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THE WOODS IN AUTUMN

By the author of "Anne of Green Gables."

FOUR SHORT STORIES

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The Woods in Autumn

L. M. Montgomery

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Maples are trees that have primeval fire in their souls. It glows out a little in their early youth, before the leaves open, in the redness and rosy-yellowness of their blossoms, but in summer it is carefully hidden under a demure, silver-lined greenness. Then, when autumn comes, the maples give up trying to be sober and flame out in all the barbaric splendour and gorgeousness of their real natures, making of the ancient wood a thing out of an Arabian Nights dream in the golden prime of good *Haroun Alraschid*.

You never may know what scarlet and crimson really are until you see them in their perfection on an October hillside under the unfathomable blue of an autumn sky. All the glow and radiance and joy at earth's heart seem to have broken loose in a splendid determination to express itself for once before the frost of winter chills her beating pulses. It is the year's carnival ere the dull Lenten days of leafless valleys and penitential mists come.

The maples are the best vehicle for this hidden, immemorial fire of the earth and the woods, but the other trees bear their part valiantly. The sumacs are almost as gorgeous as the maples; the wild cherry trees are, indeed, more subdued, as if they are rather too reserved and modest to go to the length the maples do, and prefer to let their crimson and gold burn more dully through over-tints of bronzy green.

I know a dell, far in the bosky deeps of the wood, where a row of maiden birches fringe a deeply-running stream, and each birch is more exquisite than her sisters. And, as for the grace and goldenness of the young things, that cannot be expressed in terms of the dictionary or symbols of earth, but must be seen to be believed or realised. I stumbled on that dell the other day quite by accident . . . if, indeed, there can be such a thing as accident in the woods, where I am tempted to think we are led by the Good People along such of their fairy paths as they have a mind for us to walk in. It was lying in a benediction of amber sunshine, and it seemed to me that a spell of eternity was woven over it . . . that winter might not touch it, nor spring evermore revisit it. It must continue forever so, the yellow trees mirrored in the placid stream, with now and then a leaf falling on the water to drift away and be used, mayhap, as a golden shallop for some adventurous wood sprite, who had it in mind to fare forth to some wonderful far-off region where all the brooks run into the sea.

I left the dell while the sunshine still shone on it, before the shadows had begun to fall. And I shall never, if I can help it, revisit it again. I wish to remember it always as in that one vision and never see it changed or different. I think it is one of the places where dreams grow; and hereafter whenever I have a dream of a certain kind . . . a golden, mellow, crimson-veined dream, a very dream of dreams, I shall please

my fancy with the belief that it came from my secret dell of birches, and was born of some mystic union between the fairest of the sisters and the genius of that crooning brook.

The woods are full of purple vistas, threaded with sunshine and gossamer. Down drop the tinted leaves, one by one, with the faintest of sighs, until our feet rustle most silverly through their fallen magnificence. The woods are as friendly as ever; but they do not make the advances of spring, nor do they lavish attentions on us as in summer. They are full of a gentle, placid indifference. We have the freedom of their wonders, as old friends, but we are not any longer to expect them to make much fuss over us; they want to dream and remember, undisturbed by new things. They have spread out a spectacle that cannot be surpassed . . . have flung all their months of hoarded sunlight into one grand burst of colour, and now they wish to take their rest.

The conebearers hardly know what to make of the transformation that has come over their deciduous neighbours, who comported themselves so discreetly and respectably all through the earlier months of the year. The pines and hemlocks and spruces seem to wrap their dark mantles around them, with a tinge of haughty disapproval. No change of fashion for them, and it please ye, no flaunting in unseemly liveries of riotous hue. It is theirs to keep up the dignity of the forest. Only the firs are more tolerant. Indeed, here and there a fir seems trying to change its sober garments also, and has turned a rich red-brown. But, alas! The poor fir pays for its desertion of fir tradition by death. Only the dying fir can change its colour . . . and exhale that haunting, indescribable odour, which steals out to meet us in shadowy hollows and silent dingles.

There is a magic in that scent of dying fir. It gets into our blood like some rare, subtly-compounded wine, and thrills us with unutterable sweetnesses, as of recollections from some other, fairer life, lived in some happier star. Compared to it, all other scents seem heavy and earth-born, luring to the valleys instead of the heights. But the tang of the fir summons upward and onward to some “far-off, divine event” . . . some spiritual peak of attainment, whence we shall see with unfaltering, unclouded vision the spires of some aerial city beautiful, or the fulfilment of some fair, fadeless land of promise.

Autumn woods give us another rare fragrance also—the aroma of frosted ferns. The morning is the best time for it—a morning after a sharp frost, when the sunshine breaks over the hollows in the woods; but sometimes we may catch it in the evenings after the afternoon sun has steeped the feathery golden sheets of a certain variety of fern and drawn out their choicest savour.

