NATURE IN WHITE.

> " Not slept the winds
> Within their stormy caves, but rushed abroad
> From the four hinges of the world, and fell
> On the vext wilderness, whose tallest pines,
> Though rooted deep as high, and sturdiest oaks
> Bowed their stiff necks, loaden with stormy blasts,
> Are torn up sheer."
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> —*Milton.*

THE earth is shut out, and the fields and woods are silent. Snow divots, like molten glue, cling tenaciously to the hob-nailed walking boots and turn hard—baked by the weight—drop off, and make walking an unpleasant pastime. The woodman's cart runs crisp and sings a winter song, the iron pressing the ice.

A chill breeze descended from the distant hill range months ago, and vagrant snow showers floated in the valley before the evening stars appeared. The winds carried off the last leafy remnants of the beech. Sharp frosts had withered them, and made them brittle, and a sudden blow sent them in the burn, where they only floated a little while. Down where the burn turns abruptly, those leaves settle and form into fine mould and become the hunting grounds of water-rats and birds. On such banks often the rarest of migrants settle for days. One season I have found the woodcock, another the pin-tailed duck, and in the latter season a native shot a golden-eyed duck and caught a heron while it was fighting with a mate. It is here also that one sees the first swallow dipping in the pool. Last year, early in April, I discovered a grey wagtail, which is by no means a common bird in northern counties. There is a sluice below the beds of mud and leaves, and including the water-ways, when the water is run off for repairing the sluice or approaches, the number of yellow trout captured by the village boys seems incredible. The burn is by no means large, nor the pool above the sluice, yet within the limits referred to I have seen over four hundred trout, averaging half a pound each, taken out within a couple of hours. Some of the bigger fish were lanky and ugly, but a boy brought a beauty ashore on one of his trips through the mud. I measured it. From mouth to tail, it took up twenty-three inches. The girth of the body was ten and a half inches, and immediately above the tail it measured four inches. Its total in the scale was recorded as two pounds and thirteen ounces. In the country boys seldom angle with rod and flies. They pull off their boots and hose, tuck up their trousers, and bundle boots and hose in their jackets, tying all over their shoulders. Under the stones, and along the bank edge they search, and some are very adept at seizing the slippery bodies. A quick jerk lands the fish on the bank, where it tumbles for a time, then its head lies over a dock stem and the eyes lose their lustre. A convulsive twist of the gills—a sudden leap as if life throbbed afresh—the gills move again and the yellow body quivers spasmodically, a twitch and the head is still—the life passed away.

It is about the pond and the burns animal life congregates in winter. The boys who catch the trout in summer time know also the season when the birds are tame. The farm steadings between the pond and the hills look dark and cold when the boys cross over the fields with their primitive girns. Frost lies upon the feal-dyke, sparkling its icy diamonds in the winter's sun. Whole tracks of the lowlands are planted with fir trees, and it is only on the heather moors that trees are scarce. Almost every farmhouse is sheltered by a row of fir or other quick-growing timber, and it is these trees that attract the wandering birds. Trees are the stepping-stones to finches, thrushes, and others, during their migrations. The boys know that, although they cannot account for birds always clustering in the boughs. The gean trees and rowan bushes about an orchard are tempting to birds moving in the autumn. The local blackbirds value the gean specially.

Of our native fir trees, the larch, although the most valuable from a commercial point of view, is not so plentiful as spruce. Spruce grows quicker, and forms a shelter from the storms sooner than either a larch or a red barked Scotch fir. All fir trees, however, prove of vast service to beast and bird. The hag left in the woods becomes a secure hiding-place for the hare, and rabbits often seek its shelter. Pheasants are provided annually with huts formed of the tree tops, bracken, fern, and fallen branches. Firs are perennial in their colouring, although they are more or less tarnished by the time the autumn leaves begin to fall, and the crack of the rifle echoes across the glen. The snow falls gently on the hills, but the firs stand in greenness, in colour as when the forester dug his spade in the peaty soil and pushed the tender rootlets under ground. He merely pressed the soil with his heavy boot and passed on, selecting another green wand before he cut the surface again. Straight, seeking the light of the heavens, growing steadily upwards, ever green. Green—while all around is white—green while the woodman rests his axe upon its cumbent stem.

Yet with it all, our native firs lack that touch of sympathy that human nature is ever prone to ask. There is no tender touch, no friendly averment in the history of a fir. It is devoid of seasonable compassion by its very greenness—its continuity of freshness—through summer shower and winter snow. The beech, sycamore, elm, and ash, possess that deciduous characteristic of give and take, of assimilating more freely with one's thoughts and sentiments of life and death, with the verdure of youth and the snows of age. Beech and ash take on their summer beauty, and the meadows are clothed in purple and gold, that fades and blooms again. Firs are green until axe or storm breaks their living tendrils. Theirs is one long line of growth. The same landscape of firs, without change, without human interest, facing the green uplands when the breath of summer floods the land; and with a harsh artless front bearing the crash of Arctic storm, with only a ghostly moan, as their needles rattle in the gusty winds. The soil that surrounds their spreading roots heaves with the rocking stems—great earthy billows. One advantage that must be placed on the side of the fir tree is that it will grow and thrive in desolate places. This doubtless accounts for the space the various varieties occupy in the highlands and islands of Scotland. And generally speaking, they take but a slight hold of the mould. This feature has proved a very weak point in their actual value of late. The gales of October, 1838, and November, 1893, proved conclusively that firs cannot stand northern blasts, as one would reasonably expect from their position and hardy natures. It must be granted that numbers of the trees were broken midway, but these were for the most part "gone" at the heart. There also seems to be no great care bestowed upon our forests as a rule. On many estates a reliable forester is not employed, and on others the duties are simply undertaken by the gardener or orra-man about the mansion-house. No judicious felling or planting is practised, and as a consequence, the brown touchwood of the broken trees indicates the forest monarch has warred with decay for many years. When a gale arises, the heavy head of the fir catches the wind, and bending suddenly before a sharp gust, cracks off at the weakest part. On many of the higher slopes, as well as on the low grounds, whole woods of fir broke their anchorage, partly by the force of that November gale, and to some extent by the one tree falling against its neighbour. Some of the breaches made by the wind remind one of the work of a mower in the hayfield. One might imagine a huge scythe entering at the wood-edge and laying the trees, as the sharp blade would the clover heads and grasses. The great fir roots, loaded with tons of earth and moss and bracken, stand out above the snow wreaths like gigantic rocks. Only a few years and lichen, grasses, and ferns will gather round the wrecks, and sun and rain and frost gradually level down the inequalities that mark the landscape now.

