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THE SWEDISH EXHIBITION

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ANDERS L. ZORN—Dalecarlian Girl in Winter Costume

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The
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By
Christian Brinton

Detroit Museum of Art
1916

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GABRIEL STRANDBERG—The Cripple

INTRODUCTION

THE art of the Scandinavian countries is the youngest, in the matter of actual date, in all Europe. It is but a scant century since Sweden, Denmark, and Norway could boast what may be termed a native school. The comparative remoteness of the Peninsula from the Continent, the barrier of unfamiliar language, and kindred causes conspired for a considerable period to keep these nations isolated from the main cultural currents of the age. It was the Swedes who, through the restless lust of conquest, first came into contact with the outside world, and it is Swedish art which, in point of priority as well as general importance, claims initial consideration from the student of Scandinavian aesthetic development.

Just as it was a German, Holbein, who may be said to have founded English painting, so it was the Hamburger Ehrenstrahl who has been rightly called the father of painting in Sweden. It was in response to the desire for magnificence following the pillage and plunder of the Thirty Years War that such men as the architect Tessin and the portrait and decorative painter Ehrenstrahl placed their respective talents at the service of king and court. The art of the day was regal and pompous. The impressive royal palace and the baroque likenesses

of the three Swedish monarchs whom Ehrenstrahl limned alike reflect the pretence of late Renaissance standards of taste. They eloquently typify that militant pride which had been inflated by brilliant victories upon foreign battle-field.

There was however nothing racial, nothing indigenous, in the art of this period any more than there was in that of the epoch which followed. The gay, sparkling elegance of the Gustavian regime was Gallic, not Swedish in spirit, and such artists as Lundberg, Roslin, Lafrensen, and Hall were more Parisian than Peninsular. Gracious and refined as was their Franco-Swedish rococo inspiration, it was of exotic origin, a product of superficial conditions. And so also may be characterized the British influence, chiefly that of Reynolds and Gainsborough, which made itself felt in the portraits of von Breda and the landscapes of Elias Martin. It is indeed not difficult to account for the pessimism of that engaging cosmopolitan Egron Lundgren who, during the early decades of the last century, could see scant hope for the future of Swedish painting. And yet matters were not so bad as they seemed. The sweeping aside of the arid formalism of the classic era was followed by the rise of a romanticism which, despite manifest exaggerations, possessed the sovereign quality of feeling, of emotion.

While it is true that most of the Swedish artists

of the day were virtual expatriates who resided for long periods abroad and devoted themselves to foreign type and scene, still the glow of colour and cult of character found place upon their canvases. They flocked to Rome, Düsseldorf, Munich, or Paris as the case might be. Consciously or unconsciously they imitated Léopold Robert, Andreas Achenbach, Rottmann, or the Frenchmen Delacroix and Couture. Nevertheless, there was in their work a striving for independence of vision and treatment. Fagerlin, Jernberg, and above all Höckert, were the leading exponents of peasant genre, while in Blommér and Malmström you meet flashes of genuine northern imagination. Höckert, who lived and painted for several years in Paris, excelled both as an interpreter of popular life and as an historical painter, his *Burning of the Royal Palace, 1697*, taking rank beside Pilo's *Coronation of Gustaf III*. Veritable precursors of the modern movement, these men fostered as best they knew that spirit of nationalism which was in due course to redeem and revivify the art of the North.

The task so ably undertaken by Höckert and his associates was continued by Edvard Bergh, Per Daniel Holm, Alfred Wahlberg, Reinhold Norstedt, Georg von Rosen, and Gustaf Cederström. With Bergh and Norstedt you note the increasing importance of landscape as an independent motive.

With von Rosen and Cederström you are face to face with competent portraiture and highly professional, if somewhat pretentious, historical composition. With Wahlberg you witness for the first time in Swedish art that unity of mood and lyric beauty of sentiment—*stämning* the Swedes call it—which presaged the coming of true outdoor treatment. It was in fact such men as Wahlberg, August Hagborg, and Hugo Salmson who demolished the prestige of Düsseldorf and identified themselves with the contemporary French school. The grey-green landscape setting of Bastien-Lepage and the sober peasant who appealed to one's sense of social pity, entered Swedish art with the work of these men. Sincere observers of atmospheric effect, and close students of character, they stand upon the threshold of modernism. After this date there could be no turning back. Light once and for all began to shed its shimmering glory over nature and man.

It has been necessary to sketch with a certain particularity the unfolding of Swedish painting in order that you may fully grasp its general outlines. At first an effete and aristocratic product catering to a limited section of society, it ultimately became democratic, not to say universal, in aim and application. It submitted in a limited though not less specific degree to those same influences which moulded pictorial taste on the Continent.

Classic, romantic, and subsequently realistic, it was preparing to accept in robust, straightforward fashion the programme of the modern school.

In deference to those who cling to dates, it may be well to recall 1880 as the year when these newer ideas began to assume definite form in the minds of the Swedish painters. It was at this epoch that Zorn, Larsson, Liljefors, Nordström, and the talented but ill-fated Ernst Josephson were living and studying in France. They logically became apostles of aesthetic progress, ardent disciples of Manet, Cazin, Puvis de Chavannes, and their colleagues. Restless of temperament and thirsty for the picturesque, Zorn and Josephson posted off to Spain and the Mediterranean coast, but five years later they all forgathered in Stockholm, launched an exhibition of their work, and made their first bid for public approval. While the approval was by no means unanimous, they managed to arouse considerable interest and, after a spirited contest, succeeded in enlisting a certain measure of support. The exhibition of 1885 led to the founding the following year of the society known as the Konstnärsförbundet, an organization which, despite its tendency toward autocracy, has largely shaped the destiny of the contemporary Swedish school.

It was this revolt against academic ascendancy, coupled with a spontaneous return to native

scene and inspiration which proved the salvation of Swedish art. Unlike their predecessors the men of this particular period did not remain abroad, but returned home to continue the fight upon Scandinavian soil. The note of nationalism soon made itself felt in their work, and it is this element of nationalism, sturdy and forthright, which is the dominant characteristic of latter-day Swedish painting. Bold or delicate, brilliant or subdued, the art of these men is a song in praise of Sweden. There is no corner of the country where the painter has not penetrated, no class or condition of society which he has not portrayed. *Sverige genom konstnärsögon*—Sweden through the artist's eye—is, in the words of our friend and confrère, Carl G. Laurin, what these painters have given us, and nothing could be more welcome or appropriate.

