

Some Winter Days in Iowa eBook

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Some Winter Days in Iowa

By

Frederick John Lazell

*Cedar Rapids, Iowa
the torch press
Nineteen hundred seven*

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by
Fred J. Lazell.*

1907

FOREWORD

I am glad to have the privilege, thus in advance, of looking over Mr. Lazell's delightful essays. He has surely a gift in this sort of thing. We are grateful to the man who shows us what he sees in Nature, but more to the man who like our present author shows us how easy and blessed it is to see for ourselves.

Mr. Lazell reminds me of Thoreau and Emerson, and I can suggest no better foreword than the passage from the last named author, from the *Method of Nature*, as follows:

"Every earnest glance we give to the realities around us with intent to learn, proceeds from a holy impulse and is really songs of praise. What difference can it make whether it take the shape of exhortation, or of passionate exclamation, or of scientific



statement? These are forms merely. Through them we express, at last, the fact that God has done thus or thus.”

ThomasH. MACBRIDE

Iowa city, Iowa

October 17, 1907

I. THE WOODLANDS IN JANUARY

Humanity has always turned to nature for relief from toil and strife. This was true of the old world; it is much more true of the new, especially in recent years. There is a growing interest in wild things and wild places. The benediction of the Druid woods, always appreciated by the few, like Lowell, is coming to be understood by the many. There is an increasing desire to get away from the roar and rattle of the streets, away from even the prim formality of suburban avenues and artificial bits of landscape gardening into the panorama of woodland, field, and stream. Men with means are disposing of their palatial residences in the cities and moving to real homes in the country, where they can see the sunrise and the death of day, hear the rhythm of the rain and the murmur of the wind, and watch the unfolding of the first flowers of spring. Cities are purchasing large parks where the beauties of nature are merely accentuated, not



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marred. States and the nation are setting aside big tracts of wilderness where rock and rill, waterfall and canon, mountain and marsh, shell-strewn beach and starry-blossomed brae, flowerful islets and wondrous wooded hills welcome the populace, soothe tired nerves and mend the mind and the morals. These are encouraging signs of the times. At last we are beginning to understand, with Emerson, that he who knows what sweets and virtues are in the ground, the waters, the plants, the heavens, and how to come at these enchantments, is the rich and royal man. It is as if some new prophet had arisen in the land, crying, "Ho, every one that is worn and weary, come ye to the woodlands; and he that hath no money let him feast upon those things which are really rich and abiding." While we are making New Year resolves let us resolve to spend less time with shams, more with realities; less with dogma, more with sermons in stones; less with erotic novels and baneful journals, more with the books in the running brooks; listening less readily to gossip and malice, more willingly to the tongues in trees; spending more pleasurable hours with the music of bird and breeze, rippling rivers, and laughing leaves; less time with cues and cards and colored comics, more with cloud and star, fish and field, and forest. "The cares that infest the day" shall fall like the burden from Christian's back as we watch the fleecy clouds or the silver stars mirrored in the waveless waters. We shall call the constellations by their names and become on speaking terms with the luring voices of the forest fairyland. We shall "thrill with the resurrection called spring," and steep our senses in the fragrance of its flowers; glory in the gushing life of summer, sigh at the sweet sorrows of autumn, and wax virile in winter's strength of storm and snow.

* * * * *

We shall begin our pilgrimages lacking in Nature's lore, many of us, as were four men who recently walked down a city street and looked at the trees which lined the way. One confessed ignorance as to their identity; another thought he knew but couldn't remember; a third said they looked like maples; and a fourth thought that silence, like honesty, as the copybooks used to tell us, was the best policy. And yet the name linden was writ large on those trees,—on the beautiful gray bark, the alternate method of twig arrangement, the fat red winter buds, which shone in the sunshine like rubies, and especially on the little cymes of pendulous, pea-like fruit, each cyme attached to its membranaceous bract or wing. Of course, if the pedestrians had been in the midst of rich woods and there found a trunk of great girth and rough bark, surrounded by several handsome young stems with close-fitting coats, the group looking for all the world like a comfortable old mother with a family of fresh-faced, willowy, marriageable daughters, every member of the quartet would have chorused, bass-wood.

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But no one need be ashamed to confess an ignorance of botany. Botanical ignorance is more common than poverty. It has always been prevalent. And the cause of it may be traced back to the author of all our short-comings, old Adam. We read that every beast of the field and every fowl of the air were brought to Adam to see what he would call them; and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. But why, oh why, didn't he name the trees? If he had known enough of the science to partake of the fruit of the tree of life he might have lived long enough to write a systematic botany, satisfactory alike to the Harvard school of standpat systematists and their manual-ripping rivals in nomenclature. But he didn't; and no one else may ever hope to do it.

Eve had never read a book on how to know the wild fruits, and her first field work in botany had a disastrous termination; it complicated the subject by the punishment of thorns and thistles. Cain's conduct brought both botany and agriculture into disrepute. Little more is heard until Pharaoh's daughter went botanizing and found Moses in the bulrushes. Oshea and Jehoshua showed some advancement by bringing back grapes and figs and pomegranates from the brook Eschol as the proudest products of the promised land. But Solomon was the only man in the olden times who ever knew botany thoroughly. We are told that he was wiser than all men. "Prove it," says some doubting reader, moving for a more specific statement. So the biographer adds: "He spake of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall."

Four centuries later, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego anticipated Emerson's advice about eating bread and pulse at rich men's tables. The historian tells us that they were men skilful in all wisdom, cunning in knowledge, and understanding science. Possessing such wisdom, Daniel knew it would be easy to mix up the wicked elders who plotted against the virtue of the fair Susanna by asking them a question of botany. One said he saw her under a mastick tree and the other under a holm tree. This gave Shakespeare that fine line in *The Merchant of Venice*, "A Daniel come to judgment; yea, a Daniel." But in these latter days we rarely read the story of Susanna, and Shakespeare's line is not understood by one play-goer in fifty.

When the diminutive Zaccheus climbed into a shade tree which graced a town lot in Jericho he gave the translators for "the Most High and Mighty Prince James" another puzzle, for they put him on record as going up into a sycamore tree. We had always supposed that this was because the sycamore's habit of shedding its bark made smooth climbing for Zaccheus. But scientific commentators tell us now that it was not a sycamore tree, but a hybridized fig-mulberry!

* * * * *



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But all this is digression. The best time to begin keeping that New Year's nature resolution is now, when the oaks are seen in all their rugged majesty, when the elms display their lofty, graceful, vase-like forms, and when every other tree of the forest exhibits its peculiar beauty of trunk, and branch, and twig. Often January is a most propitious month for the tenderfoot nature-lover. Such was the year which has just passed. During the first part of the month the weather was almost springlike; so bright and balmy that a robin was seen in an apple-tree, and the brilliant plumage of the cardinal was observed in this latitude. Green leaves, such as wild geranium, strawberry and speedwell, were to be found in abundance beneath their covering of fallen forest leaves. Scouring rushes vied with evergreen ferns in arresting the attention of the rambler. In one sheltered spot a clump of catnip was found, fresh, green, and aromatic, as if it were July instead of January.

Sunday, the sixth, was a day of rare beauty and enticement. Well might the recording angel forgive the nature lover who forgot the promises made for him by his sponsors that he should "hear sermons," and who fared forth into the woods instead, first reciting "The groves were God's first temples," and then softly singing, "When God invites, how blest the day!"

* * * * *

They err who think the winter woods void of life and color. Pause for a moment on the broad open flood-plain of the river, the winter fields and meadows stretching away in gentle slopes on either side. There are but few trees, but they have had room for full development and are noble specimens. All is gaiety. A blue-jay screams from a broad-topped white ash which is so full of winged seeds that it looks like a mass of foliage. The sable-robed king of the winter woods, the American crow, in the full vigor of his three-score years, maybe, (he lives to be a hundred) caws lustily from the bare white branches of a big sycamore, that queer anomaly of the forest which disrobes itself for the winter. The merry chickadees divide their time between the rustling, ragged bark of the red birches and the withered heads of heath-aster and blue vervain below. In the one they get the meat portion of their midday meal, and in the other the cereal foods. No wonder they are sleek and joyous.

