need it, Ruth," I cried. "We, who are cooped up in cities, are starving for this very thing—space and sunlight, air and

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warmth. Not the suffocating heat of the area-ways, but the glow that glances off the sun-kissed sand. Our eyes are blind with gray pavements and white asphalt, stone and cement, nothing but colors as hard as the substance we tread on. We hunger for blue and for purple, for the sea and the seacoast shadows, for green that is brighter than burnt sod, and for living red and yellow. The craving for earth under our feet is still natural to us. It is what has made possible the barefoot cult of the people who choose to get up in the morning and run around in the dew, and the 'back to all fours' cult of those who put their hands down on the floor and prance like a trained bear. And the 'stand on your head' cult, who pick out a cushion which best suits their psychic soul and balance themselves with their feet in the air for hours at a time. Perhaps it is true that it is stimulating to the brain. But Ruth, joking aside, there must be a fundamental reason for all of this 'simple life' movement—the elemental need for relaxation, which is what this sort of exercise gives to the worn human machine. I am going to give up my apartment in New York and pitch a tent on the sand-dunes!"

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Ruth laughed.

I thought that probably she would point out to me how impractical I was. But she did not. She seemed to be weighing the matter, taking me more seriously than I took myself. Ruth had a penetrating quality of sympathy with another's trouble that made of it an immediate problem for her to solve and for the sufferer to relinquish. I had come up here a week ago, for no other reason than that life had reached the stage with me where I had to run away from the confusion of my own menage. I needed another line of vision, another angle from which to approach it, and I considered it worth taking the long dull journey up the cape to get my friend's point of view. All that quiet August afternoon, while we had watched her children playing on the sand-dunes, we had been talking over life and our place in it as only two women can who had known each other since childhood and have managed to keep friends, although both of them are married. Our conversation had been mostly about New York, from which I was escaping, and that offshoot of society which has its roots among actors and producers and its branches in the motion-picture

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studios. Ruth was far removed from this forcing frame, spending her winters, more happily, in Charleston, and her summers on Cape Cod, so that I thought I could get from her the calm point of view and the fresh focus that I needed.

"Well, if you want to live here and get back to nature by way of the sand-dunes, by all means do so," she was saying dispassionately; "that would be saner than running on all fours and standing on your head in the city. But don't pitch a tent out here! It has been demonstrated that hurricanes have an antipathy for canvas. Buy a house in town, and at least have shingles over your head and running water in the kitchen. Even the birds refuse to drink from the rank pools in this desert. There is alkali on the surface and quicksands along the edges of the ponds. I 'll show you a house in Star Harbor that has been waiting for years for some one like you to come along and take a chance on moving into it."

She stood up and, giving a long "Woo-ooh!" through her hands to the turbulent young ones, led me back over the dunes to the green edge of the woods.

"There," she said, pointing over the tree-

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tops to the town that nestled at the edge of the encircled bay, "do you see five pine-trees standing up higher than all the others? That is the place."

I saw below me a mass of scrubby oaks and stunted pines, which wore out to a thin edge on the shore where the fishing-village huddled. The bright white paint of the cottages, with the sun at their backs, picked them out distinctly from the blue bay beyond them, and one house, larger than any of the others, thrust its sloping roof into prominence beside a row of pines.

"That!" I exclaimed. "But how large it is—for only my husband and myself! We would rattle around in it. We haven't enough furniture!"

I was alarmed at the expansive turn of Ruth's imagination. Even if you have put yourself in the power of a friend's advice, or perhaps just because of that, you are not ready to admit that she, with one slash of unprejudiced judgment, has cut the knot which you have been patiently trying to untangle.

"Furniture!" scoffed Ruth. "If that is all that is worrying you— There is more fur-

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niture in that house than any other house on Cape Cod. That is a captain's place, old Captain Jeremiah Hawes, and he brought home fine mahogany from wherever he dropped anchor. In his day they sailed to England for their Chippendale and to China for a set of dishes."

"What good would that do me?"

"You don't seem to understand," Ruth explained patiently; "it all goes together. There is hardly a house sold in Star Harbor but what the furniture is included in the deal. You get whatever the house contains, when you buy it."

We were retracing the path through the woods by which we had entered the dunes earlier in the day. The children ran before us, playing wood-tag from tree to tree, exploring "fairy circles," and stopping from time to time to let us catch up with them, when they would drop completely out of sight among the blueberry bushes. These grew so thick at our feet that you could pull the berries off by the handful and munch them as you strolled along.

"Tell me more about the house," I begged.

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My mouth was full of blueberries, but my mind was full of plans.

