



IMPRESSIONS OF WINTER¹

I

A BLEAK day in the beginning of winter which has come over the land with showers and fitful gusts. With a sudden whistling sound these showers and gusts make themselves heard, dying away again with long-drawn, rasping sighs, like the falsetto tones of an old worn-out singer.

The sky is greyish blue, with here and there a wandering cloud, which borrows a yellow glare from the sun's glory.

On the horizon a faintly undulating line denotes the limit of a mass of violet-grey clouds. In this deep bed the tempests go to rest after their distant raids, when they have chased before them the last stricken leaves; raised in yellow nebulous whirls the sand of the downs to a fearful height; swept the foam of the sea like a snowstorm of large, bewildering flakes; and ruthlessly whistled through the branches of the trees which shiver in their nakedness.

Now, however, the fury of the wind, that, after the calm death of autumn, rode on the wings of the tempest to sway sky and earth, has spent itself. Yet, every now and then, swelling gusts, like the last breathings of an exhausted wrestler, gasp through the air, curling the while the steel-blue water into gentle ripples.

¹ Translated by the author from his Dutch originals.

Over the river the sea-gulls are flapping their wings; or, with stiff stretched pinions skimming the surface, they glide slowly into the water. Some of them for a while soar in stately circles through the sky until they suddenly shoot down, their bills stretched forward, describing a slight perpendicular in the air. Their hoarse shrieks mingle with the groanings of the wind as from time to time it rises.

But at nightfall birds and gusts are hushed, and the water is lying in dead calm under the deep red glare of the sinking sun.

II

The sun has burst forth. By the intense glow of his pomp of rays he has in the morning overcome the cold, pale hosts of nebulæ and triumphantly entered the high-roads of the sky which open in blue splendour for his jubilant march. Now, ruler of the skies, he casts his dazzling brilliancy upon the hoary snow-sheets of the earth.

The sky is streaked with long-drawn feather clouds like unto the tender down on a dove's neck. Layers of them glide over each other and lie in a rising undulation on the dull blue, like great palms of peace.

A subtle, tremulous, transparent haze appears on the horizon. Without absorbing the forms, it pleasantly softens all sharp outlines in its dreamy embrace.

The cart-ruts, glittering in the sunlight, run in two parallel lines over the hard trodden road; and on either side, from the tops of the trees, in the silence of the calm, and the splendour of the gently loosening sun, small white flakes of rime slowly descend.

The row of gradually undulating hills, sloping away into the distance, bright in places with grey uneven snow-plots, looms in the shadowy violet dimness against the sun-drenched haze.

Before the walker's feet small crested larks, plump and tame, hop about, every now and then flying short distances and boring into the hardened layer of snow. Greedily they peck

with their little bills, these tiny town-marauders tamed by winter.

The steam-tram, with a hollow rattling, rushes along the glittering rails. For a considerable time its crest of steam remains hanging in the white net of branches, entangled in them like a flimsy cobweb veil. The impetuous bound of its course sends a short shudder through the tawny, withered oak-groves by the roadside, startling them for a moment from their rigid repose.

III

A hazy sun-blot, dimly shimmering like tarnished brass, is lingering still in the western sky. Beneath it stretches a narrow band of yellow-red, whose hues gradually fade and dwindle, passing on either side into pale grey. On the lower skirt of the sky, descending to the earth, is seen a purple-grey pile of clouds, upon which the trees of the horizon—faint, spectral skeletons, misty like the images of a dream—raise their lank shapes.

On the left, by the side of the fading edges of the bright band, there appears, only just perceptible against the almost equally tinted sky, the ridge of hills ascending and descending in even slopes. The hills themselves have a more compact, purplish-grey tint.

Further down, interrupted here and there by a projection, and grooved with ditches, which glare yellow-light in the monotony of the white expanse, like tramrails lit by the fiery eyes of the engine, a great white plain extends as far as the main road. The bark of the birches, at other seasons so glittering, appears sallow and dull amidst the snow accumulated around the tree-roots, and their overhanging, hairy boughs, delicately twined against the grey-blue upper sky, move with a faint quiver.

