

UP WITH THE LARK.

BY KATHERINE [SIC] OSLER.

A VISIT TO WINTERLAND.

One day, just such a bright frosty day as this, which makes one feel as if one couldn't sit still, I took it into my head to slide, which of course was very absurd, at my time of life. If I had realized where my slide would take me, perhaps I should never have made it, but I enjoyed myself so much that I have never regretted it. When I began to slide I found that I could not stop myself, but went sliding on and on, without any fear of falling, which is a delightful sensation. At last I saw some iron gates straight ahead of me, and began to wonder whether I should be able to stop myself, or whether I should slide bang into them, when to my surprise just as I came close to them they opened, and I slid right through them into a large white garden. All the ground was covered with snow, and all the paths were smooth ice, on which one had to slide or skate, for it was impossible to walk on them. This was awkward for me, because I had no skates with me, and I felt my power of sliding suddenly desert me, so the only way to keep on my legs was to remain quite still where I was. Presently I saw that the garden was peopled by many small figures, clad in white fur, whom I had not noticed before against the whiteness of everything else. Two of them soon came up to me, and said in commanding [p 127]

tones, which I felt there was no disobeying, "Advance, and give the pass-word!" I endeavoured to advance, but as soon as I took a step, down I went, and in a sitting position went sliding, sliding, sliding, right to the door of a great white palace, which stood almost hidden among leafless trees and huge evergreen bushes. Here I got up, not having enjoyed my second slide so much as my first. I was again requested to give the pass-word, but could only answer feebly, "I don't know what it is."

"Not know the pass-word? Then however did you get in?" they asked.

"I—I—I slid," I murmured, tremulously, "and then the gates opened, and I came right in; I couldn't help it I'm sure, and I'll never do it again, if you'll only let me go home."

The fur-clad creatures now began bowing in a most reverential manner, and at first I thought I was the object of their respect, when I saw it was not to me but to a lady who was skating gracefully towards us that they made their obeisances. She was very tall, and clad from head to feet in a magnificent ermine robe, from under the hood of which a few stray locks of golden hair curled bewitchingly round her sweet merry face. She was followed by two ladies-in-waiting, clad in white bear-skin, and two stalwart beef-eaters.

"Who is this?" she asked, looking at me calmly with her blue eyes.

"If you please, your Majesty, he says he slid here by accident, and doesn't know the pass-word," said the furry members of the palace guard.

"Who are you?" asked the queen.

"I am a poor poet, your Majesty," I replied, "who had no intention of intruding upon your domains, and begs your clemency."

"And you shall have it," she said, graciously. "I speak for myself and for the King, who is truly hearty and kind, though some people speak of him as 'inclement Winter.' Come, follow me"; and so saying she led the way into a magnificent hall, its glass-like floor covered with skins, its walls hung with ice mirrors, and sparkling as with a thousand gems; while the hall was

beautifully decorated with wreaths of evergreens, which several servants were still at work in arranging.

[p 128]

“We are going to have a party to-night,” said the queen, “and these preparations are for it. Sit down on that heap of skins, and make yourself comfortable, and I will send someone to look after you.”

I sat still wondering what would happen next, until the door opened, and two hot mince-pies walked in, followed by a cup of coffee, the steam of which curled itself into letters, which I read, until at last I spelt out the words, “Please help yourself,” which I took to be an invitation to consume the mince-pies and coffee. Lifting one of the former, I found that it rested on two little tin legs, which ran away as soon as I had taken the pie, as did also the supporters of the other pie, and the cup of coffee. Scarcely [sic] had I finished this little meal, when the door again opened to admit the Lord Chamberlain, whom I recognised by his ivory wand. He said the King and Queen wished to see me in the morning-room.

I followed his lordship into a small but cheerful apartment, where I found the King and Queen, and two or three pretty children.

“Oh!” said King Winter, “how d’ye do, Mr.—er—”

“Skittles,” said I, some unaccountable impulse prompting me to give a name which was not my own.

“Mr. Skittles, we’re very pleased to make your acquaintance. You’ll excuse us receiving you *en famille* like this, I hope. My wife said I ought to have received you in state in the throne room, but it’s such a bother getting on the crown and all the other paraphernalia, and then there’s mounting the steps to the throne, and what not, so I thought perhaps you’d not mind coming in here and taking us as we are.”

I acknowledged his Majesty’s kindness and condescension, and he continued, “Now, Mr. Skittles, we are having a family gathering this evening; we are expecting my father-in-law, Mr. Santa Claus and his wife, and son Nicholas; and my wife and I shall esteem it an honour if you will spend the day with us, and make one of our guests to-night.”

