

# A Beginning of Winter

Written by **PIERROT** in London.

When you are basking in the sun-bine of Judge's Bay, it is difficult to imagine streets three inches deep in snow, and a nipping cold that sets your ears a-tingling. But, though this is my first English winter for seven years past, I feel constrained to remark that, evil as this weather is, it is not so bad, or, rather, its effects are not so bad, as we are often led to believe. And here, of course, I must be understood to qualify my judgment so far as to admit that there is a very large section of the population, consisting of people unable to afford even the price of a scuttle of coals, to whom a rigorous winter is nothing short of a cruel infliction. But to those to whom a minimum of fair comfort is attainable, one has less a sense of dependence on the weather in England than almost anywhere else. I doubt if there is any country, outside of the tropics, where one passes a winter with so many hours of genial warmth. It is cold, and people know it is cold. There is no self-deception, and no one is so foolish as to pretend that it is warm. Hence, it is summer indoors, where one spends most of one's days; and winter outside, where one goes when one has made oneself sufficiently lethargic enough by the fire-side to be able to enjoy the force of the contrast and its invigorating effects.

Perhaps it is partly that we have had such a wonderfully long autumn. Early December saw us still able to need to dispense with fires; and it was not much before Christmas that people were apt to leave their warm gloves at home, and as often as not to saunter forth without an overcoat. Gratitude compels us, therefore, to grumble little at the advent of King Frost, when we know so well that with luck the old tyrant will have taken

his departure again within three or four months. I am not sure, also, that one has not the sense of appropriateness to endure one to the severities of winter. It is par excellence the characteristic season—the season in which the Englishman shows himself as best, as family man, as friend. The icest of men, whom even a torrid August sun seems unable to melt, loses his chilly reserve before a blazing study fire. You find that he was a good fellow all the time; only a fire was wanted to thaw him, and it has done its work well. He is genial and expansive, but still almost painfully sincere.

In London itself—and I have taken care to see but little of it these past few weeks—one's cheerful view of things receives a check. There the snow melts to a hideous compost of trodden, slushy mud; the sky becomes the colour of dried mustard; and the air is thick with indescribable exhalations, miasmic, suffocating, barely translucent. The policeman and the commissionaire look haggard and jaundiced in the yellowing light. One is glad to reach the clear, though hardly fresh air of one of the brightly-lighted tubes, which are as warm in winter as in summer, and serve to unfreeze one's tugging feet.

But there one's grumbling ends. Ten miles from London—and ten miles that the trains on occasions such as these will take eighty minutes to cover, blasting fog signals as they go—and one finds clear air, clean snow, and a healthy crispness in the air. One walks quickly—and runs without ridicule—and is soon within reach again of a well-contrived and sufficiently enjoyable summer. And a bedroom is never sweeter than with a roaring fire and an open window. Indeed the discovery of the friendliness of fires—as one makes friends of dogs and walk-

ing-sticks and pipes—is almost worth a twelve thousand mile voyage to have discovered.

A return visit to England brings clearly before one a simple fact that one is apt to overlook—that snow is as much a powerful enemy to be fought as an earthquake or a flood. I don't know what this recent snowstorm has cost the country, but it must assuredly be something in six figures. Apart from a gigantic army engaged in shovelling the deposit from the roads, there have been trains blocked, telegraph wires brought down, Northern towns isolated. To the unemployed it has been of much direct service; but in all such cases there are two sides to the question, and probably the snows have otherwise temporarily deprived large numbers of their livelihood. Thus Nature's ill-temper is as expensive in soft, innocent-looking snow as in a howling gale. But if communities cannot fight her in her tantrums, the individual is more potent. He smiles from his fire-side through the frosted glass and purrs forth his genial contentment as much as the contented tabby on his hearthrug. One could almost imagine his greeting the icy king with that old-fashioned schoolboy salute!

The Londoner's enemy Fog is quite another foe. He is an insidious, pernicious fellow, from whom there is no escape, indoors or out. He obscures your mental, as your bodily horizon; he makes a town a room, and a house its dirty, dismal corner; he depresses your existence into an endurance, your profession into a sordid fight with your immediate surroundings. Honest, open cold snow is another matter. It is clean, it is invigorating in moderate doses, and it gives a refreshing change to the landscape. Indeed, there is a wonderful exhilaration for a brief space of time in the contemplation of a vast white field where yesterday all was a sombre green. And to us who have learned by long absence to look upon it in the light of a novelty, it has all the fascination of a dainty fairyland of glistening whiteness, sweetly deceptive in its seeming innocence. How natural that the worn-worn traveller should sink down in those soft white folds and pass into oblivion of the life of

colour and reality, pass willingly to death through that fair gateway of forgetfulness. How easy to understand the drowsy passion of the snow-bewitched mountaineer for his fateful love. If he had strength he would kiss her—the beautiful, treacherous Lady of the Snows!

I did not mean to slip into this rhapsody. And was I not just now writing of the scavenger and his wintry work? Such is the mind in its queer processes. And I hope I have done something to show people that there are worse things on a holiday than an English winter. It might indeed be fairly hinted that a visit to England that was all in the summer gave only a partial picture of the reality. I don't know that it would do people much harm to pass one winter in five or ten in England. After all the best value of travel is to secure contrasts; and I am not sure that this contrast is not worth much more than its minor inconveniences would suggest.



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