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5. A whisper from the pines.

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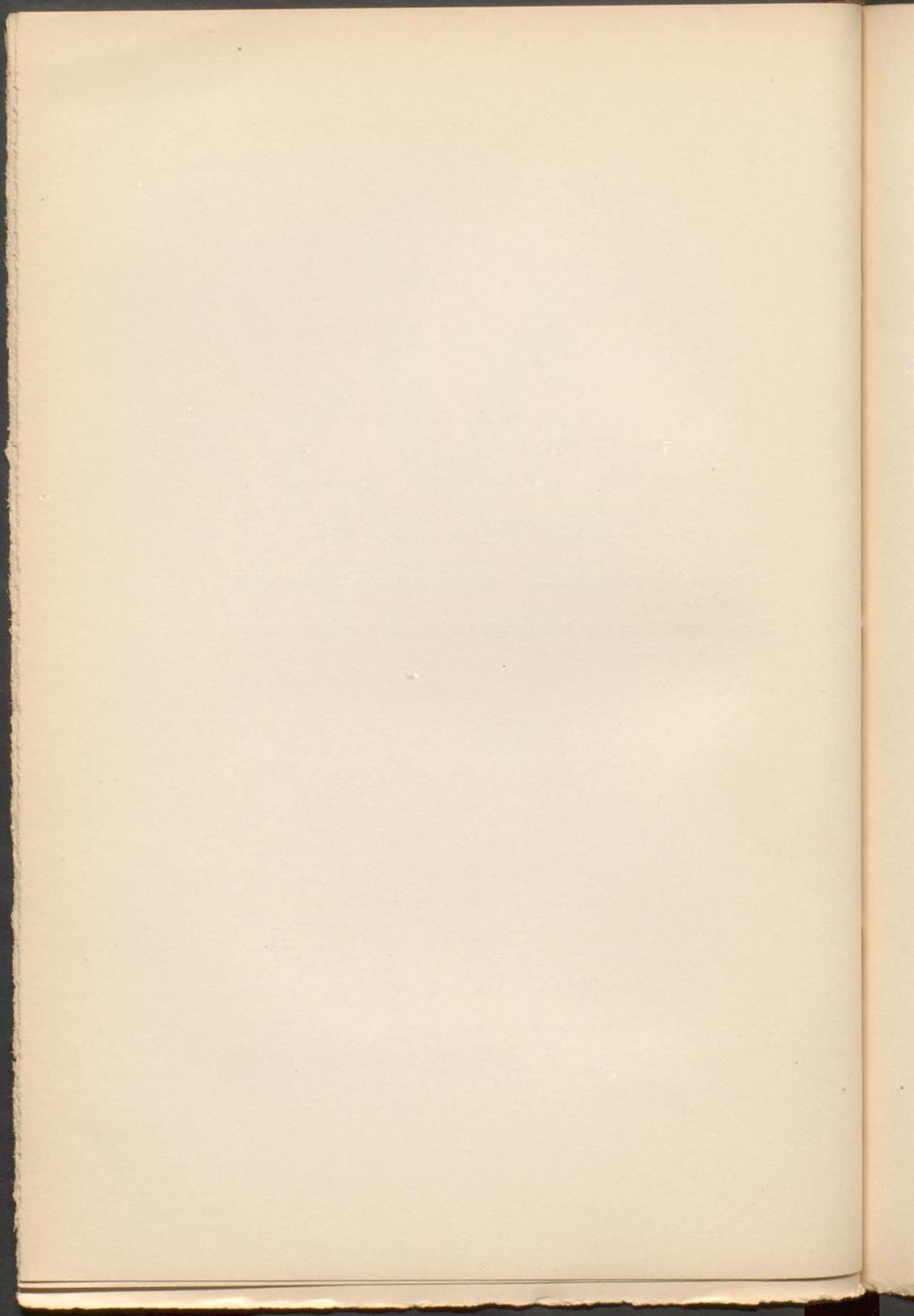
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5. A WHISPER FROM THE PINES.

I stood as still as the solemn firs, and hearkened with waiting
mind.

Then I heard far away in the topmost boughs the eternal sough
of the wind.

Fraser's Magazine.



A WHISPER FROM THE PINES.

THE great storm which swept by us yesterday, lashing the land with its double scourge of wind and rain, has disappeared in the east. The sky is clear of clouds, and instead of the harsh east wind a fresh breeze from the west is drying out the soaked and sodden earth. No spot on all the farm seems so attractive to-day as these pine-woods. They are the peculiar charm and attraction of our neighbourhood. They have become a favourite spot for writing and for study, and many a page of the summer's work will call up, in the review, the sighing of the wind in the tufted boughs and the glint of the sun on the pine-needles.

To-day I have been studying the grove. Somehow the printed page has lost its fascination, and for the hour, my mind will run along the lines of nature's book, this volume known and read of all men who will take the trouble to open their eyes. And after my readings to-day I confess to a stronger feeling than ever before possessed me, of kinship to these trees, and a blood-relationship running back through countless ages. It is amazing how many of our family traits are the common inheritance from a past which

is inconceivably remote; so our behaviour to-day cannot fail to impress the close observer of family likenesses, with our resemblance to our cousins, the trees.

