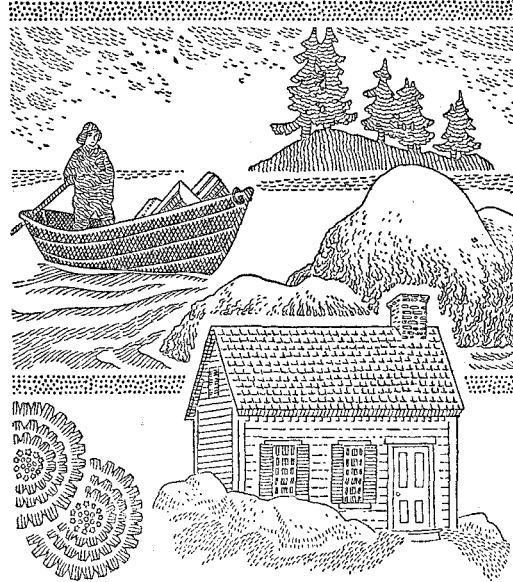


Primer for Maine

A STORY

By
Edward Harris Heth



WE have come to Maine for our holiday. It is the first time since Margaret and I have been married that I have been able to get away from the office in Chicago. It is our first trip together and at the beginning I held great expectations. All month we had been planning this together, both excited and eager, until at last we arrived in Maine. The sea is exactly as I had always pictured it since I first saw it on a picture-postal my aunt sent my mother from Atlantic City twenty years ago. In Maine the sea is the same except that it is colder and somehow seems deeper, and the trees along the coast are tall pines that shiver in the wind.

Margaret was flushed and breathless all the way up, behaving in a way I'd never seen before. But then she was returning home, where she was born and where she played summer in and out beside the sea. She can spot a school of porpoises out in the sea at a terrific distance; I look and look with my hand to my eyes and cannot see a ruffle disturbing the water. But she was born here, and now she has come home again and all the way up she was more talkative than I have ever seen her.

First it was all the white houses and then the good sea odor and then the many signs where they sell fried clams and lobsters and finally the flowers in Maine, which are twice as gay as any other flowers because of the air. She knew something about every town we passed through, tugging at my arm and talking as if she were delirious, telling me that this was the great village where they build boats; here was the town famous for its old doorways; there was the house where *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was written. At one town we stopped. There was a big white mansion with green shutters and a stately veranda and for a quarter you could go through it, up the carpeted steps and into all the bedrooms with fireplaces beside the beds. Margaret

almost pulled me from the car. Her Uncle Sed used to have this kind of a house, she said.

So all the way up she kept poking her head out of the car window because she hadn't been home for five years. After her mother died she came to Chicago to live with an uncle, and a year ago I met her and married her. She often came up to the office with me late at night when I had a big story to write, and she would sit there still as the night itself until I had finished. Often when the story was finished we'd stand together looking out of the high window at all the shadowed buildings and the river down below and all the bridges, looking like little carved Chinese bridges from up so high; then it would be as if we were part of the city and I liked it, being born and bred in Morgan Park, because we were keyed to harmony.

But being home again she kept chattering all the way, her cheeks coloring and her hands darting out of the window to point out some hill or pile of rocks, sometimes bigger than a house. "You can see where I get my outcroppings," she laughed. "Look at all the granite."

I was surprised because until that moment I had never noticed any outcroppings at all. At home we had often walked along the low sand-dunes and the yellow prairies and she seemed to belong there next to me. We had seemed like any two people happy together in the city, living in a third-floor studio with respectably sprawling furniture and serape on the walls and a good French Modern in the house, too. That was the first time I had thought of it at all.

And when we reached Maine she was eager for the heavy scent of the salt air. She rushed down to a pile of rocks jutting out of the gray water and put her hands on her breasts, breathing deeply. "Oh, this is wonderful." She put her hands to the sides of her face and turned to me laughing. "Isn't this heavenly, Jess?"

At first I couldn't evade the heavy pungent odor. In Chicago we are landlubbers and the scent of fish and weed is not beguiling. We like the good clean odor of the hot sand on the shores of Lake Michigan. Here I couldn't escape from the odor, even during the night. It was relentless. I got a panicky longing for the scent of something sweet. But soon I grew to love it, and by the second day hunted it out.