Although bound together by a manifest community of aim and idea, each man worked along individual lines. After achieving a reputation as a successful mural decorator, Carl Larsson settled at Falun, where he built himself the bright-tinted home which is famous the world over. Everyone knows and loves Sundborn. In these spirited, sparkling water-colours we see it winter and summer, outside and within. Conceived in a vein of Swedish rococo with a basis of substantial Dalecarlian motive, this series constitutes a domestic cycle the like of which you can meet nowhere

else in art. And just as Larsson found his inspiration amid the endearing associations of family life and became the foremost Swedish intimist, so Bruno Liljefors, the son of a powdermaker and himself a born sportsman-painter, ranks as the leading exponent of naturalism. First in Uppland, and later among the wave-washed skerries of Bullerö in the *södra skärgård*, or Stockholm archipelago, he studied on the scene, as no other artist has, the secrets of bird and animal life. The canvases of Liljefors present to us in their primal spontaneity of play or hungry passion a family of foxes, a pair of great sea eagles, or a flock of wild geese feeding in the lush marshland. At the outset perhaps a trifle over-faithful to certain purely objective aspects of his subject, Liljefors later broadened his style. With succeeding years he has learned to offer something more than a mere analysis of the world of outdoor nature. His recent canvases indeed prove that he is fully abreast of the modern movement.

While it cannot be denied that Anders Zorn has always been cosmopolitan in his proclivities, he, too, was unable to resist the call of his native country, and after a few years constructed at Mora, near his humble birthplace, a spacious timber house where he devotes himself to the depiction of peasant type and scene. You may have met Zorn many times and in many places,

yet you do not know him until you have tracked him to this forest-screened retreat by the silver rim of Lake Siljan, which material success has enabled him to embellish after the fashion of a true prince of art. And however much you may admire his likenesses of society queen or captain of industry, there is no gainsaying the fact that it is at Mora, and still farther up country at Gopsmoor, where his finest things have been accomplished. The pull of deep-rooted natural forces here draws him toward the very essence of local life and character as they obtain in this still unspoiled community. These canvases in short constitute not alone a precious series of documents relative to the customs and costumes of the sturdy denizens of Dalecarlia; they also chant a joyous hymn to bodily health and beauty. They are frankly pagan and Dionysian in spirit. They hark back to days when the world was younger and freer than it now is. You have only to glance at them in order to be convinced that the antique devotees of wine, dance, and tuneful pipe flourish even in subarctic forest.

Each section of Sweden has in fact found its chosen interpreter. Not far from Larsson's delectable domicile at Falun lives and paints Anshelm Schultzberg, whose work is year by year acquiring subtler colour and a more concise mastery of form. At Arvika, near Lake Vänern,

or, when the grip of frost is upon him, at Abisko, in the far north, may be seen Gustav Fjaestad, Sweden's premier snow painter. Formerly a champion skater, Fjaestad pictures as does no other artist the inviolate whiteness of winter. At once naturalistic and stylistic, he extracts the essential beauty from a given subject no matter how simple the elements may be. And not only is he a painter, but also a handicraftsman of uncommon capacity, his carved furniture, tapestries, wood-cuts, and the like contributing their quota to an always individual and accomplished ensemble. Värmland, the home of song and fancy, of Tegnér, Fröding, and Selma Lagerlöf, was also the scene of the late Otto Hesselbom's monumental canvases. In great, sweeping mass and rhythmic line he was able to fix for us the profile of forest rising against the sky and the surface of lake silvered by the sheen of long northern twilight.

With such pictorial possibilities at hand, it is small wonder that the group of Swedish painters you note congenially assembled in Hugo Birgir's Luncheon at Ledoyen's in the Göteborg Museum, should sooner or later have striven to cast off an effete continentalism and turn their eyes toward the home country. The actual work had however to be carried forth by fresher, more vigorous talents. In addition to the artists already cited, mention should be made of Carl Wilhelmson, of

the humorous and incisive Albert Engström, the austere Nordström, and Nils Kreuger, the painter of horses seen among the sparse, close-cropped hill pastures of Öland. The production of these men and their associates, characteristic though it be, nevertheless offers but an incomplete picture of that inspiring nationalist movement, that awakening of race consciousness which was at this period making itself felt along all lines of Swedish endeavour. You will recognize the same forces at play in the early novels of Strindberg—veritable masterpieces of penetrant observation, and in the more lyrical and colourful periods of Verner von Heidenstam. Alike in letters and in art the study of *milieu* became the watchword of the younger generation.

The focal point of this activity is to be found in the life-work of the late Artur Hazelius. It was he who rediscovered for the Swedish people their national birthright. With indefatigable energy and enthusiasm he gathered from all parts of the Peninsula the records of a vanishing culture and displayed them with accuracy and effectiveness. You may assume that you know Swedish art if you have visited the leading painters in their homes, or are familiar with the National Museum and the more comprehensive contents of the Göteborg Museum. You may have inspected the private collections of Prins Eugen, Direktör Thiel,

Herr C. R. Lamm, and Direktör Thorsten Laurin yet something will be lacking unless you have studied the treasure troves of past and present in the Northern Museum and at Skansen, or better, at first hand among the country folk themselves. Sweden is pre-eminently a peasant nation, and the basis of Swedish art is to be found in that primal love of pure, brilliant colour and integrity of structure which are the essential characteristics of peasant achievement. Collective rather than individualistic, this art expresses in eloquent fashion that community of aesthetic interest which produces the most significant and enduring results.

While recognizing the ready response to foreign influence, the attainment of a refined eclecticism such as you note in Swedish painting for the past century or more, there can be no question but that the best work of these artists is that which is the most fundamentally national in theme and treatment. Axel Petersson is a greater sculptor than was Molin, and the drawings of Albert Engström, also a native of Småland, outvalue the delicate aquarelles of Egron Lundgren. It was not until Sweden discovered her innate, indigenous possibilities that art began to develop in convincing, healthy fashion. This is the lesson which each successive exhibition of Swedish painting and

sculpture teaches. And this is the lesson you will find embodied in the current undertaking.