A few steps farther and we leave this broad alluvial bottom to enter the canon through which the river, ages ago, began to cut its course. These ridges of limestone, loess and drift rise a hundred feet or more above the level of the plain from which the river suddenly turns aside. They are thickly covered with timber. There is no angel with a flaming sword to keep you from passing into this winter paradise! The river bank is lined with pussy willows; they gleam in the sunshine like copper. Farther back there are different varieties of dogwood, some with delicate

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green twigs and some a cherry red. The wild rose and the raspberry vines add their glossy purplish and cherry red stems to the color combination, and a contrast is afforded by the silvery gray bark of stray aspens. A still softer and more beautiful shade of silver gray is seen in the big hornet's nest of last year which still hangs suspended from a low sugar maple. On all of these the sunlight plays and makes a wondrous color symphony. "Truly the light is sweet and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun." To be sure, this colorful arrangement of the stems and twigs is not brilliant, like the flaming vermilion blossoms of the *Lobelia cardinalis* in August, the orange yellow of the rudbeckias in September, or the wondrous blue of the fringed gentian in early October. It is more like the delicate tints and shadings of an arts and crafts exhibition, stained leather, hammered copper and brass, art canvas, and ancient illuminated initials in monks' missals. The tempered winter sunlight is further softened by the trees; as it illuminates the soft red rags of the happy old birch it seems sublimated, almost sanctified and spiritual, like that which filters through rich windows in cathedrals, and makes a real halo around the heads of sweet-faced saints.

* * * * *

There are strange sounds for January. All the winter birds are doing their share in the chorus and orchestra; crows, jays, woodpeckers, nut-hatches, juncos, tree-sparrows. But suddenly a woodpecker begins a new sound,—his vernal drumming! Not the mere tap, tap, tap, in quest of insects, but the love-call drumming of the nidification season, nearly three months ahead of time.

Swollen by recent rains, the river is two feet higher than usual. There is a sheet of ice on either shore, but the water swiftly flows down the narrow channel in the middle with a sound halfway between a gurgle and a roar, mingled anon with the sound of grinding cakes of ice. Suddenly away up at the bend of the river there is a sharp crack, like the discharge of a volley of musketry. Swiftly it comes down the ice, passes your feet with a distinct tremor, and your eyes follow the sound down the river until the two walls of the canon meet in the perspective. In a small way you know how it would feel to hear the rumble of an approaching seismic shock. Only there was no terror in this. It was the laughter of the sunbeam fairies as they loosened the architecture of "the elfin builders of the frost."

The recent rains have vivified the mosses clinging to the gray rocks which jut out, halfway up the slope. Very tender and beautiful is their vivid shade of green. Winter and summer, the mosses are always with us. When the last late aster has faded, the last blue blossom of the gentian changed to brown, the green mosses still remain. And the more they are studied, the more fascinating they become. Take some home and examine them with a hand lens,



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then with a microscope. You will be charmed with the exquisite finish of their most minute parts. Nature glories in the artistic excellence of infinitesimal workmanship. The most beautiful part of her handiwork is that which is seen through a microscope. There is beauty, beauty everywhere; the crystals of the snow, the cell structure of the leaf, the scales of the butterfly's wing, the pedicels, capsules and cilia of these mosses. No wonder that many distinguished men have been led to give their whole lives to the study of mosses and have felt well repaid.

* * * * *

Here are Nature's only two elementary forms of growth, the cell and the crystal, wrestling for the mastery over each other in a life and death struggle. The moss is built up of cell, the rock of crystal forms. Below this Devonian limestone, its crystals sparkling in the sunshine, with its coral fossils, its fragments of crinoids, and its broken shells of brachiopods, down through the Devonian, the Silurian, the Ordovician, and the Cambrian rocks, down to the original crust formed when first the earth began to cool, if any there be remaining; all these miles of rocks are inorganic, built up of crystals. But here on the surface, the tender green mosses and the bright lichens have begun the struggle of the cellular system for supremacy. These humble little rock-breakers will not rest until they have pulverized the rocks into soil sufficient to sustain higher forms of vegetable life.

Once before, many millions of years ago, the cell life had won a partial victory over the crystal. In the great sub-tropical sea which once covered this spot, corals lived and flourished as they do now in similar seas. Myriads of brachiopods lived, moved, and had their being. Gigantic fish sported in the waters. Meanwhile older rocks were being denuded and disintegrated. Millions of tons of sediment were brought by the rivers and streams to the shores of the Devonian sea. Upheaval, change, transformation followed, and the tide of battle turned. Cell life was powerless before the vanquishing crystals of the infiltrating calcite. Only the inorganic part of that vast world of organic life here remains in these fossils to tell the story—the walls of the corals, the shells of the brachiopods, the teeth of the monster fishes. Then came succeeding ages, and finally the great glaciers which brought down the drift, rounded the sharp ridges, filled up the deep valleys and gorges, and gave to Iowa her fertile and inexhaustible soil. The earth was prepared to receive her king. The glaciers receded. Man came.

Now here, on this bit of limestone rock, the struggle is on again. The mosses and the lichens have proceeded far enough in their work of disintegration to provide substance for the slender red stem of dogwood, which is growing out of the soil they have made. The fallen leaves of the surrounding trees follow the pioneer work of the mosses. The rain and the cracking frosts are other agencies. By and by the organic will triumph over

the inorganic, the cell over the crystal, the plant over the rock, and where now the fossils lie beautiful flowers will bloom.



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The short winter day draws rapidly to a close and there is time for only a brief survey of the beauty of the upland trees. The fairy-like delicacy of the hop hornbeam, with its hop clusters and pointing catkins; the slender gracefulness of the chestnut oak; the Etruscan vase-like form of the white elm; the flaky bark and pungent, aromatic twigs of the black cherry; the massive, noble, silver-gray trunk of the white-oak; the lofty stateliness, filagree bark, and berry-like fruit of the hackberry; the black twigs of the black oaks, ashes, hickories and walnuts etched against the sky,—all these arrest your attention and retard your steps until the sun is near the horizon and you look over the tangled undergrowth of hazel, sumac, and briers, far through the trunks of the trees to the western sky which is bathed in flame color, as if from a forest fire.

You are alone and yet not alone. A rabbit scurries across your pathway. A faint little squeak voices the fright of a mouse. There is a swoop of wings which you neither distinctly hear nor clearly see, yet you are aware, in a less marked degree than was the mouse, that an owl was near. You feel certain that the downy woodpecker is asleep in that neat little round hole on the southwest side of a tree trunk, just a little higher than you can reach. In the early afternoon you saw a red squirrel go gaily up a tall red oak and climb into his nest of leaves. You fancy he is snugly coiled there now. This recent hill of fresh dirt—strange sight in January—was surely made by a mole, and you know that they are all somewhere beneath your feet: moles, pocket gophers, and the pretty striped gopher which used to sit up on his hind legs, fold his front paws, and look at you in the summer time, then give a low whistle and duck; meadow mice in their cozy tunnels through which the water will be pouring when the spring freshets come; the woodchuck in his long, long sleep, and the chipmunk with his winter store of food. And so watching, listening, and musing you come at length to the western edge of the woodland and look across the prairie, far as the eye can reach, to where the red ball of the sun hangs scarce a yard above the horizon. You look upon a scene which is peculiar to this part of Iowa alone. It is not found in any other state or nation on earth. "These are the gardens of the desert, for which the speech of England has no name—the Prairies."

*"Lo they stretch
In airy undulations, far away,
As if the ocean, in his gentlest swell
Stood still, with all his rounded billows fixed,
And motionless, forever."*



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The “rounded billows fixed” are the paha ridges which the glaciers made. They are not high enough to obstruct the view, nor to mar its ocean-like effect. In the middle distance you may see a farm windmill from sail to platform, but away across the snow-plain sea you catch only the uppermost part of the white sails. The rest is concealed from view by the illusory rise of the foreground toward the horizon—for this twenty-mile stretch of prairie has an illusory curve similar to that seen from all ocean shores. But now the sun has disappeared and the windmills, houses, groves, and fences which looked like black etchings against the flame-colored sky slowly vanish, first far away toward the bluffs on the yon shore of the prairie sea, then nearer, nearer, comes the gloom until the fence across the first field is scarcely discernible. The bright vermilion fades at length to misty gray and lights appear in the windows of the farm homes.

