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From "Twice Told Tales"
#39 in our series by Nathaniel Hawthorne

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***** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK, SNOW FLAKES *****

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TWICE TOLD TALES

SNOW-FLAKES

By Nathaniel Hawthorne

There is snow in yonder cold gray sky of the morning!-and, through the partially frosted window-panes, I love to watch the gradual beginning of the storm. A few feathery flakes are scattered widely through the air, and hover downward with uncertain flight, now almost alighting on the earth, now whirled again aloft into remote regions of the atmosphere. These are not the big flakes, heavy with moisture, which melt as they touch the ground, and are portentous of a soaking rain. It is to be, in good earnest, a wintry storm. The two or three people, visible on the side-walks, have an aspect of endurance, a blue-nosed, frosty fortitude, which is evidently assumed in anticipation of a comfortless and blustering day. By nightfall, or at least before the sun sheds another glimmering smile upon us, the street and our little garden will be heaped with mountain snow-drifts. The soil, already frozen for weeks past, is prepared to sustain whatever burden may be laid upon it; and, to a northern eye, the landscape will lose its melancholy bleakness and acquire a beauty of its own, when Mother Earth, like her children, shall have put on the fleecy garb of her winter's wear. The cloud-spirits are slowly weaving her white mantle. As yet, indeed, there is barely a rime like hoarfrost over the brown surface of the street; the withered green of the grass-plot is still discernible; and the slated roofs of the houses do but begin to look gray, instead of black. All the snow that has yet fallen within the circumference of my view, were it heaped up together, would hardly equal the hillock of a grave. Thus gradually, by silent and stealthy influences, are great changes wrought. These little snow-particles, which the storm-spirit flings by handfuls through the air, will bury the great earth under their accumulated mass, nor permit her to behold her sister sky again for dreary months. We, likewise, shall lose sight of our mother's familiar visage, and must content ourselves with looking heavenward the oftener.

Now, leaving the storm to do his appointed office, let us sit down, pen in hand, by our fireside. Gloomy as it may seem, there is an influence productive of cheerfulness, and favorable to imaginative thought, in the atmosphere of a snowy day. The native of a southern clime may woo the muse beneath the heavy shade of summer foliage, reclining on banks of turf, while the sound of singing birds and warbling rivulets chimes in with the music of his soul. In our brief summer, I do not think, but only exist in the vague enjoyment of a dream. My hour of inspiration--if that hour ever comes--is when the green log hisses upon the hearth, and the bright flame, brighter for the gloom of the chamber, rustles high up the chimney, and the coals

drop tinkling down among the growing heaps of ashes. When the casement rattles in the gust, and the snow-flakes or the sleety raindrops pelt hard against the window-panes, then I spread out my sheet of paper, with the certainty that thoughts and fancies will gleam forth upon it, like stars at twilight, or like violets in May,-- perhaps to fade as soon. However transitory their glow, they at least shine amid the darksome shadow which the clouds of the outward sky fling through the room. Blessed, therefore, and reverently welcomed by me, her true-born son, be New England's winter, which makes us, one and all, the nurslings of the storm, and sings a familiar lullaby even in the wildest shriek of the December blast. Now look we forth again, and see how much of his task the storm-spirit has done.

Slow and sure! He has the day, perchance the week, before him, and may take his own time to accomplish Nature's burial in snow. A smooth mantle is scarcely yet thrown over the withered grass-plot, and the dry stalks of annuals still thrust themselves through the white surface in all parts of the garden. The leafless rose-bushes stand shivering in a shallow snow-drift, looking, poor things! as disconsolate as if they possessed a human consciousness of the dreary scene. This is a sad time for the shrubs that do not perish with the summer; they neither live nor die; what they retain of life seems but the chilling sense of death. Very sad are the flower shrubs in midwinter! The roofs of the houses are now all white, save where the eddying wind has kept them bare at the bleak corners. To discern the real intensity of the storm, we must fix upon some distant object,--as yonder spire,--and observe how the riotous gust fights with the descending snow throughout the intervening space. Sometimes the entire prospect is obscured; then, again, we have a distinct, but transient glimpse of the tall steeple, like a giant's ghost; and now the dense wreaths sweep between, as if demons were flinging snowdrifts at each other, in mid-air. Look next into the street, where we have seen an amusing parallel to the combat of those fancied demons in the upper regions. It is a snow-battle of school-boys. What a pretty satire on war and military glory might be written, in the form of a child's story, by describing the snowball-fights of two rival schools, the alternate defeats and victories of each, and the final triumph of one party, or perhaps of neither! What pitched battles, worthy to be chanted in Homeric strains! What storming of fortresses, built all of massive snowblocks! What feats of individual prowess, and embodied onsets of martial enthusiasm! And when some well-contested and decisive victory had put a period to the war, both armies should unite to build a lofty monument of snow upon the battle-field, and crown it with the victor's statue, hewn of the same frozen marble. In a few days or weeks thereafter, the passer-by would observe a shapeless mound upon the level common; and, unmindful of the famous victory, would ask, "How came it there? Who reared it? And what means it?" The shattered pedestal of many a battle monument has provoked these questions, when none could answer.

