

THOUGHTAUDIO



WORRIES OF A WINTER WALK

From Literature and Life — Short Stories and Essays

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The other winter, as I was taking a morning walk down to the East River, I came upon a bit of our motley life, a fact of our piebald civilization, which has perplexed me from time to time, ever since, and which I wish now to leave with the reader, for his or her more thoughtful consideration.

I.

The morning was extremely cold. It professed to be sunny, and there was really some sort of hard glitter in the air, which, so far from being tempered by this effulgence, seemed all the stonier for it. Blasts of frigid wind swept the streets, and buffeted each other in a fury of resentment when they met around the corners. Although I was passing through a populous tenement-house quarter, my way was not hindered by the sports of the tenement-house children, who commonly crowd one from the sidewalks; no frowzy head looked out over the fire-escapes; there were no peddlers' carts or voices in the road-way; not above three or four shawl-hooded women cowered out of the little shops with small purchases in their hands; not so many tiny girls with jugs opened the doors of the beer saloons. The butchers' windows were painted with patterns of frost, through which I could dimly see the frozen meats hanging like hideous stalactites from the roof. When I came to the river, I ached in sympathy with the shipping painfully atilt on the rocklike surface of the brine, which broke against the piers, and sprayed itself over them like showers of powdered quartz.

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But it was before I reached this final point that I received into my consciousness the moments of the human comedy which have been an increasing burden to it. Within a block of the river I met a child so small that at first I almost refused to take any account of her, until she appealed to my sense of humor by her amusing disproportion to the pail which she was lugging in front of her with both of her little mittened hands.

I am scrupulous about mittens, though I was tempted to write of her little naked hands, red with the pitiless cold. This would have been more effective, but it would not have been true, and the truth obliges me to own that she had a stout, warm-looking knit jacket on. The pail-which was half her height and twice her bulk-was filled to overflowing with small pieces of coal and coke, and if it had not been for this I might have taken her for a child of the better classes, she was so comfortably clad. But in that case she would have had to be fifteen or sixteen years old, in order to be doing so efficiently and responsibly the work which, as the child of the worse classes, she was actually doing at five or six. We must, indeed, allow that the early self-helpfulness of such children is very remarkable, and all the more so because they grow up into men and women so stupid that, according to the theories of all polite economists, they have to have their discontent with their conditions put into their heads by malevolent agitators.

From time to time this tiny creature put down her heavy burden to rest; it was, of course, only relatively heavy; a man would have made nothing of it. From time to time she was forced to stop and pick up the bits of

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coke that tumbled from her heaping pail. She could not consent to lose one of them, and at last, when she found she could not make all of them stay on the heap, she thriftily tucked them into the pockets of her jacket, and trudged sturdily on till she met a boy some years older, who planted himself in her path and stood looking at her, with his hands in his pockets. I do not say he was a bad boy, but I could see in his furtive eye that she was a sore temptation to him. The chance to have fun with her by upsetting her bucket, and scattering her coke about till she cried with vexation, was one which might not often present itself, and I do not know what made him forego it, but I know that he did, and that he finally passed her, as I have seen a young dog pass a little cat, after having stopped it, and thoughtfully considered worrying it.

I turned to watch the child out of sight, and when I faced about towards the river again I received the second installment of my present perplexity. A cart, heavily laden with coke, drove out of the coal-yard which I now perceived I had come to, and after this cart followed two brisk old women, snugly clothed and tightly tucked in against the cold like the child, who vied with each other in catching up the lumps of coke that were jolted from the load, and filling their aprons with them; such old women, so hale, so spry, so tough and tireless, with the withered apples red in their cheeks, I have not often seen.