* * * * *

This sunset and twilight scene, peculiar to Iowa, is succeeded by the pageant of the stars. These are not peculiar, in neighboring latitudes, to any clime or time. They are the same stars which sang together when the foundations of the earth were fastened; the same calm stars upon which Adam gazed in remorse, the night he was driven from the garden of Eden. The Chinese, the Chaldeans, the Egyptians, the Hebrews, the Greeks, the Romans counted the hours of the night by the revolutions of the Greater and the Lesser Bear around Polaris, and guided their crafts and caravans by that sure star’s light:

*"And therefore bards of old,
Sages and hermits of the solemn wood,
Did in thy beams behold
That bright eternal beacon, by whose ray
The voyager of time should shape his needful way."*

These

*"Constellations of the early night
That sparkled brighter as the twilight died
And made the darkness glorious"*

were mysteries to Ptolemy and to Plato, as well as to Job. All ages of mankind must have watched and wondered, pondering over the unsolved problems. When the First Great Cause projected all these whirling fire-mists into illimitable space with all the laws of physics, chemistry, evolution in perfect working order, did he choose this earth as humanity’s only home? Is this the only planet with a plan of salvation? Is this mere speck among all the myriads of worlds in the solar system, and the other systems, the only creation of His hand which has known a Garden of Eden, a Bethlehem, and a Calvary? When the sun has lost his heat and the cold crystals of the earth have fought their last fight with cellular structures, and won; when all the fairy forms of field and



forest are only fossils in the grim, gray rocks; when the music of bee and bird and breeze shall have waned into everlasting silence; when "all the pomp of yesterday is one with Nineveh and Tyre;"

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when man with all his achievements and triumphs, his love and laughter, his songs and sighs, is forgotten even more completely than his Paleolithic ancestors; then, shall some portion of the nebula which now bejewels Andromeda's girdle become evolutionized into a flora and a fauna, a civilization and a spirituality unto which the visions of the wisest seers have never attained? Shall this subtle, evanescent mystery which we call life, which glorifies so many varied forms, be wholly lost, or shall it pass joyfully through the ether to some brighter and better world? Is it true

*"That nothing walks with aimless feet;
That no one life shall be destroyed,
Or cast as rubbish to the void,
When God hath made the pile complete?"*

We are scarce a step ahead of our forefathers. We do not know.

*"Behold, we know not anything;
I can but trust that good shall fall
At last—far off—at last to all,
And every winter change to spring."*

II. FEBRUARY IN STORM AND SHINE.

February often opens with a season of cold gray days when stratus clouds, dark and unrelenting as iron, hang across the sky and bitter winds from the northwest blow down the Iowa valleys and over the frost-cracked ridges. In the city the wheels crunch on the scanty snow, and every window is made opaque by the frost. Trains are many hours late, and dense clouds of steam from locomotive funnels condense into vivid whiteness in the wintry air. Nuthatches, woodpeckers, and chickadees join the English sparrows in begging crumbs and scraps around the kitchen door. In the timber the wind rustles shiveringly through the leaves which still cling to some of the oaks. The music of the woods is reduced to a minimum. Life is a serious business for everyone who has to work in order that he may eat; there is little time or spirit for song. In the late forenoon and again in the middle of the afternoon the rattle of bills may be heard on the branches; at other times the woods are almost silent, save for the cracking of the earth as it heaves under the frost, and the boom of the ever thickening ice on the river.

* * * * *

Then the south wind steals across King Winter's borderland, and the iron clouds begin to relax. But at first there seems little improvement. "The south end of a north wind," say the experienced, and shiver. But wait. Every hour the wind grows warmer and the

clouds softer. They come closer to the earth, hanging like a thick curtain across the sky. On the prairie the diameter of the circling horizon seems scarcely three miles long. The clouds hug the far sides of the nearest ridges and shut you in, above and around. It must have been such a day as this when Fitzgerald made that line of the Rubaiyat read: "And this inverted bowl they call the sky." Today the bowl seems very small and dreary.



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By and by a snowflake falls, then a few others, soft as the spray of the thistle in the early days of October. Gently as the fairy balloons of the dandelion they float through the air and rest upon the withered leaves of the white oaks. Soon they come faster, and now the forest-crowned ridge half a mile away which was in plain sight a minute ago is screened from view by the fast falling white curtain.

“He giveth snow like wool.” Very beautiful is this snow as it softens the rugged, corky limbs of the mossy cup oaks. It is not like the hard, granular snow which stung your face like sand when you were out in the storm a month ago, when the trumpets of the sky were doing a fanfare, the wind raged from the northwest, the top of a tall black cherry snapped like a shipmast and crashed through the forest rigging to the white deck below, while the gnarled limbs of the big elms looked like the muscles of giants wrestling with the storm king. This storm to-day is not “announced by all the trumpets of the sky.” It comes softly as the breath of morning on a May meadow. It silences every sound and curtains you into a rare studio where you may admire its own exceeding beauty. There have not been so many beautiful snow crystals in any storm of the winter. You may see half a dozen different varieties on your coat sleeve with the naked eye, and you pull out a strong lens the better to observe the exceeding beauty of these six pointed stars. They are among Nature’s most exquisite forms, and they are shown in bewildering variety. The molecules of snow arrange themselves in crystals of the hexagonal system, every angle exactly sixty degrees. The white color of the snow is caused by a combination of the prismatic colors of these snow crystals. Some of them are regular hexagons, with six straight sides; others are like a wheel with six spokes, with jewels clinging to each spoke. Many men have spent a lifetime in the study of these fairy forms. W. A. Bentley, of the United States weather bureau, after twenty years of faithful work, has more than a thousand photographs of these crystals, no two alike. Every storm yields him a new set of pictures.

* * * * *

For a little while the snow grows damp and the flakes grow larger, making downy blankets for the babes in the woods—the hepaticas, the mosses, the ferns. The catkins of the hazelbrush are edged with white. The slender stems of the meadow-sweet begin to droop beneath the weight of the snow. The delicate yellow pointed buds of the wild gooseberry look like topaz gems in a setting of white pearl. The snow falls faster and the wood becomes a ghost world. The dull red torches of the smooth sumac are extinguished. The fine, delicate spray of the hop hornbeam is a fairy net whose every mesh is fringed with immaculate beauty. The little clusters of fine twigs here and there in the hackberry grow into spheres of fleecy fruit. The snow sticks to the tree trunks and makes a compass out of every one, a more accurate compass than the big radical leaves of the rosin weed in the early fall.

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As the day darkens the ghost-like effect of the storm in the woods is all the more marked. The trees stand like silent specters, and at every turn in the path you come upon strange shadow shapes of shrub and bush. The snow is piling high under the hazelbrush and the sumac, stumps of trees become soft white mounds, and the little brook has curving banks of beauty.

There is a thrill and an exaltation in such a storm. The depressing influences of the earlier day are no more. As you resolutely walk homeward through the storm and the deep snow, you feel the heart grow strong as it pumps the blood to every fiber of your being. You know why the men of the north, Iowa men, have virile brain and sovereign will. The snow is deep and the way is long, but yet you smile—a reverent smile—as you think of Hawthorne writing of a snow storm by taking occasional peeps from the study windows of his old manse.

* * * * *

Next morning the world seems to have been re-created. It is as fresh and pure and full of light and beauty as if it had just come from the Creator's hand with not one single stain or shame or pain. It is one of the few rare mornings that come in all seasons of the year when Nature's every aspect is so beautiful that even the most unappreciative are charmed into admiration; a great white sparkling world below, and a limitless azure world above. The clouds have all been blown away and you rejoice in the loftiness of the big blue dome. It is so very high that there seems to be no dome. You are looking straight through into the boundless blue of interstellar space, the best object lesson of infinity which earth has to offer. The ocean that washes the shores of continents has its bounds which it may not pass, and mariners have well-known ways across it. The ocean of human thought is vaster, but it, also, has finite bounds and man shall hardly make great voyages upon it without crossing, perhaps following, the track of some earlier Columbus. But this limitless ocean which we call the sky has no finite bounds, no tracks, no charts, no Cabots. It is measureless and all-embracing as Divine love. You and Polaris are enwrapped by both. The farthest star is but a beacon light on some shore island of this sublime sea of space; and it beckons upward and outward to the unknown beyond.