As morning dawns, rumours of the rural postman having lost his way, of sheep buried in the drift, and outlying dwellings cut off from all communication, reach the village. The boys find siskins, bullfinches, chaffinches, redpolls, hedge sparrows, tits, blackbirds, and thrushes, in the village gardens. The storm uphill has sent them nearer the city and the sea. A tree creeper digs the moss from the beech tree trunk and hunts the plantation within a yard of the observer. Where the snowdrops first break the ground the snipe runs, peering under the banks and turning up the soft miry edges of the burn. He is a solitary wanderer, but lives where other birds would starve. If the frost holds, he goes further south, and often ekes out his days on the border of the sea. The moor hens—or as we more correctly term them, water hens—are semi-tame even in summer, but in winter they feed with the farm ducks and pick up crumbs with the sparrows at the kitchen door. Wild geese settle in the mill pond, and explore the lead when the snow gets deeper. They love the mud and dead leaves which gather by the margin of the waters, but in the sunlight they sit out on the ice-floe to guard against surprise. Geese are very wary birds, and when they change their feeding grounds they rise high above the level of the land. I have often seen them trooping their aerial way towards the sea in a starry night, and have surprised them as they rounded the hill front before they took the valley. They breed on the marshy lands over the neighbouring hills, and it is only when the bare arms of the beech trees are swaying that they lodge about the lowland lochs. The wind creeps with a low whistling moan through the pine woods, and as the gathering storm bursts, sending its sleety showers down the ravine, the geese wisely draw towards civilization. Branches crackle and reedy wands shake in gusts, touching the ice-bound burn in its flow. Hungry pheasants go out into the roadway, associating with the finches and rooks. And as the sleet is driven from the north hill, and the dense misty flakes hang between the sky and earth, the peewits weirdly scream over the fields unseen.

The landscape is merely an impression—all uncertainty—almost mythical. On the tree crests the sun will fall and brighten the marshy pools below, and again dip behind the shroud of dancing snowflakes. The geese are restless, questioning the quietude. They indicate their wariness by their moving nearer the fir wood beyond. But there is a bird that boys speak of as the water-craw, alias dipper. Water-craw and dipper are both appropriate names. It is of the water, and almost black in colour, with a white breast. It is a dipper because it dips and dips almost incessantly in the stream, and even on the brook stones it bobs and sways its little plump body. That bird of all birds loves the running burns. It sits by the brook edge and ploughs the water awhile, then runs into the stream, rippling the water in tiny sprays. It is a keen fisher in the shallows and the little currents that pass over the pebbly beds. It seems not to care although icy breezes blow, or whether the meadows be hard bound and Lapland snows cover the face of the earth. It sings in winter, and seldom leaves its native burn. Most of our birds move more or less with the storms, but the dipper is not of them. Other birds go, and foreign ornithology occupy their places for a time. Many of the latter are written in the collector's note-book *rara avis,* although very often the neighbouring county possessed their nests. The little auks, that have not known such an unkind winter as this since 1881, I do not catalogue as indigenous to our isles. It is a true *rara avis.* Of late, vast numbers have been strewn along our coasts, and their frozen bodies gathered many miles inland. One was found at the base of the Grampian range. It is a true maritime specimen of ornithology, feeding, sleeping its life away mid the white curling waves of the ocean.

To traverse the woods in winter, knee-deep in snow, and pilot oneself round the upstanding roots and over the cumbent stems is no easy task. The hoarse croak of a hooded crow comes from a standing fir, and a blue tit perches on a tall reed that rises from a drift on the corry side. As I near the turnpike I hear the whistle of the carrier. He whistles to forget the cold and make the miles seem shorter. His van moves easy now, for the snow plough has gone down the strath. On my way home I passed it, where it had got blocked in a drift and had been left until the dawn. The night comes down quickly in winter and settles on hill and plain, forest and river. A mysterious filmy atmosphere that has no name, no title in the world of science or art, is present, and hangs between the distant horizon and the northern hills. Horizon and hill tops fade slowly, and the hill and sky become one great whole. The huge vapoury curtain of moving gloom creeps down the valley, blotting out the farmyards and fields. Slowly up the meadows it climbs, and the thrush moves in its retreat—restless. This seeming motionless shadow nears the road edge, passes beyond, and I am in the darkness, treading with crisping noise the newly fallen snowflakes. I can only guess at the presence of my deerhound by his cold nose touching my bare hand at times, as he keeps pace with my stride. In the country there are no gas jets to light the way. My path is cut out by the snow plough, and the white walls heaped on either side keep me in true line. The south mail with its gaslight and its white smoke crosses the shire, and carries the stream of light from city—past village and farm—to city, while darkness clings around the long drawn line of metal rails.

The mat pushed against the door, the lamp lit, I read of the ebb and flow of the world's tide.

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