

## Cape Cod Dunes Bleak in Winter

F. C. P. in Providence Journal

In the Summer, visitors come to the Cape dunes to plod curiously through the shining sand, to marvel at the hills that move with the seasons and the years, and to trudge, finally, over the last bank of them to the sea, where shore birds run on spindly legs along the tide line and gulls screech overhead and dive for fish to eat.

It is not unpleasant in the dunes then, for the sun is high and the winds not cold, and wild sweet peas bloom gaily. Clump grass, where it has managed to take root, whips and thrashes in the gusts, and the tops of its long sharp blades scratch circles in the sand, as though to mark the boundary of its narrow domain. Solitary pines, gnarled and dwarfed and bare of branches on the seaward side, give mute evidence of the odds they battle here, and the bayberry and holly that struggle sparsely are stunted and misshapen from the storms that assail them.

The rest is sand, as far as the eye can see. A hundred wind-made hills range one behind another, hills of sand so fine and soft and loosely thrown that a man walking there sinks ankle deep and gives up, at last, weary and panting from his effort. And between the hills, a hundred wind-made valleys of sand so cleanly scoured, so firm, one can pass that way and leave no mark of his going upon its surface.

Here in the valleys, sometimes, the ceaseless winds sweep deeply enough to reveal a dark smudge in the white floor of sand, and then those who know the meaning of such a sign hurry to dig there carefully with small scoops and to examine closely what they turn up. For a smudge means that winds have uncovered a shell heap left by Indians who, three centuries ago, made camp where the dunes are now and feasted on the shellfish that lay in profusion in the sheltered water across the salt marsh. Digging in the heaps the blowing sands have hidden until now often yields crude needles fashioned from bone, or arrowheads, or perhaps fragments of pottery or a bowl hollowed patiently from stone—relics of another age and of the handiwork of a people since gone.

The marching dunes that blotted out the Indian camping place are moving now on the salt marsh, where wildfowl in uncounted generations have paused in their great seasonal flights to rest and feed and play awhile. Already the sands have drifted over the deep-rutted wheel path that skirts it and are piled deep against the rude huts gunners have fashioned for shelter against the cold. But below, on the level marsh, the wild

rosemary still sends forth its million tiny flowers and makes a moving sea of lavender. Soon, too, the marsh pinks will spread their brighter color there.

This is the dune country in Summer. But Winter makes of it a dreary and a cruel place where few go, and then only for good reason. Gales lashing in from the open sea drive the sand in choking clouds that cut and burn and blind and that swiftly bury a man's footprints, to leave him dubious of whence he came and where he is and whither he should go in the vast waste. Breakers, pounding on the far shore, shake the earth. The bitter, freezing spray from them rides over the dunes and festoons every wind-warped tree and shrub and every flailing spear of grass with ice, until they gleam in the thin sunlight as in some hellish fairyland.

Then, when the sun fails and the leaden clouds that cover it loose their storm, it is folly, indeed, to be abroad there. Mingled snow and sand fly madly on the whistling wind in a curtain so thick a man can scarcely see his own hand before him and might wander, lost, in the trackless desert until he fell of weariness and cold.

They tell, in the dune country, of one such storm many years ago, when the gales beat the sea so violently and long that its waves towered high and higher until, at last, they surmounted the sandy hills and went surging through their valleys like countless rushing rivers. It was that night, they tell, that a sailing ship, its bearings lost, went hard aground in the shallows off the shore and broke quickly to pieces there, and all its men were drowned save one.

He, they say, lashed himself to the vessel's mast and rode with it through the surf and breakers far into the dunes to outwit the sea that sought him. When the storm subsided and townsfolk searched for what there might be to salvage from the ship's far-strewn cargo, they came upon the sailor in the sand and snow, a good quarter-mile from the shore. His clothes were frozen in a solid sheath upon his body, and he was dead. The dunes had taken the toll the sea was denied.

Many there are who will tell you the story is true; some who will shake their heads and call it only legend. I do not know. But this I do know, for I have seen it, and you may see it, too, unless the shifting sands that have covered it and uncovered it a dozen times, have buried it once again by now. It's a ship's mast of stout oak a foot or more through, and sound and whole, except for a splintered butt, that lies in the sand dunes, a good quarter-mile from the nearest shore.

