

From

The Woodland Life

by

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Winter in Richmond Park

and

*Extracts from A Diary in English Fields and
Woods*

Winter in Richmond Park

A keen frost and a grey hanging fog have numbed and silenced all life within the Park. Not a sound trembles through the heavy air. The rooks that travel over, each day at dawn, linger yet in their roosting-trees, and no sullen caw reaches us from their dark forms high up in the elms. Starlings, whose myriad wings make a faint music through the morning air as they pass for distant meadows, are also delaying their flight: until sunlight pierce the glooms they will not stir.

From the outermost twigs of a broad-spreading chestnut the stem is quite invisible, and the boughs above are lost in grey, so dense is the mist. Nestling against the trunk are scattered groups of sparrows, hardly moving, and betrayed only by a half-hearted chirp at rare intervals. The melancholy long-drawn whistle of a starling that sits with ruffled plumage in the same tree is the only other break in the stillness.

The windows of a cottage facing southeast flash back the first bright sunbeam. A rustling breath of wind sighs through the dense foliage of the spruce-firs and disperses the fog, till all around countless points of frosty crystal glitter in the tardy sunlight. Slowly the landscape is unfolded as the fog retires, and depths of woodland, unseen before, loom slowly into view. When at last the

mist hovers above the elms of the horizon and the far-off mere, from a kindly veil of fern doubling back to the grass the morning lark climbs high into grey space. Instantly, as in answer to a signal, the shivering birds scatter from their retreats of knot-hole, tussock, and rugged oak-limb. Widespread companies of rooks go dinning overhead, and the starlings take a hurrying flight eastward. On every side the clamouring sparrows descend to scour the grass and the bramble underwood; some of them wander to the pools, and where the ice does not prevent, indulge themselves in a bath, spraying the water with their rapid play of wings, and quarrelling noisily for the best places.

From the bed of a narrow runnel, not yet filled with winter floods, we can watch the starlings foraging across the lawn. Intent on a meal already long deferred, they allow us a close approach. At each step they make a swift downward stroke of the beak on their insect prey. Rapidly here and there they hop and run, now hidden by a tussock, now in full view above the close-shorn grass. In their busy journeying to and fro they weave an intricate maze of lightly trodden paths leaving no inch of ground unsought and no sod unprobed. Tomtits, a busy throng, find insects in plenty about the elms and in the beeches, where a few dun leaves, shrivelled and dry, still rustle in the breeze. They climb and spring and flutter from branch to bough, springing heedlessly upon the slenderest twigs

that rock wildly beneath them. As they advance slowly along the groves or away into the thickets, their merry chattering talk echoes sweetly through the glades. Ever and anon a score or two of fallen leaves are lifted feebly among the trees. The tenacious oaks still hold their leaves, but the stronger winds cause a russet fan to float slowly through the air to the deepening mass that lies in the hollows beneath.

Sober-hued "November" moths cling motionless against the grey oak-palings, and seem but half alive, not stirring even when touched. Each frost and every morning dew chills them more and more, and ere long they must perish and fall to earth. The fog that hung thick and silent about the fields an hour since suggested no thought of beauty, but now that it has vanished it leaves behind crystal beads of moisture, adorning the slim beech-wands and the dead thistle-heads below. Twin leaves of woodbine just unfolding in so cold an air, hold within their clefts one sparkling drop.

Out from the rank clinging undergrowth, now turned grey, rises a tall bleached stem of hemlock. Long bereft of foliage and blossom, it has outlasted its compeers of the summer; but its shiny stalk of crude arsenical green is now brittle and shrunken, and nothing save the skeleton ribs remain of the umbels that once bore its flowers. The old stalk rises amidst the branches of a birch, and leaning

on this support its fall is long delayed. Around are showing newly budding leaves of humbler growths, whose faintly-fragrant foliage makes the hemlock the more gaunt by contrast. On the briers, not quite leafless, though deeply sere by slow action of the elements, the few hips spared by the field-fares are dull black and wrinkled, probably by the frost. Some of their younger branches wave high above the rest in graceful curves, pale green with great ruddy claws, the thicker and older stems being dark and dull, almost of an earth-brown hue.