They may have been about sixty years, or sixty-five, the time of life when most women are grandmothers and are relegated on their merits to the cushioned seats of their children's homes, softly silk-gowned and lace-capped, dear visions of lilac and lavender, to be loved and petted by their grandchildren. The fancy can hardly

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put such sweet ladies in the place of those nimble beldams, who hopped about there in the wind-swept street, plucking up their day's supply of firing from the involuntary bounty of the cart. Even the attempt is unseemly, and whether mine is at best but a feeble fancy, not bred to strenuous feats of any kind, it fails to bring them before me in that figure. I cannot imagine ladies doing that kind of thing; I can only imagine women who had lived hard and worked hard all their lives doing it; who had begun to fight with want from their cradles, like that little one with the pail, and must fight without ceasing to their graves. But I am not unreasonable; I understand and I understood what I saw to be one of the things that must be, for the perfectly good and sufficient reason that they always have been; and at the moment I got what pleasure I could out of the stolid indifference of the cart-driver, who never looked about him at the scene which interested me, but jolted onward, leaving a trail of pungent odors from his pipe in the freezing eddies of the air behind him.

II.

It is still not at all, or not so much, the fact that troubles me; it is what to do with the fact. The question began with me almost at once, or at least as soon as I faced about and began to walk homeward with the wind at my back. I was then so much more comfortable that the aesthetic instinct thawed out in me, and I found myself wondering what use I could make of what I had seen in the way of my trade – **a writer of short stories for the New York Gazette- and my constant need of finding new themes for my editors contentious deadlines.** Should I have something very pathetic, like the old grandmother going out day after day to pick

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up coke for her sick daughter's freezing orphans till she fell sick herself? What should I do with the family in that case? They could not be left at that point, and I promptly imagined a granddaughter, a girl of about eighteen, very pretty and rather proud, a sort of belle in her humble neighborhood, who should take her grandmother's place. I decided that I should have her Italian, because I knew something of Italians, and could manage that nationality best, and I should call her Maddalena; either Maddalena or Marina; Marina would be more Venetian, and I saw that I must make her Venetian. Here I was on safe ground, and at once the love-interest appeared to help me out. By virtue of the law of contrasts; it appeared to me in the person of a Scandinavian lover, tall, silent, blond, whom I at once felt I could do, from my acquaintance with Scandinavian lovers in Norwegian novels. His name was Janssen, a good, distinctive Scandinavian name; I do not know but it is Swedish; and I thought he might very well be a Swede; I could imagine his manner from that of a Swedish waitress we once had.

Janssen--Jan Janssen, say--drove the coke-cart which Marina's grandmother used to follow out of the coke-yard, to pick up the bits of coke as they were jolted from it, and he had often noticed her with deep indifference. At first he noticed Marina--or Nina, as I soon saw I must call her--with the same unconcern; for in her grandmother's hood and jacket and check apron, with her head held shamefacedly downward, she looked exactly like the old woman. I thought I would have Nina make her self-sacrifice rebelliously, as a girl like her would be apt to do, and follow the cokecart with tears.

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This would catch Janssen's notice, and he would wonder, perhaps with a little pang, what the old woman was crying about, and then he would see that it was not the old woman. He would see that it was Nina, and he would be in love with her at once, for she would not only be very pretty, but he would know that she was good, if she were willing to help her family in that way.

He would respect the girl, in his dull, sluggish, Northern way. He would do nothing to betray himself. But little by little he would begin to befriend her. He would carelessly overload his cart before he left the yard, so that the coke would fall from it more lavishly; and not only this, but if he saw a stone or a piece of coal in the street he would drive over it, so that more coke would be jolted from his load.

Nina would get to watching for him. She must not notice him much at first, except as the driver of the overladen, carelessly driven cart. But after several mornings she must see that he is very strong and handsome. Then, after several mornings more, their eyes must meet, her vivid black eyes, with the tears of rage and shame in them, and his cold blue eyes. This must be the climax; and just at this point I gave my fancy a rest, while I went into a drugstore at the corner of Avenue B to get my hands warm.

They were abominably cold, even in my pockets, and I had suffered past several places trying to think of an excuse to go in. I now asked the druggist if he had something which I felt pretty sure he had not, and this put him in the wrong, so that when we fell into talk he was very

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polite. We agreed admirably about the hard times, and he gave way respectfully when I doubted his opinion that the winters were getting milder. I made him reflect that there was no reason for this, and that it was probably an illusion from that deeper impression which all experiences made on us in the past, when we were younger; I ought to say that he was an elderly man, too. I said I fancied such a morning as this was not very mild for people that had no fires, and this brought me back again to Janssen and Marina Nina , by way of the coke-cart.