* * * * *

Yesterday's three-mile diameter of the horizon has been multiplied by ten. There is a far sweep of the landscape which makes the soul thrill. This is the supreme pleasure of the prairies. The Iowa man who goes to the Rockies is at first awed and charmed by the mountain grandeur, but soon he pines like a caged bird. The high peaks shut him in as a prison. He sighs for a sight of the plains, for the feeling of room and liberty that belongs to the wider sky-reach. On the prairies the love of truth and liberty grows as easily as the morning light.

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The sun rose clear and golden and now is almost white, so clear is the atmosphere. The snow crystals break the white light into all the prismatic colors,—rubies and garnets, emeralds and sapphires, topaz and amethyst, all sparkle in the brilliant light. The shadow of the solitary elm's trunk, here on the prairie, has very clear cut edges and is tinted with blue. The finely reticulated shadows of the graceful twigs are sharply shadowed on the snow beneath,—a winter picture worthy of a master hand.

In the enjoyment of such beauty as this is the only real wealth. Money cannot buy it. Hirelings cannot take it from the lowly and give it to the proud. No trust can corner it. No canvas can screen it from the eye of him who has not silver to give the cathedral care-taker. February, like June, may be had by the poorest comer. But it is like Ruskin's Faubourg St. Germain. Before you may enjoy it you shall be worthy of it.

*"Such beauty, varying in the light,
Of living nature, cannot be portrayed
By words, nor by the pencil's silent skill;
But is the property of him alone
Who hath beheld it, noted it with care,
And in his mind recorded it with love."*

Leave the prairie and enter the forest which crowns the neighboring ridge. Here are more of those blue shadows on the snow. The delicate blue sky is faintly reflected on the snow in the full sunlight, but it is more obvious in the shadow; in some places its hue is almost indigo. This sky reflection is one of the most beautiful of Nature's winter exhibitions. Towards sundown the snow-capped ridges will sometimes be tinged with pink. And in a red sunset the winter trees will sometimes throw shadows of green, the complementary color, on the snow.

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You are early in the woods. Nature's children are not yet astir. The silence is profound; but it is a fruitful, uplifting silence. There are no sounds to strike the most delicate strings in that wondrous harp of your inner ear. But if your spiritual ear is attentive you should catch those forest voices that fall softer than silence and speak of peace and purity, truth and beauty.

Soon the silence is broken. Curiously, the first sound you hear comes from advanced civilization, the rumble of a train fifteen miles away. On a still morning like this one can hardly stand five full minutes on any spot in the whole state of Iowa without hearing the sound of a train. There are no more trackless prairies, no more terrors of blizzards. Pioneer days have passed away. The railroads have brought security, comfort, prosperity, intelligence, and the best of the world's work, physical and mental, fresh at the door every morning.



Whirr! There goes a ruffed grouse from the snow, scarce a rod ahead. In a moment, up goes another. Too bad to rout them from their bed under the roots of a fallen tree. Farther on a rabbit scurries from another log. There is his "form" fresh in the snow.



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The river, away down below, begins to boom and crack. The ice is like the tight head of a big bass drum, but the drummer is inside and the sound comes muffled. The frost is the peg which tightens all the strings of earth and makes them vibrant. The tinkle of sleigh bells on the wagon road fully a mile away comes with peculiar clearness.

When the sun is more than half way from the horizon to the meridian, Nature begins to wake up. A chickadee emerges from his hole in the decaying trunk of a red oak and cheeps softly as he flies to the branch of a slippery elm. His merry “chick-a-dee-dee-dee-dee” brings others of his race, and away they all go down to the red birches on the river bottom. The metallic quanks of a pair of nuthatches call attention to the upper branches of a big white oak. A chickadee and one of the nuthatches see a tempting morsel at the same time. A spiteful peck from nuthatch leaves him master of the morsel and the field. But the chickadee does not care. He flies down and spies a stalk of golden-rod above the snow on which there is a round object looking like a small onion. Chickadee doesn't know that this is the spherical gall of the *trypeta solidaginis*, but he does know that it contains a fat white grub. He knows, too, that there is a beveled passage leading to a cell in the center and that the outer end of this passage is protected by a membrane window. After some balancing and pirouetting he smashes the window with his bill, runs his long tongue down the passageway, gulps the grub and away he flies to join his comrades down in the birches, chirping gaily as he goes.

Downy woodpecker “pleeks” his happiness as he excavates the twig of a silver maple. Probably he has found the larvae which the wood wasp left there in the fall. The big hairy woodpecker flies across the clearing with a strident scream. Next to the crow and the jay he is the noisiest fellow in the winter woods. He hammers away at a decaying basswood and the chips which fall are an inch and a half long. His hammering is almost as loud as the bark of a squirrel in the trees across the river. The blood-red spot on the back of his head has an exquisite glow in the sunshine, and you get a fine look at it, for he is busily working little more than a rod from where you stand. He does wonderful work with that strong bill. One decaying basswood found recently was eighteen inches in diameter and the woodpeckers had drilled big holes clear through it. The pile of their chips at the base would have filled a bushel basket.

By the time you have reached the spring the woods are full of life and sound, and the spring itself adds to the winter music. The rocks where it bubbles out are thickly covered with hoar frost. One of the big blocks of limestone in its causeway is covered with ice, clear and viscid as molten glass. The river is bridged over with ice twenty inches thick, save only the little gulf stream into which the spring

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pours its waters. From the surface of this stream thin smoky wreaths of vapor rise and are changed into crystals by the frosty air. But the waters of the spring gush forth as abundantly and musically now as they did in the hot days of last July, and the clam-shell with which you then drank is still in its place by the rock. The pure, melodious, beautiful spring makes its own environment, regardless of surroundings. Its sources are in the unfailing hills. It suggests the lives of some men and women whose friendship you enjoy, and who are ever ready to refresh you on life's way.

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The wind of last night has carried much of the snow over the top of the ridge and deposited it in this sheltered slope of the river canon. Here are wind-formed caves of sculptured snow, vaulted with a tender blue. Turrets and towers sparkle in the splendid light. All angles are softened, and everywhere the lines of the snow curves are smooth and flowing. The drift sweeps down from the footpath way on the river bank to the ice-bound bed of the river in graceful lines. Where the side of the canon is more precipitous there is equal beauty. Each shrub has its own peculiar type amidst the broken drift. The red cedar, which is Iowa's nearest approach to a pine, except in a few favored counties, hangs from the top of the crag heavily festooned with feathery snow. Those long creeping lines on which the crystals sparkle are only brambles, and that big rosette of rusty red and fluffy white is the New Jersey tea. Those spreading, pointed fingers of coral with a background of dazzling white are the topmost twigs of the red osier dogwood. The strip of shrubs with graceful spray, now bowed in beauty by the river's brink, is a group of young red birches, and this bunch of downy brown twigs, two feet above the snow, sparkling with frost particles, is the downy viburnum. The great tangle of vine and lace work mixed with snow is young hop hornbeam, supporting honeysuckle.

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Viewed from the window of a railway train, the February fields and woods seem dead and dreary. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Every twig is lined with living buds, carefully covered with scales. Inside those scales are leaves and blossoms deftly packed, as only Mother Nature could pack them. Split one down the middle and examine it with your lens. You will see the little tender leaves, and often the blossoms, ready to break out in beauty when the warm days come and flood the world with color. Men try to photograph nature, but no photograph could do justice to the clustered buds of the red maple or the downy buds of the slippery elm. The long green gray buds of the butternut, pistillate flowers in some, staminate flowers in others; the saffron buds of the butternut hickory; the ruby buds of the bass wood; the varnished bud scales of the sycamore and the poplar; the big gummy scales which protect the



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pussy catkins of the aspen; the queer little buds of the sumac and the rusty buds of the ash; every one of these refutes the aspersions cast upon the winter woods by those who never go out to see. In their noble beauty of massive and graceful form, with their exquisite symmetry of outline, their varied arrangement of branches and twigs, giving to every species an individual expression, every twig studded with these gem-like buds, how very beautiful are the winter trees! One might almost find it in his heart to feel sorry that this rare mingling of sculpture and fretwork and lace is soon to be draped with a mantle of green.

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Why did Bryant dwell so often on the theme of death in Nature? The reminders of death are very few compared with the signs of life. Break off a twig from the aspen and taste the bark. The strong quinine flavor is like a spring tonic. Cut a branch of the black cherry, peel back the bark, and smell the pungent, bitter almond aroma, which of itself is enough to identify this tree. Every sense tells of life; the smell of the cherry, the taste of the aspen, the touch of the velvety mosses and the gummy buds on the poplars, the color of the twigs and buds, the music of the birds, all these say, "There is no death."