"It was built over a hundred years ago, by ships' carpenters who came down here all the way from Boston. They don't know how to do that kind of cabinet-work any more. The soil in the yard was hauled here by the wagon-load from ten miles down the cape to make the garden—no sea sand left there to sprout burrs! The Old Captain knew what he wanted and where to get it. He made what was, in those days, a fortune. He was master of a fleet of fishing-vessels, and used to make yearly voyages to the banks of Newfoundland for cod and to Iceland for sperm-oil whales. A pair of his big iron testing-kettles are still down in his wharf-shed, and the house is full of valuable maps and charts. Not that any one has ever seen them."

"Why not? How long has it been vacant?"

"It has never been vacant at all! That 's the trouble. After old Captain Hawes and his wife died, their son, whom every one calls the 'New Captain,' lived on there in the house for years, along with the same woman who had always been a servant to his mother. He died

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after we came here, five years ago, under peculiar circumstances, but she still lives on, behind closed shutters."

"Is the house for sale?"

"It 's been for sale ever since the New Captain died, but the old woman who lives in it won't let any one inside the door to look at it."

"I 'd take it without seeing it, if it 's all you say it is," I answered. "Why don't they put the old woman out?"

Ruth shrugged, as one who would suggest that no outsider could hope to understand how business was managed on the cape.

"Let 's go and see it on our way home," I suggested.

"All right; we can send the children on."

They were scampering through the brush ahead of us, chasing limp-winged yellow butterflies and spilling their precious garnered blueberries as they ran. Their bare legs, covered with sand from the dunes and scratched by the briers of the woods, stood the strain of the long walk better than ours, in their flimsy stockings and hot rubber-soled shoes. I wanted to sit on a log in the shady woods and rest, but no one else seemed tired

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and the thought of the old house lured me on to hurry to its doorstep.

It needed only that difficulty of getting possession to make me sure that this was the very house for which I had been waiting all my life. I knew, too, that the romance of the situation would be the deciding point in any opposition that I might well expect to meet from my husband, who was still in New York. Jasper was a fiction-writer, at present aspiring to be a playwright, and it was true that he needed for his work an atmosphere that he could people with the phantoms of his own mind, rather than the disturbing congestion of the apartment where we now lived. In setting out to follow Ruth's advice and buy a house on Cape Cod, I felt that I was doing my best not only for myself and the sort of family life that I felt would naturally follow, but for my husband and his exacting career. I realized that it would be for both of us a solution of the philosophy of living. Jasper had reached that stage in the beginning of success when it seemed to his friends that he was working too hard and playing too hard, squandering his talents upon Carthaginian gods who would only burn him up in the end.

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I had been following Ruth in silence, for the way through the wood was hard, but now we came into the outskirts of the fishing-village and, crossing the single railroad track that ran the length of the cape, struck the easy tread of the boardwalks, There were only two streets in Star Harbor, front and back, and, sending the children on to Ruth's house by the back way, their pockets oozing with blueberries, we emerged to the front street and faced the bay, just as the Pond-Lily Man was passing.

He was returning from his day's work, peddling pond-lilies up and down the cape on his bicycle, a great basket of them dripping from his arm now, their luscious white heads closed, although not wilted; and he offered them all to Ruth hopefully, to get rid of them.

"Pond-lilies," he repeated automatically, as he saw us coming into sight. "Pond-lilies. Five cents a bunch!"

He was a thin little man with a tired face, apologetic, but stubborn about his trade, selling his flowers with a mildness and a persistence that was deceptive.

Ruth bought them all, only asking if he

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would, as a favor, carry them up to her cottage.

"As a favor," he replied; "this time!"

"Pond-lilies! Pond-lilies!" he called again, as he started off, seeming to forget that we had purchased the entire stock.

"Poor thing," said Ruth; "that cry is a habit with him. He must do it in his sleep. He used to be a parson of some sort, but his 'health failed him' and that 's the way he supports his family. They say his children all get out in a flat-bottomed boat on Pink Pond, down the cape, and pick them for him every morning before it is light."

"They work hard up here," said I, feeling rather inadequate to the occasion, which was so tremendously local.

"They do," replied Ruth, with her usual sympathy and few words.

We paused to rest a moment by the bay. The water sparkled happily, with none of the menace that shrouded the deep blue of the ocean which we had left on "the outside" beyond the dunes. Here were merry little whitecaps, as innocent as the children who played upon the flats, and before us the fishing-boats, riding at anchor, had no more flavor of adventure than so many rocking-

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horses. The sunlight, mirrored from the bright waves, shone upon houses at the water's edge with a glow that turned the glass of the windows into flame and burnished the brass knockers on the doors. The white paint glistened as if it had been varnished that very afternoon, and the green blinds and the red roses climbing on the cottages were raised in tone to the height of the color of ornaments on a Christmas-tree. The whole village had the aspect of a gaily painted toy. The dust of the road was rose-tinted. The leaves of the trees looked as if they had been scrubbed and polished, and the sails of the vessels on the bay were as white as the clouds that skipped across the bright blue sky.