The thought of them rapt me so far from the druggist that I listened to his answer with a glazing eye, and did not know what he said. My hands had now got warm, and I bade him good-morning with a parting regret, which he civilly shared, that he had not the thing I had not wanted, and I pushed out again into the cold, which I found not so bad as before.

My hero and heroine were waiting for me there, and I saw that to be truly modern, to be at once realistic and mystical, to have both delicacy and strength, I must not let them get further acquainted with each other.

The affair must simply go on from day to day, till one morning Jan must note that it was again the grandmother and no longer the girl who was following his cart. She must be very weak from a long sickness--I was not sure whether to have it the grippe or not, but I decided upon that provisionally and she must totter after Janssen, so that he must get down after a while to speak to her under pretence of arranging the tail-board of his cart, or something of that kind; I did not care for the detail.

They should get into talk in the broken English which was the only language they could have in common, and she should burst into tears, and

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tell him that now Nina was sick; I imagined making this very simple, but very touching, and I really made it so touching that it brought the lump into my own throat, and I knew it would be effective with the reader. Then I had Jan get back upon his cart, and drive stolidly on again, and the old woman limp feebly after.

There should not be any more, I decided, except that one very cold morning, like that; Jan should be driving through that street, and should be passing the door of the tenement house where Nina had lived, just as a little procession should be issuing from it. The fact must be told in brief sentences, with a total absence of emotionality. The last touch must be Jan's cart turning the street corner with Jan's figure sharply silhouetted against the clear, cold morning light. Nothing more.

But it was at this point that another notion came into my mind, so antic, so impish, so fiendish, that if there were still any Evil One, in a world which gets on so poorly without him, I should attribute it to his suggestion; and this was that the procession which Jan saw issuing from the tenement-house door was not a funeral procession, as the reader will have rashly fancied, but a wedding procession, with Nina at the head of it, quite well again, and going to be married to the little brown youth with ear-rings who had long had her heart.

With a truly perverse instinct, I saw how strong this might be made, at the fond reader's expense, to be sure, and how much more pathetic, in such a case, the silhouetted figure on the coke-cart would really be. I should, of course, make it perfectly plain that no one was to blame,

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and that the whole affair had been so tacit on Jan's part that Nina might very well have known nothing of his feeling for her. Perhaps at the very end I might subtly insinuate that it was possible he might have had no such feeling towards her as the reader had been led to imagine.

III.

The question as to which ending I ought to have given my romance is what has ever since remained to perplex me, and it is what has prevented my ever writing it. Here is material of the best sort lying useless on my hands, which, if I could only make up my mind, might be wrought into a short story as affecting as any that wring our hearts in fiction; and I think I could get something fairly unintelligible out of the broken English of Jan and Nina's grandmother, and certainly something novel. All that I can do now, however, is to put the case before the reader, and let him decide for himself how it should end.

The mere humanist, I suppose, might say, that I am rightly served for having regarded the fact I had witnessed as material for fiction at all; that I had no business to bewitch it with my miserable art; that I ought to have spoken to that little child and those poor old women, and tried to learn something of their lives from them, that I might offer my knowledge again for the instruction of those whose lives are easy and happy in the indifference which ignorance breeds in us. I own there is something in this, but then, on the other hand, I have heard it urged by nice people that they do not want to know about such squalid lives, that it is offensive and out of taste to be always bringing them in, and that

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we ought to be writing about good society, and especially creating grandes dames for their amusement. This sort of people could say to the humanist that he ought to be glad there are coke-carts for fuel to fall off from for the lower classes, and that here was no case for sentiment; for if one is to be interested in such things at all, it must be aesthetically, though even this is deplorable in the presence of fiction already overloaded with low life, and so poor in grandes dames as ours.

THE END