CONCERNING GHOST BOUQUETS AND
THE THINGS OF SHORTENING DAYS: BY
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IN THE Kingdom of the Lone Elm, nothing ever comes
rudely or abruptly. There is always the warning,
"Behold, I give you a sign." A while ago, a very
little while, it seems, there was a single scarlet branch
down in the swamp land, an accident, a freak, we
termed it euphemistically. Then, one day—the hand-
writing upon the wall. Red fireballs of foliage
burned on Temple Hill, and even through a drenching rain, mock
sunshine illumined the road, pouring down from the pure gold leaves
of a double line of maples. And now for the last few days, bars are
down, pastures are deserted and cows are browsing sociably in mow-
ings close to houses. Long furrows of rich black loam, the fall
plowing, stretch darkly past the pallid fluttering pennants of the few
remaining corn-shocks. Something has filched the emerald from
the fields, covered now with the soft bloom of bleached grass-blades,
not as yet monotonously dry and sere.

We cross the stubble, almost treading before we know it on a
wee nest resting tipsily on the very ground itself, a slack abode hastily
thrown together, already disintegrating, and, of course, tenantless.
We turn it over gently with the foot, reflecting upon the shallow
little slipshod, shiftless thing, and pass it by. As we look up from
our meditations we are suddenly aware that there is growing upon
the land an astonishing barreness and openness. Stone walls, more
than ever manifest, emphasize boundary lines. Shorn of all its
drapery of vines, the watering trough seems to poke its practical
self farther into the road than usual, conspicuously black and ugly.
Houses jump out from the landscape where earlier in the year we
should hardly have suspected a habitation. In this clarifying open-
ness, distances, too, seem to have altered. There is no path or road
where we walk and do not feel that we are conspicuous, that some-
body, from somewhere, is looking at us.

We walk upon a thick matting of fallen leaves, leaves of every
design and hue, mottled and streaked, dull and ashy, yellow, red,
russet, wine-colored, light scarlet, tan, and cardinal—a royal waste
of color. In the hollow, westward, where the last leaves have already
dropped, naked dead-gray branches of the deciduous growth give
a smoky appearance to the valley. The mill pond is leaden, dully
reflecting the lifeless brown trees around its edge. Cardinal flowers
"THE BIG, OLD-FASHIONED GINGER-JAR IN THE LIVING ROOM, FILLED WITH A MIXTURE OF LAUREL AND ALDER-BERRIES, WILL MAKE GLORIOUS A CERTAIN CORNER FOR MANY A WINTER DAY, AND THE SAME CHEERFUL BERRIES WITH PLUMES OF PINE WILL MAKE A GREETING BOUQUET FOR THE HALL."
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no longer fringe its banks with tongues of fire—it is a vale of misery. Here on the heights, leaves yet cling to partially denuded branches; no more vivid scarlet and gold, however, things have sobered down to soft maroons, bronze, and tones of burnished copper. The chestnuts and the oaks show no willingness to part with their foliage, but the leaves flutter there like little tough bits of leather thoroughly tanned by the winds and frosts. We cannot resist the gloss of the big fat acorns, and as we pick them up, the glint of a bright little eye, the frisk of a red tail, and the swift hurrying scratch of little paws in impetuous retreat to the other side of the tree trunk assure us that the squirrels too have an eye to the harvest.

THE sky is clear, but for a broad belt just above the horizon, dark blue clouds with long, sharp, straight, uncompromising edges. The wind is straight out of the north, piercing and keen. There is a sting in the air. Every few seconds, a leaf weighs anchor and sets sail upon an adventurous course earthward. You can hear the sharp little tap—tap—tap—of more leaves striking upon one another in their fall. They sift into every crack and corner in the rocks, every hollow among the gnarled roots of trees.

The aging of the year, even as our own, brings a keener sense of values. With the depreciation of color values in the last few days, outline values have risen fifty per cent., so that the craftsmanship of Nature is never more apparent than now, in the architecture of the trees and the infinite interlacing of twigs etched upon a blue sky.

Here and there, in a crotch of the branches, little dark wads show conspicuously against the sky-background, the craftsmanship of feathered architects. There, out of reach but in plain sight, is the dainty structure of a red-eyed vireo’s nest, which the most careful scrutiny had failed to discover among the thick foliage of the nesting season. It is pendant from a forked branch, firmly attached to a twig on each side, round and well knit, though not firmly, and dotted on the outside with trimmings of white plant-down.

From the outermost branches of the next tree swings the hanging nest of the oriole whose favorite perch for matins and vespers was the dead branch of the maple opposite the house.