In Maine now there are old ladies everywhere in the summertime. They all wear white and walk very erectly and some of them carry canes. They hardly ever look at the sea, but strut down to the village in the morning to bother the lobstermen, fresh and smelly from their morning haul. They ask question after question and sympathize, saying they ought to get twice as much for their lobsters. Then they go into the magazine store and spend an hour musing whether they ought to buy *Harper's* or *Scribner's*. It really doesn't matter, they tell the clerk—all they want is something to read. But it takes them an hour to decide. On the lawn at the hotel old ladies in white dresses play croquet, holding colored parasols bolt-upright in their left hands. They move very slowly so that at first you think they are wooden white penguins stuck in the ground for ornaments. They can hit the ball without bending down a trifle. They are wonders.

After the first day we left the hotel, and though it was more than we could afford, Margaret urged me to rent a small cottage in the cove. So we are really at the water's door, alone, with the bay in front of us a dull blue and the open sea beyond that, a brighter blue. In the afternoons you can see endless schools of mackerel slithering in the water, diving up, diving under, their silver sides shining. There are cowering and huddled rocks all around us and in front of us a thin scallop of pebbly beach when the tide has licked its way in, but wide rolls of it when the tide is out.

Margaret rushed out on the beach, picking up crabshells and a tiny starfish and strands of blackened lecherous-looking seaweed. All sorts of seaweed drift in: lettuce, some like shavings of wood, some spangled and hung with globules like a shining savage ornament, some ferny, and great smacking flats of kelp smelling of rubber. Margaret picked up a broken bottle, its jagged edges worn smooth. "See how kind the sea is," she said, and took my finger to run it around the broken rim.

On that first night she began it, sitting on the rocks at night beside the sea. She sat there swirling her hands in the black water to stir up the phosphorescence. It was a superb display, the hundreds of sparks glittering in a wild swirl beneath the water. She threw in a stone and disturbed another brilliant white shower. A school of pollock came rimming around the rocks, each fish outlined in the spectral white. It was eerie and su-

pernatural, the translucent white against the black.

"It's getting cold out here," I said. "Why don't you come in to bed, Margaret?"

She laughed. "No. You run along if you want to. I like to sit here."

When I was half-way to the house she called to me, "Jess, would you bring out my coat?"

I hated to go in without her, unaccustomed to separating ourselves, yet I brought out the coat. "Don't stay here forever," I said softly.

She smiled at me. But it was long after midnight when she dropped silent in bed beside me.

One of the things I like to do best here is to feed the seagulls. You take the garbage out to the rocks in a big leaky pail and no matter where you look there isn't a gull in sight. But dump the garbage into the sea. They must all rise from the water the way they circle about you so suddenly, making their shrill hunting cry, flapping their sail-wings. They haggle and scramble and unawares make beautiful dips, skimming the water and sailing off with a piece of the refuse, fighting for it with each other. They make you feel beneficent, but also suddenly timid.

Often after I fed them if the tide was out I would keep standing there on the rocks, watching the seaweed, half in the water, half out. The tide leaves in a rhythm, surging methodically, tantalizing the drying weeds. They are lifted, lifted; but finally dropped to flatness. Until the rocks are covered with a great black melancholy net and they are doomed to lie there lifeless until the tide returns to them.

One day Margaret came up to me there, carrying a handful of lucky stones and periwinkles she had found along the shore. Her hair was knit by the good sea wind and her face was already tanning with the rich deep-darted tan you get from the sun and the salt mixing. "Let's go up to see Aunt Kate," she said. "I haven't seen her for years and maybe she isn't even alive any longer," she said, "but that's her house there on the hillock."

She really isn't Margaret's Aunt Kate. In a way she belongs to every one, just as her husband was every one's Uncle Leander until his troll-like body was swallowed by the sea years ago. When Margaret told me how he was drowned, I didn't think any longer that the sea was as kind as she had made out. But she told the story with a radiance on her face.

