

A WATCH IN THE NIGHT OF THE YEAR

FROM NOTES AT INTERVALS—By Edith M. Thomas

WE have reached and passed the longest night of the year. The days, from hence on, may be gradually lengthening, but it is long after the solstitial line is crossed that we derive any comfort from that fact.

The winter—though we are far enough from Arctic latitudes—seems under the domain of an elder power—Night; just as summer impresses us as being under the cheerful jurisdiction of Day. Abstractly, cold reminds us of night, while warmth is inseparable from the suggestion of light. The winter sun shines slantwise on my path. The mornings still arise out of the east. And yet a feeling, something of the nocturnal—a sense as of half-hibernating, pervades my thought. It might be better to sleep the next three months away, awaking the wiser. Or shall I keep a Watch in the Night instead?

TO-DAY witnessed the unusual apparition of an owl perched in a tree across the street. It was broad daylight. The bird was winking, or, at least, blinking suspiciously, earing, if not eyeing, the surroundings. He turned his head, this way and that, with an air of nervous apprehension. He stayed but a few moments, and then flitted heavily toward town. I cannot think what induced him to venture abroad except in his own native "owllet light." His owlship, however, is now a guest at the house of my friend, having blundered that same afternoon into the open window of the attic. There in the warm twilight (the chimney passing through the room) he enjoys his ease with dignity, is visited by children of the family and the grown people, and is fed with many a choice morsel, albeit small birds are not on his present bill-of-fare. And such as it is he has been rendered a tribute of verse, the following addressed to "The Lodger in the Attic":

IN the recent ice storm, and for some days later, we lived in a world of Arabian Nights' enchantment and splendor—especially when the sun came out, lighting up the wonderful lattice-work and filigree which the trees everywhere displayed. But now they are more delicately adorned than when they stood motionless under their crystal burdens. A white frost has gathered on all the lesser branches and fine twigs, simulating a downy bloom or willow flower beauty. Those trees which stand out in the open fields against the bluish background of woods look self-luminous, not unlike the seed globe of the dandelion much exaggerated. And now comes the wind scattering by pinches and piecemeal all the petals and pollen of this hoar-frost flowerage. Cold as it is, these light, drifting clots seem to lend a spring-time softness to the scene, reminding one of the falling bloom of the orchards, when the "blossom-wind" is blowing in late May—as the old farmers, with, perhaps, a sub-consciousness of sentiment, term the gusty weather of that period.

Driving last evening along the old "Centre-road" I was pleased with the primitive Western prospect still remaining in that quarter. The horizon was a wooded belt, with stumpy clearings—a condition intermediate between the virgin wilderness and civilization. Such pleasure had my eyes in the dark relief the woods afforded to the monotonous snowy landscape of the wide fields! The body of the woods presented a smoky purple—the very atmosphere of twilight and of sleep, with here and there a dull amber or red, the outline of a beech or a maple that retained its foliage. Sometimes there would be a sufficient group of such trees to give the appearance of a low, dying flame creeping along the forest border. Sometimes a silver-gray tree stood out—the light and graceful figure of a white birch—in contrast with the general obscurity of the background. As I was indulging in these observations, looking across the long stretch of dim fields, I heard, in the distance, the "dee-dee-dee" of the chickadee. Even this faint articulation of a living voice in nature seemed incredible, such was the impression of slumber and silence produced by the woods.

In these passing zero days the miller cold grinds exceeding small. The grist is less in quantity, but of quality it is the finest. Even when no snow is falling, and especially in the mornings, any plank or plain surface will be found to be covered with a deposit of mite-small particles, the very flour of the snow—otherwise frost. I thought this morning that the snow had gathered whiteness and purity over night, as though by reason of human withdrawal from its presence. Its celestial candor and cleanness scarcely permitted my mortal eyes to rest upon it! The trees, every limb and branch well furred with snow, lift a white tapestry all around. Passing under their cover one gains the impression that one has entered a vast snow-house. And do not the poor Arctic travelers know how to avail themselves of such tender mercies as there may be in the heart of winter, when they convert this fleecy coverlet to their uses?