Every time you plant your feet upon the snow you press down thousands of seeds, minute forms of life, each with its little store of starch or albumen, carefully compounded in Nature's laboratory, sufficient to sustain the embryonic life until the tiny plantlet learns to draw nourishment from the breast of Mother Earth and to breathe health and vigor from the sunshine and the air. By the wayside, in stony places, among thorns and on good ground, Nature sows her seeds with lavish hand. Every tree and shrub and herb, itself held fast to one place, tries to give its offspring as great a start in the world as possible. Even in late February one may see some of Nature's airships, designed to carry seeds. They are all built on the same principle, not to rise in the air, but to fly as far away from the tree as possible when falling from the branch. The basswood puts its seeds into little hollow wooden balls, then makes a sail out of a leaf and sets it at just the right angle to balance the seeds and catch the breeze. The winged samaras of the ash and the box elder are other modifications of the same principle. The round balls of the sycamore hang till the high winds of March loosen their strong stalks and then they break open and the club-shaped nutlets inside spread their bristly hairs to the breeze. The hop-like strobiles of the hop hornbeam seem especially made to blow over the surface of the frozen snow; they drop off the queer little oblong bags as they go and thus the smooth small nuts inside are planted. The oaks, hickories, walnuts, butternuts, hazelnuts, trust their fruits to the feet of passersby and to the squirrels and blue jays which fail to find many of their buried acorns



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and nuts. The big three-valved balloons of the bladdernut can sail either in the air, on the water, or over the frozen snow. The pretty clusters of the wild yam, seen climbing over the hazelbrush in the rich winter woods, have two ways of navigating in the wind; either the three-sided, papery capsule floats as a whole, or it splits through the winged angles and then the flat seeds with their membranaceous wings have a chance to flutter a foot or two away where haply they may find a square inch of unoccupied soil. The desmodium, the bidens, the agrimony and the cocklebur, which stick to your clothes even as late as February, are only using you as a Moses to lead their children to their promised land. These herb stalks above the snow, the corymbose heads of the yarrow, the spikes of the self-heal, the crosiers of the golden-rod, the panicles of the asters, the racemes of the Indian tobacco, the knotted threads of the blue vervain and the plantain, the miniature mandarin temples of the peppergrass—all these have shed, or are shedding, myriads of seeds to be silently sepulchred under the snow until earth's easter April mornings. The withered berries of the bittersweet, the cat-brier, and the sumac, like the drupes of the early fall, are scattered far and wide by the birds. All these speak not of death, but of an eager, expectant life.

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The snow is winter's great gift to states like Iowa. He is unwise who complains of the tender, protecting, nourishing, fructifying mantle of immaculate white. Where the snow lies deepest in winter, there shall you find the greatest flush of new life in the spring. Down under the snow Nature's chemical laboratory is at work. Take a stick and dig under the thick white blanket into the black soil. Here are bulbs and buds, corms and tubers, rootstalks and rhizomes, which were pumped full of starch and albumen in the hot days of last August. So far as modern science is able to tell, chemical changes are in constant progress in all these forms of underground life, preparing for the coming glory of the living green. Nature never dies. She scarcely sleeps.

Tracks on the all-revealing snow tell of an equal abundance of animal life. These rabbit tracks, scarcely two feet apart, tell how happily bunny was going. But farther on a dog came across at an angle and gave chase. The tracks are now farther apart, three feet, four feet, as up bunny goes to his burrow under the shelving rock. One last bound, nearly five feet, and he was safe. That was once when "heaven was gained at a single bound."

Bunny was too far away from home that time. Here is his usual runway from the burrow to the brook, and the nibbled barks of the saplings tell of a tender breakfast before he went prospecting. Rabbits usually run in beaten paths.



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These narrow tracks where dainty feet printed a double line of opposite dots across the snow were made by the whitefooted mouse, and the little continuous line between them was made by his dragging tail. The legend is like this, :-:-:-:-. Farther on are similar tracks, but alternate instead of opposite, like this, ',',','. They were made by the short-tailed shrew. Still farther along a queer little ridge is seen in the snow across the wood road. It is the tunnel of the meadow mouse. Part of its fragile roof has fallen in and you may stoop and look into the little round tunnel which ran from the burrow to some granary under a log.

There goes a squirrel, angling away from you, his red bushy tail high in the air as he runs through the deep snow down the side of the ridge to a big, corky-barked oak, up which he goes to wait in his hollow up there until you have passed by. He did not seem to be going very fast but when you walk over to his tracks you find they are farther apart than you can step. The groups of four are about as broad as your hand, and they are deep where the snow lies thick. But on the firmer snow at the crest of the ridge, before the squirrel became alarmed, they did not break through the crust, and the marks of the dainty toes are plainly seen. There are also the remains of a sweet acorn which the squirrel dug out of the deep snow under a white oak. Back to the river where the stream from the spring makes open water you find some queer tracks on the fresh snow; there is a round spot as big as a quarter in each one, faint radiating lines in front ending with the marks of sharp toes; these were made by the soft-padded foot and webbed toes of the mink.

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Most of the insect life is snugly hidden, but much is in plain sight. A clump of pussy willows bears many queer-shaped clusters which the entomologist calls pine cone galls; in the center of each one a larva dwells in his silken case. On the red oaks over head are other galls,—the oak apples. The buttonbush has the ash-colored cocoon of the giant silkworm, made out of a rolled leaf, the petiole of which is fastened to the branch with silk. Many others are to be found for the looking. All tell the story of Nature's abundant life,—even the morning after a February snow storm. All speak

*"Of one maternal spirit bringing forth
And cherishing with ever constant love,
That tires not, nor betrays."*

But snowstorms will soon be over. The nature-lover's spring begins near the end of the month, sometimes just before, sometimes just after. The snow and the ice will be honeycombed by the sun and we shall begin to look for the sap trickling from the maple, and to strain our ears for the first note of the wild goose and the blue-bird,

*"While winter, slumbering in the open air
Wears on his smiling face a dream of spring."*



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The frequent Rambler through the winter woods can scarcely fail to become acquainted with all the winter birds. The different species are not numerous, few of them are very shy, they are easily seen because of the bare trees, and their habits tend to call attention to them; especially is this true of the woodpeckers. It is true, of course, that one may sometimes walk in the woods for hours, scarcely seeing a single bird. But it is also true that if he starts out some sunny morning, and seeks a tract of heavy timber near a river, he will be very likely to see and hear nearly all of them.

Such a ramble was enjoyed during the halcyon days we had this year (1907) in February. By 10 o'clock the woods were fairly ringing with bird-calls. Over a meadow, near the entrance to the woods, a red-tailed hawk was circling about twenty-five feet from the ground, as if in search of meadow mice. The field glass showed the black band on his breast and tail, which, with his bright red tail, sufficiently established his identity.

The first bird seen in the woods was a white-breasted nuthatch, working on the trunk of a red birch on the river bottom. Next to the chickadee, he is the tamest bird of the woodlands. One may easily get within six feet of him, as was done on this occasion, and admire his beautiful ashy-blue coat, his white vest and white cheeks, with his black cap and nape. He pulled a fat white grub from the birch with his long, slender bill and ate it with evident relish. Then he uttered his soft "quank, quank" and gently flew to another tree.

Sometimes these "quank, quanks" come in a loud and rapid series and may easily be heard a quarter of a mile on a still day.

A flock of juncos were busy among the dead leaves and the snow. They are sparrow-size, like the nuthatch, and their faint chirpings are much like those of the chickadee. The slate gray of their head, throat, back and breast is an interesting color, and is relieved from somberness by the white under parts and the yellow bills. The white outer tailfeathers show plainly as they fly. They frequent the road through the timber and have some of the habits of the English sparrow. The winter woods would miss them.

Chickadees were busy in the birches. Surely the chickadee is one of the dearest little fellows that fly. He has four modes of expression:

1. The well-known "Chick-a-dee-dee-dee."
2. The "pe-ho," which ought to be written "la sol," pitched at about upper D and C, above the soprano staff, and timed like two quarter notes.
3. The faint chirpings as he works.
4. A happy little gurgling song, which can hardly be translated into words.

The chickadee wears a black cap with a white vest and a blue-gray coat, completing his costume with a black necktie, and he is perfectly willing to sit for you and have his picture taken.



