

DECEMBER, 1911

THE
CANADIAN
MAGAZINE

PRICE 25 CENTS



CHRISTMAS NUMBER

THE ONTARIO PUBLISHING CO. LIMITED
TORONTO

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Title: The Woods in Winter

Date of first publication: 1911

Author: L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery (1874-1942)

Date first posted: Dec. 20, 2016

Date last updated: Dec. 20, 2016

Faded Page eBook #20161212

This ebook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

The Woods in Winter

L. M. Montgomery

First published *Canadian Magazine*, December 1911.

Last night it snowed. I had been waiting for this first snowfall before I went again to the woods. I did not wish to spy upon their nakedness. It seems like taking an unfair advantage of old friends to visit them when they are unclad, with all the little ins and outs of their realm laid pitifully bare. There is always a November space, after the leaves have fallen, when it seems almost indecent to intrude on the forest, for its glory terrestrial has departed, and its glory celestial . . . of spirit and purity and whiteness . . . has not yet come upon it. Of course, there are dear days sometimes, even in November, when the woods are beautiful and gracious in a dignified serenity of folded hands and closed eyes . . . days full of a fine, pale sunshine that sifts through the firs and glimmers in the gray beechwood, lighting up evergreen banks of moss and washing the colonnades of the pines . . . days with a high-sprung sky of flawless turquoise, shading off into milkiness on the far horizons . . . days ending for all their mildness and dream in a murky red sunset, flaming in smoky crimson behind the westering hills, with perhaps a star above it, like a saved soul gazing with compassionate eyes into pits of torment, where sinful spirits are being purged from the stains of earthly pilgrimage.

But such days are an exception in late November and early December. More commonly they are dour and forbidding, in a "hard, dull bitterness," with sunless gray skies. The winds that still go "piping down the valleys wild" are heartbroken searchers, seeking for things loved and lost, wailing in their loneliness, calling in vain on elf and fay; for the fairy folk, if they be not all fled afar to the southlands, must be curled up asleep in the hearts of the pines or among the roots of the ferns; and they will never venture out amid the desolation of winter woods where there is no leafy curtain to screen them, no bluebell into which to creep, no toadstool under which to hide.

But last night the snow came . . . enough to transfigure and beautify, but not enough to spoil the walking; and it did not drift, but just fell softly and lightly, doing its wonder-work in the mirk of a December night. This morning, when I awakened and saw the world in the sunlight, I had a vision of woodland solitudes of snow, arcades picked out in pearl and silver, long floors of untrodden marble, whence spring the cathedral columns of the pines. And this afternoon I went to find the reality of my vision in the woods "that belt the gray hillside" . . . ay, and overflow beyond it into many a valley white-folded in immortal peace.

One can really get better acquainted with the trees in winter. There is no drapery of leaves to hide them from us; we can see all their beauty of graceful limb, of upreaching boughs, of mesh-like twigs, spun against the transparent skies. The slenderness or straightness or sturdiness of their trunks is revealed; even the birds'

nests . . . “there are no birds in last year’s nest” . . . are hung plainly in sight for any curious eye to see. It does not matter now. The dappled eggs have long ago hatched out into incarnate melody and grace, and the birdlings have flown to lands of the sun far-distant, caring nothing now for their old cradles, which are filled with winter snows.

The beeches and maples are dignified matrons, even when stripped of their foliage; and the birches . . . look you at that row of them against the spruce hill, their white limbs gleaming through the fine purple mist of their twigs . . . are beautiful pagan maidens who have never lost the Eden secret of being naked and unashamed.

But the conebearers, stanch souls that they are, keep their secrets still. The firs and the pines and the spruces never reveal their mystery, never betray their long-guarded lore. See how beautiful is that thickly-growing copse of young firs, lightly powdered with the new-fallen snow, as if a veil of aerial lace had been tricksily flung over austere young druid priestesses forsworn to all such frivolities of vain adornment. Yet they wear it gracefully enough . . . firs can do anything gracefully, even to wringing their hands in the grip of a storm. The deciduous trees are always anguished and writhen and piteous in storms; but there is something in the conebearers akin to the storm spirit . . . something that leaps out to greet it and join with it in a wild, exultant revelry. After the first snowfall, however, the woods are at peace in their white loveliness. To-day I paused at the entrance of a narrow path between upright ranks of beeches, and looked long adown it before I could commit what seemed the desecration of walking through it . . . so taintless and wonderful it seemed, like a street of pearl in the New Jerusalem. Every twig and spray was outlined in snow. The undergrowth along its sides was a little fairy forest cut out of marble. The shadows cast by the honey-tinted winter sunshine were fine and spirit-like. Every step I took revealed new enchantments, as if some ambitious elfin artificer were striving to show just how much could be done with nothing but snow in the hands of somebody who knew how to make use of it. A snowfall such as this is the finest test of beauty. Wherever there is any ugliness or distortion it shows mercilessly; but beauty and grace are added unto beauty and grace, even as unto him that hath shall be given abundantly.

