



SNOW.

By REV. HARRY JONES



HERE is no lady who changes her dress and wears so many different colours as Mother Nature. I am not thinking of the sky with its clothing of crimson and gold, worn for an hour when the "star-spangled" robe of night is put off, or before it is put on. I make no count of summer blues or winter greys, nor when I look from the sky to the earth do I stop to notice the manifold contrast between the solid ground and the ever-shifting sea. Nor do I point to the different aspects of grass-clad zones, sandy deserts, and polar wastes.

I now rather take, say, a few acres in a commonplace English county furnished with no mountains or lakes, and on its woods and fields I see an ever-changing vesture of green, yellow, brown (in many shades) broadly or minutely embroidered with every colour given by blossom and fruit. But I find perhaps the greatest change when these are all thrown off or hidden away and Nature suddenly appears in white. We seldom pause to ponder or even notice divers wholly new conditions of outdoor life when the ground is covered with snow. As Emerson said about the shining of the stars, suppose it came once for one week in a hundred years, with what interest we should read of its last appearance, how eagerly we should look forward to its coming, how favoured we should think that generation in which it had appeared! Pause for a moment over the beauty and strangeness of this commonplace visitation. Then, in a day, the many-tinted earth not only becomes white, but so white that the accepted examples of whiteness lose their value, the wool of the whitest sheep becoming (in comparison with it) brown, and the feathers of the swan yellow. A white horse, which is so conspicuous a feature in the field, and looks so clean when led up to the door, reveals an amount of unsuspected dirtiness enough to bewilder the smartest groom, and the most carefully-bleached linen, if hung out to dry, immediately shames the laundress. Seen from a little distance, moreover, much colour loses its significance when surrounded with snow. The green branches of the fir, the brown leaves which still hang upon the oak and beech, the tiled or mossy roof of the cottage, the stained thatch of the stack, the hedges between the fields, the gates in the fence, all help to make the landscape simply black and white. Barring the blue of the sky and red of the setting sun, all colour is banished from the scene. The picture of a countryside, which showed a thousand tints before the flakes began to fall, might be faithfully drawn with pen and ink when Nature has once put on her robes of snow.

But if this soft covering hides much life, and makes a stillness of its own, it presently reveals a surprising abundance of movement. The seemingly deserted fields are, on examination, found to be marked with imprints of claws, far larger than might have been expected from the foot of the lark, finch or fieldfare, and they are also streaked with tracks of those who, though not lions, "seek their meat by night." The silent-footed hare leaves testimony to her passage, unconscious of its significance to the sportsman and the poacher, but the naturalist notes with interest the distances she will travel in search of toothsome food. The scuttling rabbit too has small idea of the mark which it leaves in the world, though it does not make such long business