It is not our intention to review in detail the comprehensive display of graphic or plastic production which you find within these walls. The exhibition, though in no sense advanced in character, is representative of present-day aesthetic activity in Sweden. You will not here observe any work by members of the autonomous and exclusive Konstnärsförbundet. It is a fixed principle of this body to appear alone, in isolated glory, or not at all. As usual it was in this instance a case of the Konstnärsförbundet or the rest of Sweden, you therefore having before you what is virtually the rest of Sweden.

The collection is strongest, it would appear, in the province of landscape, for Swedish painting is a predominantly salubrious, outdoor product. The subtle decorative syntheses of Fjaestad, the grave, dignified vision of Gottfrid Kallstenius, the sensitively viewed forest or snow scenes by Anshelm Schultzberg, and the subdued, lyric quietude of Erik Hedberg's star-studded mountain tarns all form a characteristic panorama of exterior motive. It is with pleasure that one can include in this category the work of a comparative newcomer, Helmer Osslund, whose rich-toned, rhythmic studies of northern waterfall form a significant accession to a novel and interesting ensemble. You will in

addition not fail to note the vigorous Lofoten Island colour-sketches of Anna Boberg, or the delicate panels of Oskar Bergman whose gift of decorative design is so highly developed, and who is able to express so much with the slender means at his disposal.

While the work of such established favourites as Zorn, Larsson, and Liljefors speaks for itself, mention should be made of Elsa Backlund-Celsing and Wilhelm Smith, who combine upon fairly even terms landscape and the figure, as well as Helmer Mas-Olle, who devotes his energies to the portrayal of the Dalecarlian peasant. The latter artist also essays portraiture, though in scarcely so authoritative and accomplished a manner as does his colleague Emil Österman. If the work of Mas-Olle savours somewhat of the older school, the same cannot be charged of Gabriel Strandberg, who selects his types from the poorer quarters of Stockholm and presents them with virile stroke and penetrant intuition. You will in fact see nothing in the exhibition comparable to these drink-shattered outcasts sitting at shabby bar or shambling along in mumbling, melancholy isolation. Strandberg is a modern—modern in his luminous, broken surfaces, modern in his mordant analysis of the downtrodden. Those addicted to the precarious habit of comparison will doubtless be tempted to call him the Scandinavian van Gogh,

saving that the stressful and distressed subjects of the one are urban, while those of the other are chiefly rural.

As an exception to that modified conservatism which obviously distinguishes the current offering, Strandberg is ably seconded by Axel Törneman, who in fact strikes the most progressive note of the display. A Post-Impressionist he may safely be called, the term being sufficiently flexible to include any of the more recent manifestations of aesthetic unrest. Others of the younger and more advanced group are Gregori Aminoff, Emil Zoir, and Hugo Carlberg, while among those of less radical sympathy may be mentioned Gabriel Burmeister, Wilhelm Behm, Alfred Bergström, Olle Hjortzberg, Axel Fahlcrantz, Oscar Hullgren, and Carl Johansson, the latter of whom finds his inspiration in the Norrland where mountain and forest slumber in the luminous twilight of the subarctic summer.

The majority of the foregoing artists exhibit with the society known as the Svenska Konstnärernas Förenings, which holds its annual displays in the Academy. Founded in 1890, the organization occupies a middle position in the history of contemporary Swedish art. Young men such as Helmer Osslund and Hugo Carlberg are welcomed within the fold, while one notes at the same time those who, like Burmeister, still remain faithful

to the reposeful Barbizon tradition. Whatever their official affiliations these men are, however, seldom without that capacity for sound, veracious observation which is typical of the art of their country. Whether academy professors or independent spirits working out problems on their own account in some remote district they are not unmindful of the new and untried possibilities of the modern palette. You will find in Sweden substantially the same proportion of radicals and conservatives as elsewhere. These equations seldom vary. There are painters in the Konstnärsförbundet whom one would expect to see in the Konstnärernas Förenings and vice versa. And it is this judicious balance of elements which adds interest to the present exhibition.

Somewhat of a revelation to the general public should prove the work of John Bauer and Ossian Elgström, two young men who in different ways typify the imaginative side of the Swedish temperament. Compared to the spontaneous creative fertility of Bauer, the more deliberate concoctions of Kay Nielsen or Dulac appear affected and artificial. These fragments from a far-off realm are invariably convincing, and reflect that naïveté of feeling which is an essential feature of such compositions. Sweden already knows and loves the author of *Bland Tomtar och Troll*, and it is to be hoped that he may find ready acceptance in America.

Elgström, while falling into the same general category, presents a different aspect. The northern strain in him is complicated by a touch of the Asiatic, an affinity with the Laplander and the Japanese. Gifts such as these artists possess are the special prerogative of youth. Their older compeer of brush and pen, Albert Engström, draws his inspiration from the well-springs of human nature and character; they find theirs in a wonder-world of awe and fancy.

Concurrently with the development of painting in Sweden, and quite as definitely marked, has been the progress of the plastic arts. Had it not been for the sterile formalism so much in vogue during his day, Sergel would have achieved notable results, and the same may be said of Byström and Fogelberg. The ideals of the modern men are vastly different from those of their predecessors. A stark monumentality and a marked feeling for the material in use be it plaster, bronze, stone, or wood characterizes the production of the new school. Carl Milles, David Edström, Christian Eriksson, Carl Eldh, and Knut Jarn are all serious, vigorous talents. Their work is as a rule glyptic rather than fictile. They prefer granite to the ready tractability of wax or clay and achieve effects which not infrequently suggest the stylistic severity of the early Assyrians or Egyptians. Milles and Edström are dominant figures, the former showing

astounding creative fertility, the latter tending toward a certain archaism of feeling and inspiration. There is indeed nothing finer of its kind than Milles's masterly eagles which adorn the terrace of Prins Eugen's villa at Valdemarsudde. The conceptions of Edström, though more static, are equally impressive, while the contribution of Christian Eriksson is instinct with grace and movement. Other sculptors who command attention are Olof Ahlberg, Gottfrid Larsson, Teodor Lundberg, Herman Neujd, and Ruth Milles, all of whom figure in the present exhibition.