No longer, of course, are there any bird-notes that can be termed songs, only sharp-voiced calls now and then. Jays shriek, scold, and expostulate. The sharp, short “tweet” of an excited robin rings far different from his spring carol. In the corn stubble, one pompous crow struts up and down delivering occasional harsh gutturals.
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Not only in the tall trees but also in the lower growth of shrubbery by the roadside, empty nests confront us in such open and even rashly improvident places that we are humiliated by a sense of our own stupidity in overlooking them heretofore. To investigate the neat little cup-shaped home of a redstart brood, fastened to a sumac bush ridiculously near the road, we cross the gutter, all innocent of the commotion we are to raise. Instantly a cloud of flying plant-down whirs around us, released from innumerable stalks by the jar of our step or contact with our clothing. Indeed, we emerge well covered, in veritable Santa Claus trimmings.

All along the wayside, shadowy replicas of brilliant blossoms make a ghostly parade as of all the departed spirits of summer flowers. Soft, round pompons of fuzz, nebulous whorls of down, fantastic fringes and dainty tassels, are contrasted with the Van Dyke brown of the small brittle alder-cones, and the stiff formal steeples of the hardhack, cinnamon brown.

The whim seizes us to gather a ghost-bouquet and in a trice the shades of the goldenrods, the asters, the hawk-weeds, the thimble-weed, and the starry life-everlasting offer themselves as candidates.

Not by any means, however, is everything dead and colorless. There is no reason why the house should lack decoration even though we cannot afford hot-house flowers. The witch-hazel's leafless stalks are feathery with yellow bloom. Pale blue, pebbly-coated bayberries, thickly clustered, are almost as beautiful as a bunch of forget-me-nots. The oval leaves of the mountain laurel are green and glossy, and the naked stems of the so-called black alder, really the ilex, are ablaze with scarlet berries. The big, old-fashioned ginger-jar in the living room, filled with a mixture of laurel and alder-berries, will make glorious a certain corner for many a winter day, and the same cheerful berries with plumes of pine will make a greeting bouquet for the hall.

But dear, dear! Can we get the berries?  "Water, water, everywhere!" Everywhere is the voice of many waters. Small rills and fair-sized torrents tumble along down from the heights and empty themselves into the humble little stream that was wont in summer days to creep modestly along, screened by rank alders except for an occasional gap at a ford. Now, the little brook is no more, and the whole meadow is one broad blue lake, as if some giant, stalking over, had lost a great sapphire solitaire from his ring. But farther on,
perched precariously on the last tuft of solid turf and aided by the
crook of a cane-handle, we manage to acquire the gay branches.
True, we are almost precipitated into the water at the critical moment
of our angling, by the crack of a rifle unpleasantly close.

The cry of hounds comes, borne upon autumn winds. Over the
knoll, a figure all in russet browns moves into silhouette against the
skyline. He brings the warmth of life, action, companionship, into
the landscape. It is the hunter, in loose baggy clothes and heavy
boots, with sagging game-bag and rifle at trail. He takes his bear-
ings, sights the Lone Elm, and strikes off into a belt of pines. Run,
little hare! Make off, Sir Fox! There is one on the trail.

We stroll into the pines and hemlocks, where the keen nip of the
wind is softened and warm brown needles, just as if in summer, send
out a soothing fragrance. Feathery green sprays move in the breeze.
Scraps of blue sky show through, and we pace those aisles of dusky
light with a peaceful consciousness of being in some sanctuary,
some place of refuge. It might really be July.

Up in that tall pine is lodged a bristly bunch of heterogeneous
materials. It has no pretensions to beauty or even neatness. Its
only excuse for being is that last spring Monsieur the Crow reared
there a brood of uncouth, coarse-voiced brawlers, and they will be
among the few braves that will bivouac in the pines this winter.
This moment, among the green low-flung branches of young pines,
begin swift, stealthy flights of dusky pinions. From every tree they
come, by threes, by fives, by sevens, and presently overhead sound
the fierce anathemas and ribald jeers of a thousand crows indignant
at our presence.

We cannot walk here many times more this season. It is dis-
heartening to feel that this may be the last time we pass this way, the
last time we see the mountain without a cap of snow.

We emerge into the open again. The broad pink sun rests upon
the horizon line, diffusing a pinkish purple glow through the misty
haze fast rising in the November afternoon. Long smoky clouds
streak the western sky, turning lurid crimson on the edges.

We give a little shiver, hug our armful of woodland treasures
closer, and scamper for the open hearth fire.

Later, in the midnight hours, with thrilling blood we waken
suddenly to a strange weird call—"Honk—honk—honk!" There
they go—the wild geese in trailing, shadowy flight, and in the morning
—the mountain is white.