It was the contrast between this radiant shimmer of sea and cloud, this flicker of sunshine and dazzle of window-pane, this green of the short trimmed grass and crimson of the flowers, that caused my amazement when I first saw the house that was to be mine. I was bewildered by its drab melancholy, and I would have turned away, had not an inner courage urged me on. For it seemed to me, that August afternoon, that I had come to a crossroads in my married life, and it was in

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the mood of a weary traveler approaching a wayside shrine that I turned through the hedge at last and beheld the House of the Five Pines.

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CHAPTER II

MATTIE "CHARLES T. SMITH"

THE old mansion stood back from the road along the bay in a field of high, burnt grass. Drooping dahlias and faded old-fashioned pinks and poppies bordered the half-obscured flagstones which led to a fan-topped door. It was so long since the house had been painted that it had the appearance of having turned white with age, or something more, some terror that had struck it overnight. Wooden blinds, blanched by the salt wind to a dull peacock-blue, hung disjointedly from the great square-paned windows. A low roof sloped forward to the eaves of the first story, its austere expanse interrupted by a pointed gable above the kitchen. Beneath the dormer-window was a second closed and shuttered door.

At some period, already lost in obscurity, a wing had been thrust back into the neglected garden behind the house, and over its gray

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shingles stood the five pine-trees which we had seen from the sand-dunes. Old Captain Jeremiah Hawes had planted them for a windbreak, and during a century they had raised their gaunt necks, waiting to be guillotined by the winter storms. Faithfully trying to protect their trust from the ravages of wind-driven spray and stinging sand, they extended their tattered arms in sighing protest above the worn old house.

We went wonderingly up the flagging and knocked at the small door of the "porch." There was no answer. We knocked again, staring, as is the way of strangers, to each side of us and endeavoring to peer through the green shutter. We had to jerk ourselves back and look quickly upward when the dormer-window over our heads went rattling up and an old woman craned her neck out.

"That 's Mattie," whispered Ruth, "Mattie 'Charles T. Smith'!"

Gray wisps of hair framed a face thin and brown as a stalk of seaweed, with sharp eyes, like those of a hungry cat, above a narrow mouth. The creature did not ask us what we wanted; she knew. Her perception was clairvoyant. Long experience in dealing with

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house-hunters made her understand what we had come for without the formality of any explanation. We brushed straight past the first half of what would ordinarily have been the procedure of conversation, and I came to the gist of what was uppermost in my mind and Mattie's.

"Why won't you let any one in?" I asked, bluntly.

Ruth looked at me in some surprise.

Mattie put up a long thin arm to keep the window from falling on her shoulders. "I dunno as I need to say," she answered me, directly.

"What?" said Ruth. My friend, being complacent-minded, had not followed the argument so fast.

But Mattie did not repeat herself. She and I understood each other. She kept on gazing straight at me in that piercing way which I knew instinctively had driven many a purchaser from her inscrutable doorway.

"Will you let me in if I get a permit from the agent?" I insisted.

"That depends," replied Mattie.

Her lean body withdrew from the frame of the upper gable, her eyes still holding mine,

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until her face gradually disappeared into the gloom of the room behind her. The last thing I saw were two veined hands gradually lowering the sash, and the last sound was a little click as it shut.

Ruth, having brought me to see the house, was murmuring words of apologetic responsibility. But I did not feel daunted.

"I think I will take it, anyway," I said, "just for the view."

From the doorstep of the House of the Five Pines we faced the bay across the road, where many little fishing-boats were anchored, and white sails, rounding the light-house point, made a home-coming procession into Star Harbor. Remembering Mattie "Charles T. Smith" at her upper window, I wondered if she, too, saw the picture as I did and loved it the same way. But Mattie would have seen far more—not only what lay before us, but the ships that "used to be" and the wharf of old Captain Jeremiah Hawes, the piles of which were left on the beach now, like teeth of some buried sea-monster protruding from the sand. She would have counted the drying-frames hung with salt cod in pungent rows upon the bank of the shore lot, and she would have seen

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the burly fishermen themselves, who used to tramp back from the flats to the "Big House" for their breakfast. She had been a part of that former life which was gone, and now, like an old hull on the flats, she was waiting for that last great storm that was to sweep her out to sea. Sympathy for her made me almost wish to abandon my own project before it was begun, and yet it seemed to me that her life was almost over and that the House of the Five Pines needed the youth that we could bring it as much as we needed the shelter it could offer us. I brushed aside the thought of Mattie as if it were a cobweb that clung to my face in the woods.

"Take me to the trustee, or whoever controls the place," I begged my friend; "let 's see what can be done!"

"Now?" asked Ruth.

We had turned reluctantly through the hedge into the road.

"Why not?" I answered. "I 'm going back to New York to-morrow."

"You can't do things so quickly around here."

She must have noticed my disappointment, for she added, "There are no telephones or

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