MAKING friends with the farmer's boy, and expressing a wish that he would introduce me to his dumb friends, briefly called "live stock," I received an invitation to inspect the sheep, and the cattle when they were foddered. These stood in a yard, convenient to the barn, and were all socially gathered around a haystack. It was a fine group, taken with its surroundings, for a painter of animals: the shaggy, winter-clothed cattle, the "foolish" woolly tribe—not white, the latter, but harmoniously dingy in color; all contentedly taking their repast either from the corn-stalks strewn on the ground, or from the hay also scattered about the place. That it was deep in the winter was shown by the fact that the top of the haystack was already well truncated—consumed for fodder on many a previous chill, gray, slow-coming morning. In some spots the hay had been nibbled by mice, for whom, though I silently felicitated them on their choice of snug quarters, the farmer's boy expressed aught but solicitude.



AT one end of the watering-trough that stands beside the road a pretty device had been executed by the designer (whose obscure initials I take to be J. F.). Where the water, from the spring above, overflowed the full trough it ran through a glittering mass of ice, clear as some carven translucent stone. Behind this crystal bulwark the water could be seen trickling down through the orifice perforated by itself. The ice looked as though intended for a shrine to conceal partly the mysterious play of the water. The pool which has long been standing at the foot of the hill is now covered with a sheet of white ice, crisp and opaque in appearance as the frosting spread over a cake—a comparison as obvious as it is trivial to whoever has observed the differing qualities of ice in the fields or by wayside pools.



EXAMINING the fern patterns which the frost has drawn on the window-pane—fine and small, not longer than one's thumb nail, and scattered promiscuously like the figures on chintz—I noticed that each leaf had a white and shining midrib or line of greater transparency. There were frequent groups of four leaves, as though the frost flora favored this number.

Now, if one had but patience to watch the growth of these wild gardens of winter, it might be ascertained what conditions of temperature, etc., are favorable to each species of frost vegetation—when ferns may be expected, when mountain pines, when pond weeds and algæ. Perhaps a botany tabulating these facts may yet be arranged by some ingenious person of a fanciful and scientific turn of mind. Meantime I wonder why devotees of the needle, stitching the dull winter hours away, do not oftener have recourse for patterns to these ever-changing and beautiful designs spread before them on the window-panes.

THE NAIAD IN WINTER

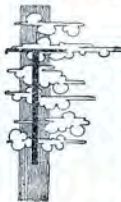
Tell me if the naiad flies
When the summer hence has fled;
Other flowers 'neath Southern skies,
Weaves she for her shining head?

Or, secure among the hills,
In some cavern does she sleep,
Till the vale with sunshine fills,
And the loosened waters leap?

Tell me where the naiad dwells?
Sometimes listening by the spring,
When relax the winter's spells,
In her sleep I hear her sing!



DISCOURAGED by the rain and softening weather, how the lichen gardens grow, hospitably borne by the old trees along their trunks! Says the lichen frill to the yellow grass blade, in these days: "You must now acknowledge my superior charms. I thrive while you still languish." Yet it cannot now be long before the grass begins to express its hopes in almost vernal color. The persistent vitality, the courage of the grass, is the sweetest wonder in nature. Why does not some one choose for his armorial device blades of grass, with the motto, *semper vivens?*



THE scent of the thaw precedes the melting time. And to-day the sky puts off its wintry face altogether, and puts on a soft cloudiness, as in early spring. . . . And now the rain comes, enhancing the cinnamon tints in the stems of the maple, which seems to be thinking already of spring. A little leaven of the coming season is already diffused through the heavy mass of winter. A house-fly, the first to emerge, performing its toilette on the window-pane, is a slight, yet significant, token.

I watch the antics of the rain as its pelting sets afloat numberless bubbles on the wayside pools. Fairy crafts are these, enchanted domes! Taken with their reflections in the water, they look like half-submerged crystal spheres. As I came along the road I was pleased to notice the tracks of the hens. As plainly as any types could say, they said: "Look out for the spring of the year." I had an impression that from some forward field or woodside was borne the scent of violets. What in reality reached my anticipating senses was the odor, not of violets, but of the damp, fresh mould out of which they start.

This is the time of bright-skied, empty days that resemble the late fair days of autumn, yet with a chill in the air not felt in the latter season. There is also a pensive, wistful, retrospective quality in the sunlight, which in me awakes a thrilling remembrance of my youngest days of conscious, enjoying life; a dream of broad corn-fields, tall woods along the banks of a shining river running due sunsetward—life in the youth of the world, as it seems to me! These days of the early spring bring such vague reminiscences as, granting the doctrine of metempsychosis, mortals can only refer to a former state of existence. In the spring of the year we are, in some fanciful sense, born again. We grow youthful with the year itself, and forget the rigors through which we have passed.