journeys as its cousin. Indeed, the daylight sometimes shows such a complicated crossing of furry footsteps outside the burrow as to suggest that there could only have been a private dance on the bankside the night before. Then, too, the vermin life of thick hedgerows proclaims itself and bears witness to the wisdom of the farmer who cleans out his ditches in the late autumn with what some might think a superfluous expenditure of labour. But snow betrays the presence of the rat and his relations who have been left in the bankside, and who leave the mean footprints of their dark proceedings in its white tell-tale coverlet. To them indeed a deep and lasting fall sometimes brings unexpected gain, since hedge-birds then occasionally grow so feeble from want of food as to become easy prey. Poor little things! Their weak bills are no match for your frozen ground, even if they could reach through its thick covering. The trustful, or perhaps impudent, robin then finds many to share his confidence. At first they sit apart and make a pretence of putting on another coat by puffing themselves out; but a clean patch sprinkled with crumbs soon shows how hunger will make them all birds of a feather. There is a small party now waiting at such an oasis with timid, sidelong glances at my window, and trying to get the better of the traditional dread which makes them give a wide berth to the owner of the garden in which they have been bred and fed. Have they been told that some men, or boys, might trap them in their distress, or perhaps even sweep the patch again with treacherous sparrow-shot while they were thankfully filling their poor little crops? How is it, moreover, that only some of our more fragile birds have the wit to spend their winters abroad? The conditions of their life would appear to be much the same. They build on the same or contiguous trees. They all, at one time or another, seem to like some kind of fruit and seed. Most have the same jerky flight which must make a journey to, say, the north of Africa, difficult to several of our summer visitants. Those who remain are occasionally frozen to death. I can suppose that, say, the flycatcher sees good reason to flit from a country when its warmth-loving insects disappear and the butterfly is safely packed away as a chrysalis, but why should the thrush stay with us all the year while his brother the redwing goes north, mostly to Denmark and Sweden, to breed, and comes to us only in the winter? The blackbird again, who would make nothing of a trip to Barbary, resolutely sticks to the same garden copse or hedgerows, though sometimes he is starved into a little bunch of feathers and bones. And when snow comes the arrangements of all are seriously disturbed. But though our most fragile migratory birds hop with others about the same lawn all the summer, not one family has ever advised a delicate neighbour to spend Christmas at Algiers, or said where it has been on coming buoyantly back in the spring. Here is the hungry little crowd on the patch under my window, while half its circle of acquaintances are far away, warm and full. They seemed to have had plenty to say to one another for months, there has been no quarrel, they have sung in the same concerts and brought their children up in the same garden, they have basked in the same sunshine, drunk of the same water, and feared the same cat; nevertheless, though the air is free to all, and no passports are asked of any, they let half their friends depart and stay themselves, to run the chance of being bewildered with snow and killed with frost. The only home animals, excluding polar bears and reindeer, that seem at once to enjoy a snowfall are dogs. Cows and horses stand and look at it in silent perplexity, and I remember once nearly driving over a solitary hen lost in wonderment at what had turned the carriage-road white. There she stood with shoulders hunched up and eyes open, though their sense was so shut that I had to fray her away from the wheel. But the dog will circle gaily around his master, barking, snatching the fresh fallen snow up in his mouth, and altogether appreciating the new aspect of the world which it provides.

Much might be said about the very great part that glacier-forming snow has played in the history of the world, when regions far south of Denmark were as Greenland, and no ancestor of Dr. Nansen lived to make his fleeting tracks upon their wide and silent plains. But I think of what may be called the relics of those days which have such unique fascination for the jaded city worker. He yearns to leave the law court, the office, and the library, for those parts of Europe that still retain heights that lie above the snow line. The *névé* of Switzerland, even the sight of it, has not merely its undefined charm for the August-heated tourist. It not only finds room for the unhooused Alpine Club, but gives a retrospective hint, however imperfect, of the white solitude that once reigned over the fields and cities of Europe. It is but a surviving

scrap of the mighty lid of ice that once shut down all signs of life in the earth on which it lay. Its little glacial tongues that are now thrust towards Oberland valleys and Norwegian fiords are the last to tell of those groanings with which rough mountains were scraped smooth and mighty furrows scooped out of the solid rock. But how many summer visitants, with their knapsacks and suits of tweed, think of the ancient days when the sun rose and set upon a boundless surface of snow from which there was no return to Geneva and Charing Cross. Now, they say, the line of snow-producing temperature which irregularly crosses America gives only twelve average days of fall in the year at Paris against one hundred and seventy at St. Petersburg, but from all quarters come summer crowds to see and traverse the last scraps and leavings of the awful unpeopled epoch during which the tent of the North Pole stretched itself over a frozen Europe, and the snow never ceased to fall.

