

PUTTING WINTER TO BED

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Old Winter with an angry frown
Restationed on his head his crown,
And grew more obdurate,
As rumours every day had flown
From some officials near the throne
That he might abdicate.

Fixing his rivals with his eyes,
He thumped his chest and slapped his thighs,
And ground his Arctic heel,
Splintering the dais, just to show
That he was lord of ice and snow,
With sinews of wrought steel.

His patience had been sorely tried
By a recent blow dealt to his pride,
When March, the stripling, dared
To jeer at him with callow yells,
And shake the hoary icicles
From off the Royal Beard.

Then at a most indecent time,
The lusty youngster nearing prime,
Gaining in reach and height,
Had called out Winter to his face
To meet him in a neutral place,
And join in single fight.

The gage accepted, Winter drew
First blood, then beat him black and blue
With Nordic thrust and swing,
Till March at last, the wily fox,
Clipped him on the equinox,
And bashed him round the ring.

And would have clearly had him down,
Captured his domain and crown,
When three parts through the bout,
Had not the king with a trick malign
Cracked him on the nether sign,
And March was counted out.

So now, with an Alaskan ire,
He donned in full his white attire,
Lord of the polar waste,
And claimed before those flabby-thewed
Contenders of a southern brood,
He would not be displaced.

And yet before the week was passed,
Neuralgic headaches thick and fast
Were blinding him with tears;
Despite the boast, he needed rest
To stop that panting in his breast,
That buzzing in his ears.

He wandered to a frozen brook
Beneath dank willows where he took
His usual noon-day nap;
He heard dull subterranean calls,
Narcotic sounds from crystal falls,
The climbing of the sap.

He laid his head against a stump,
One arm reclined upon a clump
Of glaciated boulders;
The other held his side—he had
Pleuritic pains and very bad
Rheumatic hips and shoulders.

A sorry sight indeed he lay,
A god-like being in decay—
Dead leaves were all around him:
His favourite cave of ice was streaming,
And many a fallen trunk was steaming,
The day that April found him.

With one glance at his swollen feet,
Her diagnosis was complete,
That dropsy had set in:
She felt his pulse—"Lord, what a rate!
His heart is in a parlous state,
And colic roars within.

"O shame, that March should thus surprise him,
Without a thought to acclimatize him
Towards a mellow age;
I know another way benign
To lead him through an anodyne
Into his hermitage."

She spent her morning in the search
For twigs of alder and of birch
And shoots of pussy willow;
She wove these through a maze of fern,
Added some moss on her return,
And made the downiest pillow.

Then with a bath of rain and sleet
She took the chilblains from his feet
With tender lubrication;
She poulticed out the angry spots,
The kinks and cramps and spinal knots,
And all discoloration.

So with her first aid rendered, she
Began her ancient sorcery,
Quietly to restore
His over-burdened mind to sleep,
Dreamless and passionless and deep,
Out of her wild-wood lore.

It took three days to get his throat
Clear of that wheezy guttural note,
His brain to vaporize;
She conjured him at last to rest,
Folded his hands across his breast
And sealed up both his eyes.

Then over his lank form she threw
The lightest coverlet she knew,
Brought from her deepest glades—
The whites and grays of quiet mood,
Pale pinks and yellows all subdued
With brown and purple shades.

The choicest of her tapestries,
Spring beauties and anemones
Plucked from the winter grass,
Wake-robins too: with these she took
Trout-lilies from a woodland brook
And cool hepaticas.

With one thing more her task was done—
Something she found hid from the sun
Within a valley low;
“Just what he needs, dawn fresh and white—
The north wind brought it over-night—
A counterpane of snow.

“So now this makes his bed complete.”
She doubled it across his feet,
And tucked it neatly in;
Then taking on a mood austere,
Kneeling, she whispered in his ear,
A word of discipline.

“Take heed! Before you enter sleep,
Swear by your honour you will keep
A vow which I propose:
Listen—an oath, which if you break,
'Twill carry for you in its wake
A multitude of woes.

“For eight months now, without demur,
You give your promise not to stir,
And not to roar or wail,
Or send your north wind with its snow,
Or yet the east whose vapors blow
Their shuddering sleet and hail.

“So help you then for evermore—
If you so much as cough or snore,
My seven younger sisters,
Who follow after me in turn,
Are under strict command to burn
Your body up with blisters.

“Of autumn, too, you must beware,
For if you rise to scent the air,
Our Indian-summer maid
Will plague you past what you endure,
Until you think your temperature
One hundred Centigrade.

“But if you keep this honest vow,
I pledge their virtue, here and now,
To rouse you in December;
Then you may come on Christmas day
With furs and bells, reindeer and sleigh—
But, hand on heart—remember!”

And now, to make the pledge come true,
She walked around the king and drew
Three circles on his breast;
Murmured a charm, then bending down,
She graciously removed the crown,
And left him to his rest.