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Mr. Blue Jay sat in a clump of dogwood, doing nothing. He was not so tame as the others and yet he permitted a twenty-foot view of his blue-gray coat, his aristocratic crest, his dusky white vest, his white-tipped tail and the black band across the back of his head, down the neck and across the breast—like a black collar worn very low down. It was a spring-like morning, the thermometer rapidly rising toward forty-five, and Mr. Blue Jay was in one of his imitative moods. There is hardly a limit to his vocabulary, and it would not be surprising if some of his imitative stunts should be mistaken for the call of an early robin. Among these calls is a liquid gurgle, like hard cider coming out of the neck of a big brown jug. Another, and a common one, is two slurred eighth notes, repeated, “sol te, sol te”—upper G and B in the key of C.

Meanwhile the woods had been resounding with the lively tattoo of the woodpecker, and finally Downy was found at the top of a dead dry elm, busily doing this reveille, fast and loud as the roll of a snare drum. His head was going so fast that it looked like a quick series of heads and the tree rattled so it could be heard afar. Most writers regard this as the woodpecker’s love call, a sign of spring, as it were—but Downy is usually heard and seen doing it on warm days every month in the winter. The females are seen at it almost as often as the males; the latter are known by the scarlet band at the back of the head. Perhaps it is not a love call after all; it may be only the exuberance of spirits caused by a fine breakfast and a warm morning.

Downy kept it up, heedless of the human observer. But when a red squirrel ran up the tree to within four feet of the spot chosen for a sounding board, Downy suddenly left. The squirrel sat in the sunshine and smoothed his fur with his nose and his paws, like a cat.

Two big hairy woodpeckers were on a neighboring tree, but they were not so fearless. One can hardly get nearer than thirty feet. The field glass is a great help in such cases, and no one should go to the woods without one, or at least a good opera glass. These two were both males. That could be easily told by the bright scarlet band on the back of their heads. The rest of the plumage is much like the downy woodpecker. Both have beautiful black wings, spotted and striped with white and a broad white stripe down the back. Downy’s white outer tail-feathers are barred with black; the Hairy’s are all white. Downy is sparrow-size; Hairy is robin-size. Downy is usually a gentle creature; Hairy is aggressive and militant. Downy is a little Lord Fauntleroy; Hairy is a Robin Hood.

One other woodpecker was seen on this lucky bird-day. It was the red-bellied woodpecker, more rare and more shy than either of the others. His breast is a grayish white tinged with red, and his back is barred white and black like a ladder; but the black is not so deep and vivid as that of the other woodpeckers. He has no white stripe down the middle of his back. His nape and crest are both scarlet and he utters a hoarser squeak than either the downy or the hairy.



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One of the events of the day was the sight of the winter wren, the first time he had been seen this winter. He was working among the stumps of trees at the brink of the river, under the ice which had been left clinging to the trees when the high water receded. There was no mistaking his beautiful coat of cinnamon brown, his pert manner, his tail which was a little more than straight up, pointing towards his head; a little mite of a bird, how does he keep his little body from freezing in the furious winter storms? He seemed perfectly happy, with his two sharp, shrill, impatient "quip quaps," much shriller than the "pleeks" of downy woodpecker.

A flock of tree sparrows were busy in and around a big thicket of wild gooseberry bushes on the upland. You may easily get within a rod of them, but hardly closer, and a field glass is almost a necessity to careful study. He is a grayish, graceful sparrow, with streaks of reddish brown, chestnut caps, and a small black spot in the middle of the brownish breast. One white wing bar is a distinguishing characteristic, and a better one is the difference in color of the two mandibles; the upper one is black and the lower one yellow. The tinkling notes of the tree sparrows sound like the music a pipe organist makes when he uses the sweet organ and the flute stop.

A sharp watch was kept for goldfinches and the evening grosbeak during the day, but neither was seen. This was something of a disappointment. But it was forgotten in the thrill of joy that came late in the afternoon. There was a wide stretch of river bottom, walled in on the west by a high and forest-crowned ridge; on the east was the river, with a hundred foot fringe of noble trees, not yet sacrificed to the axe of the woodsman. The sun was just above the tops of the trees on the western ridge and long rays of slanting light came pink across the river flood-plain, investing the tree-tops by the shore with a soft and radiant light. Suddenly there came a plaintive little note from the bottom of a near-by tree, instantly recognized as a new note in the winter woods. Then another, and another, leading the eyes to the foot of a big bass-wood, where a graceful bird, with a beautiful blue back and a reddish brown breast, as if his coat had been made of the bright blue sky and his vest of the shining red sand, was hopping. The field glass brought him within ten feet. A bluebird, sure enough! The first real, tangible sign of the spring that is to be, the first voice from the southland telling us that spring is coming up the valleys. There is no mistaking the brilliant blue, the most beautiful blue in the Iowa year, unless it be the blue of the fringed gentian in the fall; and the soft reddish, earthy breast enhances the beauty of the brilliant back.



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Another hopped into view; the female, doubtless, for both the blue and the reddish brown were less brilliant. Every well-regulated bluebird ought to be seen in the top of a tall elm or maple; but these seemed to have no high-flying inclinations. Maybe they could read in the clouds beneath the setting sun a prediction of the snow which came that night. They stayed a few moments and then slowly hopped away and were lost among the tree trunks. A further search only frightened a prairie chicken from beneath a hawthorne bush, where he had meant to pass the night; and the bluebirds were not seen again. But the sight of bluebirds in Iowa on the nineteenth day of February is glory enough for one day.

III. MARCH—AND A SPRING BOUQUET

Every pilgrim to the mystic land of spring knows hallowed places in sunny valleys where the tender goddess first reveals herself at Nature's living altars. Yet he can scarcely tell at which shrine she will first appear. She delights in surprising her votaries. Thoreau was right in saying that no man was ever alert enough to behold the first manifestation of spring. Sometimes as we walk toward the mossy bank in the glen where the fresh green leaves of the haircap mosses were last year's first signs of vernal verdure, the bluebird calls to us from the torch-like top of the smooth sumac and shyly tells us that, if we please, spring is here. Sometimes we thrill with the "honk, honk" of the Canada goose and think the A-shaped band of migrants is surely this year's messenger, crying in the wilderness to prepare the way of the goddess and make her paths straight; but a little later we pass through a shadowy ravine where the white oaks have held their leaves all winter, and find that the great horned owl has already appropriated a last year's hawk's nest and deposited therein her two white eggs. At the foot of the sunny hill where the spring has freely flowed all winter long, we tramp around the swamp in the vain hope of finding the purplish monk's-hood or the skunk's cabbage; but look up to see, instead, the many "mouse ears," shining like bits of silvery fur, along the slender stems of the pussy willow. Or we tramp through a hazel thicket, where the squirrels have been festive among the nuts all winter, in the hope of finding, among the myriads of short, stiff catkins, one which has lengthened and softened until it is ready to pour its golden pollen into our palms. We find neither this nor the crimson stars of the fertile flowers, but the chirp of a white-throated sparrow directs our eyes to a young aspen tree from whose every flower-bud spring is peeping.



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Nature's first flowers are those of the amentaceous trees, and the earliest of these are the pussy willow, the quaking asp, and the hazel. All of them are quick to respond to the kindly influences of a vase of water and a sunny window and we may have all three of these first blossoms in a spring bouquet at home by the first of March. Towards the last of February the catkins of the pussy willows and the aspens are creeping from beneath their bud-scales to meet the goddess of spring half way, and every warm day in March coaxes them a little farther. Meanwhile the staminate catkins of the hazel are lengthening and the pistillate buds are swelling, as the sun presses farther northward at the dawn and the dusk of each day, pushing back the gray walls of the canon of night, that the river of day may flow full and free.

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This year some of the aspens heralded the spring. They grew at the head of a little creek which traversed a long, sunny, sheltered swamp. Their gray green trunks were in the foreground of the Master Planter's color design, the darker and taller background being a mixture of wild cherry, red oak, linden, and white ash. The high notes were given by the rose purple of the raspberry, the dark maroon of the blackberry, and the orange varnished bud-scales of the aspens themselves,—Nature never forgets her color accents. In the earliest warm days of February the catkins of the aspens were peeping from their imprisoning scales, and by the first of March they were half out, their white silken fringes and tiny clusters of rose-pink stamens glistening in the sunlight as if spring's pink cheeks were sheltered by soft, gray fur. We look up at these fleecy clusters, freed from the brownish bud-scales, with a far background of bluest sky, and think that it must have been such a grove as this to which the Princess Nausicca sent Ulysses to wait for her, described by Homer as "a beautiful grove of aspen poplars, a fountain and a meadow."

