

THE LIFE OF A SUSSEX VILLAGE CHILD BEFORE THE 1914-18 WAR

By Betty M. Wells

Weather is always unpredictable, but I have memories of beautiful winter days, as I am sure you must have: sparkling mornings when the rime-encrusted trees seemed like a vision of fairyland and quiet afternoons when bare branches were silhouetted against a sunset sky and the rooks were reeling and circling before flying home to roost.

There were also cold, clear nights, when myriads of stars studded a great expanse of sky, and when there was always the hope of seeing a meteor flash down to earth. But these were only fleeting delights and however beautiful the out-of-doors might have been in winter, it was inevitably the fireside that beckoned, and what could have been more beautiful to a small child on the way home from school in the fading light of a winter afternoon than the friendly glow of lighted windows, and finally the lights of home shining out their welcome? This is my best winter memory of all.

During severe weather we noticed that the birds did not go foraging for food, but conserved their energy by sheltering in the trees behind our house, waiting for the door to open and scraps to be thrown out. I loved to see them swoop down on the paved area outside our back door, the big birds grabbing the larger tit-bits, and the small ones pecking around for crumbs. I always hoped some unusual visitor would appear among the throng, and particularly wanted to see a hoopoe - a wish that was never granted; they were very rare birds.



Snowdrops were those "fair maids of February" for whose coming we watch so eagerly every winter and even so they often take us by surprise. Once again my memory takes me back to my schooldays and to a poem which graphically described the scene on a mountainside where an army waits in ambush to fall on its hapless foes in the valley below.



No clash of arms accompanies the appearance of the snowdrops, but they come with equal suddenness, emerging from their hiding-place like a diminutive army perfectly camouflaged in their uniform of green and white, to assure us that spring is on the way. Winter may "have another flight" as the old Candlemas rhyme has it, but the snowdrops' message is clear - the old tyrant's days are numbered. We do not always need a human voice to lift our spirits - think of Wordsworth and his daffodils, and of the early lambs already in the fields.

In the garden of one of my childhood homes there was a low bank which in our first spring was covered with snowdrops. They were disturbed by my father's gardening activities, but later small clumps appeared where the scattered bulbs had fallen and taken root. A few years ago I saw that garden again in springtime; much of it had been allowed to run wild, and the patches of white under the trees were not snow, but snowdrops - thousands of them!

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