Past rolling acres of dead bracken and mossy banks drilled with rabbit-burrows, giant oaks rising on either hand, the broad track of greensward descends to the Penn Ponds. 'Tis here, girt about by tufted rushes and gently sloping turf,

“Where the duck dabbles 'mid the rustling sedge,
And feeding pike starts from the water's edge,
Or the swan stirs the reeds, his neck and bill
Wetting, that drip upon the water still;
And heron, as resounds the trodden shore,
Shoots upward, darting his long neck before.”

The wild duck are invisible, but their haunt is where the flags grow thickest, and rustling alders throw a deep shade; moorhens creep among the rushes, and every now and again their startling cry comes weirdly along the

shore. Upon the placid surface, near the tiny islet, a pair of swans glide slow and silent, heard only when they skim the water with clumsy ponderous flight; the pike assert their presence and their marauding habit by an occasional mighty swirl among the rotting weeds; carp leap perpendicularly half-way into the air. Alone of the wonted denizens of the ponds and the enclosed woodland by their margin, we miss the herons, gone, perhaps, on their wintry wanderings by wild sea-shore or in marshland solitudes. Beneath yonder oak, that leans somewhat over the water, is a favourite haunt of the heron: late into the grey twilight his lank figure may be seen there, motionless in the reedy pools, dreaming over his own dim shadow, till gudgeon or eel unwittingly approaches within the stroke of that poniard bill.

From the marshy sward about the edge of the higher pond, our way, diverging from the beaten path, lies along a slight ascent through a waste of brake-fern and crisp yellowing turf, trodden in all directions with rabbit-runs. In amongst the oaks that tower well apart like massive columns, straight and thick, we hear wood-pigeons clatter out of the branches with loudly beating pinions. On either side, far as eye can reach, stretch tiers of dark-stemmed trees. Some of them fork into a pair of giant limbs close to the earth, and are less striking than those which rise sheer up without a break for many yards. The lofty gnarled

hollows within the trunks of the larger trees suggest the haunt of owls. High out of reach against the rugged sides their nests might well be reared; but the stern spirit of game preservation drives elsewhere the soft-winged hunter of the night. In the oval shadows cast by the oaks the grass is short and spare, cropped, no doubt, by the deer when feasting on the strewn acorns.

Beyond a strip of level turf tall palings surround a large plantation, with dark chestnuts showing at the border. These are sacred depths, whence comes the vigorous crow of a pheasant or the garrulous screaming of the unwelcomed jay. Where the trees end an open space is studded with bare hawthorns, one or two still aglow with their bright haws. Nearer the fence thickly-growing rhododendron-bushes make a perpetual shelter for rabbits and winged game, affording as they do safe cover when bramble and thorn are leafless.

With the approach of night the mist has again lightly gathered, and the sun setting over the western oaks is quite obscured. Empty husks of Spanish chestnuts crunch audibly underfoot, but farther on the walking is soft and silent over the velvety sward. Not yet retired for his winter sleep, a bat wheels in eccentric curves overhead, and as he flits above the moonlit pool a faint shadow of him falls on the shimmering surface.

A Diary in English Fields and Woods (extracts)

April 1, 1895

Heronry at Richmond Park – on a harsh blowing day. Nests chiefly in firs, also in beech and oak, and almost invariably built among the crowning branches; differing much in bulk – some are huge with the layers of succeeding years, others slightly built in the manner of wood-pigeons. One nest was a yard thick, of large twigs, the hollow for the eggs, however, being no broader or deeper than usual. In general, the eggs are laid in a shallow depression, roughly lined with mosses and light grasses or branchlets. The number of the herons has decreased, the keeper thinks, since the long frost, when the ponds were ice-bound and abandoned by moor-hen and wild duck; at which season the birds are much abroad in foraging, at the river-side or remote marshlands, and a prey to every gunner. Not more than five or six nests could we then make out. One contained six eggs, an usual number; like a wild duck's in size and colour, but rough and chalky in the surface of the shell, as many sea-birds' are: they had been laid, probably, in the middle of last month, and would be hatched in two weeks hence. Another nest had only one egg, others were empty yet. Rising at our approach, the birds wheeled, their legs held parallel to their tails and close to the body, disturbing the banded wood-pigeons from the oaks

under. When about to alight, the legs are dangled awkwardly as if seeking a perch, and their cries are loud and hoarse, varied by gentler metallic calls and coughings not bird-like. We learnt that the colony is the result of a forced migration from the neighbouring Park of Bushy.