Look at these pines, for example, tall, straight fellows, most of them, running up from forty to sixty feet, rough-coated at the base, but with smooth, sleek jackets toward their tops, which well become their slim, aristocratic figures. Erect and graceful in mien, soft-voiced in the gentle winds, well-clad and well-fed in appearance, they are excellent types of a well-descended and well-connected family, proud of their birth, blood, and breeding. And in their isolation here on the little knoll where they live, forty or fifty of them, one is reminded of the exclusiveness of some human societies, whose aristocratic ways are not unlike those of the lordly pines. But it was only to-day that I discovered how much deeper and farther this analogy ran.

Within a rod of me, as I write, is a pathetic bit of tragedy whose meaning has but just penetrated my mind. Right here, in this group of stately forest aristocrats, has grown up a little, rough-barked, scrubby "pitch-pine" tree. How it happens to be here, the sole one of its kind in the grove, is more than I can tell. But it has rooted itself and grown to a height of nearly forty feet. Yet it could not hold its own. It is among competitors which altogether outclass it. These elegant members of the pine-trees' "best society" have simply crowded out their poor rela-

tion. They have squeezed in front of him and taken his light and heat. They have out-climbed and over-shadowed him. In whatever ways trees have of accomplishing the socially murderous feat, they have frozen him out.

The pitch-pine is dead. He has succumbed to the chill of good society. He has gratified his ambition, perhaps, to live the life of the "first families," and the result is, that he amounts to nothing now, save perhaps a cord-foot or so of firewood. I have a feeling that he may have found the living a little too high for him. If he had only stuck to the sand barrens he might have been a stout and thrifty tree. But the good living of this richer soil has taken the energy all out of him ; so that his haughty neighbours have had an easy and a short task in crowding him to the wall. How very human these pine-trees are ! Or shall we say how very like the trees these mortals be ? It is sometimes a little hard to know which way to put the analogy,—whether to give precedence to the man by virtue of his superiority, or to the tree on account of its seniority. In any country but America genealogy has the preference. In almost any court of Europe the pine-tree would go in to dinner before the human.

The whole grove is a witness to this exclusiveness and selfishness of the pines. The little group has but scant underbrush, even where it has been allowed to grow ; and within short range of my eye there are half a dozen other groups of pines whence other

trees have been quite excluded. The pines stand by one another. They crowd close together, and make common cause against intruders and strangers to their set. They mass their evergreen foliage in a thatch which casts a perennial shadow on the ground beneath, very discouraging to shrubs and trees which love their share of sunlight. And then they cover the ground with a carpet of rusty, cast-off needles, which seems still more to disconcert the grass and vines and creeping things. Give these pines any sort of a hold and they will maintain it against all comers. The adults of the family have no bowels of mercy.

But just look down the slope yonder at that little copse of young trees under the ledge. Day before yesterday I counted in that little thicket nine different varieties of trees,—oak, pine, birch, sumac, wild cherry, elm, willow, poplar, and ash. They are getting on well enough together. It is a very democratic group. These juvenile trees play very harmoniously in company. The question of precedence, of rank, of rights and preferments, does not seem to have come up as yet. Indeed there is a pair of young poplars, or “popples” as the boys call them, which seem to have quite taken the lead and to be the chiefs in that little group. But these equalities in the democracy of childhood and youth cannot last; they wane with growth and the maturing of character and its assertion of traits which line men—and trees as well—into groups. Happy childhood, in which caste

spirit plays so little part. How strange that it should be so much the same among the children of men and the children of the trees.

But I seem to have been writing down the pines, and giving them a bad character. I suspect I have been caught in the breath of the "spirit of the age," and blown by it quite off the course of my real sentiments. It is the defect of the age that we are envious of the strong; and we find fault with them whenever they are even unconsciously the cause of distress or disaster to the weak who get in the way of their strength, and suffer thereby and therefrom. Ought we, after all, to blame our cousins, the pines, because in being true to themselves, and living strictly and sternly by the law of their family life, they make an environment uncomfortable and impossible for the tree which thrives on a different diet? Shall we condemn the man who has attained a dinner of five courses because his diet and his demeanour are distasteful to his fellow-man who dines sumptuously on black bread and bologna? For myself I hasten to repudiate the levelling sentiments which would put me in the attitude of a critic upon the life of the pine-tree. I believe in the pines. I like their family unity. I honour them for their ambition. I do not blame them because they like their own kind best. I admire the way in which they sturdily push for the top. Above all I confess my debt to them for a lesson of deep and vital spiritual import. Whoever sits here in this grove must see how resolutely these pines push out for the

sunshine and the light. Here is one just in front of me, on the edge of the grove facing the morning sun. It is fully seventy feet high. For two-thirds of its height it has not a single limb on the inner or shaded side of its trunk. Until it begins to get the light from the west, above the tops of its companions, it stretches its long branches, like so many outreaching, uplifted, and imploring hands, toward the quarter whence the most light comes. Here are other trees, whose first forty feet are marked by dead and dying branches, dropping into decay because they are starving for light. But this tree will not starve. It pushes its long trunk upward. It reaches after the upper light; and if it can reach the sunbeams at the top it minds nothing about the shadows below. As long as it keeps in upper sunshine, the bare trunk in the sombre light of the grove, the very roots deep in the dark of the earth beneath, feel the thrill and currents born in those life-giving rays. It does not seem as if any enlargement upon that fact could be more forceful than the mere statement thereof. Long, long ago the ancestral pines began to grow as one day the human soul was to find and keep its life. Happy the man who still holds fast to the ancient and unchanging law.