When however it becomes a question of downright, inherent individuality, the foregoing artists must perforce give place to the simple, self-taught peasant lad of Småland, Axel Petersson. Starting life as a joiner, he began carving for his own diversion little figures of lean and shrewd, or jolly and obese local types such as he found them ready at hand in Döderhult. Weddings, christenings, funerals, and the like have proved his favourite subjects and it can only be said that for vigour of conception and verity of characterization, these statuettes are worthy to rank beside the drawings of Daumier or Forain. Quite frankly the best plastic work in Sweden is done in the two most typically Swedish media, granite and wood. And this is as it should be, for Greek art is inconceivable save in terms of marble, nor could the

immobility of the Egyptian figures have been better expressed than in basalt.

Surveying in sympathetic perspective the exhibition as a whole you will doubtless concede the fact that the art of Sweden is a virile, wholesome manifestation, full of fresh, unspoiled observation and revealing an almost pantheistic absorption in nature and natural phenomena. There is little pretence, little aesthetic pose in this work. Basing itself frankly upon national interest and appeal it has not strayed into tortuous bypaths where one is apt to lose contact with actual life. Submitting by turns to those larger influences which have consecutively dominated artistic endeavour in other countries, Swedish painting and sculpture have not sacrificed that sturdy autonomy of temper which must always remain a requisite characteristic of aesthetic production. The classic, romantic, realistic, and impressionistic impulses have each left their stamp upon this art, yet you cannot discover a Swedish David, Delacroix, Courbet, or Claude Monet. The master currents typified by the activities of these northerners have been adapted to specific conditions. Though the lessons taught upon the Continent have been aptly learned you will here encounter more assimilation than imitation.

Granting that this work displays a proper integrity of purpose, a distinctively national flavour,

it merely remains to be seen whether it fulfils certain more general requirements which, after all, constitute the test of enduring achievement. Is the language, linear, chromatic, atmospheric, and emotional, which these canvases speak merely local, or does it attain the accent of universality? The answer is one that may well be left to the public, and, as far as the public is concerned, it has already proved affirmative. The official exhibitions of Swedish painting and sculpture which have successively appeared at Chicago in 1893, at St. Louis in 1904, at Rome in 1911, and at San Francisco in 1915, have each won a generous measure of critical as well as popular approval. The same may also be said of the itinerant collection which toured the country in 1895-6, and of the Swedish section of the memorable Scandinavian exhibition of 1912-13.

The present offering, which comprises much of the work recently on view at San Francisco, together with certain appropriate additions, makes virtually the same appeal as did its predecessors. It has been organized along similar lines and its message to America is in no wise different. Fresh names have been added and others have disappeared. The selection has in the main tended more toward conservatism than toward radicalism; a point which has its disadvantages as well as its advantages. While in no sense holding a brief for

Leander Engström, Einar Jolin, and other audacious young Expressionists, it is nevertheless safer, when it comes to modern issues, to be inclusive rather than exclusive for, despite incidental exaggerations of mood and manner, the youngsters have a disconcerting habit of turning out right.

It is manifest that Swedish art, like the art of other countries, is to-day hesitating between the old and the new, the calm of conservatism and the troubled tides of revolution and reform. The canvases you see upon these walls do not differ in any essential respect from those of a decade or more ago. They display verity of observation, vigour of design, and a requisite regard for atmospheric effect. Save in certain cases, as for example with the work of Fjaestad, the element of synthesis is conspicuous by its absence. There are in Sweden painters who are able to organize as well as to observe, and it is in their hands that the destiny of Swedish art resides. If in brief Swedish painting is to remain true to its traditions—true especially to that stirring impetus which emanated from the men of eighteen eighty—it cannot continue stationary. It must courageously advance into the uncharted future where there will be found new combinations, new colours, and a subtler sense of that magic ambience in which all things visible and invisible are steeped.