"Uncle Leander," she said, "spent all his mornings chugging around the bay in his boat to pull up his lobster pots, leaning over the boat to haul in the lathed box with two or three sea-green lobsters captive, writhing and spreading their pincers. Once on a lucky haul he found seven in a trap, tangled up with each other like a garland from the bottom of the sea."

"Leander looked like a grumpy lobster himself," she said, "small and chunky with flat beady eyes. He had a son named Wellington. And every morning Wellington sat in the boat beside Leander, though Aunt Kate stood on the shore scowling and grumbling that she didn't want her son taking up with the sea, too. But one morning a huge rolling wave came in, and for no reason at all tipped the boat far to one side, easily, like a hand pushing the boat over, long enough for the son to drop out. That was near Witches' Island, where often the dogfish hung heavy in the water.

"The boy," said Margaret, "fell into the water and in a moment a school of dogfish had clamped their suckerlike mouths on his body. They held him under water as if it were a kind of easy sport until his eyes snapped shut, like playing a kind of trick. Uncle Leander could see the bulky black dogfish wallowing down there until finally in desperation he dove down after the boy, probably sick with terror at the sight of the boy held so effortlessly under the water. But they never saw him again, either."

We went up to call on Aunt Kate and found her still alive. Margaret said she knew it the minute we approached the door because of the rich sweet odor of drying catnip that drifted out to us. Aunt Kate is one of the natives. She received us as if we belonged to her, dragging us into the white clapboard house with black shutters and giving us sleek-varnished rockers to sit in. She is eighty-nine years old and very big, but quick on her feet. As soon as we got inside she brought out queer pathetic photographs of her sons and daughters and granddaughters and even of neighbors, making us feel as if we had lived there all our lives. She had never seen me before but she kept talking about what great youngsters we used to be, running into the sea all the time, taking a punt out to the island to hunt for shags' eggs all around the shore.

She liked to sit in half-amused disdain hearing us tell about city ways. She knew a lady who slipped in a bathtub and drowned because she hit her head when she fell. Another lady she knew got into a bathtub once and couldn't get out again. She kept falling down the sides like a crab trying to crawl out of a tin pail.

On the way home Margaret shook her head and told me how Aunt Kate despised the sea ever since it took Leander and the boy.

"Why doesn't she move away from it then?" I asked. Margaret shrugged her shoulders.

Soon the old ladies from the hotel discovered our beach. Then they began coming down with their colored parasols to sit in lumps on the ledges and watch their nieces and nephews putter in the water. You wonder where the mothers are but there never are any,

only nieces and nephews and aunts in white dresses. Some of the ladies sit on the rocks, shrieking and gathering their skirts around them and waddling down to the water's edge to drag out one of the children who has gone too deep into the water, while others go off into the bushes, poking around with their parasols to discover a wild red raspberry. "Be careful of the crabs, don't let the crabs pinch you," the ladies on the rocks cry to the children.

When the ladies invaded our beach Margaret took to sitting on the rocks far to the right, high on a ledge above the water where she could see far out to sea. Often she took a book along but she never read it. It lay at her side. In the morning she would go off by herself to dig clams, but every afternoon she sat there.

I went with her the first morning, hurrying beside her over the mud-flats when the tide had ebbd, our slatted wooden clam-baskets dangling on our arms. You wear rubber boots that make a squishy sound as they rub against each other and dungarees and an old shirt that won't mind being doused in mud, or none at all. You wallow in the rich weedy-smelling mud tinted lavender and gray and blue with a streak of orange where some dead starfish is hidden, and sink your hooks where the holes are, sometimes finding four or five clams at a time, squirting at you and sliding away from you, while the water wells green and undulant and gurgling into the hole you've just dug. It breaks your back and the odor clenches your nostrils and I thought of the fine hot sand around Michigan, so after the first time I didn't go again.

But Margaret went gaily every morning the tide was low, returning gleefully with her arms and face and legs mud-covered. She would dump the blue and ivory clams with a pleasant rattle into a burlap bag, tying the bag in the water from one of the rocks to let the sea wash them clean. "See how kind the sea is," she laughed to me, "it does all my work for me." For supper she would steam the clams in a big kettle and then I would have to sit with her at table and pretend enjoyment in eating them, hot and slippery, even in drinking the acrid broth in which they had been steamed; while Margaret sat across from me chattering and gobbling twenty or thirty clams at a meal, yanking them from their shells with deft smeared fingers, breaking off their necks with a gentle slip, laughing with the butter-sauce trickling from her red mouth.