Turn we again to the fireside, and sit musing there, lending our ears to the wind, till perhaps it shall seem like an articulate voice, and dictate wild and airy matter for the pen. Would it might inspire me

to sketch out the personification of a New England winter! And that idea, if I can seize the snow-wreathed figures that flit before my fancy, shall be the theme of the next page.

How does Winter herald his approach? By the shrieking blast of latter autumn, which is Nature's cry of lamentation, as the destroyer rushes among the shivering groves where she has lingered, and scatters the sear leaves upon the tempest. When that cry is heard, the people wrap themselves in cloaks, and shake their heads disconsolately, saying, "Winter is at hand!" Then the axe of the woodcutter echoes sharp and diligently in the forest; then the coal-merchants rejoice, because each shriek of Nature in her agony adds something to the price of coal per ton; then the peat-smoke spreads its aromatic fragrance through the atmosphere. A few days more; and at eventide, the children look out of the window, and dimly perceive the flaunting of a snowy mantle in the air. It is stern Winter's vesture. They crowd around the hearth, and cling to their mother's gown, or press between their father's knees, affrighted by the hollow roaring voice, that bellows a-down the wide flue of the chimney. It is the voice of Winter; and when parents and children bear it, they shudder and exclaim, "Winter is come! Cold Winter has begun his reign already!" Now, throughout New England, each hearth becomes an altar, sending up the smoke of a continued sacrifice to the immitigable deity who tyrannizes over forest, country side, and town. Wrapped in his white mantle, his staff a huge icicle, his beard and hair a wind-tossed snow-drift, he travels over the land, in the midst of the northern blast; and woe to the homeless wanderer whom he finds upon his path! There he lies stark and stiff, a human shape of ice, on the spot where Winter overtook him. On strides the tyrant over the rushing rivers and broad lakes, which turn to rock beneath his footsteps. His dreary empire is established; all around stretches the desolation of the Pole. Yet not ungrateful be his New England children,--for Winter is our sire, though a stern and rough one,--not ungrateful even for the severities, which have nourished our unyielding strength of character. And let us thank him, too, for the sleigh-rides, cheered by the music of merry bells; for the crackling and rustling hearth, when the ruddy firelight gleams on hardy Manhood and the blooming cheek of Woman; for all the home enjoyments, and the kindred virtues, which flourish in a frozen soil. Not that we grieve, when, after some seven months of storm and bitter frost, Spring, in the guise of a flower-crowned virgin, is seen driving away the hoary despot, pelting him with violets by the handful, and strewing green grass on the path behind him. Often, ere he will give up his empire, old Winter rushes fiercely back, and hurls a snow-drift at the shrinking form of Spring; yet, step by step, he is compelled to retreat northward, and spends the summer months within the Arctic circle.

Such fantasies, intermixed among graver toils of mind, have made the winter's day pass pleasantly. Meanwhile, the storm has raged without abatement, and now, as the brief afternoon declines, is tossing denser volumes to and fro about the atmosphere. On the window-sill, there is a layer of snow, reaching half-way up the lowest pane of glass. The garden is one unbroken bed. Along the street are two or three spots

of uncovered earth, where the gust has whirled away the snow, heaping it elsewhere to the fence-tops, or piling huge banks against the doors of houses. A solitary passenger is seen, now striding mid-leg deep across a drift, now scudding over the bare ground, while his cloak is swollen with the wind. And now the jingling of bells, a sluggish sound, responsive to the horse's toilsome progress through the unbroken drifts, announces the passage of a sleigh, with a boy clinging behind, and ducking his head to escape detection by the driver. Next comes a sledge, laden with wood for some unthrifty housekeeper, whom winter has surprised at a cold hearth. But what dismal equipage now struggles along the uneven street? A sable hearse, bestrewn with snow, is bearing a dead man through the storm to his frozen bed. O, how dreary is a burial in winter, when the bosom of Mother Earth has no warmth for her poor child!

Evening--the early eve of December--begins to spread its deepening veil over the comfortless scene; the firelight gradually brightens, and throws my flickering shadow upon the walls and ceiling of the chamber; but still the storm rages and rattles, against the windows. Alas! I shiver, and think it time to be disconsolate. But, taking a farewell glance at dead Nature in her shroud, I perceive a flock of snow-birds, skimming lightsomely through the tempest, and flitting from drift to drift, as sportively as swallows in the delightful prime of summer. Whence come they? Where do they build their nests, and seek their food? Why, having airy wings, do they not follow summer around the earth, instead of making themselves the playmates of the storm, and fluttering on the dreary verge of the winter's eve? I know not whence they come, nor why; yet my spirit has been cheered by that wandering flock of snow-birds.

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By Nathaniel Hawthorne

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