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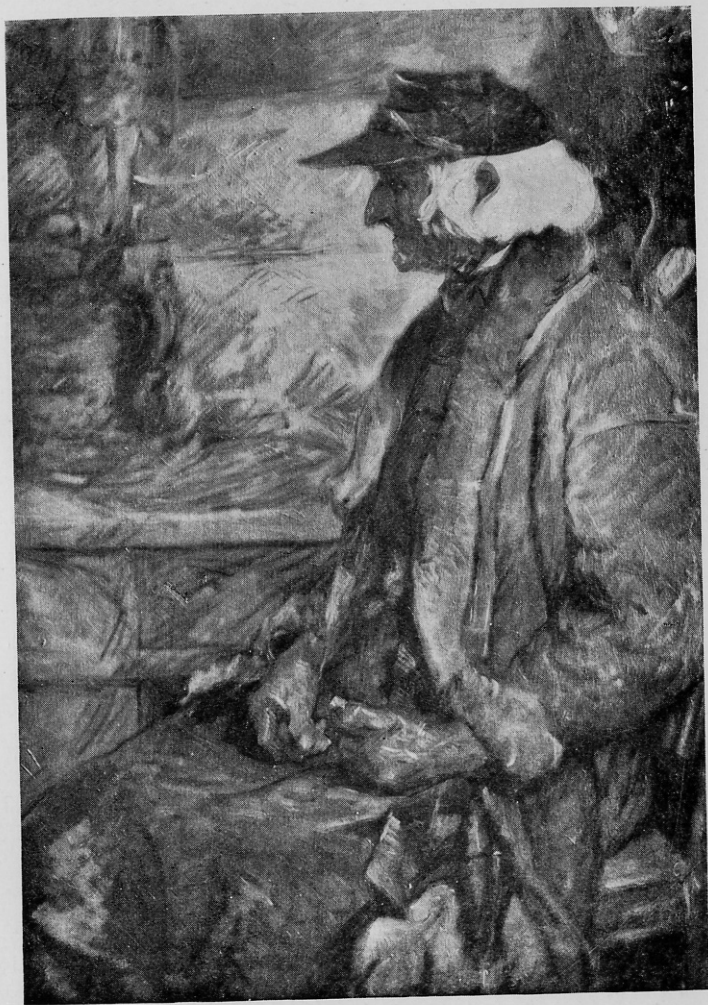
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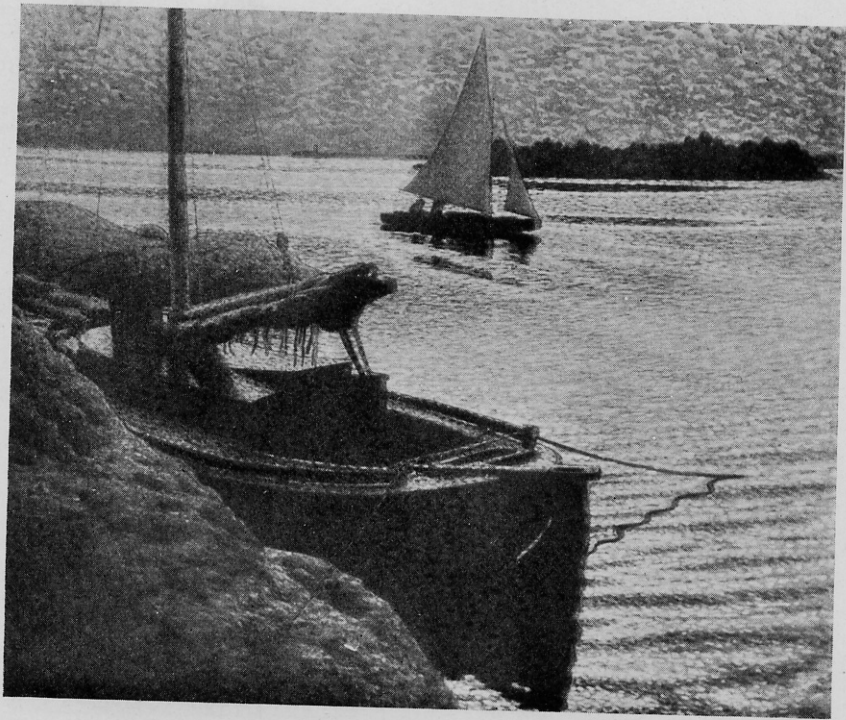
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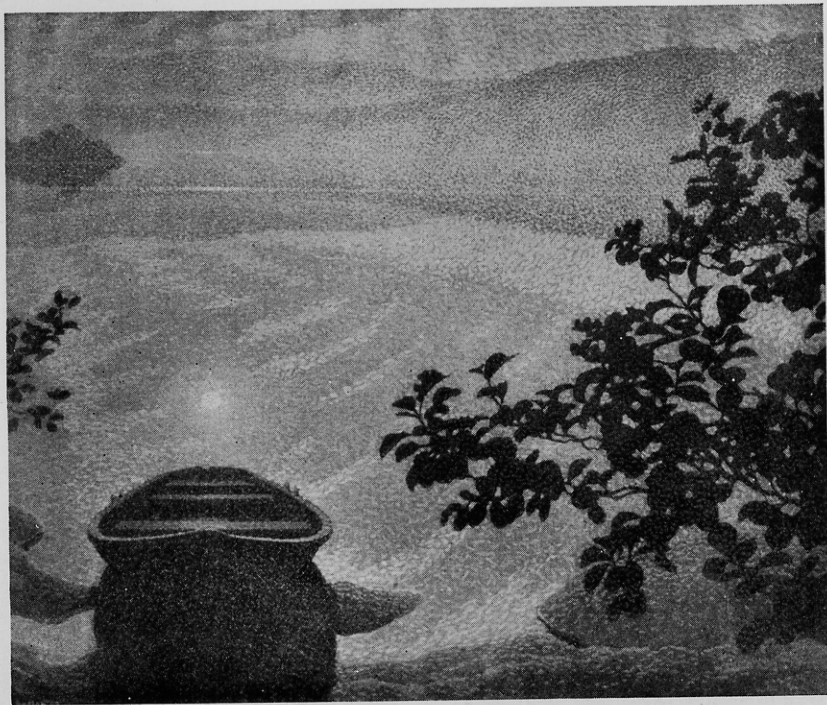
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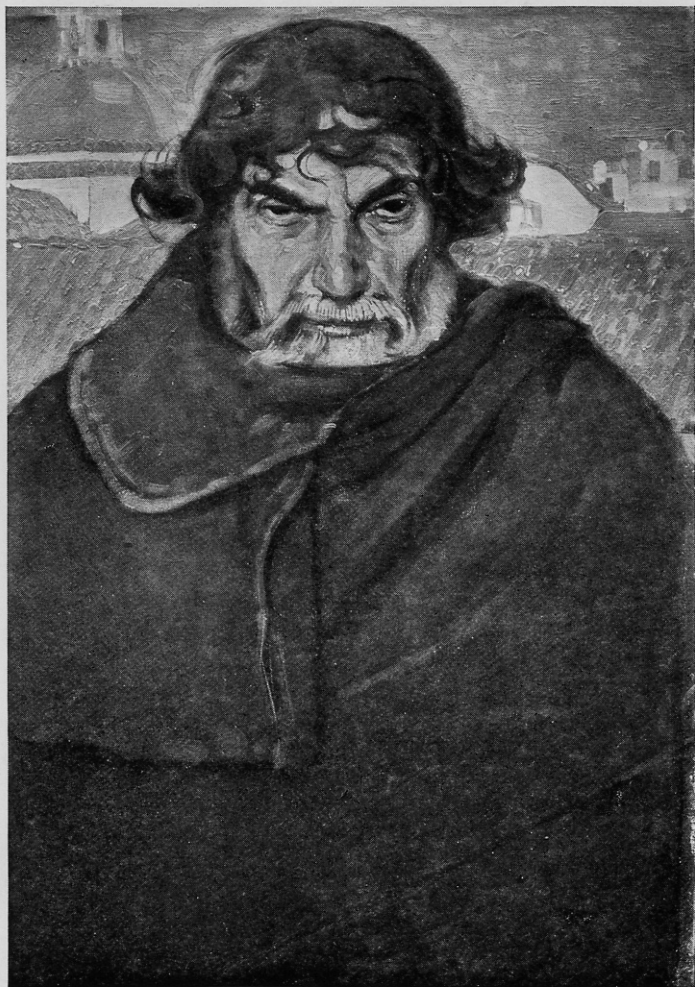