But in the afternoons, after the ladies had usurped our beach, she used to sit high upon the rocks. "Why don't we go some place else?" I said one afternoon. "We could go down to Boston to see some good shows and I could look at the library, too." But she never even answered me, only smiling slightly as if she never gave me an idea a moment's credence at all.

In Maine loneliness is not so terrible as loneliness in

other places for it becomes a thing of bare beauty. I sat close to her. She kept watching the children on the beach prancing into the water, heedlessly rushing in beyond their depth, never listening to their raucous aunts. I put my arm around her, waiting for her to lean back against me. At last I put my hand against her face, kissing her because of my sudden fear. "You've become absolutely cold," I murmured after a while. "You'd think you had never seen me before," I said.

"Look," she cried. "Look, Jess. Look out there and see the fishing dory!"

All this that I had never known in Margaret before was coming out, was dragged out by the sea.

In the middle of the night they woke us up by rapping on the window, saying that Aunt Kate was dying and wanted to see Margaret. I walked with her across the black fields heavy with the damp odor of fog and went into the house at her side. All of the relatives and neighbors were there, staring bleak-eyed though none was crying. There was a thick unusual odor in the room, and in the big bed Aunt Kate lay with the sheets pulled up to her chin. Her face and the tips of her fingers showing were red and wet with perspiration. She nodded when we came in and then motioned us to chairs, as if all we were supposed to do was to sit and watch. Waiting there I felt an anxious kinship for her because of her hatred of the sea.

"Is there anything I can do?" Margaret asked. But every one looked at her solemn-eyed and shook his head.

By that time Aunt Kate had lost her voice. Soon though she began making signs with her hands and her eyes, moving her worried lips but with no sound coming. Some one rushed to the kitchen to bring a glass of water but Aunt Kate shook her head. Some one got a hot cloth to put on her head but her eyes took on an angry annoyed look. A neighbor came with a moping step to her bedside bearing a Bible, getting suddenly a bright smile as if she had understood what Aunt Kate wanted at last, but she brushed the neighbor away with her hand. She looked helpless there on the big bed, with no way of telling what she wanted.

But finally Margaret jumped up and ran to the window, flinging it open wide so that half the people in the room gasped and shook their heads, horrified, mumbling about Leander and the son; motioning to Margaret to shut it quick. The sound of the sea came in roaring, splashing, and spitting on the rocks down on the beach. It came in steady rolls like breathing, deep

and moaning. But Aunt Kate began to smile, settling back in her goosefeather pillows again, nodding at Margaret and listening with a faint grin.

About three in the morning she died. Margaret helped with everything as much as she could, and then we started back to our cottage. "It must be terrible to die in bed," she muttered.

"For heaven's sakes," I said, "get the sea off your mind. You might think you were married to the sea," I said. "Instead of to me," I added a moment later.

"It must be terrible," she said.

I lay awake in bed waiting for her to come in from outside, but it was a long time. And when she came she dropped into bed and turned over and fell asleep and said nothing to me at all.

This morning she was out on the purplish rocks again, sitting there in the gray morning watching. The tide was up, all the rockweeds resurrected again. They stood straight and green in the water, swaying thickly. Margaret sat there silently in the gray morning watching the children on our beach rushing into the water, looking as if they were never going to stop, as if something in the water were calling to them.

"Why are you so quiet?" I asked, breaking the silence. And when she did not answer me I added, "Soon we must start back to Chicago."

"I was thinking about these weeds," she answered, "how they hang on the rocks for years and years without ever getting torn away." She looked up at me, half-smiling.

"The month flew by in a hurry, didn't it?" I asked quickly, not looking at her.

She rested her hand on my knee, the only affectionate movement she had made for weeks. But the touch of her hand soon turned me cold. "Do you suppose you could get along without me for a while?" she was saying. "I should think it would be fun, playing bachelor," she laughed.