I have a surprise for you if you will but walk with me through these still, stained mazes and over the enclosed harvest field beyond, and up this dour hill of gnarled spruces and along this maple-fringed upland meadow. There will be many little things along our way to make us glad. Joyful sounds will “come ringing down the wind;” gypsy gold will be ours for the gathering; I can promise you a glimpse now and then of a shy partridge, scuttling away over the fallen leaves; as the evening deepens there will be nun-like shadows under the trees; and there will be squirrels, chattering in the beeches where the nuts are. Squirrels, you know, are the gossips and busybodies of the woods, not having learned the fine reserve of its other denizens. But there is a certain shrill friendliness in their greeting, and they are not really half such scolds as one might imagine from appearances. If they would but “take a thought and mend” their shrewd-like ways they would be dear, lovable creatures enough.

Ah, here is my promised surprise. Look you . . . a tree . . . an apple tree . . . an apple tree laden with fruit . . . as I live, a veritable apple-bearing apple tree here in the very heart of the woods, neighboured by beeches and pines, miles away from any orchard. Years ago it sprang from some chance sown seed; and the alien thing has grown and flourished and held its own. In the spring I wandered this way and saw it white amid wildness with its domestic blossom. Pluck and eat fearlessly, I pray you. I know these apples of old and fruit of Hesperides hath not a rarer flavour, nor the fatal apple of Eden. They have a tawny skin, but a white, white flesh, faintly veined with red; and, besides their own proper apple taste, they have a certain wild, delicious flavour no orchard-grown apples ever possessed or can possess. Let us sit here on this fallen tree, cushioned with mosses, and eat our fill, while the shafts of sunshine turn crimson and grow remote and more remote, until they vanish altogether and the early autumn twilight falls over the woods. Surely, there is nothing more for our quest, and we may as well go home.

Nothing more? Look you, I pray you, over yonder, through the mist of this mild, calm evening. Beyond the brook valley, halfway up the opposite slope, a brush fire is burning clearly and steadily in a maple grove. There is something indescribably alluring in that fire, glowing so redly against the dark background of forest and twilight hill. A wood fire at night has a fascination not to be resisted by those of mortal race. Come, let us arise and go to it. It may have been lighted by some good, honest farmer, bent on tidying up his sugar orchard, but it may also, for aught we know, have been kindled by no earthly woodman, a beacon or a summons to the tribes of *færy*. Even so, we shall seek it fearlessly, for are we not members of the immemorial free-masonry of the woods?

Now we are in the grove. Is it not beautiful, O comrade of my wanderings? So

beautiful that it makes us perfectly happy; we could sit down and cry for pure, unearthly joy; and we desire fervently some new language, rich in unused, unstained words, to express our rapture.

The fire burns with a clear, steady glow and a soft crackle; the long arcades beneath the trees are illuminated with a rosy radiance, beyond which lurks companies of enticing gray and purple shadows. Everything is very still and dreamy and remote. It is impossible that out there, just over the hill, lies a village of men, where tame household lamps are shining. We must be thousands of miles away from such things. It is an hour and place when and where anything might come true . . . when men in green might creep out to join hands and foot in fealty around the fire, or wood nymphs steal from their trees to warm their white limbs, grown chilly in autumn frosts, by the blaze. I don't think we would feel much surprise if we should see something of the kind . . . the flash of an ivory shoulder through yonder gloom, or a queer little elfin face peering at us around a twisted gray trunk. Oh, I think I do see it . . . but one cannot be sure. Mortal eyesight is too slow and clumsy a thing to match against the flicker of a pixy-litten fire.

Everything is in this hour—the beauty of classic myths, the primal charm of the silent and the open, the lure of mystery, the beguilement of gramarye. It has been a pure love match 'twixt light and dark, and beautiful exceedingly are the offspring thereof.

We go home by the old fir lane over the hill, though it is somewhat longer than the field way. But it always drags terribly at my heart to go past a wood lane if I can make any excuse at all for traversing it. Sometimes I like to walk in this lane alone, for I know it well and can tryst here with many shapes of old dreams and joys. But to-night I am glad to have a comrade . . . for the dark is coming down, and I am just a wee bit afraid, with a not unpleasant fear. The whole character of the lane seems changed. It is mysterious . . . eerie . . . almost sinister. The trees, my old, well-known friends, are strange and aloof. The sounds we hear are not the cheery, companionable sounds of daytime . . . they are creeping and whispering and weird, as if the life of the woods had suddenly developed something almost hostile . . . something, at least, alien and unacquainted and furtive. I could fancy that I hear stealthy footsteps all around us . . . that strange eyes were watching us through the boughs. I feel all the old primitive fear known to the childhood of the race—the awe of the dark and shadowy, the shrinking from some unseen menace lurking in the gloom. My reason quells it into a piquant watchfulness, but were I alone it would take but little—nothing more than that strip of dried bark keening so shilly on the rail fence—to deliver me over to a blind panic, in which I should turn and flee

shamelessly. As it is, I walk more quickly than my wont, and feel, as we leave the lane behind, that I am escaping from some fascinating, but not altogether hallowed, locality—a place still given over to paganism and the revels of fauns and satyrs. None of the wild places are ever wholly Christian in the darkness, however much they may seem so in daylight. There is always a lurking life in them that dares not show itself to the sun, but regains its own with the night. Comrade, I vow I am right glad to see the steady-gleaming homelight below us, shining on homely, mortal faces. It is a good thing after the uncanny enchantment of the autumn forest.



TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Woods in Autumn* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]