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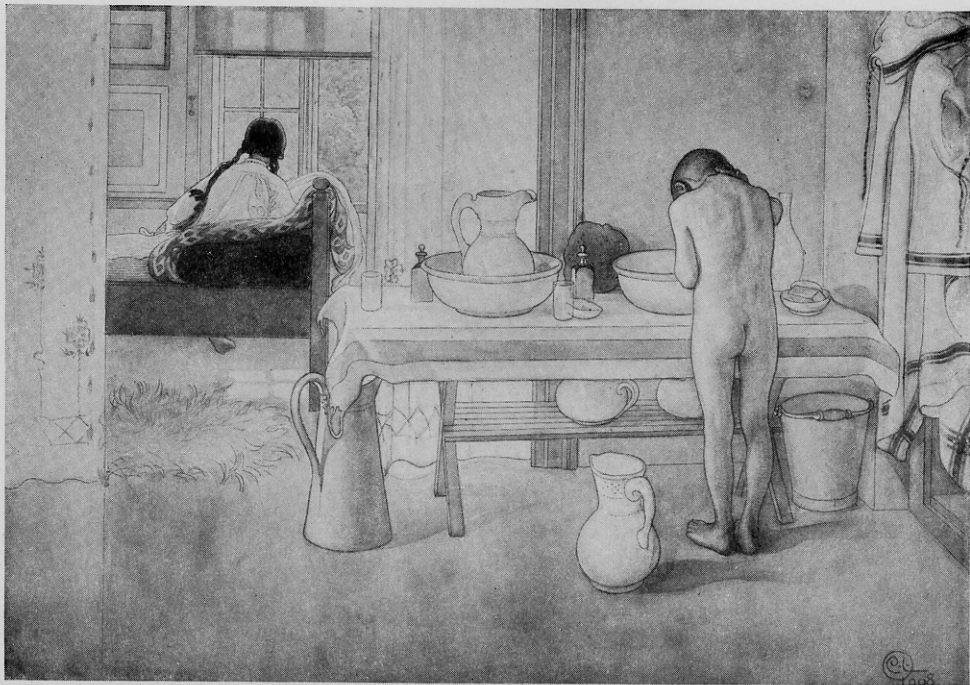
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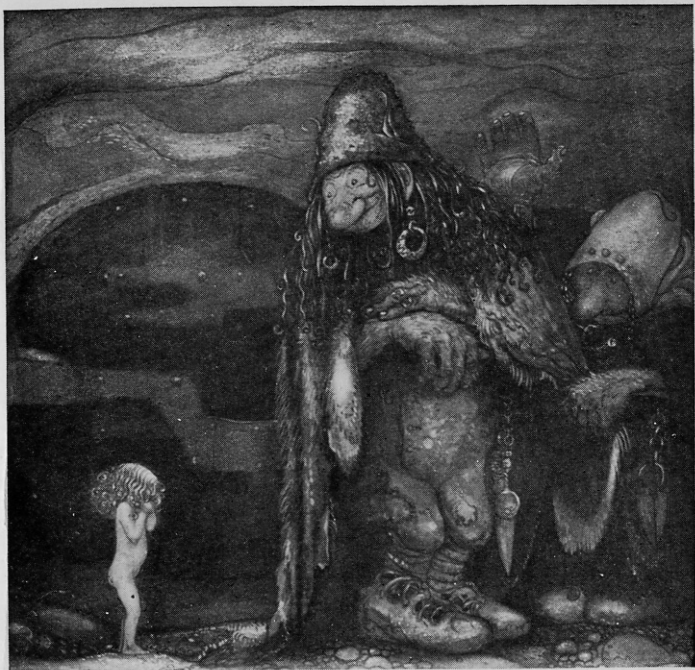
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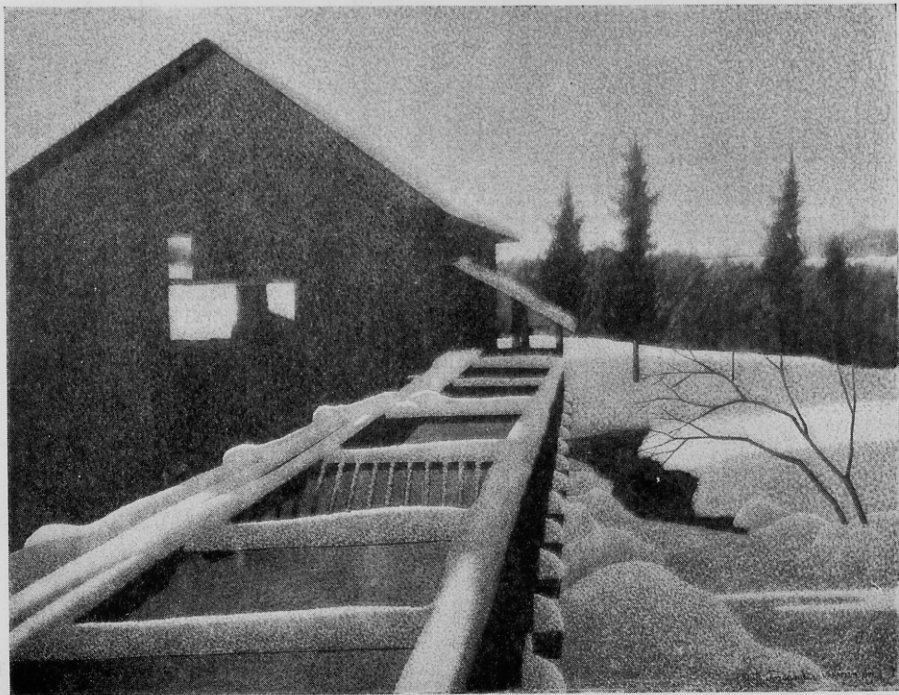