Of course I thanked the King, and said I should be “most happy,” and then he suggested that I might like to take a walk, and sent Jack Frost with me. So putting on a pair of skates each, we started off down a side path. The first thing we met was a ready trussed turkey trotting towards the palace.

“That’s for to-night,” said Prince Frost.

[p 129]

By-and-by we met a batch of mince-pies, then a huge iced cake, and then I saw, to my horror, an object staggering down the path, wobbling from side to side, and evidently having much difficulty in keeping on its legs at all.

“It’s drunk,” I said, in disgust.

“Why, that’s the tipsy cake,” cried Jack Frost. “All right, old fellow, you’re expected,” and the cake staggered on, and eventually arrived safely at the palace, as I can testify, for I tasted it that evening.

The walk through the snowy garden soon became rather monotonous, and I was not sorry to return to the palace. We entered through a side door, and were just in time to see

lunch walk on to the table. Soon afterwards, Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus and Nicholas arrived in their reindeer sleigh, with a great jingling of bells.

The old gentleman was just like his pictures, rosy and good-tempered looking, with snowy hair and beard, and clad in a red, fur-lined robe and hood. Mrs. Santa Claus was cosily attired in velvet and fur, and had a sweet face, with the expression that mammas and aunties have when the children come to tell them what Santa Claus has put in their stockings. As for Nicholas, he was a merry little fellow, who teased his fair sister by giving his nieces and nephews unlimited sugar-plums. You may be sure I was all eagerness to hear how these great people talked, and I listened with much diligence, but their conversation was not unlike that of other people.

Santa Claus said, "Well, Blanche, my dear, how are you and your husband and the children? But I am sure I need not ask, for you all look so well." And then he had a long talk with King Winter, while Mrs. Santa Claus was saying to her daughter, "My *dear* child, *such* a drive as we've had, I thought we should *never* get here. And just as we were starting Mr. Nansen called and hindered us *ever* so long, and you know your father *does* so dislike to have the reindeer kept waiting." Whereupon the Queen was very sympathetic, seeing which, and under the cheering influence of a cup of tea, Mrs. Santa Claus brightened up, and said, "Oh! well it's all over now, and here we are, safe and sound, so it doesn't matter after all." And then the conversation became general, and we talked of many things, including Nansen,

[p 130]

which brought to Mrs. Santa Claus's mind a message from that gentleman to say he would join Queen Winter's party that evening if he possibly could, though he should probably be late. By-and-by we went to dress for the evening, and just as I was wondering what I should do a well-fitting suit of evening clothes entered my room.

When we went downstairs we had tea and coffee, and I admired the ladies' dresses. Queen Winter looked lovely in a gown of snow-flakes trimmed with bands of glittering frost, and the little princesses also wore snow dresses, while Jack Frost was clad in a close-fitting suit of black and white. The court jester was there in full clown's costume, also Harlequin and Columbine, who were to assist in a Christmas pantomime.

At seven o'clock precisely a royal salute of thirty crackers was fired to announce the approach of T.S., the Cracker King. And now the guests began to arrive, thick and fast. I can't tell you all the people I met there whom I had longed to meet. There were Scrooge, and Tiny Tim, and Mr. Pickwick, and his friends, and old Wardle, and the Queen of the Fairies, and Sir Roger de Coverley, and many others. When the King and Queen had received their guests, the trumpets played a fanfare, and we adjourned to the hall, which presented a most gorgeous spectacle. It was hung with greenery and sparkled with frost. A beautiful ice floor had been laid for dancing, mistletoe was conveniently hung in several places, one end of the hall was curtained off for the pantomime, and in the centre, reaching from floor to ceiling, was a Christmas-tree loaded with gifts and ornaments, and sparkling with real frost and snow. Santa Claus took up his stand by the tree, and Nicholas, climbing into its branches, threw down the presents from the higher boughs to his papa, who proceeded to distribute them. When everyone had received a gift and the tree was stripped, Santa Claus exclaimed, "Why, I had forgotten *my* presents," and hurrying off, soon returned with a pack, which contained a present for everyone, including myself, who received a penholder with the end carved in the likeness of

Santa Claus. After this we had snap-dragon and other Christmas games, and then returned to the dining room for supper, and after supper came dancing. Then most of the guests said "Good-night." I stayed at the palace until the next

[p 131]

day, when I was driven home in the reindeer sleigh by Santa Claus, who told me I must come and visit him at his place at the North Pole before long.

"Did you ever go?" asked Jacky.

"Oh! that's quite another story. I'll tell it you some day," replied the poet." [sic]