We may, however, still see some effect of the power of snow. It comes down with such innocent softness that we hardly realize its ability to rend branches off the strongest trees, stop all human intercourse by road or rail, and silence any message by the wire. It smothers the sheep of the farmer, imprisons the impatient traveller, countermands the march of armies, and dislocates the business of a nation. It can put a brake upon the train, and create a famine in the city. But against this may be set the good it does when it comes in moderation. Cold though it be, it lays a cloak of warmth upon the tender blade in the field, and keeps the frost from sucking its natural heat out of the soil. It has been found that while the mercury in the thermometer shows thirty-two degrees upon the surface of snow, it marks between forty and fifty upon that of the earth which it covers. However cold snow is such a sluggish conductor of heat that it preserves vegetation from that frost which makes the flake itself. And the good it does is not measured by the shelter which it thus gives to the produce of the soil. Indeed perhaps in its melting it confers its greatest benefits. Rain is precious, but it soon runs off the sloping field, and thus not merely often fails to irrigate but carries away with it that valuable uppermost layer which has been enriched and fertilized by the sun and air. And, worse than this, it sometimes washes off the manure which has been spread upon the field. But the slowly-melting snow soaks into the soil, taking down with it the natural and artificial helps to vegetation which the summer and the farmer have prepared against the coming crop. Snow is economized rain. This is true on a limited and a large scale. It is seen in what I have just said about the retention of the moisture on fields which might have been merely swept by water if it had come down in heavy showers, whereas their due moistening is effected by the slow melting of the snow. This moreover retains, and renders fully effective, whatever manure may have been laid upon them. Again, whereas rain runs off into the rivers which drain a country, melted snow percolates to the springs in the water-bearing strata which, without such a supply, would be in danger of exhaustion. We hear much about wasted rainfall, and reservoirs needed to retain it, and in fact the snow-flake is really a dammed-up rain drop which is kept till it is wanted, instead of being hurried out of the country. This is one way in which snow does good to man. It acts, however, on this same principle on a far larger scale, by providing huge stores of valuable moisture among mountains during the winter. These deposits of snow, when partially melted by the summer sun, supply rivers which would otherwise be injuriously shrunk in hot weather. Indeed, there are districts which would be sorely short of irrigation unless they were periodically flooded by the rivers which traverse them. And this flooding generally comes just at the time when it is most wanted, *i.e.*, after excessive heat which, so to speak, opens the valves of the great cisterns which have been charged during the winter in the high lands. We think of frozen meat and the like being brought from another hemisphere, and perhaps we fancy that this is something new in the economy of life, but in fact Nature has long stored up iced food for the hungry fields in the shape of mountain snow. The white peaks which the Alpine tourist sees are in fact the potential supplies of the hay and corn in the valleys. This might appear to be a somewhat needlessly forced arrangement since the same snow upon the level plain might seem to promise equal or better results; but then it must be remembered that mountain peaks are, so to speak, to a certain extent, moisture-gatherers and bring more water to the fields below than would have reached them under other conditions. Moreover, the stream that comes down from above brings not only vivifying moisture, but some fertilizing matter which it has picked up by the way, and which it deposits where it comes to be of exceptional

use. This makes the soil of many valleys to be peculiarly rich and productive. It is well known that the sun and air do far more than mature the corn. They ripen also the ground. The plough turns up the soil not merely that seed may find an easier entrance into loosened earth, but that such earth as is only a few inches below the surface may be freshly exposed to the atmosphere and thus recover fresh power. Now when we consider that in a mountain-bordered valley crags are continually being disintegrated and sending down morsels to the fields from above, we see what snow does for the tiller of the soil. It is the snow that melts into the uppermost cracks of the crag which are thus ready to be split off and sent below when the moisture thus lodged has been swelled by the frost and made into a thousand wedges.

In thinking about the manifold uses of snow I might add, that though it mars all intercommunication in some regions, in others it provides the sole means for travel and transportation of goods. In the old days when the North-west provinces of Canada were a great hunting-ground, and furs were stored up at widely separated centres of "forts," it was not till the winter sledge came into work that the lonely huntsmen could communicate with one another or their distant employers. The sledge is not merely an inevitable substitute for the waggon but a vehicle capable of doing what the waggon cannot perform. Indeed in some countries much material cannot be moved till the snow comes. It is thus a carrier, and on a very large scale, as well as a fertilizer. Of course rivers facilitate intercommunication incalculably, but to refer to the old days of North-west Canada again, the mail there could not well start till the water in the rivers was frozen. Then the Indian postman set off with his bags of letters and the chief correspondence of the Hudson's Bay Company was successfully carried on. The snow-powdered flat surface of the streams made a roadway that gave a grip to the feet of the dogs and excellent sliding ground for the runners of the sledge. It is in the winter, too, that lumbering logs are dragged out of the woods over the slippery snow towards the river that shall at last float them down to the saw mill. Indeed as we look at what is done for man by snow we shall not forget to think of it as a carrier which enables the heaviest loads to be slipped towards their destination and the lightest traffic to be conducted with speed.