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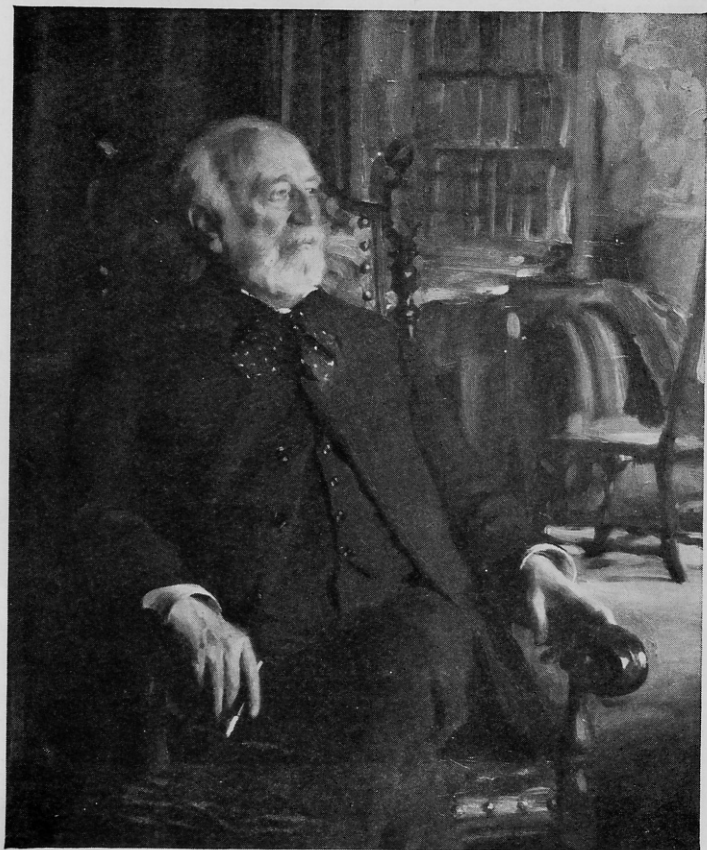
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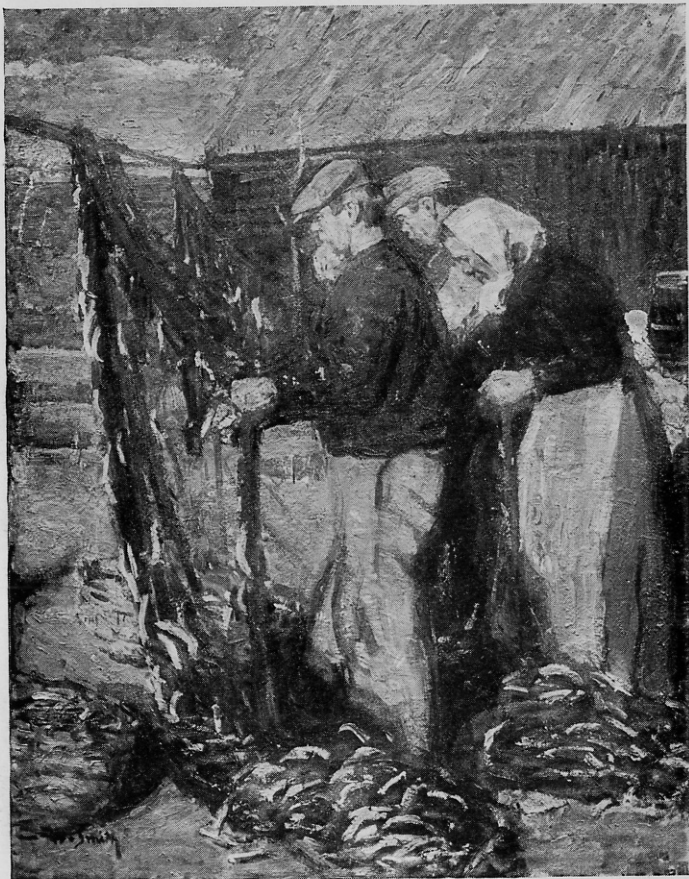
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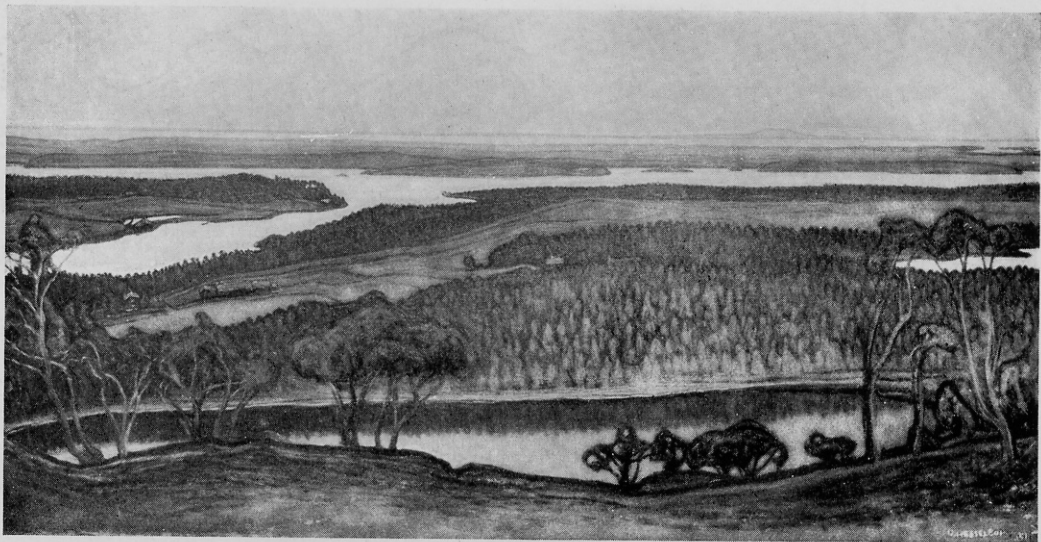
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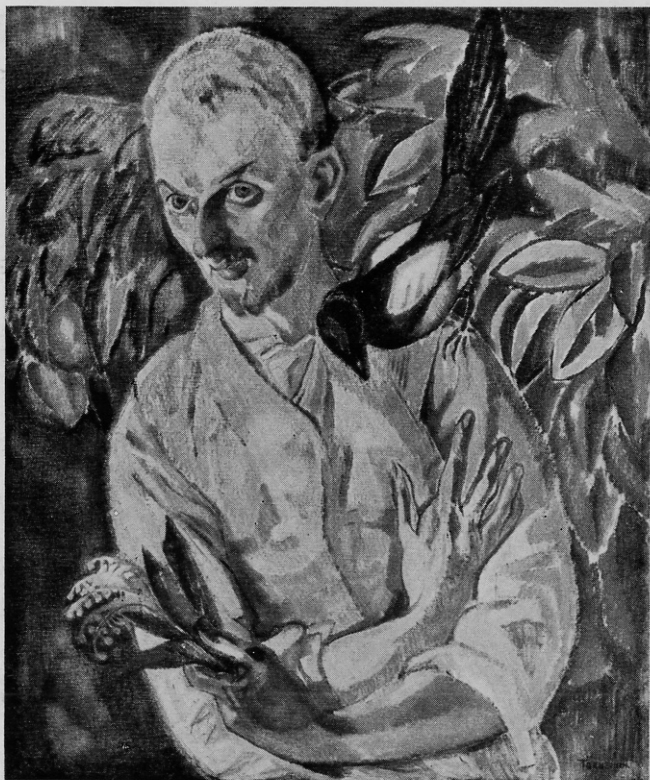
