



LENGTHENING DAYS

HE wind went gently round to the South, and the sky hung low and grey and ribbed like sea sand; and the frost went suddenly before the warmth. All night soft rain fell, and in the morning the rattle of the cabs on the stone streets was heard again, for the snow had been wiped clean away. Faint signs of Spring were discernable. The fires heated the house, and the drafts that formerly felt piercingly cold were soft and damp.

Mark in his studio felt the Spring in his bones, as the young grass feels it beneath the ground when it is still far off. He took his travelling-box and his paints and pencils, and went away to the North to wait there for the Spring coming. . . . On his way he found the wife that had long been expecting him, and they continued their journey together.

Far away they went, and left trains and steamers behind them and travelled over thawing roads, through pine forests and

LENGTHENING DAYS

melting snowdrifts, till at last they made up on Winter and took sleigh and passed it. Far away they journeyed with the sleigh and two servants, till they came to a log-hut at the edge of a great frozen river, set all round with broad lakes and low hills. There they sat down and the attendants went South again to their people, and Mark and his wife lived simply and happily.

Not before the sun rose did they waken, and when it gleamed hot on snow at mid-day they prepared their coffee and went out to watch Nature their friend putting on her Spring garments. First of its ornaments were the tiny creeping birds, delicate and bold, that came travelling from the South, feeding on invisible food in clefts of bark and fir twigs, making a tasty living when big birds would starve. Then came the King of the swans and the Prince of geese, and again they sang on their lighting, as they had sung before when they left Mark's country in the South. And here is their song, so our people say, and you may play it and sing it till it grows in your mind. But beware of the melody, lest it make you restless as the swans, and you become a wanderer, or worse, a would-be wanderer.

Guileag Eala seinn a ceo
Sa comun grai an cian a trial
Le ceol tha fao an ard na' nial.¹

Great was Mark's life there, and long the day that Mark and his wife spent with guns, chasing their fair food. Brown they became with the glare of the sunlight, with the smoke of their fires and the cooking. Beautiful they seemed to each other, so fit were they to their surroundings—so free. Long were the nights spent, when, their rich food cooked, they rested and

¹ The notes of the swan singing in the mist
With her loved companion travelling afar
With melody that grows in the heights of the clouds.

LENGTHENING DAYS

told each other tales by the burning birch logs. Mark would then draw pictures in black and white, of the life in woods, and write of the ways of the creatures they chased in the daytime. And the best of the pictures of all that he drew, was that for the frontispiece of the book that he printed; and that was himself on the hearth with his pipe in his teeth, by the big open fireplace. And the point of the picture was the face of his wife asleep on his breast, with the firelight upon it.

Warmer the Summer grew—hot and still hotter, till at mid-day all Nature seemed fainted. More and more life came northwards, till in midsummer the sweet bells of the cows of the girls at the Saeter were heard at times clanging sweetly in the birch woods. Then came the salmon fresh and strong up the river, and Mark and his wife had choice of food, of fish, and the meat of reindeer and sweet berries.

Such was their life in the nightless Summer of the far north. Then the nights came, and the birch leaves grew yellow again.

And the peasants and the sleigh and Mark and his wife journeyed southwards, further and further South, till they stopped in London. And Mark printed his book, and the people read it with pleasure.

W. G. BURN-MURDOCH.