I have no doubt that much more might be said about the manifold utility of snow. It is prized, however, by many for far more than its severe usefulness. It provides entertainment. Is not sleighing a prime pastime in Russia, the United States, and the Dominion? What a leading part does the Toboggan fill in winter among the dwellers in those lands! What exceptionally impetuous and yet carefully prepared moments of enjoyment does it not afford, enabling the quietest and most correct to enjoy the fastest pleasure of life! Then, too, the snow-shoe clubs, or whatever they are called, indicate another feature of the recreation which is eagerly relished by those who consider themselves fortunate in being supplied with a sufficient fall of snow. With snow-shoes the sportsman can better follow some kinds of game, while those who are not thus bent may, and do, simply slide and travel about for the mere pleasure of sliding; not on ice but snow.

And, to look nearer home, how immediately the first fall is pounced upon by ten thousand boys as a rare and special vehicle of that pure delight which is felt in snow-balling. And the beauty of it is that this same material makes the rampart as well as the ammunition, *i.e.*, if the "fall" be enough to build a wall or fort as well as arm the garrison. Indeed I believe an ordinary honest boy would at once give "snow-balling" as the one supreme, distinguishable excellence associated with snow. For this perhaps he chiefly values its descent, although it may be admitted that the making of snow men comes second in his estimation of its worth, or usefulness. For primitive modelling is dear to many children. But the material is limited when it is wax, or hard (as wood), requiring patience to be shaped, or (being clay) so heavy (not to say dirty, which makes it repulsive to a boy) as to preclude the creation of none but statuettes. Moreover, under some of these conditions it involves the making of a mess within doors as well as of a model, and thus provoking remonstrance on the part of unappreciative seniors. Again, as with wax or sufficiently plastic and cohesive earth, the material is not always easy to be had. But when snow comes all the difficulties attached to the business are seen to vanish. There is abundant stuff with which to work. It is provided out of doors. It is clean, light, tenacious and white as Parian marble. The scale too, on which the artist can realize his desires is enlarged. And when all is done, and the approbation of an admiring domestic

world has been enjoyed by the talented designer, there is no fear of any disappointing change in general opinion. The favourable sentence has no opportunity of being reversed. The first gratifying impression is sure to survive, since the statue itself disappears before damaging second thoughts have time to arise. The triumphant realization of desire is reached, and its memory is for ever fresh and unimpaired. There is no fear lest the once successful result should be put aside as an attempt which cruel time pronounces to be unsuccessful, however well intentioned. It is not reckoned as merely indicative of undeveloped genius, since the deliberate critic is disarmed by the disappearance of what its talented possessor had produced. The figure grows rapidly under the artist's hands. A pipe is put into its mouth (I do not know why this cold statuary should be always associated with fire and smoke), and the verdict of a discerning public is no sooner challenged than it is given with approval. And, as I have said, its reversal is prohibited by the nature of the conditions under which it has been obtained. Even the dissolution of the realized dream is not without its recommendations, for the artist sees his conception melt with interest in its departure. He watches with new enjoyment to see which limb or feature will next drop off or become obliterated. Among the uses of snow we must not reckon as least the parenthetical pleasure it gives to thousands of boys.

I have said nothing of its "beauty," though this is the first light in which its very name suggests itself to many. The purity of its whiteness, not only provides the best known illustrations of innocence and perfect pardon, but is itself unique, as seen on the widest plain or in the smallest flake. What, in its way, can be more beautiful than its deposition on the branches of trees, and where can we find more grace than in the curves of a meadow drift, or the cornice which fringes some Alpine edge? Perhaps, however, its manifold and delicate beauty has been most appreciated in the crystals which go to make up a single flake. Their shapes are hardly less numerous than the gently-descending spots of white which fill the air when it falls. Those concerned in such investigations tell us that no less than a thousand differently shaped crystals have been already distinguished in snow. Each is perfectly symmetrical. Not one irregularly formed particle can be found among the countless items which are launched from above and come to us in a common fall of snow. Their delicate fabrics may presently be broken, but as they are sent forth each is complete in structure, and yet it would, I believe, be true to say that no two are precisely alike. Leaves, feathers, down, and endless minute forms of fitness delight those who peer into the crevices of creation, but there is a permanence in their use which does not appear in snow. The transitory nature of the crystals which help to form a single flake is perhaps the most significant witness to the generous beauty expended on what is called the world of insignificance.

In its power, its minuteness and width of beauty, in its influence in the world of men, on its past effects, and present often unappreciated usefulness, as well as in its dissimilarity to much that is common, there are few things which could well interest a thoughtful observer more than such an ordinary winter visitant as snow.