As a rule, winter woods are given over to the empery of silence. There are no birds to chirp and sing, no brooks to gurgle, no squirrels to gossip. But the wind makes music occasionally and gives in quality what it lacks in quantity. Sometimes on a clear starlit night it whistles through the copses most freakishly and joyously; and again, on a brooding afternoon before a storm it creeps along the floor of the woods with a low, wailing cry that haunts the hearer with its significance of hopelessness and

boding.

To-day there are no drifts. But sometimes, after a storm, the hollows and lanes are full of them, carved by the inimitable chisel of the north-easter into wonderful shapes. I remember once coming upon a snowdrift in a clearing far back in the woods which was the exact likeness of a beautiful woman's profile. Seen too close by, the resemblance was lost, as in the fairy tale of the Castle of St. John; seen in front, it was a shapeless oddity; but at just the right distance and angle, the outline was so perfect that when I came suddenly upon it, gleaming out against the dark background of spruce in the glow of a winter sunset, I could hardly convince myself that it was not the work of a human hand. There was a low, noble brow, a straight, classic nose, lips and chin and cheek curve modelled as if some goddess of old time had sat to the sculptor, and a breast of such cold, swelling purity as the very genius of the winter woods might display. All "the beauty that old Greece and Rome sang, painted, taught" was expressed in it; yet no eyes but mine saw it.

She is a rare artist, this old Mother Nature, who works "for the joy of the working," and not in any spirit of vain show. To-day the fir woods on the unsheltered side of the hill, where the winds have shaken off the snow, are a symphony of greens and grays, so subtle that you cannot tell where one shade begins to be the other. Gray trunk, green bough, gray-green moss, above the white floor. Yet the old gypsy doesn't like unrelieved monotonous . . . she must have a dash of colour. And here it is . . . a broken dead fir branch of a beautiful brown swinging among the beards of moss.

All the tintings of winter woods are extremely delicate and elusive. When the brief afternoon wanes, and the low, descending sun touches the faraway hill-tops of the south-west there seems to be all over the waste places an abundance, not of colour, but of the spirit of colour. There is really nothing but pure white after all, but one has the impression of fairy-like blendings of rose and violet, opal and heliotrope, on the slopes and in the dingles, and along the curves of the forest land. You feel sure the tint is there; but when you look directly at it it is gone . . . from the corner of your eye you know it is lurking over yonder in a spot where there was nothing but a pale purity a moment ago. Only just when the sun is setting is there a fleeting gleam of real colour; then the redness streams over the snow, and incarnadines the hills and fields, and smites the crest of the firs on the hills with flame. Just a few minutes of transfiguration and revelation . . . and it is gone . . . and over the woods falls the mystic veil of dreamy, haunted winter twilight.

To my right, as I stand breathlessly happy in this wind-haunted, star-sentinelled valley, there is a grove of tall, gently waving spruces. Seen in daylight those spruces

are old and uncomely . . . dead almost to the tops, with withered branches. But seen in this enchanted light against a sky that begins by being rosy saffron and continues to be silver green, and ends finally in crystal blue, they are like tall, slender witch maidens weaving spells of necromancy in a rune of elder days. How I long to share in their gramarye . . . to have fellowship in their twilight sorceries!

Up comes the moon! Saw you ever such beauty as moonlight in winter woods . . . such wondrous union of clear radiance with blackest gloom . . . such hints and hidings and revealings . . . such deep copses laced with silver . . . such aisles patterned with shadow . . . such valleys brimmed over with splendour? I seem to be walking through a spellbound world of diamond and crystal and pearl; I feel a wonderful lightness of spirit and a soul-stirring joy in mere existence . . . a joy that seems to spring fountain-like from the very deeps of my being and to be independent of all earthy things. I am alone and I am glad of it. Any human companionship, even the dearest and most perfect, would be alien and superfluous to me now. I am sufficient unto myself, needing not any emotion of earth to round out my felicity. Such moments come rarely . . . but when they do come they are inexpressibly marvellous and beautiful . . . as if the finite were for a second infinity . . . as if humanity were for a space uplifted into divinity. Only for a moment, 'tis true . . . yet such a moment is worth a cycle of common years untouched by the glory and the dream.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Woods in Winter* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]