Only an aspen tree in an Iowa slough! Yes, but more than that. This is the first sign of the resurrection which we call spring. When the pilgrims to the Eleusinian mysteries were ridiculed because of the commonplace nature of their symbols, they rightly replied that more than that which met the eye existed in the sacred things; that whosoever entered the temple of Lindus, to do honor to Demeter, the productive and nourishing power of the earth, must be pure in heart if he would gain reward. The square, the flag, the cross, the swelling bud of spring, what are they all but symbols of the realities?



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We shall forget these first humble flowers of spring by-and-by when we find a brilliant cardinal flower, or a showy lady's slipper, just as we forget the timid, tender tones of the bluebird when the grand song of the grosbeak floods the evening air, or the exquisite melody of the hermit thrush spiritualizes the leafy woods; just as many a man forgets the ministrations of his humbler friends in early life when he has climbed into the society of those whom earth calls great. But the aspens will neither grieve nor murmur. They will continue to make delightful color contrasts with their smooth white trunks at the gateways of the dark woods in winter and whisper to every lightest breeze with their delicate leaves in summer. The aspen, like the grass, hastens to cover every wound and burn on the face of nature. It follows the willow in reclaiming the sandy river bottoms and replaces the pines which fire has swept from the Rocky Mountain slopes. It has a record in the rocks and a richer story in literature. Its trembling leaves have caught the attention of all the poets from Homer until now. The Scottish legend says they tremble because the cross of Calvary was made from an aspen tree. The German legend says the trembling is a punishment because the aspen refused to bow when the Lord of Life walked in the forest. But the Hebrew chronicler says that the Lord once made his presence upon the earth heard in the movement of the aspen leaves. "And it shall be, when thou shalt hear a sound of going in the tops of the aspen [wrongly translated mulberry] trees, that then thou shalt go forth to battle; for God is gone before thee to smite the host of the Philistines." What a fine conception of the nearness of the Omnipresent and the gentleness of the Almighty! No sound or sign from the larger trees! Only the whisper of the lightest leaves in the aspen tops when the Maker of the world went by!

The aspen was made the chief tree in the groves of Proserpine. And Homer, in describing the Cyclops' country, speaks of it as a land of soft marshy meadows, good rich crumbling plow land, and beautiful clear springs, with aspens all around them. How much that sounds like a description of Iowa!

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The willow is equally distinguished. The roots of its "family tree" are in the cretaceous rocks and its branches spread through the waters of Babylon, the Latin eclogues, the wondrous fire in the Knightes' Tale, Shakespeare's plays, the love songs of Herrick and Moore, and across the ocean to the New World, adorning the sermons of Cotton Mather, the humor of Hosea Bigelow, and the nature poems of Whittier.

*"For ages, on our river borders,
These tassels in their tawny bloom
And willowy studs of downy silver
Have prophesied of spring to come.*

"Thanks, Mary, for this wildwood token
Of Freya's footsteps drawing near;

Almost, as in the rune of Asgard,
The growing of the grass I hear." _



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Nor must the hazel in this earliest spring bouquet be forgotten. The crimson stars of its fertile flowers, ten or a dozen little rays at the ends of the scaly buds on the bare stems, are the most richly colored flowers of the earliest spring. Some years they are formed as early as the twentieth of March. When you find them then look for the re-appearance of the mud-turtles down in the valleys and listen for the first feeble croaks of the frogs. The old Greeks watched the tiny inner scales of these fertile flowers grow into the husk of the nut, fancied its resemblance to a helmet, and called the bush *corys*; whence its botanic name *corylus*. Its English name comes from the Saxon *haesle*, a cap. The growing hazel nuts gladdened the children of most of the early civilized world. One of the shepherds in Vergil's fifth eclogue invites the other to "sit beneath the grateful shade, which hazels interlaced with elms have made;" but this hazel of which Menelaus spoke was a tree. The Romans regarded the hazel as an emblem of peace and a means of reconciling those who had been estranged. When the gods made Mercury their messenger they gave him a hazel rod to be used in restoring harmony among the human race. Later he added the twisted serpents at the top of this caduceus. The caduceus also had the power of producing sleep, hence Milton calls it "the opiate rod."

When the crimson threads appear in the scaly buds the staminate catkins are lengthening, and soon the high wind shakes the golden pollen over all the copse. These flowers which appear before the leaves all depend upon the wind for their fertilization. That is why they come before the leaves. And there is always wind enough to meet all their needs.

March is a masculine month. It was named after the war god and it always lives up to its traditions. It has had scant courtesy from the literary men.

*"Ah, passing few are they who speak,
Wild, stormy month, in praise of thee."*

'Twas a night in March when little Gavroche took his infant proteges into the old elephant which stood in the Place de la Bastille to shelter them from the cruel wind. It was in the twilight of a day in March, when the wind howled dismally, that Boniface Willet, in *Barnaby Rudge*, flattened his fat nose against the window pane and made one of his famous predictions. It must have been a March freshet when the Knight Huldebrand put Bertalda into Kuhleborn's wagon and the gentle Undine saved them both. And we fancy that it was a cold night in March when Peter stood by the fire and warmed himself.

But the winds of March deserve a word of praise, as everyone knows who has filled his lungs with their vitalizing freshness and felt the earth respond to their purifying influence. They are only boisterous, not cruel. The specters of miasma and contagion flee before them like the last leaves. Many of the oaks have held a wealth of withered foliage all the winter but now the leaves fly almost as fast as they did in late October,

and make a dry, rustling carpet up to your shoe tops. Now and again the wind gets down into this leaf-carpet and makes merry sport.



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Listen to the majestic roar of the winds in a grove of rugged oaks, and then again, for contrast, where the timber on the river bottom is all-yielding birch. It is like changing from the great *diapason* to the *dulciana* stop. In the mixed woodlands, so common in Iowa, the effect is even more delightful. The coarse, angular, unyielding twigs of the oaks give deep tones like the vibrations of the thick strings on the big double bass. The opposite, widespreading twigs of the ash sing like the cello, and the tones of the alternate spray of the lindens are finer, like the viola. The still smaller, opposite twigs of the maples murmur like the tender tones of the altos and the fine, yielding spray of the birches, the feathery elm and the hackberry make music pure and sweet as the wailing of the first violins. When the director of this *maestoso* March movement signals *fortissimo* the effect is sublime and the fine ear shall not fail to detect the overtones which come from the hop hornbeams and the hazel in the undergrowth below.

In keeping with the majestic orchestra is the continuous noise of grinding ice from the river. There is a sign at the edge of the birch swamp which says: "Positively no trespassing allowed here"—but it is not necessary now, for the river has overflowed the swamp and big masses of ice lean up against the trunks of the birches. Out in the main channel the river is swiftly flowing, packed with ice floes, from the little clear fragments which shine like crystals, to the great masses as big as the side of a house, bearing upon them the accumulated dust and dirt and uncleanness of the winter. Pieces of trees, trunks and roots, cornstalks from fields along the shore, all are being carried seaward. In the middle of the river the prow of a flat boat projects upward from between two huge ice floes which have mashed it, like a miniature wreck in arctic seas. The best view of this annual ice spectacle is to look up the river and see the big field of broken, tumbling, crashing, grinding ice coming down.

Farther down, at the narrows of the river, where the heavy timber shuts out the sunlight, the ice has not given way and here a gorge is formed. Hundreds of tons of ice are washed swiftly up to it and stop with a crash. The water backs up, flows over the banks and fills up all the summer fish ponds along the shore. Some of it forces its way through, foaming into a white spray. By-and-bye, under the combined influence of the rushing water and the ever increasing weight of the ice, the gorge gives way and the irresistible floes pass on with a mighty crash to their dissolution in the summery waters away down the Mississippi. After many months of shrouded death this new life of the river is also a symbol of the resurrection.

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There are other days in March so soft and beautiful that they might well have a place in May.