To-night the wind of spring is blowing through the tree-tops. The trees, as if conscious of a new administration, exult as they have not been known to do through the whole winter. They shout, whistle or croon, as the mood seizes them. The wind has the tumultuous sound of many waters, and I half think, as I look out upon the night, to see a swift stream running through and over the trees; and with the sea-like noise in my ears it is easy to imagine that under the brooding darkness lies a vast, seething, watery field. Lying in my bed, a little later, with the wind-tide setting in against the walls of the house, I fall asleep, pleased with the notion that I am, in some sense, being "rocked in the cradle of the deep." When I awaken I may find that we are indeed landed upon the coast of Spring, in the blithe realm of morning-time.

AFTER A SLEEP

Night—and the strong will stilled,
Night—and the fancy waned,
Night—and the memory begged,
Night—and the spirit drained
Like a stream with drifted encumbered,
Or a dumb and frozen land;
Like a flower that pales in the shadow,
A bird that swoons in the hand!

Morn—and the faint will strengthened,
Morn—and the fancy glows,
Morn—and the memory rich-laden,
Morn—and the spirit flows
Like a bird with a carol upmuntung,
Like a land in the showers of spring,
Like a flower in the sunlight smiling,
Like a stream when the floodgates swing!



YESTERDAY, in the very heart of the snowstorm, as I sat looking out on the white anger of the elements, I had a momentary impression as of its total unreality. It seemed to me, then, like the mere painting of a storm, beheld through the window,

"While all unseen, yet in its wonted way,
Piped the drear wind of that December day."

Searching the origin of this curious impression I found that summer was not yet sufficiently out of my thoughts to give place to the conception of winter, although the latter season was waging cruel warfare in the physical world. The first great snowstorm of the year, unless I am compelled to meet it face to face, has always for me this quality of the histrionic, of the pantomimic. But by the time a second storm of the winter season arrives I am pretty thoroughly "seasoned," as it were, to the idea of winter and its rude actualities.



The supposed reply of his owlship:

Curious human, why disturb me,
And with smooth words seek to curb me?
In the ages without number,
I was born of Night and Slumber.
I was stolen from my aerie,
By young Hermes, deft and wary—
Brought to Pallas (chief of spinners,
When the gods were all bread-winners,
It was long ere mortal's coming)
While her wheel flew shrilly humming,
I, above the spindle seated,
Word for word her songs repeated,
Conning precepts, taught by sages,
In their schools in after ages.
Thus she span the fleece of Heaven,
That to airy heights was given,
When the labor was completed,
At her bidding, I retreated
Where her helmet huge suspended—
Hung with shield and falchion splendid.
Then of every care I rid me,
In the hollow metal hid me,
Where I slept for hours together,
Never stirring lightest feather.
I, the warder at sleep's portal,
Greet and speed thee, curious mortal!

"There is a budding morrow in midnight," says a young poet of the generation gone. Is it on this account that I so often dream of flowers in the depths of the winter—so much oftener than during the season that cherishes them? The enchanted garden opened again to me last night, and I wandered among its various lovelinesses. But to-day the apple trees carry crystal beads at the extremities of the twigs and the buds are frequently ice-sheathed, as though ingloriously inclosed as in some toy of spun glass. Melting off the ice and stripping away the polished brown envelope of the bud, I fancied that I could trace next May's apple blossoms, less than a pin-head in size! I noticed how the buds of the cottonwood shine nowadays, as though anointed with oil or brushed over with varnish. In truth, the tall spire and upper stems of the tree glittered so white in the morning sun that my eyes quite objected to following their outline. In this cold weather the upper branches of all trees have the appearance of having been turned by a lathe, then treated with some superior glazing process as in the case of the cottonwood. This appears to be a characteristic winter fashion. A cut-leaved birch, which I pass in my walks, lately attracted my attention in a most agreeable way. Standing leafless, with its long, pendulous branches, all with a slight eastward poise (from the prevalence of the west wind), this graceful young tree looked the very etching of a brisk April shower, its own branches simulating oblique splashes of rain. A pleasant reminder of the yet far-away spring.