At some distance stands a grove of fir-trees, those harps of the winter wind, when with a wailing rustle he sweeps through their stately branches.

Toy-like, as if a child at play had placed them at random, white-roofed cottages far away lie scattered.

And, in the foreground, close to the road, the faint gleam of the dying sun, wearily descending into a pile of clouds, glides over the silent, velvety snow-field.

IV

Brightly the sun has its play on the blanched plain; when the radiant sunlight meets the crystals, thousands of diamonds sparkle up out of the white monotony. Then their facets glitter in lustrous splendour like the clear touches of the sun on a sheet of water, and all the wide white surface is alive with a tremor and gleam of radiance which seems to shoot up and hover in the air, filling all the broad expanse of ether with an aureole of crystalline scintillation.

In some places a broad stream of golden light flows over the snow-field, while the shadow of a slight cloud suddenly passing over it dims, as if suffused with a breath, the dazzling splendour of white and crystal. And round the blue-grey range of hills on the horizon, above which the sun spreads its lustre, a golden band runs like a diadem around the head of some stern old king.

The snow crackles under the feet, and the winter wind sends its low-moving gusts over the landscape. On every side, as far as the eye reaches, snow, snow, snow. Everything is white except part of the trunks of the trees, and the walls of the farm-houses standing out like dark blots of shadow between the sparkling white of the snow and the sparkling blue of the sky. So, surrounded by winter's jubilee, inhaling the cold, dry, subtle air, and crushing the frozen snow under my feet, I proceed. The snow creaks and crepitates, and, after my treading it down, remains flat on the ground with a last half-groaning sigh, as if it would reproach me with violating its white smoothness and disturbing its icy repose. My cheeks feel the pure, ice-cold breeze, the blood-strengthening, nerve-bracing exhilaration, the fresh essence of winter.

And, walking on, I come to an orchard whose trees are wholly white, the trunks painted white by human hands, the branches

and twigs hoar-frosty by the work of winter, so prodigal of white. One of them is strangely formed, like a hunch-backed dwarf, with its fantastically distorted, undergrown trunk, and its branches horribly wrenched and twisted, like the massive white skeleton of some wondrous monstrosity which has lost itself and wasted away in a winter garden of fairyland.

And with every strong gust of wind a shower of white, tiny flakes comes down from the trees. First they hover hesitatingly in the air, hanging 'twixt heaven and earth, then slowly descend and quietly settle down on the ground.

Heavily thundering over the groaning rails, a long railway train is with violent puffs of steam just slowly passing by the barrier. First the steam shoots straight up into the air like a nebulous geyser-spout, a fountain of sun-golden mist, whose extremities, hued with fire-yellow topaz, encircle a nucleus of dull amethyst. And, suffused with light, slowly the steam-cloud extends, but continues lingering over the dark train, that, with grim grinding of axle-trees and perches, creeps slowly along.

V

Faintly blows from afar the winter wind, with long-drawn breathings, that cause an idle flapping of the withered leaves against each other as they whizz among the sere-leaved shrubs. Slowly the rime-laden branches of the fir-trees, stretched out like solemnly blessing arms, are moving up and down.

Upon all the country the thick winter fog has settled, weighing down everything with its mass of moisture, vaporising the distant trees, and absorbing the thin extremities of the branches in its densely clinging veil. Dreamily the white roofs of the farm-houses dwindle in the mist. Cold grey, the sky vaults the tawny land.

Leaning against a hill, and looking like grotesque giant-crests, the black-green pine-trees stain dark tints in the white. The slender entwined twigs of the hedge, set with pure rime, resemble a broad lace garniture fringing the snow-covered

ground. And beyond there is everywhere the close mantle of snow, uneven with trees and slightly waving stems, decked with wind-blown, fine, white-feathered plumes, clothing the ribbed bands of the earth.

In a fallow field, working the hard frozen soil, men come into sight. With long-drawn strokes of the mattock one of them sturdily loosens the stubborn glebe. With their spades others are throwing the sandy lumps in heaps, and darkly they stand out against the whitish background like dim magic-lantern shadows, cast by a faintly burning wick. Under the fog, which dims the objects and penetrates them with its chill, wet breath, everything lies hushed and quiet.

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