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*"And in thy reign of blast and storm,
Smiles many a long, bright, sunny day
When the changed winds are soft and warm,
And heaven puts on the blue of May."*

From the summit of a thinly-treed hill we look across a wide valley on the right which gradually slopes up to a high ridge three miles away. On the left there is a clear view for fully twenty miles, out to where the lavender haze hangs softly on the forest-fringed horizon. The plowed fields lie mellow and chocolate-hued in the sunlight and the russet meadows are beginning to show a faint undertone of green. The golden green of the willow fences which separate some of the fields shines from afar in the abundant light and there is a quickening crimson in the tops of the red maple groves around the homesteads. The deep blue of the high-domed sky gives a glory to the landscape. The few, far clouds, soft and white, float slowly in the azure sea and now and then approach the throne of the king of day, sending dark shadows chasing the sunlight over the smiling fields. When these shadows reach the nearer woodlands across the valley on the right it is as if a moving belt of dark pines was swiftly passing through the deciduous forest. We think of Birnam wood removing to Dunsinane, but that was trivial compared with this. The dark belt of shadow makes a strong and beautiful contrast to the reddish brown and gray of the winter woods.

The river is more than bank full. Shut in on one side by the high ridge upon which we are standing it has spread over half a mile of bottom on the other side. Once more, after many months of waiting we rejoice in the gleam of its waters. The broad valley, which has so long been paved with white, is bottomed with amethyst now, the fainter reflection of the azure sky above. The trees which have so long stood comfortless again see their doubles in the waters below. The huge gray trunks of the water elms and the silver maples, the red rags of the birches and the delicate tracery of their spray, the ruby gold of the willows, the shining white of the sycamores, the ashen green of the poplars and the dark crimson of the wild rose and the red osier dogwood,—all these are reflected as from a vast mirror.

There is not a ripple on the surface. But anon a belated ice floe comes down the main channel and shows how swiftly the waters are flowing now that they once more move "unvexed to the sea." There are still some masses hugging the shore. One by one they slip into the waters and float away,—just as a man's prejudices and delusions are the last to leave him after the light of truth and the warmth of love have set his soul free from the bondage of error and wrong.



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The stillness is a marked contrast to the recent roar of the winds. You may hear your watch ticking in your pocket. The leisurely tapping of a downy woodpecker sounds like the ticking of a clock in a vast ancestral hall. You may actually hear a squirrel running down a tree, twenty rods away. He paws out an acorn and begins to eat. The noise of your footstep seems like a profanation of holy ground. Also it disturbs the squirrel who scurries up to the topmost twigs of an elm nearly a hundred feet high. With a glass you may see his eyes shine as he watches you. His long red tail hangs down still and straight and there is not breeze enough, even up there, to stir it.

Gnats and moths flit in the soft sunlight and spiders run over tree trunks while their single shining lines of silk are stretched among the hazel.

Anon the bird chorus breaks out, full and strong. The winter birds report all present but there are a number of new voices, especially the warble of the robin, the tremulous, confiding “sol-si, sol-si” of the bluebird and the clear call of the phoebe. The robins are thick down in the birch swamps, on the islands among the last year’s knot-weed. You may tell them at a distance by their trim, military manner of walking, and if you wish you may get close enough to them to take their complete description. And, by the way, how many can describe this common bird, the color of his head and bill, his back and tail, and the exact shade of his breast. Is there any white on him, and if so, where?

After the ice is out of the rivers the bird-lover is kept busy. In the early sunny morning the duet of the robins and the meadow larks is better than breakfast. March usually gives us the hermit thrush and the ruby-and golden-crowned kinglets; the song, field, fox, white throated, Savannah and Lincoln sparrows; the meadow lark, the bronzed grackle and the cowbird; the red-winged, the yellow-head and the rusty blackbirds; the wood pewee and the olive-sided flycatcher; the flicker and the sap-sucker, the mourning dove and several of the water fowl. Last week—the first week in March—a golden eagle paused in his migration to sit awhile on a fence post at the side of a timber road. Two men got near enough to see the color of his feathers and then one of them, with a John Burroughs instinct, took a shot at him. He missed; there was a spread of the great wings and the big bird resumed his journey northward.

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By the shallow creek which ripples over the many-hued gravel there is much of interest. The frog sits on the bank as we approach and goes into the water with a splash. In the quiet little bayous the minnows are lively, and tracks upon the soft mud show that the muskrat has been watching them. A pile of neatly cleaned clam shells is evidence that the muskrat has had a feast. There is a huge clam, partly opened, at arm’s length from the shore. We fish it out and pry it open farther; out comes the remains of the esculent clam, and we almost jump when it is followed by a live and healthy crawfish.



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It never pays to be a clam. It is very meet, right, and the bounden duty of every quadruped, biped and decapod to prey upon the clam.

Farther down is a sandy hollow which was deep under water in the great January freshet. That freshet deposited a new layer of sand and also bushels of clam and snail shells of all sizes and species. They lie so thick they may be taken up by the shovelful. Two or three dead fish are also found. What a fine fossiliferous stratum will be found here about a hundred million years from now!

In March the rains and the melting of the "robin snows" soften the leathery lichens and their painted circles on the trees and rocks vary from olive gray and green to bright red and yellow. They revel in the moist gray days. And the mosses which draw a tapestry of tender velvet around the splintered rocks in the timber quarries and strangely veil the ruin of the fallen forest kings,—how much they add to the beauty of the landscape in the interval between the going of the snow and the coming of the grass! The rich dark green of the common hair-cap clothes many a bank with beauty, the dense tufts of the broom moss hide the ruin and assuage the grief where an exalted forest monarch has been cast down by the storm. The silvery Bryum shows abundantly on the sandy fields and the thick green velvet mats of the Anomodon creep up the bases of the big water elms in the swamps. The delicate branchlets of the beautiful fern moss are recompense for a day's search, and the bright yellow-green Schreber's Hypnum, with its red stems, is a rich rug for reluctant feet. The moist rocks down which the water trickles into the ravine below are stained green and orange by the glossy Entodon. These patient mosses cover wounds in the landscape gently as tender thoughts soothe aching voids left by the loss of those we love. They lead us into the most entrancing bits of the woodland scenery—shaded rills, flowing springs, dashing cascades, fairy glens, and among the castellated rocks of the dark ravines. Their parts are so exquisitely perfect, almost they persuade the nature-lover to degenerate into a mere naturalist, walking through the woods seeing nothing but sporophytes through his lens, just as a rare book sometimes causes the bibliophile to become a bibliomaniac, reading nothing but catalogues. It is a credit to be a bibliomaniac provided one is a bibliophile as well. And the best moss naturalists are they whose hearts respond to the enthusiasm in Ruskin's closing paragraphs of *Leaves Motionless*.

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The yielding odorous soil is promiscuous after its stubborn hardness of winter months and we watch it eagerly for the first herbaceous growth. Often this is one of the fern allies, the field horsetail. The appearance of its warm, mushroom-colored, fertile stems is one of the first signs of returning spring, and its earliest stems are found in dry sandy places. The buds containing its fruiting cones have long been all complete, waiting for the first warm day, and when the start is finally made the tubered rootstocks, full of nutriment, send up the slender stem at the rate of two inches a day.



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During the last week in the month, when the dark maroon flowers of the elm and the crimson blossom of the red maples are giving a ruddy glow to the woods with the catkins of the cotton-woods, the aspens and the red birches adding to the color harmony, we shall look for the fuzzy scape of the hepatica, bringing up through the leaf carpet of the woods its single blue, white or pinkish flower, closely wrapped in warm gray furs. At the same time, perhaps a day or two earlier, the white oblong petals of the dwarf trillium, or wake-robin, will gleam in the rich woods. And some sunny day in the same period we shall see a gleam of gold in a sheltered nook, the first flower of the dandelion. A few days later and the light purple pasque-flower will unfold and gem the flush of new life on the northern prairies. Even should the last week of the month be unseasonably cold we shall not have long to wait. Yet

"—a little while

And air, soil, wave, suffused shall be in softness, bloom and growth; a thousand forms shall rise

*From these dead clods and chills, as from low burial graves,
Thine eyes, ears,—all thy best attributes,—all that takes
cognizance of natural beauty,*

*Shall wake and fill. Thou shalt perceive the simple shows,
the delicate miracles of earth*

*Dandelions, clover, the emerald grass, the early scents and flowers;
With these the robin, lark and thrush, singing their songs—the
flitting bluebird;*

For such scenes the annual play brings on."