Hedge-sparrow laying: in a low-built nest with the willow “palms” over it: following the blackbird, thrush, and robin.

Swans resorting to their nests in the parks.

August 5, 1895

Swifts abound in Richmond Park, haunting the ponds there with the swallows and martins.

This wet weather succeeding the late drought favours the pheasant-rearing.

Crows do far more harm to the game in the Park than hawks: the former use art, and sidle up and wait about all day; the latter dash, gain or miss, and are off. But a hawk will on occasion seize a chick, or more often the nestling of a song-bird, under the very mouth of the gun.

The arrival of a hawk is rare and noteworthy now, and though a pair will haunt the plantations with the intent of breeding, it is very rarely that they succeed even in building a nest – far more seldom do they hatch. They, with the jays (so common near by, at Wimbledon) and rarer magpies, are ruthlessly shot.

Stoats and weasels are trapped and shot; and, so ill has the exterminating work been carried out, not one has been seen this summer.

Owls visit and are shot here.

Peewits once haunted the low greensward, rush-tufted, that sweeps to the larger ponds.

7.30 P.M. the herons return to their nesting trees: five of the birds in close company came over from the west. Each wing-stroke lifts the bird perceptibly, but its course is not thus altered, sinking as it does in the distinct interval between each flap.

October 20, 1895

Hawthorn blossoming, in scattered sprays, on Wandsworth Common; while the leaves are gone, or going, with purple about them.

Fallow bucks gathered and grunting at Richmond.

November 12, 1895

Beech-trunks covered with ledges of wrinkled fungus.

Grass, a rarer green when it is shorn by the rabbits about their burrows.

Many hips are now blackened and shrivelled by frost, but the silky seeds within are safe; several are unfaded scarlet amongst them.

Wonderful bunches of big haws on the whitethorns, but untouched by the birds; whilst the hips are almost cleared from the briers.

Tall white grasses standing in the woods, their streamer leaves quivering on every wind.

Oak smothered in green ivy, which hides its true leaflessness.

Oval willow-buds, green and nut-brown, alternate from side to side up the branches

Thick bands of chaffinches in rhododendrons at Richmond; which evergreen cover they love and roost in.

Wood-pigeons come home from their forays in the oaks, late, and in broken companies.

November 30, 1895

Hedge-sparrows singing; and intermittently, with wren and robin, through the winter.

Seven herons arriving late at the Richmond settlement.

A sparrow-hawk flew over; in autumn, released from nesting duties, they wander, like most birds, more than at other times.

A late bat abroad.

Weeding the Penn Ponds at Richmond; just as they sink, rotting, below the surface, and become less hindrance to fishing.

7 January, 1896

Year opens mild, with the happy songs of blackbird and thrush thick in the woods; green shoots rising everywhere; all life is quick and glad; the fallow deer idle in the tempered sun under the oaks at Richmond, or sip the water through budding buttercups and weeds.

Wood-pigeons crowd to the oaks at sundown, clattering loudly.

7 February, 1896

Celandine, pilewort, leaves appear.

Hérons busy in their quarters at Richmond Park. At least eight nests appeared complete, so that their nesting this year is very forward. In rising from us they made strange cries, snortings, and blowings such as could be expected of them.

Wood-pigeons still in huge numbers in the same wood; taking an hour to settle finally for the night, with noisy flapping as they dive – looking much paler in plumage than at other times.

Crow, though unpermitted, has a nest along with the herons.

Ducks wandering in the underwood and rhododendrons, pairing thus early.

Great companies of rooks and daws crowding to the places where deer have lain in the afternoon.

Many oaks felled at this time in Richmond Park.