On the beach the raucous old ladies were in distress because one daring nephew was galloping out toward the surf beyond their reach. They stood there waving their parasols at him. I came down from the rock and chased after him, splashing myself and grabbing him by the seat of his suit to haul him out. Margaret sat on the ledge watching.

I really think that if she were down there alone with the children sometime, she would let them keep on running into the sea, deeper and deeper.

NEXT MONTH: SUMMER FICTION NUMBER

Stories by CAPT. JOHN W. THOMASON, ERSKINE CALDWELL,
THOMAS WOLFE, WILLIAM FAULKNER, and others.

Heyday in a Vanished World

*The Funeral of the Emperor — Search for the Missing Editor
— John L. Sullivan in His Latter Days*

By Stephen Bonsal

*The second of two articles of reporting in the '80's.
Last month Mr. Bonsal related his adventures in
covering John L. Sullivan's fight with Charley
Mitchell in France*

AT Cologne, where we changed trains, I broke my fast and my tired brain worked better. I got in contact with the Herr Schaffner of the train and for what he seemed to regard as a princely present I thought I had secured a compartment to myself. He did not, however, placard that my privacy was not to be disturbed, but he locked me in and, though I did not like it, he said it was "*besser, viel besser.*"

Using a bag as a pillow and covering myself with a heavy coat, I was soon sound asleep, very sound asleep. How long this delight lasted I do not know, but it was not for long. I came gradually back to the hard world in which I was living and heard voices all around me. Also, it seemed, a knocking at the door. "Perhaps another telegram" was my thought, and then I opened wide my eyes. A most unmilitary looking gentleman in full military uniform was crouching at my feet in the little space that remained on the lounge. Opposite on the other side sat three stiff and very disgusted-looking middle-aged men in civilian garb, and peering at me through the window of the door was a *Jaeger* servant in a rough frieze coat. The start with which I awoke unfortunately planted one of my feet in the old gentleman's lap, but this accident gave me my cue. I apologized and placed my feet where they belonged. He was very gracious, but the other three gentlemen in civilian clothes and the *Jaeger* were evidently bursting with indignation, though they at least had no kick to complain of. As my wits came back to me, the situation did not



clear up. Here was a high officer, and despite the outrage I had done him he was smiling kindly, almost benevolently upon me, instead of unsheathing his sword which hung from the baggage-rack, and running me through. Could the man be a Prussian officer? Was all my previous experience of his class misleading? There he was, smiling kindly, while I expressed my sorrow and regret, and he, I could hardly believe my ears—

"I am sorry indeed to disturb you, more sorry than I can say to have awakened you. There were no other places in the train, so we had to come in. I urged my friends not to speak so loud, but of course they have much to talk about, the death of His Majesty and what it will mean for all of us." Then still more kindly, he continued, "I said to my friends, let's not disturb him. This *blut-junger Herr* comes out of Paris. He is very sleepy, just as I was thirty years ago when I came out of Paris. We must let him *ausschlafen*—

sleep it out." And how indulgently he smiled.

But of course I could not let this insinuation pass unnoticed. After all, I had spent only one night in Paris and my arrears of sleep came from the interminable watchful nights in the provinces. However, the old gentleman's kindness did not stop with mere words. He insisted upon my taking a drink from his flask, which would do me good, help me to sleep some more. However, it only made me talkative, and I explained where I had been and what I had seen. He seemed immensely interested, and at the next stop he spoke shortly to the three gentlemen opposite and they disappeared. "I think my friends will find other places now, and you can stretch yourself out again and be comfortable without incommoding me, but you are choosing a bad time to visit Berlin. You are coming to a mourning city. His Majesty is dead." I reassured him by telling him that from my student days I knew how gay Berlin could be, but I was glad to visit it at this historic moment.

"Your purpose?" he inquired. I told him how, as I reached Paris from the ringside, a cable had come ordering me to Berlin to describe the great funeral pageant.

"You had the telegram to come—from the ringside?"

"Yes, that was about it."

"*Sehr gut—Aber sehr gut.*" He rolled his eyes now and seemed convulsed by a repressed desire to laugh. The three civilian friends did not return to the compartment, and so the old gentleman went after them to be assured of their