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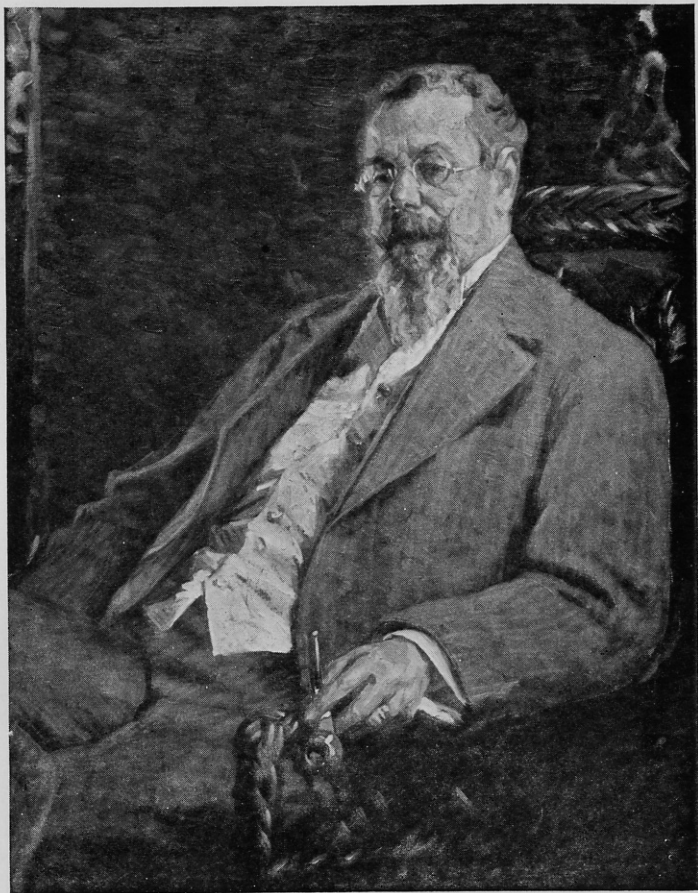
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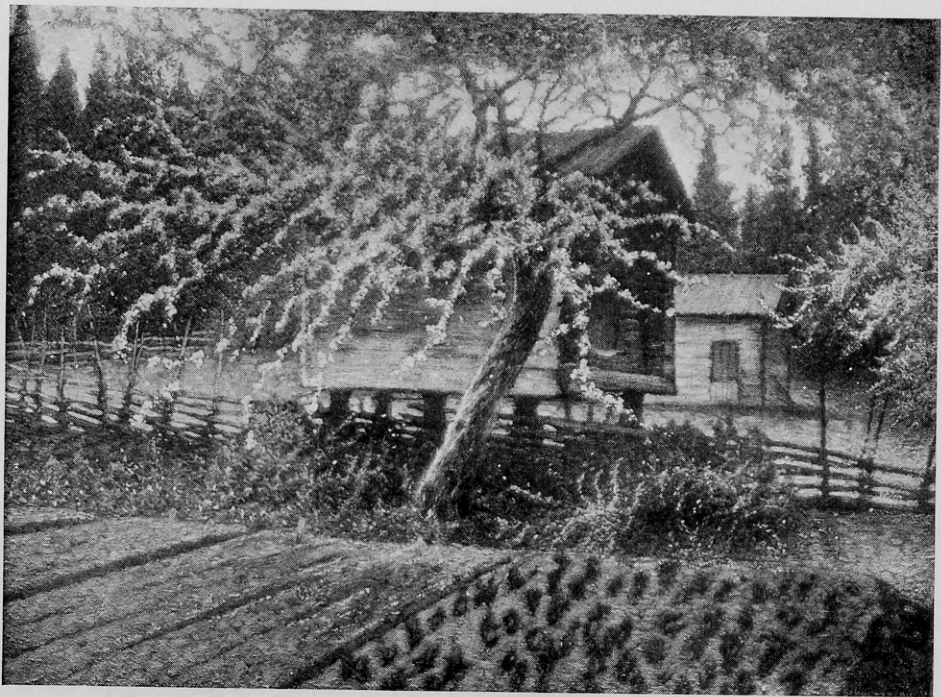
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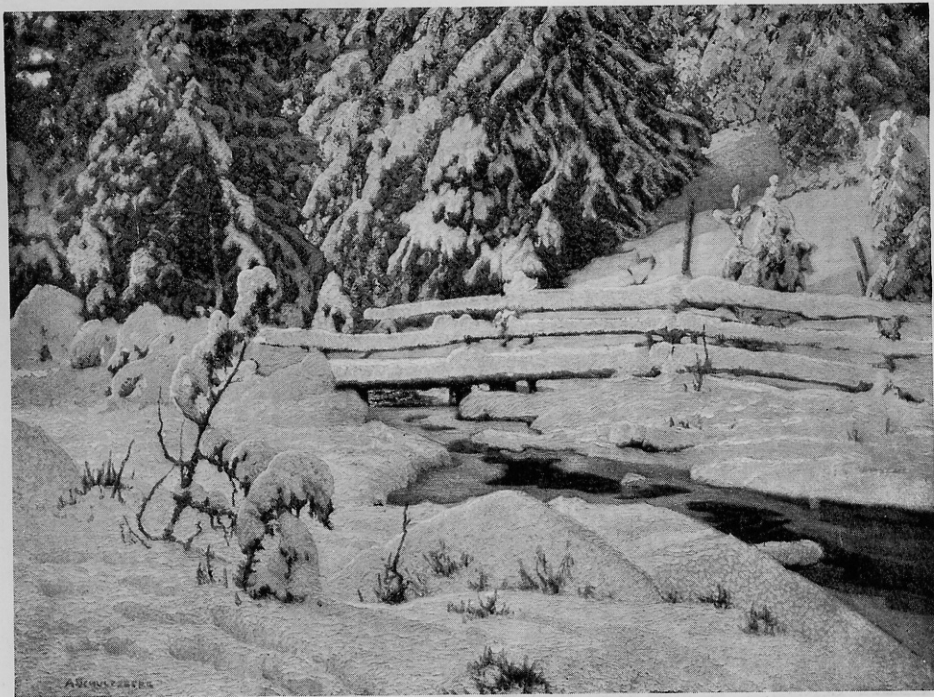
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